

## **A Narrative construction of the organization by an external party: The nongovernmental organization narrative by the United Nations.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The focus of this paper is the narrative construction of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) by the United Nations. How the NGO is conceptualized and communicated by a legitimate institution like the UN is critical for both the sustainability of NGOs and the social benefit created by them. This is because the allocation of resources to NGOs is directly affected by the understanding of what an NGO is. The data come from the 20 speeches of the 54<sup>th</sup> annual conference (2001) titled as 'NGOs today: Diversity of the Volunteer Experience' at the UN headquarters. The results of the study are derived from a critical reading of these 20 narratives. This is a procedure of reading the texts several times, back and forth. Through a participative process, the UN narratively constructs NGOs in terms of volunteerism, diversity, civil society, cooperation with governments, global problems, professionalism, and youth involvement. A preliminary theory of participative narrative construction is outlined.

### **INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE**

Organizations are social constructions by the interactions of people. Stories or narratives are one way of the member interaction and the resulting, ongoing, reconstruction (Humphreys and Brown, 2002a, 2002b; Pentlad, 1999). They define and redefine the organization and provide sensemaking resources for the members (Currie and Brown, 2003; Patriotta, 2003). Organizational narratives can be produced and diffused from within as well as imposed or communicated by an outside party (Watson and Bargilea-Chiappini, 1998). The external narrative may not directly determine the meaning of the organization but provide a specific framework to cultivate the meaning (Watson and Bargilea-Chiappini, 1998).

The focus of this paper is the narrative construction of the organization by an external party. I develop a preliminary theory of the participative narrative construction by an external party by applying and extending on past theory and research on narratives in organizations. Specifically, I look into the narrative of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) as

constructed by the United Nations. In this study, NGOs are defined as self-governing, independent, and not-for-profit organizations that are geared to improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people (Vakil, 1997: 2060). I use the term narrative 'to refer to thematic, sequenced accounts that convey meaning from implied author to implied reader' (Barry and Elmes, 1997: 431).

How NGOs are conceptualized and communicated is critical for both their sustainability and the social benefit they create (Cheng, 2005; Ebrahim, 2001; Leach, 2007). The allocation of resources to NGOs is directly affected by the understanding of what an NGO is. One of the primary supranational institutions, the UN is a powerful -external- stakeholder for many NGOs all around the world (Leach, 2007). NGOs are increasingly incorporated into the UN system through conferences and projects (Alger, 2002, 2003). In return, the UN is a 'major target' for NGOs to work with (Martens, 2004: 80). Already recognized as a legitimate organization by national governments, the UN provides its partner NGOs with entrance to different development sectors in different countries (Martens, 2004). It is also a means to communicate development discourses, the

acceptance of which is generally a condition for funding (Ebrahim, 2001). In fact, 'the UN system plays a key role in supporting NGO institution building and in helping to direct associational energies into policy making' (Sollis, 1995: 539). Its definitions reflect the international consensus among the member nations. The UN is a primary reference for the donor organizations and the general public, which are likely to provide funding and support for NGOs, to understand the NGO activity. The UN agencies like UNDP and the World Bank are major supporters of NGOs (Makoba, 2002) and might direct their funds to particular NGOs, the practices of which reflect the dimensions of the UN narrative. What the UN narrates as a 'legitimate' NGO can, at the same time, signify the NGO type that is to be supported and sustainable (Ebrahim, 2001). The definition of the legitimate NGO might include 'proper' organizational structure and professionalization (Edwards and Hulme, 2002) and practices, which probably have managerial and funding consequences. Thus, the recognition by the UN is a critical factor for the long-term existence of the NGO.

In addition to this social-practical concern, the paper is also trying to understand and theorize how a powerful external party can construct the organization narratively. The influence of external parties on the organization through narratives is rather a recent concern (Hopkinson, 2003; Watson and Bargilea-Chiappini, 1998) and an explicit theory regarding this process is yet to be provided. This paper provides such a theory. It is a particular narrative construction, in which an external party (the UN) lets the members of the organization (different NGOs) participate in the process. Such a theoretical focus can help us question the view of organizations as having definite boundaries (Mills, Boylstein, and Lorean, 2001). It can extend our theoretical understanding by looking beyond the internal organizational actors engaging in the narrative construction. This is to suggest that organizations are defined beyond their formal

or informal boundaries through narratives (Pentland and Feldman, 2007).

