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Paper Title: The Potential for Partnership – NGO Involvement in the European Policy and Decision-Making Process

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Summary of Research

This paper examines the involvement of NGOs in the European Union decision-making process in the fields of social policy, environmental policy and development aid. It traces the emergence of civil dialogue (i.e., the involvement of non governmental organizations in EU procedures of consultation and law-making), and reviews the European Commission's promotion of partnership with NGOs as an effective method of influencing policy activity. The paper concludes that the reality of this relationship resembles more a coalition than a partnership and argues that recasting the relationship thus allows a clearer understanding of NGO/institutional interaction.

Description

Problem or Issue to be addressed:

The Treaty of Rome gives no formal role to NGOs in the European decision-making process. This legal reality has not prevented such organizations over time creating alternative means to communicate with European policy makers. NGOs' need to be heard at European level is echoed in the European Commission's need for grassroots support for its policies, particularly in an age of alleged democratic deficit. How should this symbiotic relationship be classified and what difference does such classification make? This paper explores the effectiveness of partnership and civil dialogue as a method for NGO communication with European policy makers and the extent to which partnership provides a useful mechanism for influencing EU policy. It discusses the involvement of NGOs at each stage of the EU decision-making process from agenda setting and policy formation, to policy decision, and implementation in selected policy areas. It argues that the EU constitutes a unique legal order, governance of which is not subject to a single political theory. Given this multi-layered political context, it is futile to suggest that one can create a cohesive partnership template that will apply across policy sectors to all institutional relations with individual NGOs. The paper then suggests an alternative lens – the lens of coalition – through which to view NGO/EU institutional relations. Adopting this explicit conceptual lens facilitates critical scrutiny of the role of NGOs in EU policy processes. More suitable than partnership it focuses on multiple, interacting policy cycles involving multiple levels of government (Sabatier, 1993), which characterize the EU decision process.

Approach taken including data sources:

Forming part of my doctoral research on comparative aspects of charity regulation and partnership, the purpose of this paper is threefold. Part I outlines the types of liaison offered by European institutions to voluntary organizations through an assessment of Treaty provisions, European Commission Communications and Discussion Papers, European Economic and Social Committee Opinions and European Parliament and Council Resolutions. This paper relationship is then compared first with the legal concept of partnership and second, with European political concepts of partnership, such as social partnership – a term used to define the relationship between trade unions, employers' organizations and the European institutions. Part II examines the actual involvement of voluntary organizations in the European decision-making process by breaking down the process of decision-making into its constituent stages (Lasswell, 1951) and analyzing the input of voluntary organizations at each stage in the policy areas of development aid, social affairs and environmental policy. Finally, Part III sets out the dissonance between the EU's understanding of partnership and the legal concept of partnership before proceeding to reformulate the existing relationship between the EU institutions and voluntary organizations as a coalition relationship. Exchanging partnership for coalition enables the development of a more holistic policy approach towards NGO/EU cooperation. The coalition concept acknowledges the tensions inherent in state/NGO relationships; those same tensions which give rise to the need for regulation in the context of autonomy, legitimacy, representativeness and accountability. Although

there has been some discussion of these standards in the context of NGO/EU partnerships, a coalition model provides a more useful template against which to judge the success of NGO/EU interaction.

Topic's relation to the state of knowledge in the field:

There is an emerging trend among states to formalize nonprofit organization involvement in decision-making processes. The United Kingdom's Compact, Canada's Accord and Ireland's Social Partnership are examples of such processes and there is a growing body of literature that assesses the effectiveness of these different mechanisms for influencing policy activity (Plowden (2003), House (2004), Taylor (2002), Phillips (2003)). The aim of this paper is to review the current state of EU/NGO relations and to make a similar inquiry as to the effectiveness of NGO influence on policy. Much has been written on the governance process of the European Union (Schmitter (1979), Wolfe & Marks (1996), Warleigh (2003)). Consideration of NGO impact in these works tends to be marginal. Although works focusing on particular policy areas (Faulkner (1998), Wallace (2000), Bomberg (1998)) pay greater attention to the role of NGOs, concentration on a single policy sector prevents the development of a comprehensive theory of NGO involvement applicable cross-sectorally. Similarly, academic literature assessing the impact of interest groups, including NGOs, on the EU decision making process, while useful, stop short of proposing changes (van Schendelen (2002), and Richardson (2001)).

Contribution to the field your work will make:

Coming from a legal perspective, my work seeks to build on existing contributions by placing NGOs at the centre of the policy-making equation and seeking to ascertain their effectiveness across diverse EU policy sectors. My research provides a legal and political context in which to explain better the parameters for NGO involvement in European policy making. Exposing the shortcomings of the partnership model and substituting instead a coalition model not only better explains past NGO/institutional interactions, it also provides a more solid framework for future engagement, whether this continues to take an informal form or is the subject of more formalized relations.