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Performance and Norms

The Case of Emergency Relief NGOs

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Summary: Performance has become a central issue in assessing the activities of NGOs in particular. This presupposes that performance can be easily measured. Performance is directly related to the degree of professionalization of organizations in general, NGOs in particular. Professionalization is also related to the specialization which in turn is a function of experience and knowledge. Specialization has a desirable consequence which can be assessed at the micro-level, which is the success of service delivery to individuals. Less desirable could be the consequences at the macro-level. Professionalization meaning specialization leads to the fragmentation of a given area of activity. Trade-offs between the different specialities is the result so that a gap between actual performance and potential performance can open up. As a consequence performance needs to be assessed both at the micro- and the macro-level. Given resource constraints the coordination between the different specialists is a necessity, in particular for emergency relief. The purely professional perspective needs to be complemented by that of three types of actors, beneficiaries, donors and the governments of recipient countries. Their assessment of performance of particular NGOs may not necessarily be based on professional standards but rather on individual satisfaction of the services delivered or the political impact of service delivery.

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Introduction

Professionalization has become a central issue in evaluating the performance of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Professionalization in turn is a corollary of specialization in order to improve performance. Yet specialization, as March and Olson argued, can lead into the competency trap. Maslow has nicely formulated this problem as follows: if you have a hammer you are likely to treat everything as a nail. The issue of this paper on performance and norms relates directly to these two remarks. First, professionalization as a corollary to specialization may not necessarily guarantee improved performance. And second, norms play a relevant role as contextual determinants of performance, the latter being meaningless as such unless combined with some normatively grounded objective. The problem to be addressed is therefore: what are the implications of professionalization of organizations and to what extent are norms relevant in that context? Rather than focusing on organizations as such I will limit myself to non profit NGOs in general, to emergency relief NGOs in particular. The reason for this limitation will be clarified below. First, we will briefly describe the different types of NGOs. Both performance and norms differ with respect to their domain of competence and activity. Second, we will address the issue of professionalization and the linkage with performance. And third, we will elaborate on the role of norms and their relation to the performance issue.

1. The non profit sector

Conventional wisdom suggests that NGOs, contrary to the private sector and for profit organizations, are not terribly efficient meaning that their performance is anything but optimal. Authors such as Cooley and Ron have shown why, from the new economy of organizations theory, this should be the case. Their demonstration was theoretically convincing even though the empirical evidence they presented was not. Even though it is true that for profit as well as non profit organizations operate in a competitive market, they differ in that in the former case the consumers decide which ones will survive whereas in the latter the private and/or public donors have the final say. Nonetheless performance is anything but irrelevant. Before arguing why professionalization is a necessary but not sufficient condition for improved performance we will first have to clarify what performance means with respect to the activity or activities of the different types of NGOs.

Thus far there is absolutely no consensus on a general typology of NGOs. Risse suggests advocacy, epistemic and economic types thereby leaving out all the NGOs that are operative (such as emergency relief, developmental or environmental organizations), Gordenker and Weiss distinguish among others educational and advocacy NGOs. We suggest classifying NGOs according to two different dimensions. The first one relates to the primary objective of the organization which might be operational (emergency relief, development, the environment etc.), or advocacy (human rights, women, children etc.). Epistemic organizations could be considered as a subclass of advocacy organizations. The second dimension relates to the various functions performed by the individual organizations. These functions include the objective as such (development aid etc.), advocacy (either self-oriented as in the case of interest groups or beneficiary oriented as in the case of development organizations), fundraising etc.

For profit organizations operate in a well circumscribed context, the market with its specific norms. At least they are supposed to behave within certain limits defined by the states. The situation of the non profit agencies is different. In general there is no clearly defined positive framework for their activities. National laws specify only the general conditions that entitle them to the non profit status but they do not include any specification of their substantive area of activity. Thus, in contrast to their for profit counterparts it is up to the non profit NGOs to define the conditions guiding their activities. The operative agencies agencies define for themselves their particular mission. They may fill in gaps due to market failures, they may be subsidiaries to the states or they may directly challenge the states in providing alternative services. Performance can therefore be derived both from their mission statements as well as from the results of their operational activities. Advocacy NGOs are assumed to be at least potentially anti-government oriented. Their freedom of action is circumscribed by the national context in which they operate. Their performance cannot be directly derived from the success of their activities. At best their performance can be evaluated in terms of the public attention they get.

