

# Boards and Innovation in non-profit organizations: A Sense-Making Reading

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## Abstract

This sensemaking reading of research literature identifies and seeks insight from five concepts through which the role of non-profit boards in innovation may be theorised and enacted: *efficiency*, *external context*, *internal context*, *board structure* and *board processes*. These concepts emanate from making sense of fifty-one publications on non-profit organisations, boards, and innovation. The concepts are subsequently translated into reflexive questions, which may guide both practitioners and future participatory action research efforts, thus, adding to a field that appears to be dominated by non-action-based research and underdeveloped notions of innovation itself. In doing so, we move toward adopting a behavioural approach to board practices and we highlight the need for sharpened conceptualization of the very notion of innovation.

**Keywords:** board behaviour, innovation, non-profit organizations, sense-making, reading

# Introduction: non-profit, boards and innovation

The non-profit sector in its broad and international definitions, encompasses aspects and qualities that sets it apart from the market-oriented for-profit sector and the state-controlled public sector. As such, it is a sector that can challenge and renew institutional norms in order to change the political landscape (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

As part of social movements that may influence the minds of many, non-profit organisations are important innovators and change agents (Gamson 1992; Defourny et al 2014; Reuter et al 2014).

Given the recognized role of boards in non-profit organizations (Miller and Millesen 2003; Kreutzer and Jacobs 2011) and the potential for innovation in these hybrid organizations (Jaskyte, 2012, 2018; Jay, 2013; Meyer and Leitner 2018), it is of specific interest to grasp the knowledge of innovation as it is described and understood in the scientific literature on non-profit boards.

Departing from prior identified needs for more research on boards and innovation in non-profits (Jaskyte, 2012) and a pragmatic interest in board roles in innovation, we searched for insight on confirmed needs for research as well as implications for the practice of board work in non-profits. In order to make sense of existing literature on boards and innovation in the non-profit sector we seek insight from a reading along the principles of a concept-centric scientific literature review (Webster and Watson 2002). To capture studies of innovations that include everything from grand social changes to new effective programs, the theoretical background for such a review is theoretically framed within a perspective on a global and heterogenous non-profit sector (DiMaggio and Anheier 1990; Salamon and Anheier 1992) and one on board work in which qualities of practices explain performance (Daily et al 2003; Hillman and Daziel 2003; Huse 2007; Sjöstrand et al 2016).

The role of boards can be envisaged as being either recalcitrant agents, as (corrupt) principals, as pawns or puppets or as mediating hierarchs engaged in a complex and paradoxical balancing act (cf. Huse 2007). The actual and potential organisational roles of boards are essentially understood in three ways: as those of control of executive management and overall organisational use of organisational resources, of service by way of

providing contacts, financial resources, and specialised knowledge to the organisation, and of engaging in developing strategy or an emerging pattern of action by which the organization relates to its environment and potentially thrives within it (Forbes and Miliken 1999; Stiles and Taylor 2001). Ultimately, the specific weight attributed to either of these roles of a board must be understood in each case. The same goes for normative advice regarding which role could be beneficially strengthened and how that could be achieved (cf. Van Den Berghe and Leverau 2004; Sjöstrand et al 2016).

Innovation, closely related to entrepreneurship (Drucker 1993), can be described as a context and time-dependent renewal of a process, product or social system that both solves a problem and becomes used (Rehn 2017). Innovation is thus a broad concept that involves identifying and understanding problems and needs, designing new ideas, developing, improving, testing, implementation, managing risk, and diffusion into everyday use (Tidd et al 2005; Cornforth and Brown 2013). This process of innovation includes active handling of paradoxes (Lewis, 1995) and the diffusion of new ideas into practice (Rogers, 1995). With an intermediary role that can enable and connect resources, competences and ideas an important perspective on the complexity in these processes is enabled (Bessant and Rush 1995; Howells 2006; Wihlborg and Söderholm 2013). These processes of 'translation' gives an overarching theory of innovation (Callon 1984; Latour 2005; Latour and Woolgar 2013). In translation, networks of actors need to transform ideas to facts that are accepted by others: a process that also involves campaigning against other ideas and innovations (Law, 1992). All the above are aspects and processes of innovation that come with their own problems and prospects. Also, the risks involved in innovation are fraught with unintended and/or undesirable consequences (Gripenberg et al 2012).

From these initial perspectives on non-profit boards and innovation above, the identified literature is here actively reinterpreted in a sense-making process (Weick 1995). Based on a broad search within the existing scientific literature and a pragmatic knowledge perspective, our aim is that analysis of prior observations and relations enables identification of concepts of non-profit board roles in relation to innovation; concepts that point to the interception of practice and theory development, including both potential areas for future research and practical implications regarding board behaviour for innovation in the non-profit sector. Our making sense of the existing literature on the roles of boards for innovation in non-profit sector specifically answers two questions:

How is innovation described, understood and theorized in the literature on non-profit boards and innovations?

Which concepts enable making sense of board roles regarding innovation?

Our reading of a broad literature responds to these research questions. As a further result, our reading also produces a new set of reflexive questions. These are formulated with the purpose of being both expressions of theoretical knowledge and tools for stimulating reflection in practice among board members and stakeholders of boards in non-profit organisations. In this way, our pragmatic aim of contributing to innovative board practices and innovation in non-profit organizations is fulfilled.



# Method

For the purpose of this study we conducted a broad search for literature on boards and innovation in the non-profit sector. The identified literature was analysed by a concept centric reading and sense-making process.

In line with the aim of this study we wanted to identify a broad variety of literature from the non-profit sector. The non-profit sector is considered to be a set of organisations, often with a strong mission focus, separate from the market-oriented for-profit sector and the state-controlled public sector, which are both defined both by the relationships between state, market and civil society, as well as by the institutional logics within these (DiMaggio and Anheier 1990). As such, finding one simple and global definition for the non-profit sector is difficult (Salamon and Anheier 1992).

