Opening the black box: Adoption of innovations in voluntary organisations

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Abstract: Despite the huge attention paid to research into the adoption of technological innovations in government agencies and business firms, little attention has been paid to other types of organisations such as voluntary organisations (VOs). As a result, many things remain unknown: the patterns of uptake and adoption in VOs, the process of the transformation both of the organisations and the way they implement the innovation, and its implication. This paper attempts to address these problems. By presenting the case of Indonesian VOs, at a theoretical level this research is concerned with the diffusion of innovation and the effects on the practice of VOs and voluntary movements. These concerns are explored by examining two related empirical issues: (i) the links between innovation and the organisational performances, and (ii) the construction of innovation diffusion and impacts in organisations that define those links.

Keywords: adoption, technological innovations, voluntary organisations, non-for-profit, non-governmental

OUTLINE

Background and context

Research concerning organisations within voluntary sector has become more relevant today as such organisations play increasingly important roles in society. These roles are not limited to traditional activism, like mobilisation of aid and humanitarian relief, improvement of livelihood or protection of rights and promotion of democracy [1, 2], which has continuously characterised the dynamics of this sector vis-à-vis state in the modern world [3, 4, 5, 6]. Additionally, these organisations have also shaped, or at least influenced, the dynamics of the business sector. Such activity, for instance, drives consumers in ethical and fairer trading [7, 8], ethical investment, 'green' banking, provision of organic or healthier products, among others [9, 10], and demand more socially and environmentally responsible business practices such as in the instance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaign [11, 12].

Voluntary organisations (VOs) are important for business management, then, but their own management and innovation is very interesting in their own right. VOs have innovated in many ways because unless they innovate in order to build a sustainable base of supporters (e.g. beneficiaries, donors, partners networks, among others) they will not remain 'cutting edge' and relevant [6]. However, innovation in voluntary sectors seems to be under-studied compared to, for example, innovation in private or public sectors [13]. This topic has the potential to become of increasing interest given the current evolution of the sector and the performance of the organisations within it [14]. Markedly, networks of organisations in voluntary sector have promoted partnerships among different actors, both within and between economies [8, 12]. Undoubtedly, a more genuine global voluntary movement has now been provided with an excellent opportunity to advance its agenda. This has put more weight on the relevance and importance of innovation study in VOs.

Questions and approach

This paper explores questions centred around (i) to what extent, in what ways, and for what purposes have technological innovations been appropriated by VOs? (ii) what are the processes by which innovations are imported into and adopted by VOs? (iii) how do VOs adopt innovations, and how are they deployed strategically in the operations (and in an effort to further the aims) of the organisations? (iv) what are the implications, potentials and challenges ahead such appropriations? Using mainly the classical adoption framework [15] and assisted by adaptive structuration theory [16, 17, 18, 19] derived from Giddens' notion of structuration [20], the study makes its case by anchoring its empirical ground on how VOs innovate by adopting new media and information technologies, particularly the Internet in the Indonesian context. This context is taken deliberately as VOs in developing economies play more significant role in societal development, relatively compared to their counterparts in developed countries.

The empirical research took place in 2005-2006 and given the nature of the research it employed multi-method consisting of a country-scale survey involving 268 VOs, in-depth interview with 35 VOs, and a series of workshops in three provinces attended by 72 VOs in Indonesia. This research is exploratory in nature not only because it addresses complex research questions, but also because this complexity itself is a result of a paucity of research into adoption of technological innovation, particularly the Internet, in VOs. The combination of methods is applied here and is essential in systematically probing and understanding the multifaceted links between the adoption and implementation of innovation, the dynamics of VOs and social transformation it affects.

Results

The exploration carried out throughout this research shows that adoption of innovations and their use in VOs is never simple and straightforward. Rather it is multifaceted and

often raises uncertainties given that VOs by and large adopt and use technological innovations in many different ways compared to other types of organisation. But it is also this challenge that brings enormous opportunity for VOs once the technology is appropriated in strategic –and in the most case political—ways. Despite problems and difficulties, adoption of innovations in VOs often brings significant implications not only to the organisation's internal managerial performance but more importantly to the external aspects of their work, particularly the expansion of networks of voluntary movement which often span across the globe and implicate global business and state governance.

The adoption of technological innovations in VOs has its own story and explaining it is far from explaining a 'black box'. Consequently, it is also not anywhere near to the assumption of an 'automated' process, i.e. when the innovation 'is there', these organisations 'will just use it' no matter what. This study suggests that adoption and implementation of innovations in VOs, to some extent, follows a different trajectory than in other types of organisation. This is central to the analysis because research into adoption and use of technological innovation like the Internet in organisations has been mostly informed by evidence from organisations other than VOs [e.g. **21, 22, 23, 24, 25**] and thus has created a different analytical lens when analysing the interaction between the innovation and organisations.

With the distinction between 'evolutionary' and 'revolutionary' views of technological innovation [as discussed in **26**] taken into account, in the universe VOs, although the advent of many technological innovations is considered to be revolutionary in that it fundamentally empowers the role of voluntary sectors, the adoption of it in VOs seems to follow an evolutionary path. The study shows that the substitution effect of technological innovation might not be fully realised when availability and access becomes problems. Using new innovations, like the Internet in this case, does not mean replacing 'older' technologies or even direct interaction which is central to many VOs activities. Here using technology and adopting technological innovation is only secondary to physical interaction and engagement. In voluntary sector, new activism created by new technological innovations –like cyberactivism made possible by the advent of the Internet—can indeed be instrumental [as theorised by **27**], but the real social change takes place in the 'off-line' realm.

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