

'Certification of Volunteer Energy: Country and industry comparison of opportunities and restrictions of externally accredited volunteer organizations'

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Introduction

When it comes to certification procedures, one can find two main reasons for externally accredited standards in volunteer organizations: First of all, it represents a governing mechanism on a meta-societal level. Secondly, it can also work as a government instrument. In this paper we would like to concentrate on the general governance perspective of certifications of volunteer energy.

Many theories underlie the concept of certification as a governance tool.¹ On the following pages we try to outline some theoretical aspects of certification procedures by having a closer look at the governance mechanisms and drivers of these instruments in the volunteer world. In this context interesting questions arise: Comparing different countries and industries, how can the governance tool of certification be transferred to volunteer energy in a sustainable way? Which factors make certification of volunteer energy sustainable? And what are the advantages and disadvantages of institutionalizing certification processes in the nonprofit world? By sketching the theoretical background of certifications as governance mechanisms as well as of volunteer energy and giving an overview of the status quo in various industries and areas we try to

find a common basis on which further research can be build upon.

Certifications or Externally accredited standards

Context and theory behind it

The use and importance of quality improvement systems and certification processes have grown steadily over the last two decades, as organizations want to enlarge and secure their market position. In the for-profit-context we see ISO certification, total quality management (TQM) or just-in-time management (JIT) as quality- and reputation-improving tools concerning (process-) management in competitive profit-seeking markets. As the Triple P-spirit (People, Planet, Profit) becomes more and more important as well, even some other certification standards have been establishing well when it comes to corporate social responsibility (CSR) matters. In this context the SA8000, carried out by Social Accountability International, or the ecological certification of forest products, introduced by the Forest Stewardship Council, have to be mentioned. Most of these certification procedures are still voluntary, but in some industries or countries it becomes even mandatory to have an organization checked and

¹ A wide range of theories, like traditional management theories, sociological and governance theories, but also more specific principal-agent-theory, resource dependency theory, stakeholder approach and stewardship theory can be seen as the theoretical fundament of the governance role of certification procedures in nonprofit organizations.

audited by a third, objective and independent party. In Australia, for instance, all organizations who want to develop business relations with government agencies or big private companies have to be certified (Love, 2000).

More and more we can find certifications also in the nonprofit world. In the Netherlands the “CBF keurmerk” or in Austria the so called “Spendengütesiegel” are already well-known and publicly respected quality symbols for nonprofit organizations. Getting more specific, we examine in this article certification processes and externally accredited standards in volunteer organizations, dealing with the possibilities, chances and restrictions and industry- and country-related differences on certification of volunteer energy.

What are we actually talking about? In general, a certificate is a written document which explains that a product, process or person fulfils certain requirements and qualities, whereas a certification is a process in which an independent, skilful and trustful body analyses and investigates whether these requirements and qualities are fulfilled.

We can distinguish between public and private certifications, as one can find a lot of mandatory certification procedures in the public sector, like certification in the navigation or certification introduced by the government to ensure accordance with legal regulations (Van Erp, Peters, Verberk, 2004). In the latter case the government formulates targets and/or regulations, but the specific industry is free in finding ways to stick to the rules or in gaining these goals.² By contrast ISO 9000 is a fully private certification system. Industries or companies formulate their own rules and norms to which they want to adhere.

As already mentioned above, a certification represents the quality of a product, service or processes as well as experience and expertise of people. If a certification process is mandatory or voluntary is another characteristic which can distinguish from case to case. As we are talking about certifications, it is necessary to differentiate according to other comparable instruments (Smits and Van Bavel, 2004). A diploma for instance is a possible alternative. However, in contrast to a certifi-

cate, a diploma is the result of a one-time testing phase, whereas a certification implies re-verifying processes on a regular basis. To illustrate, an employee first needs to get many course certificates during his career before receiving a diploma. A plumber first needs to get many diplomas before his business may become certified. Volunteer organizations need to set up proper programs in order to get a certificate. The latter is the within the scope of this research

Another alternative to a certificate is a “seal of approval”, which represents the evidence of an inspection or a quality mark. In comparison to a certificate, the seal of approval is a brand put on a product, whereas the certification displays the documentation of the quality test. The third substitute could be standardization, which is defined as a process in which rules on a voluntary basis become the common denominator of all stakeholders involved. The outcomes of this rule-defining process are common norms and one way of making these norms effective are certifications. Last, but not least we see audits as alternative ways to certification procedures. An audit is an independent and systematic assay which aims to prove whether the quality and connected results are according to rules and regulations implemented. In this respect an audit can be part of a certification process.