Therefore, the identification of existing literature on non-profit boards and innovation was conducted with a Google Scholar literature search. In order to identify examples from a variety of organizations within the non-profit sector the search combined one of the contextual terms; "non-profit organizations", "voluntary associations", "civil society organizations", "non-government organizations" with the terms "board of directors" and "innovation". The hits from this search was analysed on title, journal, and content in order to estimate the relevance for this study. The search ended when more than ten hits in a row were deemed to be irrelevant. Although it might not be as rigour as an indexed database (Giustini and Boulos, 2013; Haddaway et al, 2015), the use of Google Scholar provides a broad overview of a variety of scientific fields, well representative for our purpose (Gehanno et al, 2013; Halevi et al 2017).

After this broad search, a first reading of the identified literature helped us identify a core set of literature of 51 articles or book chapters as being relevant for this study. The literature has been published over the last 35 years; the majority was published during 2000-2015 (Table 1), and relate to an international empirical material, although with the vast majority coming from the USA (Table 2).

Year of publication	Number of articles
2015-2019	5
2010-2014	18
2005-2009	10
2000-2004	9
1995-1999	3
1990-1994	4
1985-1989	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>

*Table 1. Number of Publications of the Reviewed Literature.*

In the analysis of this core set of literature, the context of non-profits, types of innovations, and roles of the board found was described in main observations, relations, and themes as part of a structured concept-centric scientific literature review (Webster and Watson 2002).

After interpreting and re-interpreting these observations, relations, and themes, the findings could be categorised into concepts by a sense-making process (Weick 1995). This ongoing and retrospective process, departing from the above-mentioned perspectives on non-profit sector, innovation and boards as points of reference, enables a meaningful re-creation of what boards do and may do with regards to innovation.

National context	Number of articles
USA	23
Global	4
UK	4
Canada	2
Australia	2
Spain	2
China	1
Germany	1
Greece	1
Hungary	1
Israel	1
Puerto Rico	1
Uganda	1
n/a	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>

*Table 2. National Contexts in the Reviewed Literature*

Concepts emerging from this process are fruitful for describing, interpreting and enacting the role of boards in innovation, and provides opportunities for both future research and practice development based upon past knowledge. As a final step, this study includes a series of reflective questions by considering the implications for practice of the emergent concepts (Alvesson et al 2008).

## Findings

The identified and relevant literature on boards and innovation in the non-profit sector explicitly analyses board as a primary subject in 24 of 51 articles or book chapters. The other pertinent subjects include management (11/51), organisation (37/51) and external (16/51). Almost half of the articles (24/51) have been published in three journals focusing upon studies of non-profit or voluntary organisations (Table 3).

Journal	Number of publications
Nonprofit Management and Leadership	13
Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly	6
Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations	5
Academy of Management Journal	1
Administration in Social Work	1
American Journal of Community Psychology	1
British Journal of Management	1
Corporate Governance	1
Corporate Governance: An International Review	1
Evaluation and Program Planning	1
Higher Education	1
Journal of Business Ethics	1
Journal of Business Research	1
Journal of Management Studies	1
Journal of Modern Greek Studies	1
Journal of Organizational Behavior	1
Journal of Sport Management	1
Journal of Technology in Human Services	1
Journal of Voluntary Action Research	1
Management and Organization Review	1
New Directions for Evaluation	1
Progress in Development Studies	1
Public Administration Review	1
World Development	1
Journal of Management Studies	1
Book or chapter	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>

*Table 3. Number of Publications in Journals*

In the following findings the main observations, relations, and themes regarding innovation and board roles are described together with our interpretation of how these can be categorized into key concepts.

## How is innovation described, understood and theorized?

The described themes regarding innovation and boards in the non-profit sector often relate to a normative idea of reaching effective organizations, often with a clear connotation to managerial trends in the non-profit sector. Also, these descriptions often lack references to grand innovation theory established in other fields.

Surprisingly, most of the studied literature (46/51) included no detailed descriptions or case studies of innovations, and several articles (12/51) had no real descriptions of innovation at all. Among the innovations that were studied, grand social innovations (8/51) and innovative practices (7/51) were the two main types in the reviewed literature. Rather, in the identified literature most articles (34/51) focused on the role of the board for organisational innovation.

In the identified literature, a main theme is that organisational innovation in the non-profit sector is achieved through strategizing, adaptation, and change (Salem et al, 2002; Parker, 2007). Along with an inclusive practice, decision making and collaboration (Brown, 2002), the board is described as being vital for long-time survival and a sustainable organisation (Froelich et al, 2011). The innovative behaviour and role of the board is put in relation to the organisation's capacity for innovation and effectiveness (Coombes et al, 2011). This behaviour of the board leads to innovative practices, such as networking, with an influence of new ideas and discourses into the board as well as the organisation. Rather than actual descriptions of societal innovations, they are to be reached through hybrid organisations (Cornforth and Spear, 2010; Jay, 2013; Jäger and Schröder, 2014) or the introduction of new programs in an existing sector (Schuh and Leviton, 2006). In summary, innovation is described as a normative idea of reaching effective organizations. As such, studies of innovation fits overarching managerial trends in non-profit studies.

Regarding studied innovations and examples of innovative practices, the identified literature includes cases of; technological innovation in sports (Hoeber and Hoeber 2012), the reduction of poverty through local economies in Bangladesh (Murphy et al 2012), organisations working to fight HIV (Chambré and Fatt 2002), inclusion in the field of disabilities (Salem et al 2002) and the introduction of lay boards in former Soviet regimes (Morgan and Bergerson 2000). The identified literature also

included two other perspectives on innovation: a critical perspective on challenges for non-profits being innovative when profit incentives gain influence over organisation (Steinberg 1990) and a study on how information technology influences innovation (Mano 2009).

