

# Technologies within Transnational Social Activist Communities: An Ethnographic Study of the European Social Forum

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## ABSTRACT

ICT support for transnational social movements and civil society organizations is an important field of research: not only due to the increased political importance of this sector in a globalizing world but also due to their organizational characteristics. Transnational social movement organizations are typically characterized by a lack of resources, an absence of formal hierarchical structures, and differences in languages and culture among the activists. In order to design appropriate technological support for social activists' communities, it is important to understand their work practices which widely differ from traditional business organizations. This paper investigates into the organizational practices of the European Social Forum, in particular its 2008 meeting in Malmo, Sweden. We describe organizational practices in preparing and conducting the event. Since the goal of our research is directed towards enhancing the capabilities of social movements by means of ICT, we focus particularly on the usage of ICT.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

H. 1.2. [User/Machine Systems]: Human factors.

## General Terms

Human Factors, Management

## Keywords

Ad-hoc communities and ICTs, ethnographic case study, technology & the third sector, community informatics, ICT4D (for development), facilitation of communities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Voluntary and civil society organizations are increasingly important in a globalized world, fighting for civil rights and against poverty, engaging in charity and development work, caring for environmental issues, organizing first aid in cases of emergencies, disasters and crisis. The world is facing a variety of global problems (social economical, ecological asf.) that cannot be tackled by national institutions or governmental organizations. As the problem solving capabilities of existing inter-governmental institutions: (like the United Nations, the World Bank, WTO etc.) are partly contested, the role of transnational civil society organizations (CSOs) and networks is becoming more vital.

Most transnational CSOs networks are only weakly connected or loosely coupled organizations. Their members could range from

community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activist groups, think tanks, trade unions, professional associations, cultural groups, religious organizations, informal citizen organizations, foundations, commissions, cooperatives, clubs, campaigns and charities and above. Since the causes and issues which are dealt with by these organizations and networks are global and they are working beyond national borders, the geographical diversity adds specific challenges to their almost voluntary based work: differences in languages being spoken, difference in working habits and difference of culture among the activists are some of the main problems to cope with.

Additionally, the transnational collaboration of CSOs would not be possible without the use of ICT [21]. Obviously this use of ICT is influenced by the above mentioned diversity as well: Not only different languages, cultures and habits but also the variety of ICT systems that are used by different CSOs are adding to this diversity and complexity. This diversity means a remarkable challenge for an appropriate technological support of transnational CSO collaboration. Ignoring differing work practices and cultural issues during the design and introduction of ICT solutions would very probably result in low acceptance among the stakeholders.

Other important factors affecting technology acceptance and the use of ICT among CSOs are their informal organizational structure and the highly varying technological know how among the volunteers. There are number of factors which make ICT usage in this field of application very specific. Voluntary organizations are very diverse in their operations and compositions. Most voluntary organizations face a significant lack of funding for development, improvement and maintenance of their ICT infrastructure. Since their activities are mainly run by donations, these donations are dedicated explicitly to their main work issue (like environmental work, fighting poverty etc.) very often and not to investments in infrastructure. Therefore, most CSOs do only have a small amount of donations for establishing sustainable ICT infrastructure and continuously employing ICT professionals. These factors highlight that the preconditions of ICT adoption and usage of third sector organizations are fairly different from conventional (business or governmental) organizations, especially when it comes to transnational collaboration of various CSOs from different countries. To plan for an appropriate ICT support for transnational CSOs and social movement networks, one has to bear in mind these particular issues. Specific research efforts are necessary to understand the certain problems of transnational CSO networks in adopting technology and to support them by technological solutions.

