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Discourses of participatory governance.

Case study from social enterprises
in nordic-baltic countries

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DISCOURSES OF PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE – CASE STUDY FROM SOCIAL ENTERPRISES IN NORDIC-BALTIC COUNTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

Social enterprises are a diverse group of enterprises: they vary in their social missions, business models, sizes, legal forms, ownership structures, growth-orientations and operation areas (see European Commission 2019; Defourny & Nyssens 2010) In this article, we adapt an European view to social enterprises. A social enterprise continuously produces and/or sells goods or services while having a high degree of autonomy. They operate entrepreneurially, taking a significant level of economic risk. The social dimension is described so that social enterprise has an explicit aim to benefit a community. The power for decisions is not based on capital ownership and instead the definition sees that social enterprises have a participatory nature. The definition also includes limited profit distribution. (Defourny & Nyssens 2010) EMES definition on social enterprises has included in the definition the governance dimension: social enterprises have participatory or democratic governance (European Commission 2019) The governance structure can also have significance in endeavoring the social mission (Defourny & Nyssens 2014: 21)

Pestoff & Hulgård (2016) state that the role of governance is a key issue in the European discussion of social enterprise. Governance issues have been more visible in European research tradition on social enterprises (Pestoff 2014). OECD (2004: 11) defines governance as relations between management, the board and other stakeholders. However, governance aspects and especially participatory governance aspects in social enterprises are not well explored on a practical level yet. The term governance is used in practice and in research in multiple ways.

Our aim in this case study is to understand how social enterprises in make sense of their governance and reflect their views with the current literature on governance in social enterprises. This paper contributes to the discussion on governance aspects of social enterprises by studying discourses in case companies in Finland, Estonia, Sweden and Latvia. Our approach is to study how social entrepreneurs view the governance of their enterprise, and particularly participatory or democratic aspects in them. The data used in this study are theme interviews of social entrepreneurs. The datasets are being analyzed with discourse analysis. The data suggests that the term governance is viewed from multiple discourses and participatory aspects in governance has multiple meanings in different levels.

As an implication of our study, we suggest social entrepreneurs be aware of their strategic choices how to facilitate participatory decision-making processes and develop innovative practices and tools that support relevant information sharing and purpose-oriented governing.

2 APPROACHES TO GOVERNANCE AND INCLUSIVE ASPECTS OF GOVERNANCE

Social entrepreneurship and social enterprise are given different meanings in different contexts and different scientific discussions (Defourny & Nyssens 2010). Pestoff (2014) refers to Borzaga & Defourny (2001), Nyssens (2006) and Defourny & Nyssens (2014) noting that European perspective to social enterprise is to view it as an organizational unit or enterprise. Cooperatives, mutuals and associations have been influential in the development of European socio economic landscape - and still are.(Defourny & Nyssens 2006; Pestoff 2014) Pestoff (2014) comments that in the United States research has viewed social entrepreneurship from the perspective of market based approaches to social issues. In that research orientation the focus is more on entrepreneurship than on enterprise. (Pestoff 2014)

2.1 Governance gets a new meaning in the context of social enterprises

Our study adopts the definition of EMES - European Research Network for social enterprises. This research orientation has most focus on governance related issues of social enterprises. Inclusive, democratic or participatory governance models are social elements which can be unique in social enterprises compared to purely commercially oriented enterprises. EMES European Research Network definition sees that a social enterprise can be understood with three dimensions: social, entrepreneurial and governance. A social enterprise has a primary social mission, entrepreneurial activity in the market and participatory and democratic governance model. (Defourny & Nyssens 2010)

OECD (2004, 11) defines governance as relations between management, its board and other stakeholders". Among others Hsieh (2006) has noted that overall, in studies on governance the focus has been on large multinational companies.