Before going into the details of the UN's NGO narrative, I will have a brief look at the narrative view of the organization. Then, research questions will be formulated. In the next section, I will discuss the data and methodology. Then, I illustrate the NGO narrative of the UN, using quotations extensively in order to keep grounded in the data. The following section is a discussion on the research questions and the narrative process. Next, I will outline a preliminary theory on the participative narrative construction. The last section will discuss the implications, contributions, and limitations.

## **ORGANIZATION AS NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION**

Organizations are 'storytelling systems' (Boje, 1991, 1995). In organizations, stories or narratives are used to interpret the organizational events and to create new interpretations and stories (Dunford and Jones, 2000; Humpreys and Brown, 2002). They embody institutional memory (Boje, 1991). Narratives reflect the actual experience of the organizational members (Hopkinson, 2003). Yet, they are not simply stories to be told. People enact them as well (Pentland, 1999). Narratives are enacted as the reality that is lived through by the organizational members. They are the meaning of the organization, through which the members reproduce the organization. In fact, narratives are 'constitutive processes, by which human beings order their conceptions of self and of the world around them' (Hopkinson, 2003: 1947), including the organization. They are identity performances (Humpreys and Brown, 2002; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), providing organizational identity. Participation in organization means participation in narratives (Fontana and Frey, 2000).

The organization is constructed by a variety of narrators. It is a fragmented field with multiple narratives (Boje, 1995; Hopkinson, 2003). Different interests are represented by particular narratives (Currie and Brown, 2003;

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O'Leary, 2003), which provide particular frameworks to make sense of the organization. Narratives allow the organizational members as well as external parties to negotiate, share, and contest the meaning and identity of the organization (Case and Pineiro, 2006; Dawson and Buchanan, 2005). Through narratives, each group draws organizational boundaries and act upon them. Thus, narratives have real effects on the organization (Hopkinson, 2003).

Hopkinson (2003) mentions the material bases of the organizational narratives like social structures (e.g. class and status differences) and demographic qualities. A radical approach to the organization (Bradshaw-Camball and Murray, 1991) may point out such structures. It would examine power relations and ideologies (Fletcher and Watson, 2007). This means that the political economy of the organization (the economic and political organization of society in terms of the allocation of economic and political resources and associated power and status positions) is important to understand the organizational narrative (Hansen, 2006). However, narratives are not simply the reflections of the material base. They reproduce the base at the same time they are produced by it (Pentland, 1999).

Though the organization as the space of narratives is pluralistic, there may be a hegemonic narrative in the organization such that it can subsume alternative narratives (Brown, Humphreys, and Gurney, 2005; Humphreys and Brown, 2002b). 'Narratives provide particularly compelling and powerful tool not only for communicating meaning, but also establishing the hegemony of particular interpretation...' (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005: 859). I define hegemony as 'a form of domination that gains power from being cleverly masked, taken for granted, and otherwise invisible' (Boje, Luhman, and Baack, 1999: 341) and that is based partly on consent. A successful erasure or articulation of other narratives legitimates the hegemonic narrative and brings about a coherent

organizational identity. In return, the legitimate identity is used as a power resource to manage counter narratives (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005). It can also be used to obtain external resources in order to strengthen the existing hegemony insofar as the narrative can make a legitimate claim in the eyes of external parties. This may be the case when a development NGO is organized around the hegemonic narrative of UN, secures funds from external donors, and articulates counter voices into the hegemonic one through the use of these material resources. A complete repression of alternative narratives may not lead to hegemony since some members are excluded from the interpretive frame of the organization. A certain level of inclusion is needed (Brown, 2000; Humphreys and Brown, 2002b). Inclusiveness allows individuals to identify themselves with the organization. Stories are identity performances and cannot easily be dominated. A legitimate ground, like the UN's highly institutional one, is necessary.

