

Communication in third sector organisations

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Abstract: Third sector organisations favour the social development due to their capacity to produce human and social capital in society (Putman, 2001). In order to achieve social welfare third sector organisations need to produce a positive change in the relations among individuals, groups and institutions in a society. The expectations about the third sector organisations' transparency and capacity to tackle social problems are increasing worldwide. In Mexico, this problematic is more complex because there is a low level of professionalism, transparency, accountability and participation culture in the organized civil society (ITAM, 2010). The development of the organized civil society in Mexico will depend to a great extent on its capacity to communicate its values to society and achieve a cultural and social change. Therefore, the third sector organisations must adopt strategic initiatives to reinforce their credibility and reputation, because the public and private donors are increasingly more demanding in their criteria to grant resources to social projects; and because the Mexican society has a low participation level and faces increasingly more complex social problems.

Keywords: Third sector organisations; organisational communication; Mexico; civil Society.

Summary: 1. Introduction 2. The Third Sector in Mexico. 3. Communication in the Third Sector. 4. Conclusion. 5. References.

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1. Introduction

Globalisation has profoundly affected the different spheres of society and provoked a state of general crisis that has forced the social actors to consider new forms of interaction.

One of the relevant changes is the technological revolution that has transformed the conceptualisation of communication and social interaction roles in response to the new social needs.

This article will address the changes related to social interaction from the conceptual perspective of the civil society. The concept of civil society has been addressed by many contemporary and classic authors (Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, Keane, Wolf, Cohen), who have provided different visions, ranging from the role of civil society as an expression of the fight of the citizen against authoritarianism and capitalism (socialism); its social participation in the defence of human and political rights in the public sphere (liberalism); up to the current conceptualisation that sees the civil society as a sphere capable of achieving social changes through the promotion of awareness about the diverse needs, from local, regional, national and even global points of view.

In this sense, according to the modern interpretation, the civil society is understood as the circle of relationships between individuals, groups and organisations that are different from governmental power relations (Bobbio, 2006). This distinction gives rise to a division of the civil society into two sectors: the lucrative sector and the non-profit sector, also known as the third sector.

As part of their study of the non-lucrative sector at the Johns Hopkins University (USA), Salamon and Anheier (1999) propose a number of characteristics that identify the third sector organisations (from now on, TSOs):

- Structure: this feature involves the presence of some degree of formality and permanence in time.
- Autonomy: is the feature that gives freedom to an entity to pursue its interests through its own regulations and powers, without any functional or organisational dependency on any other public or private organisation.
- Non-profit nature: i.e. not seeking to obtain any utility from its transactions.
- Voluntariness: this feature involves freedom of membership or adhesion.
- Social and public benefit: aimed at improving the level of welfare or living conditions of the beneficiaries.

The prototype of the third sector organisations are civil organisations (COs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or civil society organisations (CSOs). Regardless of their particular denomination, all they are third sector organisations (TSOs).

The existence of TSOs is not a recent phenomenon because various organisations with these characteristics and objectives emerged already in the early 19th century. One of the oldest and most well-known organisations is the Red Cross. The formal recognition of the NGOs started in 1945 with the “Charter of the United Nations”, which established in its article 71 that “The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations may arrange meetings with non-governmental organisations dealing with matters of competence to the Council” (UN, 2010).

Apart from participating as consultants in the UN, the TSOs have also participated in EU countries as observers, solicitors, and agents of social pressure. The 1990s witnessed two phenomena: a change in the role of the State in the provision of public services and a new model of economic and social policy (neoliberalism); both of these phenomena provoked an increase in the gap between the sectors of society and an increase in the participation of the TSOs in the management of social programmes.

In Latin American countries the gap was wider between the various social layers which, in the absence of means to meet their needs in the market and the absence of the state as a provider, required the action of the civil society to establish new sustainable plans.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2008), over the past two decades there has been a strong increase in the number of civil society organisations:

“In the past 25 years there has been a proliferation of both civil society organisations (CSOs) and the problems they try to solve. In democratic societies the work of civil society organisations is to provide some benefit, service or even political influence to specific groups that are members of society”.

