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IN PARTNERSHIPS WE TRUST: NGO-DONOR RELATIONS. A CASE STUDY OF ROMANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT NGOS

DAN MERCEA•, ANDRA CĂTĂLINA STOICA*

ABSTRACT. In Romania, as in other Eastern European countries, the non-profit sector developed with funds and expertise from international donor organizations. This paper considers the relationship between non-profit organizations and their sponsors; particularly the influence funding has had on the structure of the former and their peer partnerships. To develop, NGOs have had to build a funding record; consequently, they have put a strong emphasis on the vertical relationship with their donors and the requirements of the latter for funding. Competitions to secure funding, access to specific know-how, the consolidation of the grants' market have had a bearing on peer networks between non-profits. Ultimately, NGOs have been left with the difficult task of having to navigate between a pragmatic approach, to stay active in the sector, and their mission, to support the development of civil society.

Key words: civil society, NGOs, funding, partnership, development

I. INTRODUCTION

Overview of the study

The present chapter aims to be an informed and critical reflection on NGO-donor relationships in Romania. In the post-communist years the NGO sector has burgeoned, as in Romania macro-social transformations have been in high gear. To take roots, the sector had to be assisted both financially and with know-how from abroad. This relationship, between donors and non-governmental organizations working to strengthen civil society has previously been considered in different Eastern European countries (Hann et al. 1996, 2002, Henderson, 2002). Herein, our focus has been on civil society support and development nonprofit organizations based in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

We have investigated how cooperation between NGOs occurred in Romania; how they defined their missions, how broad or narrow the latter were and their effects on partnerships. Moreover, the reviewed literature informed us that donors were influencing to a degree, the strategies adopted by NGOs in their decision to partner. Thus, we looked both at partnerships between Romanian

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• University of York

* Romanian Cultural Institute Bucharest

This paper is based on an earlier draft to which Gabriel Bota contributed as part of the initial research team. In this version, the subchapter to which he made a contribution has been rewritten. We remain, however, greatly indebted to Gabriel Bota for his input and insights which we duly acknowledge.

NGOs and their donors and the non-profits' partnerships with other NGOs within the sub-geographical context of Cluj-Napoca, one of the cities with the largest density of NGOs in Romania. We aimed to discern which were the conditions that would make partnerships between NGOs successful, and to what extent partnerships would broaden and deepen the sector, i.e. to include organizations that can work together to address issues that regard the development of the sector and its functions in the wider frame of our society.

Since the early days of the third sector in Romania, non-governmental organizations have had to recognize the need to carefully consider their donors' interests, priorities and formal requirements for applications, to appropriate the categories in the discourse of the latter, on civil society. Nonetheless, the competitive development of the sector pressed non-profits to build a portfolio of successfully completed projects while at the same time controlling for loyalty to mission statements. Such events, we will argue, have affected the growth of horizontal, NGO-to-NGO *genuine* partnerships.

Access to funds has been based on a competitive approach to allocation, by donors. This has led to the consolidation of the sector, i.e. with a limited number of *traditional* donors and a decrease in the number of their beneficiaries, due to conditions for market entrance. Grants have been regarded as an investment and consequently grant-makers have observed that their local partners have the right experience and expertise to use the money they were allocated. This may have been detrimental to both the expansion of the sector and also the scope of the NGOs' activities. To that extent, the latter have been compelled to establish a record of successfully completed projects to ensure their survival. This practice may have also been unfavorable to the development of horizontal networks between nonprofits because of a focus on short term, quantifiable goals, broad mission statements and the inability to concentrate on the vision to develop the organization, partnerships and ultimately the sector.

We have been interested to see how these NGOs cooperated with their peers, their outlooks on partnerships, both on opportunities and constraints- from within and without the sector-that have shaped their vision on association. We wanted to know how the NGOs regarded requirements by donors, for horizontal partnerships, which have ostensibly been among the eligibility criteria for grants. Ultimately, we hoped to see if partnerships worked. A robust cooperation becomes possible when NGOs have a well defined mission and specialized activities. In this way, NGOs can support and complement each other, work together on common projects, as well as transfer information, know-how and competences among themselves.

The organizations we selected for our research carried out projects and programs meant to consolidate civil society in Romania. They involved, in their projects, other institutions and citizens. They tried to build networks between organizations, people and institutions. Their projects, consultancy and trainings aimed to prepare citizens for a better involvement in the problems their communities faced. They were seeking to increase citizens' civic awareness and to stimulate their participation in community development. Furthermore, they were contributing to the development of start-up organizations while also co-operating with the more established actors from the nonprofit sector. They were therefore likely to work together with other NGOs, to implement common projects, build partnerships and consolidate intra-sectoral networks[2]. Their creation and development inescapably has to be considered in the broader context of historical transformations that have occurred in Eastern Europe at the turn of the last century.

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[2] The authors of this paper have decided to anonymize the names of the NGOs that were included in this research project and also of the research participants. Our decision was based on the British Sociological Association's guidelines for ensuring the anonymity, privacy and confidentiality of research participants; online, available from http://www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/ 63#Anonymity,%20privacy%20and%20confidentiality, [20.05.2006]. Below is a brief description of the mission and activities for each organization. The information in the subsequent paragraphs was available on their web sites, at the time when the authors of this paper were deciding on a case-selection strategy, November 2005.

O1 has as its main mission "the mobilization of local financial resources for the benefit of the community". It therefore aimed to first develop partnerships between non-profit organizations, companies and citizens, with a vision to strengthen the former's capacity to raise funds. **O1's** stated role thus was to "work with the public and companies to get them involved, constantly and coherently, in the development of communities and the support of non-profit organizations". Secondly, it sought to promote an "efficient" environment for donors and not-for profits to cooperate in. Finally, the main tenet undergirding its work was its drive to "involv[e] clients/partners in the planning, implementation and evaluation of our projects"-ensure transparency. In a nutshell, **O1** trained NGOs to build a trustful relationship with their donors and other partner organizations. Ultimately, **O1** saw its mission to lie in its contribution to the sustainability of the non-governmental sector, "the long term…mobilization of local resources".

O2 had 31 clubs. The club in Cluj-Napoca was founded in 1990, and received legal personality in 2000. Its mission was "to strengthen the democracy in Romania through the stimulation of civic participation". Some of the main interests **O2** related to the following topics: "civic education", "citizens participation in the process of elaboration of public policies", "the defence of human rights".

O3 was founded in October 1992. Its mission, as described by its members, was "to stimulate local and regional development". **O3** had the following objectives: "to promote and implement local and regional development programs, to develop the relations between local government and population, to support local initiatives, to organize specialized consulting in various fields for local governments, to organize training courses for local public officials, to support the establishment and functioning of non-governmental organizations" (2006). **O3** addressed more than a single group of beneficiaries. They were civil servants, local government institutions, rural communities and, more generally, human resources in a community. **O3** had a regional office in Cluj-Napoca.

O4 was founded in January 1990 as a subsidiary of **04** Romania. Until 1998, **O4** implemented national programs at the local level. In 1998, **O4** became an organization developing its own programs, addressing issues at the county level. **O4** had as a mission the protection of human rights through all legal means. Concurrently, **O4** envisaged implementing several programs for the development of civil society: "consultancy in the elaboration of NGO projects", expertise for NGOs in writing financial applications, "organizational support programs", "organizational training programs".

O5 was founded in 1992 as an organization offering social services. In 1997 it became the first volunteering center in the country. In 2002 it was upgraded to a national centre for volunteering, with the central office in Cluj-Napoca. Its mission was to promote and develop volunteering "as a viable and irreplaceable resource in solving the problems that the Romanian society is now facing". The activities carried out by **O5** were guided by the following values: it "respects and militates for equal rights for all people without discrimination, promotes active involvement in community life, believes in the unlimited ability of each member to participate in solving the community's problems". The programs developed by **O5** were addressed to volunteering centers, state institutions, other not-for-profit organizations and businesses.

Theoretical Background

Eastern European states have been at the receiving end of Western financial assistance and respectively of a knowledge transfer for the development of the NGO sector. If there has been an ideological underpinning of the intelligence and asset transfer to the East, this was an export of a specific set of expectations, particularly that "making civil society work is a question of socialization into democratic norms" (Mercer, 2002:11). Consequently, NGOs were assigned the role of "effecting the democratic transformations of developing societies into modern, liberal societies" (2002:11). In all fact, such expectations were hardly, critics asserted, counter-balanced by a context-sensitive concern with existing societal rifts (social status, religious, gender, regional etc.); or with the skewed development of the sector (in some cases according to donor priorities) and even the power struggles within NGOs (2002:13). A synthetic description of civil society in Eastern Europe was conducted by Salamon et. al (2000).

