The intricacies of meta-organizations

EGOS 2019 subtheme

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In the contemporary world, there is not only an ever-increasing number of organizations that organize individuals, but these organizations in turn organize themselves into an increasing number of meta-organizations - formal organizations in which members are other formal organizations. In turn, these meta-organizations often form meta-meta-organizations: organizations with meta-organizations as their members. Meta-organizations constitute a salient phenomenon in contemporary society. They coordinate activities across organizational borders, they form organizational identities and they are active in influencing policy decisions of all sorts. Much of global governance takes place through meta-organizations.

Meta-organizations typically have the form of an association while the members may be any type of organization: firms, states, civil society associations. The members are autonomous organizations in the sense that the meta-organization cannot force them to join or stay. Examples of meta-organizations include industry associations, trade unions, standards organizations or sports associations but also cooperatives and multi-partner alliances. There are more than 10 000 international meta-organizations. All international government organizations and most international non-governmental organizations are meta-organizations. Large individual-based organizations such as corporations and states typically belong to many meta-organizations.

Traditionally, organization scholars have been mainly interested in organizations with individuals as their members. Systematic research about meta-organizing has only just begun. One important theme has been how meta-organizations differ from individual-based organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008). There is less systematic knowledge about how and why various meta-organizations differ from one another or how they relate to their environments. As meta-organizations are studied in a variety of fields, Berkowitz and Bor (2017)

recently called for bringing these multi-disciplinary insights on meta-organizations together in order to strengthen the basis for further studies.

In this sub-theme, we aim to bring together new insights on meta-organizations to create and strengthen the basis for theorizing this kind of organization. We welcome both theoretical and empirical studies. For inspiration, we provide examples of key topics below. Papers on other topics are also welcome as long as they explicitly contribute to our understanding of meta-organizations.

- *The creation of meta-organizations.* When and why do organizations choose to cooperate in the form of a meta-organization? What are the implications when meta-organizations arise from existing networks of organizations compared to situations when they draw member organizations together that were previously unconnected? What are the reasons for meta-organizations to organize into meta-meta-organizations, and how does this link to the reasons for member organizations to join meta-organizations?

- *The peculiarities of meta-organizations*. How do meta-organizations differ from individual-based organizations and from networks of organizations? What are the challenges for meta-organizations and how are they met? What characterizes behaviour in meta-organizations, by member organizations or by individuals working for meta-organizations? Do meta-organizations differ from other organizations in their relations to their environment.

- *Different types of meta-organizations.* How do meta-organizations vary? Are meta-organizations different due to differences in membership, goals, constitution or due to other factors? How is a landscape of meta-organizations in a particular field formed, how is actual or potential competition among meta-organizations handled, and how does the landscape influence the way in which meta-organizations work?

- *Change and dynamics of meta-organizations.* How do meta-organizations change? What are the consequences of changes in membership or in the environment? What is the role

of member-overlap across meta-organizations in the take-up of innovation or developments in a field? Are there common paths for meta-organizational development? When, how and why do meta-organizations lose relevance or cease to exist.

- *Power of, power over and power to*. What are the sources of power meta-organizations draw on toward their environments or toward their own members? What creates the differences between weak and strong meta-organizations? Why do some meta-organizations grow or become salient for their members and their environments while others remain weak and insignificant? What are the sources for and forms for power struggle between meta-organizations and their members?

- *The complexity of meta-organizations for individuals*. How do individuals deal with the variety of roles (as employees, as representatives, and as boundary spanners) and possible role conflict within a meta-organizational context? How do individuals deal with the different interests they may need to reconcile (those of their member organization, those of the meta-organization, and those of their own)?

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