Pluralist logics and organizational dynamics in CSOs: challenges for governance

Kari Steen-Johnsen1, John Michael Amis2

1Institute for Social Research, Oslo, Norway, 2University of Memphis, Memphis, TN, United States

A core feature of civil society organizations (CSOs) is their embeddedness in pluralist institutional environments. Institutional theory claims that organizations tend to adapt to norms in the environment and to develop systems for governance that are supported as legitimate by dominant external actors (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). In diverse environments one might assume that CSOs are influenced by and may adopt diverse, and perhaps competing governance systems (Kraatz & Block, 2008). This paper examines how organizations in pluralist environments institutionalize competing logics over time, and which are the internal consequences of this diversity. The main questions are 1) Which sets of governance logics may emerge in diverse environments?; and 2) Which internal organizational dynamics are created as a result of diverse governance logics? Is the organization capable of harmonizing diversity, or do these logics create lasting internal cleavages?

The paper is based on a qualitative case study of the Norwegian Skiing Association (NSA), a one hundred year old non profit organization. In accordance with the idea of institutional pluralism, the NSA faces multiple institutional environments and expectations from the state, organizational members and commercial actors. Suffused by multiple logics, beliefs and values, this constitutes a useful site for exploring the dynamics of a pluralistic institutional environment. Qualitative interviews were carried out with twenty former and present members of staff and elected leaders/board members. This was complemented by a review of governance documents (minutes of board meetings, accountancy reports, yearly reports, general assembly proceedings) from the period 1985 – 2008.

We identify three different governance logics that have been institutionalized in different phases and that have interplayed within the organization in various ways over time: the amateur-volunteer logic, the politico-administrative logic and the business-professional logic.

Using classical institutional theory one might predict different types of outcomes of such diverse logics when it comes to organizational dynamics: from persistent ambiguity (March & Olsen, 1976) to institutionalized balance (Selznick, 1957). In a situation of persistent ambiguity principles for governance will be vague and contested, and leaders will be in doubt about which procedures to follow. In a situation of institutionalized balance, a shared understanding of which principles to use when is established in the organization. In this paper we argue that diverse logics may give varying results in different parts of the organization. Different zones of activity will hence display their specific organizational dynamics; from institutionalized balance in the governance of mass sport to a situation of constant competition and ambiguity in relation to elite sport.

Starting from Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), we finally argue that structures of prestige within the NSA, which are reflected in the dispositions of agents, strongly influence which zones become contested over time, and which areas institutionalize a balance between logics. The study hence adds to the understanding of how internal governance structures in CSOs are affected by pluralist environments over time and what internal conditions are important in creating sets of different dynamics.

References


