

## **Hybridization in the Belgian third sector: Sectoral relationships, organizational features and volunteering**

Lesley Hustinx<sup>1</sup>  
Ghent University

Jozefien Godemont  
Ghent University and Catholic University of Leuven

### **ABSTRACT**

The starting point for this paper is the general prevailing diagnosis of a hybridization process that is assumed to have led to a more ‘disorganized’ or hybrid welfare mix. TSOs are compelled to flexibly combine different sector logics and features (state, market, third sector). These changes for a large part seem to be associated with the trends of double devolution and responsabilized autonomy. Taking the Belgium third sector as a case and based on semi-structured interviews with representatives from sector-specific umbrella organizations, we discern how and to what extent the processes of double devolution and responsabilized autonomy influence the relationships between TSOs and (mainly local) government, and between TSOs and their members and volunteers. We find that although in Belgium the dominant discourse on TSOs’ role and on volunteering is still neo-communitarist, a neo-liberal driven bifurcation between strong and vulnerable volunteer seems to be developing.

### **KEYWORDS**

Hybridization process, TSOs, changing welfare regimes, volunteering, third parties

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Lesley Hustinx, Department of Sociology, Ghent University, Korte Meer 3-5, 9000 Gent, [lesley.hustinx@ugent.be](mailto:lesley.hustinx@ugent.be).

## INTRODUCTION

Our paper deals with the emergence of ‘hybrid organizations’, defined as “organizations that possess ‘significant’ characteristics of more than one sector (public, private and third)” (Billis, 2010: 3), as a historically new context for volunteering in the Belgian third sector. In the international research literature the emergence of hybrid organizations has been commonly attributed to the increasing blurring of sector boundaries to the point that ‘it will not be sector that matters, but the balance of competing principles that structure a policy field’ (Evers & Laville, 2004: 251). The hybridization process has led to a more ‘disorganized’ or hybrid welfare mix from the 1980s onwards (Bode, 2006), that is also reflected in the organizational features of TSOs and in the social services they provide (Evers, 2005). TSOs increasingly deliver services through multiple parties and volatile partnerships that flexibly combine quasi-state, quasi-market and quasi-civic institutional logics (Billis, 2010; Bode, 2006; Brandsen et al., 2005; Brandsen & van Hout, 2006). It is assumed that the changing institutional environment and the more hybrid organizational structure of TSOs will also have an impact on volunteering forms and policies. The impact of hybrid organizational settings for citizens’ voluntary engagement is an emerging issue in the academic and social debate (Eliasoph, 2009; 2011). Voluntary engagement has always prevailed in the delivery of social services (Brandsen & Van Hout, 2006), but recently it has changed in a number of respects. First, at the supply-side citizens’ willingness to volunteer seems to be under pressure (Hustinx & Meijs, 2011). Volunteering has become more sporadic and transitory as is exemplified by concepts such as ‘episodic’ volunteering (Cnaan & Handy, 2005) or ‘plug-in’ volunteering (Eliasoph, 2011). Second, at the supply side third parties, such as governments, educational institutions and corporations, have been pro-actively developing highly rationalized top-down arrangements that enhance the recruiting potential of volunteers (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010; Hustinx, 2010; Hustinx & Meijs, 2011). Moreover these arrangements increasingly promote volunteering as a vehicle for social inclusion and active citizenship (Smith et al., 2010).

Our paper explores the hybridization process in different subsectors of the Belgian third sector. A key objective of our paper is to examine how the generally prevailing diagnosis of ‘hybridization’ varies as a function of a particular non-profit regime, hence warrants particular articulations depending on the context. To this end, we focus on the processes of devolution and responsabilized autonomy that have been described in the international literature as characteristic to the hybridization process. Taking the Belgium third sector as a case, we discern how and to what extent these processes influence the relationships between TSOs and (mainly local) governments, and between TSOs and their members and volunteers.

Our paper draws on qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with representatives from sector-specific umbrella organizations and with officials working in independent governmental agencies in different subsectors (culture and recreation, health, social services, community building, sports, environment, and international development). The paper will focus on the shifting welfare landscape in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, by generating themes associated with the hybridization process and by considering these themes in relation to the existing literature.

We argue that the processes of devolution and responsabilized autonomy reflect both neo-liberal and neo-communitarian perspectives, where the former perspective focuses on self-responsibility and the latter perspective focuses on the shared responsibility within a community. These two entangled governmentalities seem to be used differently according to the target group: ‘strong’, middle-class

citizens are encouraged to take up volunteering to help solve complex societal problems and to support vulnerable groups of people; in contrast, ‘vulnerable’, lower-class citizens are strongly appealed to take responsibility into their own hands and are mobilized through top-down, third party volunteering.

