Exporting Organizational Ideas from the North to the South: Disembedding the Swedish Popular Movement Tradition from Sweden

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During the last years, the role of organizational development has been highlighted as a central feature in directly building up and strengthening a vibrant and democratic civil society, and ultimately in organizing and empowering poor people in the South (e.g. the Swedish international development cooperation agency, Sida 2006). In a similar manner to the historical experience of societies in the North, the underlying idea seems to be that exporting northern ideas, values, and experiences on civil society organizations, such as the charity or voluntary tradition in Britain (Kendall 2003) or the popular movement tradition in Sweden (Hvenmark and Wijkström 2004), to the South not only will cause civil societies and organizations to flourish, but also automatically reduce poverty and strengthen democracy.

The central quality attributed to the concept of organizational development raises, however, several questions: Which ideas influence the content and function of organizational development in the setting of civil society? What are the links between these ideas and the historical experience of the North? To what degree is it possible and desirable to implement these ideas in other countries and geographical areas? What are the effects of these ideas on primarily the development of civil society organizations?

Building on a four-year research project (Larsson 2007), supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, in which the various research questions mentioned above is to be studied and analyzed in the case of Sweden and Nicaragua, this paper reports on the first stage of the project. That is, how the genesis, rationale, and content of ideas on organizational development are constructed at the national level in the North. In short, an analysis of the ideas that are to be exported and how these ideas are supposed to work in the implementation stage.

The country of Sweden will in this paper serve as an illustration of the national level in the North. The empirical base for the projects are analyses of policy documents, interviews with government officials, consultants, researchers, and practitioners, and observations of training seminars and network meetings in Sweden during the last two years.

The suggested framework in the paper for understanding and analyzing how the genesis, rationale, and content of ideas on organizational development are constructed at the national level in the North is the theory of translation (Czarniawska and Sévon 1996, 2005). Borrowing from Giddens (1992) this paper will, among other things, discuss how ideas related to the popular movement tradition in Sweden may be disembedded from their context by filtering away local specificities. Inspired by Brunsson and Jacobsson (1998) the paper will also analyze the production of ideas as standardization by considering the perceived qualities of the originators of ideas, different kinds of ideas, and why certain ideas seem to be more successful. It will also be important to discuss the process of attention rather than the alleged origin of ideas (Czarniawska and Sévon 1996).
In relation to results related to theories on organizational change and civil society, this paper expects to first and foremost contribute to discussions on the distinctiveness of civil society organizations, similarities and differences between civil societies in different countries and regions (e.g. Lundström and Svedberg 2003), and the difficulties in exporting the concept of civil society across time and space, and finally. It will also strive to make contributions to Scandinavian and international research by applying theories on organizational change (Czarniawska and Sévon 1996, 2005) – derived mainly from studies on private companies and public authorities in the North – to organizational processes in the setting of civil society.

References:
Larsson, O (2007) Lost and Found in Translation: Organizational Change in the Civil Society of Nicaragua, Stockholm: Ersta Sköndal University College.