Some examples in the studied cases of innovation relate to innovations through theories of relational capacity (Murphy et al, 2012) or adaptation of innovations (Salem et al, 2002) while some take a more holistic approach on innovation theory (cf Jay, 2013). These are connected to well established theories such as paradoxes (Lewis, 1995), diffusion (Rogers, 1995) and entrepreneurship (Drucker, 1993).

## Which concepts enable making sense of board roles regarding innovation?

The identified literature describes board roles that relate to various aspects of change, renewal, and innovation processes in the non-profit sector. Based on themes and relations in these descriptions, it is our understanding that five concepts can be fruitfully used to make sense of the board roles in innovation. These concepts are effectiveness, external context, internal context, board structure and board processes (Table 4). Only two texts did not provide any further depth to our understanding and were classified as other.

Opposite side:

*Table 4. Five concepts that enable making sense of board roles regarding innovation in the non-profit sector.*

Concept	Described observations, relations and themes	Authors and publication
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance</li> <li>• Capacity</li> <li>• Evaluation</li> <li>• Mission</li> <li>• Context</li> <li>• Uncertainty</li> <li>• Ambiguity</li> </ul>	<p>Amagoh, F. (2015)</p> <p>Callen, J. L., Klein, A., and Tinkelman, D. (2003)</p> <p>Callen, J. L., Klein, A., and Tinkelman, D. (2010)</p> <p>Carman, J. G., and Fredericks, K. A. (2008)</p> <p>Coombes, S. M., Morris, M. H., Allen, J. A., and Webb, J. W. (2011)</p> <p>De Andrés-Alonso, P., Azofra-Palenzuela, V., and Romero-Merino, M. E. (2010)</p> <p>Fredericksen, P., and London, R. (2000)</p> <p>Fredette, C., and Bradshaw, P. (2012)</p> <p>Gill, M., Flynn, R. J., and Reissing, E. (2005)</p> <p>Jaskyte, K. (2012)</p> <p>Jaskyte, K. (2013)</p> <p>Jay, J. (2013)</p> <p>Kreutzer, K., and Jacobs, C. (2011)</p> <p>Mano, R. S. (2009)</p> <p>McDonald, R. E. (2007)</p> <p>Miller-Millesen, J. L. (2003)</p> <p>Murphy, M., Perrot, F., and Rivera-Santos, M. (2012)</p> <p>Salem, D. A., Foster-Fishman, P. G., and Schuh, R. G., and Leviton, L. C. (2006)</p> <p>Siciliano, J. I. (1996)</p> <p>Steinberg, R. (1990)</p> <p>Walls, J. L., and Hoffman, A. J. (2013)</p> <p>Young, D. R. (2001)</p> <p>Young, D. R., Koenig, B. L., Najam, A., and Fisher, J. (1999)</p> <p>Zhu, H., Wang, P., and Bart, C. (2016)</p>
External organizational context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political</li> <li>• Cultural</li> <li>• Stakeholders</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Inclusion/diversity</li> <li>• Changing political landscape</li> <li>• Beyond US non-profits</li> </ul>	<p>Amagoh, F., and Kabydyeva, A. (2012)</p> <p>Borzaga, C., and Depedri, S. (2015)</p> <p>Brown, W. A. (2002)</p> <p>Guo, C., and Acar, M. (2005)</p> <p>Lan, G. Z., and Galaskiewicz, J. (2012)</p> <p>Morgan, A. W., and Bergerson, A. A. (2000)</p> <p>Rozakou, K. (2016)</p> <p>Steane, P., and Christie, M. (2001)</p> <p>Vidal, I. (2013)</p> <p>Wolch, J. R., and Rocha, E. M. (1993)</p>
Internal organizational context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complexity</li> <li>• Hybrids</li> <li>• Identity</li> <li>• Life cycle</li> <li>• Diversity</li> </ul>	<p>Abzug, R. (2017)</p> <p>Chambré, S. M., and Fatt, N. (2002)</p> <p>Cornforth, C., and Spear, R. (2010)</p> <p>Jäger, U. P., and Schröder, A. (2014)</p> <p>Jay, J. (2013)</p> <p>Kramer, R. M. (1990)</p> <p>Young, D. R. (2001)</p> <p>Young, D. R., Koenig, B. L., Najam, A., and Fisher, J. (1999)</p>
Board structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Committees</li> <li>• Size</li> <li>• Cognitive diversity</li> <li>• No clear results</li> <li>• Process matters</li> <li>• Easy research</li> </ul>	<p>Abzug, R. (2017)</p> <p>Coombes, S. M., Morris, M. H., Allen, J. A., and Webb, J. W. (2011)</p> <p>De Andrés-Alonso, P., Azofra-Palenzuela, V., and Romero-Merino, M. E. (2010)</p> <p>Fredette, C., and Bradshaw, P. (2012)</p> <p>Gill, M., Flynn, R. J., and Reissing, E. (2005)</p> <p>Herman, R. D., and Van Til, J. (1985)</p> <p>Jaskyte, K. (2013)</p> <p>Miller-Millesen, J. L. (2003)</p> <p>Siciliano, J. I. (1996)</p> <p>Smith, D. H. (1986)</p> <p>Walls, J. L., and Hoffman, A. J. (2013)</p> <p>Vidovich, L., and Currie, J. (2012)</p>
Board processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behavioural orientation</li> <li>• Networking and relations</li> <li>• Inclusive practices</li> <li>• Decision making</li> <li>• Problematic management methods</li> <li>• Lack of interpersonal relations</li> <li>• Board roles of control, service and strategy</li> </ul>	<p>Barr, A., Fafchamps, M., and Owens, T. (2005)</p> <p>Beck, T. E., Lengnick-Hall, C. A., and Lengnick-Hall, M. L. (2008)</p> <p>Brown, W. A. (2002)</p> <p>Coombes, S. M., Morris, M. H., Allen, J. A., and Froelich, K., McKee, G., and Rathge, R. (2011)</p> <p>Gibelman, M., Gelman, S. R., and Pollack, D. (1997)</p> <p>Hodge, M. M., and Piccolo, R. F. (2005)</p> <p>Jaskyte, K. (2013)</p> <p>Jay, J. (2013)</p> <p>Kreutzer, K., and Jacobs, C. (2011)</p> <p>Parker, L. D. (2007)</p> <p>Siciliano, J. I. (1996)</p> <p>Smith, D. H. (1986)</p> <p>M. Viader, A., and I. Espina, M. (2014)</p> <p>Widmer, C. (1993)</p> <p>Wolch, J. R., and Rocha, E. M. (1993)</p>
Other		<p>Auld, C. J., and Godbey, G. (1998)</p> <p>Hoeber, L., and Hoeber, O. (2012)</p>

