Differences in Organizing between Unions and NGOs:
Conflict and Cooperation among Swedish Unions and NGOs

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ABSTRACT. The protection of workers' rights is at the heart of ongoing business ethics debate. In balancing transnational corporations' (TNCs) influence in private regulatory systems intended to protect workers' rights in emerging economies, several authors have emphasized the importance of cooperative relationships between unions and NGOs. In practice, however, conflict has often entered into union–NGO relations, weakening the protection of workers' rights. We argue that cooperative union–NGO relationships are difficult to form in part because of the difference between how unions and NGOs organize. More specifically, we demonstrate, based on two qualitative studies, that the problems stem from differences in organizing related to: i) identity construction, ii) governance systems, and iii) resources. The paper concludes by discussing the possibility of successful union–NGO cooperation and improved protection of workers' rights in emerging economies.

Introduction

The protection of workers' rights is at the heart of ongoing business ethics debate. Workers' rights, for example, are dealt with by three of the ten UN Global Compact principles, are covered in nearly all firms' codes of conduct (usually with reference to the core ILO conventions), and are consistently at the centre of media 'scandals' about firms' ethical responsibilities. In the U.S.A. and Europe, workers' rights have historically been protected by labour unions, national governments, companies, and workers themselves (e.g., Dunlop, 1958). However, in most emerging economies to which transnational corporations (TNCs) are offshoring production, these traditional actors are unable and/or unwilling to secure workers' rights. National labour laws are not enforced (e.g., Cooney et al., 2002), TNCs only reactively attempt to protect workers' rights at their suppliers (e.g., Bartley, 2007), and local labour unions and workers are weak in terms of securing their rights (Wills, 1998; Eade, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005).[1] This has forced workers and labour unions in emerging economies to rely on other actors to protect their rights.

Two such actors that have stepped up as spokespersons of workers and as protectors of their rights in emerging economies are Western labour unions and Western human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (e.g., Eade, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005; Spooner, 2004). By leveraging consumer pressure, unions and NGOs have forced TNCs to create voluntary private regulatory systems intended to protect workers' rights in emerging economies (Prieto and Quinteros, 2004; Bartley, 2007; Amengual, 2010; Locke and Romis, 2010).

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[1] There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, such as state-led auditing in the Dominican Republic (Amengual, 2010), local unions successfully securing workers' rights in Mexico (e.g., Ross, 2006), and workers participating in code of conduct implementation in China (Yu, 2008). However, these are exceptions rather than the rule.

Several authors have highlighted the importance of cooperative relationships between unions and NGOs in balancing TNC influence in these private regulatory systems and protecting workers' rights in practice (e.g., O'Rourke, 2003; Braun and Gearhart, 2004; Eade, 2004; Frenkel and Kim, 2004; Ford, 2006a; Dawkins, 2010). Authors have also demonstrated how union–NGO cooperation was central to promoting workers' rights in factories in Guatemala, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia (Frundt, 1999; Rodríguez-Garavito, 2005; Ross, 2006; Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2007; Ford, 2009). However, judging from earlier studies of union–NGO relationships, such cooperative relationships are far from straightforward to form (e.g., Frundt, 1999; Traub-Werner and Carvey, 2002; Justice, 2003; Anner and Evans, 2004; Eade, 2004). The difficulties unions and NGOs face in forming cooperative relationships, despite the importance of such collaboration, risk leading to ongoing violation of workers' rights at factories in emerging economies.

To understand how better to protect workers' rights, it is thus central to understand why unions and NGOs face difficulties cooperating. In this paper, we explore one explanation, namely, differences in how unions and NGOs organize. There are many potential explanations of union–NGO conflict besides differences in organizing, such as class differences (Compa, 2004; Spooner, 2004; Ford, 2009), gender-related differences (Huyer, 2004; Povey, 2004), and NGOs' preference for codes of conduct versus unions' preference for international framework agreements (Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2007). However, we agree with previous research into union–NGO relationships that differences in organizing are among the most important explanations of union–NGO conflict and are worth exploring in depth.

The paper starts by reviewing the literature to identify current conceptualizations of union versus NGO organizing and then presents an alternative conceptual framework for union and NGO organizing. We develop this framework through two qualitative studies of Swedish unions and NGOs involved in union–NGO relationships, and conclude the paper by discussing how our results could help improve the preconditions for successful cooperation between unions and NGOs and for the protection of workers' rights in emerging economies.