Wittelooostuijn & de Jong (2007) view that democratic governance is based on principles of shared residual claims by all members, democratic decision-making rules and supportive organizational structure. In other words, in democratic organization profits are equally distributed across all employees, including manager-employees and owners based on co-determined allocation rules. Organization involves all employees directly or indirectly in operational and strategic decision-making processes. Supportive organization structure ensures that democracy is built in the organization's DNA with supportive formal procedures, rules and structures that protect the voice and the rights of managers, owners and employees. (Wittelooostuijn & de Jong 2007)

Colenbrander et al. (2017) studied governance in work-integration social enterprise in the Netherlands and adopted the definition of Travaglini et al. (2009, 6, cited by Colenbrander et al. 2017) for corporate governance, defining it as the division of powers within a company, comprising elements of management and control. Colenbrander et al. (2017: 545) note that corporate governance is framed by jurisdiction, they shape the legal personality, the limited

liability of owners and managers, shared ownership by investors of capital, delegated management under a board structure and transferable shares.

Such social enterprises that are limited companies may aim to solve the challenge of protecting the interests of stakeholders and to be able to create democratic procedures that the legal organizational form does not facilitate. It is commonly known that company laws and corporate governance codes highlight the role of shareholders (see Charreaux & Desbrieres 2001). From the perspective of democratic principles, this has a risk for concentration of power only to managers and shareholders (Witteloostuijn & de Jong 2007). Colenblander et al. (2017) comment that protecting the interests of non-controlling or minority shareholders or stakeholders has been an issue looking for a resolution.

Mason et al. (2007) outline that there have been outlined three main theories on corporate governance by Parkinson (2003). One of them views organization as property, second as nexus-of-contracts and third as a social institution (Parkinson 2003, cited by Mason et al. 2007) Viewing organization as property or as a base for contracts focuses in the interests of shareholders, who have role as providers of capital, financial risk. Managers have a role as agents who protect the interests of shareholders. (Mason et al. 2007) Governance can be also viewed from the perspective of social institutions. These organizations are not private companies but non-profit, public organizations or some social enterprises. Social institutions perspective points out engaging such stakeholders into governance who are affected by the activities of an organization (Mason et al. 2007). Research on stakeholder governance aims to identify systems that support efficient governing of stakeholder interests. Mason et al. (2007) emphasize the meaning of such management and measurement practices that support organizational communication and decision-making, engaging stakeholders systematically, and demonstrating accountability by monitoring and professionalization.

Overall, participatory, or democratic governance models are yet an overlooked area in research. Pestoff (2014) points out that the participatory governance dimension in social enterprises should be studied more carefully. Alexander & Weiner (1998, cited by Doherty et al. 2009) view that governance involves leadership of the board and management of different interests. Building on their definition, Doherty et al. (2009) emphasize that social enterprises aim to integrate these interests into their strategic process. Doherty et al. (2009) propose a distinct definition of governance for social enterprises. Doherty et al. (2009: 232) view governance in social enterprises to be “strategic and operational board-level leadership, enabling service users, managers, trustees and other defined stakeholders to create and maximize social benefit.”

2.2 Participatory governance is at the heart of social enterprises

EMES approach to social enterprises describes three aspects in the *governance* of a social enterprise. Firstly, social enterprises are established on a voluntary basis and they are independently governed. The members are free to have voice and exit. The enterprise may receive support from public or private sources but still fits to this definition, governing a social enterprise must be clearly independent anyway. This definition sees that social enterprises have a participatory nature. The people who are affected by the activity or the stakeholders are engaged in the governance, or possibly they may have a role as owners also. (Defourny & Nyssens 2010) Finally, the EMES criteria views that social enterprises have a democratic governance. As co-operatives are a form of democratic companies, and co-operatives often operate as social enterprises, Defourny & Nyssens (2010) refer to co-operatives and their “one member and one vote”-principle.