In Romania, donor assessments have alluded to a series of problems that have hampered the development of the NGO sector: "the NGO sector is a reflection of Romanian society as a whole, with 'them and us' between NGOs and government and lack of trust between individuals in the whole society" (Donor Review, 2000:27). This statement may be borne out of years of experience in the country but is nevertheless based on the assumption that there still is a long way to go, to reach the Western standards for the sector. Ironically, these standards appear to be contradicted by the empirical observations of that context. As one author who has looked comparatively at both settings argues, "the dominant Western model of civil society seems less conducive to social cohesion and successful economic performance than starkly opposed models of social order" (Hann, 1996:10).

In the region, many shortcomings and failures, along the way, have been explained as resistance to transformation due to the resilience of socialist mentalities, i.e. lack of private initiative, of trust, heavy dependence on state assistance. In the mid-nineties, when transformations were in full swing, civic anthropologists revisited earlier arguments and concluded that „in fact, many 'system-export' schemes fail because systems or units are exported without their western context". Inconsistencies and breakdowns in Central and Eastern Europe may, in this regard, have also been upshots of the fragmentary knowledge about Western institutions (Sampson, 1996:125).

There is hardly any denying of the fact that there has been a lack of trust within the NGO sector, specifically, which further undermined the liberal mission of organizations. The latter may be, in a nutshell, "to work in partnership, build alliances and coalitions". In this regard, an assessment by a donor representative, of NGO performance, came to a dismal conclusion: "if they associate, at all, [it] is on a broader playing field and trying to do everything at once" (2000:32). With this statement in mind, a first postulate that the present study has been intent on verifying was what the role foreign donors played in the creation and subsequent supporting of partnerships between non-profits. Mercer's (2002) indications pointed to the fact that actually, donor-NGO dynamics may be a determining factor for non-cooperation within the sector.

Somewhat in contrast with donor evaluations of the specific circumstances of Romanian NGOs, the appraisal of the latter, of their situation, emphasized that NGOs have been able to develop their operational capacity (e.g. to implement projects and build partnerships). However, their "capacity to formulate vision, strategies and policies [was] generally very weak;…capacity to raise resources supportive of the mission [was] also limited, with a much greater focus on short-term survival than long-term change". These shortcomings were, and donors were aware of it, also an upshot of their funding priorities (Donor Review, 2000:33). Overall, NGO organizational strategies and vision have left, in spite of in-flowing foreign assistance, several key issues for the sector unresolved, i.e. accountability, shared working practices, scope of intra-sectoral cooperation, project partnerships.

The subsequent analytical sections stem out of a more detailed review of current debates about the development of the third sector which we embarked upon at the onset of this study and which we have not included here. This paper will progress towards analyzing donor-recipient relationships and their influence on the development of partnerships among NGOs in Cluj-Napoca. Our paper was guided by the tack sociological institutionalism has developed on the study of organizations and institutional cultures (Hall, 1996). We hoped to investigate both formal and informal practices, routines and conventions that demarcate the relationship not-for-profit organizations have with their donors. For the purpose of this paper we have regarded these relationships as institutions. We were subsequently interested to discern the perception that individual NGOs had on their rapport with their patrons, i.e. their attitude towards financing criteria, the relation between their mission and such criteria, the influence funding had on their partnerships with other nonprofits.

II. The Consolidation of the Third Sector: Probing Into the Meanings of NGO Representatives

The main inspiration for this subchapter came from previous research conducted on the relationship between donors and NGOs in Russia (Henderson, 2002). Henderson has argued that foreign donors arrived in Russia with a mandate to develop civil society and consolidate the capacity of NGOs to part-take in the democratic governance of the frail Russian democracy (2002). The former were successful in providing NGOs with equipment and training to undertake these tasks, while also securing their survival at a time when the economy was in deep crisis (2003:141). However, donors' goal to ensure the development of the civil society was, critics have argued, stalled by their concern with projects that focused on short-term objectives and produced "numbers for the report back to the home office" (2002:153). This, Henderson contended, led to NGO projects closely resembling one another and more importantly, to "the emergence of a vertical, institutionalized, and isolated (although well-funded) civic community" (2002:140).

"Partnerships" is the word designated to describe what may be a variable rapport between cooperating organizations (Lister, 1999: 2) which aim at buttressing civil society, e.g. not-for-profit civil society development organizations and their financial backers. The fact that partnership roles were asymmetric and the flow of money was always from donor to receiver, forcefully bound the latter into an agenda set by the former: "this is a dialogue of the unequal and however many claims are made for transparency or mutuality, the reality is…that donors can do to the recipient what the recipient cannot do to the donor" (Lister, 1999: 4).

Much of the research about the extraneous determinants of NFPO (not-for-profit organizations) operations has focused on transnational partnerships between international donor organizations and local recipients, in developing regions (Lister, 1999, Brown and Kalegaonkar, 2002). Financial dependence may produce the erosion of NGO "identities and legitimacy in their own eyes and the eyes of skeptics" (Brown and Kalegaonkar 2002:234). It can also feed into the perception that a grant-receiving not-for-profit organization represents the political, economic and cultural interests of their benefactors. Finally, it can induce the permanent financial dependence of NFPOs on exogenous, locally unsustainable resources (2002:235).

For an NGO, designing and implementing a project entailed finding a balance between its ethical and practical purposes. The ethical purpose of an NGO is stated in its mission, its values, and its principles. In our case, we understood the ethical purpose to refer to the "nonprofit sector's civil society roles as…service providers and…builders of social capital" (Boice, 2005: 16). In contrast, the practical purpose entailed consolidating revenues to ensure survival, much like a profit-seeking company; "they allocate money toward a desirable goal and use management practices, information systems and public relations to carry out programs" (2005: 18). An objective of this study has been to analyze how nonprofits navigated between their ethical and practical purposes.

Herein we have set out to analyze how civil society support and development organizations reflected on the "structure of the funding" they received, first of all from foreign patrons (Henderson, 2002:155). The objective here was to see to what extent NFPOs developed their own agendas or reacted to the goals, logic and norms of their funding organizations. Specifically, we wanted to understand how in a project proposal, NGOs' missions and their donors' requirements were evinced. Another objective was to discern, based on the testimonies we collected, how the structure of funding was reflected in the development of horizontal networks. Finally, we considered the language that NGOs used in the communication with their donors. We were interested to learn whether the use of the donor's language influenced the structure of the organizations we researched and also, more generally, the nonprofit sector's culture. "Many service organizations have felt shut out because they cannot speak the language they feel donors want to hear or…they simply do not even bother applying for grants because they do not know how to shape their proposals" (2002: 156).

This subchapter was aimed at understanding if and how the relationship of the NGOs with their donors influenced their organization and their partnership with other NGOs. To arrive at this question, a set of propositions were constructed, drawing on arguments from previous literature on civil society, development and democracy.

The scope of this chapter is the generalization of our empirical findings to the theoretical arguments reviewed in previous sections. If grants have contributed to the consolidation of a vertical relationship between donor and recipient, the latter has determined not-for-profit organizations to concentrate on the practice of building a funding record. Consequently, there has been an emphasis on the relationship with donors, to the detriment of horizontal networks, due to staunch competition for grants.

Data Collection and Analysis

This was an in-depth analysis of the outlook civil society support and development NGOs had on their relationship with their donors. It was a case-study of this research problematic. Yin (1994:31) qualified the approach as a method for arriving at "analytic generalizations" that engenders the use of "previously developed theory…as a template with which to compare the empirical results". The focus of our project was narrowed down both geographically, to include organizations in one Romanian city which has the largest density of non-profits, alongside Bucharest (Review of Romanian NGOs, 2001) and thematically, concentrating specifically on civil society support and development organizations.

The main data collection method for this subchapter was the in-depth qualitative interview. It gave a broad scope to the interview subjects, to do an extensive interpretation of the topics discussed during our conversations. We used both an interview guide and standardized open ended questions. Our interviewees were classified as "experts" or "elites" (Quinn-Patton, 2002: 402), i.e. NGO leaders, managers, executive directors etc. The outcome was a set of stories based on a predetermined set of topics which were complemented by probes into contingencies and unrestrained comments by interview participants.

The research interviews were coded into topics that enabled reflection on answer patterns across the participants while also keeping particularities in sight. This initial stage of mapping the interviews played a seminal role in tackling the subsequent task of interpreting the story to ensue from our interaction with the participants. The methodology for this chapter was completed by adding narrative analysis and thematic content analysis to give scope to a synthetic assessment of material and cultural practices and representations built on a sociological institutionalist epistemic approach, herein to the study of non-profit organizations.

Narrative analysis is particularly suitable for interpreting data collected as *a story* (Lieblich et al, 1998: 2). "Narrators create plots from disordered experience, *give reality a unit that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly*" (Cronon, 1992: 1349 quoted in Riessman, 1993:4). Analysis thus entailed the mapping of meanings constructed by respondents, in order to retrieve their interpretive context, their perceptions and practices, i.e. the opportunities and constraints in their setting, they identified and reflected on. Such meanings, in line with the sociological institutionalist episteme (see also Fischer's discussion of social meanings, 2003), were expected to structure the knowledge, beliefs, language and actions of these actors. Consequently, the major merit in using narrative analysis lay in the fact that it did not tamper with the meanings constructed by the respondents while examining how they were constructed.

