



Reaching Out: Network building by US non-profit welfare organizations

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Abstract

Contemporary non-profit organizations operate in a fast changing and challenging environment. While the challenges at the sector level have been well documented, there is a gap in the literature in examining this issue at the local level. Based on interviews with non-profit executives, and using grounded theory methodology, this paper proposes that non-profits are using a reaching out strategy to deal with their most commonly experienced challenges of overwhelming complexity, distancing, and fragmentation. Reaching out involves different forms and levels of inter-organizational networking. These forms may be characterized as differentiation, symbiotic relations, and advocacy networks.

Introduction

Even though the idea of a ‘welfare state’ may conjure up images of a monolithic government bureaucracy, the modern welfare state in the United States is a collection of public, nonprofit, and private organizations with cross-cutting funding and program interrelationships. Non-profits have been playing an especially important role in the welfare system since the 1980s (Salamon, 1987; Wolch, 1990; Salamon, 1995; Savas, 2000; Chambre, 1999). Acting as contractors of the state, they are delivering more services, reaching new, especially previously marginalized, clients, and introducing novel solutions to sticky social problems. They do this because they are generally more nimble and efficient than public agencies. To that extent, the welfare state has benefited from its relationship with the nonprofit sector. In return, non-profit organizations have also reaped benefits from this relationship. By some estimates, over a third of the non-profit sector's revenues come from the government (Independent Sector, 2002). Among other things, this increased funding led to a growth in the number of non-profits over the last forty years.

Public policy and administration trends like ‘contracting out’ and ‘New Public Management’ (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Frumkin, 2002; Brooks, 2003) facilitated this growth in state support for the non-profit sector. Among other things these trends emphasized cross-sector collaboration, the use of multiple delivery agencies in order to encourage competition and creativity, establishing service delivery close to the clients, and outcomes measurement (Savas 1982, 2000). The operating environment for the non-profit sector changed quantitatively and qualitatively as a result. This environment provided many opportunities for the non-profit sector, but it also brought with it new problems and challenges. Non-profits found themselves in unfamiliar terrain in the legal, collaboration, personnel, and accountability areas. Therefore, along with growth and

vibrancy, the sector also experienced voluntary ‘failures’ (Salamon, 1987). Examples of these are an inability to sustain the organization in the long term due to increased competition, shortage of professional managers, lack of accountability, the simultaneous existence of duplication and gaps in services (Chambre, 1999), and the altering of program priorities to follow changes in funding trends.

Local level organizations are the primary workhorses of the non-profit sector. They directly deliver more services and reach more clients than national organizations and typically have fewer (financial and human) resources than state or national organizations. Previous research on this topic has focused more on macro level challenges faced by the non-profit sector as a whole rather than on exploring problems and challenges faced by local organizations. The literature has explored such macro level challenges as the sector's overreliance on government funding, the relative loss of autonomy of the sector due to such reliance on government funds, the crowding out of private charity, the lack of investment in capacity building, and the dysfunctional aspects of competition between traditional non-profits on the one hand and faith based organizations and private corporations on the other (Salamon, 2002; Abrams & Schmitz, 1984; Brooks, 2004; Smith & Lipsky, 1993). Even though these macro level challenges are important, they do not fully capture the challenges faced by nonprofits at a local level.

This paper presents a theory of reaching out through the building of formal and informal networked relations among localized non-profits to cope with the challenges they face.

Method

Grounded Theory (GT) methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1992) was invoked for this study allowing for the identification of social processes occurring in organizations without having to approach the data with predetermined concepts or expectations. Data were collected through twenty one interviews with executive directors of non-profits in California's San Joaquin valley. All participants had been involved with their organizations over an extended period of time and were probed about crucial operations and decisions in their organizations. Some participants were involved from the point of their organizations' founding and thus were witness to, or were directly involved in, decision making in important areas as the organizations expanded. The participants were typically involved in such major decisions as strategic planning, adding or dropping programs, choosing or rejecting new funding streams, or creating services for new clients. All the participants' agencies provided what may broadly be called ‘social and human’ services. These organizations represented a wide spectrum of operations and were servicing such clients as migrant farm workers, the homeless, abused and neglected children, and AIDS patients.

