

Strengthening civil society organizations: Models review toward an evaluation proposal

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of Civil Society Organizations (CSO) is growing. Due to this, it is pertinent to look for strategies that strengthen them. This work seeks to compare five different theoretical models associated with the strength, institutional capacities, and maturity of CSOs, which allows the integration of a system for evaluating them. Through a documentary and bibliographic analysis, with a descriptive scope, the components and concepts of strength and maturity of each of the models studied are described and contrasted. The results allows to establish the fundamentals for the conceptualization of an evaluation system based on these concepts.

Keywords: Strengthening, Maturity, Institutional capacities; Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

The participation in organized civil society is becoming increasingly important as a result of the need of its members to transform their sectors to achieve a better quality of life. It is through CSOs that citizens find greater strength to influence policies that benefit them and help them achieve their goals. Strengthening organizations guarantees more orderly growth, with solid foundations to achieve their permanence and good operation.

This strengthening allows CSOs to have greater professionalism and systematization that guarantees them the creation and operation of institutional capacities that adapt to the environment and current affairs of their sector, allowing them to face with greater force and success the search for their objectives, thus achieving a more egalitarian society.

This research work aims to contrast the information collected on five different models related to institutional strengthening, capacities, and maturity, which allow determining elements that contribute to the creation of a new evaluation system for CSOs. In order to achieve this task, the strengthening models were analyzed and compared according to the institutional capacities that they themselves establish, these being: System of Evaluation and Monitoring of Institutional Strengthening (SESFI), of the Center for the Strengthening of Civil Society; Strength of the Merced Foundation, and the model of the Foundation for the Development of the Third Sector. Additionally, two models of maturity scales of internationally recognized processes are analyzed and compared: CMMI and International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 15504. So the maturity levels of the processes associated with the institutional capacities established during the analysis of the different strengthening models.

FRAMEWORK

The issue of civil society has acquired in recent years an enormous importance not only in academic and intellectual circles, but also political and social. Its resurgence, far from being free, responds to different political phenomena of obvious relevance, such as: a) the crisis of political parties in modern democracies, which have difficulties in representing and adding social interests to their agendas since they respond to each again to the utilities of its internal elites; b) the imperative to redefine the scope and limits of the spheres of the State and of society in the light of the emergence of new actors and social movements; c) the loss of effectiveness of the traditional formulas of economic and social management of corporate and clientele order; and d) public questioning of the universe of politicians on grounds of corruption and nepotism [1].

Now more than ever, CSOs have the need to get closer to new forms of organization and leadership, as well as greater professionalization and specialization of their work to seek a constant institutional strengthening that allows them to respond to the new needs of the environment, agencies of cooperation, and donors. These key actors increasingly demand transparency and accountability that involve, among other things, the optimization of the resources granted and a greater impact of their actions for society. The economic resource becomes more competitive and organizations require better results [2].

Institutional Strengthening

This strengthening invariably implies actions that tend to reinforce the internal administrative structure and seek an external balance with those with whom CSOs interact. According to De Angoitia and Márquez [3], institutional strengthening is defined as: "The strength in the internal structure that allows the organization to be efficient in the social, political, economic, and cultural environment." Various authors and their respective conceptualizations coincide in three basic aspects: 1) construction and maintenance of institutional capacities that will strengthen the internal structure of the CSO; 2) resource management and efficiency in its use; and 3) impact on the environment. Well oriented, these aspects will help to achieve the sustainability and permanence of CSOs. The stronger a CSO is, the greater its impact on the environment [4-5].

Institutional Capacity

Various conceptualizations [6,7,8] consider institutional capacities as necessary tools for strengthening and developing an internal structure that allows the achievement of objectives in an orderly and sustained manner. Therefore, everything that contributes to ensure that these capacities are developed within the organization will be strengthening the administrative structure of CSOs.

Maturity

A third concept that interacts with the previous two is maturity. This, in an organization, feeds and strengthens through the use of existing best practices, and is achieved through the standardization and definition of processes, by the hand of their respective measurement, monitoring, control, and continuous improvement. It is expected that these practices will be combined with the correct interrelation and articulation of the organizational structure according to objectives associated with indicators, as well as the use of technology and the adequate management of projects and human talent.