In case of social movements this characteristic of loosely connectedness is even more visible than in higher structured and

institutionalized voluntary and civil society organizations. With regard to particular events or specific campaigns, networks of movements, groups and activists come together temporarily for specific causes and issues. Especially the cooperation in larger network structures and on a transnational level requires highly advanced organizing and communication skills by activists and social movements. There has been use of technology by social movements for a long time, as in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries print media and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century radio broadcasting and the television served as important tools for communication [28]. The technological advancement has introduced new media and ICT to social movements during the last decades: e.g., use of short message systems, email, new forms of online advocacy and online petition campaigns asf. [29]. To gain a better understanding of the communication and collaboration practice of social movements and CSOs, it is crucial to investigate in their adoption and usage of ICT and new technologies, especially with regard to their transnational networking.

In our case study we are mainly interested in how transnational CSOs interact with technology, how this technology is developed and appropriated and what are the main problems which they face. This study focuses on the anti-globalization movement (unless it would be better named movement for an alternative globalization), which deals with the problems caused by economic and political globalization effects [c.f.21, 33]. This movement gained popularity after the Seattle demonstrations and combines diverse civil society networks, organizations and activists [25]. The anti-globalization movement can be characterized by informal, non-hierarchical structures, absence of recognizable central leadership and by decision-making by consensus.

We investigated the organizing process of European Social Forum (ESF) which is a central civil society event where voluntary organizations and activists all across Europe gather. Since the ESF involves international networks of NGOs, labour organizations, trade unions, social movements and activists, the extensive collaboration between people from different geographical regions, cultures and backgrounds will allow us to better understand transnational organizational practices of CSOs. An analysis of these practices will help for development and design of potential information systems for civil society networks. In particular we investigate the collaborative practice in the organizing process of the European Social Forum event which held on 17<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> September 2008 (ESF 2008) in Malmo, Sweden. We were mainly interested in findings about how social activists use technology for their collaboration, how this technology is being setup and what are the main problems faced by them during the use and establishment of technology. The empirical findings promise some insights for the future design of ICT systems which will be more accustomed to the needs of this community.

The structure of remaining paper is as follows: Section 2 describes related work. The third section focuses on the research methods applied in this study. In section 4 background information and its structure is provided. Section 5 describes the organizing process of the ESF 2008 event in Malmo and section 6 gives an overview of the available technological infrastructure for the Malmo event. Section 7 contains the empirical results of the study. Section 8 presents a discussion of our findings and the last section focuses on conclusions with regard to further ICT development for CSOs and civil society networks.

## 2. RELATED WORK

There has been some related work in the context of human centered computing focusing on civil society organizations [27, 35]. This work could be classified into two areas: one is related to system design for voluntary organizations while the other is related to empirical investigations on the use of ICT by them.

In the context of system design the advantages of participatory design methods for non-profit organizations were discussed by Benston [2]. McPhail et al. similarly applied participatory design methodology for a Canadian non-profit organization in information system design [3]. A similar initiative was taken by Trigg to involve a non-profit organization in a database design project [4]. A project called "Civic Nexus" was carried out at Penn State University to empower regional volunteer organizations in design process to gain technological sustainability. In this project participatory design and end user development concepts were applied [cf. 5, 6, 7, 8]. Rohde applied participatory design methods to electronically network an Iranian NGO community so that the NGOs could benefit from increased efforts to build social capital [9]. Mclever worked on transnational, multi lingual and collaborative legislative work among NGOs on the basis of his involvement in drafting legislation for a civil society's agenda at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) [10, 11]. Pilemalm involved Swedish trade unions in participatory design processes with regard to exploring ICT needs, establishing technological solutions and analyzing their impact on Swedish trade unions [12].

