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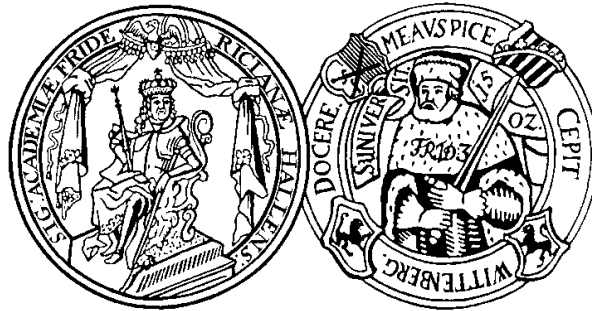
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Stefan Hielscher, Jan Winkin und Ingo Pies

How to Improve the Moral Capital of Civil Society Organizations? – Some Ordonomic Suggestions

Diskussionspapier Nr. 2017-12

des Lehrstuhls für Wirtschaftsethik
an der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg,
hrsg. von Ingo Pies,
Halle 2017

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Kurzfassung

Zivilgesellschaftliche Organisationen (ZGO) sind für die Bewältigung zahlreicher globaler Herausforderungen der modernen Gesellschaft unverzichtbar. Allerdings fällt es ZGO bisweilen schwer, jene ambitionierten Standards selbst einzuhalten, die sie völlig zu Recht von anderen Akteuren einfordern, etwa im Hinblick auf eine verantwortungsvolle Interessenvertretung, ethisches Fundraising oder die Einbeziehung wichtiger Stakeholder-Gruppen in die organisationale Willensbildung. In diesem Artikel diskutieren wir die praktischen Implikationen der jüngst am Lehrstuhl für Wirtschaftsethik entwickelten und in internationalen Fachzeitschriften veröffentlichten ordonomischen Forschungsbeiträge. Unsere zentrale Schlussfolgerung besteht darin, die Regeln für einen „fairen Wettbewerb“ zwischen CSOs zu verbessern, um so die Glaubwürdigkeit des gesamten CSO-Sektors zu stärken.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Zivilgesellschaft, Responsible Advocacy, Wettbewerb, Selbstregulierung

Abstract

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are indispensable watchdogs against corrupt practices and global challenges found in complex, modern societies. Yet sometimes, CSOs themselves can struggle to live up to the ambitious standards they demand of others, such as responsible advocacy, ethical fundraising, and meaningful participation of stakeholders. In this discussion paper, we present the practical implications of our recently published research, which suggests that strengthening the rules of “fair competition” among CSOs is a promising avenue to increase their credibility.

Keywords: Civil Society, Responsible Advocacy, Competition, Self-Regulation

How to Improve the Moral Capital of Civil Society Organizations? – Some Ordonomic Suggestions¹

Stefan Hielscher, Jan Winkin and Ingo Pies

Introduction: How Credible Are Civil Society Organizations?

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are indispensable watch dogs in our complex modern societies. CSOs are scandalizing shrewd business practices hidden to the public; CSOs keep an eye on corrupt governments when citizens lack a voice in political decision-making; CSOs are lobbying for effective international policy frameworks when national governments respond to global challenges with parish-pump politics. No doubt, international CSOs are facing a mammoth task. Yet sometimes, the same watchdog CSOs find it difficult to live up to their own moral values, especially to their promise of being true advocates of their stated missions such as fighting poverty or environmental protection. This has prompted leading CSOs to band together and set up accountability standards for responsible advocacy, ethical fundraising, and a meaningful participation of stakeholders. However, a recent performance survey² showed that CSOs are struggling to meet some of these ambitious, agreed-upon standards. Our research³ suggests that strengthening the rules of “fair competition” among CSOs is a promising avenue to improve the “moral capital” of watchdog CSOs that is desperately needed in today’s global world.

