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door Aaron Brusseel

Actionable Advocacy? How poverty NPOs influence Flemish local policymakers' willingness to act

Promotoren:

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Samenvatting

This dissertation explores Policy Advocacy Effectiveness (PAE) in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) who advocate on behalf of people living in poverty in Flemish municipalities. Flanders is assumed to operate under a neocorporatist welfare state model, where select civil society actors play an institutionalized role in characteristically collaborative policy deliberation efforts throughout all governmental levels. Some researchers note that globalization and marketization trends challenge this model's stability. They warn of an evolution towards a postcorporatist model where increased accountability demands and heightened competition among a widening field of potential policy stakeholder erode the attention given to civil society actors' traditional policy advocacy role. It is assumed they increasingly favor their community-building and service delivery roles, which are believed to be more broadly recognized as legitimate and which are additionally credited to be more helpful in guaranteeing organizational survival. At the very least, these concerns note that there are increasing constraints vis-a-vis strategic agency, leading to less confrontational advocacy. Most dramatically, some warn of a shift towards the "primacy of politics," where elected officials' responsiveness to civil society's political role is sidelined on principle.

These dynamics call for further research and empirical grounding across different levels of government and along different sectors. We focus on a specific form of Policy Advocacy Effectiveness (PAE), namely the factors that make advocacy 'actionable.' We conceptualize this as the extent to which individual municipal policymakers are responsive to advocate-championed policy inputs during the policy process and how this responsiveness is influenced by different configurations of advocacy strategies.

We do this through a four-stage approach: First, we conceptualize PAE through a scoping literature review, identifying five outcome categories. Noting a research bias toward policy cycle outcomes, we aim to innovate by focusing on individual policymaker behavior as a key, but hitherto empirically overlooked, foundational element of policy and societal change. Second, we examine the impact of strategic advocacy choices through an experimental survey aimed at municipal elected officials and elite civil servants. We find that policymakers are somewhat more responsive to direct, professional advocacy. Third, based on interviews with municipal policymakers and welfare NPO-staff in Flanders, we investigate legitimacy perceptions on different advocacy strategies, revealing strong shared expectations favoring structured, trust-based, collaborative engagement over confrontational tactics. Finally, based on the same interviews featured in the third step, we assess the motivational and contextual factors that drive individual actors to engage in sustained policy learning within a collaborative governance setting. Our results show that the advocacy efforts we examined foster incremental policy changes rather than systemic reforms through a hierarchical structure with a clear division of roles, where advocates act as signal-givers and policymakers as decision-makers.

Curriculum vitae

Aaron Brusseel behaalde in 2016 de graad van Master of Arts in de Geschiedenis aan de Vrije Universiteit Brussel (MA). Hij werkte er een jaar als onderzoeksassistent aan de vakgroep History, Archeology, Arts, Philosophy and Ethics (HARP). Daarnaast deed hij ervaring op als impactevaluator bij Oxfam België en bij het Vlaamse Departement Cultuur, Jeugd en Media. Eind 2020 startte hij een gezamenlijk doctoraatstraject in Sociaal Werk aan de Universiteit Antwerpen en in Bestuurskunde en Publiek Management aan de Universiteit Gent, met een inhoudelijke focus op de effectiviteit van belangenbehartiging door Vlaamse armoedeorganisaties. Aaron zijn werk werd gepubliceerd in vakbladen zoals *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* en in het *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (NVSQ). Het werd voorgesteld op verschillende internationale congressen, waaronder dat van het International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR), de Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) en de Vlaams-Nederlandse Sociaal Werk-conferentie.