Subsidiarity, Public Accountability and Political Responsibility: A Systematic Mapping of the Relationship between Civil Society and the State in German International Volunteer Service Programmes

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Starting point of our contribution is a contradiction which we observe regarding different international volunteer service programmes which are all funded by the German federal government(2): Whilst the NGO’s continuous calls for public funding has finally been addressed, the same organisations are now increasingly concerned about a seemingly overbearing state. Hence, new questions regarding the relationship between civil society and the state emerge and have triggered a controversial debate. Yet, apart from very few exceptions (Jakob 2011; and for the context of a national volunteer programme: Strachwitz 2011), this debate lacks sound empirical analysis and, even more, theoretical foundation. We catch up on this debate and address it in two steps. First, we present a couple of theoretical approaches to analyze the situation. Second, we take a close empirical look to different state funded international volunteer programmes.

Our theoretical view on the relationship between civil society actors and the state is threefold: Our overall perspective is guided by the principle of subsidiarity which allows us to identify at least theoretically an adequate task sharing between the stakeholders (Waschkuhn 1995; Nörr and Opperman 1997; Blickle, Hüglin and Wyduckel 2002). Delegation theory however helps us to analyze the relationship between them and serves as a channel towards the concept of public accountability (March and Olsen 1995, 141-181, Mulgan 2003, Strom 2000). Lastly the principle of political responsibility is our starting point to explain the actions of a public administration (Finer 1941).

Moving on to empirics, we identify a set of key features of each volunteer programme and allocate them on a map, showing the degree to which they are run either by the NGOs or the respective ministry. The results display a large variance between the programmes which can be explained e.g. by their different historical backgrounds and the idiosyncrasy of the overseeing ministerial portfolios. Merging our theoretical outlines with our empirical findings we conclude, that in some cases the state’s involvement is not overbearing but rather necessary, in others the principle of subsidiarity has shrewdly been undermined step by step. These conclusions allow us to give a set of recommendations how the debate between the stakeholders of international volunteer service programmes could be more focused and goal-orientated.

Whilst the empirics and conclusions surely display particularities for the German case, our theoretical approach and analytical framework is applicable to other national contexts, too. Hence, we take a short outlook to volunteer programmes such as “Voluntary Service Overseas” (UK), Fredskorpset Norway, Peace Corps (USA) and AusAid (Australia).
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In recent years three different German ministries have implemented volunteer service programmes to send young people abroad. These are: "weltwärts" ("worldwards" – Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development), "kulturweit" ("culturewide" – Federal Foreign Office) and "Internationaler Jugendfreiwilligendienst" ("International Youth Volunteer Service" – Federal Ministry of Family Affairs and Youth). Even a sub-national government is running its own programme ("Konkreter Friedensdienst" / "Concrete Peace Service" in North Rhine-Westfalia). In addition the "European Voluntary Service" (EVS), a European Commission's project, which also involves civil society actors, is popular in Germany.

References: