A NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ORGANIZATION BY AN EXTERNAL PARTY: THE NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION NARRATIVE BY THE UNITED NATIONS[1]

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The focus of this paper is the narrative construction of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) by the United Nations. How the NGO is narrated by a legitimate institution like the UN is critical for both the sustainability of NGOs and the social benefit that is created by such organizations. This is because the allocation of resources to NGOs is directly affected by that narrative. The data come from the 20 speeches of the 54th annual conference (2001) titled as "NGOs today: Diversity of the Volunteer Experience" at the UN headquarters.

Organizations are social systems produced by the interactions of organizational members (Schwartzman, 1993). Stories or narratives are one way of member interaction and the resulting, ongoing, reconstruction. They define and redefine the organization and provide sensemaking resources for the members. Organizational narratives can be produced and diffused from within as well as imposed or communicated by an outside party. The external narrative may not directly determine the meaning of the organization but provide a specific framework to cultivate the meaning (Watson and Bargilea-Chiappini, 1998).

The focus of this paper is the narrative construction of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) by the UN as an external party. "An NGO is a not-for-profit, voluntary citizens' group, which is organized on a local, national or international level to address issues in support of the public good" ("What is an NGO", 2005). The term narrative "refers to thematic, sequenced accounts that convey meaning from implied author to implied reader" (Barry and Elmes, 1997: 431). Although there are numerous studies regarding the narrative construction of organizations, the organizational research seems not interested in the NGO and its narratives. Yet, how the NGO is conceptualized and communicated is critical for both the sustainability of NGOs and the social benefit created by them. As one of the primary supranational institutions, the UN may have an enormous effect on the NGO field through its narratives. Its definitions and policies reflect the international consensus among the member nations. The UN agencies like UNDP and the World Bank are major supporters of NGOs (Makoba, 2002). NGOs are increasingly incorporated into the UN system through conferences and projects (Alger, 2003). In return, the UN is a "major target" for NGOs to work with (Martens, 2004: 80). Already recognized as legitimate by national governments, the UN provides its partner NGOs with entrance to different development sectors (Martens, 2004). In sum, its NGO narrative may be an important reference for member states, their public, and donor agencies likely to provide funding and support for NGOs. In addition, it may point out "legitimate" organizational structure (the

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degree of professionalization; for example, see Edwards and Hulme, 2002) and practices, which probably have managerial and funding consequences. For the purpose of this paper, the legitimate organization is defined as one, the narrative of which is perceived as true and grounded in the reality by those who evaluate or make sense of that narrative. I suppose that such a perception is given in the efforts of those making sense of the narrative in being part of it so that it becomes their own reality. For instance, demanding and obtaining an associate NGO status presupposes the legitimacy of the UN as a legitimate narrator. It is to share the same ground, from which the narrative emerges.

Theoretical contributions of this study to organizational analysis comprise, first, a view on the narrative construction of the organization by an external party. External narratives may be considered as important sensemaking resources likely to construct a common understanding that may lead to the institutionalization of the NGO field in a particular way. The external party influence on the organization through narratives is a recent concern (Hopkinson, 2003; Watson and Bargilea-Chiappini, 1998). An explicit theory regarding this process is yet to be provided. A narrative view may allow us to theorize organizations as having indeterminate boundaries that are to be reconstructed externally as well as internally. The internal/external distinction is a repercussion of this reconstruction process. Indeed, the paper examines such a process realized through the participation of the organizational members within the framework of the external party and develops a preliminary theory on the participative narrative construction by an external party.

Organization as Narrative Construction

Boje defines organizations as storytelling systems (1991). Organizations are linguistic devices and resources constructed during the sensemaking activity (Gephart, 1998). Put differently, stories or narratives, as constituting the organization, are used to interpret the events and to create new interpretations and stories. They embody institutional memory, the bits of which exist and continue to accumulate in the minds of individuals (Boje, 1991). From the framework of certain narratives and their meanings, the members reproduce the organization and elicit responses from the external environment accordingly.

To Hopkinson, narratives or stories are "constitutive processes, by which human beings order their conceptions of self and of the world around them" (2003: 1947). What is reflected by the narrative is not the independent external reality but the experience of the reality by the narrator as s/he retrospectively gives order and causality to it (Hopkinson, 2003). The organization is distinctly constructed by a variety of narrators. Different narratives provide particular frameworks to make sense of organizational environments and elements in particular ways, drawing organizational boundaries, on which members act upon. Thus, narratives have real effects on the organization (Hopkinson, 2003).

