

Chapter 15 Strategic management in the welfare state: practice and consequences -The case of Flanders

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Introduction

For governments within many modern welfare states it has become a key challenge to guarantee the quality and accessibility of social service provision to citizens. Under the third-party government in Belgium, this implied that far from producing the lion's share of these services themselves, governments increasingly involved private nonprofit organizations (NPOs) to implement those policies (Salamon, Anheier et al., 1999). These NPOs have become appealing partners due to their bottom-up nature, a position close to clients and their rather small scale of operation. Hence, it is expected that NPOs have greater opportunities for tailoring services to citizens' needs and are better able to perform a radar function by signaling new or rather 'unconventional' needs as well (Salamon, 1995; Boris and Steuerle, 1999). As a result, the focus of government shifted from 'rowing' to 'steering' (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). This implies a separation between the process of planning social policies from the actual implementation of those policies by NPOs (OECD, 2012). In essence, we argue that governments hereby develop a set of strategic management practices in order to steer and control the NPOs that carry out policies, while equally granting them a meaningful voice in the development of new policies as well.

This contribution analyzes the nature and consequences of the strategic management practices that have been developed in the particular context of the third-party government regime in Flanders, the Dutch speaking region of Belgium. As legislative powers increasingly shifted to the level of the three so-called 'regions' in Belgium, the Flemish government obtained a central role in developing and implementing its own social policies. It opted to gradually incorporate the private nonprofit sector, which has raised significant size in Flanders due to historical processes of pillarization. As a result, many NPOs nowadays receive more than half of their total budget from public funding by Flemish government (Verschuere and De Corte, 2013). We hereby address two particular questions. The first one is about unraveling the nature of the strategic management practices, as performed by Flemish government, with respect to the publically funded NPOs that are involved through different stages of the policy cycle. We argue that strategic management has two dimensions: ensuring involvement of key civil society stakeholders (such as NPOs), both through formal and informal channels of information exchange, for developing fair and equitable policies on the one hand, and the process of controlling and steering the actors that actually implement those policies by imposing accountability requirements on the other (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; OECD, 2012).

The second question is then about the actual impact of these strategic management practices on the Flemish NPOs. Starting from the relatively 'close' relationship with Flemish government (e.g. financially, in terms of accountability pressure, etc.) we could expect a negative impact to occur on the NPOs' willingness to raise a critical voice when (in)formally participating to the development of new policies. Next, we might also expect the NPOs to be hampered by governmental interference in making their own organizational decisions, such as defining the target groups to be reached, the procedures through which these clients will be served, the results that have to be obtained, etc. We argue these questions to be highly relevant as it has been extensively stated that NPOs should not just become another arm of government (Huxham, 1995; Boyle and Butler, 2003). Instead, NPOs

need to maintain some degree of audacity and flexibility to produce tailor-made services for the range of citizens' needs and demands they are confronted with on a daily basis. After all, it are especially these typical grassroots qualities that make them appealing partners for government (Boris and Steuerle, 1999).

As outlined before, the above questions are studied against the background of the development of the third-party government regime as it was developed in Flanders in the aftermath of the second world war. The data that are presented in this contribution are derived from a recent large-N sample of more than 250 Flemish NPOs. Before we turn to our main research questions, the following chapter focuses on the background of this research project and the composition of the sample.

About the sample of Flemish NPOs under study

In order to address the questions about the nature and consequences of strategic management practices in Flanders, we basically rely on a large-N sample of more than 250 nonprofit organizations. In essence, the directors or managers of these NPOs were questioned about different dimensions of their relationships with government (e.g. funding streams, accountability pressure, participation to different stages of the policy cycle, the advocacy strategies to exert influence, etc.) and their perceptions about their autonomy with regard to the internal management of their respective organizations. The sample consists of NPOs that are active in four policy domains: the field of poverty reduction, elderly care, youth care and the integration of ethnic-cultural minorities. We argue that this is a representative share of organizations to obtain a full picture of the nonprofit sector in the domain of Flemish welfare provision. The main task of these publically funded NPOs is to deliver social services to citizens. Furthermore, the NPOs in our sample are private ones (meaning that they do not belong to the state apparatus), they have a nonprofit character (reflected in a mission without for-profit motives) and it are all 'professionalized' ones (meaning that no pure voluntary organizations were selected).