Because this investigation proposed a context-sensitive take on the study of the relationship between NGOs and donors, a primary interest was to identify key notions and concepts participants used to describe and explain it. These we assembled into an inventory of "indigenous categories" (2002: 455) employed by interview participants. To go full circle, we designed a collection of *sensitizing concepts* that "can provide bridges across types of interviews" (2002:348), to bring into our interpretation the theoretical propositions our work started from. Examples of sensitizing concepts were: *funding market*, *project requirements* etc. The next section in this chapter is a map of the interplay between indigenous categories and sensitizing concepts. The conclusion of this subchapter will summarize the main findings and discuss them in view of the normative statements on which our paper was grounded.

Content analysis is broadly understood as "any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (2002:453). Taking reference from Singly et al. (1998:180), content analysis was herein employed for the study of the *themes*, the topics that were identified through theoretical delimitation, the formulation of the research question and working hypothesis for this section. If narrative analysis enabled the preservation of interviewee categories, thematic content analysis allowed us to discern the "structural logic" of the discourses retrieved from the interviews (1998:180). We used thematic analysis to patch together stories and discourses, into a series of dimensions, i.e. in the instance of the present research, concepts and practices embedded in a theme that can be concurrently analyzed across all interviews. In the words of Singly et al. this was a "vertical thematic analysis" which would expose variations and patterns across the principal dimensions of the investigation (1998:182).

The NGO-Donor Relationship: The NGO Perspective

Prerequisites to Building a Track Record

We started our interviews with the NGO representatives with a discussion about their relationship with their main donors, i.e. how they constructed and worked to consolidate it. A.H. noted that in the early days of the post-communist Romanian civil society, there were many funding opportunities for the sector. This had been changing more recently due to Romania's accession to the E.U. in early 2007. It was initially foreign donors that "invested substantially in the sector and supported O5" (2006). "There have been changes along the way but this is not affecting our relationship with the donors, it just channeled applications towards one or another of their funding lines" (2006).

A key aspect in building a relationship with foreign donors was the setting up of personal contacts, a task easier to carry out at a time when the "Romanian market" was small. Over the years, having a track record with a funding organization spelled success in channeling more grants into the organization, from the same or other donors. Established donors were looking for the same one thing, the "experience…that you have the capacity to manage that money" (2006). A.H. subsequently emphasized that donors regarded this relationship as an investment they had "to keep and develop" (2006). As she explained, this was a key element in the strategy of the latter, i.e. "to invest constantly in the same organizations which have a chance to survive" (2006).

O1 was set up by a group of people who had been active in the sector, working specifically on assistance programs for NGOs. "Already, at that time [in 2002] the issue of how to raise funds was a significant one" (N.D. 2006). Hence, the members of O1 decided to pool together their resources -experience and know how- and "look beyond these projects", financed according to donor objectives (2006). A key fact in this appraisal was the short term support these grants offered to non-profits, seconded by the need to work "within funders' priorities" (2006). "This means to go into directions considered to be important [and identified] at the top, and this will be the case even more when we integrate into the European Union – all projects will finance an agenda that is in concordance with what Brussels and the Romanian government define as priorities" (2006).

Considering the prerequisites for the development of a non-profit, N.D. explained that having a portfolio of projects successfully completed was a must as was a short term commitment to quantifiable and realistic goals. "You've been on the market for a while, you are a *credible* organization that wants to do something, and you meet people that want to listen to you" [emphasis added] (2006). This initial image we arrived at, about how to construct and maintain a relationship with donors, was further expanded with the insights brought by O.M., president of O4. "We sent applications to almost all funders in our field. So funders, in general, are traditional funders [working] in distinct fields…and I want to say that the majority of donors know what they give money for" (2006). Therefore, for a non-profit having a project portfolio on hand was a strategic plus because they could always "take out an idea and use it to send an application to a donor in the field" (2006).

In terms of how donors allocated funds, our interviewees pointed to what they perceived as implicit rules for allocation, i.e. time span, geographical focus etc. R.T., project coordinator in O2, pointed out that "there can be funders that only give [grants] once, to one organization" (2006). Ultimately, the sine qua non condition for a non-profit aiming to get funded was to have a track record. O.M. further qualified this statement. She explained that the first impression that donors had of their cooperation with an NGO would always be a long lasting one. In any case, donors, she explained, were bound by strict internal rules for allocating funds. "Big funders have precise rules. They can not finance an organization more than two times. This is both a legitimate and democratic conditioning because all [non-profits should have] a chance" (2006) to access funds.

F.C. talked about her organization's experience with constructing a relationship with donors. O3's experience had been to circumscribe its projects to agendas funding organizations they wished to cooperate with may have had. "This may be a weak point of our foundation but we don't usually go and knock on their door" (2006). Her understanding was that this practice ensured their projects blended in with their donors' programs. Such consonance was, she contended, preferable to an attitude she summarized with the phrase: "look, this is who we are and come on, support our activity" (2006).

Importing Categories to Develop the Organization: The NGO Lingua Franca

For all these non-profits, their main donors had been large funding organizations such as the Open Society Foundation, USAID, the Charles Stuart Mott Foundation and the E.U. principally through its PHARE program. Except for the PHARE program, communication with donors was in English. A.H. explained that having to communicate in English did not influence how the organization came to be structured. However, she recognized that "models from abroad had to be imported which were more or less adapted over time" (2006). This process of appropriating a pre-cast model was dictated by the state of affairs NGOs had to function in. "What I can say is that all the literature that got here and all the know-how about the sector came from abroad because the culture of non-governmental organizations did not exist" (2006). In any case, given the relative scarcity of available funds, all not-for-profit organizations had to have an English speaker among them. For Romanian NGOs, this became the make or break rule:

"…an organization that doesn't have people who speak English has difficulties in accessing certain resources and know-how…It's very important that in an organization there is at least one person that knows English because this is the direction of the information flow…" (A.H.,2006).

All the other interviewees concurred with A.H.'s assessment. Fluency in English, the "lingua franca" (R.T. 2006) of the sector was "a perk for accessing resources. So English was a resource for an organization that wants to communicate well, specifically with foreign donors" (O.M., 2006). Furthermore, the above assessments of our participants, in the in-depth interviews, were also backed by the results in the analysis of perceptions NGO staff had on the topic. In terms of building a good relationship with foreign donors, respondents believed that being conversant in the donors' language was important and/or very important (83%). **Ultimately, this fact may have put additional strains on these organizations and their members. If they were of a financial kind, e.g. with training the staff, even though the utility of the expenditure would be well justified, it remains somewhat unclear why the more well resourced organizations would be slow or uninterested in using the local language.**

The Project Proposal and Funding Criteria

We asked our interviewees to describe how they developed a project proposal. F.C. observed that her organization started from the assumption that donors set up a funding line with a clear understanding of what projects and organizations they wanted to attract. For her organization, this perception became the iron law of project planning. "In fact [you have to understand] what donors want for that money because otherwise you stand no chance" (2006). Designing a project began with identifying donors that had programs in the same field of interest as the respective non-profit, R.T.

explained. "You first of all have to find the idea that you want to develop your project on, and then you try to find the funding organization whose goal is to finance activities in the same field" (R.T., 2006).

Overall, we were put across the picture that the design of a project proposal was a process that started with identifying financing programs donors may have had. Subsequently, an NGO had to "check whether your mission or goals match up with a funding line" (A.H., 2006). A.H. mentioned having heard of practices like "inventing needs that match funding lines" (2006). In as far as any ethical appraisals were put into project planning, A.H. made reference to "a moral decision" to be taken on "how much to swing the balance towards your needs or towards the financing line" (2006). It was, however, unavoidable for NGOs to stand by their practical purpose, before they could consider how to balance their mission with any constraints that were to come with funding.

The same idea came across from the interview with N.D. The exact timing for starting to write a project "depended to a large extent also on the funding opportunities on the market" (2006). N.D. shared her experience with project writing and explained that in her opinion, to start a project from scrap was a daunting task; this, because lacking experience translated into an inability to focus on the major outcomes one planned to attain. "Once you already have the experience and you've implemented several projects, ideas come from previous projects" (N.D., 2006). She added that it was, she believed, essential that the members who were on the ground, who had worked on previous projects, were co-opted in this planning stage.

Ultimately, our investigation was concerned with how these NGOs adjusted their projects to funding criteria donors may have had. Together with our participants we tried to come to an understanding of what were the main requirements their projects had to abide by. There was consensus that funds meant internalizing obligations and being responsible for adhering to program guidelines. "Because I take the money, I am compelled in some way to stick to his (sic) expectations…to implement the project he (sic) gave me the money for… to demonstrate and justify my spending" (F.C., 2006). Thus, planning a project incurred careful multi-tasking: putting together a comprehensive project file, motivating an application, defining realistic objectives, assessing the likely impact.