Initial sampling was done using the snowball method with participants being asked to recommend others for the study. From these names, potential participants were chosen so as to bring in a diverse range of organizations (in terms of program activities) into the study. As initial codes started emerging, theoretical sampling was used to recruit additional participants for the study. This was done based on participants' expected ability to contribute to the elaboration of emerging codes. Such sampling is consistent with Glaser's recommendation (1978) and it helps in the fleshing out of the properties of the codes as well as in the identification of the connections

between them. Glaser (1978, 1992) argued that, in GT methodology, the goal of the researcher is the inductive elaboration of phenomena like social processes and thus sampling and interviewing (or other data collection techniques) should be guided by the need to identify and fully develop such processes and their related concepts. Eventually, this will lead to the development of hypotheses that connect the concepts and processes.

Challenges Faced by Non-profits at the Local Level

Non-profits face a wide variety of challenges key among which are the challenges of ‘overwhelming complexity’, whereby the stubbornness of the problems, their depth and scope, as well the long term impact they are having on clients seems to overwhelm the small, local non-profit; and ‘distancing’, the consequence of sustained fundraising success that transforms small non-profits into large, bureaucratic organizations causing them to lose touch with client groups and grassroots advocates and frequently rendering them unable to respond quickly to emerging issues – a key characteristic of their initial success. A third challenge is ‘fragmentation’ due to lack of coordination between non-profits when competing for grants or creating programs for clients and resulting in redundancies, wastage, and dissipation of focus and overall reduced efficacy.

Overwhelming complexity

Even the most experienced non-profit managers express frustration with the complexity and stubbornness of these problems. One of the sources of complexity, and a source of frustration, is that problems seem to spill over in ways that reduce the efficacy of a non-profit. All the hard work in an area is brought to naught because other public or non-profit organizations are not doing enough to address other aspects of the problem. Among other things, this situation causes bitterness among non-profit managers and leads to finger pointing. Another dimension of overwhelming complexity seems to be the stubbornness of the problems that non-profits are dealing with. Managers often feel that in spite of their best efforts they make little progress and feel that they are “running on a treadmill”. Non-profits dealing with child abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, gang violence, and AIDS education and advocacy all seem to be impacted in one way or another by this problem. Managers often feel that they are serving the same clients again and again because underlying problems are not being addressed.

Overwhelming complexity also persists because, even though the problems the non-profits are dealing with are multidimensional, there is not enough funding available for designing solutions that are well coordinated, systemic, and long term. Traditional grants reward discrete projects with very specific outcomes. The modest grants available to local non-profits do not support projects attempting widespread solutions to social problems. The situation is compounded by a lack of collaboration within the local non-profit sector. The perceived competition for grants can be so intense that many managers are reluctant to work together for fear of having to share vital information with potential competitors for funding support.

Distancing

In the literature, the ideal type of a non-profit is that of an organization that caters to unmet local needs—needs that have been ignored by the public and the private sectors (Hall, 2006). In doing so, non-profits are expected to rely upon local resources. In this sense they are uniquely different from public agencies serving similar clients. Public bureaucracies are expected to be more top-down and rule oriented while non-profits are expected to be more flexible and creative in the way they address social problems. In reality, however, non-profits tend to ‘go corporate’ too. As they receive larger grants, take on larger client loads, and employ more people, non-profits tend to take on the bureaucratic characteristics of public agencies. The literature on organizational isomorphism (for example, DiMaggio & Powell, 1987) implies that this could happen; it would especially happen to non-profits that are reliant on government grants and those that have a long tradition of working closely with (and for) public agencies in the implementation of the latter’s programs.

This presents a paradox for the non-profit. Even though being close to the clients and quickly responding to their needs were essential to their initial success, the subsequent bureaucratization and formalism prevents their being able to continue to sustain their grassroots responsiveness. Rather, they become preoccupied with procedures, evaluations, and internal processes and the pressure to continue do the things that will lead to even more success and to keeping or receiving large grants. Thus, non-profit leaders become preoccupied with maintaining organizational growth and developing external relations.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation occurs as services are parceled and provided amongst a large number of agencies with the onus on the clients to coordinate and claim the services they need. Fragmentation occurs for several reasons. Non-profits are intensely competing for funds and credit such that they have limited innate incentives to collaborate, share information or services. Further, grantmakers reward specialization and projects with discrete outcomes. Non-profits respond to this by slicing up the problem into measurable and relatively one-dimensional parts. Another reason for fragmentation is the regulatory environment that makes it hard for agencies to share information and coordinate services, especially where vulnerable populations like children are involved. This last factor is compounded when the situation requires non-profits to work along with public agencies. Thus, non-profit managers feel that the value of what they are doing (and its impact on their clients) is realized only when the other pieces fall in place. In reality though it is not uncommon for clients to ‘fall through the cracks’ because of the way the various agencies work in their own worlds. The lack of coordination can be particularly pronounced between non-profits and local governmental agencies in the context of competition for credit.

