HOW MANAGE THIRD SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS IN CONTEXTS OF CRISIS?
COMPARATIVE AND COMMUNICATION STUDY ON CUBAN AND COSTA RICAN NGOS

Lenay Alexandra Blason

1Catholic University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, 2University of Montpellier 1, Montpellier, France

D. McAdam and S. Tarrow (1996, 2001) use the definition of “Political Opportunity Structures” to characterize the relationship between a given context and social movements. Based on this concept, the Cuban and Costa Rican political systems may be deemed as two radically different “Associative or Political Opportunity Structures”. Consequently, the history of the Third Sector organizations in both countries presents some significant differences during these last decades, but also some singular coincidences. For instance, at the beginning of the Ninetieth’s, we observed a surfacing of an important number of NGOs coinciding with a redefinition of the Civil Society role in development processes and aid delivering systems by principal aid backers. This scenery will change again from the beginning of the current century and, especially, due to the financial crisis causing a drastic reduction of humanitarian aid and development funds.

This paper aims to answer the following questions: What are the possible costs of this crisis for NGOs in terms of management? How face these environmental changes avoiding risks of commercialization, bureaucratization or, simply, death? The answers set thereafter are based on an historical and comparative study, in terms of ‘cycle of life’, carried out within four NGO 1 in Cuba and Costa Rica, between 2006 and 2008 (Blason, 2009). For the purposes of this study, associations shall be defined as entities of communication while communication is the implicit and often explicit content of their mission, and we consider the associative project as a project of communication. Indeed, this “project” is interpreted as a balance of the three functions – Referential, Mediating and Relational functions 2 – of the linguistic expressions and processes building interaction systems at macro, mezzo and micro organizational levels (Taylor, 2001).

Through the content analyze (Bardin, 1997) of institutional periodical publications and non directive interviews, we demonstrated a reciprocal influence between the external, normative and hierarchical contexts and the way in which individual and collective actors “communicate”. On one hand, we identified, for instance, that to birthing ages of “affinity groups” (Dupuis-Déry, 2003) corresponds expressions and processes based on relational and mediating functions of communication with an important number of linguistic indicators as: domestic registers, shared metaphors, pronominal marks, etc. On the other hand, in more institutional periods, we can

1 We have studied: the Cuban NGOs, Organization for Asian, African and Latin American Solidarity (OSPAAAL) and Educational Research Center (CIE); and the Costa Rican NGOs, Service Association for Workers Rights Promotion (ASEPROLA) and Association for Health and Human Rights Promotion «Madreselva».

2 Based on the Pragmatic Communication Theory (Watzlawick, 1974), this three function could be defined as: Referential function refers communications permitting participation of associations, as collective actor, in a macro-organizational system (political community); Mediating function refers those communications of actors, representatives of a category (managers, operational actors, etc.), permitting to create a mezzo-organizational system, and Relational function is defined as communications permitting to create and to reinforce micro-organizational systems.
identify an important number of communication tools profiting the referential function of communication with linguistic indicators as formal registers, pronominal marks, indistinct metaphors, etc.

In our point of view, this assessment hires important normative consequences for the management of Third Sector organizations, principally, in periods of environmental changes. In fact, associations may be considered as a result of a dialectic tension between both “organizing” and “organized” phases and as an inherent tension between “content” and “relational” aspects of linguistic expressions making interaction systems. Thus, the survival of the association project is linked to the maintenance of a balance between the different functions of communication. According to this approach, the Communication Strategy must take into account: 1) the referential value of associations in the collective construction of public space; 2) the mediating value of associations linking individual sensibilities and universal principles and 3) the relational value of associations strengthening social links. This Strategy must foresee to keep the balance between the solidarity principle and the technical-instrumental rationality; to invent democracy at the diary association’s life; to update the representational system (organizational identity) and, finally, to co-producing the organizational ideology.

We believe this comprehensive approach is the only way to avoid the ideological criticisms often addressed to associative actors and organizations and to face these new environmental challenges. It allows us to prove influence of Third Sector in reinforcing social links and democracy.

References:


COLLECTIF D’AUTEURS (2001), Association, démocratie et société civile, Paris, La Découverte/MAUSS/CRIDA.


MEUNIER J-P. (2003), Approches systémiques de la communication, Bruxelles, De Boeck Université.


