Whose voice? Transnational CSOs and their relations with members, supporters and beneficiaries

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Abstract

It is often claimed that the participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) can mitigate the ‘democratic deficit’ of international organizations and the European Union. The underlying assumption is that transnational CSOs in their advocacy work are voicing citizens’ interests, anxieties, hopes and ideals. In this paper we report the first results of an empirical research project in which we investigated whether, and in what precise way, transnational CSOs are actually reaching out to citizens. In our interviews with officials from 60 transnational CSOs we found that in most cases communication between the CSO offices and members is dense when it comes to strategic decisions. However, in tactical matters CSO officials seem to rely more on their consultation with peers, and the international secretariats often act autonomously. We were also able to identify two prevailing models of consultation in transnational CSOs. First, there is a ‘formal and federal model’ of consultation that features representative bodies in which sub-units are represented. Second, there is an ‘informal participatory model’ in which there is a lot of ad hoc communication between the office and interested individuals. From the point of view of democratic theory, both models have specific advantages so that it cannot be said that one is generally preferable. Within each category, however, there are CSOs that perform better than others.

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1) Introduction

In the scholarly debate on European and global governance, it is often claimed that the participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) can mitigate the ‘democratic deficit’ of international organizations (IOs) and the EU. CSO participation, it is argued, will promote political plurality, enhance accountability and give voice to citizens’ concerns that governmental representatives would otherwise ignore. A key assumption underlying these theory-driven accounts is that transnational CSOs in their advocacy work formulate and ‘represent’ citizens’ interests, anxieties, hopes and ideals. Any democratization of international politics through CSO involvement therefore seems to depend upon the capacity and willingness of these organizations to take up the concerns of citizens and voice them in the political arena. This may be called the ‘transmission belt thesis’ – the idea that transnational CSOs should function as communicative interfaces that link a global citizenry with IOs (Steffek and Nanz 2008: 8).

If such a transmission belt is functioning in practice is subject to much controversy. Many advocates of civil society involvement in international politics seem to believe that transnational CSOs are indeed connecting IOs with people worldwide (Esty 2002). Many authors who perceive a democratizing potential in civil society participation would also assume that CSOs voice the arguments of a considerable number of citizens. Most critics of civil society involvement, by contrast, vigorously deny this (Anderson 2000; Johns 2003; Trachtman and Moremen 2003). In their view, transnational CSOs in reality are a jet-setting elite group that furthers its own interests and/or cultivates its pet issues without much interest in what ‘the people on the ground’ really think. Which of the two contrasting views is correct?

Unfortunately, so far there has been little academic research to empirically answer this question. There is, of course, an enormous amount of excellent literature available on transnational CSOs and advocacy networks. However, much of this work is interested mainly in the political role and importance of non-state actors vis a vis states and IOs. It focuses on political strategies and tactics, with the aim of discovering the determinants of success in world politics (e.g. Arts 1998: 55-61; Keck and Sikkink 1998: 25-29; Reinalda et al. 2001; Risse 2002: 262-268). Others are chiefly interested in the cooperation between IOs and CSOs and ask why, or under what conditions, such partnerships emerge (Bouwen 2002; Martens 2005; Reimann 2006). There is considerably less literature dealing with the internal functioning of transnational CSOs and the interaction of their leadership with members,
supporters, and those people affected by their work. Research that puts citizens in the focus has been mainly interested in transnational social movements and protest (Tarrow 2005). The question of how CSOs as fairly professionalized organizations reach out to their constituencies has been addressed in the national and local context (Guo and Musso 2003) but much less with regard to transnational organizations. The relationship between transnational CSOs and their constituency of members, supporters, and beneficiaries so far has been an understudied issue. Only for the EU we find an interview-based study on nine development NGOs (Warleigh 2001) and, based on its framework for analysis, a study on NGOs in the drafting process of the Commission’s White Paper on Governance (Sudbery 2003).

In this paper we present the first results of a much broader empirical research project in which we investigated whether transnational CSOs are actually able to function as a transmission belt between international governance institutions and the transnational citizenry. Do they reach out to citizens, listen to them and voice their concerns in international political forums? As we will explain below in more detail, when we say citizens we do not mean ‘everyone’. CSOs by their very nature can only represent or speak for a certain faction of the citizenry. The citizens that CSOs should directly reach out to can be only their formal members, their supporters, or the beneficiaries of their work. We apply a set of four criteria to evaluate the internal organizational structures of CSOs: possibilities of participation (of members, supporters, beneficiaries); transparency of the organization (internal and external); inclusion of disadvantaged groups (in the sense of empowerment); and independence (from the state and IOs, to avoid distortion of political programs). These four criteria were operationalized for empirical research through a questionnaire with 54 questions that was used to guide semi-structured interviews with representatives of 60 transnationally active CSOs involved in political advocacy at the EU institutions in Brussels, and at international organizations in Geneva.

The remainder of this paper is divided into eight sections. In the next section we provide definitions of key terms, such as ‘civil society organization’ and briefly introduce the theoretical approach from which the transmission belt model emerged. Against the backdrop of this normative model we develop and explain the four criteria we used in this comparative study to assess the extent to which transnational CSOs may count as the citizens’ voice. In section three we present the methodology of this research and the case selection. Section four takes issue with the self-perception of transnational CSO and their relation with members.
Section five through eight report the major results of our empirical investigation, divided along the lines of our four criteria. The concluding section nine puts the results into theoretical perspective, developing two organizational models of CSO outreach to their constituencies.

2) Theoretical foundations and criteria

The theoretical starting point of our research is the claim that CSOs may be able to contribute to a democratization of international governance. This idea is very popular in the recent literature on international politics and European integration. The underlying conception of democracy varies: some authors adopt a pluralist reasoning, highlighting that the presence of CSOs will lead to a more balanced representation of societal groups and interests in the policy process (Greenwood 2007); others relate to a deliberative conception of democracy, stressing argumentative rationality, public debate, and learning effects that may result from the consultation of civil society actors (de Schutter 2002; Nanz and Steffek 2004). The conjecture in both cases is that CSOs may help link international governance institutions with the global citizenry by transmitting the interests, anxieties, hopes and ideals of citizens to international organizations, and to feed them into their policy processes. As political arguments are not floating freely but are situated in the life world and experiences of citizens it seems necessary, from both a normative and a functional point of view, that transnational CSO remain in close contact with the citizenry. In that respect even a deliberative conception of democracy cannot avoid questions of participation and representation. The purpose of our research is to investigate empirically to what extent transnational CSOs are able to function as transmission belts. This section develops a set of criteria that we used to operationalize the concept of a ‘transmission belt’ for empirical research.

The term ‘civil society organization’ is fuzzy, contested and its meaning is changing over time (Jensen 2006; Jobert and Kohler-Koch 2008). It has empirical referents but also strong normative connotations, at least in the sense of ‘civility’ of such actors. Authors who seek to avoid such normative connotations are often referring to ‘interest groups’, rather than CSOs. Still others prefer the term non-governmental organization (NGO) that is widely used in the context of international governance and law (Martens 2003). The disadvantage of using the term ‘interest groups’ is that it evokes a strong association with the rational pursuit of a given group’s self-interest. Many of the non-state actors we encounter in international politics are advancing interest that they frame as public and that have beneficiaries beyond the group of
activists, such as the poor, the disabled, the marginalized, or even future generations. The term ‘interest group’, although perfectly adequate to describe transnational business and professional associations, would be a bit misleading in the context of such charitable work. Not least for that reason, non-profit organizations that pursue advocacy for others, or in the name of the common good, are often labeled NGOs, rather than interest groups. That term in its conventional definition excludes trade unions, professional associations and employers’ associations, as well as religious congregations. However, all of those actors are prominently engaged in international politics. For these reasons, we prefer the term ‘civil society organization’, which we use in a very broad sense to cover the sample of non-state actors we are studying. It is meant to denote a non-governmental, non-profit organization that has a clearly stated purpose, legal personality, and pursues its goals through political advocacy and in non-violent ways. In addition to activist organizations this definition includes the social partners (i.e. international federations of trade unions and employers associations), consumer associations, charities, and religious communities. Due to our focus on internationalized policy-making all civil society organizations we are studying are transnationally active. This means that they are pursuing their political activities simultaneously in several countries, or that they target IOs in their home country whose range of policy-making is by definition international.