Previous conceptualizations of the union–NGO relationship

The distinction between unions and NGOs is somewhat problematic. Technically, a union *is* a non-governmental organization; in addition, unions organize various human rights promotion activities aimed at developing countries. Similarly, many NGO activities could be viewed as replacements for traditional union activities. To add to the complexity, there are many types of labour unions (e.g., Fairbrother, 2008) and NGOs (e.g., Srinivas, 2009). From a theoretical perspective, the distinction between unions and NGOs is unclear, though the distinction is normally clear to union and NGO representatives. For example, all representatives interviewed for the studies used in this paper unhesitatingly labelled their organizations as either unions or NGOs.

For the purpose of this paper, we need not further consider how to define unions and NGOs, but can settle for the observation that unions and NGOs are currently on two divergent trajectories. NGOs in the field of human and workers' rights have greatly increased in number and influence in recent decades (e.g., Boli and Thomas, 1999; Braun and Gearhart, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005). This has occurred in an era of neo-liberal politics in which unions have experienced declining membership numbers, decreased

political influence, and difficulties establishing a presence in developing countries (Wills, 1998; Connor, 2004; Eade, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005).

Previous research into the relationships between TNCs, unions, and NGOs has focused almost exclusively on either the firm–NGO relationship (e.g., Henriques, 2001; Rondinelli and London, 2003; Argenti, 2004; Hamann and Acutt, 2004; Teegen et al., 2004; MacDonald and Chrisp, 2005) or the firm–union relationship (e.g., Piazza, 2002; Weston and Lucio, 1998; Wills, 2002), largely ignoring the union–NGO relationship (Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2006). As Arenas et al. (2009, p. 179) argue, it "is remarkable that this [i.e., the union–NGO relationship] has attracted so little attention … despite its capital importance in CSR debates." This neglect is likely related to the general lack of discussion of labour unions in relation to CSR issues (e.g., Preuss, 2008; Dawkins, 2010).

The sparse existing research examining the union–NGO relationship in relation to workers' rights mainly comprises the reflections of practitioners involved in specific relationships (e.g., Hale, 2004; Ortez, 2004; Simpkins, 2004), as well as a few conceptual papers (e.g., Braun and Gearhart, 2004; Roman, 2004; Spooner, 2004). In terms of differences in organizing, the attempt by Braun and Gearhart (2004) seems the best developed, capturing the thoughts presented in most previous academic and practitioner texts. Despite the fact that Braun and Gearhart's (2004) article was published in a practitioner-oriented journal, so far, it is the most interesting conceptual paper about differences in organizing between unions and NGOs and is worth discussing at some length.

Braun and Gearhart (2004) identify three characteristics differentiating NGOs from unions, one teleological, one structural, and one operational. The authors describe the

teleological difference as a difference between being interest driven and ideal driven, unions being the former and NGOs the latter. Unions are presented as seeking to control resources and decision making via their negotiations, either altering authority relationships or reallocating resources from owners to workers. NGOs, on the other hand, are presented as pursuing ideals without having any immediate material interests other than institutional self-preservation. The *structural* difference, according to Braun and Gearhart (2004), is derived from the fact that unions have members, while NGOs usually do not (cf. Arenas et al., 2009). Whereas unions are held accountable by their members, NGOs usually have no political accountability. Finally, the authors define the *operational* difference between NGOs and unions as how they each exploit politics to achieve their objectives. They argue that, whereas NGOs must remain political outsiders to uphold a "watchdog" role, unions, in contrast, want to be political insiders.

Although thought provoking, Braun and Gearhart's (2004) conceptualization does not come without caveats. Objections could be made to each of the three characteristics. Regarding the *teleological* difference, it is a challenge to claim that the labour movement, including unions, was not founded on an ideal of human and workers' rights. Viewing NGOs as not driven by material interests is also difficult, as they are not financially independent and must compete for financial resources. Decoupling NGOs' resource-dependence from their agendas may appear conceptually justifiable but is misleading. Arenas et al. (2009), for example, demonstrate how non-NGO stakeholders in Spain perceive NGOs as self-interested, having a need to grow and finance their professional staff.

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Regarding the *structural* difference, this distinction becomes unclear considering the significant number of NGOs, for example, Amnesty International, that actually do have a membership structure. Conceptualizing NGOs as not having members is an over-simplification. Similarly, that unions have a membership base does not necessarily distinguish them from non-membership-based NGOs. For example, Ford (2006b, p. 159) demonstrates how only a minor part of Indonesian unions' revenues come from membership dues (due to low worker wages and readily available donor funding), challenging the assumption that "the public to which a union is accountable is comprised only of its due-paying members." Ford (2006b) also argues that many Indonesian union leaders are not democratically elected but rather appointed by an executive committee consisting of an elite core of activists.