The governance functions of certifications

As we have now characterized the certification process and have found distinctions to familiar instruments, it is important to point out various governance mechanisms of certifications. The efficiency of the governance process in nonprofit organizations can therefore be ensured by institutionalizing certification procedures. In the following section we try to line out different governance functions and drivers concerning certifications.

When we look at certification as a legal, regulative and guaranteeing (hard or soft) approach of authority, direction, and control, three issues are important. First, the direction of NPOs to become certified. This can be done by changing the organization through self-correction and learning (lerningfunction). Second,

² Concerning public certifications issued by the government, one can find four different forms of certifications: 1. acceptance - the certification as an instrument to provide acceptance to the market; 2. accreditation - similar function as the acceptance certification, but in combination with an oversight function of the government; 3. inspection - the certification as forming model in the governance process; 4. market regulation - certification as a non-legal regulation instrument.

how to control certification. This can be done by accountability and transparency. NPOs now need to explain what they do. This is the part that can be measured. The third issue is basically 'who is the master' in this process? This is the governance perspective. Often soft ways of exercising authority are used, such as (community) reporting, stimulating consumers, stimulating volunteering, instead of obliging it.

As we look at nonprofit organizations and certifying bodies, we can stipulate that there are various effects on the governance process. In general, trust represents an important governance driver. It can be defined as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectations that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party." (Mayer, Davis, Schoorman, 1995, 712). Many claims of individual stakeholder groups are implicit and they need to trust the organization to act in their interest. From a transaction cost economics perspective trust can reduce opportunistic behaviour and therefore also reduces transaction costs. In a nonprofit or volunteer organization, gained trust ensures donations and financial resources given by external stakeholders: "NGOs raise money on the basis of donor trust, a trust shaken to the core by the revelations of improprieties. Long-term implications include difficulties raising money, loss of board members who want to dissociate and save their individual good name, and calls for greater accountability by citizens and government." (Gibelman and Gelman, 2004, 372). It becomes obvious how vulnerable trust is and how easy it can be lost by immoral behaviour of management in nonprofit organizations. An advantage of certification for companies can be found in the fact that the quality of their products and services is audited by a third, independent body, which strengthens external trust and reputation. Consequentially, prices can be advanced, demand rises, and public criticism can be warded off *ex ante*.

However, we should also consider that our trust sometimes could perhaps be based on expectations and hopes that are not necessarily just. Consider for example the trust we have in the home organic brand of one of the largest supermarket chains in the Netherlands, AHbiologisch. Do we really trust Albert

Heijn to provide 100% organic products with the 'AHbiologisch' logo on them?

So, when accreditation is part of the establishment it should become easier to separate between good and bad organizations. In order to receive and maintain the certificate it should be clear how the organization operates. This means that organizations then need to document and communicate what they want and what they stand for.

Another governance driver which has a strong link to trust is the reputation of an organization. Reputation plays an important role if contracts are not explicitly formulated. In reality most of all existing contracts, whether oral or written, formal or informal, are incomplete. In the case of incompleteness of contracts, trust becomes more important. On the basis of signalling reputation can develop and decision-makers decide whether or not a contract will be set up or not. In the long run, a positive reputation can just grow if trust-winning behaviour of management stays ensured. The building up-process of sustainable positive reputation is complex and even time- and cost-consuming. Nevertheless it is easily destroyed: "Restoring a severely damaged reputation is a painful process irrespective of the amount of time and money spent on it. The foundation of trust that underpins reputation takes time to be established but is easily damaged. A reputation is destroyed faster than it is created; it takes one day to earn a bad reputation and years to get rid of it." (Van Tulder, 2006, 214).