The narrative view of the organization can be located in the broader paradigm of postmodernism (Kilduff and Mehra, 1997). In this view, the researcher focuses on the 'margins of the organization' (Calas and Smircich, 1999). In fact, those margins may be at the very center of the organization theory. Yet, they are denied the voice generously given to the pseudo-center. The narrative analysis can provide a means to analyze the arbitrary construction of the center by fixation, exclusion, and domination. Narratives themselves are closures, resulting in boundaries (Robichaud, Giroux, and Taylor, 2004). The creation of positive knowledge relies on exclusion (Calas and Smircich, 1999) so that power, not a pure motive to discover scientific knowledge, is at the center. Then, the question of the narrative analysis is 'how the issues of representation and form are implicated in sustaining the power relations behind our theories and our institutions' (Calas and Smircich, 1999: 665). We cannot simply assume that the UN documents reflect the reality of NGOs. Rather, they are full of perspectives -marginal or dominant, individual or institutional- on which the narrative is formed.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The literature generally focuses on the process of the internal narrative construction (Boje, 1991, 1995; Currie and Brown, 2003; Dunford and Jones, 2000; Humpreys and Brown, 2002a; O'Leary, 2003; Robichaud, Giroux, and Taylor, 2004). Narrators negotiate and define the organization, of which they are a part. The narrative construction by an outside, yet powerful, stakeholder is what this paper tries to understand. It is the articulation of a narrative into the field and into individual organizations. Since this external narrative designates every single NGO, in our case, it can be called a meta-narrative. Similar to the literature (Hopkinson 2003; Robichaud, Giroux, and Taylor, 2004), the paper understands this meta-narrative as an interpretive framework imposing organizational boundaries with material effects. It is a resource for the NGO members to make sense and shape their organizations. Then, my first question is what this specific interpretive framework is. In other words, what is the UN's conception of the NGO?

The literature also shows that there is a multiplicity of narratives in an organization (Boje, 1995; Fletcher and Watson, 2007; Hopkinson, 2003). Though the concern is not the narrative plurality in single NGOs, it seems possible to assume that the UN is a field of multiplicity regarding the NGO narratives. Different interests may be reflected in those narratives, on which a meta-narrative is built. Thus, the second question is what the effect of multiplicity is on the possible meta-narrative. How and why are a number of different narratives included in the process of the construction of the UN's own narrative?

Structural causes are another point in the literature (Hansen, 2006; Hopkinson, 2003). Social, economic, and political structures may shape narratives through enforcing sensemaking frames and/or providing sensemaking resources for organizational actors. Then, the third

question is what the political economy of the NGO narrative might be. What political and economic factors might have contributed to the development of the current NGO narrative of the UN?

The last point is that hegemonic narrative is both inclusive and exclusionary (Brown, 2000; Calas and Smircich, 1999; Humpreys and Brown, 2002b). A successful articulation of opposite narratives through such inclusive and exclusionary practices may result in a hegemonic narrative, marginalizing others. Accordingly, the last question is whether we observe such a process of exclusion and inclusion in the UN case.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **UN and NGOs**

The NGO section of the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) is responsible for the relations with NGOs in the UN. There are almost 1500 associate NGOs. The section has been organizing annual NGO conferences since 1947, releases weekly briefs, conducts orientation programs for new associate NGOs and communication workshops, and keeps a database on the relationships between the UN and NGOs. NGOs should have certain financial, legal, and organizational characteristics to become an associate (The UN, 2005b). Therefore, not every NGO has the privilege to work with and get support from the UN. Likewise, not every NGO can attend the annual conferences. The NGOs included in this study are those included in the conference. The group ranges from informal youth initiatives (Balkan Youth Union) to highly institutional organizations (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies). The level of operation is also varying from local to international. They work in different fields including disaster relief, capacity building, and health and education. These features show the all-encompassing character of the UN's narrative.

### **Setting and Data**

Our data come from the speeches of the 54<sup>th</sup> annual DPI/NGO conference titled as 'NGOs today: Diversity of the Volunteer

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Experience' and held on 10-12 September, 2001 at the UN headquarters. There are 20 speeches (out of 32) that are accessible at the UN website (The UN, 2005a)<sup>23</sup>. These are keynote or plenary panel speeches. We don't have the minutes of the question-answer part. Neither are the minutes of the midday workshops accessible. There is at least one speech for each panel including the opening session. The subjects of the panels are the subcategories of the title.