The same argument could be used against the so-called *operational* difference. A great many human rights NGOs cooperate with governments as active parts of a political process, so labelling them as political outsiders by definition seems artificial at best. Similarly, labelling unions as political insiders by definition is problematic, considering the situation of many labour unions in emerging countries (e.g., Ross, 2006; Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2007).

Reconceptualizing the union–NGO relationship

Given the identified shortcomings of previous conceptualizations of the differences between how unions and NGOs organize themselves, as exemplified by Braun and Gearhart (2004), we need to reconceptualize this to achieve a better understanding of unions' and NGOs' relationship strategies of cooperation or conflict. While we share Braun and Gearhart's (2004) basic assumption, i.e., that differences in organizing between the involved organizations are key obstacles to successful union–NGO

collaboration, in this section we will present an alternative way of conceptualizing these differences. We do this by elaborating on a previously developed conceptual framework of union organizing ("Second author", 2005) based on the union–TNC relationship, leading us to explore its applicability to the union–NGO relationship.

After reviewing previous research into the union–TNC relationship for empirical evidence of explicit statements regarding the organizing ideals of unions, "Second author" (2005) argued that five dominant organizing ideals could be distinguished: i) *democracy*, i.e., unions organize to guarantee that their decisions and activities are democratically determined; ii) *efficiency*, i.e., unions organize to guarantee quick execution of their missions; iii) *policy*, i.e., unions organize in order to reflect the union–company–government tripartite system; iv) *enterprise*, i.e., unions organize to reflect the structure of individual corporations in order to gain flexibility and bargaining power at the local level; and v) *nationality*, i.e., unions organize to adapt to national legislation, institutions, and norms.

A common feature of these ideals is that each confers legitimacy on any given form of union organizing (cf. Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Suchman, 1995). A union not adhering to the ideal of *democracy* will likely be perceived as lacking legitimacy in the eyes of most of its influential stakeholders. Similarly, a union not perceived as *efficient* by its members will appear as less legitimate. If a union does not embody existing *policy* ideals, it will be viewed as non-legitimate by parts of the union movement and, potentially, by government representatives. On the other hand, if a union does not organize itself to reflect the *enterprise*, it will likely appear less legitimate to corporate managers. A union not organized in accordance

with *national* institutions will face legitimacy problems with a wide range of national stakeholders.

Compared with Braun and Gearhart's (2004) conceptual model, it seems as though their structural dimension (i.e., members versus non-members) can be linked to the ideals of *democracy* and *efficiency*, at least to the degree that the existence of members implies a need for democratic structures, and to the degree that efficiency usually presupposes some form of hierarchical coordination not ideally consistent with a democratic model of governance. We refer to this tension as the *governance dimension*. Notably, and unlike Braun and Gearhart (2004), we do not impose a specific value on any given union or NGO. Instead, the governance dimension is a relative scale and any organization, whether a union or a NGO, can theoretically position itself at any point along the dimension. For example, Amnesty International might be located towards the democratic end of the governance dimension, while a local Indonesian union might be located towards the efficiency end (cf. Ford, 2009).

The *policy* and *enterprise* ideals could be framed as related along an *identity dimension*, where unions need to balance conflicting demands from the union movement, governments, and trade associations, on one hand, and from the specific TNCs to which they are connected, on the other. Finally, the ideal of the *nation* can be seen as related to a *global* ideal. Along this *geographic dimension*, there is an ongoing tug-of-war between national institutions and globalization processes. The ideal of national union structures has come under pressure as they have been demonstrated to be largely inadequate to cope with emerging transnational corporate structures (Wills, 1998, 2002). Figure 1 summarizes these dimensions and their associated ideals of organizing.

This conceptualization of union organization differs from that of Braun and Gearhart (2004). The *ideal* and *geographic* dimensions do not appear in Braun and Gearhart's (2004) model; in addition, our proposed conceptualization downplays the role of what Braun and Gearhart call teleological and operational differences – a point to which we will return after presenting our empirical data.

Method

Given that our theoretical framework (presented above) is based on previous research into union organizing, its applicability to NGO organizing needs to be evaluated. The central assumption that differences in organizing between the unions and NGOs involved in union–NGO relationships can cause conflict also needs to be examined. To capture why unions and NGOs develop either conflictual or cooperative relationships, and whether or not these reasons are captured by the outlined framework, we make use of materials from two qualitative studies of Swedish unions and NGOs involved in union–NGO relationships related to TNC responsibility for workers' rights. Given that the phenomenon of union–NGO relationships is not yet well understood, the choice of a qualitative study is in line with previously proposed methods (e.g., Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Lee, 1999; Maguire et al., 2004).

