

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 18th and 19th centuries print media and in the 20th 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 17th-21st 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 17th to 21st 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 31st of March until 1st 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 15th to 16th 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 7th 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 1st 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

able to do this task on a volunteering basis. Thus, he was paid by the NOC for setting up the new website. Since this person was actively involved in the development of systems for social movements before and had expertise with regard to the specific needs of the social forum process, his engagement resulted in better coordination and more effective work. One member of the Information working group commented on this in following words:

“I had very good contacts and he was very quick in answering and he was also quite fast in putting it up (website)..... It was a lot easier, because he also knows the ESF and he knows the program process so he kind of instinctively knew what I was after and could come up with his own ideas.”

7. ICT SUPPORT IN THE MALMO EVENT

In order to get a better overview of the involvement of the different stakeholders in the particular work settings, we describe the different activities in the organizing process in more detail.

7.1 Selection of Themes

To categorize the activities for the Malmo event, it was decided by the NOC to finalize the themes first. For an initial listing of themes, all suggestions were collected using the initial forum website during the autumn (Sept. to Nov.) 2007. There were around 70 suggestions for different themes. These suggestions were collected and clustered because most of the suggested themes were rather narrowly defined. A proposal was developed by the NOC to run the event, based on seven different thematic categories. These themes were suggested in the EPA meeting in November 2007 in Istanbul (Turkey). Since the members of this EPA meeting did not agree with the suggestions, it was decided to have an additional European program group meeting in January 2008 in Paris (France) to discuss more profoundly on this topic. It was scheduled to draw a final decision on the themes for the Malmo forum in the next EPA meeting in February 2008 in Berlin (Germany). After the January meeting in Paris and another meeting of the European Program group held a day before the EPA meeting in Berlin, finally nine themes/categories were decided. These nine themes were approved by the EPA meeting and later (in April 2008), in another European Program group meeting in Malmo, a tenth category was added as a residual category in which all themes/activities which did not fit into the nine main categories, could be added. Thus, the ten finalized themes/categories for the program were the following:

- 1 Working for social inclusion and social rights – welfare, public services and common goods for all
- 2 Working for a sustainable world, food sovereignty, environmental and climate justice
- 3 Building a democratic and rights-based Europe, against “securitarian” policies. For participation, openness, equality, freedom and minority rights
- 4 Working for equality and rights, acknowledging diversities, against all forms of discrimination. For feminist alternatives against patriarchy
- 5 Building an Europe for a world of justice, peace and solidarity – against war, militarism and occupations
- 6 Building labour strategies for decent work and dignity for all – against precarity and exploitation
- 7 Economic alternatives based on peoples needs and rights, for economic and social justice

- 8 Democratizing knowledge, culture, education information and mass media
- 9 Working for a Europe of inclusiveness and equality for refugees and migrants – fighting against all forms of racism and discrimination
- 10 Cross-thematic. Social movements, the state and future of global justice movement [1].

7.2 Proposing Activities

Since the program of the European Social Forum is based on self organized activities, at the start of the organizing process different organizations proposed various activities. The number of proposed activities was nearly 800, and all the activities were proposed using the event website. There were some activities proposed to the NOC without using the website (by email, fax etc.). However, these activists were informed via email that they needed the event website to submit their proposals. Every suggested activity was identified by means of a code (letter plus number). Using this code, activity details (e.g. abstract, contact information) could be updated later on. The submission deadline was the 5th of June 2008.

7.3 Mobilization

Since the decision to host the ESF 2008 event in Malmo was finalized in July 2007, a Nordic mobilization group was established to initiate a mobilization campaign in the Nordic countries, which was very inactive and did never start this campaign work. Thus, starting in October 2007 the mobilization activities were carried out by two designated working groups. The Contact Group for Europe and the World was responsible for the mobilizations of organizations all over Europe except Sweden, whereas the Mobilization working group’s objective was to mobilize regionally within Sweden. The proposed target for the audience was 20,000 participants during the event. We investigated the activities of the working group which was responsible for the mobilization all over Europe (except Sweden). Although there were many volunteers interested in this working group and even subscribed to the mailing list of the working group, the most of the work was carried out by three volunteers in the working group, who were supported by twelve additional volunteers, who were involved occasionally in particular tasks. Describing this phenomenon, a member of the group described the situation as follows:

“People like to put themselves up on email lists because they know it does not matter, as it costs so little to send out on these email lists which means there are lot of more people on the list than actually are doing something”

The members of the working group mostly used physical meetings for coordination among them. The periodical meeting of the Nordic Organizing Committee was scheduled on every second month, so the working group members used these meetings as an occasion to discuss on the work of their group. Additionally, some occasional telephone conference meetings between the official NOC meetings were also carried out to plan the work. In order to organize mobilization in the eastern European countries, one member of the group visited six countries in six days. To follow up these eastern European contacts emails were used. One of the volunteers has established a “Facebook” group to attract people and working group members were excited about this support to attract more people. At the time of the event it had more than three thousand members.