Thus far, we have implicitly assumed that NGOs are active in their given national environment. Once they cross borders the situation is different as the regulation of their freedom of action is determined by their country of origin whereas their area of activity is countries of their chosen destination. The issue therefore is which criteria determine their

rights and obligations. The “*sans-frontiérisme*” movement assumes that the self-defined mission legitimizes its activities internationally. This is an extension of the emergency relief movement as one can see by the increase in the *sans-frontières* organizations such as *ingénieurs sans frontières*, *reporters sans frontières* etc. This obviously seems to imply that NGOs infer some universal legitimization for their transnational activities.

To summarize the arguments thus far: at the national level NGOs are entitled by national legislation to define themselves their domain of activity, either in operative terms or in terms of advocacy for entitlements in favour of some specific individuals or groups. Their activity may be subsidiary to the state or complementary. Their relation to the state may be adversarial to, independent of, or defined in terms of partnerships with the state. As a consequence both the norms at the national and the international level will legitimize or limit their freedom of action. This has consequences for evaluating the performance of the individual organizations.

2. The normative context of NGO activities

Even though the principle of sovereignty with particular reference to the principle of non-intervention is increasingly being challenged the states are still jealously upholding it. There are only a few exceptions where the states have agreed to limit some prerogatives through international law legitimizing the transgression of the non-intervention principle. As far as NGOs are concerned international humanitarian law allows them to intervene in the case of armed conflicts for emergency relief activities – but no more. In other words NGOs are allowed to intervene to provide assistance to the victims in international and non international armed conflicts. Only humanitarian organizations are entitled to access the territory of a third country for relief operations in the case of armed conflict. This is the exception to the rule. NGOs in general have no right to intervene in third countries unless the recipient state agrees. At the same time the authorities can also determine what they are allowed to do and what not. In the case of natural disasters, for example, as the recent events in Myanmar have shown, there is no legitimation either for state or non state actors to help the victims without the approval of the regime in place.

Thus, whatever the mission of NGOs are there is no legal and thus political justification for them to act outside their country of origin unless they have the tacit or

explicit approval of the state where they feel that their activity would be useful if not necessary. Therefore assessing the performance of any NGO depends not only on their degree of professionalization but also on the context in which they are trying to fulfil their mission. It is against this background that we can now address in detail the issue of performance.

3. Performance and Professionalization

Performance seems to be a straightforward concept. In formal terms it could be defined as an activity based on professional standards. Professional standards are derived from the “state of the art”, that is to say standards that are based on experience and scientific knowledge. One should certainly add as well a specific professional deontology. This applies to any profession. Knowledge has a desirable consequence: professionalization. But the greater the accumulated knowledge is the greater the specialization. In more pejorative terms, specialization implies an increasing fragmentation of a profession into its different specialties (medicine is a perfect example). Under these conditions the concept of performance is no longer easily defined.

Let us take the example of medicine. One can obviously evaluate the performance of a single doctor with respect to the success in curing individual patients. Let us assume for a moment that in this case the issue is the success in treating patients with cancer. The quality of the performance could be assessed in terms of the number of patients that survived. One could even compare the treatment applied with other cases where less specialized doctors were treating the same type of illness. If the doctors with a higher level of specialization turned out to be more successful than the doctors with a lower level of specialization the performance of the latter is not optima.

Performance can thus be evaluated at the micro-level, meaning that performance relates to individuals taken care of. In this case performance focuses only on the group of patients that have been treated, ignoring thereby the overall number of individuals with cancer that have not had a chance to be treated and thereby not having had a chance to be cured. This implies that performance can be evaluated as well at the macro-level. In this case

the performance of the medical system at large is at stake¹. It is evident that in this case the level of professionalization that would allow for even greater performance is not defined by the skills of the doctors as such but by the allocation of resources which the profession is not in control of.

The specialization within the medical profession has a desirable consequence at the micro-level which is that more and more different diseases can be treated successfully. The performance with respect to the individual patients treated will therefore necessarily increase. There is, however, a less desirable consequence at the macro-level: the number of patients that could be treated successfully will not necessarily increase correspondingly. As resources are limited competition for the scarce resources will increase thereby limiting the ability of the specialized professionals to cure more patients than they are actually treating. Performance standards in this case would assess the gap between those patients treated and those that could be treated if more resources were available.