The focus of our project is on the ways and means by which CSOs reach out to citizens that are concerned or affected by their work. In practice, these citizens might be their members, supporters, or beneficiaries. Members of a CSO have an official affiliation and usually pay membership fees. Supporters are those who voluntarily offer services, ideas or funding to a CSO without attaining, for whatever reason, official member status. As beneficiaries we define all those individuals whose life chances a CSO seeks to improve through its advocacy and service provision, and/or for whom the CSO claims to speak. Despite the positive connotation of the word ‘beneficiary’, there is no guarantee that these persons eventually benefit from the activity of the CSO. In the following, we are suggesting a list of four criteria to assess the degree to which a transnational CSO is able to successfully reach out to its members, supporters and beneficiaries:

(1) participation

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6 Not all scholars would agree that he term ‘civil society organization’ can be used in such a broad sense. As Kohler-Koch and Quittkat (2008) have found in a survey, academic specialists profoundly disagree if one should include business associations, professional associations and trade unions under the CSO heading.
The first, and most central, criterion is participation. The presumption of our research is that transnational CSOs, in order to fulfill their democratizing function, would need to reach out, by whatever means and procedures, to members, supporters, and beneficiaries. The aim of this exercise would be to establish a communicative process by which the decision-makers in CSOs learn about the concerns and interests of their societal constituency. Participation hence refers to practices through which the members, supporters, and beneficiaries of a CSO are involved in the internal decision-making process of the organization. In practice, participation might be organized in very different ways. Members usually have the formal right to elect the CSO board and sometimes directly take decisions at the strategic level. While voting rights are rightfully limited to formal members, supporters should also be consulted in the decision-making process. Supporters who donate money and volunteer services to the CSO (which may sometimes be more than what the members contribute) should have a right to be heard. The case for beneficiaries’ participation rests on the fact that they are affected heavily by the activities of the CSO. Therefore, they should have a chance to get their voices and opinions heard in the process leading up to such a decision. By letting the ones affected by its advocacy work participate in its internal decision-making processes and external activities, a CSO can ensure that its activities and lobbying efforts are in line with the needs of those affected.

Formal opportunities for participation do not automatically ensure that all those who are affected by a CSO’s work can participate on equal grounds. Schattschneider (1960: 35) already noted the discrepancy between the ideal and the practice of egalitarian access to societal interest groups: “[T]he flaw in pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with an upper class accent.” Formal rules and procedures are probably a good first indicator for the energy a CSO has put into trying to enhance the participation by members, supporters or beneficiaries. But not all those who participate are equally able to speak the language of professional policy makers, not all have the same social capital and social networks that give power to their arguments. Therefore, we supplement the criterion of participation with the criterion of inclusion.

(2) inclusion
(3) transparency
(4) independence
Inclusion means that CSOs should undertake empowering activities towards potentially disadvantaged groups among their members, supporters and beneficiaries. We do not expect CSOs to empower all possibly disadvantaged addressees of global or European governance but (only) those within their own constituency, that is, among their members, supporters and beneficiaries. Disadvantaged groups and individuals may be those coming from underdeveloped regions of the world or marginalized groups in an otherwise affluent society (e.g. migrants, illiterates, persons with handicaps etc.). Possible empowerment activities could include: special funding for representatives of disadvantaged groups (such as travel grants), affirmative action, capacity building, the provision of technical assistance etc. These empowerment activities are a precondition for effective participation by disadvantaged persons. The two criteria can be distinguished neatly from each other as one (inclusion) requires the empowerment of certain persons in order to enable them to voice their political concerns; whereas the other (participation) requires that these persons are in fact consulted.

Transparency is almost universally considered to be a necessary element of good governance by all types of social organizations (Bovens 2007: 449). Only by knowing what organizations do and how they do it, chains of accountability can be constructed and legitimacy awarded (Grigorescu 2007: 626). The issue of transparency has gained more importance as international organizations have extended their activity to virtually all areas of governance. Transparency is also a precondition for giving the adequate input at the right point in time, thereby making participation, inclusion meaningful and the transmission belt work. Transparency may be defined as “easy access to accurate and comprehensible information about policy decisions and decision-making processes” (Naurin 2002: 9; see also Nanz and Steffek 2005: 375).

In principle, the concept of transparency means being open and providing information to the general public. How could such a demand be operationalized for empirical research? The key measure seems to be the extent of transparency as there are numerous types of information to be made public. A key transparency demand towards CSOs and other organizations concerns the way they reach decisions (Anheier and Themudo 2005: 195). CSO should make it clear in an accessible and comprehensible manner through which decision-making procedures they form their positions. This can be most easily achieved by publishing their statutes, by-laws or memoranda of association. Contributions to the budget of a CSO ought to be transparent, too. Ideally, information on the budget should specify its size and its origin in detail in order to
allow the interested publics to assess its independence from government or companies. Making expenditure public is necessary for financial accountability, but also enables the observer to identify organizational priorities through the appropriation of funds for specific budget lines. Finally, we consider it an asset to transparency if a CSO is regularly evaluating its own activities, in particular if the evaluation is performed by external agencies or consultants, and if the results are made public.

It is generally assumed that civil society is a societal sphere separate from the state and the market (Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor 2001: 17). Therefore, the independence of CSOs from the two is generally an interesting question for empirical research. It is particularly interesting in our context as CSOs are assigned a particular role in democratizing international governance. If CSOs are to have a role as transmission belts of citizens’ interests and concerns, it needs to be ensured that they are free and unconstrained in their expression of interests and arguments. If the independence of CSOs is jeopardized, they are prevented from exercising their function as intermediaries between citizens and the sites of policy-making. On closer inspection, the criterion of CSO independence has two dimensions, which are often interlinked: organizational and financial independence. There are different circumstances which can pose a threat to the political independence of a CSO. The organizational independence is endangered if the founder of the CSO is the state, an intergovernmental institution, or a single profit-making corporation (see Martens 2001 for the creation of NGOs by UNESCO). The same is true if a CSO’s staff is seconded from, or financed by, political institutions or commercial enterprises.

It is obvious that organizational and financial independence go hand in hand and the former can be measured to a certain extent by the latter (Martens 2001). As non-profit organizations, most CSOs depend at least to some degree on financial support from the outside. If they receive a large amount of funding from government agencies or a single private company they might run the risk of becoming co-opted (Bichsel 2001: 236-238; Hirsch 2003: 9). Consequences of co-optation may be that political or business actors instrumentalize CSOs for their own purposes; that CSOs avoid criticism of the state, IO or company that provides funding; or that their programs and projects reflect donor views rather than the needs of beneficiaries, or the preferences of their own members. We are aware that relations of organizational and financial dependence are just indicators of a propensity to co-optation rather than proof that it takes place. While in some countries government-funded
organizations may indeed be government-driven, in others governments would not expect favors or conformity in return for funding (Bichsel 1996: 237). Nevertheless, our indicators allow us to assess the probability that co-optation becomes an issue for a transnational CSO.

3) Case selection and research strategy

3.1) Case selection
The purpose of our study is exploratory. We aim to obtain an overview of the internal functioning of transnational CSOs across policy fields. Unlike EU studies that normally focus on the Brussels community of CSOs only we set out to compare them to globally active organizations that are working with the United Nations system and the World Trade Organization. With these considerations in mind we decided to study four policy-fields in which CSOs are typically active at the European and global level: environmental protection, human rights protection, trade, and peace. We took European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), EU Migration policy, EU Environment policy, EU External Trade policy, the UN Human Rights Council, the UNFCCC, the WTO, and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as institutional focal points around which CSO activities revolve. As ours is an exploratory study we did not select our CSOs for study according to theory-driven criteria, in the sense of picking least likely cases or most likely cases. We initially remained agnostic as to what organisational characteristics of a CSO would make successful outreach to citizens more or less likely.

The first consideration in selecting our cases for study was that we wished to analyze those civil society actors that were regularly active in the respective policy field. This cannot be taken for granted as official registers are full of CSOs that appear only occasionally at the respective meetings and in some cases appeared only once. Our second consideration was that we wished to analyze only those CSOs that have a certain political influence. Questions of legitimacy of CSOs have arisen over the last years precisely because their political influence has become ever more visible. In order to assess the activities and importance of CSOs in the respective policy-fields we scrutinized the lists of participants distributed before and during important events (for example, sessions of the UN Human Rights Council). We investigated which CSOs participated most often (and were present at most sessions of a negotiation series, for example), which were well-represented (in numbers of officials present), and which were most active in terms of delivering written statements. In addition, secondary literature on CSO activity in the respective policy field provided additional information on which CSOs to
choose for interview. During our field work we controlled for the validity of our own selection by asking CSO representatives for their own assessment of which groups were most important/influential in the policy field or negotiation series. In this way, we complemented our initial list of CSOs. The selection of CSOs for study, of course, also depended on their availability for being interviewed, which in practice proved to be a major restraint.

