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Sub-theme 30: Organizations of Organizations

Organizations in cooperation within Development Partnerships –

The impact of organizational fields and institutions

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Attempts to solve important societal issues, for example long-term sick leave and unemployment, often involve several and varying type of actors. The European Union supports cooperation in projects aiming for new solutions and models to fight these problems. Organizations, such as partnerships as in this paper, are formed for this purpose at international, national, regional and local levels. They comprise actors from public sector at different levels, representatives from private companies and non-profit organizations. Our purpose is to show how partnerships are affected by EU-regulations, established institutions and organizational fields. We have followed one partnership close during two years time making extensive field observations, interviewed representatives in the partnership and analysed documents. The results show how decision making within the partnership shifts to legitimate actors, who became legitimate as an effect of organizational affiliation or hierarchical position. The result further reveals how the rules of one of the partnership's member organizations strongly affect cooperation. Strong organizations belonging to powerful organizational fields make a great impact in the collaboration in partnership. The partnership as a legitimate organization hereby becomes marginalised.

1. Introduction

Unemployment and long-term sick leave have for many years been seen as important problems in society and attracted much attention among politicians. This is also manifested at EU-level with several transnational initiatives taken over the last twenty years. Substantial financial efforts have followed these political ambitions, where different regional and social funds in the European Unions have been formed.

In parallel with this growing concern for social conditions and exclusion from labour market, new forms of governance have gained ground in the EU-decision bodies. This has been illustrated with concepts such as soft law and governance, replacing older forms of hard laws and classical juridical forms. These new trends have been studied at transnational level for many years (Jacobsson, 2004; Vifell, 2009). They form also part of wider studies on “an industry of regulators”, where agreements are made in consensus, and civil society together with cooperating companies replace the State as regulator.

These trends have also been linked to entities where these developments can be studied: the organizations. Discussions on new forms of regulations have identified alternative forms of organizations such as the meta-organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; 2008). This form often takes the transnational as its point of departure, and their members are other organizations, and not individuals. Another term is partial organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011), where only some of all the elements of traditional organizations are used.

The political focus on exclusion from the labour market, new forms of transnational regulation and a discussion on new types of organizations can also be studied from a perspective of local organizational action. That is the basic assumption of this paper, describing a Development Partnership operating over a three year period in a town in the middle of Sweden. The object of the partnership was to make the Social Insurance Office, The Employment Agency and several other private, public and civil society organizations work together. The intention was in more concrete terms to find new methods of combating exclusion – practices possible to disseminate to other regions. A foundational principle in this partnership was the role of participants: people who were unemployed or on long-term sick leave. In the work of this Partnership they were assigned the important role as experts as the term empowerment was a guiding idea.

This constituted a fairly complex situation. The work had to follow the requirements for EU-funding within the European Social Fund, where partnership and equal partners were some of the preconditions. All decisions were to be taken in consensus, and also the individual participants formed part of the partnership. Their position was as strong as the other partners total voting strength. At the same time, the partners had in practice very different preconditions. Some of the more powerful institutions in Swedish administration were represented: The Employment Agency and the Social Insurance Office together with a municipality and a county council. These public sector giants were to cooperate on equal footing with small social NGO's (Non Governmental Organization's), and individuals who represented themselves. Not only did the partners differ in financial backing, their experience from decision making and organizing also varied vast. The aim of our paper is to show how EU-regulations and established institutions and fields at local level together have an impact on the work. This requires a special type of negotiations, visible only from close reading of the organizational action.

The results of the study point to how a local project is slightly limited in its scope of action by the rules prescribed by transnational bodies in the EU. The ideas of decision-making in consensus and empowerment become renegotiated in the work, to facilitate a survival of the entire process. The initial power relations between the different partners are upheld throughout the work; illustrating how organizational strength and established societal fields become more prominent than the terminology proposed by the EU Employment agenda.

The rest of this paper is divided into five sections. After this introduction follows a theoretical overview, where notions of organizations are presented, along with an overview of previous studies on EU-regulations on Employment strategy. Following this, the section on Contributions links ideas of institutional theory with the purpose of the study. The concepts of fields and legitimacy are relevant for the study both at transnational and organizational level. Hereafter we introduce the research approach and a following section presents the empirical findings in the form of the two concrete examples of the action in the Development Partnership. One of those shows how an acute financial crisis is tampered with, and the other how the rules of one of the actors affected the work. The last section summarises main findings and contributions.