The speeches of some other annual conferences are available at the UN website. The reason why I've chosen this particular conference is its theme. It directly addresses the question of what an NGO 'should' be today. The theme also includes the answer as a broad term, that is, volunteerism. The title takes one further step to cover the diversity of the volunteer experience, which 'should' characterize more and more NGOs. The narrative construction of the NGO seems to begin at the very beginning with the title. Implicit in those concepts of volunteerism and diversity is the current political economy, which narrates minimal state and maximal citizen participation in economic and political life (Coburn, 2000; Gideon, 1998). This implicit reference to the political economy is another reason for my choice.

The choice of keynote and panel speeches can be justified on the ground that they are the main narratives of the conference (Robichaud, Giroux, and Taylor, 2004). They address and construct narratively the second-level subjects under the main theme. There are six panel sessions including the opening. No speech of the closing session is available. From the opening session, we have six speeches (out of eight), among which is that of the secretary general. The first session titled 'the diversity of volunteerism: perspectives from around the world' is represented with all its speeches, a total of five. The second is titled 'volunteerism and the United Nations: vitality,

expertise, and partnership' and one (out of four) speech is accessible. The third one is 'NGOs working together: coping with diversity', giving two (out of five) speeches. Next has the title 'strengthening the volunteer effort: involving younger persons' with three speeches (out of five). The last one is on 'the dynamics of funding the volunteer movement'. It has two speeches provided (out of three). The narrative of each participant is a response first to the main theme and second to the specific subcategory it is situated in. Panelists have diverse backgrounds from different nations, and with different ages, occupations, and voluntary activities. Their speeches are given in changing periods from an hour to two and a half hours, guided by a moderator. There are two sessions in the first two days each, and three in the last day.

NGO conferences are not separate from other UN policies and events. They are not the only means to narrate the NGO story. Yet they are 'the premier event for NGOs at the UN each year' (The UN, 2005b). Each year many NGO representatives attend the conference. No other event can allow the UN to form its NGO story in such a participative and inclusive way.

### Methodological assumptions

In order to study narratives, we need to make some assumptions. First, the interpretations of the narrator can be observed in the text (Brown, 2000; Gephart, 1993). These interpretations are embedded in the textual form of narratives. Second, the meaning is intertextual (Gephart, 1993). The relations of the text to other texts constitute the meaning of the text (Brown, 2000). Third, the meaning is contextually limited (Gephart and Pitter, 1995). It may change from text to text, even within a single text. Fourth, the text incorporates ideological and institutional circumstances, in which it emerges (Brown, 2000). Power relations are reflected in the text. Last, the systematic variation of the meaning in different texts indicates the existence of a particular perspective that is shared by those narrators (Gephart and Pitter, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Currently, the speeches are not accessible through the website. They were downloaded in April, 2005 and are available from the author.

## **Analysis**

The results of the study are derived from a critical reading of the 20 narratives that were downloaded from the UN website. This is a procedure of reading the texts several times, back and forth. No speech is excluded since all contributes to the narrative construction even by being uttered in the conference. Moreover, they become part of the final report published by the UN, which can shape further interpretations.

First, I read all the texts as purely textual entities. In this way, I try to decontextualize the texts and look at whether there are common themes despite decontextualization. Decontextualization may be considered as an ideal-typical (in Weberian sense) reading without imposing meaning on the text. Yet, this does not include a kind of objective perspective. In other words, common themes may not necessarily signify the same thing for all the speakers. However, the existence of such themes indicates that they are the point of consideration and possibly of conflict. They are the main objects of current narrative activity. The main themes are volunteerism, NGO, civil society, professionalism, and global/local problems (poverty, AIDS, inequality, authoritarianism). Then, having armed with the concepts from the literature and my first reading, I make a contextual reading of the texts within the conference framework and come up with other concepts, which are diversity and inclusion/exclusion. Added to these is the political economy, which provides the underlying macro-structural element of any narrative. The concern is which political-economic paradigm is globally dominant. This is because the UN is a supranational institution and national currents may not be important in shaping its narratives. Also, those currents are very much affected by the dominant global paradigm that may be reflected in the UN narrative. Specifically, this is the paradigm known as globalization, which promotes the liberalization of financial and real markets, and the contraction of the state services. Based on the readings, concepts, and the

previous literature, the four research questions stated above are formulated. These questions provide the frame, within which we can examine the process of narrative construction.