In the end we obtained a sample of 60 transnational CSOs available for study that are politically most active and are considered, by us and their own peers, as being influential. A look at the sample (Annex 1) shows that it includes general interest NGOs as well as special interest groups, such as trade unions and employers’ organizations. With a view to our question of outreach to citizens, one interesting characteristic became obvious immediately: many of the most active and influential CSOs are ‘umbrella organizations,’ which means that they are constituted by other civil society groups, not directly by individuals. 35 of our 60 cases fall into this category. In these cases the envisaged transmission belt would have to bridge several organizational sections before it reaches the citizen. Our sample also contains ‘hybrid’ cases of organizations that have both individual and organisational members. PICUM, for example, an organization active in EU migration policy, offers membership to individuals interested in migration issues and to organisations local and national groups working with refugees. Another special case are transnational religious groups such as Franciscans International or the Quakers whose members are individuals who also form national or regional groups.

3.2) Research strategy

In a first step we collected all information on the respective CSOs that is publicly available in either printed form or, as in most cases, on the Internet. In particular we were interested in their statutes and bylaws, budgetary information, reports and products of their advocacy. We also searched for codes of conduct that they adhere to and the results of external evaluation. The results of that search were already useful for our assessment of external transparency of a CSO. They were subsequently complemented by interviews with CSO officials. Our interview partners were either policy officers responsible for advocacy work in Brussels and/or Geneva or in charge of external relations of a CSO (usually in big professionalized organizations). Most interviews with CSO representatives were conducted face-to-face and in some cases by telephone, between spring 2007 and fall 2008. The interviews lasted on average around one hour, were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. All interviews were conducted following the
same set of questions included in our interview guideline. This guideline encompassed 54 questions, some asking for general information about the CSO (for example, “How many members does your organization have?”), but most questions gathering information relevant for assessing the CSOs’ correspondence to our criteria. In that respect we were careful to avoid socially desirable answers by avoiding normatively charged wording and by spreading questions on key issues (such as member participation) across the interview. 15 questions came with a set of possible answers (‘multiple choice’), while 39 questions were open. In most cases, the combination of different answers was possible so that in the following (also for the multiple choice-questions), the answers most frequently do not add up to 60 (whether several answers were combined is indicated in the footnotes). In addition, not all of our interviewees answered all of the 54 questions – the information on how many interviewees did not answer a specific question is also included in the footnotes.

4) How transnational CSOs see themselves (and their members)

As we have a rather diverse set of organizations, in our interviews we first explored the perception of their role and importance. The first, rough indicator is a name. How do CSO officials call the individuals that constitute their organizations? 28 CSOs refer to them as members and 8 as supporters. Others prefer terms indicating a horizontal working relationship, such as colleagues (8), friends (4), partners or collaborators. A group of 6 referred exclusively to terms describing employment relations, such as ‘staff’, ‘employees’, or ‘interns’, indicating that they do not perceive to have any broader base in society but are a group of professionals speaking for themselves. 10 interviewees pointed out that they are dealing mainly or exclusively with representatives of member organizations and not directly with individual members, which the national organizations have. As they nevertheless call these representatives their members we need to caution at this point that in the following some ‘members’ may be representing a lower level of the organization, like national chapters, or affiliated groups. While we are always talking about the ‘downward’ dimension of communication in transnational CSOs it is not implied that communication arrives directly ‘on the ground’.

When asked whom the organizations actually claims to speak for, most CSO officials say that they speak for their members: 35 CSO officials gave this answer. These members include individual members and member organizations, some of them being umbrella organizations

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3 Some interviewees wished to combine answers.
themselves. 18 organizations mentioned that they primarily speak for their beneficiaries, 6 CSO officials answered that they speak for the two groups, members and beneficiaries. Among those who claim to speak for their beneficiaries, SFCG and Saferworld said that they speak on behalf of people/communities affected by conflict; Human Rights Watch indicated that they speak for victims of human rights abuse. Many CSO officials, however, were careful not to say that they actually ‘speak for’ these persons or on their behalf; they chose wordings such as “we try to ensure that voices from the ground are heard by policy and decision makers” (International Alert), or said that they work “side by side with movements and organizations of poor people” (Action Aid). In this context, the interviewee from Friends of the Earth pointed out: “We work very closely with partners, with allies, for instance, in indigenous groups and communities. So, in a way, we also represent their voices in our campaigns. And we have series of strategic allies that we work with in the farmers’ movement, in the indigenous people movement. We do not speak on their behalf, but work with them closely”. This quote exemplifies a quite common ambivalence: on the one hand, many CSOs want to represent the voices of their beneficiaries, on the other hand they seem to be well aware that this may involve the risk of paternalizing. Besides their members and beneficiaries, seven CSOs answered that they speak for general purposes, such as the environment (BUND), nature (WWF), mankind in general (CIMADE), human rights (Amnesty International), or the NGO community (CONGO). The CSOs which claim to speak for general purposes may also claim to speak for their members: “We speak for human rights – we only speak for our members insofar as they consider human rights as the central concern of our association […]” (Interviewee Amnesty International, translation by authors).

Interestingly, only 2 organizations stated that they speak on behalf of citizens or civil society more generally: Germanwatch said that they were “representatives of civil society and a lobby for the weak […] a voice for Southern countries, countries that are not so strong” and ECAS said that they speak for “citizens in general”. Only one CSO – FES – indicated that they speak for their donors. While, thus, most of our CSOs claimed to be speaking for specific groups of persons and wider purposes, the Crisis Management Initiative indicated that they speak on the basis of their expertise rather than on the base of their members’ views. The interviewee from the International Crisis Group answered that they speak on behalf of what they think were the “facts on the ground”, and ISIS named itself a “think tank” and a “monitor for citizens”. Others, namely the representative of Pax Christi said that they speak for and in the name of
the organisation and the representative of GLOCOM also said it generally speaks “for itself”. ICTSD said that they speak “for nobody”.

Asked for what purpose members are involved in the organisation (multiple answers possible), the answer that was given most often was that members contribute to policy development and provide input to the CSO (36). This input by the CSOs’ members seems to be very important for some organizations. QCEA, for example, indicates that their members make the important policy decisions and the Alliance Sud said that their members formulate the policy goals. The CSO officers we interviewed also highlighted their members’ involvement in project and campaign implementation (22 answers) and fundraising (24 answers). Many CSO officers also referred to their members as helping and providing services to the general public (14 answers). 12 CSOs indicated that their members were engaged in the evaluation of the CSOs’ activities. The interviewee from WIDE, for example, mentioned that the organization has an external evaluation of their activities and that the members are invited to contribute to it. Another answer that 7 CSOs gave was that their members were directly involved in advocacy.

Some CSOs highlighted their members’ pivotal function at national level, be it through participation in national debates (IHEU), through advocacy at national level (for example, FTA), or through their national and local work with beneficiaries (CCME)5. In this context, a certain task-sharing becomes visible between the CSO advocacy office that concentrates on lobbying at the international organization on the one hand, and the national member-organizations that are involved in advocacy or service provision in their respective countries on the other6. While many CSOs assign very active roles to members this is not universally the case. Our interviewee from the Crisis Management Initiative described their function in rather passive terms: “Obviously they get the annual report, but they also get invited to the annual meeting”. To summarize, our interviews revealed that most CSOs have individuals that they would perceive as their societal constituency. Very few are consciously and openly detached from such a basis. CSO members are involved in many different types of activities: They contribute to policy development as well as implementation, fundraising, and

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4 The answers do not add up to 60, since the combination of answers was possible. All CSOs that we interviewed answered this question.

5 The answers do not add up to 60, since the combination of several answers was possible and only 44 CSOs out of 60 answered to this question. Among the 16 CSOs that did not give an answer most indicated that they did not have members and that therefore the question was not applicable.

6 The Franciscans International, however, highlighted that whenever they wanted to present something at the UN, they work with members on specific issues and address it together at the UN.
evaluation. However, the degree to which the CSOs’ members are involved in the organizations seems to vary enormously.

5) Participation
As highlighted above, with regard to the criterion of participation, the presumption of our research is that the CSO offices should reach out to their members, supporters, and beneficiaries. We therefore focused on the communicative process between CSO staff and their constituency, in particular between the international advocacy office of CSOs and their members. We concentrated on the ways in which the CSO (offices) consult and cooperate with their members and how the members can participate at the CSOs’ decision-making and political activities, looking at formal as well as informal ways of consultation and communication, and at conflict resolution mechanisms.