Donors had been adamant about defining measurable goals, our interviewees expounded: "…if you didn't include enough clear indicators, numerical, you have to go back to that aspect and say how you will measure the impact of the project" (A.H., 2006). This meant that a successful project, regardless of for example, its long-term vision, had to be meticulous in defining short-term, quantifiable targets. Application terms such as this were part of formal requirements foreign funders had. It became apparent from all the interviews that these were never the object of any negotiations between donors and grant receivers. "There either is compatibility between the aims of the organization and those of the donors, or not" (R.T., 2006). In any case, the mission, the "intrinsic values" of an applicant organization should have never been the object of any bartering based on formal funding requirements, R.T. surmised.

N.D.'s perspective complemented the above statements. She also talked about the careful consideration future grantees had to give to the application criteria. "There is no choice. I think it is very, very important to know before what they [the application requirements] are" (N.D., 2006).

These rigors and subsequent contract clauses were perceived as negative incentives for subsequent changes in the project, due to new developments in the implementation context, further down the line. "If you want to change something, this, in general, generates a lot of discussions and negotiations" (N.D., 2006). N.D. further qualified this observation by noting that one had to differentiate between private and public funders, the latter being generally sensitive about procedures, this making post-application adjustments a daunting task (2006). D.S., referring to EU grants (e.g. PHARE civil society development grants), explained: "They are not necessarily interested in the result of our project. They are interested in the activities actually taking place" (2006). Contrary to that, private donors were seen to be more concerned about outcomes (D.S., 2006).

However, D.S., managing director at O3 observed, when making reference to practices in the sector, that some NGOs were, bluntly, "opportunistic" (2006). Donor priorities designated specific interest areas they would consider applications for, e.g. interethnic relations, provision of social benefits etc. Having this awareness, some NGOs would change their goals, vision etc, to match the respective funding priorities. D.S. saw his organization to be different from this latter type of non-profits. He explained that his organization's survival was the result of its being consistent with its mission. Nevertheless, they were "somewhat lucky because the way our mission is formulated, it is quite…it can include many fields, let's say" (D.S., 2006). For O3 that meant that it had never been in the unfortunate position of having to downsize its operations or shut down because it could not find funds for its projects.

From two of the testimonies we collected (of A.H. and F.C.), a puzzle ensued about the relationship between, on the one hand, commitment to program guidelines and on the other, putting ideas into practice. The main threat NGOs were generally faced with was to submit a half-baked project and later realize implementation could only be faulty. A flawed project, in a portfolio, could take a toll on future funding. More specifically, a damaged record was a dent in an NGO's reputation that could take a lot of resources to fix. "If in the past you had an unsuccessful project then the respective donor will not give you any money a second time" (F.C., 2006). A.H. felt somewhat the same about running such a risk but she contended that some donors could be more flexible in their assessment: "sometimes we made mistakes and we told them that and we got funding to do what we had learned was wrong, to fix that…it's this system of *lessons learned* which they genuinely work with" (2006). Ultimately, closely following program guidelines was essential both in preparing a project application and during implementation. At none of these stages did these two organizations negotiate any clauses with their donors, based on their mission:

"you don't negotiate…in general there is an evaluation scheme that donors will publish…you get an answer and a score. You can sometimes submit a contestation…additional clarifications may be asked, generally about elements for the monitoring and evaluation of the project" (2006)

To conclude, NGOs aimed to do their best to stay in line with their donors' instructions for the grants they offered. If there was any fault in the implementation of a project that had been approved, it could have jeopardized an NGO's future, i.e. its capacity to secure subsequent funding. Therefore, the best option for the latter was firstly, to guide its activities in line with its practical purpose and ensure its survival and only subsequently to be concerned about staying faithful to its mission and ethical purpose.

The "Market", Competition and Horizontal Networking

Several of the questions in our interview guide probed into the developments the interviewees perceived the sector had undergone. We were interested to learn how they had created and maintained their horizontal network with partner organizations. Building a strong relationship with donors, over time, was tantamount to having an impeccable track record. A.H. likened NGOs to profit-seeking companies. Funding was regarded as an investment donors made and which was tied to expectations of adequate deliverance. She compared the non-governmental sector to a market. Consequently, she perceived competition for funding between NGOs as being imminent. "One way or another, there is a market everywhere. There is also a market between NGOs, funding is limited and somehow we all compete for it"[3] (A.H., 2006). The market metaphor was used, successively, by several of our interviewees. A.L. also applied this trope to underline what she perceived to be a positive development, akin to a process of natural selection: "on the NGO market should survive only those organizations that do things right. The rest, like on any other market, will perish" (2006). A similar line of reason, a positive outlook on sectoral competition was also endorsed by R.T. He believed that the latter was both "healthy" and hardly a disincentive for partnerships and professionalism. Losing a competition for grants, he contended, was an opportunity for NGOs to assess their performance and "to research the field in which it [an NGO] put forward an application, so that it becomes credible for the next contest" (R.T., 2006).

Competing for the same resources made NGOs aware of one another. F.C. remarked that there was "envy" between not-for-profits (2006). This was the main downside of competition. On the positive side, she saw it as an opportunity to share learning experiences: "We learn from one another…we are happy if another organization receives some funds and has managed to implement a project" (2006). In contrast, N.D. put forward a perspective which didn't rest on the above

[3] Original quote in Romanian: "si intre ONG-uri este o piata, finantarile sunt limitate cumva, ne batem cu totii pentru ele sau ne batem impreuna pentru ele" (A.H., 2006)..

dichotomy. Her argument was grounded on a further qualification of the need for partnerships in the sector, also likened to a market. In her regard, organizations were well advised to partner with each other, in order to send a common and credible message on the market. "It is also a source of credibility when there are more organizations behind an initiative" (N.D., 2006). Partnerships were, therefore, perceived to be a solution for toning down any possible arguments among non-profits. "If everyone would do the same thing separately, this is a source of conflict between organizations, and the market would be bamboozled" (N.D., 2006).

A.H. explained that generally, funding organizations tried to encourage cooperation between non-profits. Her organization's mission, to promote volunteering, made cooperation a fundamental aim while also allowing it to be flexible in choosing partners. Finding a financing program was the initial step in project planning, for all these organizations. What followed was a research process aimed at assessing feasibility, finding beneficiaries and partners to work with. This phase was precursory to submitting the project. "Generally you first look for partners and not after…and many times partners help out in your relationship with the donors and to get a project accepted" (2006). F.C. observed that partnerships were desirable, depending on an NGO's mission. Some funding organizations required partnerships in the implementation of their projects. If this constraint was absent, NGOs generally tended to work individually. "…we also support one another if in certain circumstances such support is required but it's more about the fact that everyone is implementing its project" (2006).

Comments

The qualitative data from the in-depth interviews with NGO representatives of civil-society support and development organizations produced evidence backing the working hypothesis for this subchapter. The intent here was to observe the perceptions of the interviewees in regard to their relationships to donors and the influence they exert on horizontal partnerships with other NGOs. The postulation this chapter commenced with was first confirmed and second, further qualified.

The structure of funding was likened to a market, in which a limited number of prominent, well-established organizations were able to build a track record of funded projects. The market was consolidated also because, as one interviewee explained, donors regarded grants as an investment and consequently wanted to ensure that their local partners had the right experience and expertise. This, as argued in the theoretical section of this paper, may have been detrimental to other, less experienced organizations and for that matter, to the overall development of civil society.

To extend our understanding of the latter problematic we considered the role that the drive to establish a financing record played in the development of horizontal networks between nonprofits. Interviewees explained that there was competition between NGOs and at worst even envy. They also expounded that funding organizations tended to encourage cooperation between grant receivers.

However, if this was not a specific requirement for the financing programs, NGOs will have worked individually.

An organization's mission added a moral dimension to its pragmatic search to secure funding and ensure its survival on the market. In describing how a project proposal was developed, interview participants generally showed that the practical purpose of their organizations was the first to guide their activity. Thus, the first task in planning a project was to identify a funding opportunity and subsequently design the former in accordance with donor requirements. If this was not the case, NGOs would have had to have a stable source of income that would give them the leeway to experiment with ambitious ideas (N.D., 2006). If an organization was in neither of the above two situations, it would have had to run based exclusively on volunteer support (O.M., 2006).

Starting from the early days of the third sector in Romania, NGOs have had to recognize the need to carefully observe donor interests, priorities and formal requirements for applications, to appropriate the categories in the discourse of the latter, on civil society. The latter was imagined as an autonomous zone where individuals and groups associate freely, keep the state in check, address community needs and create partnerships to foster democratic development and economic growth. Nevertheless, the competitive growth of the market, the need to build a portfolio of successfully completed projects while also controlling for loyalty to mission statements were disincentives for horizontal, NGO-to-NGO *genuine* partnerships. The next subchapter discusses, in more depth, the topic of such partnerships and shows that there was, at the time of this research, general reluctance towards formal requirements for partnering. That meant that NGOs did associate in several ways but, generally, their representatives felt that this outcome was not the result of any top-down pressure. Rather, it was a *natural* process, inspired by common interests and goals, willingness to assist peers and, more broadly, changes in context-political, social and economic.

