

A Tool for Charting out the Relationships between Government and Third Sector Organisations in Various National Settings: Applying Social Network Analysis to National Action Plans on Fight against Poverty

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Slightly adjusted abstract

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Roughly over the last 15 years international organisations (UNDP, EU, World Bank and others) have mainstreamed the issue of involving third sector organisations in public tasks - in the decision making and planning as well as in the provision of public services - as part of the efforts to support democracies and development. The literature offers various explanations for the growing interest in the enhanced cooperation, ranging from a cost-cutting neo-liberal agenda and an increase of control (e.g. Patel 2004) to a positive turn in the mode of governance as a step for deepening democracy, responding to the “democratic deficit” and the decline in traditional forms of participation.

A main obstacle to evaluate the changes and to identify general trends, regarding the motivations for cooperation and possibly factors for success of support measures, lies in the difficulty to compare situations in different national settings. As a contribution to provide this needed empirical grounding this paper proposes a conceptualisation of the relationships between governmental agents and third sector organisations. To obtain a heuristic tool for the concrete analysis the method of social network analysis is employed. The approach is tested in a trial run, charting out the structure of cooperation around the concrete policy event of national action plans for social inclusion in two European states (Italy and Germany) touching upon the interferences with the supra-national (European) level.

Comparative third sector research usually operates either on a macro level using key figures and highly aggregated data (data collection with 'head counts', e.g. Centre for Global Governance, diverse years, Tusalem 2007) or on a micro level, with rich, often historically grounded descriptions of single cases (e.g. Laird, 2007). While both approaches provide valuable insights, the first perspective is usually missing out on finer shades of grey in the interactions between state and non-state actors and the second leaves some questions open with respect to the comparability beyond single cases. The inter-organisational network analysis proposes a meso-level approach to complement the two strands of research. Patterns of inter-organisational interactions are taken as the indicators for structural and thus sustainable changes in the relationships. The conceptualization of state - third sector relationships builds on two fields of discussions: categorisations proposed in established democracies, mainly from studies on the welfare mix and reflections from the context of development aid (among others: Vincent / Harrow 2005, Najam 2000, Proulx et. al 2007, Brinkerhoff, 2002). Furthermore, the operationalization takes up some insights from the Civil Society Index, a program run by CIVICUS – World Alliance for Citizen Participation. While applied to a specific policy

event within the European Union the framework intends to be suitable for cases, which vary strongly in their cultural backgrounds.

First results will be part of the presentation. At the centre of the presentation stands the conceptualization of state-third sector relationships to be used and its applicability in diverse contexts.

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