Defourny & Nyssens (2012, 21) view the governance structure “*as the set of organisational devices that ensure the pursuit of the organisation’s mission*”. They suggest that governance in social enterprises can be analyzed by the following dimensions: autonomy of governance bodies, participative dynamics, limitation of shareholder rights and constraints in profit distribution. (Defourny & Nyssens 2012: 21-23)

EMES views of corporate governance have had influences from co-operative tradition (Defourny & Nyssens 2012). Furthermore, in cooperatives governance has special characteristics that are essential when considering democratic governance models of socially rooted enterprises. Co-operative movement historically is based on noble values and principles that have shown to be able to develop social justice and wealth in such communities who have used cooperatives as socio economic tools. ICA (1995) has declared a statement on co-operative identity, where the traditional co-operative principles are collected. In the statement co-operation is defined as an “*autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.*” One of the principles is democratic member control: “*Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are organised in a democratic manner.* (ICA 1995) The owners, customers, managers or employees can have a dual role as owners and their operational role. Members democratically control and contribute to the capital of their co-operative. (ICA 1995)

How can collective dynamics be managed and led in social enterprises? Nyssens & Defourny (2012) comment that EMES approach describes an ideal-typical governance model of social enterprise where one aspect is participatory dynamics. Practically this means that stakeholders have a clear role in governance or are involved in it. Nyssens & Defourny (2012: 22) refer to Nicholls (2006) and note that also in collective dynamics there may be a strong leadership - by one leader or a team.

While inclusive governance has clear advantages it also can have challenges. Borgaza & Defourny (2001) view that social enterprises have high governance costs, and they may suffer from situations where ownership lacks clarity, and owners are not well defined. Borgaza & Defourny (2001) view inclusive governance as double-edged sword, while it has ability to engage various categories of stakeholders such as the clients of the social enterprise, volunteers or local communities into the decision making processes or even production, the conflicting interests may also hold up a social enterprise from efficient and quick actions when needed. (Borgaza & Defourny 2001)

3 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS UNVEILS MEANING SYSTEMS

This qualitative case study focuses on language and speaking. We think that phenomena related to governance are complex and aim to understand the many perspectives of social entrepreneurs regarding governance. The case study as a research strategy is able to study the multifaceted phenomena and their context. (Yin 2009: 4.) Governance on a practical level is a contextual phenomenon.

The datasets were collected by interviews from ten social entrepreneurs, two to three from each country, Finland, Estonia, Sweden and Latvia. The interviews were semi-structured

theme interviews. In this qualitative research, the dataset plays an essential role. The organizations interviewed represent different governance models and company forms, others are team-based small social enterprises while others are large organizations. The common factor is that each organization identifies itself as a social enterprise, has a social purpose and operates entrepreneurially in the market and views their company as an independent company with democratic or participatory governance model. We study the speech of social entrepreneurs and focus on their sensemaking on their governance model: how they see the dynamics and the social coordination of their governance model, the roles and the boundaries in it.

The philosophy in this study is social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann 1994), we view that governance is a socially constructed phenomenon. This fits well with the analysis method, discourse analysis. In this study we have not had any hypothesis. Our analysis is inductive - we analyze the empirical datasets and create our interpretations into categories. From our point of view theories offer perspectives but are not at least yet able to explain governing in social enterprises fully, on the contrary theories have very little explanation power on diversity of governance views in social enterprises. Our aim is to understand how our informants, social entrepreneurs experience their governance. However, these ten datasets are limited, they are one-hour interviews which provide one situational and subjective discussion on the theme, not the exhaustive picture of the governance, which is a changing, contextual, multi-layered in practice. However, these stories provide examples of how phenomena are being constructed in different discourses.

Discourses can be defined in many ways. We define discourses as established and regular meaning systems which are produced and reproduced in social practices (Suoninen 1999, 21) Our focus is on *how* these discourses are being produced in speech, how and what kind of issues related to governance are being described. The discourses are always contextual, and the study should take context into consideration (Dijk 1997). In this study by context we mean the organizational conditions: the social system, legal form, ownership structure and the country and its legal system. Governance practices are being constructed in discourses (Mayar 2015, 756). The governance is constructed both in macro-level discourses and in micro-interaction discourses, and these different personal, interpersonal and societal levels have interrelations. (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000). In this study we gain information from speech, which mainly may refer to micro-interactions, but can also refer to macro-level practices that influence the governance of social enterprise.