## Effectiveness

Many observations and connections in the literature on non-profit boards and innovation relate to how innovation, innovativeness, and innovative organisations could or should lead to higher effectiveness. In these, innovation is seen either as means for performance and effectiveness, or as a result of efficient organisations and processes - or a combination of the two. An important question is how to operationalise effectiveness. This becomes explicit when the organisational mission is considered. Most of the articles include various measures and operationalisations of performance and effectiveness. Although there are many positivist ambitions to correlate the role of boards, innovations and effectiveness are presented in the reviewed literature; it is our interpretation that the large variation in these offers little assistance when it comes to understanding or supporting the practice of board work. In the following, we present different observations and connections of effectiveness from this varied literature.

Coombes et al (2011) found that, in a survey of US non-profits, innovation and the board's behavioural orientation related to organisational entrepreneurship. The social oriented mission of non-profits also means that the risky, proactive, innovative behaviours of the boards primarily concentrate on enhancing social outcomes, while financial performance remains a means to achieve social results. In an attempt to overcome this complexity of measuring performance in non-profits, the authors measured both financial performance and self-reported social performance.

The importance of organisational mission was also found in Salem et al (2002): the study of US collective action organisations and their ability to adopt inclusion. Strategies where the ability to remain consistent with social missions while remaining open to innovation, explained why specific internal and external factors characterise the organisations that adopted inclusion. These strategies for innovation also included avoidance of dependency on funders, which required non-mission related activities. In an exploratory survey of US non-profit hospitals, McDonald (2007) found that a mission that motivates and clearly formulates support innovativeness with performance measured as self-reported innovativeness and the number of adopted innovations.

In a survey of Israeli non-profit human service organisations, Mano (2009) found the use of digital communication to be beneficial to innovation; it was regarded as a measure of performance where respondents self-reported aspects of how new ideas were put into practice. The results led the author to



conclude that larger and more well-funded non-profits would be likely to use IT when establishing innovations. The author argues that this shows how non-profits differ from and are more complex than for-profit companies. Furthermore, Jaskyte (2013) found that, in a survey and interview study of American school networks, board size was the only significant measure of size that corresponds to technical innovation. In the case of administrative innovations, board size and organisational age were the significant measures, as younger organisations with large boards introduced more innovations.

In an earlier literature review, Jaskyte (2012) also found many different aspects of board effectiveness have an indirect effect upon organisational innovation.

Murphy et al (2012) case studies on global partnerships in Bangladesh and Indian development work introduces the idea of relational capacity as a factor for social innovation capacity. The role of such social capital for effectiveness was further underscored by Fredette and Bradshaw's (2012) study on boards in Canadian non-profits. Fredericksen and London (2000), however, found that non-profits engaged in public partnerships in the housing sector often do not have the capacity to deliver what is needed. In this view, effectiveness becomes a result of how external contextual factors, such as political actors, judge the potential performance of non-profits.

Another take on effectiveness is how the idea of an efficient board can lead to improved performance. Based upon both organisational data and interviews with leaders from US non-profits, Gill et al (2005) argue that quality of the board's own practice is the key factor between board efficiency and organisational performance. Zhu et al (2016) investigated for-profit and non-profits in Canada and found that the way in which the board discusses, and processes various management methods are important factors for strategic involvement and organisational effectiveness.

In a study of how capacity of non-profit agencies affects program implementation and the organisational ability to start something new, Shuh and Levington (2005) developed a maturity framework that revealed both size and age of the organisation to be insufficient criteria. As a result, the ability to capture the general direction of organisational development was found to be important instead.

The way in which non-profits can evaluate their operations to strengthen innovativeness is another area of interest. Carman and Fredericks (2008) describe how evaluation is quite common in their work on how American

NGOs evaluate their performance; however, this is done in many ways and with different purposes. They argue that evaluation instead could be used for strategic development and innovation. They also think that funders should have this perspective on evaluation.

Through examining financial data from large US non-profits, Callen et al (2003) found that major donors on the board correlates to organisational effectiveness; however, the number of board meetings, number of committees, and the existence of a strategic committee were not associated to effectiveness. In a survey of US non-profits, Callen et al (2010) also found that board control and boundary spanning are needed for effectiveness. Controlling behaviour lead to effectiveness in stable contexts, while boundary spanning is needed in more complex and dynamic environments. De Andrés-Alonso et al (2010) found in their study of Spanish foundations, that cognitive diversity is an important factor for effectiveness. Due to large uncertainties, Steinberg (1990) also rules out financial incentives as a method for achieving effectiveness in US non-profits.