2. Theory

The local/regional Development Partnership under study in this paper has members representing organizations from different organizational fields and with them well established institutions. The Employment Agency and the Social Insurance Office are among the most established organizations in the public sphere in Sweden. They are powerful in themselves, but it is of special interest when they cooperate with other organizations for different purposes. Here regional representatives of these huge and complex national organizations interact with representatives from Social NGOs, trade unions along with a municipality and county council in a local setting.

With this as background, two areas of interest will be encircled in the following theoretical section. Firstly the mere idea of organization is discussed and the question on what type of organization this partnership represents is raised. Can terminology on meta- and partial organization help us understand this organizing? The other theme places our study in a context. It brings to the fore issues on globalisation and contemporary forms of regulation where soft law and governance become prominent concepts. The partnership illustrates both what an organization actually can be seen as, and how organizational life is affected by conditions formed at transnational level.

2.1 Development partnership as organizational form

The collaboration between actors from different organizations in a Development Partnership has similarities with two forms discussed in the literature: meta-organizations and partial organizations. Meta-organizations consist of other organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008) whilst the characteristic of partial organizations is their use of only a limited numbers of the elements that traditionally make up a formal organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). These two approaches question basic assumptions in theories on Organizations. It is firstly assumed that members of organizations are individuals and secondly, when organizations are studied they are regarded as well defined entities with all necessary elements.

The members of meta-organizations consist, as said, of other organizations and their aim is to work in the interest of its members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). These types of organizations exist on national as well as international level, they are often associations but with no special

legal status. Following this, the autonomous and independent member organizations have often a higher status and are seen as more powerful than the meta-organization itself.

Partial organizations can be found within as well as outside or among formal organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Instead of making a distinction between an organization and its environment, these authors focus on the distinction between the organized and the non-organized. A partial organization is a decided order taking diverse forms depending on their grades of membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring and sanctions; the necessary elements of a formal organization. A complete, formal organization has by definition access to all these elements of organization, whilst a partial organization is based only on some of them. In its most extreme form one is sufficient, for example membership. From this Ahrne and Brunsson (2011:85) define organization as *“a decided order in which people use elements that are constitutive of formal organizations”*.

The Development Partnership under study has no legal status and the partners involved have a high degree of independent identity. Furthermore: the decisions taken in the Partnership were not always accepted in the partner organizations. Our studied partnership was obligated to organize in the form of a development partnership with equal partners from different organizations. In this inflicted partnershipform, the organizational elements of hierarchy and rules are those the partnership had to struggle with to operate the partnership. On the basis of the above, we regard the ideas underpinning meta-organizations and partial organizations useful for understanding the organizational action evolving in the Development Partnership.

2.2 Partnerships as a new form of governance

The principle of partnerships for EU-funding is part of a wider picture. Researchers from different disciplines and countries have studied how a new form of governance is evolving based on soft law and a new form of regulation. Soft law is a method where traditional legislation is replaced by voluntary agreements reached in private, or semiprivate, often international organizations. In the EU it has also been expressed as “Open Method of Cooperation”, an intergovernment cooperation, that includes supranational elements (Jacobsson, 2004). It builds on a broad participation of actors aiming to reach coordination and adaptation of member-state policies on a voluntary basis. The OMC provided a roadmap for cooperation when the EU faced an increasingly diverse group of member states. As hard

laws and a traditional juridical framework leave room for regulation based on voluntary agreements one important precondition is that those are to be reached in consensus

The cooperation in Public-Private Partnership constitutes an adjoining form for these ambitions on a supranational coordination. It involves actors from private, public and non-profit organizations (Mörth & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). Development partnerships have, still according to the ambitions outlined by the European Union, a specific aim to develop new ways or models to conquer a problem addressed by the politicians. To receive funding from some of the programs of the European Union, you are required to organize the work in a Development Partnership. The terms partner and partnership further expresses that actors involved are to participate on equal conditions (Mörth & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). This terminology illustrates how a new type of language and knowledge is emanating from ambitions to form a common EU strategy on the social and employment field. 