How often do CSO officers personally get in touch with their members? Most interviewees reported rather frequent interaction. 17 officers responded that they had daily contact with CSO-members, 6 indicated that they had weekly contact, and 13 indicated that these contacts take place regularly/often. Only 7 responded that they had monthly contact and 4 indicated that these contacts were rare. However, many CSO officers said that the frequency of member interaction depended on the demand on the members’ side. This was highlighted by the interviewee from ITUC who said that “it depends. There are some who contact me on a weekly basis, and there are others who contact me like once a month and others once a year. So it really differs from one to another”. It may also vary among the departments within the CSO. As our interviewee from the Franciscans International pointed out: “There are departments […] that are much more engaged, the African department is basically on daily contact; there were some programmes on daily contact. And maybe in advocacy-doing we have contact with quite a few of the members […]”.

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7 The distinction between members and supporters could not always be made clearly in the empirical cases. Some CSOs referred in their answers to their ‘members’, although we would qualify these persons as ‘supporters’, and the CSOs are also sometimes inconsistent with regard to how they classify these individuals.
8 Most of the 11 CSOs that did not answer to this question said they did not have members in this sense. 8 CSOs responded in an ambiguous way. Several CSOs combined different answers, saying, for example that with some individual members they had daily contact, while with others this contact only rarely took place. Hence, again, the answers do not add up to 60.
9 According to the interviewee from CCME, the frequency does not depend on the size of the member organization: “Small organizations are often better at processing information, depends more on how compatible the EU and national policy is. This is very important” (Interviewee from CCME).
With regard to the means of communication, the CSOs’ staffs reported to be using a wide range of communication channels for keeping contact with their members. Many indicated that they communicate through individual letters and emails (36), through newsletters (35), conferences (31), but also through real-time communication (26). Interactive fora (13), the homepage (12), the intranet (12), and hearings (3) were also mentioned. The CSOs’ modes of communication, thus, encompass one-way-communication (such as newsletters or the homepage) as well as interactive modes. There seems to be a large variety of communication channels between the CSO staff and their members and our interviewees said that they considered it important to gain the input from their members.

Our interviewees particularly highlighted their members’ importance with regard to the CSOs’ strategic decision-making. While many CSO officers answered that the strategic decisions were made in the CSOs’ boards (37 chose this answer), approximately to the same extent the answer was given that these decisions were made by their members, either at the annual member conferences (28 answers), by member surveys and discussions (8 answers) or in committees composed of members or member representatives (4 answers). Most often, hence, CSOs indicated that their strategic decisions were made by the board and by their members, most frequently at the annual member conferences. 21 CSOs responded that their strategic decisions were made by the board/executive or steering committee and by their member conferences/member discussions. Many CSOs seem to have highly formalized and elaborated structures of member participation. In some CSOs, the boards are composed of member representatives (for example, the presidents of the member organizations) or its composition is approved by the member conferences, and annual member conferences are complemented by meetings of members that take place more often, such as continental and regional consultations (for example, Pax Christi) or specific committees (for example, Solidar). At some CSOs, the member conferences adopt long term strategic action plans for the organizations, for example, at Action Aid, where a “massive participatory exercise”

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10 Combinations of answers were possible. 14 CSOs did not answer the question.
11 However, as the interviewee from Birdlife indicated, “The communication channels that are used most often are not always the most important ones. Individual emails and email-lists are very frequent means of communication, but personal meetings are also very important. They are more difficult to organize and more expensive, but the personal contact at these meetings is very important (translation by authors)”.
12 In this context, the interviewee from Solidar stated that “[…] we are a member driven organization, so we exist at the will of our members, if you like. They pay affiliation fees in order to have their interests represented collectively. So we need to make sure that our work is being led by their priorities.”
13 Two CSOs (ESF and Christian Aid) mentioned that their member conferences took place more often than once a year, one CSO mentioned that its member conference only took place every 3-4 years (CONGO), and one CSO (Pax Christi) highlighted that its strategic decisions were taken at the annual conference and at their tri-annual world assembly composed of all members.
Interviewee from *Action Aid* took place to decide upon the 5 years guideline. This may also serve as a means to inform the members about the past and current work of the organizations (as our interviewee from *PICUM* pointed out).

It seems that particularly in those organizations that dispose of organizations as members (umbrellas) the decision-making procedures are highly institutionalized and member organizations are involved through specific, formal procedures in the strategic decision making. While umbrellas often involve their member organizations in the strategic decision-making, there are other organizations at which these decisions are made by the management board (for example at *Saferworld*) or by a single CSO officer who answered to our question on where the strategic decisions were made: “That would be basically me, understanding GLOCOM’s mission which is the promotion of the Internet and various Internet principles” (Interviewee from *GLOCOM*). In total, 10 CSOs answered that the strategic decisions were made by the advocacy office and 18 referred to different persons and departments within the CSO, among them to CSO staff and management (9 answers).

In contrast, with regard to the tactical, day-to-day decisions, most of our CSO staff answered that these were made by the advocacy office (38 CSOs chose this option). Only 8 indicated that these were taken by the board, and 6 referred to member surveys and discussions; one officer indicated that in addition such decisions were taken at regular meetings of members.

12 CSO officers referred to different persons and departments within the CSOs, 5 interviewees said that these decisions were taken in specific working groups and committees and 8 referred to individuals in the CSO management, among them the executive directors.

Some of our interviewees explicitly differentiated between the decisions to be taken depending on their importance and on whether they concerned urgent matters. While budgetary questions, for example, are decided in the CSO by the member conferences, others are decided upon by the Executive Committee or groups of members (Interviewee from *Bankwatch*). As our interviewee from *Birdlife* pointed out, day to day decisions that need to be decided quickly can be handled by the secretariat alone, as long as they do not contradict the general strategies set forth in the position papers that are agreed upon by the members.

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14 Again, these answers do not add up to 60, since the combination of answers was possible and 3 CSOs did not answer this question.

15 One officer claimed that these decisions were taken at the annual member conferences which seems, however, difficult to be implemented in practice.

16 Again, these answers do not add up to 60 since the combination of different answers was possible and 4 CSOs did not answer to this question.
It becomes visible that most CSOs seem to have a certain task-sharing between the member conferences and board which are responsible for the strategic decision-making on the one hand, and the advocacy offices or other staff and management which take the day to day tactical decisions on the other. Specific mechanisms, such as working plans that are agreed upon by members or the board and which serve as guidelines for the daily work of the organization, ensure that the different bodies within the CSO act in accordance with each other and with the general goals of the organization. The board is, however, sometimes involved at the level of the tactical decisions, too, and some CSOs indicated that they try to involve their members also at this level of decision making, mainly through ad hoc surveys and discussion.

When asking CSO representatives about the motivation for this rather frequent interaction with their members, the answers (multiple answers possible) mentioned most often were:

1) to inform the members about the work of the organisation (36);
2) to receive the members’ input in policy-making (31);
3) to mobilize members for advocacy at national and other levels (30);
4) to convince members that the IO is important (18);
5) to base policy advice on public support (18).¹⁷

The answers show that the interaction between the IO-level of a CSO and its members is a two-way process, i.e. informing members about the activities of the IO-level office is as important as receiving member feedback for policy-making. The top-down dimension of communication is illustrated by the attempt to mobilize members for advocacy at other levels also ranks very high among the motivations for member interaction. In general, the answers reveal a rather strong position of many IO-level offices vis-à-vis the rest of the organization. They definitely are not just service-providers, instrumental in channelling member concerns and interests to the IO. Instead, it is also their role to provide leadership, initiate policies, and encourage member engagement at other than the IO level.

Asked about a possible trade-off between organisational effectiveness and member access to the CSO, 9 organisations confirmed that such situations occurred while 34 CSOs denied it.¹⁸

¹⁷ 9 CSOs mentioned other motivations for member interaction than those listed and 15 CSOs did not answer the question, 11 of them because they had no members.
What is noteworthy is that those CSO representatives who perceive the trade-off and those who do not often described the same situation in the interview but seemed to draw different conclusions from it. Many interviewees said that slow responses from members were occasionally a problem in their advocacy work. While some concluded that this was a real obstacle to working efficiently others found that the communication with their members increased the quality of their work regardless. One CSO representative said: “The more you consult, the less efficient you are, it is inevitable [...]” (Interviewee at ECAS), whereas another explained: “Sometimes you might have the situation that you need to react very quickly and you need input which is not coming on time [...] But in general I rather see [it] positive than a trade-off from this, because with my work I do on the EU level I am effective and I am listened to because I bring specific examples and [...] the officials hear something they do not hear from the governments. And that makes my position stronger. If I tried to do that based only on my knowledge which I have being in Brussels, I would never be able to get the same results.” (Interviewee at Bankwatch) Thus, what often seems to differ is not the situation itself but the way it is perceived and handled by CSO staff.