7.4 Merging Process

Although there were nearly 800 activities proposed for the Malmo event, it was not possible to schedule all those activities. Due to limited logistics capacities and resources, it was decided to organize only 200 activities from these proposals. This “downsizing”-process was named as the “merging process”. In preparation of the ESF 2008 event, it was the first time that this merging process was carried out using the event website. At previous forums, the merging was managed by using excel files. Responsible for this merging was the Program working group of the NOC, while a European Program network did officially finalize the program. Thus, the European program group represents the decision-making body, while the practical activities were carried out by Program working group.

After ten themes/categories for the program had been agreed on and decided on, all suggested activities were clustered and categorized into these theme categories. For each of these ten themes a committee with volunteers was formed and supported by a facilitator each. The volunteers in these ten committees had to go through abstracts of all the activities in their thematic category and to chalk out which activities could work together. This matching was not only based on the topic of the activities but also on the political relationships between the proposing organizations. All the committees used excel files to extract data from the activities database to plan and conduct the matching or merging task. Using excel files enabled them to work with the data even when they were not online. On the basis of this work, initial proposals were elaborated, which were communicated to the concerned people who had proposed those activities. The communication about these initial proposals was based on email. If the addressed CSOs or social movements did not agree with the suggestions of the committee, they were encouraged to find their own partner organization with whom they would like to collaborate. Once the initial proposals were sent to activists, they were asked either to accept the merging suggestions or to carry out alternative merging activities on the event website by themselves. Once the organizations agreed upon the merging proposals, they could do the merging using the codes of the old activities on the website. According to the negotiation results, the activities on the website were finally merged by their collaborators and a new code for combined merged activities is generated. The use of excel spreadsheets introduced big problems later on, when the program schedule was going to be finalized, because the web-based merging results differed from the earlier excel-based planning and suggestions in most of the cases. This media disruption between excel-usage and online activities caused a remarkable extra amount of workload for the Program working group which had to find out about these differences by locating each activity.

Some of these problems resulted from lacking know how, since activists did not understand how to carry out the merging activities online on the event website. Furthermore, some people or organizations did not understand the meaning of the merging process at all. Various originally suggested activities were lost, because the facilitator of one theme discarded a specific activity and moved it to another category where the responsible facilitator did not pick it up. Some activities merged with other activities without notifying the members of the program working group. Several organizations were engaged in more than one activity. If they used the wrong codes during the merging process, different activities merged unintentionally. Some people cancelled their suggested activities. Other activists did not manage to get in touch with their

suggested partner organizations (which were suggested by the merging teams). Therefore, lot of workshops were left over which should have been merged but actually were not. Sometimes people changed titles and/or keywords of their activities, so it was hard to find them by using the keywords in the website database. As a result (and due to all of the above mentioned problems) the final program was constituted out of 272 activities. Once the list of activities was finalized, the Logistics working group reserved places to host all officially planned activities. A list of all places and venues along with their actual size was developed to assign venues and schedule time slots for each activity. Since a responsible person from the Program working group was based in Malmo at the same location the Logistics working group was seated, the scheduling of the activities was quite easy.

The communication among the European Program network and the Program working group of the NOC was based mainly on mailing lists. Additionally, some members of the European Program network were designated facilitators for some of the themes which made information sharing easy. Furthermore, telephone conferences and physical meetings in Kiev (Ukraine) and Brussels (Belgium) took place in May and July 2008 respectively to finalize the program. One of the interviewees described that due to the high amount of workload; in some cases the communication was not very good.

The volunteers working in the Program working group evaluated their use of website as very positive. One member stated

“I think without the website it would have been a nightmare”

While others commented on the same:

“I know a lot of people from personal meetings but merging process was also supported by “OpenESF” space as well as internet. It would not be possible to have this merging process without this media like internet, like email, like telephone because we are not able to travel around the world every day so we can be in contact all the time not only on international meetings.”

