

Analyzing Political Activists' Organization Practices: Findings from a Long Term Case Study of the European Social Forum

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Abstract. Designing ICT support for transnational networks of social activists is a challenge due to diverse organizational structures, cultural identities, political ideologies, and financial conditions. In this paper we present empirical findings on ICT usage in the organizing process of the European Social Forum (ESF) covering a period of almost 3 years. The European Social Forum is a platform for political activists involved in the anti-globalization movement. During our data collection period, the 5th and 6th European Social Fora were held in Malmo (2008) and Istanbul (2010). The paper describes complex social practices in organizing ESF events. We use the term *fragmented meta-coordination* to denote this type of practice. Mundane IT applications, such as a mailing list and a content management system, play a central role in enabling different aspects of fragmented meta-coordination. The findings also indicate how lacking resources, organizational distribution, and technical limitations hamper the preparation process and reduce the transparency of political decision making. Our analysis highlights central organizational and technological challenges related to ICT appropriation in transnational networks of social activists.

Key words: ethnographic case study, technology and the third sector, community informatics, social movements and ICTs, political organizing, meta-coordination

1. Introduction

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and social movements play an important role in every society as they protect the rights of the people and are engaged in developmental activities. Social movements and CSOs can have member organizations ranging from local grass root organizations to well-structured transnational NGOs. These member organizations work together on joint activities over a specific period of time. In order for their political initiatives to succeed, these diverse organizations need to be effectively coordinated.

The issues with which the social movements usually deal have a global dimension. Therefore, networks of civil society organizations need to be organized at a transnational level. Transnational cooperation enables social movements and civil society organizations to profit from each other's

experiences, to plan common actions, and to act as an important pressure group towards governments. However, transnational cooperation bears inherent challenges due to the multiple languages, cultures, political ideologies, strategies, and tactics which are coupled, in the case of European Social Forum (ESF), with loose organizational structures and the shortage of human and financial resources.

The empirical data that we gathered is based on the anti-globalization movement which focuses on problems resulting from economic and political globalization. This movement is supported by individual activists as well as members from community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activist groups, think tanks, trade unions, labour organizations, professional associations, cultural groups, religious organizations, informal citizen organizations, foundations, commissions, cooperatives to clubs, campaigns and charities. The movement is characterized by a non-hierarchical structure, the absence of a recognizable central leadership as well as a decision-making process by means of consensus. This movement organizes a regular global event called the World Social Forum (WSF) which is a central point for knowledge sharing as well as for the dialogue and social networking between the actors of this movement. After the emergence of WSF in 2001, different regional and thematic fora emerged. The success of the movement can be seen by the fact that in 2010, 42 different fora had been organized. Each forum had an independent organizing setup.

We investigated into the organizing process of the European Social Forum (ESF) which is a European level platform for activists. The huge number of European activists at the ESF enabled us to better understand technology use in multicultural environments. We specifically focused on the organizing practices of the activists during the 5th ESF (ESF 2008) in Malmo, Sweden, and the 6th ESF in Istanbul, Turkey.

In our case study, we were mainly interested in answering the following questions:

- How is the complex collaborative task of organizing an ESF coordinated?
- How do lacking organizational resources and the intercultural context affect coordination?
- Which role does IT play in organizing an ESF?
- How much do organizing practices vary between different events and how much do the organizers depend on the availability of technological infrastructures?
- Which problems do activists have to face in their appropriation of the technological artefacts?

We focus on ESF's organizing process and try to understand its complex practices. We look at which level technology supports these practices and where there are problems with given technological options. Our work contributes to the CSCW literature by providing a better understanding of coordination activities adopted by political activists and develop design guidelines to better support transnational political events of the type of ESF.

The structure of the remaining paper is as follows: Section 2 describes related work. The third section focuses on the research methods applied in this study. In section 4, a case description is provided. Section 5 gives an overview over discontinuities in the overall ESF organization process and the available technological infrastructure in general. Section 6 analyzes the ICT usage of activists with regard to the involved specific coordinating activities in detail. Section 7 presents a discussion of the empirical results and our findings regarding our research questions. The last section provides a short conclusion.

2. Social activists and ICTs

With the advancements of information and communication technologies (ICTs) new opportunities for political activism emerged by tools such as emails, SMS, websites, social networking applications, blogs, or online petition sites (Surman and Reilly 2003). There are several studies which focused on ICT usage in support of organizing tasks such as information dissemination, fund raising, information management within a single activist organization as shown in Table 1. McPhail et al. (1998) applied a participatory design methodology for realizing a database system within a Canadian non-profit organization working on reforming the Canadian justice system. The objective of the prototype was to improve information access by providing centralised information storage about members, volunteers, fund raising and other similar organization activities. By doing so the project volunteers had acquired a better understanding of their work practices and the willingness to experiment with technologies had grown. Taking a gender perspective, Pini et

Table 1. Research Efforts of ICT in individual organizations.

	Working Domain of Case	Empirical Study/ Technology Design	IT Artifacts	IT Supported Practice(s)
McPhail et al. [1998]	Reforming Canadian justice system	Participatory Design	Database System	Organizational information management
Pini et al. [2004]	Australian farm women	Empirical Study	Discussion list	Intra-group communication
Farooq et al. [2005; 2006]	Sustainable watershed planning	Participatory Design	websites, wikis	Improving day-day organizational work
Sen et al. [2010]	Education provision to underprivileged children	Empirical Study	Yahoo! Groups, Microsoft distribution lists, Facebook etc.	Coordination activities, fundraising, and community building.

al. 2004, worked on the use of discussion lists by an Australian group of farm women. They highlighted that mailing lists transformed the farm women's lives as they helped them to adopt new identities such as community leaders and political activists.

Farooq et al. worked with local community groups to improve their organization work by introducing them to ICT artefacts such as websites and wikis. They helped volunteers to become involved in the development process and to enhance technology sustainability (c.f. Farooq et al. 2005; Farooq 2005; Farooq et al. 2006). Sen et al. 2010 analyzed the work practices of a Seattle based activist organization working to educate underprivileged children, and found that a single web application, such as Facebook, Yahoo groups, Microsoft distribution lists, could not help activists with all their tasks. Instead, a variety of social web applications better supported the differentiation of tasks. Most activists were good at using multiple applications, others preferred to stick with one application even though it might be limited in its functionality. They used applications to coordinate activities, for fund-raising or for electronic community building.