The first, more general study aimed to capture preconceptions and ideas held by union and NGO officials regarding the nature of union–NGO relationships. Throughout this paper, we will attempt to exemplify how these general ideas and preconceptions are translated into practice in a specific union–NGO relationship. For this purpose, we use a second longitudinal qualitative study of the processes of redefining Swedish

garment retailers' responsibility for workers' rights at their suppliers' factories between 1996 and 2006.

For the first study, twelve of the most influential representatives of Swedish unions and NGOs involved in union–NGO relationships related to workers' rights were interviewed regarding their experiences, using semi-structured interviews. Each interviewee was responsible for workers' rights issues and/or union–NGO relationships in his or her organization. The initial interviewees were identified by the authors, based on prior research, as highly influential in the area of study; these were then asked to list the organizations and individuals linked to Swedish unions or NGOs that they perceived as most influential. The interview study ended when no further individuals or organizations were identified as "influential" by any interviewee. The interviews (lasting on average one hour) initially focused on discussing potential conflict in union–NGO relationships and the reasons the interviewees saw for such conflict. In the second part of the interview, the interviewees were asked to position their own organizations, and the unions or NGOs with which it had relationships, along the dimensions described in our theoretical framework (presented above) and in the Braun and Gearhart (2004) framework. The interview data were then coded by the two authors to identify similarities and differences within an interview, between interviews, and between union and NGO officials. High degrees of similarity were identified in the union group and the NGO group, while some important differences were identified between the union and NGO groups.

For the second study, 52 semi-structured one-hour interviews were held between 2002 and 2008 with the main union, NGO, and TNC representatives involved in defining Swedish garment retailers' responsibility for workers' rights. In addition, written

documentation (e.g., reports, newspaper articles, and websites) was used to validate the information obtained in interview; few inconsistencies were identified between the information obtained from the verbal and the written sources. The collected data were then coded and used to construct a chronological representation of the workers' rights negotiations between 1996 and 2006. The positions adopted by the TNCs, NGOs, and unions were identified at each decision point in the chronological representation of the process. This earlier version of the empirical section was then sent to the interviewees, who validated the descriptions of the negotiations. All of the interviewees' suggested changes (only a handful) were incorporated into a final description of the negotiation process. From this description, themes were identified based on our theoretical framework (presented above) and on Braun and Gearhart's (2004) framework regarding differences between union and NGO organizing. Relevant data not captured in these two theoretical frameworks were used to create new themes. Finally, the identified themes were used to restructure the empirical section in a thematic, rather than purely chronological, order.

Developing the union–NGO conceptual model

Building on our empirical studies, in the following section we will refine our presented conceptual model. We explore the dimensions presented in Figure 1 one at a time, and conclude this section by integrating any additional insights into a revised conceptual model. This will give us an extended conceptual model that can better explain why unions and NGOs form either conflictual or cooperative relationships.

The "identity dimension"

Based on our general interviews, we find strong support for the *identity dimension* (i.e., policy versus enterprise) of our conceptual model. Our findings indicate that

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unions and NGOs define themselves based on both their position in the traditional

tripartite industrial relations system, and the institutional point of reference of their

corporate influence mechanisms, i.e., international framework agreements (unions)

and codes of conduct (NGOs). The most significant finding in relation to the identity

dimension is that union officials do not recognize NGOs as workers' representatives,

since they are not part of the traditional tripartite industrial relations system. Hence,

unions construct their identity in exclusive terms in relation to the policy ideal:

> **Union representative$_1$:** We [the unions] are the legitimate representatives of all
>
> workers and we use every opportunity that exists within the national legal
>
> framework.

> **Union representative$_3$:** NGOs work using tools [i.e., codes] that are unilaterally
>
> determined by the firms and that have no built-in legal sanctions connected to
>
> them. Also, within the "social dialogue", it is obvious that the only "social"
>
> actors are unions, firms, and governments.

The active construction of "we" and "they" – "we are" and "they are" – emphasizes

that union representatives link their organizational identity to the policy ideal, while

simultaneously linking the NGO organizational identity solely to the enterprise ideal.