Effectiveness also tends to be a theme in studies concerning the following: organisational structures, cost-effectiveness, and impact (Young et al 1999), as well as organisational identity (Young, 2001), aspects of board behaviour in best-practice literature (Miller-Millesen 2003), lack of performance measures for controlling behaviours (Kreutzer and Jacobs 2011), financial and program outcomes of different evaluation practices (Schuh and Leviton 2006), use of performance measurements in program evaluation (Carman and Fredericks 2008), formal planning in relation to objective financial performance and subjective ranking of social performance and (Siciliano 1996), positive organisational deviance, networking and environmental and social performance (Walls and Hoffman 2013), the factor of boards in planning, performance measurements, funding and human resources (Amagoh 2015) and, lastly, active reinterpretation of paradoxes in processes and outcomes (Jay 2013).

Given this plethora of aspects of the (contested) board's role in organisational effectiveness, we conclude that an ability to handle ambiguity in performance measures and initiatives for higher effectiveness is an important aspect concerning the role of the board: especially when the social mission of a non-profit organisation is properly taken into consideration. Even if these studies appear in the identified literature on non-profit boards

and innovation, however, there are mostly vague connections between effectiveness and innovation.

When it comes to effectiveness and innovation it is our interpretation that, in order to support board practice, boards should reflect over the ambiguity that arises from contrasting views on their mission and an effective organisation.

Furthermore, the many studies on effectiveness have been done on varying board behaviour in various contexts. Thus, the pertinent external factors and the specific context of the organisation that the board governs should be attended to with great care.

## External Context

The board's role in innovation and the external organisational context is described in the reviewed literature through contextual observations and connections. Here, surrounding political and cultural norms along with social networks and the inclusion of stakeholders form the role of the board. Several of these studies specifically describe non-profit organisations beyond the context of the USA.

The stakeholder perspective is an important aspect of how boards relate to external context in their organisation. Vidal (2013) found that in a study on cooperatives in Spain, the changing political landscape transformed non-profit organisations into social entrepreneurs: a change that required a multi-stakeholder governance, with both stewardship and collaboration required by the boards.

Morgan and Bergerson (2000) found in their study of Hungarian lay boards that national and cultural political norms of the former Soviet regime affected the implementation of lay boards. However, global management norms were also adapted as the idea of lay boards was implemented.

This dependency upon a wider political context or changing political landscape is consistent with Wolch and Rocha's (1993) survey of voluntary organisations in the UK. Changes in funding and management trends led to a need for planning. The authors also found that the culture in voluntary organisations tended to be a constraint for planning; when it is done without competence, the quality in services is compromised.

This strong dependency upon funding re-occurs in Guo and Acar's (2005) study of US-based charities. The researchers found that an organisation is more likely to develop formalised collaboration when it is older, has a larger

budget, and is government funded. Where board linkages with other non-profits were strong, formalised collaboration was more developed in organisations.

Steane and Christie's (2001) survey of Australian non-profits supports the fact that the board knowledge in the non-profit sector is valued higher than is functional expertise. Their main results indicate that non-profit boards tend to adopt a stakeholder approach to governance.

Brown (2002) also studied the inclusive practices of the board in American non-profits. Directors of the board and CEOs generally believe their organisations to be inclusive in governance. The study also revealed, however, shortcomings in the impact of inclusion practices upon stakeholders, input from diverse groups, and the inclusion of non-board members in decision-making groups. Borzaga and Depedri (2015) has also studied this multi-stakeholder governance model: specifically, in Italian cooperatives and Canadian non-profit health providers. They describe how the boards' governing role includes everything from stakeholders from patients and families, to professionals' external knowledge and resources. This finding supports the importance of multiple stakeholders as social costs increase.

In studies on the external organisational context, the non-profit organisation itself can also be an innovation in society. Examples of this can be found in the following research: Rozakou's (2016) study of Greek volunteer associations, China's innovation system as described by Lan and Galaskiewicz (2012), and Amagoh and Kabdiyeva's (2012) study of NGOs in Kazakhstan.

As aforementioned, the external organisational context in the literature is conceived as the political context together with the board networks of stakeholders. Thus, the ability to collaborate with, and handle, a shifting political landscape becomes the board's key task. This ability rests upon networks and connections, and who is included in what way in the board works.

Our interpretation is that, in order to support board practice when it comes to the external organisational context and innovation, boards should engage in active reflection about changing external context and how stakeholders that are included in the board work.

Managing these external relations is ultimately related to how this is done within the frame of a particular organisation.

## Internal context

Many observations and connections in the literature on non-profit boards and innovation connect to what we refer to as the internal organisational context. A common theme is the complexity of non-profit organisations and their differences: from the private to the public sector. Organisational hybridity and of associational form are highlighted, along with a sensitivity to time or organisational lifecycle.

Cornforth and Spear (2010) argue in their book on hybrid civil society organisations, that the increased complexity following hybridity leads to decoupling processes in governance and a mixed composition of the board: with a combination of both stakeholders and elected directors. Jäger and Schröder (2014) also raised this idea of combining identities. They proposed a functional solidarity that integrates the market and the civil society sector when defining hybrid organisations as an organisational identity. In a case-study of a public/private partnership, Jay (2013) found that paradoxes, arising when multiple logics are combined in hybrid organisations and the re-interpretation of projects and processes can, indeed, be a source of innovation.

Another aspect of organisational structures and their role for the concept of internal organisational context are the various forms of meta-structures found in the non-profit sector. Young et al (1999) studied the advantages and disadvantages that exist for corporate partnerships, federations, and member organisations when coping with typical NGO challenges. He found that corporate partnerships were the most flexible and adaptive that also engage high-profile boards; membership organisations were the least flexible, with a low ability to prioritise and engage powerful boards. Federations, with their affiliates, were the most effective in advocacy.

As time goes by, organisations mature: from newness to adolescence, to mature and old organisations. Thus, a life-cycle perspective is an important part of the internal organisational context in which the boards operate. Over time, the roles of the board change as the organisations change. For example, Abzug's (2017) historical research of US-based non-profits reveals that historical periods shape the pre-requisites for the board.

