

The relationship between religious inspired solidarity initiatives and civil society

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Introduction

In this paper we investigate the tensions religious initiatives experience while collaborating with the government. In contemporary Western societies, numerous initiatives with a religious inspiration play a significant role in the provision of services and support people in vulnerable positions in society (Beaumont & Cloke, 2012). We define Religion Solidarity Initiatives (RSIs) as: ‘Initiatives that, from a religious inspiration, aim at organizing collective action for and/or providing support or services to people in vulnerable positions’ (Maes et al., 2023 & forthcoming). Many studies already confirm that these RSI are indispensable in the support of people that are neglected or ‘forgotten’ by the welfare state (Beaumont & Cloke, 2012). Some studies even state that RSIs replace the traditional welfare services especially when they substitute the work of the welfare state or other civil society actors while caring for people in need (Kahl, 2005; Beaumont & Cloke, 2012). Ressler et al. (2023) in their study provide evidence that religion is an enduring, significant and pervasive component of the U.S. nonprofit sector. Congregations and other religion-related organisations are the most prevalent type of organisation in the US nonprofit sector and they operate in every major domain of the nonprofit sector. Using in depth interviews with both actors from RSIs and the local government, participant observations and document analyses we try to answer the following research questions:

- 1.1. How and when do RSIs collaborate with (local) governments?
- 1.2. What are the tensions in the relationship between local governments and RSIs?
- 1.3. Which strategies or coping mechanisms do RSIs develop while dealing with these tensions?

We adopt an institutional logic approach to theorize the relationship between RSIs and local governments. Institutional logics perspective as stated by Thornton et al. (2012) are the symbols and practices, along with their underlying assumptions, values and beliefs that help individuals attach meaning to the daily activities within particular social settings. They are supra-organizational and abstract but they become observable in

the concrete social relations of actors who utilize, manipulate and reinterpret them (Skelcher & Smith, 2015). In our in depth-interviews and participant observation, we focus on the concrete social relations of the actors. This is important, because how individuals make sense of their social environment and understand the social system they are operating in, is thought to shape the goals they choose, the identities they claim, and the symbols they adopt to enact them. In the case of RSIs this is formed by the religious inspiration of the organisation or initiative. The construction of these (religiously inspired) definitions, rules, and expectations makes an institutional logic unfold, shift, and evolve at the field level, so to do the organizational structures and processes within the (secularized) field that enact them (Thornton, 2002; Beagles, 2022).

The results confirm that tensions do exist in the relationship between local government and RSIs. At first glance, cooperation seems to be working well but the in-depth interviews show that coping mechanisms and adjustments are being made on both sides of the relationship to mitigate the clashes between different logics. We will elaborate on what these adaptations are and how the different mechanisms are deployed in the day-to-day practice.

Religious inspired solidarity initiatives and institutional logics

In our research we focus on Religious inspired Solidarity Initiatives (RSIs), these initiatives can range from small-scale ad hoc initiatives to large-scale formal organizations (Maes et al., forthcoming). The activities of RSIs can be placed in four main categories: providing basic services, politicizing, community work and empowering individual people. According to Stjerno's (2004) definition of solidarity: the willingness to aid others based on feelings of shared fate, the various activities of RSIs can be categorized the umbrella of solidarity. These solidarity initiatives of RSIs include a variety of activities aimed at combating poverty and social exclusion, based on religious logic. From this religious logic, RSIs retrieve their sources of legitimacy and identity that contribute to the strategies and control mechanisms that guide their social interactions (Beagles, 2022). To operationalize religious solidarity initiatives, RSIs often work in collaboration with the government. This is similar to how NGOs operate, as they do not exist in an environmental vacuum and interact with their secular environment, including a government with a different logic. This environment has an impact on RSIs and challenges their own religious logic and identity (Beagles, 2022).

To understand how the relationship between RSIs and government is formed, we start from each actor's own institutional logics. Thornton (2012) describes institutional logics as: *the symbols and practices, along with their underlying assumptions, values and beliefs that help individuals attach meaning to the daily activities within particular social setting*. The logics not only influence what parts of the environment are giving attention and how they are understood, but also influence the types of goals, identities, and forms of power that are considered legitimate (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Institutional logics scholars have categorized seven types of institutional orders, which include (nuclear) family, religion, state, corporation, market, profession, and community. These orders differ in the sources from which actors gain legitimacy, authority, and identity, as

well as in the norms, strategies, and control mechanisms guiding their social interactions (Thornton et al., 2012; Beagles, 2022).