2.3 Employment strategies and regulation

Jacobsson's (2004) study provides concrete examples how these new measures form a system of governance and how the system has the potential to change current practices in the member states. These measures will also add to the integration process, but in another way than hard law would do. Meaning making is her main focus and how this becomes crucial. Work with soft law entails that a social mechanism is working, and she shows how language is crucial along with knowledge creation. Of special interest for our study is how the language relates to Equal-projects, as this program brings in a new terminology local administrators have to learn. The national administrators are forced to accept this special EU-language and adhere to its vocabulary.

Jacobsson and Johansson (2007) portray the Employment strategies of the EU from a slightly different angle. The same basic idea of governance is here expressed as the OMC, Open Method of Cooperation. The reception of OMC is located to a national milieu: how has social NGO:s in Sweden been affected by the Employment Strategy in general and the new forms of governance in particular? The answer is that the OMC has had a limited direct influence on national reforms in Sweden. The major result is instead that new patterns of cooperation among social NGOs have been established at a national level. Firstly, the EU has broken the ground for institutionalized partnerships, such as the Development Partnership described in our paper. An important aspect is how these include not only employer and employee

representatives – something that would have been a continuation of a Swedish tradition. Instead, from the 1990's and as a result of the Swedish EU-affiliation, also social NGOs are given an active role. The EU actually required social economy organizations to take part in the ESF-partnerships both through the European Social Fund (ESF) and later. The EU has hereby become important to raise the legitimacy for Swedish social NGOs and new forms of governance at a transnational level have become a resource for them. Jacobsson and Johansson winds up in a language of new institutionalism by showing how these NGOs have made attempts "to de-stabilize and re-negotiate the institutionalized social field, by requesting voice and participation in social policy-making" (Jacobsson & Johansson, 2007:24). The importance of OMC and the soft law regulation is manifested in the upgrading of the NGO sector in the Swedish policy making in social policies.

Employment strategies within the EU have been studied with institutionalist theories also from a more general perspective. Vifell (2009) discusses the new guidelines for the EES – European employment strategy, with a focus on effects on the Swedish public administration. Her main conclusion is how decoupling is used in this practice. Swedish representatives have, on the one hand, to act in accordance with the norms of the European cooperation. The state of Sweden is required to be regarded as a legitimate actor in a European context. On the other hand: among national actors the EU and European influence on Swedish employment policy is not a legitimate concept. The administration needs to solve this contradiction and the solution is that activities are separated and different parts of the organization can handle different issues. Another way of decoupling is the classical measure: to separate how activities are presented from their actual implementation. The ambitions on the transnational EU-level are so filtered down to a national level with the help of decoupling.

2.4 Regulation – an issue larger than the EU

The Development Partnership in a small and sparsely populated region in Sweden, formed on the basis of EU-rules in order to receive EU-funding, have so become placed in a wider context. The identification of new forms of regulation gave us concepts such as soft law and consensual agreements. This in turn echoes a debate on regulation in different societal spheres. Scholars have looked into it also from the broad perspective of accountability (Boström & Garsten, 2008), as well as with more limited scopes such as banking regulation (Humphrey et al, 2009), rating agencies (Kerwer, 2005), global accounting regulation (Chiapello & Medjad, 2010) and the regulation of auditing (Loft et al, 2007) to identify a few.

Some have even suggested this should be seen as a change from an Audit Society (Power, 1997) to one dominated by an “industry of regulators”. An important contribution to this discussion is Power (2007). Our paper can be placed also in this context, and exemplify how wider societal turns can be illustrated within a more limited case.

3. When EU rules comes to town and a Partnership is formed

When studies on EU regulation of Employment describe processes on a national and transnational level, the data consists mainly of text-documents on strategies and regulations. Those transnational regulations need however to be turned into national legislation or regulation and in the end also action. Our Equal-project (Bogren, 2010) serves as an illustration of Employment strategy less as text and more of action in a local context. The overarching intentions expressed in documents are here confronted with diverse organizations joined in a partnership where the basic rules of conduct and decision making are determined at a transnational level. The organizations have to cooperate and struggle with the problems described in all these documents. Without the EU-money the partnership would never have materialised. This is the first of the intended contributions of our paper – to move the studies on employment strategy and the role of EU from an in itself necessary discussion on transnational regulations to one on organizational action at a local level and show how the intentions of the EU-strategy is taken care of.