Our paper is structured as follows: first, we examine if, and to what extent the Belgian third sector can be typified as a hybrid environment. The Belgian non-profit sector has been characterized as a corporatist welfare regime with a ‘third party government’ system: the government to a large extent shares the responsibilities for service delivery with TSOs (Salamon, 1987) and a substantial portion of TSOs is government-oriented in seeking funding and legitimacy (Billis, 1991). Moreover, TSOs are involved in policy formulation processes (Zimmer, 1999). Second, we present our methodology. Next, our study focuses on the impact that the processes of double devolution and responsabilized autonomy have on Belgian TSOs. We present our key findings with regard to the tensions that arise as a result of the heightened autonomy and responsibility of TSOs in their relationships with government(s) and their volunteers and members. Finally, we present our conclusion and raise some points for discussion.

### **PROFILE OF THE BELGIAN THIRD SECTOR**

The Belgian welfare state developed in the context of pillarization, which is reflected in its current corporatist welfare state model. This welfare state model depends to a large extent on government funding and public institutions (socialist pillar), and is based on collective services delivered by volunteers in the realm of the private sector (Christian pillar) (Mertens et al., 1999). To govern this model, the Belgian welfare state combines the principle of subsidiarity, that implies a delegation of public services to TSOs at the local level, with a centralized public administration.

Flanders has three policy levels: municipal, provincial and Flemish. In line with the subsidiarity principle, recently a further double devolution of discretionary power has occurred at the governance level. The first devolution occurred from the central state to the local policy level through the decree ‘Reduction of Planning Obligations’ (RPO) (2011). The RPO decree, from 2013 onwards, increases the discretionary power of cities and municipalities, limits the provincial tasks, and reduces the involvement of the Flemish government at the local policy level. It grants municipalities more independence and self-determination in the design and implementation of measures across a wide range of policy domains. Furthermore the RPO decree reduces the planning and reporting obligations that municipalities face and allows them more operational autonomy within the overall policy framework and priorities that are set out by the Flemish government. The sectoral policy plans will be integrated into transversal and long-term plans. To that end the Flemish government, in consultation with the different sectors, is aligning the sectoral decrees to the RPO decree. Traditionally, and especially during this process of policy change, the Flemish government is leaning on the superstructure of sectoral umbrella organizations that it subsidizes *ad nominatim* to support the TSOs in their respective sector. The second devolution from the local policy level to the sublocal level of TSOs was initiated earlier through the decree on ‘Local Social Policy’ (LSP) (2004). The LSP decree obliges cities and municipalities to involve the general public and local TSOs in developing, implementing and evaluating service delivery at the municipal level.

The Belgian third sector was ranked as third largest (after the Netherlands and Ireland) of the 22 countries studied in the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (CNP) (Salamon et al., 2003). According to the results of the CNP, the Belgian third sector in 1995 contributed more than 25 billion

(9.5%) to the gross domestic product (GDP) (Mertens et al., 1999). For their financial resources, Belgian TSOs mainly depend on government funding (77%), and to a far lesser extent on fees (19%) and philanthropy (5%). The Belgian third sector can thus be typified as government-dominant (Salamon et al., 2003).

With respect to its internal composition, two-thirds of the 50.000 associations in operation in the Belgian third sector in 1995 were concentrated in the fields of culture and recreation, education and research, and social services (Salamon et al., 2003). The third labour force included 350.000 FTE paid workers and 100.000 FTE volunteers in 1995. It constituted 10.9% of the economically active population, and the volunteer share of this labour force amounted to 21.7% (Salamon et al, 2003). The Belgian third sector is service-dominant as is exemplified by the large share of the third labour force (86%) that worked in service-delivering associations in 1995 (Salamon, 2003).

Paid workers can be principally found in the fields of education and research (38.7%), health (30,4%) and social services (13.9%), and volunteers are mainly active in the fields of social services (55%), culture and recreation (33%). From 1998 to 2005 the third sector in Belgium was rapidly professionalizing: the growth percentage of paid employment was two times higher (3.1%) than that of total employment (1.2%) (Marée et al, 2008). Most new jobs were created in the sector of social services.

