When Activism Fades Out: Causes Of Closure Of Voluntary Associations In Finland And Estonia

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Within Third Sector Studies, there is a tendency to discuss successful organisations, their growth and growing importance, and rather not to discuss what can easily be interpreted as failure. In its frequent focusing on “best practices”, research on voluntary organisations often verges on advocacy. But what about the “worst practices”; or simply, about the tendencies of social change that inevitably lead to a change of the voluntary sector as well, causing new organisations to emerge and old ones to end their activity? In the conditions of a “late modernity” characterised by a fluidity of self-identities, a tendency towards individualism contributes to the shrinking of organisations and to a shortening of their life-span. A growing relevance of particular interests fosters a fragmentation of the NGO sector. Other, less firmly organised types of collective activity take over functions that previously were typically fulfilled by membership organisations. New, hybrid types of organisations emerge in the cutting points of the voluntary, public and business sectors. An emerging need for rationalisation often forces organisations to make choices between mobilising resources primarily either from their members, or from other important potential sources – notably the state and the municipalities, but also businesses. In this situation, less effort is being done for finding new members and for activating the old ones.

In the present paper we will discuss results from an empirical research project on the closing down of voluntary membership associations in two Northern European countries, Finland and Estonia. Finland is one of the Nordic countries, while Estonia belongs to the European Union’s new Central and Eastern European member states. In both, voluntary association is the most typical form of non-profit organisation. Similarly with the Scandinavian countries, Finland has a large and well developed field of associations; in neighbouring Estonia, this is much less the case, but the sector is still strong in comparison to other parts of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe. However, there is clear evidence that in both countries, a considerable part of the legally existing associations are not active in practice. Every year, a number of associations are closed down and removed from the official registries. Our study is based on interviews conducted in the two countries in 2012 and 2013 with (former) members of organisations that had within the past two years terminated or were just about to terminate their legal existence. In addition to the 30 interviews (15 in both countries), we will discuss data on participation trends and recent changes in the legal framework regulating associational activities. Our data underlines the importance that membership and organisation building have for sustainability. Estonian organisations are more than the Finnish ones characterised by a leader-centred organisational culture, potentially harmful for sustainability. Recent legislative changes in Estonia encourage the professionalization of NGOs, but they also disencourage other types of collective activity. Finnish organisations, on the other hand, were often older than their Estonian counterparts and did not manage to reproduce their active membership. There are also some tendencies towards rationalisation in the associational field as a reaction to the loss of members; small local associations with little activity are merged into larger, still functioning entities. Many organisations were influenced by life cycle transitions of their members. In a few cases, an organisation was closed because its main goals had been achieved. If the members continue their activities within larger, more sustainable organisations, the resulting consolidation of the associational field can even be beneficial for civil society as a whole. On the other hand, much of the skills, networks and other resources that the previous organisation has accumulated will be lost.