Another motive for this focus is that studies on partnerships from the view of organizational theory are relatively sparse. There are studies made with a political science perspective describing the change from government to governance (John, 2001; Kjaer, 2004). Such studies are especially common in the United Kingdom where cooperation in partnerships was implemented by the Labour government already in 1997 (Flinders, 2005). One example is Bennington and Geddes (2001) discussing social exclusion and local social governance. Also in Sweden scholars within political science have studied the phenomenon, focussing democratic issues (Mörth, 2006; Hedlund, 2008). In sociology we find studies on empowerment and structural impact (Larsson, 2008) as well as about representation and equal relationships (Wistus, 2008). A study on partnerships with a clearer emphasis on business is provided by Sandebring (2006a; 2006b) discussing the collaboration between involved organizations around the access to electricity. But none of these studies draw on or pay attention to organizational theories.

On a more general level, there are also requests for more studies concerning cooperation in partnerships (Mörth & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Svensson & Nilsson, 2008). Mörth and Sahlin-Andersson addresses for example that cooperation in partnerships does not always function and why more studies from the field are needed. Svensson and Nilsson points out that the perceived strength in partnerships, with many organizations involved and solutions found in a spirit of consensus, at the same time become the weakness of partnership cooperation as the work can be too large and unfocused.

While this paper draws on organizational theory with an empirical base in partial organization with meta-organization character, our study also includes another type of actor. In this specific Development Partnership, where strong organizations constitute the membership, one partner is to represent the target group or the participants in the project. They do not belong to any organization, and this forms another type of problem not discussed in depth earlier, neither in the literature on partnerships nor in studies on meta-organizations.

3.1 Institutional theory as guidance

Another intended contribution is to make more explicit use of institutional theory in our endeavour to understand this local organizational action. For that second purpose, an introduction to the theory and major concepts is required.

The advantage of institutional theory for our purposes is the basic premise of its scepticism towards atomistic accounts of social processes. The environment or the context has been fundamental in the different varieties of institutional theories used by scholars over the years. Many standpoints in the theory have changed, but the foundational idea that Institutional theory discusses the relation between the institutional environment and organizational action remains intact.

This awareness of the external environment is firstly identified in the term institutionalism itself. Once an organization becomes aware of the environment, self awareness also changes. This process of increasing insights has many consequences and to Di Maggio (1988) this is where institutionalism has set in. It can thus from this perspective both be regarded as a process and an outcome.

A central construct of institutional theory has been “the field”. The concept has been used for understanding processes in organizations, of which some have been presented earlier in relation to our own study. Scott’s definition of organizational fields as “*a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field*” (Scott, 1995:56) is classical. Following him we also see the field as a loose grouping where the common meaning system is the common denominator. This definition has several implications. It clarifies how field is a matter of inter organizational relations, and further points to how organizations not only are interlinked by geographical location or their goals. The term field implies that organizations interact more frequently with each other than with other organizations as they might produce similar services, depend on the same type of suppliers or might be under the same type of regulation. Another important implication is how similar institutions guide organizations in the same field; structures that give stability and provide their actions with a meaning they can share between themselves.

Environments and institutions are hence interlinked, and legitimacy is closely connected to this reasoning. One of Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) major contributions was the observation that organizations incorporated elements from the environment, and hereby gained legitimacy. In their seminal article they gave ample examples, and following studies have also shown what measures are used to achieve this desired acceptance. In general terms one can say that whilst organizations express ideas of efficiency, they instead in their actions strive for legitimacy and survival. In the same line of thinking, the formal structure of an organization contributes to legitimacy rather than to coordination and control. Also Tolbert and Zucker (1983) emphasize the legitimacy as an explanation for organizational survival.