The companies that mature are those capable of developing self-learning and permanently introducing technical and organizational innovations, as well as maintaining the philosophy of continuous improvement. The concept of organizational maturity allows the introduction of a discipline and a metric to define the level of maturity at each stage and monitor it. This allows us to face the challenge of change with the constancy and knowledge necessary to reach the achievement of the established objectives [9].

SESFI Model

The SESFI model (System for Evaluation and Monitoring of Institutional Strengthening) is a diagnostic tool created and used by the center for the strengthening of Civil Society in Chihuahua, Mexico. This model is used to determine where the main strengths and weaknesses of CSOs are located, and in this way build a clear and understandable vision of the current situation of the organization, as well as define an improvement plan that strengthens its institutional capacities. This will have a greater impact on the achievement of its objectives.

This model has twelve institutional capacities grouped into four areas according to their objective, which are classified in a five-level development scale. In the first level the development is incipient, because the people who work for a social cause have high motivation but too many limitations to operate. The second level is the subsistence call, where initial processes and procedures begin to appear with partial results. In the third level of development there is already a more formal structure. The fourth level is where organizations are more developed in terms of processes and procedures and have an impact on their beneficiaries in a sustainable way. Finally, the fifth level is that of transformative organizations, who are leaders in their sector and role models for the transformations they make to their beneficiaries [10].

Table 1: Capacities measured by the SESFI model.

Capabilities according to SESFI	
Gobernance	1. Compliance with legal regulations 2. Effective governance 3. Strategic planning and management
Management	4. Financial and infrastructure resources management 5. Human talent Management (employees and volunteers) 6. Knowledge management
Sustentability	7. Effective communications and visibility 8. Financial sustentability 9. Leadership development and Social capital
Impact	10. Knowledge and effective user tracking 11. Effectiveness in attention model 12. Social impact evaluation

Source: own elaboration based on information from Center for the Strengthening of Civil Society [11].

Fortaleza Model

This second model is the one used by the Merced Foundation (Fundación Merced, in Spanish), called Fortaleza (Spanish for strenght). This allows a clear identification of the degree of development or maturity that a CSO presents through its nine institutional capacities and 243 descriptors or attributes. The conceptual perspective that guides the instrument is procedural, insofar as it seeks to place the diagnosis on a maturity scale. In this way, organizations can have a very clear idea of the strengths they will need to develop and the weaknesses they must overcome [3].

Table 2: Capacities from Fortaleza model.

Capacities according to FORTALEZA MODEL from Fundación Merced	
1.	Strategy
2.	Governance body
3.	Resouces mobilization
4.	Operative team
5.	Intervention Model
6.	Management
7.	Communication and difussion
8.	Information and Communication Technologies
9.	Linking and relationships

Source: own elaboration based on information from Fundación Merced [12].

According to De Angoitia and Márquez [3], in order to build the Fortaleza model, a diagnosis was made of the needs demanded, in this particular case, by the organizations that Fundación Merced had been supporting. The instrument facilitates a wider and deeper diagnosis that incorporates new aspects and includes different scales, which allow to identify more clearly the degree of development or maturity of each process or element for a specific dimension. This model seeks to: 1) obtain a photograph of the degree of institutional maturity of the organization that allows the preparation of the work plan; 2) Let members know their organization is aware of its strengths and weaknesses.

Third Sector Development Model

Model used by the Foundation of the same name, which aims to influence the consolidation and institutionalization of third sector organizations in Mexico through two strategic lines: research and institutional strengthening. The Foundation has strengthened the management and management capabilities of various CSOs at national and international levels through advice and methodological support on various topics [5]. In 2010, he conducted an investigation whose results yielded 10 institutional capacities with 108 attributes that contribute to institutional strengthening.

Table 3. Capacities from Third Sector Development Model.
Capacities according to Third Sector Development Model

1. Social methodology and institutional planning
2. Financial sustainability
3. Strategic plan and performance
4. Human talent organization
5. Financial and tax management
6. Beneficiaries: participation and impact
7. Communication and image
8. Professional development of collaborators
9. Legal framework compliance
10. Direction and governance

Source: own elaboration based on information from Third Sector Development Model [13].