There was however a problem which occurred during the merging process which hampered smooth information sharing among all the collaborators of an activity:

“When an activity was merged only one email address of the people who had proposed that was visible and this made it really difficult to get in touch with all the people, and I think it created a lot of confusion because we needed to reach people with important information about updating the languages and venues and all these things and then the information did not spread to the other partners quite often.”

7.5 Preparing Activities

The organizations proposing an activity were responsible for arranging the layout and organizing contents and speakers for the specified activity. In order to analyze their actual use and the potentials of ICT support, we analyzed the preparation process of different activities for the ESF 2008 Malmo event.

There was a proposed workshop on the topic “research on social movements”. After the merging process, two other activities, namely “Librarians for informational commons and another Europe” and “Who writes our history?” were merged to this activity. The participants did not know each other before and the whole preparation was done using the collaboration platform “OpenESF”. A project was developed on the “OpenESF”

containing wiki pages, blogs and mailing lists. The abstract of the workshop, workshop flyers, and presentation details and sequences were discussed using the wiki pages and relevant material was uploaded on the project workspace to be accessed by all participants.

There were two activities related to water problems and Ilisu dam in Turkey. In the first workshop eleven organizations (2 from Germany, 2 from Turkey, 1 from France, 2 from the Netherlands, 2 from Italy, 1 from Switzerland and the European Transnational Institute) were collaborating, whereas in the second workshop ten organizations were collaborating (2 from the Netherlands, 2 from Sweden, 1 from Germany, 1 from Finland, 2 from Italy, 1 from Turkey and the last organization was a European campaign present in Germany, Austria, Sweden, Belgium, UK, France and Italy). During the preparation of these two workshops, the organizers did not use the collaboration platform "OpenESF", but emails and telephone communication instead. For the first workshop organizations in Rome (Italy) who had access to a Kurdish NGO and French people contacted the speakers in the region and further communication was done using emails to propose speakers. For the second workshop a person from a German NGO, who has lived in Turkey before, contacted a speaker and invited her to Malmo.

One of the interviewees, who was involved in the organizing of all the above three workshops, described why collaboration tools were used in the first workshop but not in the two other workshops.

Describing the experiences of the first workshop, she said:

"That was easier because everybody was speaking English we did not really need translations..... In the preparing process it was more a matter that nobody has time to prepare a speech, so no one really wanted to be the main speaker, so we were kind of discussing who has to do it because you also did not know each other personally before. But it was not really a problem..... In this case it was only organized through the "OpenESF" platform and it helped very much".

While commenting on the other two workshops she described:

"This is a network which is in Turkey and the Ilisu region, many people even do not speak English so you have to call someone maybe in Rome, because there are many exiled Turkish people, like in Rome, in France and in Germany so they have to call the people in Turkey and Kurdish region so you can not send an email to everyone and then just hope that people understand."

There was another workshop "Initiating a process to connect research and citizenship", that was managed by a single organization from France. The interviewee described that they did not use the collaboration platform:

"We tried it but because of few people who were quite old and not used to use such tools, so we realized that it is lot easier to use the mailing list."

Describing the preparation process, the interviewee stated that he tried to identify a few stakeholders and representatives of main organizations; he wanted to have in his workshop. Even if the people from those organizations could not participate, he got their feedback on the initiative. After calling 10-20 people, he prepared the abstract of workshop and sent this abstract to all contacted people with a request to join this workshop as speaker. Once the speakers were identified, they were asked to describe in two to three sentences what they plan to say in the workshop. On the basis of

those responses, the abstract of the workshop was revised and sent back to speakers with a request to extend their presentations. On the basis of this extended abstracts, the schedule of the workshop was finalized. This schedule was discussed and consensually agreed on. This whole negotiation was based on email and telephone communication. On the day of workshop, they met some time before to discuss about the plan and schedule for the workshop and made last adaptations.

