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Data producing NGOs confronted with the requirement to professionalise

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Context and object

- Our research focuses on French locally and regionally set up NGOs confronted with the requirement to professionalise. The NGOs selected deal with nature and are involved in data production.
- Until 1980s, NGOs were composed of lay and scientific volunteers. They developed activities of general interest and some of these NGO's built some substantial links with the Ministry of Environment.
- Since the 1990s, this context has changed due to the global management of biodiversity, the use of information technology, and the spread of neoliberalism. As a result (consequently), national and various regional authorities have been requiring NGOs to professionalise.

Point of view and methodology

- We use the notion of professionalisation not in the sense of the recognition of an occupational group as the exclusive owner of a range of skills, but as a historical process that combines two dimensions: interaction among members of NGOs inside, and the impact of the State and other forms of power outside (Demaziere, 2009).
- Questions: How are these volunteer associations affected by this process? What does professionalisation change for unpaid members? How do they react to this requirement?
What links exist between professionalisation and neoliberalism?
- A socio anthropological approach allows us to think both local (how do the NGOs work) and global (neoliberalism or building of global knowledge).
- Methodology: qualitative surveys through the volunteer associations in various French regions.

The enthusiast, an essential member of the associations

- We define enthusiasts as ordinary citizens putting their skills to the service of NGOs as a volunteer (more or less enlightened enthusiasts).
They use scientific knowledge (for example taxonomy) and embedded knowledge linked to their familiar space.
- Enthusiasts have various motivations: they range from the wish to learn to the pleasure of being together. They also include the responsibility towards the balance of nature. Confidence and mutual acknowledgment make this collective process possible.
- In this frame, data are products (resulting) of passion and subjectivity on the one hand, of reason and objectivity on the other hand.

1. The ways leading to professionnalisation: The commodification of the activities

- ❑ **The increase in the expertise market in relations to the development of biodiversity conservation policies, and the competition between public and private structures have caused changes in the associations. These changes are characterise by the recruitment of regular employees and the development of commercial activities.**
- ❑ **Data which are produced by NGOs have become a prevailed government instrument on international scale. Data are now impacted by the process of standardisation. This process makes it possible to move data from where they are produced locally to where they are stored in the name of transparency and biodiversity management.**
- ❑ **Data are now considered as a commodity**

2. The ways leading to professionalisation: transformation of relationships between the State and NGOs

- Until the 1990s, NGOs were key partners of public authorities. They were allowed to perform public services tasks and they received public subsidies to undertake initiatives.**
- During the early 2000s, the modernisation of the State called New Public Management (NPM) played a significant role in the transformation of the relationships between the State and NGOs. The NPM tried to provide administration standards coming from the private sector to the State, with the goal of being more efficient.**
- These standards have two main consequences. First: fewer and fewer subsidies are coming from public authorities. Second, NGOs are confronted with market and competition with private structures like consulting firms.**
- This change is leading NGOs from a status of specific public player to a status of private player. NGOs are becoming service providers among several others.**

The range of positions taken by NGOs in response to the requirement to professionalise: first typology

- ❑ **We draw a typology from four NGOs based on three main criteria: the number of regular employees, the commoditisation of NGOs' activities and their involvement in networks and partnerships.**
- ❑ **The NGOs professionalisation movement falls into a continuum ranging from NGOs that are made up of volunteer and that have chosen to stay out of the market to those called «associative businesses» which employ ten workers or more. Among them, there are other NGOs that try to limit the process of commoditisation and employ a minimum number of workers (fewer than 5).**
- ❑ **Concerning the involvement in networks and partnerships similar differences can be observed between those which are included in national and international networks and the others only belonging to local networks.**

Tensions and adaptation strategies

- ❑ The professionalisation of NGOs is not compatible with the values upheld by enthusiasts: autonomy of action, ability to undertake initiatives, attachment to land, interpersonal relationships, trust, and so on.
- ❑ Professionalisation causes tensions because of the use of volunteers' work for commercial purposes. Moreover the employment of workers makes the relationship between employing workers and volunteers more challenging. The hiring of employees tends to disqualify volunteers and scare them away.
- ❑ One of the strategies adopted by some NGOs consists in limiting the professionalisation process in order to make it compatible with the volunteers values. Another one consists in sharing the tasks between volunteers'/enthusiasts and professionals.

Conclusion

- ❑ The professionalisation process is largely the result of an order given to the naturalist NGOs by public authorities in the name of efficiency. Professionalisation can be considered as a new management standard (Boussard, Demazière and Milburn, 2010).
- ❑ Nevertheless, we have explained that not all NGOs are fully engaged in professionalisation. They present different degrees of professionalisation from fully engaged to not at all.
- ❑ Moreover, we have pointed out that professionalisation highlights the emergence of specialists' expertise which is different from the volunteers' expertise. Specialists' expertise is based on codified, abstract and decontextualised knowledge whereas volunteers' expertise is based on local daily experience.
- ❑ The professionalisation movement has also raised the question of NGOs role and tasks. Should they be as close as possible to business like consulting, or should they first have to take care of nature, because of their special relationship to land ?