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Understanding and explaining strategic collective action in political groups

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New ideals of political participation

- Increased interest for alternative forms of influencing policy making processes
 - EU and "participatory democracy"; Lisbon treaty contains articles about 'Citizen's initiatives'; EU Parliament starts 'Citizens Agora'; focus on open consultation processes with NGOs
- Similar trends on the national level
 - "Compacts", "Agreements", "Framework for cooperation", "Cooperation memorandum" or "Charte des engagements réciproques"
 - England (1998), Italy (1999), Scotland (1998/2003), Ireland (2000), Croatia (2000), Denmark (2001), France (2001), Estonia (2002), Latvia (2005), Lithuania (2007), and Slovenia (2007)
- Role model is England and its Compact (1998)



Civil dialogue in a Swedish context

- On social welfare 2008-2009
- On integration 2009-2010
 - Three parties: the government, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL) and the third sector.
 - Resulted in written agreements approved by representatives for the third sector, by SKL and by the Swedish government.
 - The documents have been put online and are available for all “concerned” civil society organisations to take part of and eventually sign



Two civil dialogues compared

	Civil dialogue on social welfare	Civil dialogue on integration
Starting point	September 2007	January 2009
Government's aim	Strengthen the third sectors' role as critical voice and increase the number of service producing civil society organisations	Eliminate the obstacles for civil society organisations' work in the field of integration
Participant organisations	Mostly national umbrella organisations	National and local organisations
Agreement ready	October 2008	May 2010
Initial framing	A new start for the "Swedish model"	An implementation of the first civil dialogue
Signed by	53 civil society organisations	35 civil society organisations
Follow-up process	Common working group	Steering group



Aim and research questions

The aim of this paper is to understand and explain the participation of civil society organisations in the Swedish civil dialogue process between state and third sector from the point of view of their experience of interaction, opportunities and threats. The following research questions will be addressed:

- How do we explain the participation of civil society organisations and their strategies?
- How to understand the context of the participation (i.e. power constellation, asymmetries in resources and experience, institutional setting etc.) and what influence does it have on the process?
- What influence does the civil dialogue process have on the political context of Swedish civil society organisations?



Two theoretical perspectives

	POS	SAF
Central Concept	Political Context	Strategic Action Field
Level of analysis	From Macro- to Meso-level	Meso-level
Focus of the model	Actor in context	Interaction in context
Actor(s) at the centre of the model	Mobilising social movement	All actors (individual and collective)
Strategy of the actors determined by	Opportunities (+ threats)	Opportunities, threats and social skills
Actors' positions	Protagonists Antagonists Bystanders	Incumbents Challengers Governance Units
Levels of analysis	Interactional context Configuration of actors (including institutional actors) Structures	SAF Proximate SAFs Distant Safs
Direction of explanation	Top-down: Structure-Context-Actor	Top-down and bottom-up All directions as SAFs are interdependent



Actors or interaction?

- The civil dialogue is characterised by a tension between cooperation and competition between representatives of civil society organisations
- POS focuses on specific social movement (organisations)
- SAF focuses on interaction between actors in the field
 - Such shift, from actor to interaction, gives the possibility to grasp the more complex relation among the participating actors



Which positions?

- There is no consensus among the civil society organisations on the positions upheld by other actors
 - Some CSO might interpret the government while other stronger CSOs as the antagonist (POS)
 - Some CSO might see the government as "governance units" and stronger CSOs as "incumbents" while other CSO might see the government as "incumbents". All CSOs see themselves as "challengers (SAF)



Which strategies?

- The CSOs experience the dialogue process as an opportunity to affect the relation between public sector and third sector (POS & SAF)
- The CSOs perceive as threats to be controlled by the government or by other stronger civil society organisations but also that the dialogue will trigger competition among civil society organisations (POS & SAF)
- The ability to create a sense of struggle and convince others of being on the same side as “challengers” against certain incumbents is the most important social skill (SAF)



The civil dialogue in context

- The POS approach has a stronger focus on the (political) context
 - It can help highlighting how the civil dialogue is a product of a change in the Swedish political context
 - It can offer tools to assess whether the agreement is a possible new political opportunity structure for Swedish CSOs
- The interactional character of the SAF approach makes it difficult to take the broader political context in consideration. Proximate and distant SAFs broadens however the scope and enables more complex analysis.



Political participation in the civil dialogue

- CSOs are able to take control over the process to be able to speak with one voice
- CSOs are able to formulate a common, shared position separating their aims from the government's framing of the dialogue
- Some CSOs experience the dialogue as undemocratic as they are drawn towards a consensus against the government's positions (cooptation by stronger CSOs)
- Other CSOs find the framing of the dialogue by the government as an impediment to real influence (cooptation by government)



SAF and POS

- The SAF approach enables a more interactional analysis
 - Who interacts with whom in the dialogue?
 - Which positions are upheld by the actors?
 - Which other SAFs influence the dialogue?
- The POS approach enables a more contextualized analysis
 - Is the civil dialogue a new POS for Swedish CSOs?
 - Who are the antagonists and the bystanders?
 - How does the political context influence the dialogue?





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