Another workshop was focusing on "Resistance against Nato and alternative peace strategies in Europe". In this workshop four organizations from Sweden, Germany, Georgia and the European Charter Network were collaborating. The Swedish people set up a project space on the collaboration website for the introduction. However, it turned out that further discussion took not place on this website. Since the participants visited several international meetings, they met at the sides of those events face-to-face to plan this workshop, followed by telephone calls. The interviewee described the problem as follows:

"During the war in Georgia it was not possible to provide a lot of information on this space andEspecially the Swedish group used this to introduce themselves. Especially in this network we have lot of connection around the world because it is an old network and so we can do networking with the space (OpenESF) and without it"

7.6 Documenting Outcomes

For the documentation of the ESF 2008 event, there is no official outcome (like a reader, or proceedings or another written documentation), since it is organized mainly as an open space for networking and planning on common actions for the future. However, the ESF is used as a platform to start different projects and processes for future work. Thus, many outcomes are in the shape of something that happened in the forum e.g. some initiative, some network started, some statement agreed with other organizations. On the forum website, you could find an online form to provide information about the different initiatives, using the activity code, which was generated by the system at the time of proposing an activity or later during the merging process. This form can also be filled out as a hard copy, then send to the organizing committee which will update it on the website (by a volunteer). Until December 2008, 43 initiatives have been published on the website. The call for publishing the outcomes is still open.

8. DISCUSSION

The empirical findings from the presented ethnographic case study seem to be quite useful to derive some design requirements for technological support for the ESF process and the involved community.

8.1 Knowledge Transfer

Since the responsibility for the organization of the ESF events change from one event to the next, a close cooperation between the members of previous, the current and the following organizing committee is a crucial issue. This networking and collaboration was mostly based on personal contacts of social activists. As some people from Nordic countries have already participated in previous forums, they knew some people who could provide some help and support in the EPA meetings. Nevertheless, this knowledge transfer from previous committee members to the current ones is not supported technologically, or at least not in a systematic way.

8.2 Perception of Technology

Some social activists were quite skeptical with regard to the use of ICT in the process. They were of the opinion that the introduction of technology will lead to a weakening of their political process. Their main concerns were about the digital divide between countries of the North and South and about that technology is going to replace the physical contacts.

“You cannot have this whole middle class idea of the perfect communication through homepages and email lists. It is of course an illusion because somewhere there has to be taken decisions about economy and somewhere there has to be taken decision about politics and that is done when people meet,”

“World Social Forum process supposed to be also with a focus on global south and many people don't have the access or even the knowledge. So if the tools get very good that's ok but it doesn't ... I think there has to be workshops with people in the global south, there has to be resources for them so they can also be part of the process - because otherwise I think what I see in the World Social Forum processes that already the NGOs and resource intensive organizations are dominating the process and if we concentrate more on using emails, OpenESF and tools like that it could even be more dominated by the people from global north.”

8.3 Systemization of Technology

Another important observation was that the social activists themselves are quite aware of the importance of technology. In order to strive for a better sustainability of technological solutions for the ESF process, the “web-team” is evolved. They people in “web-team” are trying to have active collaboration between volunteers working in context of world social forum so that common shared initiatives could be taken. Nevertheless, lack of technical and financial resources is hindering in the establishment of sustainable technological infrastructures.

8.4 Decentralized Web Sources

The European Social Forum process has brought forth multiple websites along with the different meetings during the last seven years. It is not trivial to understand the link between these different ESF web (re)sources. The objective of each website is not clear and information is just placed on a resource on the basis of availability. The historic information about the previous events is placed at different websites and it is hard to find all those information. There seem to be a strong need for some kind of structuring all decentralized web sources, databases and workspaces of ESF events to make valuable information easily accessible. Otherwise valuable information, knowhow and already gained achievements are on risk to be forgotten and to get lost.

8.5 Usage of ICT Infrastructure

The use of the central event website for the ESF 2008 event was very helpful in getting the activities registered and the merging process managed. Nevertheless, the utility of this website could be significantly enhanced: Some expertise finding mechanisms could help in searching for specific know how, the merging process could be supported better by a recommender mechanism that could suggest some options for clustering, matching and merging of relevant activities. One member of the Information working group, who interacted regularly with the website, claimed that if the website's developer would have been in Malmo, more people would have benefited during the organizing process. With better opportunities to articulate their needs, they would have been more

aware of the possibilities of such a system and would have gained a better understanding about the support of this central event website.