Similarly, some researchers have worked with a set of multiple nonprofit organizations as shown in Table 2. Pilemalm 2002 worked with Swedish trade union activists to explore ICT needs and to develop technological requirements for a web-based prototype system to support trade union shop stewards. In her empirical work she found that activists made mainly use of simple applications such as email lists, discussion fora, and bulletin boards for knowledge sharing purposes. Kavada 2005 investigated into three non-governmental organizations (Oxfam, Amnesty International and World Development Movement) in the United Kingdom and found that organizations hesitate to invest into IT. Moreover, she pointed out that the use of internet differed among the organizations based on their culture and goals. Goecks et al. 2008 analyzed the potential of collaborative technologies for fund raising activities in non-profit organizations. They proposed two models for non-profit fundraising and discussed research opportunities for collaborative computing in this domain. Similarly, Torres-Coronas et al. 2010 described the advantages of using ICTs and web 2.0 in non-profit organizations based on their analysis of third sector organizations in Catalan. They concluded that it is important to understand the main obstacles in integrating ICTs and web 2.0 in their organizational strategy and also to see how technology can help them to carry out their mission and to improve the public image. Voida et al. 2011 had a look at how information about volunteers is managed in non-profit organizations and found that activists used information system tools ranging from database systems to paper based records.

Finally, there have been research efforts analyzing the role of ICTs in complex networks of nonprofit organizations as shown in Table 3. O'Donnell 2001 investigated mailing list usage by women organizations in Northern Ireland. She found that institutional affiliations prevent mailing lists from becoming

Table 2. Research Efforts of ICT in a set of multiple organizations.

	Working Domain of Case	Empirical Study/ Technology Design	IT Artifacts	IT Supported Practice(s)
Pilemalm [2002]	Multiple Swedish trade unions	Participatory Design	Web based prototype (Mailing list, discussion and bulletin boards)	Organizational information management
Kavada [2005]	Human rights, poverty and justice organizations	Empirical	Websites	Information provision, resource generation, organizational networking, public participation, political campaigning
Goeck et al. [2008]	Multiple domains e.g. Humanitarian, Education,	Empirical	Websites	Fundraising
Torres- Coronase et al. [2010]	Multiple Catalanian Organizations dealing with children, elderly, immigrants, drug addicts etc.	Empirical	Websites	Day-day organizational tasks
Voida et al. [2011]	Multiple organizations dealing with education, environment, health, human services, foreign affairs, and public benefit	Empirical	Information management tools (databases, excel sheets etc.)	Information management of volunteer information

effective since activists assume that their messages may be perceived as official standpoint of their organization. Furthermore, members did not participate in discussions actively, as activists reported difficulties in expressing their opinion without knowing the list's members. She also observed that members used it only for international networking, but not for local activities. Rohde 2004 applied an Integrated Organization and Technology Development (OTD) process (Wulf and Rohde 1995) to improve the social network among Iranian NGO's. He introduced and tailored BSCW, a web-based cooperation platform, in a series of workshops in which activists from different NGOs

Table 3. Research Efforts of ICT in Network of NGOs.

	Working Domain of Case	Empirical Study/ Technology Design	IT Artifacts	IT Supported Practice(s)
O'Donnell [2001]	Irish Women Organizations	Empirical	Mailing list	Inter organizational communication and networking
Rohde [2004]	Iranian NGO Resource Center	Technology tailoring	BSCW	Social networking of NGOs
Melver [2004, 2004a]	Transnational NGOs at World Summit of Information Society	Empirical		Collaborative multi lingual writing
Kavada [2009, 2009a]	Anti-globalization movement networks (ESF)	Empirical	Mailing list	Collective identity building
Stoll et al. [2010; 2010a]	Network of NGOs in support of human trafficking victims	empirical		Inter organizational coordination
Saeed & Rohde [2010]	Anti-globalization movement networks (ESF)	empirical	OpenESF	Collaboration practices
Saeed et al. [2010]	Anti-globalization movement networks (ESF)	empirical		Knowledge Management
Saeed et al. [2011]	Anti-globalization movement networks (ESF)	empirical	Mailing list	Communication

participated. As a result of his work, he emphasized the need for an active cooperation of the Iranian NGO community for their long term sustainability.

Furthermore, Melver 2004, 2004a elaborated on a set of design requirements when supporting collaborative multilingual legislative work among transnational NGOs. The requirements were based on experiences when preparing legislation at the world summit on the information society (WSIS). Stoll et al. 2010, 2010a studied the inter-organizational coordination of nonprofit organizations dealing with victims of human trafficking. They realized that the organizational

affiliations and preferences of the actors involved have a significant impact on the choice of collaboration partners'. They further highlighted that individual actors are more important than organizational affiliations. Even in case individuals left an organization the personal linkages remain while the connection between the organizations may break. Furthermore they characterize the role of informal coordination among non-profit coordination to be vital.

Kavada 2009a: b has already worked empirically on the role of mailing lists in the preparation process for ESF 2004. She described that three parameters, namely mailing list objectives, accessibility and geographical diversity of participants help to change the level of collective identity. She further highlighted that email communication increases the reach-out of the movement. However, email overload, the lack of trust in solely email contacts and the vulnerability towards misunderstandings can lead to the fragmentation of the political process (Kavada 2009a). In earlier studies we already investigated into specific practices within the ESF and the usage of certain ICT applications. We analyzed knowledge sharing practices among the organizing committees of ESF 2008 (Saeed et al. 2010), usage of one specific collaborative application (OpenESF) by ESF 2008 activists (Saeed and Rohde 2010), and the role of mailing lists in communication among ESF activists (Saeed et al. 2011). In an earlier version of this paper (Saeed et al. 2009), we focused on the organizing process for ESF 2008. In this paper, we extend the empirical basis of our study by looking at the time between ESF 2008 and ESF 2010 and the organization of ESF 2010.