Furthermore, the regional setting and type of core activity influences the board's structure and composition. In their article on American non-profits in the emerging policy field of Aids/HIV, Chambre and Fatt (2002) found that organisations' vulnerability differs between newness, adolescence, and old age. The most common reason for organisational death included problems of funding in relation to policies: where organisations that started in a policy of crisis (and engagement) did not recruit boards with the fiscal expertise needed as organisations matured.

Kramer (1990) studied British national voluntary agencies serving people with disabilities from 1976 to 1989: a time period of major shifts in policy. There was a consistent pattern of growth, bureaucratisation, and professionalisation during this long period of serving. Although self-selection and self-perpetuation were common in those boards, members of these did not perceive this to be a problem.

Another important aspect of the internal context concerns the organisation's identity. Young (2001) describes the role of identity for organisational structure. In a case study of two large American umbrella organisations, he found the ability to resolve multiple identities should be an important part of non-profit strategy. the metaphors of goal-seeking systems, economies, and polity were useful for including the multiple stakeholders and ambiguous economic environments around them.

All in all, the literature on board work and its part in innovation contains many different observations, some even contradictory. The literature revolving around internal organisational context relates to innovation by organisational complexity, lifecycles, and identity. Regarding the board's role, it is our interpretation that diversity needs to be handled and considered.

In order to support board practice when it comes to internal organisational context and innovation, our interpretation is that boards may fruitfully reflect over how to identify and harbour the complexity of hybridity, diversity, and pre-existing identities in their organisation, with particular attention whether to consider the organisation as being new, adolescent, mature or old.

Board practice may also be structured in various ways.

## **Board Structure**

Boards can be, and are, structured differently: in terms of formal roles, age, gender, and other characteristics of directors, frequency of meetings, and

further internal organisational forms such as sub-committees. Quite a few studies approach the possible connection between board structure and organisational performance, of which innovation is a part. The set-up of these appears to take its cue from the wider field of corporate governance studies. The board's structural properties are also quite easily measured and counted, which is another factor that explains the large number of such studies. Connections and themes regarding the concept of board structure are described in the following observations.

Siciliano (1996) showed in a sample of 240 American YMCA organisations, using a formal sub-committee on the board tasked with strategic planning, was conducive to better financial and social performance. More specifically, the activities of setting goals, objectives, and action plans, and monitoring results were linked to better performance. In a study of 144 Spanish foundations, De Andrés-Alonso et al (2010) concluded that cognitive diversity in the board is conducive to the board's impact upon organisational effectiveness. Such studies lend credibility to the concept of board structure as being important to a framework in understanding and contributing to innovative board work in non-profit organisations.

Jaskyte (2013) identifies board size as being the only significant predictor of organisational innovation in a study of several structural characteristics of organisation based upon surveys and interviews with executives in 79 American non-profit organisations working for community participation in schools. The larger the board, the more innovation. Walls and Hoffman (2013) demonstrated the importance of human capital is supported in a study on how organisations act when it concerns environmental and sustainability norms. They found that the directors' experience in the environmental field related positively to innovation and the renewal of the organisation. However, Abzug (2017) found in a study of American non-profits in 1931, 1961 and 1991, that board size does not correlate with racial and gender diversity on it.

Several other studies attempting to connect board structure to organisational effectiveness suffer from the significant shortcoming that effectiveness is operationalised in a subjective rather than an objective manner. Fredette and Bradshaw (2012) studied 234 Canadian non-profits and found the social capital of the board relates to perceptions of the board's 'governance effectiveness', without the inclusion of any metric of organisational effectiveness. Smith's (1986) study of 97 voluntary organisations in Massachusetts, USA was an attempt to differentiate between an

‘outstanding’ versus an ‘average’ voluntary organisation. The difference between these two categories was based upon subjective judgements of local leaders. Smith himself concluded the following: “It is an irony that while many people study voluntary organisations, very, very few seem interested in studying their effectiveness” (p. 34). The literature surveyed here shows how there appears to be an increasing interest in studying non-profit effectiveness. The challenge of doing so in a methodologically robust manner, however, remains with us.

A number of contributions point to the relative lack of importance of board structure as opposed to what goes on within it. Miller-Millesen (2003) concluded in a survey of literature: “It is time to supplement our knowledge of what boards look like and what they should do with more empirical evidence of their actual behaviours” (p. 534). Such a conclusion was reinforced by Gill et al (2005), concluding that the prediction of board effectiveness and organisational performance rests upon capturing the degree of attentiveness to one’s practice in the board room (cf. Herman and Van Til (1985) on the complexity of non-profit boards).

Further support for putting board processes centre stage can be found in Coombes et al (2011): In a study of a large sample of New York State non-profits, they show that a strategically active and cohesive board is conducive to the organisation’s social performance. With regard to the multiple roles in agency, stewardship and resource dependency theory, Viader and Espina (2014) also found large similarities between for-profit and non-profit board work. This blurring between for-profit and non-profit boundaries is also supported by Vidovich and Currie (2012), who studied the abundance of interlocking directorates on boards in Australia.

In line with Miller-Millesen’s (2003) theoretical overview and her conclusions in the form of specified hypotheses, there are arguably structural antecedents to an ‘entrepreneurial orientation’ in a board, conducive to mission fulfilment in non-profit organisation.

When it comes to board structure and innovation, it is our interpretation that boards should reflect over the connection between (re-)structure and improved performance, in order to support board practice.

Given the structure of the board it is now time to look deeper into the actual process therein.