## **Limitations**

The study has some limitations. First, not all the speeches are available from the UN website. Those that cannot be included might have provided additional insights about the narrative construction. I don't have the minutes of the question and answer periods as well as the workshop minutes. These minutes are important to understand how individual participants make sense of the NGO. I didn't observe the conference. As Boje puts, performance and text are the two sides of the same coin (Boje, 1991; see also Doolin, 2003). I have told my story by looking at the one side of the narrative. Lastly, the final report of the conference is not accessible, either. It is the concrete form of the meta-narrative. Yet, having looked at the final reports of the other NGO conferences held by the UN, it seems final report is no more than a collection of speeches.

## **NGO NARRATIVE**

In this section, I will point out the components of the NGO narrative constructed by the conference participants. These are essentially the concepts that turn up in my critical readings. Volunteerism is the main theme in the narrative. Around this main theme, there are diversity, civil society, NGO-government cooperation, global problems, professionalism, and youth involvement. I will illustrate the narrative components as they appear in the speeches with a few key examples. The concern of this section is more with the product, the NGO narrative, than the process. The latter is addressed in the discussion of the research questions.

The conference speeches narratively construct the NGO as volunteer activity. This begins from the start, before any narrator tells his/her story, with the main theme of 'NGOs today: diversity of the volunteer experience'. NGOs are equated with the volunteer

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experience in this heading. This is also emphasized in the opening session.

'I believe all of us gathered here today are aware of the central role that the volunteer spirit plays in the work of these NGOs.' (ST, opening session)

Further, whatever the nature of the volunteer experience is, it seems to be covered by the term NGO. Formal as well as informal activities are included in the speeches. The diversity is of the NGO activity at the same time. The framework of volunteerism is defined to include a variety of sectors in the first panel. Volunteerism emerges as a general phenomenon that embraces formal/informal public/corporate sectors.

'The broad framework put forward here allows for both formal (organized) and informal (one-to-one) volunteering to be included and for volunteering carried out in the public and corporate sectors.' (OFC, first panel)

Almost in all narratives, volunteerism is depicted as a universal phenomenon. It exists in every human society as a central motive. Likewise, narrators with different origins mention the long existence of volunteerism in their societies. This contributes to the universal character of voluntarism, which can be observed in any part of the world.

'Volunteering is a basic human impulse, found in almost every country.' (KA, opening session)

'Bangladesh has a strong cultural heritage and voluntarism is inseparable component of that culture.' (OFC, first panel)

The theoretical plurality assigned to the sphere of civil society seems to be associated with this universal volunteer experience and with the variety or 'diversity' of NGOs. Often, the speakers use the terms NGO and volunteers as well as civil society

interchangeably. The link between these terms seems to be taken for granted.

'NGOs and other civil society actors are diverse and this diversity can at times seem difficult to manage.' (LW, not appear in any session, yet listed under keynote/panel speeches)

'The beginning of the eighties was marked by fast growth of voluntary public organizations, NGOs, foundations in various spheres of life.' (RK, first panel)

Volunteerism seems to be an inherent quality of civil society, for which volunteers' responsibility and responsiveness form a firm ground to build on. In addition, as a universal phenomenon, volunteerism may be the basis for a transnational civil society. The collaboration among NGOs can be a first step to materialize this higher level society.

'When the first humans volunteered to cooperate they were building civil society.' (FEG, first panel)

'The transnational Civil Society includes NGOs from the North and South...' (AK, third panel)

The common denominator binding different cultures together and shared globally, volunteerism is a proper response to the global challenges of our times. Volunteerism and NGOs are placed at the center of the global problems. Volunteerism has a large human and financial potential to cope with these problems.

'The answers to the problem must come from the people... This implies volunteerism at all levels.' (RR, first panel)

'Statistics suggest that volunteering in the United States is equal to nine million full-time jobs with a value of \$225 billion per year. In the few countries where these contributions have been measured, they are believed to account for as much as 8 to 14 per cent of gross domestic product.' (KA, opening session)

Nevertheless, NGOs or volunteers should cooperate with governments to struggle

growing problems. This is not to say that volunteers should work under the direction of governments. A kind of partnership is needed.