1. Responsible Advocacy Means to Be Responsive and Accurate

In the 2000s, international CSOs found themselves in hot water as external and internal critics demanded higher accountability, questioning both the legitimacy and effectiveness of their work. In 2008 then, the international elite including Oxfam, Transparency Int., and Greenpeace, founded the “INGO Accountability Charter” (today: “Accountable Now,” AN) to strengthen the third sector’s credibility. In its early days, AN focused on financial accountability and good governance, giving way to pressures from international organizations and donors as well as from business firms who wish to see CSOs comply with the same integrity standards they demand from others. It was not until 2013 that responsible advocacy returned on the agenda when members discussed common standards such as fact checks and clear procedures to formulate and exit advocacy positions. Also, a “Complaints Handling Mechanism” (CHM) was introduced to give stakeholders a voice to critique misrepresented interests or other questionable advocacy practices.

A CHM can be an important instrument to support responsible advocacy. “Poverty pornography” provides a telling example. Observers⁴ use this term to criticize shocking

¹ This discussion paper is a long version of a much shorter article published on the “Bath Business and Society” blog of the University of Bath, UK (<http://blogs.bath.ac.uk/business-and-society/>) in July 2017. Since a blog is rather limited in length to attract attention, we here use the format of a discussion paper to explain the practical relevance of our work in more detail, using more arguments, examples, and references.

² Accountable Now (2016).

³ Cf. Hielscher et al. (2017).

⁴ As an example, the blog “Aid Thought” (<http://aidthoughts.org>) published an article about poverty pornography in July 2009 asking “What is ‘poverty porn’ and why does it matter for development?”.

but misleading imagery in CSO's fundraising campaigns such as the notorious "potbelly child." Critics disapprove of such shocking images since they violate peoples' dignity in the Global South, concealing root causes of poverty and misdirecting well-intentioned help. However, such forms of irresponsible advocacy practices remain fashionable. Some development CSOs are still not above poverty porn. The "rusty radiator"⁵ collects impressively frustrating examples, awarding the "fundraising video with the worst use of stereotypes" on a yearly basis.

Granted, poverty porn is an extreme case. Only a minority of CSOs engage in it. Yet this example shows how some forms of controversial advocacy tactics seem to be very effective in raising public attention, gaining member support and securing funding, although they reinforce stereotypes and misrepresent stakeholder interests.⁶ To broaden the context, advocacy CSOs sometimes are tempted to simplify messages and use over-simplified or even populist formulas to attract attention. Such tactics risk misrepresenting complex issues and concealing root causes. As a case in point, academic research reveals serious inconsistencies in advocacy positions related to the global food crisis in 2008.⁷ Before the food crisis, CSOs claimed that *low* food prices promote poverty and hunger in rural areas in developing countries. After the food crisis, however, the very same CSOs claimed that *high* food prices cause hunger and poverty in urban areas in developing countries. In another case, CSO campaigns have been scandalizing the effects of speculation on food prices, although research suggests other aspects are much more important in the fight against poverty and hunger.⁸

In principle, CHMs could be used by critical stakeholders to raise issues related to poverty porn—if CSOs were responsive. However, a *Performance Study on the Excellence of CSO accountability* suggests that there is still a long way to go, even for Accountable Now members. In this study, Accountable Now analyzed how CSOs, including 20 member and 20 non-member organizations, give critical voices a say in their work, and how they use "fact checks" when entering or exiting campaigns. Results are sobering. Although these standards have been in place since 2008 and are binding for members, CSOs seem to fare quite poorly in "stakeholder responsiveness" and "responsible advocacy." More specifically, only about 10 percent of CSOs responded to complaints raised by the evaluation team as a blind test, although stakeholder responsiveness is both an agreed-upon standard and an essential requirement to become a full member of Accountable Now. In a similar way, many CSOs lacked robust fact checks and clear procedures to adopt or exit advocacy positions needed to reveal and correct mistakes or inconsistencies in advocacy positions.

⁵ <http://www.rusty radiator.com>.

⁶ Cf. Fassin (2009).

⁷ Cf. Swinnen and Squicciarini (2012).

⁸ Cf. Will and Pies (2016).