The perception of field has however developed over the years. An increased focus on change has been one ingredient. Another is the view that the field is as much about the relationship between the actors, as how the field affects the actors. The field is increasingly seen as a contextualised relational space; where disparate organizations come together to form a common understanding of things they share (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). This view of field leads to questions such as how and why do fields emerge? What are the processes behind?

4. Research approach

We have followed a Development Partnership during two years. Interviews were made three times with representatives from all organizations involved, as well with representatives from the target group and with the staff in the project organization. Project application, project plans and meeting reports are example of analyzed documents. Observations were performed during meetings with the development partnership and at those occasions field notes registered who spoke and their comments. The study is presented more in depth in Bogren (2010).

This Development Partnership received project funding from the Equal-program in the EU European Social Fund and was carried out in a town in the middle of Sweden. The aim of the project was to work out and test models for new ways back to the labour market for the target group; individuals who were long-term sick-listed or long-term unemployed. This specific region had bigger problems in this respect than most other regions in the country. Another aim in the project was to highlight existing barriers to rehabilitation. The project was carried out from June 2005 to December 2007 and the budget for the project was 13 million SEK.

The partnership had nine partners involved, including both local and regional actors. One of the partners was, as stated earlier, the target group itself. Other partners were representatives from the public sector (the Social Insurance Office, the County Labour Board, the County council, local authorities and local authority associations), the private sector (one employers' organization and one trade union organization) and the third sector (Coompanion, which supports co-operative development). These representatives also contributed financially, or in kind, to the project. The big public organizations had most of the monetary contribution, apart from the EU-funding. All organizations had one representative each and the target group had eight representatives in the development partnership. There were all in all sixteen representatives and hence an expected balance between the target group and other representatives. This power-distribution was the main rationale of the project, and made the ideal of empowerment appear more tangible.

The analysis is based on extensive field-notes from meetings in the Development Partnership, transcripts from interviews carried out over the period with actors and documents from the

project. In the research process we have also received feedback from the actors involved. The study has been carried out as a process-evaluation, similar to a kind of action research. In line with this, the findings in the study have been reported to the actors all along the project period and their comments have been discussed. That has become a form of validation for our study.

5. Decision making and legitimacy in the partnership

In the following two empirical examples, we show how a hierarchical order in terms of decision-making unfolds and how rules in one of the member organizations affect the work of the partnership. This takes place at the background of a constellation formed with half of the available resources funded by the EU and the related framework for this funding stipulating specific forms for decision-making and power balance.

5.1 Crisis with the budget: empowerment vanished

The Development Partnership had meetings approximately once a month (with all sixteen representatives) and this constellation was seen as the partnerships highest decision-forum. Over time, less and less decisions were taken at the meetings with the entire partnership. Decisions instead moved to the staff group or unofficial groupings of representatives from dominating organizations. We will present one example describing financial difficulties in the project and the emergence of a so called “budget group” to illustrate how decision making and legitimacy evolved. These events led to the development of a more pronounced hierarchical order in the partnership.

In December 2006 the project was threatened by serious economic problems: the funding proved to be insufficient to sustain the project. The main financiers of the project therefore suggested a special group, the budget group. In this formation only representatives from the public organizations participated, those who had contributed financially. Only a quick confirmation of their formation as a group took formally place at the meeting in the Development Partnership at December 1. The task for the budget group was to present proposal on how to handle the financial straits and manage the project financially and personally the coming year.

At the meeting in the Development Partnership three weeks later, the budget group presented their solution for continuing the work. They suggested a part time chairman salaried by the

project and working 30%. The idea was that a stronger leadership was necessary for running the project. They also suggested an economic controller to review and monitor the financial situation in the project. The meeting of the partnership adhered to the suggestions from the budget group without any discussion what so ever. It was more seen as a report to be confirmed, than a proposal to be discussed and evaluated.

The financial situation for the project, in itself a matter of survival, was really the trigger for these events. But there were also other problems involved. During 2006 decision authorities were unclear in the project. Among other problems, the division between the project leading coordinator and the Development Partnership was never clarified. When taking care of these financial problems a hierarchy between the involved partners became visible. In this crucial situation the individuals of the target group were not at all seen as qualified partners along with the small organizations within the partnership. The target-group representative Britta commented the situation:

Compare with a football team where everyone will get to play but when it is a crucial situation you bring in the best players.