These capabilities were an indispensable guide to direct efforts aimed at resolving weaknesses and reaffirming CSO strengths. With them, resources are optimized to efficiently achieve the objectives of each of the organizations supported.

Maturity Level Evaluation Models

Finally, maturity is analyzed according to two models that assess the level of process maturity within organizations. Currently there are models that fulfill this function with service companies and are a reference for the operation of CSOs. The concept of organizational maturity is an emerging issue that allows the introduction of a discipline and a metric to define the maturity of the systems to follow up to facilitate the transition between the different levels of maturity proposed by the models available in the literature. These models that measure the degree of maturity through standards and methodologies are guides that help an organization improve the way it can achieve its objectives [9].

CMMI Model

CMMI model (Capability Maturity Model Integration) is the quality standard most used internationally by software development organizations. Its evolution has allowed it to be used in other types of organizations such as service organizations, where CSOs are located. CMMI uses the levels of maturity and ability to describe recommended routes that organizations must follow to improve their processes. Taking them from a poorly defined level to a state of improvement where quantitative information is used to keep improving according to the objectives of the organization [14]. According to the Software Engineering Institute [15], a maturity level consists of specific and generic practices related to a predefined set of process areas that improve the overall performance of the organization. The maturity level of an organization provides a way to characterize its performance. A level of maturity is a defined evolutionary platform for the improvement of organizational processes. Each level of maturity develops an important subset of the organization's processes, preparing it to move on to the next level. This model proposes a scale by stages with five levels of maturity. Each of them forms a basis for ongoing process improvements and are named by numbers 1 through 5:

1. Initial. At this level, the organization generally does not provide a stable environment to support the processes. Success in these organizations depends on the competence and heroism of the organization's personnel and not on the use of proven processes. Maturity level 1 organizations are characterized by a tendency to commit themselves excessively, to abandon their processes in times of crisis and not to be able to repeat their successes.

2. **Managed.** It is the second level in the scale, where it is guaranteed that the processes are planned and executed according to the policies; the projects employ qualified personnel who have adequate resources to produce controlled results; relevant stakeholders are involved; processes are monitored, controlled, reviewed, and evaluated according to their objectives.

Defined. This level is characterized by processes that are well characterized and understood, which are described in standards, procedures, tools, and methods. The set of standard processes of the organization, which forms the basis of this level, is established and improved over time.

4. **Quantitatively managed.** Here, the organization and projects set quantitative objectives for the quality and performance of the process, which are used as criteria in project management. The quantitative objectives are based on the needs of the client, end users, organization and process implementers. The quality and performance of the process are interpreted in statistical terms and managed over the life of the projects.

5. **Optimized.** At this level the organization continually improves its processes based on a quantitative understanding of its business objectives and performance needs. The organization uses a quantitative approach to understand the inherent variation. The effects of the process improvements deployed are measured using statistical techniques and other quantitative techniques, to compare with the quality and performance objectives of the process.

The institutional capacities already mentioned above can be described as processes within nonprofit organizations. These, like the processes within any organization, should be the main object of improvement, thereby allowing a constant maturation in its operation.

ISO 15504

Another model that serves as a basis for identifying maturity levels is the 15504 standard that assesses the capacity and continuous improvement of any type of process in organizations. The standard describes the basis for carrying out evaluations by maturity levels, for which it defines a six-level scale. The description of these maturity levels is as follows [16]:

Maturity level 0: Immature Organization. Level at which processes are not implemented. Therefore, the purposes of the organization are not achieved, nor are products or process outputs identified. Therefore, there are no attributes to evaluate at this level.

Maturity level 1: Basic Organization. At this level the organization simply implements and achieves in a basic way the results of the process, and by reaching the proposed results it is possible to satisfactorily identify the results of the evaluated process.

Maturity level 2: Managed Organization. Here, in addition to implementing the objectives of the processes, the organization demonstrates planning, monitoring and control of both the processes and their associated work products.

Maturity level 3: Established Organization. The processes at this level are completely standardized and it is required to have implemented all the processes of the previous levels.