In this way, union representatives frame NGOs as useful only for organizing

consumer campaigns and exerting corporate pressure. Hence, NGOs are framed as

disconnected from the tripartite policy system compared with their role as political

outsiders/"watchdogs" as argued by Braun and Gearhart (2004) regarding their so-

called operational difference.

Interestingly, several interviewed NGO representatives confirmed the presence of this

union framing of the difference between unions and NGOs. However, rather than

regarding it in positive terms, as the union representatives did, the NGOs regarded this framing as "unproductive" and "exaggerated":

> **NGO representative$_2$:** They [the unions] continuously point out that they have a legal mandate to represent workers, while we [the NGOs] lack such a mandate. However, who has given the *Swedish* unions the mandate to negotiate workers' rights in developing countries? We are in a more similar situation than they want to recognize.

> **NGO representative$_3$:** The unions perceive themselves as being "nice" by allowing us [NGOs] to participate in discussions of workers' rights, as if they were the only "real" workers' rights representatives. They assign us tasks expecting us to follow their agenda.

The NGO officials recognize that unions are *more* legitimate advocates of workers' rights than are NGOs but, in sharp contrast to the unions, they frame this difference as a matter of degree and not in absolute terms. Hence, NGOs construct their identities as partly policy oriented, and to some extent question the legitimacy of the unions' construction of themselves as policy oriented. NGO officials also stress their corporate- or industry-level focus in relation to workers' rights, versus the union focus on the national level. As an example of this, NGO officials present codes of conduct as a tool for achieving improvement of workers' rights in individual companies.

We can identify and illustrate this difference between union policy organizing and NGO corporate organizing in our longitudinal study of the process of defining the responsibility of Swedish garment retailers for workers' rights. In 1996, Swedish NGOs initiated a relationship with Swedish unions in order to pressure Swedish garment retailers to increase their responsibility for workers' rights at their suppliers'

factories (at the time, the retailers acknowledged no responsibility for such issues). The first six years (1996–2001) saw cooperative relationships between the NGOs and unions (under the banner of the Swedish Clean Clothes Campaign) and great success in terms of pressuring garment retailers first to acknowledge responsibility for workers' rights at their suppliers' factories, then to create a harmonized industry code of conduct, and finally to establish a formally independent NGO- and union-led code of conduct monitoring system. However, in the seventh year (2002), the participating unions switched from a cooperative to a conflictual strategy, arguing that the codes of conduct (mainly developed by the NGOs and TNCs) were inadequate and should be replaced by binding international framework agreements. Hence, the unions decided that the NGOs' corporate-focused organizing (materialized in codes of conduct) risked crowding out union organizing based on the traditional tripartite policy ideal (materialized to at least a greater extent in international framework agreements). This union withdrawal from the cooperative union–NGO relationship resulted in the collapse of the ongoing project and, to date, NGOs have continued using codes of conduct rather than international framework agreements. Hence, differences in organizing along the identity dimension are important for explaining why unions and NGOs have difficulties forming cooperative relationships.

These findings in the Swedish setting are remarkably similar to Arenas et al.'s (2009) findings in the Spanish setting. In a study of Spanish stakeholders, Arenas et al. (2009) found that trade unions were the stakeholder group that expressed the most concern over the NGOs' role in workers' rights issues, and that NGOs also acknowledged the trade unions' reluctance to accept them. Spanish unions perceived NGOs as "meddling in a dialogue that trade unions and employers' associations have had for some time"; the unions "fear that the NGOs are going too far in taking upon

themselves functions that in principle belong to trade unions, such as protecting rights of overseas workers' and improving their labor conditions" (Arenas et al., 2009, p. 186). Furthermore, Adji (2002) and Ford (2006a, c) indicate that labour unions in Niger, Indonesia, India, and Malaysia hold similar views, and Preuss (2008, p. 155) confirms this picture, claiming that European unions are "keen to point out that they nonetheless occupy a special status" in discussions of workers' rights. As Dawkins (2010, p. 129) puts it, unions are generally wary "about the stakeholder framework, and specific concerns about CSR programs that tend to equate labor unions with other stakeholders."

From these findings, we conclude that the identity dimension is highly relevant for understanding difficulties in relations between unions and NGOs. Unions tend to place greater emphasis on the tripartite industrial relations concept that is the core of the policy ideal (while attempting to exclude NGOs from approaching this ideal), while NGOs place more emphasis on the corporate ideal. This is most clearly materialized in the fact that NGOs organize their activities around corporate codes of conduct, while unions organize their activities around international framework agreements that are far less common among corporations. However, this difference is a matter of degree, unions doing some organizing based on the corporate ideal, and NGOs doing some organizing, at least according to them, based on the policy ideal.