The legal framework and the organizational support structure for volunteering in the Belgian third sector have been expanded in the last decade. The federal law regarding the rights of volunteers (2005) regulates the legal distinction between voluntary and paid work, volunteers' liability, insurance and the reimbursement of costs, and volunteering by specific groups (e.g unemployed and early retired). The Flemish decree on volunteering in the domains of welfare, public health and family (2009) sets additional quality criteria for volunteering policies (e.g. training and support) within TSOs that operate within these fields. The Flemish government subsidizes the Flemish Volunteering Clearing House to give advice, information and training on the legal framework and to stimulate a volunteer-friendly climate among governments at different policy levels. In addition, every provincial government has its own clearinghouse to promote and support volunteering (e.g. free volunteer insurance for TSOs, provincial volunteer trophy). Finally, Flemish municipalities support local TSOs by offering logistical support, by announcing their activities to the general public and by showing recognition.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Following the John Hopkins International Classification of Third Organizations (ICNPO), a wide variety of subsectors (culture and recreation, health, social services, environment, community development and international development) has been included in the study. These subsectors are considered as voluntary sectors, because they mainly or partly develop their activities by engaging volunteers. Spread over one year (2011-2012), 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from clearinghouses for volunteering (at the Flemish and provincial level), from sector-specific umbrella organizations and with officials working in independent governmental agencies. In addition a senior researcher with expertise in the field of social welfare was interviewed. With few exceptions, all umbrella organizations belonged to the Flemish 'superstructure'. In Flanders, sectoral umbrella organizations have traditionally been the intermediaries between TSOs and the Flemish government. All TSOs' advocacy efforts go through these umbrella organizations. The selected respondents were particularly information-rich, because they could provide a helicopter view and an overall narrative on their subsector and the organizations within it. The interviews centred

around the process of hybridization and were guided by a topic list that entailed four broad themes: sectoral relationships, organizational features, third parties, and volunteering. The interviews, that lasted 90 minutes on average, were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed with NVivo.

## **DEVOLUTION AND RESPONSIBILIZED AUTONOMY**

In the international literature on welfare state regime changes, two main and closely entangled shifts come to the fore. First, a double devolution of discretionary power from the central state to the local policy level, and from the local policy to the sublocal level of communities, TSOs and individuals, occurs (Fyfe, 2005). Devolution increases the room for creativity and local innovation, but it may also lead to more volatile and contract-based partnerships with local governments that force TSOs into task-linked and time-limited arrangements (Bode & Evers, 2004; Bode, 2006). Second, a ‘double movement of autonomization and responsabilization’ (Rose, 2000) or a shift towards ‘responsibilized autonomy’ is set in motion (Morison, 2000). The focus shifts from collectively respected social rights at the societal level to entrepreneurial responsibilities of autonomous actors such as TSOs, communities, firms and individuals (Ilcan, 2009). Both individual self-responsibility and shared responsibility for the care of socially vulnerable groups are stressed (Lub & Uytterlinde, 2012).

The devolution and the shift in autonomy are assumed to heighten the pressure for accountability and transparency and thus align with a neo-liberal policy stance. Furthermore both trends also reflect a neo-communitarian policy perspective in that the third sector is increasingly seen as “a place where politics can be democratised, active citizenship strengthened, the public sphere reinvigorated and welfare programmes suited to pluralist needs designed and delivered” (Brown et al., 2000: 57). This overall evolution has been grasped by the notion of ‘community-through-government’ (Ilcan, 2009).

The respondents discerned both devolution and a shift towards responsabilized autonomy in the Flemish third sector, as well as a heightened pressure towards accountability and transparency, albeit with context-specific articulations. We present the findings with regard to the impact of the autonomy and responsabilization shifts.

## **AUTONOMY**

The respondents observed three paradoxes regarding TSOs’ heightened autonomy: 1. Policy planning as an accountability tool forces TSOs into task-linked and time-limited arrangements; 2. The devolution from the central to the local policy level leads to a passing of responsibilities to TSOs; and 3. Municipalities as third parties complicate the operation of TSOs.

### Policy planning as an accountability tool forces TSOs into task-linked and time-limited arrangements

Following the further devolution, TSOs experience a greater pressure towards accountability and transparency. Since a decade, the accountability focus regarding Flemish TSOs has been gradually shifting from the input (sources) and the output (number and quality of services), to the process (operational procedures) and the outcomes (results of services). Instead of filing an annual quantitative operational report, the majority of TSOs now have to write a multi-annual and substantive policy plan. In the transition period towards policy planning a number of problems arise.

First, policy planning is fairly new to most subsectors, with the exception of the community development sector that has used this approach from the 1980s onwards, and TSOs lack experience.

As a result, the administrative burden – still existent in smaller and less professionalized TSOs - seems to have shifted towards a planning burden for TSOs.