‘Governments should resist the tendency to see NGOs solely as adversaries... At the same time, NGOs need to acknowledge the legitimate roles and responsibilities of the State.’ (KA, opening session)

There seems to be concerns about the ‘professionalism’ of the volunteer and NGO activity. It is emphasized that volunteerism should include accountability. Volunteers should pursue their goals systematically.

‘This approach requires strategic planning, continuous evaluation of all available resources, timely and informed decision-making, and striking an effective balance between change and continuity... Volunteers must be organized around clearly articulated goals, targets and performance criteria and must be guided by good governance and sound management. A well-structured coordinating secretariat with paid staff will facilitate program planning and program delivery, and will support the performance of the volunteer as professional.’ (EBJ, third panel)

A subtheme is the involvement of youth. Youth emerges as the most important pool to make volunteers.

‘The ideal candidates for the job are the youth, and why the youth? Because they have the time, the energy and the urge to make a difference. Their emotions are raw and their spirit has not been subdued by the complacencies of the world.’ (HSD, fourth panel)

## **DISCUSSION ON RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

### **What is the UN’s conception of NGOs?**

The story that I derived from 20 stories of the UN demonstrates that the UN constructs narratively NGOs as volunteer organizations. This is not to put what is already transparent into words, but a social event that accomplishes a particular judgment, opinion, or even ideology (Emerson, 1982). Though volunteer activities are diverse, all can be included under the general concept NGO. The justification comes from the ‘taken-for-granted’ facts that volunteerism is universal and that it is one of the most popular responses at the community level to the global problems. Civil society is also integral to the NGO narrative. NGOs belong to civil society and are critical actors in maintaining the plurality and effectiveness of this sphere against governments and supranational political institutions. Yet, cooperation with governments is encouraged. Additionally, a professionalization seems necessary to ensure effective and sustainable results. The narrative points to the youth as the workforce of the volunteer NGO.

The speeches are indirectly or directly articulated into the theme of volunteerism. They are narrated and reconstructed within the conference framework. For instance, the whole speech of KN (fourth panel) is about the ‘volunteer’ experience of a group of young people, and this experience is now part of the UN’s NGO narrative, defining and defined by the latter.

‘The BYU (Balkan Youth Union) represents a group of young people who met each other through the Internet... The activists are volunteers, our members do not pay any fees, and we don’t have any financial support and hence no managers.’ (KN, fourth panel)

The emphasis that they are not professionals (no fee, no finance, and no manager) can now be reinterpreted, within the conference framework, in terms of diversity (or say, they are at the very early phase of



organizing) rather than a counter argument against professionalism.

**How and why are a number of different narratives included in the UN's narrative?**

Multiplicity is one factor that legitimizes the NGO narrative as constituted in a participative manner. Participation reflects the logic of civil society, to which NGOs are assumed to belong, and is a necessary resource for the narrative construction. Different voices are needed to demonstrate this inherent plurality. After all, the main theme includes the concept 'diversity'. Multiplicity is what gives the UN narrative its unity.

'...over 2,000 people have registered, representing over 600 organizations in 90 countries from all regions of the world. These figures demonstrate the remarkable international representation...' (ST, opening session)

The meta-narrative seems to arise out of the diversity of positions and opinions. It is an outcome of a representative, as a result legitimate, platform. Different experiences and ideas are allowed to voice and to become part of the narrative. In this way they are internalized and neutralized. Contradictory accounts as well as supportive arguments are relativized from the viewpoint of the main theme. It is what they respond to. They are caught up by this theme and defined within it. Counter arguments are bound simply to define the gap between the current situation and this ideal. Positive accounts, on the other hand, help support the view that the ideal has been already reached or we are on the right path. In either case, the speech narratives refer to and articulate legitimacy into the meta-narrative of the NGO as volunteerism.

The unity of the narrative is rooted not only in the multiplicity of accounts, which signify completeness in terms of participation, but also in the repression of meanings assigned to volunteerism. Different voices are blurred by the main theme, 'NGOs Today: Diversity of the Volunteer

Experience'. Following the main theme from the reverse, the diversity of volunteer experience is solidified as the NGO, specifically the civil society actor that takes on roles in global/local problems with a professional manner.