Similarly there have been empirical studies of the adoption and use of ICT by different voluntary organizations: O'Donnell analyzed the role of mailing lists in connecting different women organizations in Northern Ireland [13]. Cammaerts and Van Audenhove investigated how transnational social movement organizations use internet in their organizing process [15]. Pini et al. studied the use of discussion lists by an Australian farm women group (AWiA) [16]. O'Donnell and Ramaioli analyzed an online information network for the non-profit sector in Ireland [17]. Cheta investigated the usage of internet by the social movement organization *Portuguese Accessibility Special Interest Group* (GUIA) [18]. Edwards presented a case study on the role of internet applications for the Dutch women's movement [19]. Cordoso and Neto, investigated the role of ICTs in the pro-East Timor movement in Portugal [20]. Aelst and Walgrave analyzed the use of internet in organizing protests in the anti-globalization movement [21]. O'Donnell et al. focused on how two community-based organizations are using video communication to support economic and social development in remote areas in Canada [22]. Kavada investigated the usage of internet by three non-governmental organizations in UK [23] and analyzed how email lists were helping the organizing process of the ESF 2004 [24].

The above mentioned work shows that there has been some design efforts to involve non-profit organizations but there has not been many efforts in the case of a particular transnational voluntary organization where the geographical and cultural diversities play an important role on technological setup. Some researchers mentioned above have analyzed the role of technology in transnational voluntary organizations but there is little work on specific socio-technical practices of these transnational voluntary organizations and social movement. In our work we are not focusing on a single organization or network, but on an adhoc-community of social movements, multiple networks and organizations from different European countries. Our focus is on design-oriented analysis,

aiming to find factors and requirements of CSO networks, based on their work practices to optimize ICT systems.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

In order to analyze the work practices of social activists involved in the ESF, different qualitative research methods are used: literature review, participant observation, and interviewing. For the participant observation, we visited the European preparatory assembly held in Berlin, Germany in February 2008 and the ESF 2008 event in Malmo in September 2008. Furthermore, three online meetings using Skype and one telephonic conference of the volunteers engaged in the setup of the technological infrastructure for ESF 2008 were attended during the period of June- August 2008. Normally in these meetings 5-10 activists were present to discuss different issues like design of website, advertising strategies of OpenESF. A total of 14 qualitative interviews were conducted and recorded, partly on site (3 interviews) during the meetings, partly as telephone interviews (11 interviews). The recording of interviews helped to capture all the information, which would have been difficult if only notes were taken during the interviews. The average duration of interviews was approximately 30 minutes. The interviewees represent a broad sample of the people engaged in the ESF organizing: 4 members of the organizing committee, 4 members of the “web-team”, 4 social activists who organized workshops at the event and 2 social activists who attended the event. These 14 interviewees stem from Germany, Sweden, United Kingdom, Hungary, Turkey, France, Italy and Greece. In order to perform analysis, the records of the interviews were transcribed and this written material was categorized. In order to understand the specific problems and issues, related data was clustered together.

### 4. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The World Social Forum is a renowned event organized by social movements and other civil society networks worldwide. This event initiated as a result of gathering of community organizers, trade unionists, young people, academics and activists in January 2001 at Porto Alegre, Brazil to rethink and recreate globalization for the advantage of deprived people [32]. The charter of WSF emphasizes that this forum is not a decision-making body but an open space for discussion of ideas, and forming new proposals to carry on further actions [14]. The success of WSF has triggered a number of local, national, thematic and regional forums [25, 26]. These forums are related with WSF, as they adhere to the charter of the WSF but the organization of these forums is independent from each other. Since these chapters are independent from each other, there is no common ICT infrastructure which would be shared among all chapters. Instead one can perceive a remarkable divide among different WSF chapters resulting in extensive presence of some social forums in virtual sphere while some others do not have an internet presence at all.