Most of these empirical studies highlight that inter-organizational coordination, information management, fundraising and collaborative writing are challenging tasks within networks of political activists. They describe the appropriation of rather mundane ICT applications for communication and information dissemination purposes among stakeholders. They mainly seem to indicate positive effects of ICT usage. However, none of these studies has looked at the organization of large political events and the cooperation and coordination practices, specifically in a transnational context. While Torres-Coronas et al. 2010 suggest to explore the potential of embracing ICTs, there is a need to better understand the organizational processes and practices. In our work we focus on comparing the organization of two large-scale political events, ESF 2008 and ESF 2010. Although the setting of our case study is the same as of Kavada 2009a: b, we focus on the coordinating aspects in planning and organizing tasks which have not yet been investigated.

Despite their promises, advanced ICT tools in support of collaboration seem not to be in much use among social activists. Instead rather mundane applications, such as email, get appropriated to a vast variety of different tasks. Furthermore, the complex settings of organizing political collective actions and political agenda setting processes need to be better researched, and technology design for these multi-lingual and multi-cultural settings could not be found in literature. In order to explore the potential of ICT applications for transnational

networks of political activists, there is a need for empirical work on their computer supported practices.

The organization of these political gatherings requires extensive information management and coordination activities. We are particularly interested to look at the coordination processes leading up to the ESF to understand how it relates to the notion of cooperative work. Schmidt and Simone 1996 described how interdependent activities can be coordinated and aligned by means of specifically designed artifacts. A comparative analysis between both ESF events and their organizational practices provide us with more insights about technological support in coordinating political activities. Our design-oriented analysis aims at identifying design challenges and requirements for ICTs to support cooperative practices of transnational political actors.

3. Research methods

This is a long term research project which was initiated in January 2008 and lasted until October 2010. In this paper, we start by looking at the organizing process of the 5th ESF in Malmo. Later on we will analyze the transfer from Malmo to Istanbul and the preparation and holding of the 6th ESF. The data collection has been carried out by triangulating results from different ethnographic research methods, which includes semi-structured interviews, participant observations and a content analysis of relevant documents and web sites. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty-one activists participating in the ESF. These interviews were recorded to avoid a loss of information. The interviews were conducted at different time intervals which could be categorized into four sets (mainly before and after the ESF in 2008 and 2010). The initial set of interviews (before the ESF 2008) mainly focused on understanding the work processes and the IT applications involved. The second set of interviews (after ESF 2008) mainly focused on the evaluation of the ESF and problems related to technology use. The third set of interviews (during the ESF 2008 and the ESF 2010) mainly focused on the transition process, the planning and the preparation of the ESF 2010, whereas the focus of the last set of interviews was mainly on the evaluation of the ESF 2010 and again the ICT support. The interviewees participated in the ESF activities in different capacities. They functioned as organizers, volunteers, participants and, technology developers from different countries to reach a multicultural perspective. Six interviewees were from Greece, five from Italy and four each from France, Germany and Sweden, two each from Turkey and the UK and one each from Norway, Czech, Austria and Hungary. The actors who were involved in organizing the two events were interviewed multiple times to understand the progress of work and future plans. Overall, we ended up with some twenty hours of audio-recordings of these interviews. Due to language and logistical problems with some participants four interviews were conducted via e-mails. Furthermore, three Skype text chat meetings were attended. One of

these chats was a meeting of the web team of ESF, in which a participant observation was conducted. The other two meetings were held with Turkish Organizing Committee representatives to learn about the planning of the ICT setup during ESF event in Turkey. Moreover, for the participant observation, we carried out eight different field visits lasting 26 days in total from 2008 to 2010. We visited the European preparatory assemblies held in Berlin (Germany), Vienna (Austria), Athens (Greece), Istanbul (Turkey), Paris (France) and the ESF 2008 in Malmo (Sweden) as well as the ESF 2010 in Istanbul (Turkey). Content analysis was carried out on the websites, mailing lists and other official documents like minutes of meetings. In order to avoid a loss of information all the interviews were transcribed and the field notes were written down. The data analysis was based on a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We have not developed any hypothesis before the field work; instead we explored the field by collecting empirical data. Then, the empirical material was clustered to understand problems and issues. Our assumptions are driven from the empirical findings as recommended by grounded theory.

4. Case description

The ESF follows the charter of the World Social Forum except for having its own independent organizing process. The World Social Forum is a global gathering of political activists of the anti-globalization movement starting in 2001 at Porto Alegre. The charter of the WSF emphasizes that the forum is not a decision making body, but an open discussion forum for knowledge sharing and for the coordination of common actions (WSF 2008). The success of the social forum concept has gained extensive recognition and resulted in many thematic and regional fora with their independent organizing processes. The organizing committee provides the logistics while different organizations propose activities ranging from seminars, workshops, thematic assemblies, demonstrations and cultural events. Figure 1 highlights two different activities held during the ESF 2010. In our study we specifically focused on the European Social Forum which is the regional platform for European activists. The first European Social Forum was held in Florence in 2002. After the 1st ESF, it was decided that this event would take place annually and that the European preparatory assembly, which is open for activists from all over Europe, will manage the future ESF process and the local organizing committee will be responsible for providing logistic support. In order to involve many activists from different regions, the hosting of the ESF kept on changing. Paris hosted the second ESF followed by London in 2004. After London, the ESF transformed into a biannual event; Athens, Malmo and Istanbul hosted the 2006, 2008 and 2010 events respectively. In our work, we specifically focused on the last two ESFs held in Malmo (Sweden) from September 17–21, 2008 and Istanbul (Turkey) from 30 June to 4 July 2010.



A snapshot of demonstration during the ESF 2010

A snapshot of a seminar during the ESF 2010

Figure 1. a. A snapshot of demonstration during the ESF 2010 b. A snapshot of a seminar during the ESF 2010.