This conclusion agrees well with previous NGO and union research. For example, Blood (2004) argues that NGOs are far more similar to private corporations than to any existing political institution, and that NGOs should thus be viewed as "political corporations" that are better adapted to form close relationships with TNCs than with unions. On a similar note, Millar et al. (2004) claim that NGOs have both a market

and an institutional identity in today's global business environment. On the other hand, unions' strong connection to traditional tripartite systems has been demonstrated by several researchers (e.g., Northrup and Rowan, 1979; Haworth and Ramsay, 1984; Weston and Lucio, 1997; Gallin, 2000).

The "governance dimension"

The results of our general interviews also support the importance of the *governance dimension* (i.e., democracy versus efficiency). A common perspective among union officials is that NGOs' organizing activities are not as legitimate as unions', since NGOs often do not have members or democratic governance. On the other hand, union officials also acknowledge that NGOs are sometimes more efficient, at least in the short run, as their decision-making processes are quicker:

> **Union representative$_5$:** NGOs have no legitimate mandate from their members to negotiate workers' rights. Mostly because many of them have no members.

> **Union representative$_2$:** One is sceptical of the legitimacy of many NGOs, as they do not necessarily represent any members. Therefore, any cooperation between us and them must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

> **Union representative$_6$:** Unions are often characterized by rather slow bureaucratic processes as they are membership-based organizations. NGOs are probably able to move quicker in that sense.

The interviewed NGO officials share this view that unions are more legitimate than most NGOs, thanks to their democratic structure, though they are lacking in efficiency. This governance difference is also a central argument in previous research (e.g., Blood, 2004; Huyer, 2004; Arenas et al., 2009). However, some interviewed

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NGO officials stressed that they encounter a similar trade-off between democracy and efficiency when interacting with large membership-based NGOs:

> **NGO representative₅:** It is important to remember that most of the NGOs active in workers' rights are recently founded small organizations. When we collaborate with organizations A and B [larger membership-based NGOs], we face similar problems as when working with unions. They ask us who we are working for, and we ask them why their decision making is so slow.

This indicates that differences in organizing related to the governance dimension are not as much related to differences between unions and NGOs, but are more related to differences between unions and the specific NGOs active in workers' rights (mainly small non-membership-based NGOs).

Our longitudinal case illustrates how this difference between organizing for democracy or for efficiency affects union–NGO relationships. First, when the Swedish unions withdrew from the cooperative union–NGO relationship in 2002, this was partly related to their claim not to have a mandate to negotiate for workers in developing countries. Instead, they claimed that negotiations with TNCs should be conducted by local national unions with the support of global union federations and materialized in the form of international framework agreements. For the NGOs, the question of mandate was not as central, since they perceived that their mandate was to efficiently realise the ideals of internationally established workers' rights (i.e., the relevant UN and ILO conventions). Second, throughout the studied years (1996–2006), NGO officials on several occasions expressed frustration at the unions' excessively slow and bureaucratic decision making. These observations lead us to

conclude that the *governance dimension* is relevant for understanding the differences in organizing between unions and most NGOs involved in workers' rights.

The "geographic dimension"

The *geographic dimension* (nation versus global) argues that one difference in organizing between unions and NGOs is that unions are inherently local in nature, which might differentiate them from other types of organizations such as NGOs. Our interview findings indicate, however, that while unions are indeed local in their basic setup, this does not significantly differentiate them from NGOs, as they too are mostly locally oriented in how they both act and organize:

> **Union representative$_4$:** Unions have worked for a long time with a predominantly national focus. Thus, strong national organizations have been built, sometimes making it difficult to achieve coordinated international efforts.

> **Union representative$_1$:** The union movement has always been based on local unions that can represent their members through local negotiations.

> **Union representative$_3$:** I do not know whether I agree. NGOs too are locally anchored, for example, the Red Cross and various other social movements.

> **NGO representative$_6$:** Most NGOs are organized locally, although we deal with global issues. We collaborate across borders, but organize the bulk of our activities locally.

These quotations illustrate two central features of both union and NGO organizing. First, the fundamental organizing principle of both types of organization is based on local rather than global organizing. Second, this confers a high degree of power on national relative to global organizations.