This study examines language and assumes that language is partly autonomous – meanings are constructed in interaction situations and are multifunctional, they do not as such mirror the reality. On the other hand, discourses also way to construct meanings and pave the way for other than linguistic actions. (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000)

The dataset
A. Middle sized limited liability company in Finland
B. Small limited liability company, Finland
C. Middle-sized limited liability company, Finland
D. Small limited liability company, Estonia
E. Association, Estonia
F. Small limited liability company, Latvia
G. Small limited liability company, Latvia
H. Small limited liability company, Latvia
I. Large limited liability company, Sweden
J. Middle-sized co-operative, Sweden

Table 1. Interviewed social entrepreneurs and the legal forms of their social enterprises

4 THE INTERPRETATIVE RESULTS

4.1 Three discourses of governance

We analyzed the ten interviews with discourse analysis and interpreted three different categories in accordance how and what contents about governance was spoken. These discourses are meaning systems and they can also overlap with each other.

Firstly, we interpret discourses explaining the relation of governance and social mission. Secondly, we interpret the discourse on how ownership is viewed. In the third discourse, discourse about stakeholders, we interpret who are the stakeholders and how stakeholder relations are viewed.

4.2 Discourses on governing the social mission

How do interviewees describe the connection of governance and social mission? In some social enterprises the participatory governance is viewed more profoundly than in others. Some social entrepreneurs view that the social mission is separated from their governing, and some social entrepreneurs see that their governance model supports and is part of their social mission. When the speaker is the founder, and the founder or founders are active in managing the firm, then the combination of social mission and business is solid. Also, the nature of business model, the relation of social mission and business activities has effect. In

addition, communicative, participatory processes can also be integral part of construction the social target itself.

Interviewees also discuss how they view the relation of social mission and business. Whereas in other social enterprises social mission and financial activities are inseparable, as we interpret in this discourse: *“We have stated in our social mission and are engaged to pursue it in the long run. The aim in our company is not profit maximalization...this firm serves its purpose.”* (C)

There can be different variations on relation of social mission and business. The way of seeing them can also change during times in some companies, so that there are many levels of seeing the relation social mission and business. One of our interviewees speak that social objectives and business mission were strictly separated earlier and represented the thoughts of a current leader. New leader integrated social mission and business activities. Interviewee highlights the importance of business area corresponding the social area and overall philosophy.

“We are mainly a social organization; the financial part only coexists. We do not see a risk in managing hybridity of both fields.” (G) Interviewee expresses that both social and financial part have to be governed. In governing and decision-making processes, the social mission and financial activities can be seen in many ways: in a continuum they can be considered as one system or as separate issues to be governed.

Spoken discourses reveal how leaders have power in leading the values of social enterprise. Especially when social enterprise grows and gets more employees, defining the philosophy of the social enterprise, including values and mission, is viewed to require a considerable communication work. Also being able to anticipate the future as a collective unit requires competences.

4.3 Discourses on legal form, ownership, and decision-making

The influence of the legal company or organization form is there, when they describe the governing and relations are organized. The interviewed social entrepreneurs came from limited companies, non-profit associations and co-operatives.

The ownership structure had a clear connection in discourses about governing and it was given significance. Some social enterprises were owned by one person, some by a team and some had more complex ownership structures. We interpret that legality and ownership are influential discourses in governing. However, in the discourses we interpret that owners have power to create sense of shared ownership. Argument of democracy sounds more convincing when it is seen as process, a goal that has takes efforts.

“We want to develop our firm towards a more democratic direction...people (employees) invest themselves here, their work. We make decisions as a team.” (C)

Also, a wider macro environment influences the spoken discourses of social entrepreneurs. The legal form constructs both identity and may also effect on practices for reporting. Latvia is one country with recently adopted law governing social enterprises. The law provides for general limited liability company legal status but has several specific conditions. It requires social enterprises to establish consulting stakeholder groups and submit annual social and financial reports to the Ministry of Welfare.