One conclusion this chapter arrived at was that partnerships were forestalled by grants for two reasons. Firstly, because of the strong competition for funding which forced organizations to either have broad mission statements or work exclusively with volunteers. If this was the case, then broad missions would have induced a reluctance to cooperate, for fear of overlapping interests, strategies and visions. As one interviewee noted, overcoming this situation would have incurred the further specialization of NGO missions and a consequent complementing of their activities. The process had started and, as another interviewee explained, it was bound to continue as the structure of funding was also changing, i.e. through increased funding from EU structural programs. But this was a process of consolidation that may have had a centripetal effect on the sector. Intermediary organizations, grant-makers and resource centers would have to become a buffer for this process if the NGO sector was to continue expanding quantitatively and to enhance the quality of its output. Secondly, partnerships may have been constructed, albeit in order to abide by application criteria and to build a strong record. Nevertheless, the short-term focus of grants and the need to offer realistic targets for each project (i.e. quantifiable, to be included in progress and evaluation reports) may have impeded long-term partnerships, the development of the organizational capacities of NGO networks and their vision for consolidating the sector.

Finally, reading into the meanings put forward by the interviewees also gave scope to the articulation of a conclusion on the dynamics between the state and the third sector. In the Romanian context, the relationship between the two was not at all static as previous models designed in other circumstances postulated (see Salamon, 2000). Rather, the third sector appeared to be both critical of the performance of the state and at the same time optimistic about the future cooperation with public authorities. We leave this topic for further exploration elsewhere but one key aspect to note here is that the state has become, with EU accession, an intermediary in the EU grant schemes. To that extent, future research (e.g. on regime theories, the EU governance system) may find a noteworthy puzzle in the new interaction between the state and the non-profits.

III. Building Partnerships in the Third Sector; The Perspective of NGO Staff

In this subchapter we aimed to look at aspects which determine NGOs to associate, and analyze the perceptions of the latter on intra-sectoral cooperation. We started with a focus on donors' requirements for NGOs to associate in projects and discussed the perceptions of NGO members and staff on this type of collaboration. We were interested in observing the relationship between donors and NGOs and the influence this relationship had on horizontal partnerships among NGOs. To recreate an image of how NGOs developed networks of collaboration we subsequently wanted to know how information, know-how and volunteers circulated from one NGO to another.

We formulated the above objectives based on a research question in which we considered how partnerships emerged and why the operation of NGOs brought only limited horizontal association in the third sector. We systematized this question in a working hypothesis in which we proposed that if partnerships between NGOs occur most frequently as a result of donor requirements- i.e. as a constraint on receiving grants or as a requirement for project implementation-this would lead to a discontinuous cooperation between non-profits. Moreover, competition for funding will have limited, to a certain extent, the specialization of NGOs' missions with NGOs trying to cover as many topics of interest for donors as they could. A clear and specific mission and objectives could have paved the way to horizontal, *genuine* partnerships between non-profits which could have strengthened the sector and ensure its long-term development.

Adapting our approach: using mixed methods

We operationalized our hypothesis through a set of variables we included in a questionnaire to be used in structured interviews. We consequently conducted a survey on a non-probabilistic sample of NGO members and staff. We used a mixed methods approach to design our questionnaire, recruit our participants and analyze the ensuing data.

The adaptive theory approach is a mixed-methods technique for data gathering and analysis (Layder 1998:39). It endorses the use of various research methods in order to increase the amount of knowledge collected (information, data) which could lead to amplifying "the potential for theory generation" (1998:42). Using both quantitative and qualitative data we were able to develop a pool of information about the research group under study; they complemented each other and made possible a more profound examination of the research topic.

We used a sub-type of purposive sampling, "theoretical sampling", one of the main two data-sampling techniques in quantitative research (Layder 1998:46) to select "…events, people, settings and time periods in relation to the emergent nature of theory and research" (Layder 1998:47). We started from an understanding that in our case empirical data and theory would be coterminous: "the researcher is enjoined to collect and analyze the data simultaneously so that there is immediate feedback from the data collection which in turn suggests various implications for theory-generation." (Layder 1998:47). In a subsequent phase, based on what she/he has found until that moment, the researcher will gather new information to expand the theoretical ideas.

In line with the adaptive approach, people and events have to be included gradually in the sample "through the combined forces of prior theoretical ideas or models and the collection and analysis of data in relation to them" (Layder 1998:47). Only in this case we can think about a "'true' theoretical sampling" (1998:47). In our turn, we arrived at our samples through detailed interviews. Consequently, sample size was not as pressing a concern as it is for probability samples. The expectation hence was that case-selection would provide particularly relevant data for generating new insights into our research topic.

We applied twenty three questionnaires to the members and staff of the organizations from our sample (4 – O5, 5 – O2, 4 – O1, 6 – O3, 4 – O4). The questionnaire was self-administered. We designed the questions based on the interviews taken in the first phase of our research, the Review of Romanian NGO Sector (2001), and the Donors' Review (2000). The questionnaire had twenty one items. We envisaged enriching our data from the interviews through this questionnaire, to come up with a broader understanding of the relation between NGOs, and between NGOs and donors, to strengthen our grasp of our research problematic. We decided to apply this questionnaire to what we regarded as information-rich respondents, actively involved in the work of their organizations, e.g. in project writing, project management, networking with donors and other NGOs.

In our questionnaire we opted for closed questions and a small sub-set of open-ended questions wherein respondents could complete and refine some of their answers. Such open-ended questions asked them to consider the state of the non-governmental sector, the most frequent forms of cooperation between NGOs, how they regarded NGO members who left an organization, or the factors that determined them to choose working for a certain organization. With their answers to these open-ended questions we expanded our interpretation of the answers to the closed questions (Singly et al., 1998:65). Finally, we also collected socio-demographic data about our respondents.

This was a systematic approach that referenced the conclusions of the previous subchapter, checked for the consistency and accuracy of findings therein, and extend the breadth and depth of our investigation (Fischer 2003:154). Our questionnaire was a means to ensure consistency, in spite of this change of scale, also allowing us to develop the range of data we gathered. Ultimately, this was not a statistical test (Van Evera, 1997:29), but we envisaged our approach as an opportunity to compare our theoretical propositions and the views of NGO leaders with the perceptions of the NGOs' members and staff. We also hoped that by using the categories from the interviews we would compensate for not using the "I don't know" and "I cannot answer" response options in our questionnaire (Singly et al., 1998:67).

The Perception of NGO staff on Third Sector Partnerships

Cooperation in the NGO Sector

Project partnerships demanded by foreign funders were rare (47% of respondents believed so). Funds stimulating cooperation had been available for joint applications and there were even "bonus points" for applications made together by non-profits (A.H., 2006). However, A.H. did not think she could identify "a pattern" in application submission, i.e. a trend in collective applications. "But I expect that in the future because of the system of European structural funds…serious changes will occur" (A.H., 2006). This finding was in line with previous arguments, in the Review of Romanian NGOs. One likely explanation for this outcome was offered by D.S. (2006). He contended that, "generally, foreign funders design a strategy based on the needs in their home countries" (2006). In a subsequent phase, the latter present their plans to NGO leaders in Bucharest or academics who are at some distance away from the problems of the likely beneficiaries. Therefore, "some funding lines may open for several topics which are not perceived as priorities by NGOs or the beneficiaries" (D.S., 2006).

Contrary to that, partnerships initiated together by NGOs were, respondents claimed, frequent and/or very frequent (74%). Rather than teaming up to become eligible for a funding application, we understood that non-profits would partner to increase their operational capacity (A.H., 2006) or to support the development of the sector (D.S., 2006, N.D., 2006). Overall, partnerships between NGOs were, in our respondents' assessment, frequent and/or very frequent (83%). Finally, cooperation outside projects was very frequent (for all the questions in the questionnaire, on this topic), i.e. participation at events organized by NGOs, discussions, round-tables, petition-writing etc. This last point had previously been made by O.M. who said that her organization participated in "the big debates that take place in Cluj" (2006). They concerned the sector and more generally, the local community.

Formal structures of cooperation were regarded as a constraint, "viewed negatively because they are thought to comprise autonomy" (Review of Romanian NGO Sector, 2001:33). The authors of this review offered the legacy of former centralizing totalitarian organizations as an explanation for this phenomenon, they identified through their research. Nevertheless, both in our analysis of the in-depth interviews and later in our network analysis we have found that the NGOs we studied were participating in formal structures of cooperation. Based on such observations, we posit that the intensity of their engagement in such structures fluctuated according to their short-term objectives, their concurrent involvement in other projects, the lack of constant financial support for the development and maintenance of NGO coordination centers, and for encouraging participation in them. This proposition needs further testing, to be undertaken elsewhere. The evidence we built it on also came from D.S.'s (2006) statement that "on the one hand, there is no financial support, on the other there is not enough time" for NGOs to join extended structures of sectoral cooperation.

