

## **Best Article in *Voluntas* Award 2011**

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The Best Article in *Voluntas* Award is a newly created award generously funded by our publisher, Springer. The award is to be given biennially at the ISTR International Conference for the Best Article in *Voluntas* during the previous two year period. A committee was established to read the journal articles for 2010 and 2011 and select the best article. The committee included Adalbert Evers, Germany (chair); Eliza Lee, Hong Kong; Kari Steen-Johnsen, Norway; and Ebenezer Obadare, USA.

The committee first established the type of article that they were seeking and set out the following-- *Voluntas* attracts very diverse types of articles which represent work in different areas of science which include

- 1) Articles that are authentic mirrors of national debates and problems, however with limited value for cross-national debates
- 2) Articles clearly targeted to a very special field or problem that is shared internationally; but they do not always “speak” to a wider community
- 3) Articles that take up a broader theoretical challenge that is important for our field (e.g. how to understand reference to civil society)
- 4) Articles that combine reasoning and finding from different levels – empirical and theoretical, local/national/regional and general

The committee determined that the contributions from the fourth stream, contributing to a process of “bridging” in various ways, were best suited to be considered for the award.

The article that best met these criteria and was the unanimous choice of the committee was *The Challenge of Activist Coalition Governance. Accommodating Diversity to Create Institutions – An Approach via the Interrelationship Between Action, Project and Instrument*, by Carine Chemin and Corinne Vercher. (*Voluntas* 22/4 published in December 2011).

Carine Chemin is Professor at Reims Management School, Reims, France and Corinne Vercher is Professor at the Department of Economic and Social Administration, University of Montpellier, Montpellier, France.

The contribution of Chemin and Vercher focuses on the phenomenon of intersectoral networks and coalitions of actors. What they have taken up as a significant case in point is an activist coalition called *éthique sur l'étiquette*, the French arm of the European anti sweat shop / clean clothes campaign. The French arm is not simply an NGO but a mosaic of community groups, activist groups and mainstream organisations with actors so different as e. g. a consumer association, a fair trade federation, a workers union and two organisations for development aid. What this coalition tried in France was to tie into the network retailers and companies, convincing them to subscribe for a commitment to sell increasingly clothes that obeyed to some social and environmental standards concerning their production process, working conditions etc.

You will all know similar processes and problems of forming coalitions and networks with an enormous inner diversity. The likewise practical and theoretical problem the authors have taken up is: What is allowing such plural coalitions to work and stabilize, to find forms of governance that allow common action while respecting the diversity of these groups and coalitions?

When tackling this issue, Chemin and Vercher rely on two sorts of theoretical background. One is the stream of institutionalist theories that study hybridisation, i.e. the capacities to amalgamate different institutional logics making them compatible with each other (e. g. state and market logics but as well managerial and professional concepts). The theories claim that hybrids are possible but they testify as well that hybrid networks are likewise precarious. The other theoretical background that comes in at this point is the debate on governance. Chemin and Vercher relate here especially to the contributions of Kooiman on network-governance and his emphasis on finding a well working relationship between the development of three components: a shared “project,” related forms of action, and suitable “instruments.”

Using this analytical grid and on the basis of dozens of interviews the authors have dealt with the French antisweatshop coalition. Their case studied is however not a success story but one of progress and failure.

They show that building a joint network was a challenge for each of these organisations that had to give up and to learn something concerning their projects, types of action and instruments. Chemin and Vercher then studied the attempts to accommodate this diversity. While the coalition came to an agreement, it showed that a central instrument they used, a report card on the behaviour of retailers, was very successful initially but causing severe problems in the further process. Initially these short reports were welcomed by the shops that joined the network because rather good ratings were helpful for their reputation. However once in subsequent reports it was published that further progress was small or missing, they saw this kind of reporting and publicity as basically negative for them.

The controversial debate in the coalition that followed this problem with the major instrument they used, was not able to overcome this difficulty. It showed how limited and precarious the “joining up” process was. In the coalition, some groups wanted to better capitalism, while others wanted first of all to denounce its antisocial traits or build up an alternative economy. Moreover it became clear, how difficult it was to network with salesmen for whom social components such as the ones from the anti sweatshop alliance were quite strange and unusual.

Struggling about the instrument of the report card, the coalition finally broke up. It did not find ways to oppose and propose, for openness and dialogue with the companies.

In their paper, Chemin and Vercher analyse the final failure for building a stable coalition network as resulting from the inability to balance the dynamic of interaction between projecting something, finding the right forms of action and developing appropriate instruments. At the same time, they use their study in order to show that these three factors, project, type of action and instruments are basic – not as separate items but by their dynamic interplay. The authors argue that it needs what they call a “whirlwind process of mutual adjustment” of practices, instruments and discourses.

The paper ends with some conclusions and propositions concerning the governance of coalitions and what they call the “pluralistic social dilemma.”

Several things are intriguing about this article and make up for its special, what we have called “bridging” quality: the ability of the authors to bring together elements of theory building (governance theory and institutional theory of hybridisation) and concept building in the field of Third Sector Research; the way they have combined careful empirical research and guidance with a clear set of analytical hypotheses.

Furthermore they have pushed the debate on hybridisation a bit further, asking for those factors that are critical for the success and failure of attempts to bring together in a coalition what is usually seen as being contradictory and apart.

By all this they have been enabled to study a very specific field and development in a way that makes it interesting for most of the third sector research community. These authors have with their article contributed to a better understanding of the challenge of building intersectoral networks, where change in the organisations is not merely a feature of isomorphism or of a mere modernisation of governmentality. They focus on the ability of Third Sector Organization led networks to contribute to a more civil society. And that is, we think, an orientation that holds ISTR researchers together beyond all the diversity of topic and methods we are busy with. It is after all this by which contributions like the one of Chemin and Vercher make a difference.