For its part, the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) reported a significant increase of TSOs in recent years: the number went from 40 in 1946 to 2,350 in 2003 (UN, 2010). Likewise, the relevance of the TSOs within the social, political and economic fields has become evident in the so called “global civil society”, as Salamon and Anheiner (1999) confirm with the following facts:

- If the third sector were a country it would be the eighth world economy (ahead of Brazil Russia, Spain, and Canada), since it handles 1.1 trillion dollars in expenses, which is the equivalent to 4.6% of the world’s gross domestic product.
- The third sector occupies the equivalent to 19 million paid full-time workers; i.e. 4.8% of the total non-farming occupation in the world.

- The workforce of the TSOs' volunteers represents the equivalent to 10.6 million full-time workers.
- Two-thirds of the activities performed by the TSOs are concentrated in the three traditional areas of welfare services: education (30%), health (20%) and social services (18%), followed by the area of leisure and cultural activities (14%).
- The main source of income is constituted by fees and payments for services (49%), followed by the public sector (40%) and finally by philanthropy and donations (11%).

According to the Observatory of the Third Sector, the TSOs are the institutions that enjoy the greatest credibility in most countries. Being entities that propose alternative models of coexistence in society, the TSOs offer solutions to local problems, protect the quality of life, and give a platform to the voices that are usually ignored in the traditional social media (Observatory of the Third Sector, 2010).

Regarding the role of the civil society, Anthony Giddens (1999) points out that it must act in collaboration with the State to ensure that the actions undertaken translate into welfare for the community. This is why the TSOs in contemporary society must act as agents of social transformation, which apart from managing economic resources are capable of generating alternative resources, based on their influence, prestige, information and impact on social networks and other media. For this reason, it is considered that the value added by the third sector to society is the social capital, which is understood as a type of asset that exists in the networks of cooperation and linkages of trust between the various social actors (Putman, 2001).

The social capital is then an intangible and collective resource that has the features of the public good, which can be positive or negative. It is understood that the social capital is a network of links and the quality of the resources that circulate in this network. The TSOs can contribute to a higher density of cooperation networks, to the proliferation of social trust links and obviously to enhance the social capital (Portocarrero, 2003).

Some key elements of the TSOs' contribution to the creation of social capital are:

- Social networks: They strengthen the solidarity, the capacity of defence of interests and rights, and the capacity of obtaining, using and implementing information. Networks add value to groups and individuals and allow them to access greater resources. The TSOs work in networks. These alliances give density to the social spaces, strengthen and deepen existing spaces, create new domains and help generating new knowledge and actions.
- Values: They are an essential element for the existence of the social capital, not as limitations to the individual freedom, but as frameworks of reference for any type of cooperation. In order for a community to exist it is not only necessary for the

members to interact, but also to become real communities that are united by the values, norms and experiences that are shared by its members. The deeper and more solid these common values are, the stronger the sense of community will be.

In this way, the TSOs are remarkable for having developed a diversity of activities of early response to social problems; are characterised by their commitment to service, which links them to the population very closely; thus these entities have managed to infuse their ideas to the various social actors, and now face the challenge of achieving their goals with greater professionalism, creativity and efficiency (Vidal, 2004).

The Mexican Centre for Philanthropy indicates that the degree of development of the civil society is determined by several factors: a) the existence of an associationist culture and tradition; b) the legal provisions that ensure the respect for the free association and encourages the creation of conditions for the emergence and development of groups; c) the vitality of a society that organises itself to express its interests and demands; and d) the degree of self-organisation of the groups, which allows the creation of fronts, confederations, networks, among others, which watch over the interests of the civil society (Villalobos, 1997).

Around the world the TSOs have a strong social capital, which in turn becomes a symbolic capital that supports them and gives them legitimacy in the population, by being present in the collective imagination as agents of solidarity, common good and altruism.

In this context, the relations of the TSOs with the State, society, donors, and volunteers are strategic axes that these types of organisations strengthen to achieve a balance between social development and the quality of life, among governmental, private and social sectors. Thus, the role of the TSOs is vital to achieve a sustainable development and the full respect for human rights.