The large majority of CSOs representatives (29 out of 60) declared to be generally satisfied with the communication with their members. 10 organisations replied that they are not satisfied, the most prominent concern being insufficient feedback from members: “I think it [the communication with members] could be a lot better because we send out a lot of information and don’t necessarily receive the feedback that we’re looking for.” (Interviewee at Solidar) Many of those who claim to be generally satisfied also expressed this worry: “If it was up to me, I would want more, but for what I think is realistic I am satisfied.” (Interviewee at BUND, translation by authors) One CSO representative explained that he did not expect members to contribute very much due to the complexity of the issues he dealt with and which are largely unknown to them. (Germanwatch) Several CSO representatives pointed out that member communication was imbalanced, i.e. that some members contributed much more than others. One CSO representative thus stated: “There are always only a few [members] who give feedback and it is usually the same ones.” (BUND) and another said: “I have a group of

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18 17 CSOs did not provide an answer to the question, 11 of which indicated that they had no members.
19 Some CSOs indicate that they have successfully overcome the trade-off between effectiveness and member access through the introduction of clear consultation procedures (e.g. setting deadlines, establishment of specific bodies responsible for taking short-term decisions) that all members have agreed to. WIDE has employed an officer who is in charge of the communication with members.
20 6 CSOs provided an ambiguous answer and 15 organisations did not reply to the question, nine of which indicated that they did not have members.
persons [...] [who] are more active than others and it’s difficult to maintain the momentum with everyone.” (ESF)

34 CSOs report that they have experienced situations where members were unhappy with the way the organization was working strategically or tactically (4 of which only report one single incident). Usually these problems are related to differences of views between members that have to be resolved, for example regarding controversial policy issues. The interviewee at Amnesty International, for example, cited abortion and UN peacekeeping missions as such controversial issues. The problems may also be related to communication and consultation procedures between the IO office and the members. For example, the interviewee at the Franciscans explained: “[…] sometimes they [the members] would like a different kind of language in specific cases. We are an organization that works directly at the UN, we use the language which is […] adequate to do that. Maybe there is a particular member who […] would like to use a stronger language which can be more useful in the area they work, but will not be understood that well here.” 13 CSO representatives claimed to never have encountered conflicts about participation within their organization, but some stressed that they could only speak for themselves and that other colleagues might have had different experiences.21

17 CSOs indicate that they have formal conflict resolution mechanisms in place and that designated bodies (e.g. the Steering Committee, the Board or the Secretary General) are entrusted with resolving such disagreements within their organisation. 18 CSOs have not installed formal mechanisms, but 13 of them report that they resolve such conflicts informally, i.e. through discussions, often on an individual basis. 4 organizations indicate that they have formal as well as informal conflict resolution mechanisms in place.22 Several CSO representatives pointed to the limits there are for CSO staff to resolving conflicts between members. The interviewee at ECRE said, for example: “[...] we can never make all members happy at once. That’s the real challenge of being a European NGO.” Generally the awareness of problems related to participation seems to be rather high among CSOs. More than half of the interviewed organisations indicate that they have experienced such difficulties. But only roughly half of those CSOs that have seen such disagreement have responded with the installation of formal conflict resolution mechanisms.

21 10 CSOs replied that they did not have any members and 3 organisations did not answer the question.
22 10 organisations do not have members and 11 did not provide any answer.
To summarize, while members seem to play a more important role in the formulation of long-term, strategic decisions of CSOs, the tactical and day-to-day decisions often appear to be left completely in the hands of the secretariat. Some organizations try to limit its discretion by specific safeguard mechanisms such as long term work plans that establish a framework for the day-to-day business. In addition, to some extent the autonomous role of the secretariats in short-term decision-making seems to be mitigated through ad hoc consultation via telephone, e-mail, etc. Nevertheless, there is a rather strong position of the IO office with regard to the individual members, or member organizations, which is also confirmed by the responses related to the motivation for member interaction and the emphasis on members’ importance for CSOs’ advocacy.

Not surprisingly, there seem to be important differences between organizations with predominantly organizational members (umbrellas) and those with individual members. Particularly in umbrella organisations, the participation of the member organizations is ensured by formalized decision-making procedures. Here the member organizations are represented in the member conferences and boards, and in most cases they adopt the strategic decisions. However, the degree to which member representatives are involved in the everyday business of an umbrella organization seems to vary greatly. Some CSO officers report to be in constant touch with them, while others say that they have “rare” contact and ascribe a more passive role to their members as receivers of information. The situation is similar in the other group of organizations, those that have an individual membership base. Some interact frequently with those members, while others do not seem to pay great attention to their views.

The differences we found with regard to the perception of a trade-off between member access and efficiency also suggest that the members’ role is different from one CSO to another. While the input from their members is regarded as vital by some CSO officers, others rather seem to perceive consultation as a burden. This might be an indicator for different organizational cultures in which members (no matter if organizational or individual) are more or less important. However, members themselves also seem to contribute to these differences: not all members are able or willing to make the same contribution in terms of policy input to the IO level.
6) Inclusion

Against the backdrop of the critical remarks on equality of participation mentioned in the previous section and the imbalances within CSOs that are a point of critical concern in the current literature (see, for example, Edwards 2000; Hudson 2000; Courville 2006), we require from CSOs to undertake empowering activities towards probably disadvantaged groups among their members/supporters and beneficiaries\(^{23}\). While the criterion of participation focused on the interaction between CSOs and their members, our focus here is wider and includes also their beneficiaries. But the empowering activities are also a precondition for effective participation of disadvantaged persons among the CSOs’ members. In this context, we asked the CSOs whether they undertake empowering activities, whom they consult with regard to policy development and whom the CSO claims to speak for. Our interviews revealed that many CSOs indeed have certain provisions for empowerment in place. 38 out of 60 CSOs responded positively to our question (5 answered negatively and 3 in an indeterminate way)\(^ {24}\).

However, the mechanisms that CSO representatives classify as empowerment encompass a large variety of activities. The answer given most often by the CSOs was that they engaged in consultation and cooperation with disadvantaged groups and that they asked for their input (18 CSOs gave this answer), either directly or via their member organizations. Some CSOs, such as Picum undertake field visits in order to ensure that the voices of those affected are reflected in their projects and policies, others say that they cooperate with local partners (for example, Saferworld).

However, our interviewees stressed that they were careful not to engage in paternalizing behaviour: “So we are not coming and saying ‘in Africa the people think like that’. What we’re saying is you need to consult them and if you want, we can give you the names of the partners we have on the ground and we can even invite them to Brussels to come and talk to you” (Interviewee from Saferworld). In this context, 9 of our CSOs mentioned that they acted as channels for the voices of disadvantaged persons, for example, by organizing roundtables with IO representatives and groups of marginalized people (for example, ICTSD) or by providing travel grants to enhance the participation of women coming from developing countries at international venues and CSO meetings (for example, WIDE). CSOs act here as facilitators for disadvantaged persons by providing them with the means to participate at international political events and thus by giving them the opportunity to raise their own

\(^{23}\) Above, we defined disadvantaged groups and individuals as those coming from disadvantaged regions in the world or disadvantaged sectors in society.

\(^{24}\) 14 CSOs did not answer to the question.
concerns. 11 CSOs indicated that through their general policy they pursued the aim of empowerment, and 9 CSOs said that they engaged in capacity building and training, for example through training funds (IISD) or other activities. The CSO Asylkoordination, for example, organizes training for refugee organizations and communities on how to get registered as an organization, on how to get funding etc. at national and EU level. Besides these activities that may either target the CSOs’ members or be directed to persons outside the organization, the CSOs also undertake activities that are focusing exclusively on their own members and organizational structure and that aim at empowerment.

9 CSOs indicated that richer sections within their organization provide funding to less affluent ones. Within the Climate Action Network, for example, Northern ‘regional nodes’ help southern networks to come to negotiations (by paying travel costs) and they help them financially to participate at telephone conferences. Sometimes they even provide their Southern counterparts with the means to pay salaries so that their staff can work fulltime for the organization. Other possible instruments include differentially structured membership fees for richer and poorer sections within the CSO (this is, for example, set in place by Solidar and EPLO). Besides, the CSOs also have specific staffing provisions in place aiming at empowerment (8 CSOs gave this answer), for example, they have equal opportunity hiring practices, they particularly promote younger staff, or they have specific internship programmes designed for persons coming from developing countries (the latter is, for example, the case at the Asian Legal Resource Centre). Gender mainstreaming was mentioned by three CSOs as means for empowerment. 3 CSOs mentioned that their boards include different constituencies. As our interviewees reported, at Picum, for example, one position on the board is reserved for a representative of migrants’ organisations, and ENAR’ bylaws request that among the two board members per country, at least one should be from an ethnic/religious etc. minority and that gender parity shall be ensured.