Our longitudinal study of garment retailers provides some additional insight into the geographic dimension. In this case, it was apparent that both unions and NGOs were organized locally, non-Swedish organizations being involved only temporarily or in a supporting role. Actually, the only truly international phase of the studied processes was in recent years (2003–2006), when several Swedish and European garment retailers organized their activities through a European project (the Business Social Compliance Initiative). However, this project more or less excludes unions and NGOs (Egels-Zandén and Wahlqvist, 2007), so the local, rather than global, organizing ideal has not been challenged among unions and NGOs. These findings indicate that the global organizing principle is *not* a relevant concept for understanding differences in organizing between unions and NGOs.

Extending the model: The "resource dimension"

After empirically exploring our conceptual model, it appears as though two dimensions, the *identity* and *governance* dimensions, are relevant when addressing differences in organizing between unions and NGOs, while the third dimension, the *geographic dimension*, is less relevant for this purpose. Furthermore, and not discussed above, our empirical results provide a clear critique of Braun and Gearhart's (2004) notion of a *teleological* difference (NGOs as ideal driven versus unions as interest driven) and an *operational* difference (NGOs as political outsiders versus unions as political insiders) between unions and NGOs. As noted above, we instead suggest that the outsider–insider conflict relates to permission to participate in the traditional tripartite industrial relations system rather than to a more general political insider–outsider debate. In terms of the ideals versus interest difference, the vast majority of interviewees considered this difference superficial and/or irrelevant. We therefore argue that the geographic dimension, as well as the teleological and

operational dimensions, adds little to our understanding of differences in organizing between unions and NGOs. However, during our empirical study, an additional dimension emerged as relevant for discussing union and NGO organizing, namely, the *resource dimension*.

A critical time in the longitudinal garment retailer study was when the unions withdrew from the six-year cooperative union–NGO relationship in 2002. The unions presented several reasons for this decision, but were nonetheless criticized by the NGOs and the retailers for having previously supported the aspects of the collaboration that they now criticized. Throughout the six-year cooperative relationship, the NGOs had actively advanced the projects, while the unions were commonly perceived as more passive. Afterwards, the unions claimed that they viewed the cooperation as an opportunity to learn about and evaluate the appropriateness of codes of conduct and monitoring systems (the focus of the collaborative project). In that sense, the unions assumed a longer-term perspective on their involvement in the cooperation than did the NGOs. This arguably illustrates how unions and NGOs operate according to different "time horizons," time seeming to move faster for NGOs than for unions. However, we have chosen to reject the initial inclination to label this difference the "time dimension," since we believe that the differences in time horizons are symptomatic of underlying differences between unions' and NGOs' access to financial resources.

One major reason for unions' ability to preserve a longer time horizon is that they are to a certain extent financially self-sufficient through their membership fees, the members being an actual part of the organization. As the union movement is strongly fragmented into various industrial and professional sectors and competition for

members is therefore low, this provides for a relatively stable resource base. A stable resource base in turn allows for a longer-term financial and operational perspective, since union officials are held accountable to their constituents for a longer time. In contrast, NGOs frequently do not have members, must compete for financial resources from individual supporters, and must consistently advertise their activities. In addition, NGOs must usually account for the financial support they receive from governmental and/or private agencies on a yearly or even more frequent basis. For example, the Swedish Clean Clothes Campaign recently received an almost overnight 50% resource cut following the change from a Social Democratic to a Conservative Swedish government. We argue that these differences between unions and NGOs along the resource dimension manifest themselves in the speed with which unions and NGOs respectively advance their joint efforts, as demonstrated in our garment case. As also demonstrated in our case, this risks leading to frustrated feelings from both unions ("they are moving too fast") and NGOs ("they are moving too slowly") that over time may harm, and in the studied case did harm, the potential for successful cooperation between unions and NGOs.

Having identified this resource dimension, we argue that any organization can organize itself around the autonomous ideal, i.e., being financially self-sufficient, or the dependent ideal, i.e., not having full control of their financial resources. In the Swedish case, unions organize around the autonomous ideal and NGOs around the dependent ideal. However, as Ford's (2006b) study of Indonesian unions demonstrates, some unions do organize around the dependent ideal as well.

We can thus summarize our findings, presenting a revised and extended conceptual model of union–NGO differences in organizing. This model includes the three

remaining dimensions from our analysis: i) the *identity* dimension, ii) the *governance* dimension, and iii) the *resource* dimension.