One of the more explicitly arranged and "hard" governance factors are incentive contracts. The purpose of incentive contracts is to reduce potential conflict of interests between different stakeholder groups. Incentives make people act according to the interest of others and therefore moral hazard situations can be avoided. The divergence between principal and agent can be reduced. According to the hypothesis of the homo economicus, money is seen as an incentive factor and represents the basis of contracts. Those are linked to incentive salary mechanisms and can be installed for management as well as for board members. The governance function can be *ex ante* ensured effectively as responsible managers or board members are more likely to act according to the mission of the organization. For that reason, the vision and mission have

to be sharp. Both represent another governance driver. From an institutional perspective a sharp, common vision reduces bargaining problems and governance works effectively already inside the organization. External and ex post control becomes redundant as internal stakeholder groups control divergent or opportunistic behaviour. The stronger a vision - and/or mission - is communicated and implemented within the organization, the more people share it and the more can follow and work for it. Consequently we can see vision as a governance driver first from a stakeholder perspective, but also as a precious resource of an organization, which prepares success in respect to fulfilling the mission. Governance becomes easier and preferably less necessary as all interest groups pull together.

Certification can also be used as a realization instrument of government goals. The government can regulate by manipulating criteria for certification. A last governance function of certification is its legal, guaranteeing and regulative function. An example of the regulative function could be to stimulate customers to book their vacation at a certified traveling agency, that guarantees money-return in case of bankruptcy. In this case not having the certificate within 5 years could imply that the traveling agency would be out of business.

All these governance functions and their effects can be accredited to certifications of nonprofit organizations. They reduce the governance investments and simplify the whole governance process. Recapitulating governance becomes more effective by certifying NPOs or volunteer organizations. However, externally accredited standards also imply disadvantages. The following section summarizes advantages and drawbacks of certifications in the nonprofit context.

Discussion of advantages and drawbacks

Certifications of nonprofit organizations bring along positive and negative side effects. We already mentioned some positive effects from a governance perspective, but one can also find advantages concerning other angles. One major advantage can be found in the own perception of the organization which wants to be certified. As already mentioned concerning the vision, the NPO has to be quite conscious and aware of organizational culture, norms, processes and all types of

other characteristics which shape the entire organization. It is forced to take a close look at everything which is going on inside the organization. The outlook of getting certified functions as a powerful tool as it makes internal stakeholders sensible to what is going on within their organization. Besides that, being finally certified represents an award for all the costs the organization has to face in the preceding phase. The organization gets a better market position and a more positive reputation. There is also the possibility of subsidies granted by the government for certified organizations, which gives another incentive (Verberk, Peters, Van Erp, 2002, 3). Another positive side effect of getting involved in a certification process is the fact that with opening the door to a third, externally independent party, who is actually certifying, other parties become more aware and conscious as well. For instance, besides the government the board of directors gets more involved. The rising informal attention within the organization was already mentioned earlier.

Theoretically, by introducing certificates the threat of sanctions or negative effects on the organization becomes bigger. The danger and fear of losing or not getting the certification and therefore forfeiting an important position and reputation in the market will shape the behaviour of management.

Said all that, we can find also some negative sides and risks concerning certifications of nonprofit organizations in practice. A case in point: Even if the industry is actively supporting certification processes of NPOs, it does not mean that rules, norms and based regulations are known and generally accepted. Also a better market position cannot be assumed and taken for granted in all cases. As soon as the certification procedures are more common, the positive effects on the position in the market, e.g. as to winning donors, are lost or at least weakened up again. By letting an external party standardize and audit the organization the management is supposed to at least become supportive and in line with the relevant norms. This might not be guaranteed. Thus, it is essential to recheck the commitment of involved stakeholder parties on a regular basis and evaluate lived norms and values within the NPO. Another disadvantage of certifications can become effective if managers just use this instrument as a marketing and reputation benefit and act opportunistically directly after being certified.

To avoid this situation, it is obvious how indispensable a rechecking procedure on a regular basis becomes. Furthermore, having emphasized the governance effects of certifications earlier, there is always the likelihood of having minor control and monitoring in practice.

Summarizing, certifications work as trust-ensuring mechanisms. The target groups of nonprofit organizations, donors or other stakeholder groups gain trust and confidence in the qualities of the management and the board of directors regarding carrying out the mission. Unfortunately, due to the risks mentioned above not all organizations are able to implement certification processes in a way that supports this goal.