The organization of the ESF is carried out collaboratively by a regional organizing committee and the European preparatory assembly (EPA). The organizing committee responsible for the ESF 2008 was the Nordic Organizing Committee (NOC) and for the ESF 2010 it was the organizing committee of Turkey (TOC). The EPA is an open meeting taking place 3–4 times a year, in which any organization, network group, or individuals adhering to the charter of the World Social Forum can participate. By means of a mutual consensus, the EPA comes to decisions about the ESF process, mainly focusing on political issues, whereas the logistics and practical tasks are carried out by the respective local organizing committee. In order to focus on specific themes and issues, different European thematic networks have emerged, e.g. labor and globalization, public services, anti-repression. They try to establish common actions. These networks attract organizations interested in these specific themes and are an important platform for political actions on those particular topics. There is a day before each EPA meeting dedicated to network meetings, so that activists and organizations participating in the ESF are also able to join these network meetings. The “web team” is a group of activists working for the ESF on a voluntarily basis in order to support ICT setup, whereas “babels” is a group of volunteer interpreters working at different social fora to translate during seminars. “ALIS” is a radio based interpretation system which was applied during the ESF 2006 in Athens. These people also helped setting up the interpretation equipment at ESF 2008.

In order to have a clear understanding of organizational activities, it is important to understand the organizing practices of the ESF. Initially, the local

organizing committee is formed and members try to involve other organizations in the organizing committee. In the meantime, the organizing committee tries to setup an ICT infrastructure and other logistics arrangements in order to enable European activists to propose potential activities (seminars, workshops, assemblies, demonstrations etc.) for the upcoming ESF. After expiration of the deadline, the number of activities is reduced according to the availability of logistics. This process of minimizing the number of activities is called “merging” and is normally a two-phase process. In the first phase, called voluntary merging, different organizations are encouraged to find other similar activities and to merge them. Once the deadline for the voluntary merging has expired, a team of organizers coordinates the activists, makes suggestions for merging and then tries to formulate and propose a program. In the meantime, the local organizing committee tries to arrange for translations during the seminars of the forum by providing volunteer interpreters and arranging equipment for synchronous translation. Furthermore, meeting spaces for the different activities as well as free mass accommodation for activists and volunteers are arranged. Additionally, the organizing committee carries out a European-wide mobilization to attract people to attend the forum.

The Nordic Organizing Committee consisted of 139 member organizations with participating organizations from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. The financial decision making was the responsibility of the board with a central office to disseminate information and a coordination group for channeling activities. The work was distributed among eleven work groups as described in Figure 2. The information work group was responsible for maintaining an event website, coordinating public relations (esp. to press and mass media) and publishing information material, whereas the Logistics work group was responsible for managing issues like security, transport, venues and infrastructure. The cultural programs were managed by a cultural work group. The ALIS work group mainly focused on the ALIS system, which was used for interpretation during the forum. The program work group was responsible for organizing the program of the Malmo event; the demonstration work group was responsible for preparing and managing the demonstrations during the forum. The fund-raising work group dealt with arranging the economical resources for the event and the duty of the contact group for Europe and the world was to mobilize for the ESF 2008 event in Europe and other regions. An additional mobilization work group focused on the regional mobilization efforts in Sweden. The interpretation work group was responsible for the synchronous translation during the forum, whereas the volunteer work group was responsible for the mobilization and coordination of volunteers (ESF 2008).

On the other hand, the Turkish Organizing Committee was composed of 70 organizations from the Turkish and Kurdish region as shown in Figure 3. In order to better coordinate the mobilization and organizing activities, a moderation committee was set up which included five main trade unions of Turkey. There were six different working groups which were active at some point during the organizing process. The

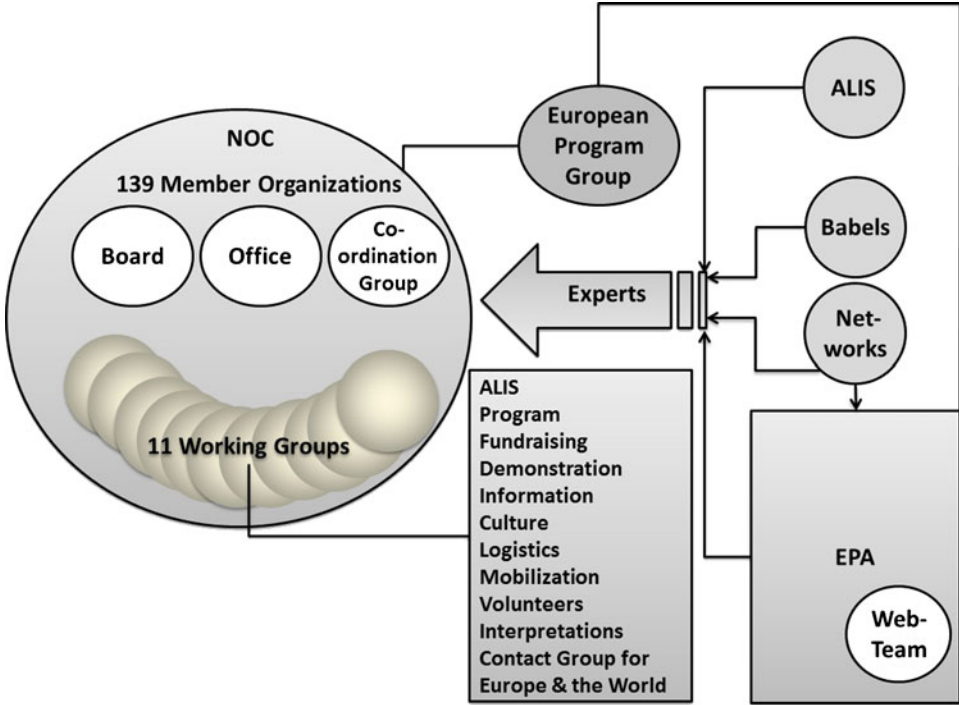


Figure 2. Organizing committee of the ESF 2008.

translation working group was responsible for managing the translations during the seminars, the logistics working group was responsible for arranging rooms and accommodations, the media group was responsible for spreading information, and the Middle East group was responsible for mobilizing about this topic issue. The culture work group was responsible for arranging cultural activities and the program working group was responsible for assembling the program. In order to promote mobilization especially in eastern European countries an All European mobilization committee was established, consisting of European activists.

Table 4 provides an overview of differences and similarities of the ESF 2008 and ESF 2010. The limited number of organizations involved in TOC means that there were fewer organizations which could input their resources (human and financial) to arrange the logistics but also to secure a strong local participation during the forum. As a result, there were only six work groups and the organizing tasks were not carried out perfectly: There was a rather low level of mobilizing activities, organizing tasks were delayed, and there was a lack of information for the activists. This fact became evident as the committee was only able to attract some 3000 attendees which was way less than previous ESFs. As a result most of the activities, seminar and workshops, had rather few attendees.

