BUSINESS SCHOOLS DEVELOPMENT SUSTAINABILITY THROUGHOUT STRENGTHENING THE THIRD SECTOR AND CIVIL SOCIETY CAPACITY

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Abstract The purpose of this contribution is to discuss how business schools can facilitate Community-based research processes to make more effective citizens' participation in decision-making processes and strengthen third sector and civil society capacity. Research finding show that business schools have the potential to strengthen the third sector and the capacity of civil society to play a key role developing sustainability. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim at tackling important social challenges of our times, among them peace, justice and strong institutions [SDG 16], making clear that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is focused on decision-making with particular emphasis in the participation of vulnerable and marginalized communities. Citizens are constantly balancing their power and are increasingly concerned to understand the structures and processes that enable them to participate effectively in decision-making processes. Strengthening civil society through the review of the structures, processes to enable effective and respectful attitudes is recognized. It offers means to improve citizenship competences for their effective participation in the construction of the public domain. Finally, it proposes attention on the organizational learning of the third sector and civil society organizations.

1   Introduction

This paper presents social responsibility in the frame of the economy and business in general based on research developed in a business school supporting Third Sector organisations concerned with community development and social transformation. Community organization has emerged as a policy concern, especially by clarifying how can research – and research-based evidence contribute to the development of strategic responses to these potential opportunities and structural social transformations (Mayo et al., 2013). Social transformations are at the center of enabling citizens who are not against democracy and have not lost confidence in the political class and in their institutions (Castells, 2020). How can citizens enable their effective participation in the process of decision-making?

As civil society becomes stronger its demands on the state increases, something which requires a better organisation of both the state and civil society something that means mutual constitution. The self-organisation of civil society needs of a social context that respects democratic principles, which are widely explained in Political Theory; and also, are necessary to understand the processes of self-organisation, that have been the concern of systems thinking and cybernetics.

Increasingly social work has approached the contemporary theories of knowledge democracy that emphasize the importance of 'co-construction of knowledge', respect for the knowledge-creating powers of local people and local organizations, and those arguing for trans-disciplinarity and sustainability in higher education. But demonstrating that Community Based Research (CBR), whether independent of a university or in collaboration with university-based scholars, is complex and can influence positively the learning of both theory and practice (Tandon, 2016).

This contribution presents firstly, reflections about civil society self-organization and in what ways it relates with social transformations in democratic processes, secondly, discusses CBR methodology as a co-production process to develop community capacity building processes, thirdly, it brings research finding and finally, it concludes with remarks about challenges and dilemmas of this kind of research.

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2   Theoretical Background: Civil Society Self-organization

Citizens are the elementary components constituting the agents of our democracies. Their competencies, values and resources are essential in securing principles like freedom, human dignity and social justice and solidarity. Clearly requires that all can have the opportunity to become active citizens, which means eliminating any economic or social barrier to the participation of disadvantaged groups (Kymlicka, 2002). It requires an understanding of these processes of constitution and mutual influence between democratic structures, organizations and citizens possibilities to be agents.

Active citizenship, community organizing and development have emerged as topical, if highly controversial, policy concerns over the past decade and therefore the question is how can research provide support to organisations facing these challenges? Drawing upon the learning approaches developed by Paulo Freire (Freire, 1972) to understand structures of power, by articulating, disarticulating and rearticulating community journeys we can start creating a new empowerment process.

Civil Society (CS) organization has not been given, in fundamental ways, enough attention. Self-organisation of CS implies that certain groups are more able than others to obtain help from the state and this is, in most cases, owing to organisational competence. Thus, it is essential to help to improve the competences of those who are less successful. It is not sufficient in civil society to say ´organise yourselves and go out to work', the state must also provide the assistance that associational life requires, above all protecting the weakest (Walzer, 2002). To transform it into a more active contributor to social processes could improve the way in which our democratic societies function, as it will offer a more effective balance to state institutions.

To do something about this problem requires an understanding of the relationships between the state and civil society. The state should enable effective processes of self-organisation in the civil society. The public domain is the primary connector between people and power. The Theory of Civil Society reveals powerful means of enhancing democracy and social solidarity (Young, 2000).

We use the idea of organisation as a closed network of people in interaction more than an institution legally established; an organisation can emerge from institutionally distributed resources sharing focus on the same policy (Beer, 1979; Espejo, 2000). Citizenship is a property that emerges from the way we relate to each other. As human beings we give meaning to our existence in a relational process something that occurs in a permanent negotiation of individual and collective meaning creation (Mendiwelso-Bendek, 2002).

In particular, this paper emphasises citizenship as a *property* that emerges from the way we relate to each other. As human beings we become fulfilled by relating to others, something that must occur through permanent negotiation (Mendiwelso-Bendek 2002, 190). Citizenship is observed as a stable construction that emerges from the way in which we relate to each other and which we build in our moment-to-moment communications. To understand the idea of citizenship as a stable construction in addition to status, feeling or competence, it is necessary to point out that we as citizens are producing the contexts, we belong to at the same time of being constituted by these contexts (Espejo, 2000). It is an observation of ourselves in concrete relations. It is a systemic observation. The systemic observer acts inside and outside the action. From this perspective we simultaneously observe ourselves as actors and observers, in a circular causality (von Foerster 1982, 808). In this relationship between action and observation, observation and accion can be improved. Observation of our interactions such as observation that achieves enough stability to maintain the system independent of particular actors and time, produces observational closure (De Zeeuw, 1995). Observational closure allows us to identify the patterns of the interactions and we can observe individual and collective interests simultaneously, independent of time. Especially the observer is observing the consequences of his/her actions in the dimension of the whole. When a collective achieves observational closure the natural variations of individual action are contained by the collective's stability; this is a social system with particular (emergent) properties (Espejo, 2000). This requires a systemic horizon, which implies understanding the consequences of our actions on all those potentially affected by our actions, which means the ethics of the action and at the same time to the ethics of the consequences of our actions. We are adding the ethic of responsibility to the ethic of action, according to Cortina (1998).