Reaching Out as a Coping Strategy

Non-profit managers acquire methods of coping with the challenges that their organizations face by ‘reaching out’ and connecting with other non-profit and public organizations. More specifically, the reaching out results in strategic competition through differentiation, symbiotic relationships, single-issue alliances, and advocacy networks. *Differentiation* helps nonprofits enhance coordination and improve fundraising efficiencies. Non-profits in small communities are sensitive to being perceived as stepping on each other’s toes in raising funds. At the same

time though they feel the pressure to distinguish themselves to the donor community and they understand that comparisons with other similar non-profits are inevitable. Differentiation has the advantage of not only enhancing fund raising efficacy but also providing more focused services for clients.

The formation of *symbiotic relations* between smaller and larger non-profits results in two-way sharing of resources between organizations involved in similar work regardless of major differences in their relative sizes. The relations involve formal and informal linkages and result in the exchange of a wide variety of resources (for example, people, training, ideas, and strategy). Symbiotic relations are not primarily about the transfer of money (though this may sometimes occur) but are focused on other ways in which organizations can help each other. One of the ways in which larger organizations benefit from symbiotic relations is that smaller organizations help them overcome the distancing problem described above. Larger organizations gain insight regarding emerging clients' needs as well as other political issues that could potentially impact their programs. Being able to quickly respond to such needs validates that they still care about their clients and that they are still nimble enough to create or modify programs for such emerging problems (even though their connections to some of the communities are indirect). At the same time, the small nonprofits also benefit because they gain access to guidance from experienced staff, leads to influential grant-makers, and even some pass-through dollars. In some cases, the smaller organizations act as sub-contractors for the larger non-profits delivering services on the latter's behalf while keeping them plugged in, so to speak, with what is happening at the ground level. The smaller organizations especially appreciate the opportunity to have a larger impact than they otherwise would have.

Non-profits may also use symbiotic relations to form single issue alliances with government agencies in order to quickly act on a hot-button public issue. Such alliances are unique in their focus on raising the public's awareness on a single issue and are usually dismantled after some progress has been achieved towards tackling that issue. Such alliances may be short-term or longer-term and enable the non-profits to accomplish more, and more quickly, than through their traditional individual efforts. Further, because all participants realize that they are working towards helping a single (or a few) cases, they tend to focus more on the outcomes than on the 'usual politics' that exist between non-profit and public agencies operating in a domain.

A third form of reaching out occurs when non-profits form policy *advocacy networks* with public agencies with the goal of changing existing public policies or shaping emerging policies. These networks are unique in the sense that they are not directly focused on delivering services to clients but on the broader policy environment. This policy environment is important because it sets the programmatic and funding priorities in their domain. The advocacy networks are not lobbying groups because they were relatively short term and were focused narrowly on one or two issues. The advocacy networks are interesting because of the strict legal and political environment they operate under—an environment that imposes restrictions on lobbying by non-profits and public agencies. Public agencies don't want to be perceived as lobbying their own political bosses for fear of criticism by the latter. However, they stand to benefit (more funds, more programmatic impact) should such lobbying be successful. They thus seem to form networks with non-profits to advocate on single policy issues. Non-profits want to walk a fine line between policy advocacy, maintaining neutrality (for IRS purposes), and positioning

themselves in ways that they will be able to draw more funds should a policy is changed after all. In these quid pro quo relationships, the actual advocacy (its public face) is provided by the non-profits; the public agencies take a relative back seat but provide other resources (information, legislative know-how, and access to policy makers). They also bring attention to the issues being advocated on through timely newspaper announcements. If public policy changes as a result, all members of the advocacy network tend to gain.