2. The third sector in Mexico

Thus, the TSOs promote social development due to their ability to produce human and social capital (Putman, 2001). This implies a positive change in relations between individuals, groups and institutions in contemporary society, in order to help achieving social welfare.

However, the inclusion of the TSOs on the global stage (which is demanding and complex) has led that its rapid growth and has caused major internal shortcomings regarding their professionalisation and organisational development, and an increasing social demand for visible and direct results and impacts on the social development.

The previous implies that the TSOs should therefore take initiatives to strengthen their credibility and reputation. In this sense, the effective management of the organisational communication is a strategy capable of improving the organisations' transparency, social confidence and reputation, all of which are key elements for the production of social capital. For this reason it is necessary to develop a communication strategy that achieves social links that are strong enough to translate into collaborative, participatory and integrative activities of all the public, private and social actors.

In the case of Mexico, there is a low level of development in the organised civil society in comparison with other countries in the region. Here are some facts which illustrate this problem:

- Most of the registered civil society organisations are short-lived, since each year about half of all existing organisations disappear, while only a slightly higher number of new entities are created.
- Most Mexican TSOs are micro and small sized organisations.
- While in Chile there is an institutional density of 50 organisations for every 10,000 people, in Mexico there is only one organisation per 20,000 inhabitants (ITAM, 2009).

Despite the Mexican population has shown solidarity and generosity in the occurrence of natural disasters, in terms of the support and participation in civil society organisations, Mexico occupies the last place among 36 developed and developing countries in Latin America, Europe and Africa. Regarding this situation, the civil society in Mexico has the following characteristics:

- 0.4% of the economically active population is part of the non-lucrative sector workforce. The average for developing countries is 1.9%, i.e. five times higher than in Mexico.
- Less than 7% of the income received by the TSOs is donations from the private sector, which constitutes 0.04% of the GDP. This puts Mexico in the last place among the studied countries.
- 8.5% of the income of the TSOs is governmental resources, which places Mexico in the last place among Latin American countries.
- 85% of the funding of the Mexican TSOs is obtained through fees. In this aspect Mexico is placed second at the international level (Salamon, 1999).

According to the First National Survey on Philanthropy and Civil Society, undertaken by Mexico's Autonomous Technological Institute (Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo of Mexico, aka ITAM), Mexicans do not trust the non-profit sector mainly due to the following reasons:

- 74% of Mexicans claim they have little or zero confidence in the activities of this sector.

- 79% prefers to directly support a needy person than an institution (Layton 2005).

The Second National Survey on Philanthropy and Civil Society in 2008 concluded that:

- Mexican generosity is shown through informal channels.
- Mexicans do not feel connected to social organisations.
- Mexicans do not participate directly in social assistance projects (Layton 2008).

The data show the low level of the organisational development of the civil society in Mexico, which may be the result of a paternalistic and authoritarian political tradition that has not allowed the promotion of an associationist culture among Mexicans. It is important to note that in Mexico there are problems impeding the development and sustainability of the third sector since there are no specific public policies and there is a lack of an appropriate legal and fiscal framework promoting formal co-responsibility and philanthropy.

The TSOs' permanence in the time will depend on the quality and transparency of their actions. In this sense, David Brown and a group of researchers at Harvard University consider that the "civil society organisations are legitimate when the roles and activities they perform are accepted as appropriate for their contexts" (Brown, undated). Now, however, it must be recognised that the accountability and transparency in organisations are key elements for achieving the legitimacy they seek.

In Mexico this problem is more complex due to the low professionalisation, the low level of transparency and the weak participatory culture of the organised civil society (ITAM, 2010). Before this, it should be noted that the development of the civil society will depend largely on its capacity to effectively communicate its values to the Mexican society.

According to data from the Mexican Centre for Philanthropy (CEMEFI, 2008), the third sector in Mexico is composed by 33,010 organisations that are grouped into four types:

- Religious (6,806): their activities include worship, evangelism, and social assistance.
- Mutual Benefit (6,659): their aim is to defend common interests.
- Services to third parties (19,428): their purpose is to solve social problems, particularly those faced by vulnerable groups.
- Political parties and associations (117): their purpose is clearly the promotion of ideologies and political candidates.

