The EQUAL-program, a new opportunity structure for immigrant organizations?

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Immigrant organizations are a heterogeneous category which includes different types of organizations. Ethnic organizations gather people around a collective identity which has its source in the ethnic or national origins of the members. Trans-ethnic organizations gather around other types of collective identities such as gender, religion, neighborhood etc. They can answer to very different kinds of needs depending upon the groups' perceptions of their necessities, their level of integration and their socio-economic status. Examples of activities are: celebrating festivities, maintaining contact with the country of origin, informing the hosting country about the culture and traditions of the group, organizing leisure activities for children, offering advice and support in contact with the authorities, helping finding job and housing but also offering social welfare services such as culturally sensitive elderly care in the mother language.

Many of these organizations are caught in between a dilemma which consists in keeping a balance between the need for cooperation with the authorities not least for the purpose of mobilizing resources and between the strive for independence for the purpose of being able to function as a critical voice (Rex 1994). The aim of the study is to analyze the participation to the EU-financed EQUAL program by immigrant organizations and its significance for these organizations. I will address the following questions: can we interpret EQUAL as a new opportunity structure and/or a new structure of resource mobilization for immigrant organizations? Which organizations get access and what are the obstacles for participation? Does participation trigger competition between organizations? Does it open new possibilities?

The study will have a comparative approach and focus on immigrant organizations in two different institutional contexts: Italy and Sweden. By a cross-country comparison I aim to highlight similarities and differences, to estimate consequences and to give a deeper understanding of how eventually new opportunity structures for NGO:s interact with the existing institutional framework.

The EQUAL program is one of the community initiatives financed by the European Structural Founds between 2001 and 2007. EQUAL financed experimental projects led by partnerships of public, private and non-governmental organizations. The program can be seen as an example of a new role played by the EU in the area of social policy and especially of employment. The aim of EQUAL is to support new methods for preventing discrimination and fighting against inequalities in connection to the labor market. Research points to the fact that EU could offer new opportunity structures for NGO:s (Marks & McAdam 1996). The participation to EQUAL could give NGO:s the possibility of financing new activities that might be positive for the target groups but at the same time it requires administrative and organizational skills and competences which are not always easy to find in small NGO:s, which rely mostly on the efforts of non-professional volunteers and are usually strongly dependent on time-limited public funding.

The theoretical framework for this study consists mainly of the concept "political opportunity" applied to research on new social movements. The theory stresses the importance of the broader political system in structuring the opportunities for collective action (McAdam et al. 1996). Studies point at the fact that different social policy regimes correspond to different roles of the third sectors in the production of welfare (Kazepov 2008) and that different incorporation regimes correspond to different types of immigrant organizations and roles for them in society (Soysal 1994) The choice of two relatively dissimilar national contexts as Italy and Sweden is also based on such theories.
The data consists of interviews with individuals representing 10 immigrant organizations in Sweden and 12 in Italy that have participated to EQUAL. The interviews have been conducted from fall 2007 to summer 2008. A preliminary analysis of the data shows that:

Immigrant organizations in Italy have experienced more difficulties participating to EQUAL than the Swedish ones. One possible explanation is the overall wider lack of resources that this organizations face compared to their Swedish equals. The organizations in Italy experience also more difficulties in their participation because of linguistic, cultural and administrative barriers that derive also of their less established position in the Italian organizational landscape. The participating organizations are in both countries relatively well established, with strong ties to other NGO:s and with experience of working with public sector organizations and receiving public funds for projects. The organizations in Sweden also described the participation to EQUAL as a new and more positive experience comparing to the traditional ways of financing their projects through local and national funds while the Italian ones were more skeptical.

The study shows that although EQUAL could be seen as a new opportunity structure for immigrant organizations it still implies a high threshold for participation. This threshold becomes an obstacle for less established organizations to access the opportunity structure. Further the less established the participating organizations are, the less they gain from participating to the program. The ceteribus paribus different starting conditions of immigrant organizations in the two national contexts probably effects the way in which EQUAL can function as a new opportunity structure for many immigrant organizations.


- McAdam et al. (1996) “Introduction” in Mc Adam et al. (Ed.) Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements. Cambridge University Press.