Humpreys and Brown (2002) see narratives as an interpretive framework composed of a plurality of interests. There is a plurality of realities and associated truths intertwined with organizational members' particular interests. These different interests are represented by particular narratives or stories. Narratives allow the members as well as external parties to negotiate, share, and contest the meaning and identity of the organization (Humpreys and

Brown, 2002). Humpreys and Brown also mention the existence of the hegemonic narrative such that it can erase or subsume alternative narratives. We define hegemony as "a form of domination that gains power from being cleverly masked, taken for granted, and otherwise invisible" (Boje, Luhman, and Baack, 1999: 341) and that is based partly on the consent of the group that is dominated. A complete repression of alternative narratives may result in an alienation of the bearers of those narratives. A certain level of inclusion is needed (Brown, 2000; Humpreys and Brown, 2002). Inclusiveness lets counter arguments emerge and be defeated in the controlled environment of the hegemonic narrative.

The literature generally focuses on the process of the internal narrative formation. The narrative construction by an outside party is what this paper tries to understand. Similar to the literature, the paper understands the external narrative as an interpretive framework imposing organizational boundaries with possible material effects. The main concern is the narrative construction process, not what the UN's narrative is though I will have a brief look at it. The discussion revolves around the questions of what is the effect of multiplicity on the possible UN narrative, do we observe a process of exclusion/inclusion in the narrative, and is it an indication of an emerging hegemonic narrative.

Data and Methodology

Our data come from the speeches of the 54th annual DPI/NGO conference titled as "NGOs today: Diversity of the Volunteer Experience" and held on 10-12 September, 2001 at the UN headquarters. There are 20 speeches (out of 37) that are accessible at the website of the UN ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," 2005). These are keynote or plenary panel speeches. There is at least one speech for each panel.

The NGO section of the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) is responsible for the relations with NGOs in the UN. The section has been organizing annual NGO conferences since 1947, releases weekly briefs, conducts orientation programs and communication workshops, and keeps a database on the relationships between the UN and NGOs. NGOs should have certain characteristics to become an associate NGO ("What are the criteria for NGOs to become associated with DPI," 2005). Not every NGO has the privilege to work with and get support from the UN. Likewise, not every NGO can attend the annual DPI/NGO conferences. The NGOs included in this study are those included in the conference. Yet, this is a diverse group ranging from informal youth initiatives (Balkan Youth Union) to highly institutional organizations (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies). The level of operation is also varying from local to international. They work in different fields including disaster relief, capacity building, and health and education. These show the all-encompassing character of the UN's narrative.

The speeches of some other annual conferences by the NGO/DPI section are available at the UN website. The reason why I have chosen this particular conference is its theme. It directly addresses the question of what an NGO is in our times. The theme also includes the answer as a broad term, that is, volunteerism and diversity. The choice of keynote and panel speeches is largely a matter of necessity. Their use can be justified on the ground that they are the main narratives of the conference. One limitation is that 17 out of 37 speeches

are not available. But all the speakers are invited. This indicates that the conference participants are very likely to comprise a particular group of similar views on the issue. It is not inaccurate to expect that this is the view promoted in the conference. Furthermore, thinking that the narrative process is one of omission, fixation, and domination (Calas and Smircich, 1999), I can say that the availability of particular documents on the web site may be an indication of their representativeness for the UN's narrative of the NGO.

I follow a procedure of reading the texts several times, back and forth. First, I read all the texts without any conception in mind. Yet, this does not indicate a kind of objectivism. Common themes may not necessarily signify the same thing for all the speakers. However, their existence indicates that they are the point of consideration and possibly of conflict, that is, the main objects of current narrative activity. The main themes are volunteerism, NGO, civil society, professionalism, and global/local problems. Having armed with the concepts from the literature and my first reading, I reread the texts within the conference framework and come up with the concepts of diversity and inclusion/exclusion. Based on the readings, concepts, and the previous literature (certainly a sample), the research questions stated above are formulated to frame the discussion on the narrative process.