*Previously the government argued more quantitatively. For instance, each operational unit of a socio-cultural organization had to demonstrate at least twelve activities per year. Now the government expects TSOs themselves to decide what they consider as an operational unit. They are asked to set their own standards and to justify themselves in relation to those standards. TSOs need to be more explicit about what they do (...) and they have to legitimize it too. I have noticed that many TSOs are used to the 'old system' of (...) governmental output measures. The flexibility that policy planning requires is not yet obvious to many TSOs. (Socio-cultural sector)*

Second, although governments at different policy levels defend the principle of policy planning, in practice they tend to employ a rather rigid vision on policy planning and leave little room for interim evaluations and adjustments. The emphasis in practice often still is on quantitative output indicators that are often considered as ambiguous. And in the socio-cultural sector wherein TSOs are no longer obliged to provide quantitative output indicators, the two government officials commented that their agencies experience severe difficulties to achieve transparency about TSOs' operations,

*What we advocate is actually counteracted by the sleek, technical, managerial governmental rationality. We advise organizations in the community development sector to formulate their goals based on sound knowledge and to consider these goals as feasible hypotheses. But in today's policy logic you are expected to reach your targets, otherwise it is considered as bad practice. We argue that a policy plan must be like a beacon, a landmark, that might be in need of reconsideration. (Community development)*

*Since 2004, the culture of no longer requesting numbers dominates in the socio-cultural sector. We get the strong impression that the sectoral umbrella organization might be withholding information and that it is afraid to release its figures on the operation of the sector.(Socio-cultural sector, policy)*

The respondents observed that TSOs invest more time, also partly because of the policy planning approach, in reflecting about their mission and updating it to the needs of their target groups. Moreover TSOs, due to the greater competition within the sector, are inclined to communicate professionally and customized about their mission.

#### The devolution from the central to the local policy level leads to a passing of responsibilities to TSOs

The respondents argued that the devolution of power from the central to the local policy level represents both opportunities and threats to local TSOs. The context in which TSOs operate is expected to become more contingent on the political constellation of municipalities, thus creating a conducive or detrimental context for TSOs' operation and continuity. A few respondents observed a passing of responsibilities from the municipal level to TSOs. For instance, a respondent working in the youth sector noticed that the liberalization of the subsidiarity principle has inclined local policy makers to hedge themselves from potential liabilities, and paradoxically has lead to more and stricter regulations for local TSOs.

*In recent years we have noticed that as policymakers at the Federal and Flemish policy level simplify legislation, the legislation in municipalities becomes stricter. Mayors feel more accountable and want*

*to cover themselves. As a result they translate the rather flexible legislation at a higher policy level into a stricter legislation at their own local level. (Youth)*

Furthermore, a respondent working in the ethnic-cultural minorities sector pointed to the process of 'forced autonomization' that a more substantial role for TSOs can set on: This process entails that ethnic self-organizations, which since their inception have been institutionally embedded and professionally supported, are recently being compelled to sail their own course.

*Ethnic self-organizations have largely grown from a professional context. Recently they are being pushed to become autonomous and to rejoin the 'real' voluntary sector. To these organizations this evolution feels as a loss. After all, they had a good support structure and to a great extent activities were organized for them. (Ethnic-cultural minorities)*

### Municipalities as third parties complicate the operation of TSOs

Flemish municipalities have always mobilized volunteers to contribute to municipal service delivery which has largely grown out of private initiative (e.g. playground and sports activities, service centres for the elderly). However, municipalities increasingly engage volunteers to ensure the affordability of these activities and services, and they reinstall co-ownership by local TSOs –as is regulated by the decree Local Social Policy. In that context they pursue a more formal, and standardized volunteer policy, for their own service delivery but also with regard to the service delivery by the local TSOs within the broader area of their municipality. Several respondents voiced concerns with regard to municipalities engaging TSOs and volunteers to ensure the affordability of local service delivery. First, municipalities that provide similar services and activities as local TSOs (e.g. the municipal sports department versus sport clubs) are likely to create an unfair competition for resources, including volunteers.

