

Civil Society Organizations: The Site of Legitimizing the Common Good

Liv Egholm, CBS Copenhagen Business School, Denmark, le.dbp@cbs.dk

Michael Meyer, WU Vienna (University of Economics and Business), Austria, michael.meyer@wu.ac.at

Damien Mourey, Sorbonne Graduate Business School, France, mourey.iae@univ-paris1.fr

Call for papers

At present Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are experiencing increasing public and academic attention, especially as suppliers of social cohesion, promoting active citizenship and safeguarding the common and greater good in society through their special characteristics and values. Accordingly, CSOs have been championing their contribution as the rescuer/savior not just of the traditional welfare states but also of the national cohesion as such.

However, CSOs do not by definition create social cohesion and contribute to the common good. Researchers have recently shown that many voluntary-based associations, cooperatives, mutual funds, philanthropic organizations, transnational advocacy groups and, more recently, social entrepreneurs to name but a few, have purposes closely related to their particulate interest and not necessarily directed towards a common good (Alexander, 2006; Frantz & Fuchs, 2014). Even though their legitimizations and justifications often are articulated as a collective engagement towards the making of a “better society” and a willingness to contribute to the “Greater Good” linked to positive characteristics of Civil Society, one cannot just study these organizations and associations as a good per se (Dekker, 2014).

CSOs have also to deal with an array of stakeholders that have expressed different and sometimes divergent claims in recent times. Donors, funders, beneficiaries, volunteers, workers, regulators have different interests in and representations of the performance of a CSO. Being accountable to all of them might just be an impossible task as there is no clear-cut hierarchy among them and no obvious common ground. Admittedly donors and funders have particularly made accountability claims over the recent past. However, meeting the expectations of some stakeholders might spark tensions with others as well. It is often argued that CSOs have to deal with four different types of accountability upwards (donors), outwards (alliance partners), inwards (workers and volunteers) and downwards (the beneficiaries) (Ostrower & Stone, 2015). However, we still need to better understand how and to what extent these different accountabilities are articulated, prioritized as well as which consequences they have.

The concept of legitimacy within CSOs has been discussed and defined as “the right to be and do something in society - a sense that an organization is lawful, admissible, and justified in its chosen course of action” (Edwards, 2000) or more recently, Alexander’s division between the civil and uncivil sphere (2006) and Lichterman & Eliasoph’s (2014) identifications of organizations, who perform civic action. As such, the legitimization of CSOs’ actions and existence is intertwined with stakeholder accountability, contemporary “regimes” of justifications and the range of available institutional and organizational forms (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Meyer et al. 2013). Accordingly, CSOs must be studied for *how* and *which* specific understandings of the common good and society they promote - and thus which consequences that entails - also in line of which groups are found worthy of being included within the “Common Good” and which are not (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001; Reuter, Wijkström, & Meyer, 2014).

In this sub-theme, we welcome empirical and theoretical contributions exploring the role the common good plays in the relationships of legitimacy, justification and accountability. In particular, we welcome papers addressing the following issues:

Creating the common good of society: As organizations use the striving for a good society or safeguarding of the common good as a way to legitimize themselves, these legitimations also spill over and promote

specific understandings of the common good and society. How do these processes take place? What are the consequences of these changes? And what type of politics/inclusion/exclusion do they conceal?

Managing and institutionalizing legitimacy in Civil Society: How do CSOs manage and institutionalize their explicit role of doing good. To what extent does the organizational form appear as a materialization of its legitimization? How do “professionalization” and “participative governance” work as a way to strengthen legitimacy? What are the different sources of legitimacy for CSOs? What are the institutionalization processes of the legitimate CSO?

Managing Accountability claims to strengthen legitimacy in Civil Society: How exactly do CSOs develop accountability systems and standards that enhance their legitimacy in civil society? How do CSOs order the different accountability claims made by their stakeholders? Which accountability mechanisms have emerged in recent times? What can be said about performance measurement systems, reporting and audited processes, and social impact evaluation that have spread into Civil Society as a necessary step to enhance accountability? Are these accounting and auditing practices a way to enhance performance, to acquire resources and/or to strengthen organizational legitimacy? To what extent does the push towards more accountability by some powerful stakeholders lead to tensions with other stakeholders whether internally and externally? Are there different modes of accountability depending on the type of relationship with the stakeholders?

Convenors

Liv Egholm (le.dbp@cbs.dk, Denmark) is Associate Professor at Department of Business and Politics (CBS). She is currently the co-leader of the CISTAS project (www.cistas.dk). Her research interest concern philanthropic gift-giving, legitimation processes, pragmatism and the messiness between civil society, state and market.

Michael Meyer (michael.meyer@wu.ac.at, Austria) is Professor at the Department of Management and head of the Institute of Nonprofit Management at WU Vienna (University of Economics and Business). His research interests concern managerialism in NPOs, functions and participation in CSOs, civic engagement, social systems theory, and career research.

Damien Mourey (mourey.iae@univ-paris1.fr, France) is Associate Professor at Sorbonne Graduate Business School (IAE Paris). His research interests concern accountability and professionalization processes in nonprofit organizations, social systems theory and “Art and Management”

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