Another important observation is that the “web team”, “ALIS” and “bables” were all missing in the organizing process of ESF 2010 which ultimately

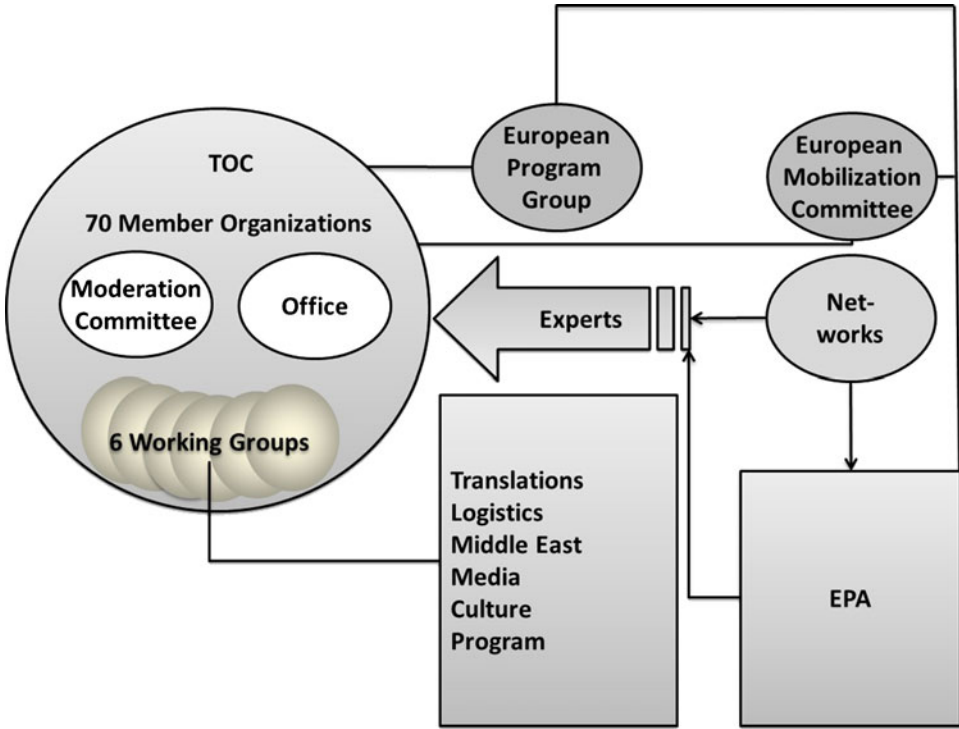


Figure 3. Organizing committee of ESF 2010.

increased the burden and problems of TOC. There was only one person in the “web team” who could develop technical artifacts and he was not available any more. He offered that he or someone from his company could help out. However, the inability of the Turkish organizing committee to pay him for maintaining the

Table 4. An overview of the ESF 2008 and ESF 2010.

	ESF 2008	ESF 2010
Location	Malmo, Sweden	Istanbul, Turkey
Size of the hosting committee	139 organizations	70 Organizations
No of Working groups	11	6
No of activities in final program	272	225
No of Attendees	12,000	3,000
Participants in activities	mostly full	Limited
Participation of local activists	High	Low
Interpretation Tool	“ALIS”	None
Responsibility for arranging Interpreter volunteers	“babels” Group	Turkish Organizing Committee
ICT Support	“webteam”	None

OpenESF platform and the official website of ESF 2010 prevented the reuse of his experiences. The remaining members of the “web team” were not active anymore in the ESF process after ESF 2008. Similarly, the “babels” interpreters had not been reimbursed for their traveling expenses to Malmo. Moreover, the delays in setting up the interpretation equipment for the ESF 2010 de-motivated them. Hence, they did not show interest in participating in the ESF 2010. The “ALIS” people urged the NOC to purchase equipment early enough, but the TOC could not afford equipment at that time and later the ALIS people refused to participate as well.

5. ESF organizing process: discontinuities and hidden leadership

Apart from the organizational structure of the ESF committees and bodies, the organizing process of the ESF events was characterized by discontinuities and a “hidden leadership”, described by participants as informal decision-making structures beyond the formal committee structure. Not only the organizing committee and the working groups consisted of very different organizations and members with highly diverse interests and experiences, but also the whole organizing process lacked transparency.

One member of the NOC gave feedback on the ESF process in the following words:

First thing is that there is general false information all the time because of a glossy picture that is always presented. That this is a unique process for which one has to be known...that means only people who had attended [former] ESF [events] could be among the professionals running the process...

Over the years the ESF organizing process got strongly influenced by the informal structures of long-term participants who did not only come to the ESF events themselves but played an important role in the preparation meetings. These people use to gather frequently at the sidelines of meetings of the different committees and also at other events. These informal interchanges may lead to decisions in a way that is very often not visible and understandable for newcomers or less strongly engaged participants.

An Italian activist added on the issue of hidden leadership at ESF and EPA meetings:

...in fact we have an oligopoly group, you don't write they are leaders but if you stay always, it's here. [...] in fact this is the same situation in the IC of the WSF. A lot of people that stayed always in every international council decide more and more than the people that arrive there one time a year [...] But in fact there is a [hidden] leadership—it's a factual leadership, it's not written in every document but if you stay here you decide. If you don't stay here you decide less than the others.

Obviously the ESF organizing process suffers from personal and organizational discontinuities, some participants are able to take part on a regular basis, others are not. Each event is organized by a new committee with new members and organizations involved, located in a different European region. The problems that occur with these discontinuities concerning the transfer of organizational “know how” have been analyzed in detail by postulating the concept of “nomadic knowledge” (Saeed et al. 2010).

Furthermore, the described informal structure is biased. It mainly consists of Western European “ESF veterans”, mostly stemming from better organized and well-equipped organizations with their own priorities and agenda.

In a message on the European mailing list on October 17th, 2010 a Hungarian activist commented as follows.

For implementing the above goals we should create a new, transparent and accountable coordinating commission (CC), including progressive movements engaged in green, feminist, human rights, trade, debt issues or other field. The new CC must include mainly young people and women. The informal „hidden” leadership consisted of mainly ESF-veterans of West Europe should now step back. Eastern Europe must have a much more balanced representation than in the past.