*Sometimes local governments profile themselves as societal midfield. They organize their own volunteer work and thus unintentionally stifle grassroots volunteering. For example, a city sets up a project with social counsellors who on a voluntarily base give lectures in families and associations. They receive a fee for this voluntary work. Now, who are the people who are willing to do this? These are the leaders and founders of the associations. Associations heavily depend on them. As these founders shift their priorities, because they get paid for their engagement, the original association is in danger of collapsing. (Ethnic-cultural minorities).*

Second, the incorporation of local TSOs in local social policy may affect TSOs' mission. Some TSOs stray from their original mission (mission drift or dilution), others follow the social policy agenda set out by the governmental or third sector and partly lose sight of their own priorities (mission creep). For example, youth houses are mobilized to reduce poverty, playground activities are tailored to suit outside school childcare, and service centres for the elderly are expected to pursue active ageing strategies. The respondents of the socio-cultural sector remarked that TSOs and government deliberately keep distant from each other policy priorities to avoid interference. This seems more difficult in the sectors of poverty reduction and youth, that at least for certain policy priorities (e.g. child poverty in the poverty reduction sector, and the validation of competences in the youth sector), experience mission creep.

*The government has always tried to minimize interfering with the choices that socio-cultural organizations make. It has adopted a kind of tolerance towards TSOs. (Socio-cultural sector)*

*A number of themes that the government moves forward, will guide our work. For example, the theme of child poverty is little salient to people in poverty, but government wants to pay attention to it. Then we face the choice to go along with it or not. The advantage of going along with it, is that the voice of people in poverty is heard in the debate. But on the other hand, this creates a discrepancy with what people in poverty genuinely concerns. (Poverty reduction)*

Third, the partnership between municipalities and local TSOs may neglect smaller, grassroots organizations that should be able to fulfill a complementary bottom-up signalling function.

## **RESPONSIBILIZATION**

During the interviews, the respondents mainly focused on the shift in responsibilities from the municipal policy level to TSOs and individual citizens. The respondents explained this shift in responsibilities by referring to the more dominant position of a neoliberal policy in Belgium. They also pointed to budget cuts – though limited - and to the decline of paid staff members in the public sector at the local level.

The shift in responsibilities from municipal government to TSOs essentially seems to take on two forms. First, TSOs and the volunteers that engage in them are appealed to take their responsibility for complex societal problems that affect specific social groups, such as poverty reduction and the integration of ethnic minorities. Second, TSOs are also increasingly mobilized to support and sometimes activate welfare clients, people with psychiatric problems, people that are labour unsuitable or that are otherwise vulnerable in today's society. These vulnerable groups in society are themselves urged to take on third party volunteering as a lever for social reintegration or activation.

*Societal problems are often passed on to ethnic self-organizations. For example, crime. When riots break out, one looks directly to the self-organizations (...) Since the economic crisis, the idea of shared responsibilities dominates even more. How can the third sector take up responsibility? I guess that's the new trend in all sectors. (Ethnic-cultural minorities)*

*Societies Where the Poor Take the Floor {Verenigingen waar Armen het Woord Nemen} are increasingly called upon to provide social services. Their core business is not sufficiently known by government. These associations aim to empower people and to incrementally change the social structures that cause poverty, but they don't provide individual assistance to people in poverty. (Poverty reduction)*

Sectors that are less dependent on government funding, such as the sports sector, feel less inclined to contribute to the solution of societal problems, even though they are increasingly mobilized to that purpose.

*The last few years, Flemish ministers pay quite a lot of attention to the social role of sports clubs. They mobilize the sports sector to realize objectives other than sports. They want to prevent violence, promote integration and so on through sport. Sports volunteers are expected to do it all, but that is unsustainable. It's not the role of sports clubs, but of existing professional organizations. (Sports)*

These heightened pressures on the contribution of volunteers, both ‘strong’ and ‘vulnerable’ have altered the relationships between TSOs on the one hand, and their volunteers and members on the other hand. The tensions that arise, differ dependent on the ‘type’ of volunteer, namely strong or vulnerable.

#### Strong volunteers and shared responsibility

The respondents underlined the appeal made to stronger volunteers, but at the same time noticed some factors that complicate their engagement.

The respondents indeed observed that the expectations of TSOs’ paid workers regarding volunteers are rising. They pointed to the sustained promotion of expertise among volunteers. Likewise, volunteers set higher standards for the growing group of paid workers in TSOs. Volunteers at the local level increasingly delegate administrative tasks to paid workers, and they consider a well-developed, professional support as self-evident. On the one hand respondents remarked that volunteers’ expectations sometimes clash with the philosophy of associational life. On the other hand, they agreed that professional support was necessary to support volunteers in fulfilling the often complex administrative requirements. The respondents attributed these mutual rising expectations to the legal regulations in terms of quality care to which TSOs must comply, to the expansion of the activities offered by TSOs, and to the competition TSOs have to cope with.