As discussed in section 4 above, most CSOs perceive themselves as speaking particularly for their members. However, they consult also with other persons besides their members when deciding on strategy and tactics, and this is potentially relevant for inclusion as well. Our interviewees most often indicated that they consult other international CSOs (28 CSOs mentioned this). While some CSOs are part of more formalized networks of CSOs whom they see as their ‘allies’ (for example, Germanwatch through the Climate Action Network), others rely on more informal consultations (for example, IP Justice or ATTAC). The interviewee
from Greenpeace indicated that they needed the information from other CSOs due to lacking resources. Hence, besides strategic advice, CSOs consult with each other in order to obtain expert information. Others, such as FTA, also indicated that they contacted other business organizations in order to publish common press releases and statements. Another answer that was often given is that CSOs consult with affected persons, local CSOs and stakeholders (this answer was given 16 times). Also in this case, more formal and institutionalized consultations with affected populations can be distinguished from informal ones. In this regard, some CSOs, such as the Franciscans International, point at their communication channel with their beneficiaries via their member organizations. Others report that they organize workshops and meetings with local activists and beneficiaries, and that they maintain close ties with local organizations (ALRC). Local CSOs are important consultation partners for some transnational CSOs (such as for Amnesty International), since they work more directly with the persons concerned. While some CSOs, such as the SFCG, have established procedures for gaining feedback from beneficiaries\textsuperscript{25} and for feeding their positions into their decision making process, others, such as the Crisis Group, report that they consult with beneficiaries without there being any formal mechanism in place.

Five CSOs also stated that they consult with international organizations, such as, for example, FAO, ILO, and UNCTAD (IATP) or the EU Commission (FIELD), and seven said that they consulted governments and national delegates. In this context, ISIS points out that they make use of the contacts that they have in these institutions. Furthermore, external researchers and experts are mentioned as important consultation partners by eight CSOs. Three CSOs indicated that they consult with donors\textsuperscript{26}.

In conclusion, CSOs undertake activities that aim at the empowerment of disadvantaged persons, be it within or beyond their own organization, staff, members and beneficiaries. Some CSOs act as facilitators who make it possible for disadvantaged persons to claim their own voice, while most CSOs are careful not to say that they are actually speaking for these persons. Rather, they claim to speak for their members. The CSO officials that we interviewed seemed to be well aware of the reproach of paternalizing behaviour towards affected persons.

\textsuperscript{25} As our interviewee reported: “In Nepal we have a radio programme on youth which is a soap opera. And what we then do is we have a listeners group of beneficiaries which is youth from rural areas and we actually have discussions with them, and ask them whether they felt that the discussion in the radio programme was relevant and whatever they say is then input immediately in our programme. So there is a continuous cycle…”

\textsuperscript{26} The answers do not add up to 60, since the combination of answers was possible and 4 CSOs that we interviewed did not answer to the question.
With regard to consultation and policy input, CSOs seem to be oriented - besides their members - in particular towards their peers, above all internationally operating NGOs, IOs and national government staff. Some CSOs also highlight that they consult with the persons affected, but in this regard, it is useful to distinguish those CSOs that have formal consultation procedures in place from others that simply state that they would consult with “people on the ground”.

7) Transparency

CSOs are not only actors demanding transparency, they also ought to be the addressee of transparency claims. In our view, especially decision-making processes need to be transparent as a precondition for successful participation. Having said that we should stress that most of the issues that we are concerned with in this section would elsewhere fall under the heading of ‘CSO accountability’ - a term that we do not use here.

An empirical approach to transparency comprises two dimensions (cf. Grigorescu 2007: 627):

- the addressees of transparency, and
- the extent of transparency.

The first dimension refers to the group of people who have access to the information published. We distinguish between transparency towards the public at large as the broadest degree of transparency and inner-organizational transparency, i.e. transparency towards members. The second dimension of transparency refers to the numerous types of information to be made public. A regular demand towards IOs and CSOs concerns the way they reach decisions (Anheier and Themudo 2005: 195). In addition, the advocacy positions of a CSO should be traceable. Also, they should disclose a certain amount of financial information. Ideally, this would include not only the overall size of the budget but also the percentages that different donors contribute (see section 8 below). When assessing the transparency of CSOs, one should also consider whether they have made a conscious commitment to openness and accountability. For example, a CSO might choose to sign or impose on itself a code of conduct to make its principles and practices public. Also, CSOs might conduct or commission evaluations of their own work which demonstrate a certain level of self-criticism and a commitment to improving their activities.
The empirical assessment of CSOs is therefore based on interview questions regarding the extent of information published as well as the addressees of information. More precisely, CSOs were asked which documents are made public and whom the information is made available to (the public/members). Additionally, CSOs were asked whether they evaluate their activities and if they have subscribed to a code of conduct. The interviews were complemented with information available on CSO websites and in CSO publications, such as annual reports, evaluations, and budget reports.

CSOs were asked whether they made draft papers, minutes of Board meetings, financial reports, activity reports, and evaluation reports available to the public. 5 CSOs indicated that they publish minutes of Board meetings, 10 CSOs distribute draft papers, 7 organizations make mailing list archives available, 22 CSOs publish activity reports and 7 CSOs make evaluation reports public. To be able to judge the difference between inner-organizational transparency and transparency towards the larger public, CSOs were asked whether they provide their members with more information than the general public. 39 CSOs confirmed this while only 5 organizations claimed that their members do not receive more information.

This result is in apparent contradiction with the responses regarding the publication of specific documents. In that context, 25 organizations indicated that documents that are distributed to their members are also made available to the public. These opposing answers could be interpreted in the way that CSOs believe to be giving more information to their members although this is not the case. Also, it might mean that documents beyond those we inquired about are exchanged between the CSO office and its members. Alternatively and perhaps most plausibly, it could be that the additional information purveyed to members is shared informally and therefore does not come to bear when asking about specific documents.

With regard to the publication of financial information, the results are rather positive. 41 out of 60 organizations publish the overall size of their budget while only 12 organizations do not reveal their financial situation and 7 do not answer the question at all. In several cases, CSO representatives claimed during the interview that their budget was available on the website or in their annual report but it turned out that this was not the case. 44 organizations publish the

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27 Multiple answers possible. 4 CSOs gave an undifferentiated answer (e.g. saying that documents are being published but without referring to the specific ones asked for), 13 CSOs did not reply to the question, and 11 CSOs indicated that none of the documents inquired about are made available to the public.

28 By informal we mean that the information cannot be traced in written documents. Alternative ways of providing members with information might be phone conversations, e-mails, or meetings.
percentages that specific donors or categories of donors (e.g. foundations, international organizations, states) contribute to their budget, while 8 organizations choose not to publish this information and the remaining 8 did not provide any answer.\(^\text{29}\)

It is striking that of those 12 CSOs who do not indicate the overall size of their budget, 8 are organizations defending special rather than general interests, e.g. trade unions or business associations. This corresponds to about 67\%, while the overall share of special interest organizations in the sample only amounts to about 17\%. Even if our sample is too small for sweeping generalizations, there seems to be a tendency for CSOs defending a general interest to be more transparent about their overall budget than organizations defending special interests.

To the question of whether their organization possessed a code of conduct, 19 out of 60 CSOs answered in the negative, sometimes adding that they had “nothing in written” (HRW and Asylkoordination) but nevertheless “common standards and values of what is acceptable” (Asylkoordination). Only 12 out of 60 CSOs responded positively.\(^\text{30}\) Of those 12, 8 indicated that they adhere to an inner-organizational code of conduct, such as a “Code of Ethics” (WWF) or “Guiding Principles for Conflict Prevention” (International Alert). 3 CSOs are signatories to the INGO Accountability Charter\(^\text{31}\). A fourth organization has signed this Charter but the interviewed policy officer was not aware of it, in spite of the fact that information about it is available on the CSO’s website. The remaining 15 CSOs adhere to their organization’s mission statement or staff manual, to donor or national regulations for non-profit organizations (e.g. “Belgian law” in the case of EuroCommerce or “European Commission regulations” for IHEU), or to general philosophical or religious values, such as the “Quakers’ testament” (QUNO) or “Franciscan values” (Franciscans). One can conclude from these answers that formal codes of conduct still seem to be of minor importance to transnational CSOs. Moreover, if they exist, their relevance for the individual policy officer appears to be limited.

\(^{29}\) Out of these 44 CSOs, 7 claim that 100\% of their budget are made up of membership fees (or 100\% private donations for 1 CSO) but do not indicate the overall size of their budget. 5 of these 7 CSOs are organizations defending special interests.

\(^{30}\) 14 CSOs did not answer the question.