## Board Processes

The literature includes observations and relations on how boards organise their work and meetings. These board processes include behavioural orientation perspectives on networking, connections, inclusive practices, and decision making. In the literature concerning board processes, as described below, the role of the directors in governing a non-profit organisation for innovation and renewal can take many forms. Regarding the role of the boards for organisational innovation, Jaskyte (2012) summarises that, although only limited studies exist, board capital, culture, cohesiveness, connections, and demography can be expected to have direct effect upon organisational innovation. Interestingly, cohesive boards can actually restrain innovation. Based upon these many roles and processes, it is our interpretation that an active process of decision-making and embracing of complexity should be engaged in the boards. In the following section, we give examples of these many roles and processes in the reviewed literature.

In an early study, Widmer (1993) explored role conflict and ambiguity among boards of directors in American non-profit human service organisations. She found that the directors took the following roles: trustees, workers, experts, representatives, and figureheads. Also, those who fulfil multiple or boundary roles are the ones who experience role conflict. Coombes et al (2011) studied the behaviour of boards in US-based non-profits and found that strategic and cohesive boards are more entrepreneurially oriented. This entrepreneurial orientation leads to increased social rather than financial performance in non-profits.

Smith (1986) interviewed organisational leaders in an effort to study what distinguishes outstanding US-based voluntary organisations in the 1960s. He found outstanding organisations with a high social status: both regarding its members and in the eyes of others. The outstanding organisations had more prestige in the community, a higher income, better educated members, and more committees with active participation in decisions.

In their study of a European-based CSO, Kreutzer and Jacobs (2011) address the paradox of combining the board's controlling and coaching behaviours. They propose the board can have four different roles as combinations of high or low control and coaching. In another case, Barr et al (2005) study the many possible roles non-profits boards can have, as in those of Ugandan NGOs. Here they find highly educated boards with a large heterogeneity, and directors that were involved in many organisations. As these organisations were acting on behalf of an international community, the

governing of these various directors still managed to have a clear focus on donors rather than on the local government.

The idea that board processes could influence innovation in relation to organisational effectiveness has been studied for quite some time in the voluntary and non-profit sector. For example, Smith (1986) found that based upon interviews with US voluntary organisations that had been judged as outstandingly effective, boards in these organisations had more committees and took active participation in the decision making.

Formal management - such as planning - is a common response to external pressures on the organisation. Regarding planning within the board, two articles from the mid-1990s took a standpoint that such processes relate to innovation. Wolch and Rocha (1993) interviewed executives in voluntary UK-based organisations regarding how their respective organisations plan a response to political and funding changes. Although they found the change in the external context lead to planning, this planning also came from management trends. The authors highlight that such trends might encompass a risk of missing the wanted quality since more planning is done without the required competence. Moreover, a culture of voluntary organisations was found to be a constraint for planning. For example, when it comes to the development of new leaders, Froelich et al (2011) examined how non-profit charities and cooperatives planned for succession. Based upon a survey of CEOs, they found that, to a large extent, the boards are responsible for the poor connection between the need for succession planning and the actual plans and actions undertaken. Furthermore, the causal links between (formal) planning and effectiveness have been tested in American voluntary associations; Siciliano (1996) found these to have significant correlations when it comes to formal planning in the board's sub-committees.

Another aspect of board process is the use of management techniques. A critical perspective on how management techniques developed by large businesses could be applied by non-profits was introduced by Beck et al (2008). In a case study on a small American non-profit trying to manage innovative programs that had been initiated, they found the appliance of businesses management techniques to be problematic for the complex context of non-profits. Thus, management often applies a single technique when solving a specific task. Although this may work for some, the lack of a holistic management approach suitable for complex non-profit contexts often create negative counter effects. Following the scholarly field of problems with adopting methods developed in another organisational

context, the authors suggest that bundles of practices that are better adopted to the internal context may help in addressing the counter effects they observed.

All in all, the observations described above add to the importance of the concept of board processes in relating to organisational effectiveness rather than directly to innovations. An underlying assumption also appears that some specific notions in the voluntary or non-profit sector could explain the fact that planning or the use of specific techniques does not always correlate to effectiveness. Thus, active board work was also found in Jay's (2013) study of hybrid organisations: active reinterpretation of processes and projects in relation to failure or success led to innovation.

Board processes in relation to innovation also include the notion of including or excluding different views and experiences. In a survey of non-profits providing services to low-income or disadvantaged individuals, Brown (2002) found that board members believed their organisational governance to be inclusive. The results also showed that boards were not aware of their impact upon stakeholders; they did not seek input from diverse groups and did not include non-board members in decision-making groups. Hodge and Piccolo (2005) found in a study of US non-profits that the involvement of the board depended upon the source of funding: where the privately funded have more board involvement techniques.

An important role for any board is to make decisions. In a case study of non-profit professional associations, Parker (2007) saw how the board of directors uses both formal and informal decision making. Their strategic perspective was dominated by financial terms and an attention to organisational politics.

Lastly, the importance of quality in board practice becomes apparent in Gibelman et al (1997): their study of areas of negligence when things go wrong. They found that the failure to manage and supervise activities led to the studied problems, as did the neglect or waste of corporate assets, having a conflict or a self-benefit of interests, the improper delegation of authority, the harm done to third parties through wrongful action and/or a breach of contract, and offenses against taxing authorities.

In conclusion, we find that the identified literature relating to board processes is mostly based upon surveys and case studies, deals either with behavioural orientation of networking, decision making, and inclusive practices or with problems in applying management methods. Furthermore,

the many roles of the board are often categorised as either control, service or strategy. These are roles that could be used in various ways depending upon the task at hand, which includes different approaches to innovation.

When it comes to board processes and innovation, it is our interpretation that boards should reflect on when to take the role of control, service or strategy in order to support board practice. Moreover, an active reflection is recommended on how networking, paradoxes, and complexity affect quality of decisions.