Nonprofit organizations and RSIs, are influenced by different institutional logics in their interaction with the environment. In his research, on nonprofit organizations, Knutsen (2012) states that from an economic perspective, some nonprofit organizations are perceived as increasingly institutionalized as "hybrids" of private and public organizations due to resource-based relationships with the private and public sectors, including financial, competitive, or contractual relationships. From a charitable perspective, some nonprofit organizations gain support largely on the basis of their values and the values of donors and volunteers. This includes financial, competitive, or contractual arrangements. This is believed to be the fundamental and inherent characteristic of NPOs. In practice, NPOs assume characteristics from both the public and private sectors, often blurring sectorial boundaries. While some NPOs emphasize efficiency as an economic aspect, others prioritize free giving, care, and values as a charitable aspect. The growing trend of non-profit organizations (NPOs) adopting traits from other sectors complicates the task of differentiating between inherent non-profit characteristics and those acquired from the private and public sectors. The participation of RSIs in public services is part of a larger movement called hybridization, where governmental, nonprofit, and private sectors collaborate. Hybridization involves overlapping governance mechanisms and sectors, leading to varied effects on public services and the actors involved (Lotta et al., 2023). In the provision of services demanded by the government NPOs rely on government funding, but often at the cost of their autonomy (Ferris, 2001). Unlike the private and public sector, the nonprofit sector has a multitude of logics, and different organizations within this sector are hybrids through combining multiple logics in different ways (Knutsen, 2012; Elloukmani et al., 2023). How these logics are combined, according to Skelcher and Smith (2015), can be classified in four types of organizational structures: segmented, segregated, assimilated and blended. In our research we want to identify whether RSIs combine different logics with their own religious logic and whether these four types of structures are also recognizable in RSIs as part of their strategies or coping mechanisms.

Previous research (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013; Cnaan & Newman, 2010) has examined the effectiveness of RSIs, their connections with state organizations, and the obstacles they confront while preserving their religious identity. The procedural, management, and activity scope of RSIs are influenced by the relationships they have with state organizations, which create risks and difficulties. The provision of government services can depersonalize RSI services and compromise their religious identity. RSIs prioritize flexibility for survival, but it could result in a possible distancing from their religious origins. Although prior studies exist, the day-to-day effects of RSI-state partnerships and their transformative consequences are still ambiguous. Current literature primarily concentrates on the U.S. context, where RSI characteristics and demands influence their cooperation with governmental organizations (Lotta et al., 2023). In our research, we use institutional logics as a method to identify the logics of different actors, but also to identify the tensions between RSIs and the government by looking at where the logics collide. This conflict necessitates

different strategies for RSIs to address the situation, and our goal is to highlight those strategies in our research.

Method

In this paper, we explore the challenges faced by religious organizations when collaborating with the government, focusing on the various tensions that arise. Using the institutional logics perspective we attempt to examine the following research questions: How and when do RSIs collaborate with (local) governments? What are the tensions in the relationship between local governments and RSIs? Which strategies or coping mechanisms do RSIs develop while dealing with these tensions? We have conducted qualitative research in the Flemish region of Belgium, in specific on the urban city context. We concentrated on two cities: Antwerp & Leuven which together provide the necessary variety in terms of socio-cultural demographic characteristics, political orientation, institutional context and the profile of RSIs. We used research triangulation to analyze the practices of religiously inspired initiatives and their relationship with welfare state actors and civil society, through document analysis, semi – structured interviews with both government actors as RSIs and participant observations.

The case selection followed two important steps. In each city we started with constructing an overview of (all) possible religious actors in the city. To find the cases we used snowball or chain sampling (Morris, 2006). To do so we started from existing overviews we received from city council, welfare state actors and umbrella organisations. In this starting overview of religious actors we included all religious communities and congregations in the city and all the organisations and initiatives linked to religion or congregation. This latter group includes all the schools, clubs, care facilities, socio-cultural organisations, political parties, ... that are based on religion or worldview -as indeed any of these organisations might be or incorporate a RSI. In addition, exploratory interviews were organized with representatives of religious movements, specific umbrella organisations or headquarters of organisations localized in the city to further complete the overview of potential locally orientated RSIs present in the city. When the overview of the city was completed after snowball sampling, document analysis and the first exploratory interviews, we selected 9 RSIs from each city list to include into further research. We used variation criteria (see table below) to get as much variation in the selected cases as possible.

