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What should quality mean in social economy organisations?¹

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This is another blog-post in our thread about lessons learnt from the work with social welfare and other social economy organisations in Portugal.

These organisations are under an increasing pressure to improve “quality”. This pressure is due to two reasons, at least. One has to do with the fact that some are facing increasing competition from other providers of similar services. The other is that the State, private donors and the society at large are become more vigilant and demanding about the quality of the services delivered by these organisations. Going now to what does it mean to improve quality in these organisations, one meaning is to improve the professional qualifications of their managers and workers. So, we have been witnessing a substantial increase in the number of managers and workers with college degrees and in the number of training hours provided to the personnel in these organisations.

To improve quality also means to improve the quality of the services delivered to the users. Improved professional qualification of the managers and workers is rightly seen as a condition to improve the quality of the services. Another front of this trajectory to improve quality related to the other two already mentioned here is the implementation of quality management systems. The second edition of the FAS Project presented in one of our previous blog-posts was focused in this kind of systems. If this implementation is done based on participatory methods, with a clear focus on improving performance and without blowing out of proportion the instrument (the information system needed for this kind of system), the top management and the workers see clear benefits in adopting the system and go along with it. In some cases, the organisations make one step further and go for the certification under the ISO norms or under national norms that exist for social welfare services.

Often the talk and actions taken to improve quality in these organisations are limited to what we have mentioned up to now. There is, however, another front for quality management and improvement which is very important for this kind of organisations. We are talking about organisations whose mission is to contribute to more solidarity in the relations among human beings and between human being and their environment. Also, as we mentioned in our last blog-post, these organisations are under frequent risk of asymmetric information problems in the relationships among their stakeholders. In that previous blog-post we talked about the positive role of participation to cope with these problems.

¹ Blog-post published in European Social Innovation Research, on May 1, 2013.
(<http://siresearch.eu/blog/what-should-quality-mean-social-economy-organisations>)

Now, we want to mention another complementary factor that can contribute to cope with those problems, in line with the type of mission these organisations have. This factor corresponds to the human qualities of the managers and workers. To fulfil well their mission these organisations need at all levels in the organisation people motivated by the Common Good that the organisation is supposed to serve. If the organisation is captured by opportunistic interests of some managers or some workers some time along the way this will be detrimental to the performance of the organisation and may even be a cause of its death.