*Many local immigrant self-organizations consider it as self-evident that they can rely on a paid worker to coordinate their operations, and to write up their reports. That attitude in fact clashes with the philosophy of associational life that pursues an autonomously functioning voluntary base. (Ethnic-cultural minorities)*

*The high expectations regarding volunteers’ technical, administrative and community-building skills are no longer sustainable. Therefore in the sports sector the group of proponents in favour of a further professionalization process is growing. (Sports)*

The organizational expectations regarding volunteers differ between subsectors, but overall they are on the rise. The respondents observed that the expectations are higher in service-delivering subsectors (e.g. social services, health) than in expressive ones (e.g. culture). The organizational expectations furthermore differ within subsectors, for example according to the target group that is served (e.g. volunteering in the field of health requires more skills when the recipients are people with a disability in comparison to elderly people). The respondents remarked that high organizational expectations are acceptable in the case of semi-professional volunteers (e.g. in palliative and victim care) who receive extensive training, but that these expectations should be scaled back for other volunteers.

Respondents emphasized that professionalization and promotion of volunteers’ expertise are likely to complicate volunteers’ engagement. First, the expertise gap and the power imbalance between the expanding professionalized sectoral superstructures at the national and regional level, and the primarily volunteer-based substructure of local TSOs, further increases. TSOs seem to experience substantial problems to involve volunteers in their strategic and operational decision-making. This is particularly relevant for membership-based organizations, less so for corporatist TSOs in which volunteers aren’t involved in the policy lines of the organization, but participation is limited to the voluntary action itself and the organizational volunteer policy. In some sectors (e.g. environment,

international development, family) the decision-making now mainly lies with the paid staff, because the substantive complexity of TSOs' core issues has made volunteers' involvement much more difficult. Furthermore, volunteers also seem less willing to make efforts to participate.

*In the early years of the organization, the volunteers held the decision-making power. In the meanwhile the organization has been professionalized. In practice, volunteers are no longer involved in the operational decision-making. It is important that volunteers at least have a say in the strategic choices. But even that is difficult to accomplish. (International development)*

*People claim decision-making power, but very few people make an effort to actually use it. (Family)*

Second, in some subsectors the increasingly professionalized superstructure stands in growing contrast to the crumbling voluntary base. This latter trend is further exacerbated when TSOs' expand their membership base by offering member benefits, a business-like strategy that may lead to clientelism.

Finally, the pressure to promote expertise among volunteers might lead to the over-professionalization of volunteers, and possibly be of-putting to some volunteers, especially those in a vulnerable position (e.g. in poverty, with a mental condition).

#### Vulnerable volunteers

Several neighbouring countries (e.g. the Netherlands, Germany) deploy 'third party volunteering' as a policy instrument to economically activate unemployed citizens. The public employment service of Flanders (VDAB) sees volunteering in a TSO as a possible transitory phase between inactivity, and a job on the regular labour market, or if not feasible, in a sheltered workshop or in the labor care system (Leroy & Holderbeke, 2010). In this approach volunteering is used as a lever to increase the employability of the unemployed (Kampen, 2010). Particularly jobseekers with non-work related problems (i.e. medical, mental, psychic or psychiatric) in the course of an activation stage are sometimes referred<sup>2</sup> to TSOs to volunteer (VDAB, 2007). In line with this, more and more Public Centres for Social Welfare, i.e. municipally-based autonomous organizations that provide social assistance, are developing a far-reaching activation policy to guide welfare recipients to the labour market (the work first approach) and sometimes use volunteering as a lever to that end. Among the respondents, opinions differed as to using volunteering for economic activation.

*There are several reasons to recruit volunteers. Firstly, TSOs need helping hands. Secondly, TSOs want volunteers to learn something. Well now, whether that learning is for life or to increase one's employability... These two goals don't exclude each other. In TSOs for vulnerable youth, volunteers for instance learn to keep a time schedule. Their attitude problems need to be addressed first and foremost, and they will benefit from this, be it for life or on the labour market. (Youth, policy)*

*We shouldn't associate volunteering with an activation discourse. If you encourage people to volunteer in return for unemployment benefits or income support, this clearly doesn't apply as volunteering. (General Welfare)*

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<sup>2</sup> These referrals are made by the public employment service of Flanders (the unemployed), Public Centres for Social Welfare (living wage recipients), or the National Institute for Health and Disability Insurance (people with health problems or disabilities) (VDAB, 2007).