## Discussion: Areas for Further Research

As concluded by Jaskyte (2012) there is a need for more qualitative studies on the role of boards for innovation. The un-stated prerequisite for such study is a concept of innovation itself, something we have found self-evident, un-stated or simply ignored in the literature made sense of here. The conception of innovation that does appear to dominate is one of it as transforming organizational structures or processes leading to efficiency in one sense or the other.

The potential for innovation in non-profit organisations, however, reaches from societal innovation to organisational innovations and new innovative practices (Meyer and Leitner 2018). The concept itself thus needs heightened attention. Is innovation an unproblematic normative and positive thing, is it process-oriented, managerial, societal or what? Furthermore, as non-profit organizations are mission oriented rather than profit maximising organisations the idea of evaluating risks and prospects in innovations must be considered with great care.

From the perspective of innovation theory, organising for innovation is made possible by letting everyone use a part of his or her time for renewal and ideas, using project teams with more resources, and dedication-specific innovation or R&D offices (Govindarajan and Trimble 2013). The question of how to best organise for innovation, remains; the intermediary role that can enable and connect resources, competences and ideas gives an important perspective on the complexity in these processes (Bessant and Rush 1995; Howells 2006; Wihlborg and Söderholm 2013).

Thus, the underlying theoretical understanding of innovation as a broad and varied concept that required further specification in order to advance knowledge and practice: be it one that focuses upon products or processes or rather one than on societal outcomes. Furthermore, it is our understanding that the unknown in these change processes can be fruitfully addressed by means of testing, risk management, and models for diffusing results.

The lack of studied innovation among non-profit actors and contexts and the gap between social innovation and the systemisation of policies supporting it (Krlav et al 2019) are also identified.

Although there were few descriptions or cases of actual innovations in the identified literature, organisational innovation is often described as being a positive force that is needed in sustainable non-profit organisations. Furthermore, nowhere in the literature are innovations described in a sense of social change; this important role of for boards in non-profit organisations appear not to be theorised in terms of innovation.

There is lack of empirical descriptions in the reviewed literature; however, innovation is often described as a normatively positive way of achieving good board-work and effectiveness leading to sustainable organisations. This also means the world-changing social innovations often assigned to non-profit organisations lack theorisation of innovation in the reviewed literature on non-profit boards. Rather, the literature largely relies upon theories developed in studies of corporate boards. Thus, it is likely the specific context of voluntary or non-profit organisations is a factor that is believed to explain some of the complexity in the studied results (Callen et al 2010).

We found surprisingly little work with a critical perspective on boards as rational agents for innovation; there is ample space for critical perspectives on how management, decision making, formal structures, and rational goal setting often do not lead to desired outcomes and effects (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Brunsson 2007; Alvesson and Willmott 2012). Rather, several of the studies try to link various ideas of performance or effectiveness to aspects of the board that can be more easily measured. Our belief is that the variation of these studies is symptomatic of a reality that needs to be understood in more qualitative and critical aspects.

There are few descriptions in the identified literature of the board's role in a wider governance perspective, which focuses upon the political and institutional norms creating the role of the board. We argue that the lack of this perspective leads to focusing more on the managing role of the boards, thus, missing out on how theories of innovation could help explain the way in which the board actively uses analysis and intelligence in order to achieve societal change.

Given the many aspects of and methods for innovation, an overarching theoretical understanding of innovation as processes of 'translation' could be fruitful (Callon 1984; Latour 2005; Latour and Woolgar 2013). Networks of actors need to transform ideas to facts that are accepted by others: a process that also involves campaigning against other ideas and innovations (Law, 1992). One implication arises: the translating process of innovation through

network and networking of the board of directors in the renewal and innovation in non-profit organisations is of particular interest for future research.

Lastly, the qualities in practice for understanding the roles and responsibilities of a board is also of great importance (Stiles and Taylor 2001; Huse 2007). We notice the few inside observations and descriptions of non-profit board work and behavioural practices. These all point to the need for future research approaches that can help close this important knowledge gap.

## Conclusion and implications for practice

The reviewed literature on non-profit boards and innovation contains surprisingly few actual descriptions of innovation and little use of innovation in relation to societal changes. Rather, we have discussed the literature on non-profit boards and their role in innovation, by providing theoretical frameworks for how context and board behaviour can lead to control, strategy or service of the organisation, as well as how the effectiveness of a board can influence organisational innovation: either by direct or indirect linkages. In line with reviews by Miller-Millesen (2003) and Jaskyte (2012), we re-iterate their pointing to the need for case studies of boards of directors in order to arrive at deeper understanding of the antecedents of performance. We propose that one possible further step is participatory research efforts (Aagaard Nielsen and Svensson 2006; Reason and Bradbury 2008) eliciting board role performance by posing reflective questions based upon a theoretically and empirically informed understanding of the role of both structures and processes within non-profit boards in innovation, thus, taking into account the specificity of the non-profit organisation in a particular external and internal context, along with the contested nature of the concept of innovation. Specifically, we see the need to concentrate on the role of non-profit boards when trying to renew efforts for social change.

Such future research should benefit from a series of self-reflective questions that can also support development and learning in non-profit boards engaging in processes of strategic renewal and innovation. Through a reflexive approach (Alvesson et al 2008), the possibility for new knowledge both in and of the practice of non-profit boards and innovation is, thus, enabled.



Therefore, returning to the observations and connections of effectiveness, external and internal context, board structure and processes, and non-profit boards and innovation, we propose a set of reflective questions for board members to ask themselves:

- What sources of ambiguity exist regarding our mission and our conceptions of an effective organisation?
- How do we include stakeholders in relation to a changing external organisational context?
- How can we identify and harbour multiple identities of our organisation?
- In what way do we believe that various board structures relate to improved performance?
- How do we decide if and when to take the role of control, service, strategy in relation to a specific task?
- How can we embrace complexity as a driver for quality in our active decision making?

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