How ownership is also divided has an impact on governance. The way of speaking is very different in a social enterprise where there is just one owner who has multiple operative roles, too: *“At the moment I am a manager, owner, cleaner and supervisor”* (Interviewee C)

In some enterprises the management team members are also owners. The owners have a different position than managers, and these dynamics are also expressed by language. Some social enterprises highlight informality in their communication between their management team and the board.

It is in the hands of formal power keepers how to enable informal interactions, if it is not built in the structure and processes very strongly. How do the interviewees make sense of inclusiveness related to decision-making? Who is included in the decision-making processes and how? In discourses, shareholders or owners, or in co-operative owner-members, have highest decision-making power, who elect the board, and in many cases board members and management team members are the same. In micro enterprises there can be just one person, who is a shareholder, director and officer. In our data, associations may have most multilevel governance systems, with management team and board members and official roles from stakeholders included in the governance.

Some of the interviewees talk *“we make decisions..interacting with owners and management team”* (Interviewee B) where as in one of the cases a lonely owner views that *“I have partners.. We have a small team and we discuss most of the decisions together”* (Interviewee D). The team that the interviewee D refers to consists of hired employees.

4.4 Discourses on stakeholder relations

One way of making sense of the governance model is looking at it from the perspective of stakeholders. Each social enterprise has its own approach to stakeholders. Some interviewees make sense of participatory governance highlighting the perspective of employees, and communication culture or communication practices in the social enterprise. There are different power distances when interviewees talk about stakeholder groups, or individuals. We interpret that the interaction is frequent, and collaboration is in a mature level, when interviewees describe their stakeholders and them as *“we together”*. They also make justifications for collaboration: *“We have to be able to develop together.”*

How is the voice of stakeholders and participatory practices shown in ways of speaking? The interaction methods and formality and informality vary. How do discourses unveil how social enterprises engage their stakeholders in governing? Interviewees connect micro-interactions and quality of interactions in participatory governance.

“Does your company's governance model have some participatory or democratic elements, what kinds of?”

“Yes, eat and drink together. Less bureaucracy and more fun and harmony together. I see when people are happy or when they are not happy. Everyday people from our company want to work here. I have more than 15 CVs and so on in my table...” (Interviewee H)

What kind of involvement roles are expressed? Participatory governance needs structured processes. There are different means for this. There are many ways to involve stakeholders in governance, they can for example have active roles in the board or advisory roles.

“We have a consulting group consisting of our main stakeholders – persons with disabilities. We also consult with our staff members in our decisions.” (Interviewee F)

Local communities, cities or regions are often seen as a stakeholder to social enterprise, also. They can have many roles, also as clients: “..Such stakeholders as municipalities are our clients – they buy our products and services.” (Interviewee G)



Figure 1. The interpreted discourses related to governance in case social enterprises.

5 DISCUSSION

In this case study we aimed to understand how social entrepreneurs make sense of their governance and inclusive aspects in governing. We had two to three theme interviews in each country, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, and Sweden, and analyzed the datasets with discourse analysis. Saxena & Jagota (2015: 55) have noted that in micro and small enterprises the governance plays a critical success factor. Governance deserves attention in all sizes of enterprises. Our dataset consisted of interviews from a wide variety of different sized social enterprises in different industries and different target groups. We aim to understand governance in their case, our aim is not to create generalizations.

Language is one of the essential means to construct reality and institutions (Berger & Luckmann 1994). We view discourses as action, and similarly discourses reflect different expressed realities (Pietikäinen & Mäntylä 2009). In this chapter we critically evaluate our research process and interpreted results, reflect our analysis with the literature that we reviewed and discuss the interpreted results assuming they also reflect some the real-life governance challenges, and propose future research directions.

We interpreted several different ways of speaking about governing. We viewed governance as a social construct, that is constantly produced and reproduced and framed in both micro-

interactions such as situational discussions and every day or annual practices and processes, and macro-level, such as laws, regulations and national or international definitions (Berger & Luckmann 1994) In micro enterprises the discourses are very different than in bigger organizations. On the other hand, Witteloostuijn & de Jong (2007) comment that principles of corporate democracy are not depending on size nor the activity, competitive or institutional context, but are universal principles.

