

Between clients and bureaucrats: An ambivalent position of NGOs in the social inclusion agenda in Czech statutory cities

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Abstract

This paper examines the landscape of policy work conducted by NGOs with respect to the social inclusion agenda. Based on a qualitative case study of integration policy in a Czech city, the paper focuses on the relations between collaborative and critical policy work of NGOs. In this case, while the collaborative position is mainly justified by apolitical expertise, long-term professional experience and compliance with official standards of social work, the latter calls upon community-based knowledge and political participation. We argue that despite indisputable long-term benefits of collaborative policy work it includes risks of paternalism, accountability deficit and exclusiveness. These risks become more significant with increasing shared understanding and mutual interdependence. In this situation there is a room for the episodic external critical capacity to challenge the governance structure and enforce the accountability of collaborative networks.

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1. Introduction

The central theme we explore in this article is the idea that we can distinguish between two fundamental regimes of NGOs working in the social inclusion area. The first one, which is typical for institutionalized and mostly service-based organizations using neutral professional knowledge, which establishes their authority to be engaged in policy disputes. In relation to clients, their goal is to reach a state where clients will be able to live without any further assistance. The second regime is typical of activist groups using their expert knowledge to assist citizens in exercising their own agency in defending their interests in policy debates. Their ultimate goal is to increase citizens' policy capacity and to mobilize them to defend their interest without any assistance. We hypothesize that the way different NGOs perceive their relationship to their constituencies determines the character of their policy work. Our main concern is with how these two regimes interface with each other, and with the policy work of bureaucrats and local citizens.

The mushrooming of informal groups emphasizing the advocate's role and mobilizing citizens can be considered as a new phenomenon in the post-socialist context which was previously described predominantly in terms of expert

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driven ‘transactional activism’ (Císař, 2013; Petrova & Tarrow, 2007). In transactional activism, NGOs’ legitimacy does not result from active membership but from epistemic sources – the scientific knowledge, expertise and experience they produce and use in public discourse (O’Neill, 2001, according to Buth, 2011). Transactional NGOs have been also heavily involved in processes of collaborative planning with public authorities. In contrast to transactional activism, newly emerging activists groups are formed by people with diverse backgrounds and derive their legitimacy directly from citizens’ mobilization. They are also more critical towards politicians and policy bureaucrats and they can be characterized in terms of social movements.

The case study from which we draw these points involves a local controversy which erupted in 2012 between two NGOs representing these different styles of policy work. Their “public war” arose from a housing crisis in one of the largest impoverished Czech areas – *Předlice in Usti nad Labem*. Studying this controversial case provides us with different accounts of how NGO policy workers see their jobs, construct their policies and engage with stakeholders. Particularly, we intend to describe how NGOs might, at this level, be considered to have expertise and how their expertise is constructed. In addition, we discuss the differences between the character of policy work employed in the formal and informal processes of influencing public policies and the differences between strategies and accounts used in different regimes of NGOs’ policy work, focusing on how they justify their policy positions, choose their policy strategies and exert their policy influence. We are interested in how policy workers, in our case those from NGOs, get a place at the table, how the question is framed, what discourse is accepted as valid, and how this work relates to the outcome at any point in time. Generally speaking, we are interested how collaborative venues for policy work might be related to alternatives styles of NGOs’ policy work such as informal protests and what is the relation between collaborative and critical capacity of NGOs. Especially the role of shared understanding and constructing of target population is taken in consideration.

2. The policy work of NGOs

Drawing on the narrative of “governance” (Offe, 2008; Rhodes, 1996), we consider policy as an ongoing dynamic and interactive process between actors – governmental policy workers, non-governmental actors, or business associations – with diverging interests in formulating, promoting, and achieving common goals by mobilizing, exchanging, and deploying a range of ideas, rules, and resources (Torfing, Peters, Pierre, & Sorenson, 2012: 3). There is obviously no single account of policy work. On the contrary, there are many different activities and ways to make sense of such activities that can be understood as policy work. Policy process participants are supposed to have overlapping agendas, different interpretations of the problem and different levels of concern about its resolution (Colebatch, Hoppe, & Noordegraaf, 2010: 228).

Keen (2006) lists activities which can be associated with NGO policy work: (1) monitoring government; (2) researching issues relevant to a policy field; (3) making pre-budget submissions; (4) preparing submissions to government inquiries; (5) liaising with political representatives and their staff; (6) being available for consultation; (7) sitting on government committees and task forces; (8) influencing legislation; (9) networking with relevant policy communities; (10) disseminating information; (11) ensuring visibility, credibility and legitimacy of the organization; (12) encouraging public debate.

In the modern state, crucial sources of policy-making innovations come from professional communities as key fora in developing and testing knowledge, setting standards and steering behaviour (Dunleavy & O’Leary, 1987: 302). Over the last two decades, the expansion of new forms of engagement between state and citizen might be viewed as evidence of a new form of collaborative policymaking (Innes & Booher, 2003); collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2011; O’Flynn & Wanna, 2008); or interactive governance (Torfing et al., 2012). Collaborative models of policy work deal both with diversity and interdependence because of needs to be inclusive and to explore interdependence in the search of solutions (Innes & Booher, 2003: 54). In their model of collaborative governance, Ansell and Gash (2008) distinguish: (1) starting conditions (including resource asymmetries, incentives for participation and history of cooperation); (2) collaborative process (face-to-face dialogue, trust building, commitment to process, shared understanding, intermediate outcomes); (3) institutional design (participatory inclusiveness, forum exclusiveness, clear ground rules, process transparency); (4) facilitative leadership and (5) outcomes. Public authorities’ interest in initiating collaboration with NGOs can be summarized in three propositions: collaboration can encourage trust, collaboration can unlock distinct competencies of other sectors, and collaboration can deliver a transformative approach to service improvement (Entwistle & Martin, 2005). Sirianni (2009) presents

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