Collaboration between non-profit and public organizations for shaping policy takes many different forms. This happens for example when non-profits reach out to collaborate with public agencies in areas when the latter have discretionary funds. Thus a public agency may be charged by its governing legislative body with protecting children from abuse. However, a few non-profits may lobby locally to make the case with the agency that targeting teen parents with educational campaigns may be an appropriate way of fighting abuse given the circumstances of the place. Thus, non-profits and local public managers together make micro level public policy by determining how exactly the funds will be used and which client groups will be targeted. As Lipsky (1980) said, street level bureaucrats sometimes set policy by determining the details of program implementation. Interestingly, non-profits also seem to be playing a role in street level bureaucracy of this kind. Figure 1: (cannot be shown)

Discussion

Even though terms like 'the independent sector' and 'the third sector' conjure up impressions of the non-profit sector as a separate entity from the public and private sectors with relatively impermeable boundaries, the reality is that the non-profit sector has, especially since the 1980s, become very closely integrated with the public sector. A key impetus in this regard was the Reagan administration's decision to allow large scale contracting by public agencies with non-profits for the delivery of social services. This phenomenon continued under subsequent administrations. As a result, the non-profit sector grew at an annual rate of 5.1 percent between 1987 and 1997 (Independent Sector, 2002). This impressive expansion occurred at double the rate of growth of the business sector during the same period. The non-profit sector's growth was especially dramatic between 1989 and 1992 (7.3 percent per year). The sector currently has over one million organizations falling under the various exempt categories of the tax code (most of them are under the 501-c-3 and 501-c-4 sections of the code). The sector employs over 11 million people and has revenues over 700 million dollars (Independent Sector, 2002).

This increasing reliance of non-profits on government funding sources, and their increasing coordination with public agencies during the implementation of welfare programs has caused people to question whether the 'independent sector' is really independent. Salamon (1987, 1995) called this situation 'third party government' because of the extent to which the nonprofit sector has become a contractor of the state. Other writers have questioned whether the unprecedented reliance on government funds could compromise the autonomy of the nonprofit sector, especially in areas of advocacy. Wolch (1990) explored the implications of this situation further by pointing out that the non-profit sector has in effect become a 'shadow state' in that it operates like the state (delivering public goods that are deemed important by state actors and using public funds) but without the full institutional capacity of the state and without its legitimacy. This shadow state situation results in the transfer of the state's responsibilities to the non-profit sector but

without a sustainable strategy for maintaining the latter's ability to continue providing these services without state support. In the worst case scenario the state could retrench funding for welfare programs but the non-profit sector will be holding the responsibility for delivering services to client.

Concerns such as these about the dysfunctions of the nonprofit sector's overreliance on the state have started a debate in the literature about the challenges now facing the sector. Most of these debates though have focused on sector level challenges (see for example Netting et al, 1990; Smith & Lipsky, 1993; O'Regan & Oster, 2000; Frumpkin & Andre-Clark, 2000; Austin, 2003). There appear to be three major sector level challenges discussed in this context. The first focuses on the concern that the nonprofit sector may not be able to keep up with the fast growing expectations from it, especially in an era of governmental retrenchment in the welfare arena. The expectations are coming from policy makers, public administrators, and citizens. Discussions on this issue raise several questions. These include: to what extent can non-profits continue providing current levels of service, and carry current case loads, if governmental funding for welfare keeps decreasing? If services have to be cut, would non-profits be expected to make these decisions on behalf of the state? On what basis will such decisions be made?

The second issue is related to the above but it focuses specifically on emergency management. It addresses questions such as these: to what extent can the non-profit sector be a substitute for state agencies in 'first responder' situations, especially during mass emergencies? Does the sector have the professional expertise, financial resources, the logistical sophistication (especially when coordination between agencies within the sector is required), and access to supplies that are essential for success in such situations? The criticism received by the American Red Cross after the Katrina disaster (Moore, 2005) shows that even the largest of non-profits can fail in this regard.

The third issue concerns the growing competition between non-profits on the one hand and faith-based charities and, even, private corporations on the other for the same pool of government funds. Many non-profits already operate with low margins. Their administrative expenses are under squeeze largely because many funding sources do not want to pay for indirect expenses. Nonprofits are struggling to compete for talented staff and the downward pressure on administrative costs will make this even worse. In this context, the growth in public policies that encourage faith-based organizations and private corporations to compete with non-profits could make matters worse for the latter.