One regular meaning system related to governance that we interpreted was the speech on social mission and its variations in relation to business activities. In the sense of governance, there are many ways to speak about the meaning of social mission and business. Many researchers have noted that social enterprises in their governing face a challenge balancing their social mission and business (Pache & Santos 2013; Ebrahim et al. 2014; Doherty et al. 2019) On the other hand, the social mission can be inseparable from business, and social enterprise may view them as one system. They can also connect and engage relevant stakeholders such as clients in a way that is a unique factor - could be also a competitive advantage. Social mission is something that needs leading side by side or integrated into business activities. We interpret that leadership here can be shared or led by one person or a team.

When governance structure is seen as Nyssens & Defourny (2012) define it: "as the set of organisational devices that ensure the pursuit of the organisation's mission" this leads to a very different perspective as traditional literature on corporate governance. Davis (2001) emphasizes that co-operative management should clearly state their purpose. The social enterprises we interviewed had many legal forms, one of the interviewees was co-managing a co-operative. However, this statement is beneficial in all social enterprises. It may support the choices made in creating participatory processes too. Davis (2001) views that governance stands for preserving the integrity of the enterprise and ensures that the enterprise is able to fulfill its purpose. The definition by Defourny & Nysses (2012) highlights the role of social mission in governing.

There are many approaches to how meaning of participatory or democratic processes are viewed in a social enterprise. Davis (2001, 30) comments that "issues of democracy are issues of process; they are secondary issues concerned with means". Davis (2001) points out that the processes should support the purpose. We propose that social enterprises and their social mission benefit from clear strategic choices in how participatory or democratic processes are perceived and implemented in an enterprise. Also, Witteloostuijn & De Jong (2007) note that having a democratic organization does not mean that it lacks hierarchy.

In our interpretation one powerful discourse when talking about governing is related to ownership. This is in line with the other studies on governance in general, ownership is seen to define relationships among stakeholders. (Kroll et al. 1997) However we suggest that in addition to legal ownership, in social enterprises the concept of "psychological ownership" in individual and collective level (Pierce et al. 2001, Pierce & Jussila 2010) may unveil understanding on phenomena related to ownership experiences of governing parties, insiders and those who are aimed to include from outsider positions.

Psychological ownership theory suggest that ownership is also a cognitive-affective state, an experience that individuals and groups develop towards immaterial and material targets. The targets are such that they invest oneself, use time and energy, values, and identity. (Pierce et al. 2001; Pierce & Jussila 2010, 2011) We suggest that in addition to legal ownership, ownership experiences are relevant phenomena in governing. Not only legal ownership determines ownership behavior, but also psychological ownership may be a powerful motivational force determining governance dynamics. Overall, the communication procedures seem to be important. In line with previous literature, the discourses that we

interpreted highlight that in addition to formal procedures and structures, informal communication procedures also play an essential role.

Thirdly we interpreted the discourse entailing ways of speaking about the stakeholders and their involvement. Relations to stakeholders are not static. Discourses build roles, identities, and relations. In speech these identities are strategically managed (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). The discourse on stakeholders is interrelated and overlapping with previous discourses and includes moral statements about the social mission.

We have only grasped the surface of the phenomena related to the governance of social enterprises. We also see the need to gain more understanding the strategic choices and creativity that social entrepreneurs experience when they plan and conduct participatory governing methods. There are influential pioneer examples such as democratic principles and values of co-operatives.

As Ebrahim et al. (2019) observe, social enterprises offer a rich arena for examining many questions of governance. We suggest that governance in social enterprises should be studied with multiple different methods to gain new understanding of perceptions and processes related to participatory governing. In different sizes of social enterprises there may be different practices and tools in creating accessibility to democratic structures, information sharing and efficient and accountable decision-making processes. How can social enterprises create supportive formal and informal procedures to facilitate collective participation? How can relevant groups of stakeholders be well informed to be able to make decisions and how to support the sense of shared goals as well? The social missions may evolve over time. Studying these from the socio-psychological perspectives also could provide insights about the challenges and their alternative solutions.

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