Strategic management practices

For Osborne and Gaebler (1992) strategic planning is a key concept for governments to reinvent themselves by separating the strategic planning and policy making function from the policy execution and the delivery of services. In this chapter we argue that strategic management entails two different dimensions: ensuring involvement of key civil society stakeholders for developing fair and equitable policies on the one hand, and steering, controlling and evaluating the actors that actually implement those policies on the other.

First, in order to be responsive to citizens' needs in an increasingly complex society, governments must connect with an expanding range of civil society stakeholders. Strategic management is then about creating the mechanisms for informed policy making by bringing together views of these important stakeholders (OECD, 2012). This is especially relevant with regard to the private NPOs that receive public funding to provide social services to citizens. The main argument is that these NPOs are an appealing partner for government, due to their bottom-up nature, expertise and unique position close to clients, to supply substantial evidence for making these informed policy choices (Salamon, 1995; Boris and Steuerle, 1999; Ross and Osborne, 1999). Still, while some Flemish NPOs succeeded in obtaining a formal role within the policy cycle, others primarily rely on some indirect strategies to steer government's policy.

In a recent study Flemish NPO managers were asked to indicate whether their organizations were involved in different stages of the policy cycle and about other strategies they rely on to exert influence. Table 15.1 shows that approximately two out of three of all nonprofit organizations has been formally involved by Flemish government in the process of developing (66,5%) new policies and evaluating (64,7%) them over time. Furthermore, NPOs seemed to rely on a wide range of additional strategies to protect the well-being of their clients and to promote economic development and social justice (Reid 1999; Bar and Schmid 2013). In concrete, almost half of the NPOs in our sample are able to maintain substantial informal contacts with policy makers (e.g. politicians and

administrations) next to these formal participation procedures. This implies that some NPOs benefit from additional channels of information exchange and one-on-one relationships with policy makers in order to defend their organizational interests. Besides, almost eight out of ten of the Flemish NPOs equally rely on more collective oriented strategies to exert their influence. This could be attributed to the functioning of various sectoral umbrella organizations in Flanders in which NPOs voluntarily chose to collaborate for adjusting their point of views and to translate these ideas into political claims. As Flemish government has gradually recognized these umbrella organizations as legitimate mouthpieces, NPOs are once more enabled to give input for enriching the policy making process (Verschuere and De Corte, 2013). As a result, we are able to argue that Flemish government relies on a range of formal and informal channels of information exchange to give NPOs a voice in the process of setting its strategic goals and developing new policies.

Secondly, Osborne and Gaebler (1992) argue that steering is not only about setting the goals, but also about choosing the strategies to achieve them and involving the right organizations to carry them out. Hence, strategic management is not just a matter of making plans, but also to evaluate the actors involved in implementing government's policies and the strategies on which they rely to do so.

Although Flemish government does provide some social services itself, it heavily relies on the private nonprofit sector to carry out welfare provision to citizens (Salamon, Anheier et.al., 1999). As argued before, NPOs receive substantial public funding to perform these tasks. Still, these funds are not free of obligation as they are accompanied by a set of accountability requirements through which governments exerts some control over these non-public actors (Ospina, Diaz, et.al., 2002; Whitaker, Altman-Sauer et.al. 2004; May 2007; Benjamin 2008). In a narrow view, accountability could then be defined as the answerability to a higher authority in a bureaucratic chain of command (Kearns, 1996). This reveals three fundamental questions: *who* is accountable (NPOs), *to whom* (Flemish government) and *for what* (Christensen and Ebrahim, 2006). Concerning this latter question, Cho and Gillespie (2006) argue that government's main goal is to ensure the provision of services to citizens by imposing standards on quality. Furthermore, such reporting requirements could also be of administrative or financial nature or deal with measures of equality and the fair treatment of people (Vincent and Harrow, 2005).