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3   Participatory Action Learning and Research Approach

This research is underpinned by Participatory Action Research (PAR) which has roots in the works of Fals Borda (1990) and Freire (1972). It draws on direct interaction with citizens outside academia and constitutes the basis for the articulation of 'science and society' used by the European Union Horizon 2020 programme. In alignment with CBR principles, this research is applying learning and research-based methodological approach that starts from citizens' own perspectives, expectations, issues and knowledge. Citizens are actively involved, as actors and researchers, in the formulation of research questions, determining the tools, and developing the project. The research projects offer a space for academics and citizens that enables open, ongoing, participative research to generate learning, evaluation, and impact. It generates a mutual co-learning process, academic researchers and citizens co-creating knowledge and practices to improve learning structures and to articulate decision making processes. Participatory evaluation is essential part of the whole process and is embedded in each stage. This is enabling meaningful public participation and democratization of knowledge. All outputs and publications are making visible the contribution and participation of all those involved in the project.

Specific area is allocated to constructed conversations attending civil society self-organising processes. Attending the complexity of civil society self-organising community processes, community-based research naturally is engaging in co-production knowledge and practice. Increasingly work has approached the contemporary theories of knowledge democracy that emphasize the importance of 'co-construction of knowledge', respect for the knowledge-creating powers of local people and local organizations, and those arguing for trans-disciplinary and sustainability in higher education, demonstrating that can benefit the learning of both the theory and practice (Rajesh et al., 2016). Lincoln Business School research has been working with third sector and community organisations, local groups for community development, engagement and empowerment, especially aiming to connect with vulnerable, disadvantage and marginalized ones (Mendiwelso-Bendek, 2015; Herron & Mendiwelso, 2018).

Constructing conversations forms an important part of our participatory research approach and builds on earlier Conversation Theory (Pask, 1976). extends this to further discussing the relationship between communication, conversations, and knowledge to help the conceptualization and understanding "what takes place when effective communication occurs, the process of coming to know where one participant in a conversation can be said to understand another participant's "knowledge".

In our work, the creation of opportunities for conversations of various forms is central. These are not any conversations, but "…conversations that observe, analyse and reflect about community and authorities' organizational practices, processes and structures. These are conversations of civil society about barriers, opportunities and learning in processes that influence decision making processes" (Mendiwelso-Bendek, 2015, 909).

4   Findings

Our community research and learning programme has been focused in a local city where the City Council, local residents and community project programmes and the University have been developing active learning and action spaces with community groups (including young parents, aging groups and newly-arrived communities) to help contribute to shaping local community plans and to develop community capacity. In the urban context the city has also seen rapid changes to its population demographics, with inward migration that has brought international students and also isolated communities. The City Council has repeatedly sought to create mechanisms to engage local residents in ongoing constructed conversations to help shape agendas and impact on the creation of the formal local plans and has worked with researchers as part of this wider activity (Herron & Mendiwelso-Bendek, 2010; 2018).

It is found that for active citizenship it is necessary not only to increase stakeholders' competencies but also make effective those organisational structures relevant to the policy issues of concern. However, and this is a key reason to increase people's competencies, these structures are the outcome of self-organising processes shaped by those who are better organized, with more resources and in positions of power (Espejo & Mendiwelso-Bendek, 2011).

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The point that has being emphasized is that there are major challenges for civil society in the current context, whatever the policy makers suggest to the contrary, in terms of the potential opportunities to be grasped. In this increasingly marketized policy framework, organisations concerned with community development need to be more effective than ever, bidding for resources and tendering for contracts, but without losing sight of their distinctive values and missions in the process (Mayo et al., 2013; 2019).

5 Conclusions

Citizens are constantly balancing their limits of power and are increasingly concerned to understand the structures and processes that enable them to participate effectively in decision-making processes. Strengthening civil society through the recognition of the need to review the structures, processes and enable effective and respectful attitudes is recognized. Third sector organisations, as key players in the area, have an enormous journey to develop organisational learning capabilities to play effective action and impact dealing with the current social challenges.

Agents can enable their self-organisation through their own resources and creativity or through the support of external agents, such as researchers, NGOs, government agencies, private trusts, philanthropy or others forms of support. Accepting that self-organisation is inherent to the complexity of social processes, the challenge for us is to work out how to make these self-organising processes more effective. How can citizens of a community improve the quality of their own interactions? How can these citizens co-create desirable values in their interactions with external enablers, such as organisations and policy-makers?" (Mendiwelso-Bendek & Espejo, 2015, 114).

Community-university research supporting self-organising works with groups and community organisations generate different forms of practices and knowledge and the ability to reflect on that knowledge in a process of 'constructed conversations' (Mendiwelso-Bendek & Herron, 2010; Mendiwelso-Bendek, 2015).

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to tackle important social challenges of our times, among them peace, justice and strong institutions [SDG 16], making clear that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is focused on decision-

making with particular emphasis in the participation of vulnerable and marginalized communities. SDG target 16.7 aims to "Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels"; and the Rio+20 Conference outcome document - the "Future We Want"- paragraph 14 recognizes that "opportunities for people to influence their lives and future, participate in decision-making and voice their concerns are fundamental for sustainable development".

It is necessary to enable an effective organisation of Third Sector Organisations and civil society structures, to produce meaning and solid research evidence for social policies development in the journey of social transformation.

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