Cooperation among organizations with a different mission and goals was also rare (69% wrote that such partnerships were rare and or very rare). However, a possible explanation for its occurrence may have resided in D.S.'s argument that, for instance, his organization would team up with other non-profits when they were asked to. This happened even though they were not active in the same area. In any event, he would have favored partnerships with organizations that had a mission and a vision similar to that of O3, and only offer specific advice for other non-profits applying for funding in other interest area. "We even helped them to write the applications" (D.S., 2006).

Cooperation among NGOs with similar missions, goals, objectives, respondents claimed, was frequent and/or very frequent (a total of 82%). To take an example, O3 and O4 were both organizations that were partners in several NGO networks. These were either umbrella organizations, i.e. both these organizations were members of the 'Civic Local Council' (*Consiliul Civic Local*), or ad-hoc project partnerships. The latter differentiation was also discussed by O.M. (2006).

Networks were important also because NGOs that would consider implementing a project outside their immediate geographical area had to necessarily become partners with other non-profits from the particular community they would arrive in (A.H., 2006). Ultimately, A.H. believed that, to take the example of volunteering centers, even though there may have been demand for volunteers, in a distinct context, identifying partners was just as important as addressing this demand (2006). "We can't take that risk [not to have partners] because I'm accountable to the donor and I have to return their money back if I didn't do what I promised to" (A.H., 2006). NGOs were thus, first and foremost, aware they had to partner-up for pragmatic reasons, i.e. to complete a project or to address needs greater than their organizations could handle alone.

Knowledge and information sharing and volunteer exchanges were frequent and/or very frequent (82%), respondents showed. The frequency of this type of cooperation was confirmed in the Review of the Romanian NGO Sector (1999:31). The know-how and the experience obtained in project writing and through project implementation circulated from one organization to another, in the non-profit sector.

NGOs seemed to be very willing to help the others with this kind of resources. Experts from one organization would lend their abilities to help other NGOs, when asked to. O.M. outlined this practice, in the case of her organization: "…I can say that from the 11 members of the O4 team, at least three or four work permanently as specialists in other projects carried out by other organizations, too" (O.M., 2006).

Key Factors in NGO – Donors Collaboration

In our respondents' evaluation of NGO-donor collaboration, first, a history of previous projects undertaken by the NGOs was very important, as was the trust that donors put in the NGOs they financed and finally, the mission of the latter. We were presented with a similar perception, throughout all the in-depth interviews, of the need for trust donors had. Trust came from "the consolidation…of the relationship at the institutional level" (R.T., 2006) and the potential in each project for successful implementation. That consequently meant that one may have envisioned the gradual consolidation of the sector, also because of the constant need for trust. Nevertheless, it looked like, in terms of trust, there was only a unidirectional relationship, with our respondents conjecturing that their trust in donors was comparatively less important (39% believed it was not important).

We understood that a strong portfolio and the capacity for innovation in a project were fundamental for the financial survival of a non-profit. Secondly, donor objectives also seemed to be highly important (92%) for cooperation and ultimately NGOs' securing of funds. Project evaluation-of implementation and impact- both medium and long-term, undertaken by NGOs, was also very important for a positive relationship with donors. Finally, need-based assessments of the circumstances of project beneficiaries were in their turn deemed very important, respondents wrote (86%).

We were somewhat puzzled by the fact that our respondents perceived their trust in funders to be less important in their cooperation with grant-makers. If overall, the lack of trust was detrimental to partnerships, coalitions, and prioritizing (Donor Review, 2000:32), we postulate that trust in funders was an issue on which there was comparatively less emphasis because of a deeply engrained affinity, of the non-profits, for their benefactors. To better grasp this finding we turned to the Romanian Donor Review. The latter has mapped the eschewed history of the NGO sector in Romania. "Donors played an important role in the formation and development of the NGO sector…it is to be expected that their perceptions and visions will have shaped it" (2000:30).

If the above explanation was also an expression of the vertical accountability of NGOs to their funders, in terms of the internalized institutional practices that the former have absorbed since the creation of the sector, we felt we had to probe for the sensitivity non-profits had for the Romanian context. We were not particularly concerned with the effectiveness of their services for their beneficiaries but rather with the relationships built within the sector. We understood both from the questionnaires and the in-depth interviews that working and personal relationships, formal and informal interactions, were quite common. However, an unresolved puzzle was the perception that donors had that it was a lack of trust within the sector which generally led to a reduced number of partnerships, some degree of mis-coordination in the sector and even the spawning of pragmatic and opportunistic non-profits. We attributed such developments to the competition for funding, to funding priorities donors had, to the broad focus of NGO missions and the lack of funding alternatives.

A very large proportion of the respondents believed they understood well, or very well what were: their donors' priorities (95%); the way their funders operated in (87%); the factors their funders' activity was constrained by (78%). An organization like O1 was founded by experts from within the sector who were aware of these constraints and also had a vision of how to gradually overcome them. Donors were reducing the scope of their funding and moving out of the region and were leaving behind a sector that not only had to struggle for resources (Review of the Romanian NGO Sector) but perhaps also lacking a clear understanding of how to use the concepts they had appropriated, to apply them henceforth. Even though the sector was consolidating, there were bound to be many more twists and turns in its development.

Partnerships with other NGOs were deemed to be important and/or very important for the cooperation of these NGOs with their donors (69%). We interpreted this result as a possible incongruence between the representation of donor induced partnerships (negative perception) and the actual practice of partnering with other NGOs, to qualify for a grant. NGOs could therefore associate to fulfill donor requirements, even though they were adverse to this claim. Furthermore, a knowledge and information transfer from foreign donors to NGOs, the latter deemed was highly important for their organization. In contrast to that, a similar transfer from other NGOs was comparatively less important for these organizations. This in spite of the fact that, our respondents claimed, knowledge and information sharing was very frequent among NGOs.

Horizontal Partnerships: Cooperation vs. Competition

We also wanted to look, comparatively, at the perceptions the staff of these NGOs had, on the one side, of their cooperation with other NGOs and, on the other, of the competition between projects put forward by organizations with similar missions. We asked them how important a series of factors identified in the literature was, for the functioning of their organization. 73% of respondents believed their organization's relationship with other NGOs was important and/or very important. 70% of them also conjectured that competition was also important and/or very important. Of our respondents, 93% saw partnerships as an opportunity for their organization. 74% of them believed they were not problematic for their organization when they would engender an unequal rapport between partners. 61% believed that the specifics of each organization's activity were important in a partnership and respectively 75% regarded long-term financial support for cooperation of little importance.

We subsequently asked how important the following factors were, for partnerships between NGOs: projects previously undertaken together (75% of respondents deemed them as important and/or very important); the mission of the other organizations (86%). Fewer of them believed personal relationships were important (61% important and/or very important, 39% of little or no importance); 87% believed that donor requirements to partner were important and/or very important; 83% considered that other organizations' need to enter into partnerships were important and/or very important; 87% thought that important and/or very important was to partner in order to address community problems. Finally, respondents were split about the importance of the reputation of an NGO when considering a partnership (48%-of little or no importance, 52% important and/or very important).

As we could see from these answers, the mission and the specialized activities of an organization were important and very important for considering a future partnership. In general, NGOs kept a good rapport with other organizations, but they preferred to associate in projects with other non-profits from their field of activity. R.T. underlined this fact when discussing relationships in the sector:

"We know, we are involved, we have relationships with the majority of NGOs, but…the primary relationships are with those organizations which have as objective citizens' information, missions or volunteer involvement in certain specific problems of the community, public integrity, institutional transparency, civic education. These are the institutions, organizations we collaborate with more frequently [i.e. the organizations from the same field as O2" (2006)

D.S. agreed, in what he said, with R.T. Moreover, he emphasized how important it was for a partnership that the NGOs belong to the same interest area. His organization preferred to cooperate with organizations which were not located in Cluj, but had the same focus as O3 (2006). Partnerships were more likely to register the successful implementation of a project, to be a gainful experience for all the involved non-profits, and for the sector at the same time, when organizations had a well-defined mission. The latter had to draw the boundaries of the specific niche of interests they were concerned with, and their beneficiaries. N.D. pointed out that through "specialization", "the fear of working together" (2006) would be minimized. She thought that organizations which had a broad mission and common beneficiaries felt insecure when working together on projects. As she explained, "from the outside they could be seen as one organization being more powerful [than the other]" (2006). Finally, when discussing the issue of "specialization and complementarity", N.D. gave the example of her organization, O1, and O5, two non-profits supporting the development of civil society, both covering a certain field without overlapping their missions, i.e. "financial resources mobilization" and "volunteering", respectively (2006). In addition, the specialization of an NGO helped attract funds more easily on the long term.