Whereas the macro- and micro-level distinction relates to what one might label as objective criteria for assessing performance there is another dimension which we label as the subjective dimension (lacking a better term). This subjective dimension is directly related to the various actors having a stake in the performance of some group of professionals. Again we could distinguish between the micro level and the macro-level. Leaving the professionals aside there are first the beneficiaries. These could be patients, poor people or the members of a community where a development project is being implemented. This includes in general all the individuals that profit from the activity of a nongovernmental organization. Performance is therefore assessed at the micro-level in subjective terms by the recipients. At the macro-level there are first of all the donors themselves which assess the performance of the agencies they have financed. One must consider as well the governments of the recipient countries which may or may not be satisfied with the performance of the various NGOs.

Performance can therefore be evaluated according to different criteria: in terms of the "objective" professional standards it can be assessed at the micro-level and/or at the macro-level (the latter being close even though not identical to the notion of impact).

¹ In order to simplify the argument we jump directly to the level of the medical system at large, rather than focusing on the particular subsystem dealing with cancer.

Performance can also be assessed in terms of the subjective satisfaction of the beneficiaries, the donors and the recipient countries. It is unlikely that these different performance criteria will converge – supposing that they do - because professional standards will either be unknown by all or, even if this is the case, be shared by all the actors involved.

Thus far, we have primarily been dealing with professional organizations (meaning NGOs) delivering services of some kind. What about advocacy organizations? Human rights organizations could also be said to deliver services in the sense that if they are successful in convincing some government to reduce its repressive policies this will profit some particular group in a given country. Yet such organizations cannot impose on any government liberalization policies. Performance in this case is no longer measurable in terms of success (liberalization). It is at best assessed in terms of mobilization of public opinion or in creating awareness at the political level, nationally and/or internationally by having a particular human rights issue being put on the political agenda.

4. Professionalization, Specialization and Performance

Unfortunately there is hardly any serious research on the professionalization of NGOs. One reason is that the concept of NGOs is associated with the properties non-profit and voluntarism. This leads to one type of criticism of NGOs considered to mean amateurism, that is individuals who want “to save the world” according to some normative concept. There is another type of criticism which actually deplores the professionalization of NGOs because it undermines the very notion of civil society participation. Whatever the value of the criticism against professionalization or against amateurism, NGOs specialized in a particular domain are effectively concerned with professionalization. This latter group of NGOs is the one we will address. First, a few propositions will be formulated relating to professionalization. We will then do so with respect to performance.

Professionalization implies necessarily specialization. This means the training of the personnel of the organization itself respectively the recruitment of trained personnel. That leads us to a first proposition:

H1: The level of professionalization of an organization is related to its mission and the resources available for that purpose

This general proposition can be decomposed into a number of components:

H1.1: The mission of an organization will determine the degree of specialization required. Thus, the broader the mission of an organization, the greater will be the need for specialists,

and therefore

H1.2: the greater the resources available to an organization the greater the possibility of its professionalization.

Professionalization, however, has follow-up costs needed for translating it into improved performance at the micro-level. Improved professionalization means greater specialization. Given limited resources

H2: Increasing professionalization implies increased resources for intra-organizational coordination among the various specialties.

These hypotheses apply to the organizational level. If competition among NGOs active in the same domain is given this has consequences for the performance at the macro-level.

H3: The greater the number of professionalized agencies the greater the competition among them and the greater the likelihood of duplication.

This brings us to the issue of performance. Let us briefly look at the micro-level in conjunction with the proposition of the competence trap. The competence trap means that an agency specialized in specific services may be more and more performing but disregarding at the same time both the specific needs for which the organization has been designed and disregarding as well other complementary needs. Two examples may serve to illustrate this particular argument.

The first example: When the Tsunami had struck the person responsible for fund raising in a big humanitarian organization in France was delighted given the overwhelming response of private donors. The CEO of the same organization asked him at some point to stop further fund raising appeals. The organization had already reached the limits of its response capacities. The fund raiser was disappointed arguing that he never has had such a success.

The second example is based on a thought experiment. Let us assume that an emergency relief organization is specialized in medical services but also providing additional assistance to victims in an emergency situation. Given the high level of specialization the organisation invests a great amount of its resources in the medical domain because this is what it is best at. The resulting trade-off between medical aid and – say – the provision of food aid means that the more people are treated, the smaller the number of beneficiaries is getting food aid.

These two examples illustrate not only the problem where professionalization may lead into a competency trap by focusing exclusively at the micro-level but also as how to improve the performance at the macro-level. The corresponding hypothesis is:

H4: Given scarce resources coordination of the different professional activities can bridge the gap between micro-level performance and macro-level performance.