The discontinuities and lacks of transparency in the organizing process are partly reinforced by a missing (public) documentation of decision-making and administrative processes. As we will show in our analysis of the “virtual infrastructure” of the ESF below, there is not any public “common narrative” of ESF events or a “shared history” of the movement. Neither are there ESF participants who could help with regard to visibility of (formal and informal) processes, and thus, support the building of a collective identity of the ESF community. The following description of the IT infrastructure of the European Social Forum will clarify this point in more detail.

5.1. ESF websites: scattered information sources

The virtual dimension of the European Social Forum is not very well-structured, as the involved activists mostly lacked technical skills to carry out the tasks themselves. Moreover, a general lack of financial resources means that they cannot easily hire the services of IT professionals. There is an official website (FSE 2008) of the ESF which contains partial information about past ESF events. It is also supposed to be the information source for the ESF currently in preparation. Since there is not any assigned webmaster, a volunteer sometimes updates this website based on his time availability. As a result it often fails to deliver updated information. In order to facilitate information exchange among activists, there is a European mailing list, which is the most active channel of information exchange among activists. The official website and the mailing list

are managed by EPA, whereas all other activities specific to an ESF event lay in the responsibility of the local organizing committee. As a result, the websites of former events do no longer work since the organizing committee is not very much interested in maintaining them once the event is over.

In order to prepare the ESF 2008, two other websites were presented. One website was dealing with the program logistics. The second website was in support of the collaborative merging process for submitted seminar and workshop proposals. It was also supposed to serve as a communication platform between the events. The development, usage and design deficiencies of this collaborative website have been discussed in one of our earlier papers (Saeed and Rohde 2010). The setup of the website for logistics was a complex process. The information working group of the NOC came across a social software development company which promised to help by setting up a website for free. The transfer from the previous Athens ESF did not happen as the people in the company were not familiar with using the PLONE content management system with which the Athens ESF website had been realized. As the people in the information working group were not sure of the requirements of the website, they were in contact with volunteers from the “web team”. Thus, a whole new website was developed from scratch and people started to propose activities for the forum using it, but there were conflicts on further enriching the functionality of the website. Our interviewees reported on communication problems between the information work group and the company. One member from the information work group described the situation as follows.

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

As the forum was approaching, the NOC, through “web team”, contacted the Greek developer who had developed the website for the Athens ESF and hired him. The activities which were already proposed on the old website were re-entered to the new website by the NOC members. As the Greek developer was already aware of the ESF process based on his previous involvement, his engagement resulted in a better coordination and more effective work. One member of the Information work group commented on this in the following words:

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

After the Malmo forum the official website of the ESF was not updated for almost a year, as the volunteer stopped working on it. The EPA meetings were

taking place regularly every 3–4 months, but there was no information about it on the website. One activist, who worked on ICT activities for the ESF, described the following reason for not updating the official website.

I think the last webmaster was “X” and she just stopped doing this, because at some point she was doing a lot on a voluntary basis and she had no money to go to EPAs. She said ‘Ok, you want me to be the webmaster, but then, at least, if you don’t pay me, give me the possibility to come to the meetings.’ So she stopped.

After almost 1 year, other activists noted outdated information on the website and brought up this issue on the mailing list, the activist who was maintaining the website stated that the people in the ESF had no interest in the website. Therefore, she decided to stop updating and waited for a response. At that time the control of the website was handed over to another activist who did minor updates on the website.

The ICT infrastructure development at the Turkish side was also quite complex. The collaborative website (OpenESF) which was used during the ESF 2008 was no longer active. The Greek designer who had developed it, wanted to have a regular income for the maintenance and the server costs. However, the Turkish Organizing Committee did not have any money, so the site went offline. One member of the Turkish committee described this in the following words:

We do not have many financial resources. So we cannot finance anything and we cannot even finance the printing of our documents. As you see we had some problems even to finance the event website. So I guess as organizing committee of Turkey we will not be able to finance the OpenESF.

For the event logistics website the situation was also quite complex. The Turkish Organizing Committee had a website on the Turkish Social Forum which they used to publish some initial information. One member of the Turkish Social Forum was in contact with the Greek developer since the Malmo forum and was interested in using this website for the ESF 2010 because they did not have enough financial resources to setup a new website. The member of the Turkish Organizing Committee described their plans in making the website functional in the following way.

I guess we are going to use the help of people who prepared that website, you know “X” from Greece and also some people from Sweden maybe and we are going to change the language actually a bit and that website will work in Turkish, English and maybe some other languages.

The University of Siegen offered to provide server space for hosting the website of the ESF 2010. The initial installation was done in September 2009 and the TOC wanted the website to work before December 2009, but it was not realized as the TOC members were busy in other organizing activities. So when TOC finally contacted the Greek developer at the end of February 2010 to ask for

help with some changes in the installation, he did not want to do them on a voluntarily basis. Instead he offered to ask an employee of his company to conduct these activities for a flat sum of 4.500 Euros. The Turkish Organizing Committee did not have the money, so they tried to look for volunteers in Turkey that had some expertise in Plone. In the meantime, one activist from the TOC also started to learn Plone to do customization. However, it did not really work out. As a result, registration procedure for seminars and workshops was running late and people from all over Europe were very concerned. At that point, the University of Siegen helped out to carry out some changes in the website forms to enable the registration of activities. As a result, the website was, quite a bit behind schedule, ready to receive submissions of activities. When the activities were registered, it turned out that the activity merging feature of the website does not work due to programming errors in the code.

As a result of our empirical work with ESF 2008, we had intended to develop a prototypical feature to make the merging process more transparent to those who had registered proposals. This feature would have enabled to merge activities via the website by involving those remote activists who had submitted the activities. When we tried to fix the above mentioned errors and to implement the new merging feature, the absence of documentation and the lacking structure of the given code implied that it was considered easier to rewrite the application.

Finally, due to these problems, increasing time pressure, and the considerably lower number of registered activities, the Turkish organizers did not fix the website's problems and merged the activities manually.