Table 15.1 shows of the use of the accountability requirements as perceived by NPO managers.. These parameters are related to administrative and financial reporting, the quality of the services, the number of services to be produced (quantity), the target audience to be served and the social effects (e.g. reducing poverty, etc.) to be obtained. In general, each of the selected accountability parameters is relevant for more than 70% of all NPOs. Furthermore, approximately three out of four NPOs in our sample indicates of being held accountable on at least five of these parameters. This implies that the accountability pressure that is exerted by Flemish government could be considered as rather high. This finding is also reflected in the fact that eight out of ten organizations must report at least once a year (and sometimes even several times a year) to Flemish government on these accountability requirements. To conclude, we argue that in the course of this process, Flemish government is able to exert some degree of 'control' over the NPOs by maintaining oversight over and inducing prescriptions about for example the population of clients to be treated and the way how this clientele should be served.

The impact of strategic management practices

Throughout the historical development of the welfare state in Flanders, many NPOs have been considered by government as preferred and legitimate partners to plan, develop and implement social policies. As NPOs received large amounts of public funding to perform these roles, they gained financial stability, which allowed them to further broaden the scope of their activities to citizens (Froelich, 1999; Salamon, Anheier et.al., 1999). The strategic management practices of the Flemish government included involving, steering and evaluating the NPOs they fund. Still, there

might be the danger that maintaining such ‘close’ relationships with government has a negative impact on the NPOs’ structure, culture and behavior as well (Smith and Lipsky 1993). In general terms, Salamon (1995) points to ‘vendorism’, or the fact that the NPOs’ initial socially inspired mission could be distorted in the pursuit of governmental support. In essence, this is related to the potential loss of the NPOs’ distinctive competencies, which mainly result from their bottom-up nature and rather small scale of operation, and that give them the flexibility to respond to new or very complex needs or citizens’ demands and to provide tailor-made services (Boris and Steuerle, 1999). Hence, for governments involving NPOs through different stages of the policy cycle, the key challenge becomes one of holding NPOs accountable for the public monies they receive without, however, reaping the indisputable benefits that derive from their autonomy of not just being another arm of the government apparatus (Huxham, 1995; Boyle and Butler, 2003). The impact of strategic management by government on Flemish NPOs will be analyzed in a twofold way: the NPOs’ willingness to speak out freely when advocating for particular and sometimes unconventional demands on the one hand, and the NPOs’ ability to maintain autonomy in making their own strategic organizational decisions on the other.

Impact on role perceptions of NPOs

First, it has been shown that government allows NPOs to have a voice, both formally and informally, during the process of planning and developing its policies. Moreover, due to their unique position close to clients, NPOs are regularly confronted with very particular needs and demands from within civil society. This poses a critical challenge to NPOs: will they signal these perhaps unconventional issues and defend them even if this puts a pressure on their relationship with their main funder, or will they rather chose to ‘conform’ to what they consider as the government’s current preferences? This is important as NPOs are expected to provide substantial input for informed policy making. After all, there is empirical evidence that maintaining close relationships with government has a negative impact on the NPOs’ capacity and willingness to perform a radar function and thereby raising a critical voice to advocate for the interests of their clients and constituents (Child and Gronbjerg, 2007; Nicholson-Crotty, 2007; Schmid, Bar, et.al., 2008). Still, a recent study on the advocacy behavior of Flemish NPOs found little evidence to support such resource dependence framework (Verschuere and De Corte, 2013). NPO managers were hereby asked to indicate the relative share of efforts (time, staff, money, etc.) they were spending to perform a so-called ‘expressive’ role (e.g. by participating to formal consultation procedures, by maintaining informal contacts with policy makers, by forming coalitions with other organizations, etc.) compared to the efforts made for their service delivering role. Based on a large-N sample of more than 200 NPOs, a one-way Anova analysis showed that although the monies received from Flemish government represented more than half of the total budget for many NPOs, they did not have a negative (or positive) impact on the NPOs’ willingness to perform a critical role towards government as being a watchdog. This implies that Flemish NPOs should not totally fear of being ‘punished’ for unwelcome behavior or for speaking out frankly when signaling particular needs and demands. This finding was explained by referring to the historically grown ties between the nonprofit sector and government in Flanders, which has led to a situation in which both actors are, at least partly, dependent upon resources (e.g. financial means vs. expertise or production capacity) controlled by the other parties.