Comments

In this subchapter we discussed different types of cooperation in the third sector, how they emerged, and what factors influenced them. What we have learned about collaboration between NGOs at the donors' request, as it became apparent from the answers of our respondents, was that it occurred quite rarely, in comparison to other forms of partnership. NGOs were willing to associate particularly with organizations having similar missions and objectives. Working together with organizations with different mission and objectives was sanctioned if it was outside projects. In the first case, it was important that organizations had a specific mission and a specialized area of activity, in order to complement each other, and in this way to avoid competition or the fear of it. Outside projects NGOs cooperated in different events; they exchanged information, know-how, expertise, they helped each other when they were asked to.

Another important issue was that of trust: donors' trust in NGOs, NGOs trust in their donors and NGOs trust in each other. We observed that donors' trust in NGOs was central when evaluating projects for funding. On the contrary, our respondents' answers showed that their organizations did not consider their trust in donors to be important for vertical partnerships. Within the NGO sector, however, there seemed to be an inherent lack of trust which limited collaboration between organizations.

A strong debate in the sector related to finding alternatives to foreign funding. NGOs were well advised to try to attract funds from private local companies, multi-national companies, Romanian private foundations, and the local and central administration. Finally, NGOs had to learn to adapt to new funding circumstances, and learn to convince these potential donors to get involved in the community, through their projects.

IV. NGO Networks: an Outlook

Generally, civil society is strengthening democracy, but a well-developed civil society is buttressed by a strong institutional backbone formed by NGOs. Building networks between NGOs is not necessarily straightforward, or, in other words, the process has several particularities. First, networks seem to be created mostly by NGOs with similar declared missions or following the same goals. Abelson surmised: "NGO networks vary in the extent to which they have been formalized, representing coalitions of organizations with similar goals" (2003:2). On the other hand, creating cooperation networks between NGOs depends also on donors, firstly because in most of the situations donors have specific funding interests and secondly because there is a limited number of donors on a market. Ultimately, they provide the material support for establishing such networks and some of the strategic and moral constraints the latter are confined by.

One question for which we went back to the literature was "how effective are NGO networks at strengthening the NGO sector?" (Abelson, 2003:2). When creating networks, NGOs become more credible in front of the donors when they apply for grants, and have a better chance of being funded. More than that, such networks help NGOs develop, for example through knowledge sharing. Thus, creating networks "begins with communication" (Abelson, 2003:6). Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, "integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network" (Edelman, 2003:3). Communication between NGOs from a network facilitates an information exchange which helps the development of every NGO and the tertiary sector, overall.

Networks encourage organizations to share how they develop strategic plans, fostering long-term sustainability. Funding could often draw NGOs to a particular issue but "networks can help organizations become more sustainable through strategic planning" (Abelson, 2003:8). In spite of many perceivable benefits, horizontal partnerships between non-profits may be constrained by many circumstantial factors that influence both particular organizations and the broader environment they function in. If partnerships generally bring together NGOs with similar goals and missions, competition for funding may inhibit their willingness to cooperate. This proposition has been discussed in the preceding subchapters. However, the literature ensuing from the Romanian context has showed that when they are ready to associate, non-profits would do so with a genuine regard for cooperation- identifying needs, beneficiaries and solutions in the communities they work with and alongside other partner organizations- and not simply respond to donor requirements. This subsection briefly develops on these propositions. We used the same sample of NGOs as in the previous subchapters.

The social network perspective encompasses theories, models, and applications that are expressed in terms of relational concepts or processes. It is situated at the intersection of social theory, empirical research and formal mathematics and statistics (Wassermann and Faust, 1994). There are several fundamental principles that give the specificity of this perspective, among which the crucial one refers to the centrality it gives to the idea of the interdependence of actors and their actions, unlike most inferential statistics models that conceive actors as atomized entities. Social Network Analysis (SNA) places the emphasis on actors and the relations between them, as opposed to other perspectives focusing on actors and their individual attributes.

By analyzing relational data and the ties or the interactions between the elements of the structure, we are able to get to data that cannot be reduced to characteristics of the social system, and thus which cannot be highlighted by analyzing an aggregate of the elements that make up the social system. SNA conceptualizes structure as lasting patterns of relations among actors and contributes to the outlining of the characteristics of the social structures and of the elements' position in these structures (Wasserman and Faust, 1994).

The present study focused on the existing ties between 5 NGOs from Cluj-Napoca; we consequently analyzed several social networks referring to the same group of actors, each corresponding to a different content of the ties (Wasserman, 1994). More specifically, we looked at three types of relations between these NGOs: formal relationships, represented by their past or present collaborations; the possibility of initiating formal relationships in the future (collaborations or partnerships in future projects); informal relationships between the members of an organization with members of the other organizations.

The method of data collection we have chosen was the phone survey. Our questionnaire was made up of three questions, each operationalized for a specific type of network. One member from each of the five NGOs replied to our questionnaire- the first person to answer the phone. We chose this selection method because the questions focused on general problems concerning these organizations, and that was why we expected any member of the organization would have been able to answer these questions (by chance, the individuals who picked up the phone and thus answered the questions were persons occupying leading positions in these organizations).

To sum up, we analyzed three different social networks, referring to the same group of social units, which we identified for the purpose of our study to be civil society support and development NGOs, based in Cluj-Napoca. The first social network we considered was the formal network, and the formal relationships between the NGOs, represented by present or past collaborations or partnerships. The second social network we observed was based on the NGOs declared readiness to collaborate, formally, in future projects, with the others NGOs. The third social network we examined was based on the declared existence of informal relationships between members of one organization with members of any of the other four organizations, the network of informal ties.

Data Description and Interpretation

Have (do) you collaborated (collaborate) with the following non-governmental organizations from Cluj, in projects undertaken by your organization?

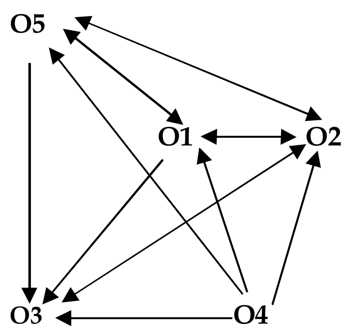

Figure 1. Past/present collaboration among the five NGOs

As Figure 1 shows we identified ten ties (four bidirectional and six unidirectional relationships) among the five NGOs under study. We were puzzled by the fact that there were more unidirectional relations than there were bidirectional ones. We surmised that very likely due to limits in our design and response imperfections our participants' accounts about current/past collaborations appeared incongruent. To give one example, we asked our participants to try to recollect the history of partnerships with other organizations but not all of them were familiar with their organizations' past engagements since their establishment. Further analysis would have to explain and qualify the reasons for this occurrence.

In order to describe the centrality of the nodes of this graph, we only referred to *degree centrality* and left aside the measures for *closeness* and *betweeness* that would be more appropriate for larger networks. A high in-degree centrality was a measure for the degree to which an organization was recognized by the others as a past or present partner in projects. The out-degree centrality in this case was more closely related to the self perception of an organization as being in partnership with the others. Bidirectional ties indicated the mutual recognition of the partners and could have been an indicator for a greater importance of those partnerships than those which were only signalled by one of the parties involved.

Organizations O3 and O2 had the maximum in-degree centrality (indicator =1), as the existence of a partnership with them was signalled by all the other organizations; they were followed by O5 and O1 (indicator =0.75) that were chosen by 3 other organizations each. The more peculiar case was node O4, which had the lowest in-degree centrality (indicator =0). This organization reported being linked to this local network of NGOs with similar goals, a statement which was not corroborated with those of the other participants. Again, stressing the limitations of the data we were analyzing, we can hypothesise about the relative isolation of this node from the rest of the network, apart from its own perception.

If an application for a funding program would require partnerships with another non-governmental organization from Cluj, which of the following organizations would you collaborate with?

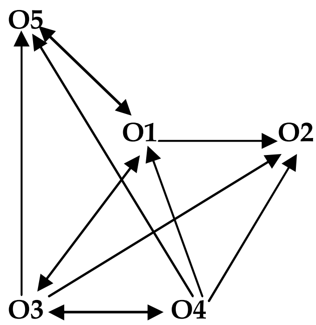

Figure 2. Readiness for future collaboration among the five NGOs

Figure 2 shows that four of the organizations named one partner organization which was also ready to collaborate with them in the future- three bidirectional relationships. However, there were a larger number of cases -five unidirectional relationships- in which the intention of one organization to associate with another from the five was not reciprocal. The network of the five NGOs that formed, using this criterion, measured the readiness to be involved in future projects. The in-degree centrality was here related very much to the prestige or popularity of the organization, while its out-degree centrality referred to its actual willingness to cooperate in the future. O1, O2 and O5 were the most popular potential partners for future projects (indicator =0.75). O4 continued to have the lowest in-degree centrality, being the least recognized of all the organizations (indicator =0.25). However, it did not remain entirely isolated from the rest of the network, as there was one organization that named it as a potential partner.