The Turkish organizers did not update the result of the merging process on this website, as the responsible activist found it difficult to deal with the Plone based website. In order to publish the program and other relevant information, the activist configured a website using the JOOMLA content management system as he knew how to use this content management system. When he was asked to describe the reason for setting up this additional application he said:

This is just an informational website, it has a different objective than the other one and it is much easier to make changes on this one. The esf2010.org is for registering activities etc. but it does not have much information on it. But the new site is just for giving people information about the ESF (ESF 2010), especially to people who heard about the ESF for their first time.

This lack of information on the official website prompted a group of activists from Germany to set up a blog where they put information acquired through mailing lists. A German activist described her reasons for developing the blog as follows:

The idea for the blog was the result of a process of research for information on the ESF 2010 in Istanbul. On official websites, interested people could not find

updated information. The websites were full of old and confusing information. A colleague and I joined the ESF-mailing list. Since then we have published all important information on our blog. On the other hand, I try to diffuse the information on the mailing list to the facebook-group for the ESF 2010.

As a result multiple websites originated to provide partial information, one Plone-based website was used for activity registration, a second Joomla-based website was for publishing the program and collecting the participant's registration fees, and a third blog-based website provided day to day updates. Beyond these three there were even more websites run by different European activists (see below quote). Finding relevant information in the presence of these multiple website was quite a challenge. An activist from Norway, who participated in the ESF, described this in the following words.

I found five different websites for the ESF 2010, which is a lot, and one is, of course, the fse-esf.org which has been the main working site for the ESF for several years. I do not like that website it is not easy to find what you are looking for. And then there is esf2010.org, which is the registration website. There also is the esfistnabul.org which I believe is the main website for the ESF 2010, but I am not sure. There is another website of the Turkish Social Forum, but there is not much in English. It is a bit confusing, but yeah it is there and the last one is a blog, the [esf2010.blogspot](http://esf2010.blogspot.com), which the Belgium trade unions use; it has been putting out information for the preparatory assemblies for a long time now, because they do not find the information. So they made this stuff, which has been useful for me at least.

Summing up the empirical findings presented so far, the ESF organizing process can be characterized by personal and organizational discontinuities, by informal processes and a "hidden leadership", by lacking documentation of transparency of the decision making, by a missing "shared history" and common story framing, and by scattered information sources.

Given the dislocated nature of the network's activists, IT could have played an important role in overcoming some of these features. However, the opportunities of an appropriate IT structure were not met for some of the same reasons from which the overall organization process suffered.

In the following, we will analyze the participant interactions in more depth to better understand organizing and coordinating activities.

6. Coordinating activities, efforts and obstacles

In order to gain a better overview over the coordination practices, we looked at different organizing activities during the organizing process of the ESF 2008 and 2010.

6.1. Communication among the organizing members

The organization of such a huge event requires extensive financial and human resources. Most organizing committees are short of both human and financial resources. Although the ESF events are politically very important and people want to be involved by attending meetings and by participating in the coordination activities, normally only a very small number of dedicated people volunteer for the actual execution of the tasks. In case of the ESF 2008, the physical meetings were the main source for the coordination among volunteers. These meetings were sometimes collocated with the NOC meetings scheduled every second month. Furthermore, sometimes emails and telephone calls were used to coordinate meetings. Similarly, in the case of the ESF 2010, fortnightly physical meetings were the main communication source among activists who prepared the forum. It was also sporadically supported by phone calls and mailing lists.

6.2. Themes of the fora

The first important task for the organization of the social forum is to decide on the main themes/categories around which the final program will be formed later. In order to ensure that it is an open process, proposals for themes of the ESF 2008 were gathered on the website from September to November 2007. Activists proposed 70 different themes. These themes were clustered by the NOC as they were quite narrow in their scope. So a proposal was presented by the NOC comprising 7 different themes during the EPA meeting in November 2007 in Istanbul, Turkey. The members of the EPA did not agree on these themes. As a result, the task was handed over to a European working group. This working group met in January 2008 in Paris and also in February 2008 before the EPA meeting in Berlin. After the discussions, nine themes were finally approved. Later in April 2008, an extra residual category was added to accommodate all those activities which could not be combined with other themes. In the case of the ESF 2010, instead of getting web based proposals from activists, the organizing committee of Turkey presented a proposal of ten themes during the Vienna EPA meeting in July 2009. The themes were based on their discussions with Turkish organizations in their local meetings. The participants of the EPA meeting raised different objections with regard to the proposed themes. As an example, there was one theme named “war and peace—against war, militarism, occupation and Zionism”, to which German activists strongly reacted as they demanded the word “Zionism” to be deleted, for otherwise they would withdraw from the ESF. As a result, it was decided that these recommendations would be considered in the meeting of the European program working group before the next EPA. After this meeting, the modified list of themes was to be presented again to the EPA. The program working group met on 24 September in Istanbul and they reported their

work to the EPA in Diyarbakir on September 25–26. These themes were never reported on any website or mailing list until the agenda of the next EPA meeting was circulated on the mailing list and on the website in February 2010.

6.3. Proposal submission

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

In the case of the ESF 2010, the deadline for proposing the activities was March 15th, 2010, but the website did not start to work until early March, so the deadline was extended to April 10th. The number of proposed activities was 303 by then. Most of these activities were entered through the website where lists of these activities were also visible. Unlike the Malmo ESF, nearly 70 activities were proposed on paper-based forms by Turkish organizations. The website was realized in the English language. Since quite a few Turkish activists were not familiar enough with English, they proposed their activities through paper-based forms. These proposals could not be seen via the website. One Italian activist described a minor problem with the activity registration form:

There was a problem, for example, with the nationality field of the organization, it was impossible to put more than one nation. So we had lots of problems, for example, the education network is not a national network but we were obliged to write one nationality when it is not the national, e.g. you can read it like “education network France” and all the people think that this network is a French network which is not true, and we had similar problems for the labor and globalization network, and all the European networks. It was impossible to write e.g. Europe, Italy French, and Germany and so on.