Impact on decision-making autonomy of NPOs

Secondly, there might be an impact of strategic management practices of Flemish government on the NPOs’ capacity to make their own strategic organizational decisions. The involvement with governmental funding programs, and the control measures and bureaucratic pressures attached to it, can lead to goal displacement and unintentional effects on the choice of programs and clientele (Gjems-Onstad, 1990; Gronbjerg, 1991; Smith and Lipsky, 1993; Jung and Moon, 2007; Gazley, 2010). This might hamper the NPOs’ capacity to tailor services to the particular and often very

complex needs of their clients (Salamon, 1995; Boris and Steuerle, 1999). Several studies focused on this topic of organizational autonomy and found a negative impact of public resource dependence on organizational autonomy. Anheier (1997) found that NPO managers whose organizations were financially dependent on government typically adopt state-oriented strategies when dealing with crisis situations. Froelich (1999) argued that funding government might exert pressure on the NPOs to change some of their internal processes, such as the choice of clientele. Gronbjerg (1991) found that public agencies explicitly try to control program choices of the social service organizations they fund. Through a longitudinal case study of collaborative partnerships in the environmental area, Nicolic and Koontz (2007) showed that government involvement may impact organizational resources, issue definition and internal decision-making procedures. A study on Korean cultural organizations revealed that NPOs are hampered by public funding, especially in goal setting and program choices (Jung and Moon, 2007).

Our own work (Verschuere and De Corte, 2012) found evidence for supporting a resource dependence framework: the more NPOs relied on funding from Flemish government, the less likely they were to report autonomy in making their own organizational decisions, like defining the mission, target groups, results to be achieved, and working procedures of NPOs. This implies that the strategic management practices of Flemish government do have their drawbacks as NPOs become somewhat less flexible in responding to the complex demands they are confronted with in daily practices.

Conclusion and discussion

In this chapter we present results from a large-N survey in which more than 250 NPO managers were questioned about different dimensions of their relationship with governments at different levels within the Belgian federal state (also see Table 15.1 and Table 15.2 for an overview). It was found that NPOs primarily developed close financial relationships with the regional Flemish government. This finding is, however, not that surprising as many legal competencies with respect to welfare policies have been transferred over the years to this regional level. Hence, we outlined the strategic management practices through which Flemish government tried to involve, steer and control private NPOs for the purpose of social service delivery to citizens. Moreover we analyzed some potential drawbacks for NPOs of maintaining such close financial and accountability relationships with government. As was shown, this was especially the case with regard to the autonomy of the NPOs when making their own strategic organizational decisions such as the target groups to be served and the results to be obtained when working with these groups. Still, when analyzing the extent to which NPOs are able to maintain their flexibility and autonomy as private actors, we must also focus attention to the complex institutional environment in which these NPOs are functioning. Firstly, we must point to consecutive processes of reforming the federal Belgian state since the 1980's whereby legislative powers concerning social welfare policies have been fragmented between the central federal level and the regional level in Belgium. This has led to a situation in which NPOs do not only have to be accountable to the regional Flemish government, as being their main funder and regulator, but as shown in Table 15.2, some NPOs will have to adhere to a set of criteria that are imposed by the federal government as well. Furthermore, as measures taken at both governmental levels are not necessarily fully adjusted to one another, this might lead some NPOs to operate in a relatively complex institutional environment.

Secondly, we recently witnessed a tendency to further decentralize competencies and tasks from the regional to the local governmental level in Flanders. With the aim of increasing accessibility of social service delivery to citizens, the regional government launched the Decree on Local Social Policy (2003) in which it asks local governments, as being the governmental level closest to citizens and their needs, to enhance cooperation with the NPOs that are active on their territory in at least two ways. On an operational level local governments must involve NPOs in the implementation of their social policies, while on a strategic level they must give these NPOs a strategic role in

developing new policies as well. What is new, however, is that this involvement must not be carried out through traditional hierarchical mechanisms of command and control but as a result of horizontal relationships via the creation of governance networks. From the perspective of NPOs, it could be argued that this will inevitably lead to the development of differing strategic management practices at this local level. Once more, an additional pressure is then put on NPOs to develop complicated and time-consuming horizontal relationships with local governments in the municipalities in which they are active. In practice, however, it appears that the ambitious objectives of the Decree are heavily complicated by the context in which Flemish NPOs have to operate (Verschuere & De Rynck, 2009). Or in other words, local governments might have little financial and regulative levers at their disposal to urge these private actors to cooperate with them. As shown before, many NPOs are indeed primarily active at a supra-local scale and are financed and held accountable at the higher (Flemish and federal) governmental levels.