As we have seen, the central functions of the TSOs dedicated to the service to third parties and mutual benefit are the social financing and articulation of local efforts. Therefore, their work is important in the construction of social capital in various regions of the country. In this sense, according to Putman (2001), social capital refers to “those distinctive features of the social organisation, such as confidence, norms and networks, which can improve the efficiency of an organisation by facilitating coordinated actions”.

It is important to consider that in order for a TSO to achieve its objectives, it requires to undertake more than just isolated actions: it is necessary to comprehensively manage all the processes that generate credibility, trust and solidarity inside and outside the organisation.

The systemic approach of organisational theory highlights the relevance of the interrelations of the system (organisation) with its environment (society), and suggests the strategic importance of communication in these internal and external interrelations (Bertalanffy, 1975). Thus, the TSOs face the following challenges:

1. In the field of internal organisational processes:

- They require efforts to identify, approach, link, accompany, and motivate the various social actors that are capable of contributing to the social development. For this it is necessary to develop and implement effective methodologies for the analysis, diagnosis and evaluation of the community.
- They must have directive councils or boards that are representative of the communities and, on the other hand, must maintain a committed group of volunteers.

2. In the field of external organisational processes:

- They need to raise awareness among the members of the community about the importance of its shared responsibility, commitment and participation in the development of the desired changes.
- They need to raise awareness among the governmental and private sector to channel resources (local, national and international; public and private), to support the solution to social problems.
- They need to promote transparency, accountability and visibility of the impact of their actions and achievements.

3. Communication in the third sector

The work of linking the public and private sectors to meet social demands is a complex and difficult field of activity and that is the reason for the importance of a strategic communication management in the TSOs to accelerate these processes of social interaction.

Confidence is a key factor for the construction of a culture of solidarity and social responsibility. In this sense Drucker (1994) points out that:

“Organisations are founded on trust. Trusting on other means knowing what we can expect from them. Confidence is a synonym for mutual understanding”.

The theories of collective action and social networks claim that the social capital formed by networks of reciprocity, voluntary cooperation and commitment, contribute to the formation of community (Vargas, 2003). This is based on the following points:

1. Social networks are a fusion of cognitive elements and power relations between individuals, groups and organisations that are interrelated in structures to build a collective process.
2. Collective action is a form of improving the individual symbolic resources in view of the exclusion that the market and the State have generated in the postmodern society.

On the other hand, Burt's (1978) definition of the principle of cohesion in the social network theory argues that the actors of a network connect with each other through processes of socialisation and interaction, and that the strength of this cohesion is based on the intensity of the communication links.

Understanding communication as an opportunity to bring like-minded people together offers a wide range of possibilities of interaction in the social field, so that the more the TSOs have communication mechanisms the more they will be able to facilitate the understanding, coordination and cooperation that is necessary for the growth and development of society.

One of the weaknesses of the TSOs, in the voice of their actors, is their communicative strategies. Small and medium-sized associations have a critical view on their own strategies:

“We lack an adequate communication strategy. We have little capacity to transmit very important problems to society, either people do not know about us or has the wrong image, often we fail to capture

their interest. [...] In general, we have serious difficulties to break the silence of the press and the media to disseminate and project our reality towards the social environment. We only attract the attention of the media when there is a catastrophe or some scandal" (Esplai Foundation, 2002: 20).

Managing communication in organisations through the planning of key messages targeting strategic audiences to try to engage them to achieve productivity and raise public awareness is not an easy task or a sporadic effort. According to Rebeil and Nosnik (2000), organisational communication:

"[...] is in charge of encouraging the active contribution of all those that integrate an economic, political, social or cultural system, operationally and tangentially, and seeks to open spaces for the discussion of the problems of the company or institution in order to achieve collective solutions that benefit the system and make it more productive".

Communications management in the TSOs is a tool of socialisation and cohesion inside and outside the organisation, not only a dissemination strategy. The global nature of communication makes that in the organisation "everything communicates" (Costa, 2001), and for this reason the TSOs should take advantage of this situation to generate commitment in their volunteering and credibility and confidence in their donors and society; i.e. communication must become a generator of human, social, and relational capital to achieve social welfare.

