Power and Institutions in Global Standardization

The Role and the Importance of Ambiguity in Institutionalizing New Standards of OSR

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Macht und Institutionen in globalen Standardisierungsprozessen: Die Rolle und Bedeutung von Ambiguität für die Institutionalisierung neuer Standards für organisatorische Verantwortung

“It [power] is at its most effective when least accessible to observation.”

(Lukes 2005: 64)

This paper seeks to understand the success of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) in creating a platform for the development of ISO 26000, a standard of organizational social responsibility (OSR). The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, neo-institutional theory combined with political theory will help us to understand how ISO successfully managed to attract and maintain the participation of several opposing groups in the development process of its ISO 26000 standard. Second, we introduce here the concept of platform and examine how institutional platforms facilitate the construction of new institutions at an international level. This will lead us to propose an account of how new political places work in the emerging global infrastructure on OSR.

Keywords: ISO 26000, Power and Institutions, Meta-Organization, Governance, Globalization

1. Introduction

Our Motivation for this paper stems from a simple, though puzzling, question from field research on the ISO 26000: how to explain the success of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) in the development of a standard for Organizational Social Responsibility (OSR)? It does so by combining neo-institutional theories and the typology of political places by Bryson and Crosby (Bryson/Crosby 1992) to develop theoretical lenses for investigating ISO’s positioning as a platform for the development of this standard. Results presented here are derived from a field-study conducted from 2008 to 2010. They reveal the importance of maintaining a certain degree of ambiguity when developing norms and standards. The importance of ambi-