“A Model for the Analysis and Evaluation of the Performance of Associations”

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In recent years Civil Society Organizations and Social Movements, have grown in importance for their innovative strategies for poverty alleviation; their key role in conflict resolution; for expanding social, cultural and other collective rights; for lobbying governments for more transparency and accountability; as well as for strengthening governance; among a number of other issues. In parallel, the amount of resources channeled to them by donors (either public, multinational or private) has grown exponentially.

Because of this growing influence and the resources they control, there is a growing concern on how to evaluate their performance. Some approaches have established distinct main criteria, like the attaining of the organization’s mission; its financial sustainability; the impact of the organization on its beneficiaries; or its capacity to adapt to changing contexts. Our model proposes a different perspective; the aim of the research is to evaluate the performance of CSOs, through some elements of internal functioning and performance; but also by taking into account the social and political logic of their performance. For so doing, the research has been designed to embrace three interconnected axis (1) practical results; (2) internal performance and (3) the organization’s relation with their environment.

The axis of practical performance looks to answer the question, to what extent the association achieves results, reaches its goals, solves problems and obtain benefits regarding its own purposes?. Efficacy and efficiency are here observed in four dimensions: normative, strategic, productivity and exchange.

The second axis is related with the internal performance. It focuses on its capacity to coordinate actions, make adequate decisions and establish agreements with other actors; as well as with the dealing with internal conflicts. This axis comprehends a number of criteria and standards related with the association’s rules and procedures for decision making and with its mechanisms of integration, cohesion and identity; in addition to members participation, representation and leadership and the collective and identity mechanisms that exist to monitor decisions and agreements.

The third axis focuses on the capacity of the association to relate itself with the environment and includes criteria and standards that evaluate its competence to build up social capital, its learning curve, its communication and resource management; as well as, its political interaction, representation, legitimacy and its social relevance. The model includes also considerations about the effects of the environment on the association’s performance.
The model builds on two main premises: first, that evaluation—because of its own nature—has a normative dimension; and second, that it is necessary to take into account the diversity of organizations and associative practices, in order to avoid the risk to apply the same performance standards to organizations that may actually be radically different.

Regarding the first consideration, it is important to say that the standards that integrate the model of evaluation are the result of a double process of conceptual and operational definition of the variables that impact associations’ performance, and of a number case studies of very different types of associations. This constant contrast of theoretical issues with reality added methodological strength to our research. Regarding the second premise, we believe that it is possible to distinguish associations regarding their complexity level, which can be set within a spectrum between two opposed poles: those of high complexity versus those of low complexity. This, maybe the key theoretical and empirical finding of our model.

The model that we propose here is the result of a collective seminar that discussed and reflected on the conceptual basis of the approach; as well as on extensive research on empirical cases undertaken in Mexico from, 2004 to 2008.