- Insert Figure 2 about here -

Conclusions

To protect workers' rights at factories in emerging economies, union-NGO cooperation is crucial in balancing TNC influence in private regulatory systems. In line with previous research (e.g., Justice, 2003; Eade, 2004), the conducted study illustrates that failure to collaborate jeopardize the protection of workers' rights in practice. We have attempted to explain unions and NGOs difficulties to form collaborative relationships by identifying significant differences in organizing largely overlooked in previous research. We have identified such differences in organizing along three distinct dimensions: i) the *identity dimension*, concerning unions' and NGOs' institutional points of reference; ii) the *governance dimension*, concerning unions' and NGOs' internal governance systems; and iii) the *resource dimension*, concerning unions' and NGOs' relative autonomy and dependence on access to financial resources.

The developed conceptual model is based on differences in organizing between unions and NGOs in relation to workers' rights. While similar differences in organizing could exist in union-NGO relationships in relation to other issues, workers' rights issues are characterized by, for example, traditionally being embedded in tripartite industrial relations system (impacting unions and NGOs positions in the identity dimension) and mainly involving small non-membership-based NGOs (impacting unions and NGOs positions in the governance and resource dimensions).

Hence, further research is needed to explore the conceptual model's applicability in non-workers' rights issues.

This paper's findings have important implications for unions and NGOs and in the end for the protection of workers' rights. The primary implication is that for collaboration between unions and NGOs to be successful, these differences in organizing must be reconciled. A first step towards such reconciliation is for both unions and NGOs to be aware of these differences. A second step is for unions and NGOs to have the ability to communicate regarding these differences. The findings of this paper facilitate both awareness and communication, as they focus on certain differences in organizing while providing a conceptual language with which unions and NGOs, academics and practitioners can talk about and make sense of these differences. By reconciling these differences, unions and NGOs can focus their resources on acting as spokespersons of local workers and unions instead of engaging in inter-organizational conflicts.

The importance of union–NGO relationships would suggest that further research into these relationships is highly relevant to academics and practitioners alike. Such research may follow several paths. While this paper has highlighted structural aspects of union–NGO relationships, other papers have discussed more strategic aspects of these relationships (Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2006). A third approach would be to focus more explicitly on the more operative level of union–NGO relationships and examine the concrete activities undertaken by unions and NGOs in attempting to protect and improve workers' rights. The present study, along with earlier studies of the union–NGO relationship, should also be expanded on to incorporate more perspectives from other geographical areas through, for example, comparative studies

and studies of different types of collaboration. This paper contributes by making a

preliminary attempt to conceptualize and map the complexities of the union–NGO

relationship.

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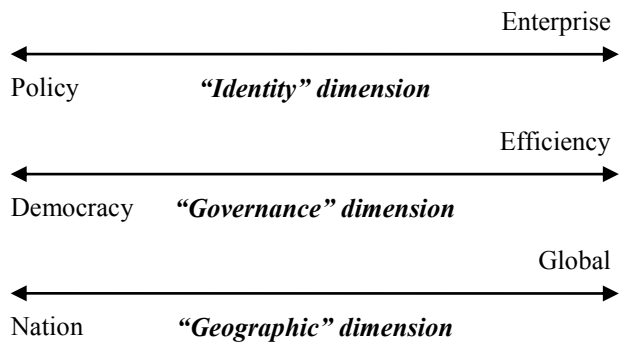
Figure 1

Enterprise

←————————————————————————→

Policy　　　　　　*"Identity" dimension*

Efficiency

←————————————————————————→

Democracy　　*"Governance" dimension*

Global

←————————————————————————→

Nation　　　　*"Geographic" dimension*

Figure 1: Preliminary conceptualization of differences in organizing

Figure 2

Enterprise

←————————————————————————→

Policy　　　　　*"Identity" dimension*

Efficiency

←————————————————————————→

Democracy　　*"Governance" dimension*

Dependency

←————————————————————————→
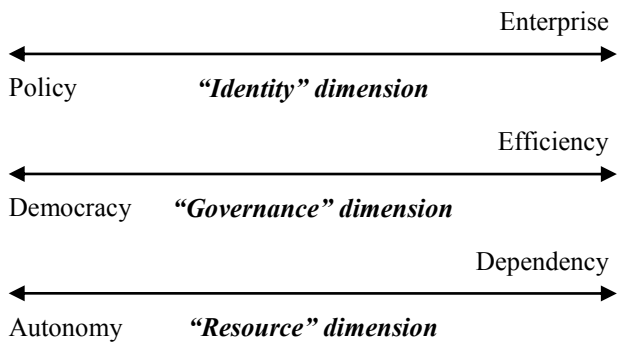
Autonomy　　*"Resource" dimension*

Figure 2: Revised conceptualization of differences in organizing