The European Social Forum is one such forum which includes activists and social movements from all over Europe. At the second WSF event in 2002 many European organizations were present and they decided that there should be a similar initiative at the European level. The first ESF event was held in Florence, Italy in 2002. There was an organizing committee to manage political events and a secretariat to manage practical arrangements. After the success of the ESF 2002 Florence event, the Italian organizing committee in the preparation assembly proposed to systemize the preparation process and establish a regular, open European preparatory assembly (EPA) to manage future ESF events. It was decided to host the forum in a different European country each time to make

the process visible in every region. Additionally, country-wide social forums started to emerge and French organizations proposed to host the second ESF 2003 in Paris. The ESF 2004 event was held in London (UK) and the ESF 2006 event took place in Athens (Greece). The last event was held in Malmo (Sweden) from 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> September of 2008. First, the ESF was planned as a regular annual event which was changed later into a biennial event. There were some discussions by some activists that organizing social forum annually is difficult. So it was decided by EPA that after the 2004 forum in London this event will be transformed in biennial event. One of our interviewees described the reason for the layout of ESF as a moving event as following.

*“There are some people who participate in most forums but I think the whole logic of moving the European Social Forum to different countries every time is that you get different people mobilized to participate in the ESF every time.”*

The management of ESF is carried out collaboratively by a regional organizing committee and European preparatory assembly (EPA). The EPA is an open meeting in which any organization, network group or individual adhering to the charter of the World Social Forum can take part. This EPA draws decisions about ESF and mainly focuses on political issues whereas the practical work and ground level planning is done by the respective organizing committee. The organizing committees work according to the decision made at EPA. Usually 3-4 EPA meetings take place annually; the meetings and the decision-making is done on the basis of consensus. There are various European networks, which meet at the EPA meetings to discuss current political issues, call for actions and campaigns. These networks focus on specific themes or issues like labor; public services etc. and try to establish common actions. Since there are many activists who are also interested in the social forum process, the EPA meetings are also used to conduct these issue-related meetings of CSO networks. Usually these issue-related network meetings are scheduled one day in advance of the EPA meeting.

It is important to understand how the European Social Forum events are organized: Initially different organizations (networks, groups, social movements, NGOs, campaigns, initiatives) propose activities and once the activities are published, the organizing committee focuses on merging different activities based on their themes and relevance. After planning for activities is finished, the organizing committee schedules and coordinates logistic support for these activities and finalizes the program. The activities could be workshops, seminars, assemblies, open discussion places, street walks or any creative cultural activity. Once the program is finalized, it is published and interested people and organizations can register to participate. The event provides a platform for networking for new joint actions which form the basis for future cooperation among different social activists and organizations.

### 5. ORGANIZING PROCESS

During the EPA meeting on 31<sup>st</sup> of March until 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2007 in Lisbon, it was decided that the next ESF event would be hosted in Scandinavia, either in Copenhagen (Denmark) or Malmo (Sweden). After the EPA, both initiative committees (Malmo, Copenhagen) analyzed which venue would be better for the event. Later in July it was finally decided to host the event in Malmo due to practical matters and the members of the Danish initiative committee withdrew their offer. The next EPA was held in Stockholm on 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2007. During this meeting the planning for the

event was presented and discussions were carried out around different issues like mobilization, funding and venues [30]. A Nordic Organizing Committee (NOC) was formed in September 2007 and a meeting was held on 7<sup>th</sup> of October in 2007. In this meeting of the NOC 139 member organizations took part. A board was founded, having 15 members from different member organizations of NOC from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, which was assigned the responsibility for managing the ESF 2008 Malmo event. Furthermore, eleven working groups emerged, working under the organizational umbrella of the NOC, most of them having sub groups.

These working groups were coordinated by an office in Malmo and a designated coordination group. The eleven working groups dealt with following issues: Information, Logistics, Cultural, Alis (a conference interpretation system), Program, Demonstration, Fund Raising, Contact Group for Europe and the World, Mobilization, Interpretation, Volunteers. The Information working group was responsible for maintaining an event website, coordinating public relations (esp. to press and mass media) and publishing information material, whereas the Logistics working group was responsible to manage issues like security transport, venues and infrastructure. The cultural programs were managed by a Cultural working group and the Alis working group focused on the Alis system which was used for interpretation during the forum. The Program working group was responsible for organizing the program of the Malmo event; the Demonstration working group was responsible for managing the demonstrations during the forum. The Fund Raising working group dealt with arranging the economical resources for the event and the duty of the Contact Group for Europe and the World was the mobilization for the ESF 2008 event in Europe and other regions. An additional Mobilization working group was focused on the regional mobilization efforts in Sweden. The Interpretation working group was responsible for the interpretation during the forum, whereas the Volunteer working group was responsible for the mobilization and coordination of volunteers [1].