In terms of their readiness to become associated with other organizations from this set, O4 and O3 had the highest out-degree centrality (indicator =1), as they were willing to cooperate with all the other institutions. O2 (indicator =0) and O5 (indicator=0.25) were the least inclined to form partnerships. The most recognized organizations from this group were the ones less inclined to associate themselves with the others in the future. We surmised, looking at the history of these latter two organisations that their track record with donors, their public visibility and their membership in other project networks and umbrella organisations may have been a reason for this outcome. Contrary to that, O4 seemed to have operated a change in its mission focus and engaged more in partnerships with public authorities (O.M., 2006). However, it was keen on developing future partnerships within the sector. The changing structure of funding may have been a determinant for this course of action (O.M., 2006) Overall, O3 appeared to be the most pro-active organization in our sample, as far as partnerships, both present and future, were concerned.

Do you have an informal relationship (friendship etc) with the members of the following organizations?

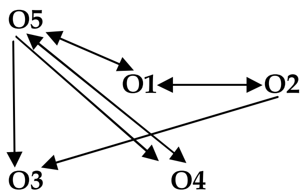

Figure 3. Representation of informal relationships the interviewed representatives stated they had with any of the members from the NGOs quoted in our question

O3 and O4 had the lowest possible out-degree centrality (indicator=0), meaning that they declared that they did not have informal relationships with any of the other organizations. However, they were mentioned by at least one other NGO. The small clique[4] between O1, O2 and O5 that was present in the first graph (referring to past or present collaborations) was also present in the informal relations one. Members of these three organizations mutually acknowledge their participation in projects and the fact that they had informal relations with each other. The clique was, however, missing in the graph that was formed on the basis

[4] A clique represents the maximum number of actors who have all possible ties present among themselves.

of the organizations' willingness to cooperate in the future. We postulated that this absence may have been caused by the fact that it was likely that neither informal relationships, nor any past cooperation will have had a fundamental bearing on future partnerships between these organisations. To that extent, returning to the findings in the previous sections, we expected that at least one other factor may have had a significant influence on this outcome-the specifics of future projects. That is, depending on requirements for future projects, these organisations may have decided what organisation to associate with. Ultimately, this brought the donors back into the picture, as well as the idea of weak partnerships and all the drawbacks in the process of market consolidation we have previously discussed.

We must stress again the limitations of the data our analysis was based on: this study could not establish who the actual members in an organization were, with which respondents had stated they had an informal relationship. Also, organizations differed in size and the number of people active within them. Finally, the questions we asked did not prompt respondents to also make reference to past and not only present informal relationships with any of the members of the other organizations.

Comments

With this subchapter we hoped to begin to understand how these five NGOs from Cluj-Napoca were interacting or had interacted. We hoped to produce a tentative map of the relationships between them, and offer a limited set of criteria these relationship were based on. We were also interested to see whether these five NGOs had built any networks between them. Any expectations we may have had regarding partnership networks came from one of our main reasons for having researched this sample of NGOs from Cluj-Napoca; the fact that they all espoused one similar goal- the support and development of the institutionalized civil society.

Our study reviewed theoretical propositions that expounded the idea that the existence of horizontal relationships between NGOs strengthened civil society, and helped every NGO to further its aims. In analyzing the concept of NGO partnerships, we found two important dimensions: partnerships for projects and informal partnerships. Thus, herein, based on this systematization, we hoped to see which one of the two types of partnerships would more likely inform our respondents' decision to collaborate with NGOs from our sample and others.

The comparison of the densities of the three different networks was interesting in this respect. The network with the highest density[5] was the one referring to the past or present collaborations (10 existing ties out of the 20 that are possible, 0.5). The density of the informal ties network was smaller, only 0.3 (6 existing ties out of the 20 that would be possible). The density of the network referring to their willingness to collaborate in the future lies in between these values, namely 0.45.

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[5] These values are obtained if the three graphs are regarded as non-directed ones, and no difference is made between unidirectional and bidirectional ties. If we are to take into account the fact that they are signed graphs, the values of the densities are all smaller than those indicated here, but their order remains the same.

Ultimately, we were left with the conundrum: in spite of the stories we collected in our interviews, about horizontal partnerships, and which resonated with findings in other studies that had dealt with the development of the Romanian NGO sector, our tentative network analysis somewhat blurred the expectation that *genuine* partnerships would be more desired if not yet present. Contrary to that, we observed that partnerships appeared to be, first and foremost, instrumental for projects and not a heuristic category for the development of the sector. This inference brought us back to the discussion we referenced earlier about the ideological underpinnings upon which the tertiary sector was grounded on in Romania.

V. Conclusion

This project has allowed the authors to consider and contribute to a broad debate about the Romanian post-communist society and the competing visions that have aimed to develop some of its fundamental institutions. Non-governmental organizations are and will be, in various ways, playing a role in the transformation of the beleaguered relationship between the state and civil society. They are also a relay mechanism for promoting alternative visions for *the good society*, within the framework of a consensus about the procedures in which this conversation will be conducted- the contemporary democratic regime. This would be a liberal ideal which has been associated with the development of civil society at the end of the last century. In these final paragraphs we briefly return to this ideal and consider other structural factors-of which principally funding- that have had a bearing on the NGO sector. The main concern for this paper remained, however, the relationship between non-profits and their sponsors and the influence this may have had on horizontal partnerships in the sector.

Firstly, project portfolios were essential for the financial security of the NGOs in our sample, and this more so as the funding market was being gradually consolidated. Such developments put a great strain on the ethical purpose of these organizations, expressed in their mission, and were ultimately a disincentive to horizontal, *genuine*, partnerships. This meant that mission statements were generally broad, aiming to cover much of the interests of donor organizations and be in line with their priorities.

The respondents to our questionnaire believed that cooperation based solely on a requirement by donors was not popular among NGOs which preferred to associate with peers who had similar missions and objectives. They would do so, perceivably, drawing on their own assessments and needs rather than just heed to donor requirements. In any case, several nuances should qualify this inference. Firstly, NGOs would generally consider horizontal partnerships opportune when designing a project. Project based partnerships developed to a different extent based on evaluations of institutional capacity and implementation context on the one hand and formal requirements to set up partnerships, i.e. funding constraints. Secondly, even if partnerships were instrumental rather than built on a long-term vision, also for the overall development of the sector, NGOs were likely to choose their partners based on their own preferences and needs. That meant that even if the reason for establishing partnerships rested with the need to comply with funding criteria and other prerequisites for submitting an application, non-profits had the leeway to decide what specific organization to cooperate with. Indeed, this may be the main explanation why the representatives of the NGOs in our sample believed that their decision what NFPO to work together with was not constrained by their funders. However, their interpretation may have been circumscribed by their appropriation of the categories and liberal discourse of their donors, on the one hand, and the absence of any indication in the application form of what organization to collaborate with. Ultimately, the biggest threat in this line of reasoning may have been the limitation it could bring on partnerships and how widely they would spread within the sector; and consequently the added marginalization this process would bring to less significant actors. This would have been a noticeable limitation for the sector as its existence and functioning were not grounded just on evolutionary market rules but encompassed a wide moral dimension.

NGOs cooperated in different events, participated in debates regarding the sector, exchanged information and know how, supported each other and shared their expertise. They were ready to cooperate with organizations that were involved in specific activities and had well-defined missions. To that extent, partnerships were established between organizations that had common interests and concerns. We observed, however, that organizations tended to have broad mission statements which were discussed elsewhere as a possible encumbrance to cooperation. Furthermore, even if organizations would find the common ground on which to work together, be it their mission, their institutional capacity, or their network with public authorities, or local constituencies, partnerships were created for an upward accountability to funders. Finally, as far as trust was concerned, we learned that, for donors, it was very important to be able to trust NGOs when they considered funding their applications and in the later stages of implementation and evaluation. In contrast to that, the extent to which NGOs were trustful of their sponsors seemed less important for a functional relationship.

This last finding seemed problematic for a constructive relationship based on feedback and learning both non-profits and their sponsors were eager to have and show. To this was also added the lack of trust between organizations, to which our survey respondents alluded. This we contrasted with all that we had thus far learned about establishing partnerships and we conjectured that structural changes in NGO funding coupled with a readiness to assess the general performance of the sector, by means of perhaps setting up a network within the sector, specifically concerned with this issue, could have a positive impact on the future development of the sector. An independent and transparent horizontal network for knowledge and skills transfer which would bank on new structural opportunities associated with E.U. accession may be one development we believe would be of benefit to the entire sector. The state, both at the central, local and intermediary levels could contribute to this outcome.

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Andra Cătălina Stoica *has an MA in Political Sociology from the Faculty of Sociology, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca. She is currently a project coordinator in the Department for Romanian Cultural Institutes Abroad, at the Romanian Cultural Institute Bucharest.*

Dan Mercea *is an MPhil/PhD student in communication studies at the Department of Sociology, University of York, United Kingdom. His current research interests cross several disciplinary boundaries while considering the dynamic between ICTs, political organizations such as parties and also social movement organizations, political participation, collective identity and political culture.*