Maturity level 4: Predictable Organization. Compliance with the processes of the previous levels is required to be achieved. The organization quantitatively manages the processes, that is, measures and analyzes the time of its realization

Maturity level 5: Optimized Organization. Level 5 corresponds to the adaptation of all the processes worked in the first four levels, but it seeks that these have a continuous improvement in such a way that they contribute to the business objectives of the company.

Although the terminology used to define maturity levels differs between models, their content matches. Both models range from an incipient organizational structure in the first levels, to a proven definition and application of the processes at the highest levels, which allows for continuous improvement. In both cases, the degree of maturity of the organization can be seen in an integral way by simply identifying the status of the processes and their results within each level. The strengthening of these processes and capacities allows to scale to the next level.

METHODOLOGY

To carry out this analysis, a qualitative approach of an applied, non-experimental, explanatory type was developed through bibliographic work.

Information was needed to define the concepts of institutional strengthening, institutional capacities, and maturity in order to have definitions that guide the strengthening efforts of CSOs. Information was obtained regarding models of strengthening of different organizations oriented towards the professionalization of CSOs. These models were contrasted to identify coincidences in institutional capacities that could be the basis for a new system of evaluation of maturity. Subsequently, two models that measure the level of maturity in the processes of the organizations were analyzed, comparing their measurement scales to determine a new scale appropriate to the strengthening model for CSOs.

Eventually, with this review, analysis and contrast of models, it is intended to lay the foundations of a new evaluation system that helps CSOs in their professionalization.

RESULTS

As a result of the literature review of each of the models and concepts, the following comparative tables of Institutional Strengthening and Capacities were developed, in order to obtain a clearer view of coincidences and differences.

Table 4. Comparative among models in relation with Strengthening concept.

COMPARATIVE AMONG MODELS IN RELATION WITH STRENGTHENING CONCEPT			
	SESFI CeFoSC	FORTALEZA, FUNDACIÓN MERCED	THIRD SECTOR DEVELOPMENT MODEL
Diagnostic	YES	YES	YES
Capacities	12	9	10
Attributes	220	243	108
Strengthening Definition	NO	YES	NO
Measurement	NO	YES	YES
Strengthening Level	YES	YES	YES
Maturity Level	NO	YES	NO
Capacities focused on the definition of Strengthening	NO	YES	NO
Evaluation by organisms oriented to maturity level	NO	NO	NO
Publications	YES	YES	YES

Source: own elaboration (2017).

In this comparison, the complexity with respect to each of these models is appreciated, through the quantity of capacities, attributes and the respective definitions of the elements that constitute them. The conceptual "gaps" that are the main differences between them are observed, as well as the amount of attributes they evaluate, the Fortaleza model being the most complex.

The SESFI model and the Third Sector model do not have their own definition of strengthening, so it is difficult to know if their capabilities are adequately focused on achieving their objectives. Nor do they establish a measurement that allows to assess the degree of strengthening. The three models have an initial diagnosis that allows them to know the situation of the organization and plan accordingly in an effective way the points to be strengthened. None of the models are evaluated at maturity by agencies dedicated to it.

Similarly, a comparative analysis was carried out regarding the concept of institutional capacity, which is described in the following Table 5:

Table 5. Comparative of models regarding institutional capacities.

COMPARATIVE OF MODEL REGARDING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITIES AL		
SESEFI-CeFoSC	Strength- Merced Foundation	Third Sector Foundation
Compliance with legal regulations	Strategy	Social methodology and institutional planning
Effective Governance	Governing body	Financial Sustainability
Communication and effective visibility	Resource mobilization	Strategic planning and performance
Strategy management (Planning and execution)	Operative team	Human resources organization
Financial management of resources and infrastructure	Intervention model	Financial and tax management
Human resources management (employees and volunteers)	Management	Beneficiaries: participation and impact
Knowledge management	Communication and diffusion	Communication and image
Financial sustainability	Information and Communications Technologies	Collaborator's professional development
Leadership development and social capital	Linking and relations	Legal framework compliance
Knowledge and effective monitoring of beneficiaries		Direction and governance
Effectiveness in the care model (methodology and model)		
Social impact evaluation		

Source: own elaboration (2017).