\(^{31}\) A code of conduct created by CSOs for CSOs which outlines their “common commitment to excellence, transparency, and accountability” (www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org). It has been signed by 16 large transnational CSOs as of yet.
With regard to evaluations, we differentiate between internal and external evaluations. Internal evaluations are usually targeted towards advocacy activities, programs and projects, organizational impact, goals achieved etc., and they are designed for internal use or for reporting towards donors. They are typically carried out by the CSO’s staff or member surveys, or by organizational bodies, such as the General Assembly or the Board. But SFCG, for example, hires staff specifically to carry out evaluations. External evaluations are conducted by outsiders, e.g. by hired consultants or peers. They often relate to specific programs or projects, but can also refer to the work of a CSO as a whole. For example in the case of Solidar, an external consultant was hired during a process of strategic planning to overlook and evaluate the organization’s strategic plan.

The results show that the large majority of 42 out of 60 organizations evaluate their activities only internally. Only 7 organizations commission voluntary external evaluations to improve their work and efficiency. It has to be noted that conducting evaluations can only be conducive to transparency if the evaluation reports are made public. But only 7 organizations indicated that they make evaluation reports available to the general public. 4 additional organizations provide at least their members with these documents. 8 CSOs point out that they are required to produce evaluation reports of projects and/or programs for their donors, thereby increasing their transparency at least towards their contributors. Notwithstanding the possibility that evaluations as carried out by the majority of the CSOs interviewed contribute to improved organizational efficiency, these findings are rather unsatisfactory from the point of view of transparency, especially towards the public at large.

To sum up, it appears that CSOs are more transparent towards their members than to the public at large. It seems, however, that the additional information provided to members is of informal kind since it cannot be detected when asking about the publication of specific documents. With regard to financial transparency, most of the CSOs interviewed publish their overall budget as well as the percentages contributed by different donors. Among those CSOs who do not reveal their overall budget, the percentage of organizations defending special interests is disproportionately high compared to the overall sample. Formal codes of conduct seem to be of little importance for transnational CSOs. With regard to evaluations, only very few CSOs undergo independent external assessments and internal evaluations are rarely published.
8) Independence

The criterion of independence aims to assess the degree to which CSOs are autonomous from nation states and IOs. It is a necessary precondition for CSOs to fulfil the ‘transmission belt’ function that forward citizens’ interests and concerns and not to be co-opted by public authorities (Steffek et al. 2009). For analysing the independence of CSOs, we generally distinguish between two dimensions: financial and political independence. Financial independence refers to the question if CSOs or their activities are financed from public budgets. If being (co-)funded by either nation states or international organizations, CSOs might be more susceptible to being under the political influence of public authorities (Hulme and Edwards 1997). Political independence refers to the question if CSOs tend to adjust their policies and strategies to governmental requirements. Since we are unable to provide a detailed examination of CSO policies, we approximate the political independence by evaluating mainly four aspects indicating CSOs’ susceptibility to being co-opted: the foundation, the staffing, the relationship with the IO where the CSO is active, and the strategies for advocacy.32

The assessment of the financial independence is based upon official financial reports and was in some cases complemented by additional inquiries during our interviews, if necessary. It is measured by the percentage of total public funds in a CSO’s annual budget. 14 organizations refused to provide any information on sources of financing. The remaining 46 CSOs are divided as follows: 22 CSOs do not accept public funding (10 of which are funded by members only) while 24 do.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budget Composition</th>
<th>Number of CSOs</th>
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<tr>
<td>Budget co-funded by governments/IOs</td>
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<tr>
<td>(sum of public funds in percent of the budget)</td>
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<td>Budget not co-funded by governments/IOs</td>
<td>2233</td>
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<tr>
<td>Budgetary Information are undisclosed</td>
<td>14</td>
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Table 1: Public Funding of transnational CSOs

32 For a more detailed elaboration see Steffek et al. 2009: 18f.
33 Please note, this information could not be verified by official accounts for all 22 CSOs, because ten organizations do not publish financial reports. In these cases, we fully rely on interview statements.
The interesting point with regard to the 24 CSOs that receive public funding is its relatively high degree: The budget of 13 CSOs consists of more than 50% public funds and the budget of five organizations consists of more than 90% public funds. Public funding is provided either by governments or IOs. Several nation states provide funding for our CSOs, but the percentage shares of national governments are in most cases relatively moderate. However, in our setting we identified two striking exceptions: In 2007, FES received 91% of its funding from different German government agencies and EPLO received 50% of its funding from the UK Department for International Development. With regard to IOs, our cases are funded on a larger scale only by the EU. Not only a high number of CSOs receives EU contributions but even the percentages are remarkably high: In three cases EU funding exceeds 70% of the CSOs’ total budget (ENAR, HEAL and ECAS).

The assessment of the political independence starts with an analysis of the foundation of our CSOs. The history of our CSOs shows that there are three groups of public actors that might provide incentives for the foundation. First, the foundation of three organizations was initiated by (former) parliamentarians or politicians. For example, CMI was founded in 2000 by the former president of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari. Second, another two organizations were founded with major incentives from national governments. For example, IISD was founded in 1990 by a joint initiative of different Canadian governmental agencies. Third, IOs exert certain influence on the foundation of transnational CSOs by privileging certain types of organizations. Two umbrella organizations play a privileged role as ‘social partners’ in a specific IO by representing transnational business or labour. The foundation of these CSOs went hand in hand with the history of the IO. The trend that IOs foster collaboration selectively with CSOs providing certain representativeness recently recurs at the European level also in other parts of civil society: Although not directly asked about it, three interviewees stated that the emergence of umbrella organizations in Brussels is necessitated by the position of the EU to cooperate preferably with organizations that represent a unified voice of European civil society.

34 One of which even stated to feel pressured by its major donor, the European Commission.
35 The idea for the foundation of IISD arose from recommendations of a National Task Force on Environment and the Economy that was established by the Canadian Council of Ministers on the Environment. The Government of Manitoba induced Winnipeg as headquarter. Major initial funding was provided by the federal government (Canadian International Development Agency and Environment Canada) that is reduced to about 22% (contributions by the federal Government and Governments of provinces) in 2007.
Questioned about the recruitment of professional staff, eleven CSOs reported that a candidate’s experience with specific IOs was an advantage. In most statements, however, it remained unclear if this implies working experience within an IO or experience working on an IO. Only one interviewee clearly pointed out that the CSO is recruiting from former government and IO staff. The analysis of the general relationship with IOs revealed that 15 CSOs are in contractual relations with IOs. Only two of them, however, have contracts with non-EU-institutions. All remaining organizations are contracted by the EU for project implementation. Additionally, we have asked for self-assessments that indicate the general role vis-à-vis the IO (partner versus counterpart) and the basic working approach (reactive versus proactive) towards the IO. Regarding their role vis-à-vis the IO, only four CSOs described themselves exclusively as partners (ECAS, CCME, DBV and Oxfam). The majority of statements were undecided, in the sense that most organizations oscillate between acting as counterpart and partner of the IO, depending on the policy issue concerned. Similarly, most CSOs (32) were undecided whether to classify their dominant working approach as either proactive (acting on own initiative) or reactive (responding to calls from the IO). Only two interviewees stated to act exclusively reactively (ENAR and FES) and four others stated to act predominantly reactive. 14 organizations indicated an almost exclusively proactive working approach.

With regard to the strategies that are applied by CSOs for influencing policies of IOs, we distinguish between cooperative (direct lobbying/direct relations to policy-makers, participation in formal consultations), confrontational (public demonstrations, mass protests etc.) and neutral (policy papers, press releases) strategies. Two organizations said to apply exclusively cooperative strategies: SFCG stated to participate in formal consultations only and DBV stated additionally to lobby directly to policy-makers. Four organizations apply exclusively neutral strategies. Not a single organization relied exclusively on confrontational means. The most interviewees (27) stated to use some combination of cooperative and neutral strategies. 18 organizations said they occasionally also resorted to confrontational strategies. Three organizations apply confrontational measures in addition to neutral strategies while the remaining 15 organizations make use of completely mixed strategies, including cooperative, confrontational and neutral means.

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36 One case is the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (FES), which has temporarily implemented WTO programs for capacity building in LDCs through its national offices. The other case is WWF Germany, which sometimes takes over lead tasks for projects in the maritime area.

37 ENAR and FES receive public contributions of 92% and 91%, respectively.
To summarize, the analysis of independence gives certain reason for concern. With regard to financing, especially the EU sponsors some CSOs to such an enormous degree that doubts about the independence of the organizations arise. The EU also exerts a notable influence on the structure of European civil society by fostering collaboration with umbrella organizations. With regard to political independence most CSOs adopted a rather cooperative attitude towards IOs, but we would not argue that this finding is a real clue for co-optation, since willingness to cooperate is essential for successful political advocacy and only two organizations apply exclusively cooperative strategies. There is probably also a selection bias towards cooperative organizations in our sample because we were looking for the most important CSOs, and confrontational organizations tend to remain rather at the margins.