Variation criteria

Table 1 -variation criteria

Religion	Congregation	Which religion, denomination or congregation is involved?
Organisation	Size and scope	What is the size and scope of the organisation (number of (staff) members; local/regional/national/international/global scope)?

Organisation	Type	What type of organisation is the FBO (formal or informal; profit or non-profit; ...)
Organisation	Staff	What types of staff does the FBO have (paid and/or voluntary)
Solidarity	Type	What kind of solidarity do the FBO offer (basic needs, housing, work, study, children, ...)?
Location	Type of location	Is the FBO active in the city, the periphery and/or the countryside?

For each RSI, we conducted at least one in-depth interview with a manager or leading staff member of the organisation or initiative. Depending on the size of the organisation, we also interviewed one of two employees or volunteers and at least one participant or client. With an eye at including an outsider's perspective, actors from the local government were also interviewed.

In total 46 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted between February 2022 and June 2023 and were conducted in Dutch, French or English depending on the best spoken language of the respondent. The interviews were introduced by a brief description of the study. Each respondent signed an informed consent that also included a description of ethical clearance and anonymity. The interviews took place at a location of the respondent's choosing, usually a room at the RSI location itself. Only if this was not possible was a location outside the RSI suggested where the interview could be conducted. The transcripts were made by the researcher, a co-researcher and students, all names were pseudonymized in this process. We interviewed 37 different RSIs in different cities: 23 Christian, 12 Muslim, 1 Buddhist and one world-view based organization. Nine organizations got an in-depth analysis with participant observations during February 2022 and June 2023.

Data analysis

During our semi-structured interviews, we provided guiding questions to examine the connections between their religious community and other religious communities, (local) government, civil society, and other RSIs. We used feedback loops to code the interviews, moving back and forth between the concepts from the institutional logics approach and the findings from the interviews. The first step was inductive coding for general themes such as 'relationships with other religious communities', 'relationships with one's own community', 'relationships with government', 'relationships with civil society', and 'relationships with religious initiatives'. Each main code was thoroughly analyzed and refined, resulting in four sub-themes: 'Evaluation of the Relationship', 'History of the Relationship', 'Type of Relationship', and

'Strategies in the Relationship'. In the final phase, we connected the coded interview information with theoretical frameworks using the theories of hybrid organizations and institutional logics.

Results

Relationship between local government and RSIs

At a first level of analysis of the results, the relationship with the local government seems to be positive, which is also mentioned by the respondents in the interviews, but when we ask deeper questions about the specific relationship with the government, we notice that there is a lot of variation in the cooperation. In practice, we can see a broad spectrum of cooperation between RSIs and the (local) government, with no cooperation or contact at one end and intensive cooperation or contact at the other. During interviews with RSI staff and volunteers, we found that the elements that influence the relationship with the local government can be grouped into three main factors: Lack of mutual awareness, established networks, and trust can impede collaboration among organizations. It is important for RSIs to possess knowledge about the government and its functioning to avoid missing out on opportunities for recognition and subsidization. Additionally, some may struggle to interact with the government due to uncertainty about the resources and support available to them. According to government personnel, their top priority is to become familiar with the RSIs working in their municipality and the specific resources and aid provided by each. Their approach towards the execution of the RSIs in the region is welcoming and without wanting to instrumentalize the RSIs. The understanding and existence of local networks containing RSIs are equally important; in practice, these networks often serve as an intermediate level of interaction with the government or as a platform where RSIs can come to understand the government in a safe environment. Several local networks existed in both cities, and RSI participants confirmed that they were able to interact, often informally, with local government officials or deputies, as well as with other secular organizations. These networks were considered important by the government as they provided an overview of religious actors in the city and allowed for joint events to be organized.

Last, trust is a crucial factor that affects the relationship between RSIs and the government. This appears self-evident, but interviews with RSIs employees reveal that trust has numerous facets and is contingent on various factors. For instance, individuals may have general trust in the government, but lack confidence in a specific official. In addition, past experiences on both sides can cause distrust. Furthermore, members of religious social institutions founded by an ethnic group that experienced government oppression towards religion in their country of origin are crucial in establishing a positive relationship in the present. Similarly, the government holds prejudice against RSIs, fearing negative impacts on their relationship. Individual interactions with members of RSIs can also have a positive or negative impact on the government's relationship.