The previous comparison shows a greater number of elements associated with the concept of Institutional Capacity in the SESFI model, the three models share several similarities in these elements, but are named differently. SESFI is the only model that evaluates the social impact. It is necessary to integrate the necessary capabilities, but from a definition of strengthening that guides the process. Fortaleza is the only model that has this definition, presenting the most summarized and concise capabilities. Next, in Table 6, the comparison between the models that evaluate maturity levels is presented:

Table 6. Maturity scales comparative Comparativo de escala de madurez.

Maturity scale comparative		
	CMMI	ISO 15504
Maturity level 5	Optimization	Optimized
Maturity level 4	Quantitative managed	Predecitable
Maturity level 3	Defined	Established
Maturity level 2	Managed	Managed
Maturity level 1	Initial	Basic
Maturity level 0		Immature

Source: own elaboration (2017).

According to the previous comparison, both models are similar in their scale of maturity measurement. The only difference is the start of the scale, in the case of ISO15504, it starts with zero (0), while CMMi starts from the value one (1).

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the objective set at the beginning, a revision of theoretical models was carried out that would establish a frame of reference for the creation, maintenance, and classification of the institutional capacities required for CSOs, strengthening being one of the fundamental capacities to be evaluated. To do this, it is highly recommended to have your own definition of strengthening within the organization so that all your efforts are directed towards it.

By strengthening these institutional capacities, work is done directly in the internal part of organizations, which in turn undoubtedly impacts their surroundings. The more appropriate the selection of capacities, the greater the transformative impact of CSOs in their context.

For the definition of the capacities, the models of SESFI, Merced Foundation, and Foundation for the development of the third sector were evaluated. For the definition of maturity levels, the CMMi and ISO15504 models were reviewed. The review of all of them allowed the determination of aspects that should be included in a proposed model, as well as a scale that allows to evaluate the level of maturity of the processes associated with these capacities.

The aspects of governance, administration, sustainability, human capital, planning, and legal framework, are the matching capabilities in the three models. Undoubtedly, the new model must have them and add all those that are aimed at the concept of strengthening and maturity that the center has, so that all efforts are aimed at its objective.

Once determined, the capacities and attributes that contribute to the objectives of the organism in question are ordered and classified in the previously defined levels that, in turn, will determine the maturity with which the organization to evaluate has.

As in the models analyzed, in the proposed model it will be necessary for all processes to be fulfilled at each level, through capacity building actions that will allow scaling to a higher level. When the organization is located at the highest maturity levels, it will invariably be institutionally strengthened. The incorporation of a maturity scale into the strengthening models will allow an integral view of the situation that the CSO has, making it more transparent, sustainable, and available to continuous improvement.

Although it is not within the objectives of this work, as a recommendation, the following table is presented with the proposed evaluation model, which incorporates the concept of the level

of maturity of the organization. Said level would begin with a scale where one (1) is taken, as an initial maturity level, until reaching a level five (5) -Transformer. This table presents the proposed scale and on the other hand the attributes or processes of the capacity that must be met at each level to achieve the proposed maturity. It is necessary to strengthen processes at different levels to achieve a higher level of maturity. As an example, one of the capacities is developed: legal regulations. Its attributes are classified at different levels. This table would be repeated for each of the capacities determined.

Table 7. Maturity model proposed for SOC, regarding legal framework.

Maturity levels	Requisites
5-Transformer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous improvement • Documenting and sharing experiences
4-Sustainable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International donor • Processes and systems • Transparency
3-Growing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CLUNI register (OSC's id for Mexican government) • Compliance with regulations
2-Estructured	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constitutive Act • RFC (tax id) • Donataria • Deductible receipts
1-Initial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility of constitution • Legal requirements • Investigation

Source: own elaboration (2017).

With all the information collected, structured, and contrasted, it is possible to continue in the search for a maturity evaluation system for this type of organizations by searching for the matching capabilities and contrasting them in practice with the CSOs, in order to determine and classify these organizations based on a previously defined level of maturity.

This evaluation system ensures that the capacities contained in the different levels of maturity will be adequate for the achievement of the objectives of the CSOs. At the same time, it will help donors have a scale to measure the degree of maturity of CSOs and thus be able to route resources more efficiently, allowing them to operate in the best way to achieve sustainability and permanence.

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