There are six panel sessions including the opening. The titles are the predetermined subcategories of the main theme "NGOs today: diversity of the volunteer experience". The narrative of each participant is a response first to the main theme and second to the specific subcategory it is situated in. Panelists have diverse backgrounds from different nations, and with different ages, occupations, and voluntary activities. Their speeches are given in changing periods from an hour to two and a half hours under the guidance of a moderator. There are two sessions in the first two days, and three in the last day of the conference.

Discussion: NGO narrative

A Brief Look at the UN's narrative

My story points out that the UN constructs narratively NGOs as volunteer organizations. This begins from the start, before any narrator tells his/her story, with the main theme of "NGOs today: diversity of the volunteer experience". NGOs are equated with the volunteer experience in this heading without any reservation in mind. The NGO of today is one of volunteerism even if some volunteers may not acknowledge that they are part of the NGO sector. Though volunteer activities are diverse, all can be included under the general concept NGO. The justification comes from the taken-for-granted facts that volunteerism is universal and that it is one of the most popular responses at the community level to the global problems. Civil society is also integral part of the NGO narrative. NGOs belong to civil society and are critical actors in maintaining the plurality and effectiveness of this sphere against governments and supranational political institutions. Yet, cooperation with governments is encouraged and a professional manner seems most adequate to ensure sustainable results. The narrative points to the youth as the workforce of the NGO.

Reconstruction of and within Main Theme

Personal accounts are narrated or reconstructed within the conference framework. For instance, the whole speech of KN is about the "volunteer" experience of a group of young people, and this experience is now part of the UN's NGO narrative, defining and defined by the latter. "The BYU (Balkan Youth Union) represents a group of young people who met each other through the Internet… The activists of BYU are volunteers, our members do not pay any fees, and we don't have any financial support and hence no managers" ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," KN, 2005).

The narrative is not wholly unified. There are counter arguments and arguments partially address the whole. Inclusiveness is a quality of a narrative that aspires to be hegemonic (Humpreys and Brown, 2002; Brown, 2000). As a counter voice, "most of the NGOs are shifting from the original role and depending very heavily on foreign donations forgetting their commitment in promoting volunteerism" ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," OFC, 2005). While this quotation claims that the NGO activity can hardly be defined as of volunteers, it is neutralized at the moment of utterance since it's performed under the title of "diversity of the volunteer experience". It is just a part of that "diversity". It should also be considered that NGOs' "original role" is defined in terms of "their commitment in promoting volunteerism". In other words, the argument doesn't challenge the UN's framework. The narrator makes sense of his experience within that framework (using it as a resource as well as a boundary) while incorporating that experience into the narrative.

The narrative unity is rooted not only in the fragmented accounts, which signify coherence as participation, but also in the repression of meanings assigned to volunteerism. The latter may obtain different meanings across and even within the speeches (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Yet, they are blurred by the main theme. Following the main theme from the reverse, the diversity of volunteer experience is solidified as the NGO, specifically the civil society actor that takes on roles in global/local problems with a professional manner.

Participative process

The speakers' narratives are reconstructed while they construct the NGO narrative. Any NGO activity is redefined or reread in terms of volunteerism, by which the UN's narrative is defined. Fragmentation is captured by the term "diversity" and the participative construction process, and is neutralized by the term "volunteerism" and its arbitrary assignment to the NGO through that process. Participation reflects the logic of civil society, to which NGOs are assumed to belong, and is a necessary resource for the narrative construction due to this given quality. Counter voices are also needed to demonstrate this inherent plurality. After all, the main theme includes the concept "diversity". Then, multiplicity is one factor that legitimizes the NGO narrative of the UN. It also provides unity for the narrative. "…over 2,000 people have registered, representing over 600 organizations in 90 countries from all regions of the world. These figures demonstrate the remarkable international representation…" ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," ST, 2005). The narrative pretends to arise out of the diversity of opinions. It is the outcome of a representative, as a result legitimate, platform. Both contradictory

supportive accounts are relativized from the viewpoint of the main theme, to which they respond. They are caught up by and defined within this meta-argument. Counter arguments are bound to define the gap between the current situation and this ideal. "Considering the given fact and NGOs role in present situation, a few NGOs came forward to uphold the spirit of volunteerism by incorporating volunteerism into their ongoing program and thus institutionalizing that to a great extent" ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," OFC, 2005).

Exclusion/Inclusion

The whole process is one of exclusion and denial as well as inclusion.

"Those NGOs took to the streets peacefully, only to find their voices drowned out by those bent on violence and destruction" ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," KA, 2005).

