Does the EU matter for national third sectors in Europe?

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The idea that we should move beyond a two sector model when designing and implementing European policy is in vogue amongst politicians, academics and other commentators - and would indeed become a significant part of the EU’s "hard law" infrastructure if the Lisbon Reform Treaty were to be fully endorsed. Using evidence and argument assembled through the TSEP (Third Sector European Policy) network, this paper looks at how a three sector model, in a pre-Reform Treaty world of "soft" policy at the EU level, could be connected with "Europeanisation", drawing on the work of the TSEP network (Kendall, 2009). It will accept Bache and George’s contention that "the main value of Europeanisation is in highlighting the changing nature of relations between the EU and Member States" (2006, p. 58), if institution building beyond the State is considered in scope. This allows us to achieve relevance by take seriously developments which do not presuppose European integration, convergence, or even necessarily demonstrable shifts in governance in this sphere.

Framed in this permissive way, the paper seeks to identify some of the sub-components of “Europeanisation” via a “stipulative approach”, wherein no claim to comprehensiveness or exhaustiveness is implied (Rhodes, 1997, pp., 52 - 53). Instead, we may pragmatically stipulate three particular meanings where evidence and argument assembled for TSEP seem to offer useful pointers and clues to how the two concepts may be connected. In particular, we posit that Europeanisation in relation to third sector policy may be understood as:

- a process where domestic third sector ‘horizontal’ (‘cross cutting’ or ‘generic’) policy environments interact with the EU level; and where

- general ‘horizontal’, trans-policy field infrastructure institution building in and around the Brussels-based EU institutions becomes to some demonstrable extent oriented to such a policy space; and as

- a multi-level policy process potentially involving deliberately engineered third sector co-ordination efforts within relevant European ‘policy modes’ (cf. Wallace, 2000)

It is hoped that the value of the paper may be to begin to expose the range of links that can and do exist empirically and conceptually between collective third sector policy and Europeanisation processes. In the case of the TSEP network EU countries, it is clear that we cannot speak of ‘Europeanisation’ in relation to horizontal third sector if this is taken to refer to a process demonstrably involving convergence and integration. Indeed, we are also unable to refer to ‘Europeanisation’ in a more limited sense, whereby clusters of countries seem to respond with a certain degree of consistency to specific policies (Nedergaard, 2006; Börzel, 2006, p. 496). Nation-specific policies and practices overall tended to be reproduced, in large part as a reflection of what we have referred to as the deep diversity of national third sector policy arrangements.

However, this does not mean that linkages, relationships and efforts at institution building relating to third sector European policy have not emerged, at least with reference to the three meanings of ‘Europeanisation’ stipulated for review here. The paper tries to show that modest episodes of policy activity, albeit often anticipatory, time-limited, limited in scope, and exploratory in character, can be found, and referred to some of the contexts, motivations and
agendas that seem to lie behind these actions. It will be concluded that even if there has been no consistent build up of policy momentum in the EU (based on the analysis of the TSEP sample of countries), the pockets of activity witnessed to date suggest that this topic will continue to be worthy of empirical exploration and conceptual analysis. This will be true even if the Lisbon Reform Treaty fails to overcome its final hurdle.

References


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1 The pending European Reform Treaty has retained the references to civil society and associations which emerged as a result of the Constitutional process that preceded it (Will and Kendall, 2009). It says that ‘institutions shall, by appropriate means, given citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and exchange publicly their views in all areas of Union action…. The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.’ This reference builds on a range of ‘soft’ precedents already represented in the EU process via Declarations, a variety of policy mode accommodations, and the European Economic and Social Committee’s attempts to re-interpret its rationale anew under a ‘civil society’ banner since the Nice Treaty, as discussed in the paper.