There are several considerations to make when investigating the possibilities of certification for the volunteer sector: what would be the selection criteria, what purpose does the certificate serve, should it have a private or a public character and should hard or soft control measures be used? The next section will go deeper into the context of volunteering.

Volunteer energy and certification procedures

Status quo in the volunteer context

"Volunteers are the cornerstones on which the voluntary sector is based." (Meijs et al. 2003:20). And Drucker announced that the 21st century is the "volunteers' century" (Van Tulder, 2006, 149). Both statements show the importance of volunteer energy within our society and the nonprofit sector in general. Without volunteers the third sector would have to face a lack of workforce and therefore lowering the ability of carrying out its abilities and "duties" properly.

There are some important issues around certification in the volunteer sector. First, free will and choice are preconditioned. Second, to volunteer organizations, the mission is most important. When certifying mission driven NPOs the mission should be the incentive mechanism and object of control and not the results. Third, there is the high danger of hold-up because of specific investments. Volunteers make transaction costs, because they need to determine whether they want to work for an NPO or not. Certification could reduce those costs. Last, there should be less control mechanisms for volunteers. Volunteers, especially in

health care, have few possibilities to exercise power and control other than with their hands (in an association) and feet (leave).

Some possible reasons for certification of volunteer energy could be to improve trust in organizations for volunteers, who are crucial for the success and who bring in many assets.

Also, a believable 'hedging' of specific investments ensures an efficient level of investments - external hedging by certification bodies. Value can just be generated by combining resources - by making specific investments an organization can create inimitable bundles of resources.

Next to this the power position of volunteers is strengthened ("bills of rights of volunteers") and power is causative connected to the ownership of valuable resources (time, energy, et cetera.).

Certification is not entirely new to the volunteer sector. In several countries, volunteer centres and volunteer institutes have been introducing standards, awards and hallmarks for volunteer organizations.³ For example in 1998, the U.K. began an initiative for "Investing in Volunteers". During the pilot phase of the program from 1998 to 2002, more than 60 organizations achieved the "Investing in Volunteers Standard", which provided a range of practical benefits. Among the reasons in favour of this standard we can find the motivation to encourage more people to volunteer as people will feel more encouraged to volunteer for an organization. Another factor is to sustain the motivation of existing volunteers and to enhance their experience of volunteering. Furthermore, improving their organization's reputation in the local community, reassuring donors that the organization is professional and that their money is spent in an effective manner and drawing the attention to the organization's decision makers, are important advantages of this certification process.

The British "Investing in Volunteers Standard" is based on four main areas of volunteer management: Planning for volunteer involvement, recruiting volunteers, selecting and matching volunteers, and supporting and retaining volunteers. To become accredited, the organization should comply with ten indicators,

³ The following text is based on Brudney, J.L./Meijs, L.C.P.M. (2005): Gambling with the future of volunteering? The tragedy of the commons. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action, Washington, DC, November 17-19, 2005.

the selection criteria. It may be feasible for any organization to meet these requirements. However, the indicators cover many areas ranging from showing commitment to volunteers, to supporting their needs for money, management, staff time and materials, to protecting them from harm and having introductory procedures for new volunteers. An applicant is assigned an approved assessor to assist and guide the organization through the certification process. By going through the ten steps of the process, the organization can finally achieve the standard. Upon approval by the awarding body, the organization receives an official "Investing in Volunteers"-plaque and is entitled to use the "Investing in Volunteers"-logo on stationery, branding and website.

In the USA, the Points of Light Foundation & Volunteer Center National Network "engages and mobilizes millions of volunteers who are helping to solve serious social problems in thousands of communities. Through a variety of programs and services, the Foundation encourages people from all walks of life - businesses, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, low-income communities, families, youth, and older adults - to volunteer." (<http://www.pointsoflight.org/about/>; see also Brudney and Willis 1995). The organization gives several awards to volunteers, for example the "Daily Points of Light Awards" that "honors individuals and volunteer groups that have made a commitment to connect Americans through service to help meet critical needs in their communities" (<http://www.pointsoflight.org/awards/dpol/>). Every day one volunteer or volunteer effort in the country receives a "Daily Point of Light Award".