In sum, we might conclude that Flemish NPOs do have to operate within a relatively complicated institutional context in Belgium. This is related to the fact that they are confronted with strategic management practices at different governmental levels. Furthermore, it was found that nature of the relationship they developed at these different governmental levels could vary (e.g. top-down vs. horizontal relationships). Finally, it was shown that the strategic management practices, and especially those from Flemish government as being their dominant funding source, could have a negative impact on their internal management and perception of organizational autonomy.

Strategic management practices	Parameters	Descriptive data on Flemish NPOs (N=255)	
<i>Dimension 1 – Giving NPOs a voice in the planning of social policies</i>			
Formal channels of information exchange	Participation to the different stages of formal policy cycle	Stage	Rel %
		Policy development	66,5%
		Policy Implementation	72,9%
		Policy Evaluation	64,7%
Informal channels of information exchange	Informal contacts with policy makers	Policy maker	Rel %
		Politicians	34%
		Administrations	58,7%
	Collective strategies through umbrella organizations	Strategy	Rel %
		Forming coalitions	73,3%
		Participation to umbrella organizations	72,7%
<i>Dimension 2 – Steering and</i>			

<i>controlling the actors that implement social policies</i>				
The process of holding NPOs accountable for the public funds they receive	Accountability Parameters	Parameters	Rel %	
		Service Quantity	74,1%	
		Service Quality	71,4%	
		Financial reporting	72,2%	
		Administrative reporting	74,7%	
		Target audience	76,6%	
		Social effects	72,6%	
	Total Accountability Pressure	Sum of six parameters	Rel %	
		Maximum 1 parameter (low)	15,5%	
		Between 2 and 4 parameters (medium)	11,4%	
		5 or 6 parameters (high)	73,1%	
	Frequency of obligation to report to Flemish government	Frequency	Rel %	
		Never	13,1%	
		Once over several years	6,3%	
		Once a year	50,4%	
			Several times a year	30,2%

Table 15.1 – Strategic management practices in Flanders: the Flemish government (also see Verschuere and De Corte 2012 for more detailed description on research population)

Strategic management practices	Parameters	Descriptive data on Flemish NPOs (N=255)		
<i>Dimension 1 – Giving NPOs a voice in the planning of social policies</i>				
Formal channels of information exchange	Participation to the different stages of formal policy cycle	Stage	Rel %	
			Fed	Local
		Policy development	18,8%	56,6%
		Policy Implementation	22,1%	58,8%
		Policy Evaluation	17%	54,4%
Informal channels of information exchange	Informal contacts with policy makers	Policy maker	Rel %	
		Politicians	34%	62,7%
		Administrations	58,7%	70,7%
<i>Dimension 2 – Steering and controlling the actors that implement social policies</i>				
The process of holding NPOs accountable for the public funds they receive	Accountability Parameters	Parameters	Rel %	
			Fed	Local
		Service Quantity	17%	34%
		Service Quality	18%	35%
		Financial reporting	22%	34%
		Administrative reporting	27%	31%
		Target audience	22%	41%
		Social effects	14%	38%

	Total Accountability Pressure	Sum of six parameters	Rel %	
		Maximum 1 parameter (low)	73%	54%
		Between 2 and 4 parameters (medium)	14%	18%
		5 or 6 parameters (high)	13%	28%
	Frequency of obligation to report to Flemish government	Frequency	Rel %	
		Never	56%	41%
		Once over several years	6%	3%
		Once a year	28%	35%
		Several times a year	10%	21%

Table 15.2 – Strategic management practices in Flanders: the federal and local level

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