Tensions in the relationship

Tensions and difficulties arise in the relationship between the government and RSIs when seeking government funding. Applying for government funding requires the organization or initiative to understand the bureaucratic system and to acquire the skills and expertise to prepare a good grant proposal. (Smaller) RSIs, usually under-resourced and understaffed, are often unable to make the necessary investments to

undertake this process. Moreover, the language used by the government can be excessively complex, leading to errors during or after the application process. Additionally, there is a tendency to favor established players involved in the government's drafting of grant conditions or at the table as interlocutors to identify needs in society.

“Our application to organize an event for people in poverty was approved by the city but at the last minute we had to change locations. We did not know that we had to let the local government know. As a result, we lost part of our grant for expenses.”

Some RSIs deliberately avoid applying for government funding and rely on donations and funds to sustain their activities. This strategy stems from their concern over institutionalization, as government grants come with expectations and reporting requirements. They value the unique character of their projects over the benefits of grants. Additionally, they question the feasibility of reporting with limited staff.

“Yeah, we are limited in our help but we can help people we choose to help... because we don't have to explain ourselves. This is a conscious choice because, as soon as we get government funding we, maybe it's an exaggeration, but 90% of our people will lose their help because they don't qualify for 'official' (quotations is ours) help”

There are prejudices present in the relationship with government, such as the suspicion that the organization seeks to evangelize or that a religious group cannot operate professionally. Some RSIs attempt to collaborate with the government, or government organizations, to demonstrate the organization's professionalism and to dispel these prejudices. Despite positive collaborations, these prejudices persist and prove difficult to eradicate.

Strategies to cope with the tension

In our analysis of the organizations and how they deal with the clashing logics and tensions in their relationship with government, we use the organizational structures of (Skelcher and Smith, 2015): segmented, segregated, assimilated and mixed. We examined which RSIs combine different logics with their own religious logics and whether these four types of structures are also recognizable among RSIs as part of their strategies or coping mechanisms.

The RSIs that deliberately avoided connecting with or cooperating with the local government or seeking funding were able to preserve their own religious identity and logic. The majority of the RSIs we analyzed operated as hybrid organizations, incorporating both the logic of the government and their own organizational logic.

RSIs employ a "segmented structure" to obtain grants and/or recognition from local government. This entails establishing a non-religious subsidiary organization that concentrates on a particular target group, a specific theme prioritized by the local government or a specific activity, such as meal distribution or leisure

activities for youth. This subsidiary organization can then submit an application for acknowledgment and/or financial support from the local government, but the funding will be allocated to the entire initiative or organization. Other religiously inspired solidarity initiatives (RSIs) began to blend their own and the government's logic. In situations where RSIs have only partially implemented this approach, we classify them as having an "assimilated structure." This phenomenon has been observed, for instance, among RSIs who adjust their language to that of the government in order to facilitate collaboration. We observed that RSIs retained their own logic, language, and symbols in internal communication and daily practices. A more profound form of blending logics we saw in an RSI recognized by the government as a public health institution. The institution's objective is to care for the most vulnerable individuals, with a particular emphasis on proximity. The care provided is in line with this belief and forms the foundation of the organization. However, government cooperation and expectations placed upon healthcare institutions result in a mismatch between the contradiction of proximity and long-term care inherent to complex problems, and the government and economic visions of problem-solving for possible reintegration and time justification. The government envisions a limited care pathway, whereas in reality this is not always the case. The organization operationalizes an economic perspective, drawing on the lean aspect introduced from the business world to increase efficiency, and providing training and education to both staff and volunteers for its implementation. Meanwhile, there is a strong emphasis on achieving and maintaining quality labels through Qualicor, indicating a commitment to quality. These labels ensure quality of care and have gained significance in all care institutions in Belgium over the years. Employees are required to document specific tasks performed on the work floor. This process is generally perceived positively as it brings attention to certain care tasks that may otherwise be overlooked, resulting in increased recognition. However, these administrative tasks demand more time and effort that they cannot devote to their spiritual bond with the patient.

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