Furthermore, the collaborative workspace “OpenESF” was not used by all stakeholders in the process. In order to promote this platform, the activity registration form offered a column for mentioning collaborative project spaces and for the preparation of activities. Nevertheless, many activists did not use the “OpenESF” system at all. Describing the advantages of “OpenESF”, one member of organizing committee described the use of “OpenESF” as very helpful for activists in setting up a network. Since this networking is one of the main purposes of the ESF in general, the platform offers a great potential which was not recognized by many activists to the full extent. Another participant described the usage of “OpenESF” by members of organizing committees in the following way:

“Some working groups used the (OpenESF) some did not ...It was not a driving force in any working group unfortunately. It would be nice, if more working groups used it in order to get more input from people around the world. People in the board, people hired by NOC did not know how to use open ESF”

As existing social networking and community sources (Web2.0) are gaining more popularity, a group was established on “Facebook”, which helped in attracting many people to the event.

8.6 Lack of Information Sharing

Some participants in the organizing process did not benefit from the available technology at all. Since the ESF organizing network was mainly an adhoc community, comprising many activists from very different organizations in various countries, a lot of information was not available to everybody right in time. Some members of the organizing committee did not realize the advantages and features of the technological infrastructure. One of the volunteers working in the organizing committee described this phenomenon as follows:

“We had a bunch of mailing lists, but no one really knew exactly what's on them and what they were and I think also we were too few people organizing the forum.”

Another social activist, who participated in the forum, described her experience in using “OpenESF” as follows:

“The Open ESF was very good because I could see photographs of people, I could see where they are involved in, what other groups they are involved in, what sort of projects have been launched. So it really helped me to organize my attendance in the European Social Forum in Malmo.”

One member of the organizing committee commented on the use of the collaborative tool as following.

“Using Open ESF discussion group - I don't know why I have not thought about that it could be quite useful.”

As a result of the limited use of the platform, a lot of additional workload came up, that could have been avoided. A typical example was as follows:

“The finance person had a separate register for paid organizations even though you could easily use the website. Probably because he did not know that you could do that from the beginning and then when he has already started the database it was kind of no use to stop it because he liked it better.”

Another activist described his experience of browsing the “OpenESF” and finding the interesting projects:

“X” invited me to join a group. I know “X” and I know she is interested in similar things, then I went through “X’s” group and then I picked specific people that I thought were interested in the same thing in which I was interested a then I went through their projects to see whether they are interested or not”

8.7 Digital Divide in Europe

Some eastern European activists lack computer access so it is very hard for them to get updated on all the matters only through online information. So one participant from Hungry described that it is very hard for them to use these facilities and they mostly are dependent on physical meetings to mobilize the people in their region. As he was acquainted with email usage so he communicated on the behalf of his group with NOC, since telephone calls are too expensive. He further said that

“The most important problem is lack of finances, because quite a lot of activists in our movement have not got a nice fancy computer and they cannot go into “OpenESF” or if they can, they speak Hungarian so it needs translation We initiated quite a lot but regretfully not too much resonance and answers of course it can improve but it is a slow process, it means people must learn foreign languages or another alternative is to have good translations..... and other point is people should use the internet but people who are poor they have no access to this fancy thing.”

8.8 Training by Peers

Furthermore, lacking computer know how is another important obstacle for the adoption and use of ICT by the ESF participants. It was observed that peer training was quite helpful. Social activists with some background in technology were helping their peers by giving training to other activists. Sufficient computer literacy cannot be simply presumed, many social activists learned to use the websites of the forum during these training sessions organized by “web-team” during the EPA meetings.

9. CONCLUSION

The European Social Forum is one central event for social movements and civil society in Europe. Our study showed some of the hindrances and obstacles for the use of ICT systems during the preparation process for the ESF 2008 Malmo event. The study indicates needs for a better understanding of the specific needs of adhoc community of CSOs, movements, networks and activists in order to identify appropriate design requirements for technological support.

The analysis of the work practices of the ESF community brought insights in the collaboration between different activists spanning all over Europe and led us to a better understanding of their practice of appropriate, adopt and use ICT for their support. With regard to the design of ICT for Civil Society Organizations (and especially with respect to transnational cooperation in CSO networks), we still lack a sufficient body of knowledge, particularly analyzing their specific needs. Our ethnographic study is one first step to understand the particular work practices and transnational cooperation structures of these cross-cultural networks of voluntary organizations. Since we are aiming in supporting the ESF process by designing some technological tools, our next steps are the definition of specific design requirements and the participatory design of some prototypical systems. These prototypes shall be evaluated in practice by the social activists and further adapted to their specific needs. Following a socio-technical approach [34], the presented ethnographic analysis of the ESF community marks a starting point

for developing appropriate support for this particular transnational CSO network.

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