9) Conclusions

It can be stated that most of the CSOs that we interviewed are aware of the importance of their members’ participation and of possible problems related to it. However, we observed a difference with regard to tactic and day-to-day decisions as opposed to long-term strategic decisions. While CSOs’ members are involved in the long-term strategic decisions, with regard to the daily business and tactical issues, CSOs seem to rely more on their consultation with peers, namely other international CSOs, and the international secretariats often act autonomously. Nevertheless, the communication between the CSO offices and their members is dense; most organizations interact through various communication channels and communicate frequently. It is also important to take the context of the CSO-member interaction into account. Several CSO officers mentioned that they were unsatisfied with the feedback they got from their members. Apparently, CSOs’ members often are not so eager to get involved in the CSOs’ decision making (see also Warleigh 2001: 623) and rather are satisfied with a certain ‘task-sharing’, leaving the daily business to the staff of the advocacy offices which is often more familiar with the institutional setting and decision-making processes of the international organizations. This also corresponds to the finding of CSOs’ increasing ‘professionalisation’ (see, for example, Martens 2005).

Many of the CSO officers that we interviewed highlighted that they had provisions for empowerment in place which we evaluated as the CSOs’ effort to include the persons who are

38 This is in clear contradiction to Sudbery’s claim that civil society organisations in the EU tend to prioritize the achievement of effective results over the need to raise awareness among their supporters (Sudbery 2003: 89; see also Warleigh 2001).
affected by or benefit from the CSOs’ activities. These provisions either target the CSO itself through staffing policies or member empowerment, or they target populations outside the CSO. While we cannot assess the efficacy of these mechanisms in detail here their existence documents that transnational CSOs take the problem of uneven representation seriously. With regard to the criterion of transparency, we observed a difference between CSOs that act for general purposes and those that act on behalf of special interests (for example, a specific industry). The CSOs that defend a general interest usually are more transparent with regard to their budget than special interest groups. Altogether, external evaluations do not seem to be very popular among the CSOs that we interviewed; most of them evaluate their activities only internally (that means CSO members or staff). In this context, it could also be observed that codes of conduct do not seem to play an important role for the daily business of the organizations.

These findings can be related to the lively debate about CSOs’ accountability in which codes of conduct are often called for (for example, Bendell 2006). With regard to independence, again, the difference between CSOs defending a general and those defending a specific interest seem to matter. Since CSOs that defend a special interest usually dispose of more resources than general purpose groups, they are generally more independent from the governmental sector than the other groups that often need governmental funding. We also observed a certain influence of international organizations, and in particular of the EU, on the CSOs’ internal structuring and formation. The European Commission seems to encourage the formation of networks of CSOs (and prefers to work with these organizations, see also Warleigh 2001: 622; for other organizational requirements, namely the groups’ ‘representativeness’, see Greenwood 2010). This is the main reason for the large amount of CSOs belonging to this organizational type within our sample. Despite this influence of IOs on CSOs’ formation and while many CSOs increasingly pursue cooperative strategies towards international organizations, only very few understand themselves solely as ‘partners’ of the IOs and governments. Most CSOs insist on their role as being a ‘counterweight’ to other groups and to the governmental sector.

What do the results mean for the democratization of international governance? Are transnational civil society organizations reaching out to citizens and in any meaningful sense representing their interest and values, hopes and anxieties? Most CSOs take their members, supporters and beneficiaries seriously and indeed are in frequent contact with them. There are,
However, tremendous differences in how this outreach to the basis is organized in practice. Among the transnational CSOs we looked at, we found two distinct models of interaction to which the three organizational types that we identified in the beginning might be allocated. First, there is the ‘formal and federal way’ of organizing outreach that is typical for umbrella organizations. Second, there is the informal and direct participatory way of organizing outreach to individuals that is typically found in expert organizations, but also in some bigger organizations that we classified as ‘membership organizations’.

The formal and federal model typically functions through representative bodies in which the organizational and (in some cases) individual members of the umbrella are present. The organizational members may be national member organizations, national chapters of the same CSO, or autonomous groups that constitute an alliance. In the formal federation, participatory rights are normally explicitly stated and participatory procedures are very clear. The transnational representative body (whose name varies) is central in controlling the ‘executive’ of the organization and in providing the input from members or member groups. The formal federation thus emulates the model of representative democracy that exists in the public realm, and we have seen that the EU fosters the formation of transnational civil society organizations precisely along these federal lines.

From the democratic theory point of view, this model of outreach has some clear advantage in that it safeguards the rights of all parts of the CSO membership to influence the internal policy process of the organization. On the other hand, such a rather complex organizational structure cannot respond quickly and ad hoc to new developments and by necessity needs to grant much leeway to the advocacy office. What is more, the chain from the decision-making centre to the individual member tends to become long and opaque in these umbrellas, in particular when they are embedded in network structures that are on the rise in the capitals of transnational governance. From the perspective of an individual member or supporter it tends to produce the same ‘remoteness effects’ that multi-level governance also suffers from in the public domain. In addition, formal-federal practices of consultation tend to be inward-looking, in the sense that they privilege formal members over informal supporters and beneficiaries. Mechanisms of empowerment that formal federations reported were often directed to disadvantaged groups among their own members.
The informal way of organizing outreach is definitely typical for small transnational organizations without a federal structure or mass membership. These organizations are typically consulting their members and supporters electronically and often on rather specific questions. This is made easier by the fact that most of their members or supporters seem to have considerable expertise in the area. When citizens outside the organization are contacted under this organizational model, these are very often beneficiaries or people affected by their work. Quite obviously, these organizations cannot claim to be ‘representative’ of an impressive number of citizens. But small size may have its advantages: if managed properly, these organizations allow for a high level of direct participation and of internal deliberation. If they reach out to beneficiaries they can remain in close contact with the persons affected by the international policies pursued in their field of activity, thus adding a valuable citizen perspective to the international political arena.

In sum, we cannot say a priori that one specific type of transnational CSO, or one specific consultation regime, is superior to others in its ability to reach out to citizens and gather their concerns. Rather, we should develop standards of ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ that are tailor-made for the respective type of organization. Participation and empowerment should mean different things for different types of organizations. Under the formal-federal model of consultation we would expect that procedures of internal democracy are consistently applied and that efforts are made to mobilize and support disadvantaged groups of members. Under the informal model we would expect organizations to be open to direct participation of their limited number of members and supporters, to enable processes of deliberation by all, and to reach out to those affected by their work. We know from our research that in both camps there are organizations which seem to take the outreach to their members (or beneficiaries, respectively) very seriously, while others appear to be sluggish. Thus, even when acknowledging that the term ‘outreach to citizens’ may mean different things for different types of CSOs we still are able to critically evaluate the performance of individual organizations.

One example may suffice to illustrate the critical potential inherent in our approach. In Brussels we found a small group of organizations, all located in the field of EU foreign relations and security that definitely cannot count as the citizens’ voice in international politics: the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI); the International Security Information Service (ISIS) Europe, and the Crisis Group. These were the only organizations (out of 60)
that did not perceive themselves as representing or speaking for concrete persons but on behalf of their ‘expertise’. None of them has any members beyond the circle of activists and only the Crisis Group reports to consult occasionally with beneficiaries of their activities. Moreover, CMI and the Crisis Group have been founded by ex-members of government and IO officials, respectively. Such expert organizations may be characterized as professional think tanks very close to the centres of political decision making but definitely not as embodiment of citizens’ concerns. We should stress, however, that these are outliers and not representative of our sample. Many transnational CSOs have at least some grounding in the citizenry and some potential to establish a communicative transmission belt between citizens (understood as their members, supporters and beneficiaries) and international organizations.

What needs to be acknowledged is one limitation of the research performed so far with respect to the umbrella organizations that are important civil society players, particularly in Brussels. Within the formal-federal structure of the umbrella we concentrated on the link between the first and second layer of organization (when counting from the top) but were not able to follow the chain of communication down to the individual member. This research clearly needs to be complemented by a systematic analysis of participation and consultation below that point, taking into account not only formal channels of representation but also informal avenues for individuals that can bypass one or several layers in this construction. Only then can we pronounce any judgment on the ability of these complex multi-level structures of organized civil society to become something like ‘the citizens’ voice’.

References


Annex: List of organizations under study

(n.b. ‘policy field’ refers to the context in which an organization was interviewed, which is not necessarily its only field of activity)

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