Multiplicity is captured by the term 'diversity' (of the volunteer experience) and the participative construction process, and is neutralized by the term 'volunteerism' and its arbitrary assignment to the NGO through that process.

**What is the political-economic framework of the UN's NGO narrative?**

This is a political as well as a narrative construction. The face of the political economy of the NGO narrative can be seen in the global/local problems mentioned by the speakers.

'Along with freedom, the free market economy, decentralization, expensive cars, and vacations abroad came despair, drug use, unemployment, homelessness, and lack of access to medical services.' (KMS, fifth panel)

The underlying economy of power is obscured behind the emphasis on volunteers and the NGO activity as their story. A counter narrative is counteracted in the very speech it is narrated and one of the main sources of 'new balance of power', that is, the multinational corporation, remains hidden behind the volunteer spirit.

'Look at what has happened to the UN since Ted Turner and Bill Gates created foundations to enhance the work at the UN. These people voluntarily gave large sums to help humankind through the UN.' (LW, not appear in any session, yet listed under keynote/panel speeches)

The question may be why those people have volunteered to provide such large amounts. The absent presence of the critique of the political economy as a system, which causes the ills that volunteers have had to address, is revealed in the praise of wealthy

volunteers. There is a rich literature on the structural causes of poverty, inequality, and unemployment and their effect on the expansion of the NGO sector (Edwards and Hulme, 2002; Gideon, 1998; Mercer, 2002; Meyer, 1995). It is the global economy and its political institutions that largely give way to the problems and the NGO sector as the associated solution.

The UN narrative emphasizes volunteerism as the solution to these problems. Rather than a large-scale political transformation, it proposes a transformation at the level of individuals. This is in line with the contraction of governments and the reinvention of the individual as the central subject of politics in the global era. Determinism is confronted by volunteerism (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and possible structural problems are assigned to its direct opposite.

‘Human capital is still humankind’s most powerful source of change and well-being of humankind and not the market economy or technological and scientific innovations as such.’ (HH, opening session)

It can be said that structural causes are marginalized while volunteerism is placed at the center. Volunteerism is depicted as a central human motive. Yet, it is also mentioned that volunteers respond to some serious problems.

‘Volunteerism is partly a response to these challenges, and one solution to the increasing need for global citizens to take concrete action’ (HH, opening session)

Then, this is not a volunteer activity. Moreover, volunteerism is not an essential human quality but a historical/social phenomenon conditioned by the political economy. But there seems to be a binary of volunteerism and political economy and the latter is dominated by the former, which is situated beyond history. The association between volunteerism and NGOs is arbitrary,

disregarding the political economy, which at the same time frames the UN’s story.

### **Do we observe a process of exclusion/inclusion in the construction of the narrative?**

The whole process is one of exclusion, denial, domination as well as inclusion.

‘The credibility that thousands of NGOs have created over many years must not be lost because of action by groups whose aims are not related to enhancing the global agenda.’ (HH, opening session)

‘The writer seems to believe that volunteers, themselves, have no substance, and are not worthy of consideration. This letter is an example of one of the very reasons this conference is needed and can make a significant contribution.’ (KG, opening session)

The exclusion is obvious in the first quote. It distinguishes between the NGO and those whose aims are not to enhance the global agenda whatever the latter is. The second one first constructs narratively the excluded and justifies the conference on that narrative. The person who wrote the letter appears to have a different perspective on volunteerism. But it doesn’t count in the UN. The agenda is preset to make sense of the NGO as volunteerism.

The process is not simply one of exclusion. Different voices are included in the conference and the NGO narrative.

‘Public money covers two thirds of the costs for most of the organizations active in the social sector... A replacement of public service by volunteer activities is looked upon as a threat against the level of social welfare by a large majority of the population.’ (SF, first panel)

‘These networks that usually utilize a single language - mainly English - and include the crème of activists in national Civil Societies, indirectly hold the seeds of exclusion for many sectors and grassroots organizations. Activists of the Civil Society in the South are in fact linked to the circles

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of knowledge and flow of information usually falling under Western hegemony.’ (AK, third panel)

SF talks about the public money provided to civil society, which raises questions about the divide between civil and political societies and the capacity of the former to balance the latter. Also, it is emphasized that social welfare is mainly the job of governments not of volunteers. AK explicitly points to the Western hegemony in the NGO sector and indirectly devalues volunteerism by drawing attention to the power relations behind. These counter points become part of the UN’s narrative in the form of diversity. The hegemony of the narrative is secured on participation as well as exclusion.