Hereby the ambition with equal partners disappeared and the target-group was not seen as a competent actor. The target group had not showed so much interest in finance discussions earlier and that probably mattered when it came to expectations of their role in this financial crisis. On the other hand, no serious efforts were made to introduce them into the issues either – the whole thing was presented as something beyond their reach.

Two legitimate actors emerged as a result of this crises; the budget group and the working chairman. Representatives from the public organizations, also the funding contributors, took responsibility for solving the financial crisis in the project and they could therefore be seen as legitimate actors. All members of the budget group represented well established organizations. When the salaried chairman was appointed, this leading role was another way to create a hierarchical order for the operation of the partnership.

During this process the Development Partnership as a whole lost its legitimacy as a decision making organ. The target-group, as an important partner, was outmanoeuvred from groups where decisions were taken, such as the budget-group and the staff-group. Less important decisions were reached in groups with the target-group attending. Other decisions were taken

in the staff-group, led by the chairman, but where the target-group did not participate. A lot of decisions had now moved from the entire Development Partnership to the chairman and subgroups.

A hierarchical order had consequently emerged– a salaried chairman and public organizations that funded money for the project became legitimate actors as regards decision-making. The target group and the smaller organizations were no longer seen as partners with full responsibility.

5.2 “Some are more equal than others”

In this section we will describe how the formal rules in one of the involved organizations made it hard for the partnership to operate within the intentions of the project. The example concerns the participation of the target-group and the rules in one of the member-organizations that had impact on the whole existence of the partnership. The idea of equal partners in a Development Partnership is at stake.

In the beginning of the project there were severe problems for the target-group to get involved in the project at all. A basic principle of the project was the active involvement of the target group representatives, and all organizations behind the project supported this idea. This was following also from the idea with equal partners, forming decisions in the partnership in consensus. But once the initial steps of the project were taken, the rules within the Social Insurance Office even prevented some of the representatives from the target group to participate. This is a complex issue, close to a Catch 22-situation. On the one hand the representatives from the target group were supposed to contribute with their experiences from being long-term sick-listed or long-term unemployed. On the other hand, it could be argued from a formal point of view that if they took part actively here, their entire situation became different. A critical question emerged: where they really that sick and for those reasons excluded from the labour market if they managed to take an active role in the partnership? When the national legislation and the applied regulations in the framework with the Social Insurance organization were scrutinised, the participation of the target group appeared impossible. At long last the situation could be solved. A special decision stated in a letter from the regional top management at the Social Insurance Office clarified the situation to its own officers and the project could continue.



Both the target-group and the Social Insurance Office were important partners in the partnership, based on their skills concerning the situation for long-term sick-listed. The involvement from the target-group was absolutely crucial for the survival of the partnership since the participation of this group was such a fundamental idea in the project. In this case the rules concerning social insurance were still close to hinder the active participation of the target-group. The balance between the partners was not upheld in the organisational practice.

This pointed to an obvious contradiction. For the Social Insurance Office it was important to follow the rules concerning social insurance. If not, they wouldn't have been seen as a legitimate actor in their organizational field. For the Development Partnership this was instead a frustrating time as it was obvious how the rules in one of the member-organizations were not only the rules of the game, but that those rules could actually halt the entire Partnership. In this situation the established regulations in the Social Insurance Office (a well established organization in a well established organizational field) for a period prevailed over the aims behind the Development Partnership.

6. Main findings and contributions

The Development Partnership and its participants described here were all under pressure from two sides. At first the EU-ideals had to be addressed. Those prescribed not only the organizational form and accompanying decision making rules, but also what ideas were seen as influential, mainly empowerment. Secondly the established organizations and other partners in the collaborating partnership had their own logics and frameworks to attend to. The findings can be located to the tension between these two forces.

As explained, an explicit aim of EU-projects of this kind is to include disadvantaged groups, target groups, into decision-making in and management of projects. When looking for solutions to social problems such as unemployment and absence from work due to illness, the experiences of these groups are deemed essential. Our findings point however to some fundamental difficulties with this ambition, when the category doesn't belong to an existing organization. Development Partnerships consist of other organizations from different spheres, public, private and civic society and constitute hereby a form of meta-organization. To this can be added that the public organizations working with these social issues are well established and form strong organizational fields. When target groups with experiences of

being excluded from the labour market meet these strong forces and their established fields in a meta-organization, their position becomes very weak in spite of all the good intentions.

