Chapter 8

Where Are You? Consumers’ Associations in Standardization: A Case Study on Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of international standardization has reinforced enduring questions on the legitimacy of standards. In that respect, the participation of all stakeholders, including the weakest ones (unions, NGO, consumers’ associations) is crucial. Given the recognized role of consumers’ associations to express legitimate objectives, the question of their representation becomes central. In order to get a deeper understanding of their participation, this article explores the evolution of their representation within the Swiss national mirror committees of international standardization between 1987 and 2007. It probes the extent to which their participation is determined by the distinctiveness of issues supposedly related to consumers’ concerns and by their own use of standards. The empirical findings of our study indicate an underrepresentation of consumers’ associations and confirm the topical specificity of their implication in standardization processes. Finally, we found evidence that the use of standards in an association’s activities supports and encourages its participation in standardization committees.

INTRODUCTION

Standardization is part of the infrastructure of globalization providing cross-border nongovernmental coordination mechanisms, which formally respect state sovereignty. Various studies in organizational science and international relations have examined how voluntary and consensual standards have become crucial tools in the organization of global markets (Graz, 2004; 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. In other words, who defines standard matters for the recognition of their greater use in society at large? As Ulrich Bamberg, from the German KAN (Workplace Health and Safety and Standardization Commission) emphasizes, “Standardization is characterized by a paradox of ‘large minorities.’ The two biggest groups concerned (370 million consumers, including 165 million salaried employees, in the EU) are in the minority on standardization committees … if represented at all” (Bamberg, 2004, p. 13). Given the recognized role of these actors, especially consumers’ associations, to express legitimate objectives in matters of health, safety or environmental protection within the standardization process, the question of their representation, as well as the mechanisms governing their involvement within these arenas, becomes central (Fabisch, 2003; Biswell, 2004; Dawar, 2006).

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, despite their recognized contribution to the process of legitimizing standards. Some case studies in distinct specific international committees have provided evidence of their under-representation (Morikawa & Morrisson, 2004). Several scholars have highlighted that including the weakest stakeholders remains important for the perception of legitimacy in decision-making procedures that respect public interest concerns (Raines, 2003; Fabisch, 2003; Dawar, 2006). Standardization studies conventionally explain the under-representation of civil society actors in international committees of standardization by lack of financial, cognitive and temporal resources (Egan, 1998; Schmidt & Werle, 1998; Tamm-Hallström, 2004). From a more sociological perspective, consumers’ concerns in standardization are understood as a rhetorical resource under the control of standard-setters (Cochoy, 2000; yet, by identifying standardization processes as topical issues related to consumers’ concerns, such a rhetorical resource may in turn reinforce consumers’ effective participation (Cochoy, 2000).

While studies draw attention to the resource that consumers’ participation brings to standardization organization in terms of legitimacy, they largely ignore the resource that standards can in turn bring to consumers’ associations themselves, through the use of for instance comparative tests. Moreover, the study of their participation in an international committee only provides a one shot picture of their implication with no clue to its evolution in the course of time. Finally, financial, temporal and cognitive resources are determinant in explaining consumers’ under-representation, but these elements remain very broad and only partially take into account the dynamics governing the involvement (or not) of these actors in standardization work.

Thus, the following questions remain largely unexplored: does the evolution of consumer’s participation reflect the growing importance of standardization in society? To which extent is their participation related to the specificity of the topics standardized? To which extent does the inclusion of standards in the deliverables of consumers’ associations affect their participation in committees?

This article tries to answer these questions by exploring more systematically the evolution of consumers’ associations’ representation within national mirror committees of international standardization processes. It probes the extent to which their participation is determined by the distinctiveness of issues supposedly related to consumer’s concerns and by their own usage of standards.

Our contention is that a resource-based explanation of the under-representation of consumers’ associations should bring together the resource-consuming activity of standard-setting with the resource-providing activity of consumers’ associations. In other words, this article argues that the propensity to use standards in the services