In the Netherlands, CIVIQ and NOV have developed the certificate "Vrijwillige inzet GOED GEREgeld!" (in English: "Volunteer effort, well organized!"). Organizations that receive this certificate can keep it for three years, to show to the outside world that they arranged their volunteer work properly. The certificate can lead to more volunteers and more motivation of current volunteers. Thus, the target group may also benefit from the certification. Furthermore, being certified may show financial partners and other stakeholders that their money is spent efficiently and effectively. NOV thinks that organizations that invest in managing volunteers should be rewarded. This is also

why the certificate can only be obtained by organizations that comply with the criteria set by NOV. The first step implies a self-evaluation phase which leads to a score, on the basis of which advisors of NOV will decide if the NPO may proceed with the accreditation process. The NOV certificate needs to be evaluated every three years. In this way the organization is continuously motivated to keep on improving itself.

Merrill Associates have developed a "VOLUNTEER BILL OF RIGHTS" (www.merrillassociates.net/documents/bill_of_rights.php). These 'rights' can be used to set up criteria for a certification process. These rights read as follows:

1. Right to be treated as a co-worker, not as "just free help" or a "prima donna",
2. Right to a suitable assignment with consideration for personal preference, temperament, life experience, and education,
3. Right to receive a thoroughly planned and effectively presented job training,
4. Right to know as much about the organization as possible, including its policies, staff and programs,
5. Right to continuous education and information about new developments and opportunities,
6. Right to obtain profound guidance and direction by someone who is experienced, well-informed, patient and thoughtful,
7. Right to get an orderly, designated place to work,
8. Right to acquire a variety of experience,
9. Right to be heard, to have a part in planning, to feel free to make suggestions and to have respect shown for an honest opinion,
10. Right to be given recognition and expressions of appreciation.

Certification procedures in other industries

Besides the volunteer sector one can also find certification procedures in other industries as well. In the fisheries sector for instance, several certificates exist. For example the Marine Stewardship Council, founded by Unilever and WWF in 1997, has the mission "to safeguard the world's seafood supply by promoting the best environmental choice". The MSC certificate guarantees that the fish is caught in a sustainable way. The first principle e.g. says that "a fishery must be conducted in a manner that does not lead to over-fishing or depletion of the exploited populations and, for those populations that are depleted, the fishery

must be conducted in a manner that demonstrably leads to their recovery". Secondly, "fishing operations should allow for the maintenance of the structure, productivity, function and diversity of the ecosystem (including habitat and associated dependent and ecologically related species) on which the fishery depends". The third principle demands that "the fishery is subject to an effective management system that respects local, national and international laws and standards and incorporates institutional and operational frameworks that require use of the resource to be responsible and sustainable".⁴

The MSC's accreditation program is accessible to all organizations at a fixed fee. In order to obtain MSC accreditation, specified requirements as stated in the MSC Accreditation Manual must be met. A technical advisory board conducts the assessment. Once accredited, the organization will be subject to at least annual surveillance audits to ensure ongoing compliance with the MSC accreditation criteria. A re-assessment is conducted every four years. The MSC seeks compliance with ISO/IEC 17011. In 2005 fourteen fisheries have been certified to the MSC environmental standard and over 300 seafood products bear the MSC's blue eco-label and are available in supermarkets around the world.

Another symbol that can be found on seafood, especially on tuna cans, is the "dolphin friendly" logo. This logo indicates little by-catch of dolphins or turtles during fishing. However, this logo looks like a certificate, but in fact it can be used by any producer and is not audited or controlled by an accreditation agency.

Another sector which has already implemented certification processes is the forestry sector. In 1993 the Forest Stewardship Council was created as an international network to promote responsible management of the world's forests. Unsustainable use of woods manifests itself by deforestation, illegal exploitation, over-exploitation and agricultural plantations dominating over woodlands. Over the past 10 years, over 73 million hectares in more than 72 countries have been certified according to FSC standards while several thousand products are produced using FSC certified wood and carrying the FSC trademark. FSC operates through its network of national initiatives in more

than 34 countries. To become certified, producers of timber, paper and other forest products must meet ten principles and 57 criteria that address legal issues, indigenous rights, labour rights, multiple benefits, and environmental impacts surrounding forest management. This certificate can only be obtained if many criteria are met. FSC certification is carried out by FSC accredited certification bodies which are monitored by FSC accreditation on a regular basis.