The integral and holistic nature of communication management allows linking all the areas of the organisation: the financial area, the strategic planning area, human resources, etc. This is because "communication in Mexican organisations is expressed as a comprehensive communication strategy that incorporates, among its tasks, the internal, corporate or institutional communication, and the advertising processes, which include marketing among the organisations' current and potential customers" (Rebeil, 2000).

For this reason, communication will become part of the organisations' strategic plans, as Pizzolante (2004) points out:

"Strategic communication is based on a planning process that allows designing a plan to properly disseminate our actions, through messages frequently transmitted by the organisation's formal and informal spokespersons, which play a key role in transparent building of trust".

This concept is known as Integral Communication, which is a way of understanding communication in an organisation in both the internal and external dimensions, for

the purpose of generating a public image that favours the objectives of the organisation.

A comprehensive approach to communication allows achieving uniformity and meeting the strategic objectives from the planning, execution, implementation and evaluation of the media and tools. This holistic vision of communication sees the organisation as a vibrant community full of people that evolve and change in their constant interaction with the environment or supra-system. This is known as integrated or integral communication (Rebeil, 2000).

However, communication is not only the production of the correct message in the appropriate media and channels, “all communication has an intention” (Nosnik, 1995). This means that the intention of communication seeks to produce an effect. A productive approach to communication studies the information flows and feedback mechanisms that are necessary to achieve the quality of life that a social group desires.

According to Abraham Nosnik (2003), productive communication is the study of how individuals and groups unite thanks to information and dialogue (information plus feedback) to establish and conquer their objectives. In other words, productive communication consists of placing the communication process on its own context, or on the system it is trying to help to integrally achieve objectives and targets. Productive communication is born of the feedback that allows knowing the needs of the communication systems in order to align them with the ultimate objectives of the organisations and in this way contribute to the fulfilment of these objectives (Nosnik, 1995).

The vision of Abraham Nosnik (2003) particularly prioritises the human factor as part of this process of development, which includes ethics and productive intelligence to achieve the adaptation to a complex, competitive and uncertain context through the materialisation of such processes as innovation, transformation and social change.

The three conceptual axes of Nosnik’s productive communication are: the language theory of Charles W. Morris; the communication theory, and the three fundamental processes of information.

4. Conclusion

Communications management is no stranger to the world of the TSOs and is a practiced that is linked to their daily productive and strategic work. Communication means raising awareness, disseminating information, denouncing, educating, fighting, changing, promoting, or putting pressure, and it is through the

communication process that the TSOs become real and legitimate social interlocutors.

According to Costa (1995: 293), communication is “the central nervous system of the organisations”, the flow generated by all the interpersonal relationships in the organisation and the relations of the latter with its environment. In this sense, the TSOs play a very important role at the time of communicating values and tackling prejudices, since this communicative function is inserted in its own identity, as Vicente Vidal (2004) points out:

“Companies communicate in order to exist, but the third sector organisations exist to communicate, to transmit their values to society. It could be said that communication is part of the essence of these organisations, and is present in all their processes, in all the management”.

Through the civil society organisations the individuals exercise their citizenship, and build solutions to address public issues. Thus, by contributing significantly to the achievement of the TSOs’ objectives (by coordinating and linking collective actions based on shared values) communications management becomes stronger and supports the development of society.

On the other hand, the more that the TSOs’ communication management develops with a holistic (Rebeill, 2000) and productive approach (Nosnik 1995), and not instrumentally as it is traditionally operated; the more the TSOs’ forms of communication become forms of influence in the relations, perceptions and actions of the social actors, which are fundamental in the generation of changes favouring social welfare.

Studying the third sector organisations represents an opportunity to support their development and professionalisation. Developing communication research in the TSOs would allow identifying the attributes, dimensions, and communicative needs of the Mexican TSOs and their audiences, to understand conceptually and operationally the way in which the communication in these organisations can directly boost their effectiveness and efficiency and thereby help them to achieve their goal: social development in Mexico.

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