

IRSPM Conference Proceedings

From April 11. to 13., the 15th Annual Conference of the International Research Society for Public Management (IRSPM XV) took place in Dublin. The theme of the conference was “Value, Innovation and Partnership”. In the panel on “Blurring Sector Boundaries, Hybrid Organizations and Public Services: Current Issues and Common Ground“, Björn Schmitz presented a paper on “Organizational Hybridity in Social Finance – A Comparative Case Analysis“. Ekkehard Thümler contributed a paper on “Foundations, Schools and the State. School Development Partnerships in the US and Germany as Legitimacy-Generating Arrangements” to the “Philanthropy, Public Services, Policy: Working Together or Falling Out” panel.

In his contribution, written in cooperation with Gunnar Glänzel, Björn Schmitz emphasized the relevance of organisations that, in the granting of funds, take into account both social and ecological criteria, yet, at the same time, have to face economic requirements. The loss of reputation of conventional finance institutions has led many clients and investors to look for alternative forms of investment thus making the above mentioned organizations more and more popular. In a comparison between Oikocredit (Netherlands), Charity Bank (UK) and Regionalwert-AG (Germany), Björn Schmitz was able to show that these organizations experience strong organizational frictions due to their position between profit and social interests. The dangers of deviating from their own mission, i.e. a so-called “mission drift”, thus acting in favour of one stakeholder group solely, are high. Social finance institutions as hybrid organizations work to counteract such risks by focusing on legal form and governance instruments. These organizations require a high degree of authenticity and need to be viewed very neutrally. Therefore, transparency and communication requirements are highly important.

Ekkehard Thümler examined the role of school development partnerships between foundations and public actors. In the literature these kinds of partnerships are discussed in controversial ways. Some scholars claim that these partnerships play a crucial role in modernizing and enhancing the performance of public school systems. Others accuse them of promoting the neo-liberal restructuring of the education system. Based on empirical evidence on such “public-philanthropic partnerships” in Germany and the US, Ekkehard Thümler suggested an alternative diagnosis: In many cases, instead of enhancing the performance of schools, partnerships confer a high degree of legitimacy for the public and private actors involved.

The IRSPM conference brings together a wide range of researchers from different fields resulting in a remarkable diversity of content and methods. Yet, this diversity also leads to the impression that a uniform comprehension and the operationalization of central terms such as “innovation” or “social impact” are yet to be accomplished which makes the comparison and the scientific dialogue between the presentations difficult. At the same time and unlike, for example, the Arnova conference, many contributions seemed to take a rather critical stance towards the transfer of concepts, methods and terms from economics to third sector research. Stephen Osborne, for instance, remarked in his keynote speech that, both in research and in practice, the term “innovation” is often considered as a value in itself. However, “innovation” is not *per se* helpful and positive. A critical reflection and revaluation – if necessary – of the term is needed – most of all in the areas of public services and nonprofit research.

These remarks are probably also true for a number of other terms inspired by economic thinking that are currently *en vogue* in the nonprofit sector.

From a theoretical point of view, new institutionalism, stakeholder approaches as well as social network research were among the most prominent concepts taken into consideration. However, their actual operationalization in the relevant research projects does not always seem to be convincing. The most important research desideratum continues to be a systematic link between the transformation phenomena on the macro level and the changes that can be observed from an organizational perspective. In our view, these fundamental issues need to be addressed more systematically.