2. *How Competition Affects CSO Behavior*

So why is it that member CSOs struggle to comply with AN's standards? A suggesting explanation would be to assume that member organizations lack a will of being more accountable. This account is inconsistent with the amply documented high aspiration of CSO leaders to promote accountability within their organizations.⁹ In our opinion, a more convincing explanation is that CSOs need to operate in a highly competitive environment, all seeking funding, members, and media attention. All these are necessary, but scarce resources, and the competition for these can impede responsible advocacy.

From a theoretical point of view, CSOs are facing a structural challenge here, which in academia is often described as a "commons problem" or, more generally, a "social dilemma." CSOs can either choose the easy way and scandalize what is easy to scandalize, without paying too much attention to potential negative side-effects, including misrepresentation, stereotyping, or hiding root causes. The danger is, of course, that other CSOs follow suit to secure their "piece of the pie" but risk the whole sector's reputation as a promotor of the common good. Here, scholars speak of unintended consequences, because these results are undesired side effects that CSOs would like to avoid.

Poverty pornography is an extreme example of an unwelcome side effect. In other occasions, CSOs might be tempted to blame unpopular politicians, "big pharma" or multinational corporations to mobilize public support. However, this strategy may conceal the underlying systemic complexities and interdependencies. So, while CSOs might be scandalizing less relevant sideshows, there is the risk that more pressing issues and systemic challenges remain unattended since attention spans in the media and the public are both short and scarce.

3. *Responsible Advocacy is a Collective Challenge*

Can we expect the single CSO to refrain from this kind of adversarial "competition" and to choose the other option, i.e. to engage in responsible advocacy, merely on a voluntary basis? As much as we set our hopes on people to behave the moral way, we fear that especially CSOs in financially weak positions see themselves forced to apply effective but morally controversial advocacy tactics. As mentioned above, social dilemmas can take unprecedented dynamics and lead to a "downward cascade of cooperation."¹⁰ Thus, the single CSO needs to be sure that all other relevant competitors for public attention follow suit.

This is why Accountable Now is such an important initiative: Given that compulsory government regulation would be out of place for advocacy CSOs that need to have full rein to criticize governments, CSOs themselves must create common standards of responsible advocacy, ethical fundraising, and participation of stakeholders for the whole sector. Although it is encouraging that Accountable Now has mechanisms in place to raise the private costs of those members that do not abide by the rules, it is still a long way to go until all relevant "competitors" are included. Until then, the initiative is a pioneer in experimenting with new forms of governance, including reporting and monitoring.

⁹ Cf. Schmitz et al. (2012).

¹⁰ Ostrom (2000, p. 152).

Conclusion: Creating an Enabling Environment for Responsible Advocacy

In June 2017, CSOs organized in “Accountable Now” were meeting to set the course for the future. Now, some voices are demanding a stronger leadership to turn advocacy work more responsible. Others are looking more towards external monitoring. Taking the incentives of competition into account, our research suggests that both strategies create an enabling environment for responsible advocacy. Regarding raising costs, an effective monitoring of irresponsible campaigns requires graduated reputational sanctions. For example, in cases of repeated rule violations, Accountable Now could raise public awareness for bad examples. Giving competition a positive direction, Accountable Now could grant prizes for best practices in responsible advocacy that help CSOs to raise funds and public attention. An advantage of the latter approach is that it can easily include non-members.

Of course, there are no ready-made solutions. Finding answers is a process of collective learning, which is what Accountable Now is all about. It is crucial for CSOs to acknowledge that they are sensitive to incentives that originate from a dysfunctional institutional framework of competition. The goals of helping the weak, the marginalized, the neglected and the poor are commendable and worthy of all political support. But their siding with the disadvantaged does not spare CSOs from the adverse effects of the competition for scarce resources. “External” monitoring may be a way to move ahead to save the “moral capital” of CSOs since good intentions need to be supported by appropriate incentives for both: to do the right thing and to do things right.

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¹¹ Als kostenloser Download unter <http://ethik.wiwi.uni-halle.de/forschung>. Hier finden sich auch die Diskussionspapiere der Jahrgänge 2003-2012.

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¹² Als kostenloser Download unter <http://ethik.wiwi.uni-halle.de/forschung>.

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