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Associate Professor in the Department of Business Policy, Alfred Vernis currently manages research for the ESADE Social Enterprise Knowledge Network (SEKN), led by Harvard Business School, and has published various articles and books on Third Sector Management. Vernis spoke to us about the key aspects of his book Nonprofit Organizations: Challenges and Collaboration. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan: 2006.

Alfred Vernis
Associate Professor of the Department of Business Policy
What How did you work with the other three co-authors of the book?
Between us we decided on the topics that we wanted to deal with. Then each of us drafted a chapter and another member of the team would read it and make suggestions. After that, we would produce a revised draft and the whole team would look at it and give more feedback. It should be said that some chapters were easier than others as, in some cases, you would have a paper you had already published elsewhere that you could use as the basis.

What is the main contribution made by the book?
We think that we have focussed on future issues that are of major interest to NGOs. So, on one hand, we cover accountability, their boards and training for their members, while on the other you have partnerships both between nonprofit sector organisations and with companies and governments.

This isn’t the first time you’ve published about nonprofit organisations. Why did you decide to focus on this area?
There are a number of reasons. First of all, ESADE has always been strongly committed to training entrepreneurs and we knew that we also had to reach out to social entrepreneurs. So, at the start of the 1990s we started working in this area. Then the second reason is that, at the time, we were successfully putting in place a public management programme and public managers asked us to back the third sector which works with government to roll out social policies. Finally, my team and I have always worked with NGOs and we thought it would be a good idea to bring that knowledge to ESADE and help enhance the sector with other players.

Turning to the content of the book, has institutional strengthening been extensively studied in the world of business?
It’s an idea which comes more from international cooperation agencies and multilateral bodies like the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. In the business world people also talk about strengthening organisations, but greater stress has been placed on processes, quality, people, and so on. Now, these aspects are also important for nonprofits, but they do need to have organisations which function beyond volunteer work.

Do nonprofit organisations have the same importance in Spain as they do in other countries? What are some of the main differences?
What’s called the Third Sector is just as important in Spain as it is in other EU countries such as Italy, France, Germany and Holland, although it is slightly stronger in the UK and, of course, in the US. The main thing that sets Spanish social organisations apart from their counterparts in other EU countries is that they are younger, as they were mostly set up during the transition to democracy, whereas in other countries they appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. The other difference is that they still don’t have the degree of social trust that you find in other countries. That is in part because of their relative youth and also because some people have used NGOs to get rich and the media have latched on to that.

Examples are a major part of your book. Where did the idea to include them come from and what was the reason behind doing so?
As we were saying before, we like to keep our nose to the ground and that means we have contacts with some pretty interesting examples. We included them in the book to bring it closer to the reader, as we didn’t want it to be read by just a handful of academics but rather by people who work in the sector, and sometimes you can get an idea across much better with an example.
Based on the conclusions you’ve come to in the book, are you planning to pursue other lines of research in nonprofit organisations?

Yes, and in fact we’ve already made a start. We’re now focussing on two things: firstly, while it is true that what nonprofits do is extremely important, if the outcomes of their work cannot be demonstrated, then society will get fed up supporting them. That means we have to find ways of publicising the real results achieved by NGOs. The second thing we’re looking at is how to enable NGOs to learn to develop in competitive, market-based environments and, at the same time, keep on working with less well-off people. Poverty and markets are an important issue for us and we are already involved in projects in both areas.

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