Throughout the narrative process, the significance and credibility of what people tell are ensured by the institutionalized and legitimate setting of the UN. The long historical existence and perceived independence of the UN appears to be appropriate for a stable foundation of the new meaning for NGOs. Perceived neutrality overcomes the contextuality of meanings. The UN becomes a platform to ‘arbitrarily’ associate volunteerism and NGOs, giving that association a common-sense character. The new narrative is concretized by the written final report. Once published, it acts as an archetype (Brown, 2000). A new framework is put into use, sensitizing NGO people and volunteers to the convergences between their experiences and the new meta-narrative.

### **PARTICIPATIVE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION**

This section provides a preliminary theory of the participative narrative construction by an external party. It seems to be the process that is used in the UN. This unique process may be put into a few propositions, which may guide future research. Participative narrative construction of the organization by an external party is defined as a process, in which the external

party’s narrative regarding the organization is formed by the active participation of the organizational actors, within the preset framework provided by the external party, in discussing, negotiating, and shaping the narrative so that the actors’ viewpoints can be assimilated into that framework and the resulting narrative.

Assumption one: External party is a legitimate and powerful actor for the organization in the sense that its narrative is perceived as true by and grounded in the reality of the members of the organization who evaluate or make sense of that narrative, and that the narrative is likely to have important financial and material effects.

Assumption two: The political economy of the external party is reflected in the main theme as the central object to be narratively constructed.

Proposition one: The external party provides a main theme, by which the participation of the organizational members is narratively predefined or framed.

Proposition two: Within the main theme, the external party supplies subcategories, by which the diversity of participation is regulated and directed towards the construction of the main theme.

Proposition three: After the narrative scope of participation has been restricted (propositions one and two), the participant organizational members narratively fills the main theme, solidifying and fixing it, detailing exclusions and inclusions.

Proposition four: The participant organizational members reconstruct their narratives at the same time they construct the main theme, making the process self-constructive and the main theme self-reflective on the organizational members’ own narrative.

Proposition five: The main theme, which was initially taken for granted as a framework without content, becomes a taken-for-granted narrative with content as the organization.

## CONCLUSION

The NGO meta-narrative provides a sensemaking resource for individuals to construct their own narratives. It is likely to be communicated as the norm of the sector. Hence, it has important organizational and financial consequences for the NGO sector (e.g. Starkey and Crane, 2003). Moreover, it may reproduce the political economy and associated power relations, in which it is produced. The actors of the NGO field - governments, donors, general public, and NGOs themselves- may like to or have to make decisions in line with the narrative. For example, volunteerism may be increasingly professionalized and formalized. NGOs without a volunteer 'staff' may find it difficult to obtain funds. Those professionalizing their volunteers and fitting the narrative may secure funds yet lose their autonomy. NGOs may attempt to find alternative financial sources. They may also take the risk of marginalization to keep their autonomy. Another alternative is to try to become an associate NGO of the UN and reshape the sector from within. Thinking that the conference was in 2001, these decisions may have been already made. It is necessary to study individual organizations to understand what the effect is.

The narrative construction in the conference is based on the participation of different organizational members within an external setting. A variety of perspectives are articulated into the meta-narrative. Other institutions may have different construction strategies. State institutions may have more authoritarian narratives imposed on participants. These narratives may have a formal and objective tone in narrating their story. It would also be interesting to see how other external and powerful parties produce general narratives. We can search for such construction processes in chambers of commerce or occupational associations. Both participation and politics may characterize such settings. Within a single organization, on the other hand, parties may build their strategies on the internal power balance.

Participation may be little. We need to examine different organizational settings to come up with such narrative construction strategies.

The study also presents a view on the narrative construction of the organization by an external party. This is not simply an internal process. We need to look at the external narratives that can potentially define the organization. The organization may have indeterminate boundaries. The narrative analysis provides a tool to examine that indeterminacy and its possible fixations along with the fixation strategies. It may allow us to theorize organizations as being reconstructed externally as well as internally. The distinction between internal and external is a repercussion of this reconstruction process.

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