

Learning in Temporary Organizations - the Example of United Nations' World Summits *Kathrin Böhling (Sociology), Social Science Research Center Berlin (Germany)*

The focus of this paper on learning in temporary organizations challenges the organizational learning discourse to reconcile learning with diversity among different groups of actors (Berthoin Antal 1998; Easterby-Smith/Crossan/Nicolini 2000). There is no overall collectivity in temporary organizations whose members may be learning for (Argyris/Schön 1996), but rather distinct learning curves among the different groups of actors. Temporary organizations are “groups of permanent organizations collaborating towards the accomplishment of a joint task with the duration of the collaboration explicitly and ex ante fixed, either by a specific date or by the attainment of a pre-defined state of condition” (Bakker/Cambré/Provan forthcoming). Examples of temporary organizations include construction projects, movie sets, organizers of sporting events and, as will be discussed in this paper, World Summits of the United Nations.

Under conditions of multiple-context embeddedness and tensions between the ephemeral, task-oriented collaboration and orchestration, the core challenge for temporary organizations consists in achieving coordination (Gkeredakis 2008). Making collaboration work in temporary organizations requires both formal and improvised coordination strategies (Faraj/Xiao 2006). Coordination in temporary organizations rests in particular ways on the interrelation between structure and enactment and is contingent upon context. This paper takes a closer look at the activities by which coordination gets accomplished in temporary organizations within an organizational learning framework. It builds on a view of organizational learning as an ongoing activity of maintaining and modifying established structures and processes. Since it moves “between familiar and emergent activities and between established and emergent social relations” (Blackler/McDonald 2000: 833), organizational learning is essentially a practical and politicized accomplishment.

Drawing on anecdotal evidence about the introduction of the multi-stakeholder approach in the World Summit on the Information Society of the United Nations, the key message will be developed that the activities by which coordination gets accomplished is the site of learning in temporary organizations. The multi-stakeholder approach is an innovative mechanism to transform the coordination of decision-making on problems of global reach in UN Summits. As a growing number of stakeholders from business and civil society are involved in the deliberations and negotiations about global issues, the introduction of the multi-stakeholder approach was seen as a promising route for the emergence of novel forms of interaction among states and non-state actors to cope with the challenges in an ever more global polity and economy (Benner/Reinicke/Witte 2004; Selian 2004). It was raising hope for supra-national governance to materialize in the UN because the multi-stakeholder approach could imply that overall problem solving capacity would be improved and societal participation and control increased.

The focus on learning in the temporary organization of the UN Summit on the Information Society scrutinizes this assumption from a sympathetic but skeptical perspective. The multi-stakeholder approach in UN summitry provides non-state actors with resources, opportunities and incentives to affect the intergovernmental negotiations on problems of global reach in important ways. But transforming the underlying principle of bridging public-sector bodies with private-sector entities and civil society into actions and structures entails ongoing efforts of the actors involved to reinterpret and reformulate established rules of procedure and routines. It involves furthermore the willingness among powerful groups and coalitions to create participatory arrangements for non-state actors to play a role in the numerous plenary sessions and working groups of UN Summits where deliberation and interest accommodation is taking place. The socialization of the Summit newcomers and unlearning of old behaviors and worldviews among states may become important driving forces for learning to occur in the temporary organization of UN Summits. Space is given to unfamiliar views and perspec-

tives, goals and interest if the criticisms on the legitimacy and effectiveness of the established ways of interest accommodation among states that have worked in the past are used to reorient international deliberation and negotiation. But the lessons of these cumbersome and energy-consuming processes are likely to be lost if not encoded into rules and routines to guide future behavior.