In Belgium, the policy focus so far remains primarily on volunteering as a lever for social activation and reintegration and mainly concerns ‘voluntarily guided volunteering’, meaning that people can freely choose whether or not to volunteer but once engaged are expected to follow certain organizational rules (Hustinx et al., 2007). In the last years, in response to the increasing demand of referring organizations (e.g. psychiatric institutions, Centres for Public Welfare, Public Centres for Social Welfare) to include vulnerable volunteer candidates in TSOs, the attention for these groups has grown. Mainly psychiatric patients in aftercare, people in poverty, foreigners without a legal residency permit -who are officially not allowed to volunteer- and occasionally ex-prisoners, have been referred to TSOs. It is agreed upon that volunteering opportunities should be accessible to all candidates, but this ideal is hard to realize, and sometimes stands at contrast with organizational efficiency.

*Although we give high priority to the right to volunteer for all, for now we don't seem able to realize this target. (Clearing house)*

*TSOs can not provide guidance to vulnerable people that come to volunteer. They need volunteers, helping hands that can work fairly independently. (Clearing house)*

The respondents pointed to several reasons that complicate the engagement of vulnerable volunteers: insufficient support from the referring organizations, a lack of time and expertise among TSOs, and a shortage of motivation among the volunteers that are urged to volunteer.

In particular psychiatric patients in aftercare need intensive support that the referring organizations often fail, and the host organizations can not provide, because they lack time and expertise. Several respondents pointed out the thin line between volunteering and therapy when working with vulnerable people.

*Psychiatric patients pose a “chronic” problem. We welcome them provided that volunteering doesn't become therapy. (Health)*

*I find that a difficult discussion. On the one hand, a psychiatric patient who is advised to take up volunteering to reintegrate, is considered not to be volunteering, but to follow therapy. On the other hand, someone who retires and starts to volunteer to cope with the loss of work-related social contacts and daily structure, can be considered to use volunteering in a therapeutic form as well, as a form of occupational therapy. (Clearing house)*

Moreover the respondents in the sectors of poverty reduction, community development and ethnic-cultural minorities stressed that certain preconditions for volunteering, such as transport, catering and childcare, are particularly important for the volunteering opportunities of vulnerable groups. In these sectors cost reimbursement (actual or fixed) is sometimes used to lower the threshold to volunteer for lower-income target groups.

### Members

With regard to the membership base of TSOs, that often forms the most important recruitment pool for giving both time and money, the respondents observed two salient evolutions. First, membership based organizations – in particular in the socio-cultural and sports sector - more often choose to expand their membership base by offering benefits, through which the membership fee can be easily earned back.

Although this strategy is successful, respondents warn for the adverse effects it may have for the voluntary base.

*I know of many organizations that offer their members benefits in return for their membership: a member magazine, coupons, a discount on the entrance to events. (Socio-cultural, policy)*

*A number of our volunteers reproach us that we put too much emphasis on the reimbursement of the membership fee and that in this way we maintain or strengthen clientelism among members. (Family)*

*There's a snag in member benefits. For some tasks you cannot go without volunteers. It is not because you are requesting a 300 euro membership fee that the shirts of the soccer team will get washed all by themselves. (Sports)*

Second, the respondents noticed the flourishing of informal citizen initiatives outside TSOs. For instance, in the environmental sector, eco-activists are developing initiatives (e.g. the transition movement, Lets) outside the realm of TSOs. In the international development sector numerous so-called 'fourth pillar initiatives' are emerging (e.g. family members that decide to set up a charity to support an orphanage in Bangladesh). 'Light communities', consisting of personal networks that are affiliated to central key figures, are considered to be essential for the proper functioning of ethnic self-organizations.

*Some people maintain so many contacts that they seem to converge into a network. They are the founders of TSOs and organize all sorts of activities, but at the same time they are the principal contact person for numerous people to address in case of questions or concerns. (Ethnic-cultural minorities)*

In the community development sector spontaneous neighbourhood- and community-based initiatives blossom too. Some of the respondents partly attributed this 'informalization' trend to citizens' growing preference to withdraw from organizational contexts in their private time. These observations seem to support Billis' (2011) observation that 'the hybrid territory between TSOs and the informal sphere of family, friends and neighbours' presents a new and relevant research arena.