All three of the above issues are important for the sector from a macro level perspective because what happens at that level would have significant ramifications for the non-profit sector as a whole. However, these are not necessarily the issues that are urgent and compelling for local level non-profits. As this study's proposed theory of reaching out suggests, the specific challenges of particular concern to local non-profits have more to do with their ability to coordinate and maximize their efforts within the constraints of their local and often limited resources.

Relevant for this study are two bodies of literature in organizational theory that have examined how, when, and why alliances are formed. The first is the resource dependence approach

(notably Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and the second examines inter-organizational networks from a political economy perspective (notably Benson, 1975). The resource dependence literature assumes that all organizations operate in an environment of resource scarcity and they therefore interact with each in order to acquire resources that will make them powerful. Typical resources in these situations are money, information, technology, and people. The relative power of an organization in this situation is directly proportional to the control it has over unique resources that are badly needed by others. Such power is further enhanced if an organization can decrease its dependence on others for the resources it needs. Organizations get into networks in order to exchange resources and maximize their utility. This approach is useful because it helps us focus on how resources flow between organizations and it helps us see how small and large organizations each have resources that the other needs (see for example Provan, Beyer, & Kruytbosch, 1980).

Benson's (1975) political economy approach to interorganizational networks takes a slightly different perspective. He argues that authority is an important resource being exchanged in networks, along with money. Further, such power is dependent on the links that organizations within a network have with actors in the external environment. In that sense, Benson sees the world of networked organizations as a relatively open system. We need to study a wider variety of variables in order to see how, why, and when organizations offer or seek linkages with others.

Benson's approach appears more suited to understanding the phenomena I observed in this study. Even though non-profits are keen to acquire financial and other resources described by the resource exchange approach, all of this seems to be guided by the need to acquire authority and a sense of legitimacy. Non-profits want to do well and they especially want to be seen to be doing what others are not able or willing to do. This comes through especially strongly in the comments of participants representing the larger non-profits. Even though they already have many of the resources like money and people, they still seem to need to reach out to smaller organizations in order to build authority that is based on legitimacy, on a sense that they are still relevant in the community. As Benson (1975, p. 232) notes, authority "... refers to the legitimation of activities, the right and responsibility to carry out programs of a certain kind, dealing with a broad problem area or focus."

Reaching out then becomes a coping strategy of non-profits when faced with compelling challenges. The reaching out that was observed in this study should perhaps be understood in terms of the jostling to establish legitimacy by actors, in their own eyes and in the eyes of their peers, within the network and in the larger environment. Benson calls such legitimated claims as domains. The goal of organizations is to operate with authority in domains or networked spaces where they are the dominant and well-regarded operator. This then becomes the motivation for the collection of relationships each organization forms with others. Domains are conceptually distinct from inter-organizational networks. In the context of this study, domains are areas for operation or areas of interest while inter-organizational networks are the functional mechanisms. For example, several such networks could operate in the domain of foster youth care. This suggests two research questions that merit further study:

1. What discourse strategies are used by actors to gain authority in a domain? A lot of the talk that participants did was to frame their own identity for themselves. We can assume that this type

of communication also occurs when non-profit managers talk to their peers in other organizations. Because gaining legitimacy by an organization requires the acceptance of such position by others, such a pursuit would involve engaging actors in the network through a discourse. Communication here could take different forms—speeches, publications, pronouncements at public hearings, and policy advocacy statements for example. A future study could examine cases of legitimacy building by nonprofit actors within a policy or program domain focusing specifically on the discourse strategies. What modes of communication are used? What metaphors? And, how do the modes and metaphors vary in different situations?

2. What is the role played by public agencies in the growth or decline of the legitimacy of a non-profit organization within a domain? Benson's approach is especially useful because it emphasizes the role of external actors (external to the network) in shaping outcomes within the network. As I discussed early in this paper, governmental agencies play an enormous indirect role in the contemporary non-profit sector. We need to study the mechanisms through which public agencies enable or hinder nonprofit agencies in the pursuit of an authoritative status within a domain. Again, through the use of case studies we can see how public agencies tip the balance one way or other and what quid pro quo occurs.

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