This means at the intra-organizational level that

H4.1: the greater the internal specialization of an organization the greater the need for coordination meaning the optimization of performance globally given the different needs of a given number of potential beneficiaries.

H4.2: the greater the specialization of different organizations the greater the need for coordination among them, meaning optimizing the performance globally given the different needs of a given number of beneficiaries.

Summing up the arguments this far we can infer provisionally that professionalization can certainly improve the micro-level performance of an organization. But micro-level performance may reduce the macro-level performance.

The analysis thus far more or less implicitly assumes that the performance of emergency relief agencies is more or less a technical issue. On the one hand professionalization as such will contribute to improved performance. On the other the solution to optimize simultaneously micro-level and macro-level performance is coordination. And this means that the management within and between organizations becomes equally important as the substantive activities of the organizations themselves.

5. Norms

Performance as we mentioned briefly above, is always embedded in the legitimation of the objective or objectives pursued by any kind of professional activity. One type of norms it concerns the professional activity as such, which is what kind of behaviour is acceptable and what is not. These kinds of norms relate to the means used. There is a second type of norms related to the end of the activity. For emergency relief agencies the end is to save lives. Assessing the performance of an agency is therefore related both to the means and ends. For emergency relief agencies both ends and means are more or less well specified which seems to immunize these agencies in some way against norms enunciated by the three other actors mentioned above: beneficiaries, donors and host countries. The more recent developments reveal that additional norms can be included both with respect to the means and ends. As far as the ends are concerned accountability towards the beneficiaries has become a prominent issue. The Humanitarian Accountability Project International (HAP-I) been pushing this issue for some time as a relevant topic on the humanitarian agenda. Another initiative proposed by Mary Anderson also suggested an extension of the normative basis of humanitarian action with the “do-no-harm” principle. The HAP-I initiative remains within the legitimate bounds of the existing norms by wanting to create awareness that victims are not simply objects in need but that they are also individuals that have to be legitimately treated as subjects even in emergencies. The Anderson initiative in contrast actually tends to undermine the impartiality principle included in the Geneva Conventions.

For humanitarian agencies the assessment of performance relates therefore to the different aspects mentioned: the respect for the norms concerning both ends and means. Performance relates as well to the degree of professionalism and its impact at both the micro-level as well as macro-level. But to limit the performance of humanitarian agencies exclusively on their activities neglects one critical aspect, the potential vs. the actual performance. The donors, primarily the states and international organizations such as the European Union with ECHO, determine the performance of the humanitarian agencies through their resource allocation decisions. These decisions will limit the degree to which agencies can professionally do their work successfully.

Resource allocation, however, is but one even though important element for the performance of humanitarian agencies. Host countries or the parties to the conflict can also impose restrictions on their performance. They may limit the access to the victims; they may require money for access or lute their material etc. This is the reality which clearly limits the performance of humanitarian agencies. The problem therefore is whether they are accountable for these kinds of conditions. From an analytical perspective the norms of third parties concerning the objectives of emergency relief aid conflict with those of the humanitarian agencies. Given their powerlessness, however, they are faced with a trade-off concerning performance and access.

In the case of all the other NGOs delivering services of one kind or another, their own criteria of performance grounded in specific norms on ends and means are determined externally, with no support in any legal framework legitimizing their activities. Unless their own norms relating to primarily to the ends are either conform or compatible with those of their beneficiaries or host states their own defined criteria of performance are secondary and subject to we have called the subjective evaluation of both. Very likely no such conflict will arise as long as their activities are more or less considered to be technical in nature such as drilling wells or setting up a basic health care center. One could even go further by arguing that outside the emergency relief domain NGOs delivering services in areas such as development or the environment, independent of their own normative understanding as civil society representatives are basically subsidiaries of the states that are legitimized to set the norms determining the ends, therefore legitimized to assess their performance.

6. Conclusions and outlook

We have only touched upon the surface of the issue of performance and norms of nongovernmental agencies. Professionalization and with it specialization play an important role in determining the performance of these types of agencies. Professionalization leads inevitably to a management issue both within and between agencies within the same domain. Performance can be measured both at the micro-level but also at the macro-level, the latter coming close to the macro-level impact of specific activities. For NGOs in general, humanitarian agencies in particular, the donors set limits

through their resource allocation decisions. In the field, host countries in general, or parties to a conflict in particular, also impose limits to the performance because of their ability to define and impose their particular norms related to the end of specific activities. And this could mean that independently of the level of professionalization the performance of NGOs is never exclusively within their own prerogative.