Chapter 9

The INTERNORM Project: Bridging Two Worlds of Expert- and Lay-Knowledge in Standardization

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a pilot project to reinforce participatory practices in standardization. The INTERNORM project creates an interactive knowledge center based on the sharing of academic skills and experiences accumulated by the civil society, especially consumer associations, environmental associations and trade unions to strengthen the participatory process of standardization. The first objective of the project is action-oriented: INTERNORM provides a common knowledge pool supporting the participation of civil society actors to international standard-setting activities by bringing them together with academic experts in working groups and providing logistic and financial support to their participation in meetings of national and international technical committees. The second objective is analytical: the standardization action provides a research field for a better understanding of the participatory dynamics underpinning international standardization. This paper presents three incentives that explain civil society (non-)involvement in standardization that overcome conventional resource-based hypotheses: an operational incentive related to the use of standards in the selective goods provided by associations to their membership; a thematic incentive provided by the setting of priorities by strategic committees created in some standardization organization; and a rhetorical incentive related to the discursive resource that civil society concerns offers to the different stakeholders.

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INTRODUCTION

Standardization is part of the infrastructure of globalization providing cross-border nongovernmental coordination mechanisms, which formally respect state sovereignty. Various studies in economics (Blind, 2004), in law (Schepel, 2005) in organizational science (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000), and international relations have examined how voluntary and consensual standards have become crucial tools in the organization of global markets (Graz, 2004, 2006; Tamm-Hallström, 2004; Krewer, 2005).

As the increased usage of standards affects a wide range of issues, such as environmental management, psychological tests, measures of the quality of medical services, and nanotechnologies, the quantitative and qualitative expansion of international standardization has reinforced enduring questions on the legitimacy of standards (Werle & Iversen, 2006, p. 20; Ruwet, 2009, pp. 12-13). In other words, who defines standard matters for the recognition of their greater use in society at large. In that respect, the participation of all stakeholders, including the weakest one (unions, NGO, consumers’ associations) is crucial (Raines, 2003; Boström, 2006). Given the recognized role of consumers’ associations, unions and environmental associations to express legitimate objectives, the question of their representation becomes central. Surprisingly, civil society participation in international standardization received little attention from scholars dedicated to the study of standardization (Wilcock & Colina, 2007, p. 3). Despite this lack of specific attention, studies on the world of standardization never fail to stress the under-representation of civil society actors, such as consumers’ associations, environmental protection organizations, unions, and NGOs.

This paper presents a pilot project called INTERNORM which was recently successfully submitted to the University of Lausanne in order to engage at both analytical and practical level the under-representation of civil society. INTERNORM aims to create an interactive knowledge center based on the sharing of academic skills and the experiences accumulated by the civil society, especially consumer associations, environmental associations and trade unions to strengthen the participatory process of standardization.

The INTERNORM project has a twofold objective. The first is action-oriented. At this level, INTERNORM is aimed at bridging the actors of the civil society and academics in order to sustain civil society participation in international standard-setting activities by the common pooling of the specific knowledge of these actors. Moreover the project should provide financial support to civil society actors for their participation in committees - most notably for the membership fees allowing access to national standardization bodies and for traveling and accommodation costs. The second objective of the project is an analytical one. The standardization action initiated through INTERNORM will provide a useful research field for a better understanding of the political, social and economic implications of standardization for society by studying the role of consumer associations, trade unions and environmental associations in the setting of the technical specifications governing globalization. Adopting a more long-term perspective on the links between standardization and civil society associations, we identify three incentives which explain the dynamic of their involvement. An operational incentive, related to the use of standards in the product and services provided by these associations to their members. A thematic incentive, provided by the setting of priorities by strategic committees created in some standardization organization. And a rhetorical incentive, related to the discursive resource that civil society concerns offers to stakeholders. These three incentives will be illustrated using the case of the consumers association as a precursory civil society associations (Hilton, 2008, p. 215).

In the next section, we present the rationale, the modus operandi and the different partners.
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