In the air traffic sector certificates are implemented in a different way. GreenSeat is an organization that promotes the compensation of CO₂, released by airplanes. The main goal is to protect the natural resource air. Besides that stopping the global warming is another aim of the organization. It offers planting trees to compensate carbon-dioxide-pollution, paid by consumers who donor money to the organization. This is not a real certificate, but the organization does offer a 'certificate' to the customer who was travelling by plane and has invested in planting trees. From this point of view, any consumer can obtain the 'certificate'. There are no fixed criteria that need to be met upfront. The organization is now exploring the possibilities to offer CO₂-compensation in a standard procedure on the booking-websites.

What we see from the described certificates and awards is that a certificate can be obtained either by only the best organization or by almost all organizations. Another choice involves the dynamics of the certificate. Examples of certificates that are meant for only the top 10% in the sector are the MCS and FSC certificates. Other hallmarks, such as Green-Seat consumer 'certificates' and the "dolphine friendly" logo, are easier to obtain by a large part of the sector, but if uncontrolled, less trustworthy.

Conclusion and empirical outlook

The topic of certification procedures and institutions concerning volunteer organizations or volunteer energy is obviously beyond controversy. Various aspects make the discussion on the one hand fruitful and interesting, but on the other hand complex; stakeholder issues, human resources as centre of attention and qualitative factors like trust or reputation make it difficult to find one generally accepted solution.

⁴ These quotes were found on the website of the Marine Stewardship Council www.msc.nl

Volunteers, 'competing' volunteer organizations and society asks the question whether volunteer organizations are trustworthy. As with other 'tragedy of the commons' situations, every party experiences negative effects when one party misuses the common good, in this case the volunteers. Certification can help answer the question of trustworthiness.

When looking at the selection criteria of a possible certificate for volunteer organizations, it should be clear that not the output or results should be the object of control, but the achievement of the organizational goals. The purpose that the certificate would serve is to give an incentive to arrange volunteer management well and it should be possible to obtain the certificate only for the top, for the best organizations, and not for 90% of the sector, because then it would be hard to distinguish between organizations that manage volunteer energy well and those that hardly even think about their 'use' of volunteer energy. In the volunteer sector only a private certificate would be possible to introduce, because it should not be a judicially obliged certificate, but more comparable to e.g. product certification. Because of the non obligatory nature of the certificate, it should also be a voluntary certificate (as opposite to compelled) and soft control measures should be used to regulate. Besides this rough indication of how a certificate for the volunteer sector would need to look like there is little known on how such a certificate would work in practice. A few examples from the Netherlands, UK, Switzerland and the USA were described in this article.

The discussion is mainly on what to do if an uncertified volunteer organization is not trustworthy and

how can government react to that? The reaction to organizations that have not received a certificate due to e.g. ill volunteer management will be different from each stakeholder. Volunteers will simply stop volunteering for the organization and the government (and society) should wonder if this organization still has its 'licence to operate'. Other volunteer organizations, that can suffer from reputational damage due to the ill performance of other volunteer organizations, should wonder if this 'shame and blame' is also partly their fault. So the question remains how one can change the bad behaviour of volunteer organizations after certification. Punishment by volunteers in a sense of not volunteering for those organizations could work, but would not solve the problem of properly maintaining the common good (volunteers). Voluntary certification creates the problem of collective action, because as long as there is no severe punishment for not being certified, certification will have little effects. We do see potential for certification in the volunteer sector, but it is unclear how to implement this the best way. For that reason we suggest further and deeper research. Especially an empirical analysis seems to be inevitable as so many different opinions come together. A stakeholder analysis on the basis of qualitative interviews or case studies would be an appropriate way of finding out best practice methods and processes. First steps into this direction are provided in this paper by showing various certifications in various industries, and also in the nonprofit world. Furthermore, the differences concerning countries represent a wide range of research possibilities. A comparative case study would be enlightening. Finally, we see a lot of opportunities in broadening the discussion from the governance aspects to legal or political perspectives.

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