The respondents noted some tensions related to the increasing number of initiatives deployed by the informal sector. First, although informal initiatives can flexibly respond to local needs and fulfill a leading role in innovating fundraising practices and advocacy strategies, they are also prone to what Salamon (1987) has described as 'philanthropic amateurism' that may reflect a bad image on the third sector as a whole. Second, while TSOs are keen to collaborate with these informal initiatives and to exchange know-how, some caution is needed to avoid that these initiatives lose their grassroots character and are incorporated by more established TSOs or forced into the current legal framework. For instance, the representatives from the provincial clearing houses on the one hand endorsed a good legal framework for informal volunteering as well, but on the other hand were reluctant to stifle spontaneous initiatives. Finally, some respondents cautioned that vulnerable groups of people (e.g. low socio-economic status) do not have the same potential to set up informal networks as middle class citizens and that a more organized setting – especially at the start – for these groups is primordial.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Our paper examined how the generally prevailing diagnosis of 'hybridization' varies as a function of the Belgian corporatist non-profit regime. More specifically we explored how and to what extent processes of devolution and responsabilized autonomy influence the relationships between TSOs and (mainly local) governments, and between TSOs and their volunteers and members. To this end we used qualitative data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives from sector-specific umbrella organizations and with officials working in independent governmental agencies in different subsectors.

The respondents discerned both devolution and a shift towards responsabilized autonomy in the Flemish third sector, albeit with context-specific articulations.

Regarding TSOs' heightened autonomy, respondents observed three paradoxes : 1. policy planning as an accountability tool forces TSOs into task-linked and time-limited arrangements; 2. the devolution from the central to the local policy level leads to a passing of responsibilities to TSOs; and 3. municipalities as third parties complicate the operation of TSOs.

The shift in responsibilities essentially seemed to take on two forms. First, TSOs and the volunteers that engage in them are appealed to take their responsibility for complex societal problems that affect specific social groups, such as poverty reduction and the integration of ethnic minorities. Second, TSOs are also increasingly mobilized to support and sometimes activate welfare clients, people with psychiatric problems, people that are labour unsuitable or that are otherwise vulnerable in today's society.

'Strong', middle-class citizens are encouraged to take up volunteering to help solve complex societal problems and to support vulnerable groups of people; in contrast, 'vulnerable', lower-class citizens are strongly appealed to take responsibility into their own hands and are mobilized through top-down, third party volunteering. These heightened pressures on the contribution of volunteers, both 'strong' and 'vulnerable' have altered the relationships between TSOs on the one hand, and their volunteers and members on the other hand. The tensions that arise, differ dependent on the 'type' of volunteer, namely strong or vulnerable.

As to strong volunteers, the respondents underlined the appeal made to them, but at the same time noticed some factors that complicate their engagement. First, the expertise gap and the power imbalance between the expanding professionalized sectoral superstructures at the national and regional level, and the primarily volunteer-based substructure of local TSOs, further increases. TSOs seem to experience substantial problems to involve volunteers in their strategic and operational decision-making. Second, in some subsectors the increasingly professionalized superstructure stands in growing contrast to the crumbling voluntary base. Finally, the pressure to promote expertise among volunteers might lead to the over-professionalization of volunteers, and possibly be of-putting to some volunteers, especially those in a vulnerable position.

With regard to vulnerable volunteers, in Belgium, the policy focus so far remains primarily on volunteering as a lever for social activation and reintegration, rather than on third party volunteering aimed at economic activation. According to the respondents engaging vulnerable volunteers remains difficult, and requires that these volunteers are intrinsically motivated, that the referring organizations acts as intermediaries between the volunteer and the host organization and offer sufficient support to both parties.

Finally with regard to the membership base of TSOs, that forms an important recruitment pool for volunteers, the respondents observed two main evolutions. First, membership based organizations more often expand their membership base by offering benefits, through which the membership fee can

be easily earned back. Second, the respondents noticed an ‘informalization’ of the third sector, as exemplified by the flourishing of informal citizen initiatives outside TSOs.

In Belgium so far the dominant discourse on TSOs’ role and on volunteering is neo-communitarist. However, a bifurcation is growing between strong and vulnerable volunteers. Furthermore, strong volunteers are being encouraged to take up volunteering as a shared responsibility to help solve complex societal problems and to support vulnerable groups of people, whereas vulnerable volunteers are strongly appealed to take responsibility into their own hands and are mobilized through top-down, third party volunteering. Against this background we wonder whether neo-liberal communitarism is bound to become the dominant governmentality principle in Belgium and in countries with a similar corporatist welfare regime. Indeed, neo-liberal communitarism combines an increased need to earn one’s citizenship (neo-liberal) with an increased focus on the community as a place where active citizenship can be strengthened (communitarist) (van Houdt et al., 2011). Therefore questions for future research among others, are: is the distinction between strong and vulnerable volunteers made in the policy discourse in other countries and other welfare regimes? What are the implications of this bifurcation in volunteer profiles for the present-day nature of volunteering?

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