"The credibility that thousands of NGOs have created over many years must not be lost because of action by groups whose aims are not related to enhancing the global agenda" ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," HH, 2005).

"The writer seems to believe that volunteers, themselves, have no substance, and are not worthy of consideration. This letter is an example of one of the very reasons this conference is needed and can make a significant contribution" ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," KG, 2005).

The exclusion is obvious in the first two quotes. One denies "those bent on violence and destruction" as the non-NGO. The second distinguishes between the NGO and those whose aims are not to enhance the global agenda, whatever the latter is. The third one defines first what it excludes. It constructs narratively the excluded and justifies the conference on that narrative. The person who wrote the letter appears to have a different perspective on volunteerism. But it doesn't count in the UN. In fact, the conference tries to devalue that perspective. The agenda is preset to make sense of the NGO as volunteerism.

The process is not simply one of exclusion. Different voices are included in the conference and absorbed into the narrative.

"…a few NGOs came forward to uphold the spirit of volunteerism by incorporating volunteerism into their ongoing program and thus institutionalizing that to a great extent" ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," OFC, 2005).

"History has shown that differences are easily translated into hierarchy, domination and racism; into asymmetry in access to resources and power and to forms of control." ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," FEG, 2005).

"Public money covers two thirds of the costs for most of the organizations active in the social sector... A replacement of public service by volunteer activities is looked upon as a threat against the level of social welfare." ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," SF, 2005).

"Along with freedom, the free market economy, decentralization, expensive cars, and vacations abroad came despair, drug use, unemployment, homelessness, and lack of access to medical services" ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," KMS, 2005).

"Activists of the Civil Society in the South are in fact linked to the circles of knowledge and flow of information usually falling under Western hegemony" ("54th annual DPI/NGO conference," AK, 2005).

OFC, the speaker of the first quotation, points out a separation between volunteerism and NGOs, which is contrary to the thesis of the conference. FEG mentions the danger of diversity and possible repressive consequences associated with it. SF talks about the public money provided to civil society, which raises questions about the divide between civil and political societies and the capacity of the former to balance the latter. Also, it is emphasized that social welfare is mainly the job of governments. It is a structural problem that cannot be solved by volunteers. Similarly, KMS emphasizes the structural basis of NGOs and undermines the claim of universal volunteerism. AK explicitly points to the Western hegemony in the NGO sector and indirectly devalues volunteerism by drawing attention to the power relations behind. The stories, from which I take these quotations, are generally within the agenda set by the UN. Their counter points become part of that agenda in the form of diversity and inclusiveness, concretizing the participative narrative construction. They are now a property of the UN framework, ready to be reinterpreted. The narrative hegemony is legitimized on the consensus and participation as well as exclusion.

Legitimate institutional source and sense-making resource

The significance and credibility of what people tell are ensured by the institutionalized setting of the UN. It's become a platform to "arbitrarily" associate volunteerism and NGOs, making that association common sense. An objective account is derived from the "universality" of the UN. The boundaries of the NGO concept are extended by this universality without any boundary. At the same time, the conference formalizes informal stories, events or what seems messy/disorganized/diverse. This fixation is concretized by the written final report, which may, once published, act as an archetype (Brown, 2000). A new framework is put into use, sensitizing NGO people and volunteers to the convergences between new experiences and the new narrative, and providing them with the keen eye to rediscover the new within the old narratives. The narrative creates a subject position that has the capacity to subject his/her self-narrative to the narrative (what is created is not a deterministic relation between the narrative and the submission to power, but a capacity that can be used as a sense-making resource). It doesn't overdetermine what the NGO is. It provides a sense-making resource for individuals to construct their own narratives within the parameters of this external narrative. The long historical existence and perceived independence of the UN appears to be appropriate for a stable foundation of the new meaning for NGOs. It is possible to appeal to this stability and impartiality every time the narrative is questioned so that the credibility can be built again. Perceived neutrality overcomes the contextuality of meanings.