The effects of the meta-organisation-form were palpable. This is illustrated with the beginning of the work, when one of the member organizations became so much more powerful than the others. This eventually threatened the whole work when this organisation exerted its power. The group of participants were marginalised, in spite of the guiding principle of empowerment. That principle was fundamental not only in the EU-language and the Equal-program guidelines. It was the founding idea of this very project. Regardless of all this, the strong partner was close to stop the work, drawing on its specific regulations and rules.

This importance of perceived organizational strength was verified by other events. Decision making forums moved away from the partnership to a limited number of actors seen as more legitimate. The legitimacy of the Development Partnership itself was questioned when the representatives from well-established organizations took over as financial problems unfolded in the partnership. In the end the established organizations with a firm position in their own field had a great impact in running the project. What mattered ultimately was the belonging to an organization and to a field – it strengthened the position in the project.

The findings can be taken one step further. In other contexts the organizations in this case all might belong to different fields; the county council forms one, the labour market organizations forms another and the social security office belongs to yet another field. This is in line with Forsell and Jansson (2000) and their view of different fields in the public sector. It appears however that the established public organizations when they encountered the target group and their position formed a joint organizational field within the partnership. They had shared interests to defend.

Also here, it becomes important to compare with the overarching principles of the work. The intentions were to develop new ideas and practices to conquer social exclusion – an ambition in itself requiring reflections on both the existing frameworks in the area and the power-relations between public bodies and other actors. Especially the role of social NGO's has been emphasized in this respect. Further: the idea of empowerment could possibly have encouraged a more modest action from the major players in the partnership as the idea was to give voice to excluded citizens and from there develop new ideas. The explicit aim of identifying

hindrances to rehabilitation should further emphasise this desire to question present practices. A specific mechanism was also intended to facilitate this: the consensus-idea for decision making in the partnership prescribed in the EU-norms. In spite of these intentions expressed in the setup of the partnership, the stronger local organizational logic got the upper hand.

The target group did not belong to an organization neither did they form any during the project. Contrary to this, a few individuals became instead actors in the partnership. The target group formed possibly something similar to an organizational field, with its own norms and institutionalized practices. In this field, a few strong individuals also received a special position, whilst most of them were never involved in important discussions. The final picture emerging of this Development Partnership is thus one of a meta-organization where the public organizations formed one field, discussing and exchanging experiences with a number of individuals. These individuals never represented more than themselves, as they did not belong to any organization. The EU-principles had little importance in this respect – those were at most seen as obstacles, but never really hindered the processes to evolve. When the project application expressing these ideals was adopted, other forces were set in motion.

The regulation of Employment initiatives within the EU is expressed in a new language and based on soft law and voluntary agreements. The principles on empowerment and Partnership are not only adding to the Employment vocabulary, it was also guiding the work described here. But as a consequence of the new forms of regulations, they can not be seen as absolute rules. They are rather expressing political ambition and – perhaps more importantly – a requirement to get EU-funding.

These political ambition on equal participation and influence for the target group proves however not to be implemented so easily. Barriers in the form of well established institutions and organizations had a great impact on the partnership, here seen as a form of meta-organization. This is obviously something politicians, other policymakers together with actors inside or outside the European Union advocating empowerment and influence for target groups need to consider. The vocabulary might be adopted but it still proves to be on a surface level. The resistance upheld by established organizations and strong organizational fields can form major obstacles to these ambitions.

From a theoretical standpoint this also points to weaknesses and problems in the new governance expressed in terms such as “soft law” and governance. As these forms are based on meaning making, language creation and diffusion of knowledge (Jacobsson 2004), the already established organizations in strong fields become important. Their representatives have a long tradition of sustaining their positions in society. With the new winds of governance blowing through their offices, they also learn how to tamper with issues of prescribed cooperation and partnerships. Their framework is perhaps to a large extent still one of “hard rules” rather than “soft law”.

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