Some people in the NOC knew the organizers of the ESF 2006 event in Greece, so these experienced people helped them to get connected with relevant stakeholders. The support from the experienced Greek organizers of the former event was continued during the whole preparation process of the ESF 2008 Malmo event, because the Malmo organizing committee had no experience with the organization of such kind of event. The Greeks advised the Swedish organizers in issues like how many activities should be planned for the forum, provided information about budget and they also shipped the old booths from Athens which were required for setting up the ALIS system in Malmo.

## **6. ESTABLISHING TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE**

The virtual presence of the European Social Forum has been visible but not very well-structured. There is a central website which serves as an official website and whose main objective is to serve as important information source with regard to the process. There are also different mailing lists hosted on this website, which serve as an important tool for information dissemination and coordination. The websites also provides links to all past/former social forum websites. Minutes and information about EPAs are published there as well. All former ESF events have their specific websites, some of them are active and some are down. The development of the event website is carried out by the respective organizing committee. There is a “web-team” which reports to EPA and which is responsible for

the ICT infrastructure of the ESF for the coordination with the respective organizing committee based on their previous experiences. The members of this “web-team” are volunteers who continuously plan to improve the ICT infrastructure despite the noticeable lack of financial and technical resources. One of the members of the “web-team” described the task of the group as follows:

*“Web-team is supposed to care about the support websites, to care about what type of functionalities are needed by the organizing committee ..... We have to pass (infrastructure) from one to another (Organizing Committee)”*

In order to provide a platform for activists in between the events and to prepare for the event activities, an additional collaborative website was deployed by “web-team”. This website (called “OpenESF”) was launched in the EPA meeting at Istanbul on 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2007. In this platform the activists can create different project spaces with mailing list, blogs and wiki pages. The users could invite other people to their projects and even interested people could join the relevant projects without explicit invitation. This website was based on the “OpenPlans” system which is an open source system developed by the Open Planning Project [31]. This website was intended to serve as a collaborative space for the preparation of the Malmo forum. In order to familiarize activists with this workspace, volunteers of the “web-team” trained activists at EPA meetings. They helped people in setting up their accounts and workspaces and explained how to use the website. These practical training sessions helped to attract activists in using this website.

The establishment of the event website of the Malmo forum was the responsibility of the Information working group. Since the EPA meeting was taking place in Stockholm in September 2007, this website was intended to be ready before this meeting, so that all relevant information could be published on this site. During the initial meetings with Swedish activists, the Information working group came across a social software development company which promised to develop the website for free. The basic version of the website was released in summer 2007 and it was updated in February 2008. It was discussed to extend the website of the 2006 ESF Athens event, but this website was based on “Plone” - an open source system with which the people in the company were not familiar. Thus, it was decided to develop the new website from scratch. Our interviewees reported on communication problems between the Information working group and the company. One member of the Information working group described the situation as follows.

*“I think they did not really understand what kind of work load it would mean for them and how much dependent we would be on them because none of us in the group was actually capable of building websites by (him)self.”*

In March 2008 this matter was proposed to the board and it was decided to ask for the services of one member of the “web-team” to extend the website of the Athens forum. Despite the delay, the website was strongly required to build the program and start the mobilization campaign. The members of the “web-team” were already in contact with the Information working group to transform possible ideas into design requirements for the website. Since the members of the Information working group were not familiar with specific design requirements for the desired website, they needed support of the “web-team” members. However, the developer in the “web-team” who had developed the Athens website before was not