Implications, Contributions, and Limitations

Narratives have material effects since they are likely to be used as a sensemaking resource. Likewise, the NGO narrative of the UN may affect the NGO sector organizationally and financially. The actors of the NGO field –governments, donors, general public, and NGOs themselves- may like to or have to respond to the narrative and reorganize their decisions

accordingly. For example, volunteerism may gain a more professional character. NGOs without a volunteer "staff" may find it difficult to obtain funds. The tension between professionalism and volunteerism may be acute in the long-term, leading to a total rejection of either side. NGOs may have to restructure themselves to effectively tackle with this tension. Legitimacy may be a crucial issue and can be assessed by the match between what the narrative proposes and how the NGO currently works. This fit is again a managerial matter and should be planned carefully. This is because achieving fit may result in the loss of autonomy, which is another source of legitimacy for NGOs. They may also take the risk of marginalization to keep their autonomy. Another path is to try to be an associate NGO and get into the UN system to reshape the sector from within the system. Thinking that the conference was in 2001, these decisions may have been already made. It is necessary to study individual organizations to understand what the effect is.

The narrative construction in the conference is based on the participation of a diverse group of people. Though they basically work out the main theme, as we have seen, there are counter arguments as well. A variety of perspectives are articulated into the narrative. Other institutions may have different construction strategies. For example, state institutions may have more authoritarian and central narratives that are simply imposed on participants. In that case, the nature of the narrative may change as well. Reports, for instance, may have a formal and objective tone in narrating the story. We need to examine different organizational settings to come up with such narrative construction strategies.

Moreover, internal and external narratives may be formed in diverse ways. The UN is an external party for NGOs. Participative style may be more adequate to have the narrative accepted. It would be interesting to see how other external, yet legitimate (as perceived by the concerned actors), parties produce general narratives. For example, we can search for such construction processes in chambers of commerce or occupational associations. They may adopt specific strategies to legitimize the narrative. Internal parties, on the other hand, may build their strategies on the internal power balance or imbalance. Participation may be completely absent.

Narratives can be a mechanism for the institutionalization of the NGO field. They may be the first step to define the organization within the collective so that a common conception develops and is used to interpret. The perceived legitimacy and power of the external party is a critical input for the narrative to be legitimate in the eyes of organizational members. The external party can produce an institutionalization resource (allowing actors to make sense the organization in particular directions) in the form of narratives. The study also presents a view on the narrative construction of the organization by an external party. The narrative construction of the organization is not simply an internal process. We need to look at the external narratives that can potentially define the organization. The organization may have indeterminate boundaries.

The study has some limitations. Not all the speeches are available at the UN website. Those that cannot be included might have provided additional insights about the narrative construction. I don't have the minutes of the question and answer periods as well as the workshop minutes. These minutes are important to understand the sensemaking of the

participants and their individual conceptions of the NGO. I didn't observe the conference. As Boje puts, performance and text are the two sides of the same coin, that is, narrative (Boje, 1991). I have told my story by looking at the one side of the coin. Lastly, the final report of the conference is not accessible, either. It is the concrete form of the narrative. Yet, having looked at the final reports of other conferences, I can say that they are no more than a collection of speeches. This is in line with the participative approach of the UN. The UN gives the constituent narratives a kind of autonomy to tell the same story as they like.

The Participative Narrative Construction by an External Party

This section provides some preliminary insights for a more detailed theory of the participative narrative construction by an external party. Based on the data, this unique process may be put into a few propositions, which may guide future research. Participative narrative construction of the organization by an external party is defined as a process, in which the external party's narrative regarding the organization is formed by the active participation of the organizational actors, within the preset framework provided by the external party, in discussing, negotiating, and shaping the narrative so that the actors' viewpoints can be assimilated into the narrative.

Assumption: External party is a legitimate and powerful actor for the organization in the sense that its narrative is perceived as true by and grounded in the reality of the members of the organization who evaluate or make sense of that narrative, and that the narrative is likely to have important financial and material effects.

Proposition one: The external party provides a meta-concept or theme, by which the participation of the organizational members is narratively predefined or framed.

Proposition two: Within the meta-concept, the external party supplies subcategories, by which the diversity of participation is regulated and directed towards the construction of the meta-concept.

Proposition three: After the narrative scope of participation has been restricted (propositions one and two), the participant organizational members narratively fill the meta-concept, solidifying and fixing it, detailing exclusions and inclusions.

Proposition four: The participant organizational members reconstruct their narratives at the same time they construct the meta-concept, making the process self-constructive and the meta-concept self-reflective on the organizational members' own narrative.

Proposition five: The meta-concept, which has been initially taken for granted as a framework without content, becomes a taken-for-granted narrative with content as the organization.

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