6.4. Merging process

In 2008, it was decided by the NOC that the final program would comprise 200 activities. Some activities had a relevant project page on the collaborative “OpenESF” website; anybody could join those projects and discuss potential merging ideas. Some people contacted other organizations by emails, after seeing

the list of proposed activities on the website. After the voluntary merging deadline, a European working group tried to further reduce the number of activities. As there were ten themes for the ESF 2008, all activities were categorized on the basis of these themes. A facilitator and a group of volunteers were assigned to each theme. They were provided with an excel sheet that contained the activity data. The excel sheets were exported from the website and enabled the volunteers to work offline as well. These people looked through each activity for each theme and made suggestions for merging. Then via email they coordinated the entries hand in hand with the people who had proposed those activities, and encouraged them to merge. The merging suggestions were based on the relevance of activities and political relationships among the proposing organizations. If the contacted organizations did not like the merging suggestions, they were encouraged to find their own merging partners. The volunteers noted down these suggestions in excel sheets and asked the people, who had proposed activities, to merge accordingly on the website, using their activity codes. Some organizations were not able to merge via website, so they received help from the coordinating volunteers. This process introduced lots of problems in the end when the program was about to be finalized. There were huge discrepancies among the web-based merging results and the planned merging proposals documented in excel sheets. This media disruption between excel-usage and online activities introduced an extra amount of workload to the program working group, which had to locate each activity to find out the discrepancies. There were different reasons for these problems. In some cases, the activity was found suitable for another theme and was forwarded to another facilitator, but the other facilitator could not pick it up. Some organizations merged with someone else's activities without informing the organizers. Sometimes one organization proposed more than one seminar and thus had multiple codes. As a result, while finalizing the merging of an activity through the website, organization might use the wrong activity code and merge to an activity, which they did not intend. Some people even changed their minds and cancelled proposed activities. As a result, lots of activities still remained which should have been merged according to the proposals in the excel files. Another important factor of this problem was that people changed the titles of their activities, so it was difficult to track them. Finally, when the program was published, it had 272 activities. The coordination in this whole process was carried out by using emails, mailing list discussions, telephone conferences and OpenESF. One German activist commented on this with the following words:

I know a lot of people from personal meetings but the merging process was also supported by "OpenESF" space as well as the Internet. It is not possible to have this merging process without such media as the Internet, emails, the telephone, because we are not able to travel around the world every day, so that we could be in contact all the time, and not only on international meetings.

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

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

In the case of the ESF 2010, the merging process was a bit simpler since there were not so many proposed activities. One Italian activist described the reason for the smaller number of activities in the following words:

...I think one part of the reason is that the ESF is in a little crisis and the other is that we [activists/organizations] network better than before.

Due to the lack of technological knowledge, Turkish organizers were not able to export the list of activities from the web-based database. As a result, they prepared a Microsoft excel file by re-entering the data about activities that had been proposed through the website, and also by paper-based forms. The Turkish organizer, who carried out this task, commented in the following words:

I started to copy and paste things from the website and some of them came through paper-based forms, from a Turkish organization, it took a few nights actually.

In May 2010, there was a meeting of the European program working group in Istanbul and people attending that meeting were handed over a printed copy of activities, which was not updated, though. The excel sheet was projected with the help of a beamer. The Turkish representative initiated the discussion by starting with activity 1, and people present in the meeting were to say if they wanted to merge their activities or wanted to be alone. The Turkish representative also documented this by adding another field in the excel sheet with the title "seminar no" as shown in Figure 4. The serial number of the activity, which was to be merged with other activities, was put in this field.

One problem was that sometimes people wanted to merge later, which disturbed the whole numbering sequence of seminar field, and it was difficult to track seminars by numbers as the numbers for each seminar kept on changing. As the merging feature of the website did not work, the organizing committee of Turkey sent this excel sheet to the European mailing list and gave them a week's time to report back other merging proposals for organizations that did not attend

Theme of Activity	Type of Activity	Activity Name	Proposing Organization	Seminar No
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Figure 4. Schema of the excel file used for merging.

that meeting. Also, after the merging, the organizations were advised to send new titles to the organizing committee along with their preferred translation language, during the seminar at the forum. Although the translation wishes had already been entered on the website together with the activity proposals, the Turkish organizers could not look into the database, as it was an object-oriented database, and they preferred to be given this information again from the organizers. Some people communicated this to the Turkish Organizing Committee via email, others responded on the European mailing list. On the basis of these feedbacks, a draft program was sent to the European mailing list. The activists responded with corrections as in some cases organizations were not updated, some activities were missing etc. After these corrections, the final program was sent again, in the excel sheet whose schema is shown in Figure 5, to the mailing list.

Describing the different technology used during the merging process, a Norwegian activist commented with the following words:

Well I think that the merging process in 2008 was more open, because now the merging process has gone through the list, and because I believe some have sent their merging wishes to the whole list, some like me, I did not send it to the whole list, because I am not interested in what kind of merging problems some other organizations had, I am just interested in my seminars, so I just answered to the Turkish Organizing Committee. I think there were lots of emails on the list concerning the merging process which I just deleted, because I just did not need them in my seminar; I do not want to read this. I think that through a website like the 2008, we used the OpenESF, but that was better because then you could go in and find your seminar.

6.5. Payment of seminar/workshop fees

Every organization proposing an activity had to pay a registration fee to the organizing committee for the logistic support. Since activists from all over Europe participated in the ESF, a web based payment mechanism was established. For the ESF 2008, the web-based payment system was enabled. One member of the NOC described her experience of enabling the web-based payment system:

It was quite difficult to get the payment functioning and we ended up by not doing it with a Swedish bank, because they were so expensive, not so

Time Schedule	Theme of Activity	Type of Activity	Activity Name	Proposing Organization	Seminar No	Speaker	Languages
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Figure 5. Schema of the excel file used for the final program.

much to the setting up, but per transaction it was quite expensive for the people who paid online, and we did not want it to be more expensive to pay online than through a bank transfer, because we prefer the online payments as it is easier and faster and then we ended up doing it by bank, Attica (Greece), and that took a lot longer than we had thought. It was also started quite late and they had told us in the beginning that you could also pay in Swedish crowns, but then, when it was there, they said no that is not possible, so the only possible payment was through Euro online, which was a problem because of the exchange rate. In order to not confuse the people, we just used like 50 Euros for 500 crowns, even though in reality it is a bit less, so we would lose a lot of money if everybody paid in Euro in Scandinavia. We had to ask all the Scandinavian organizations just to pay through bank transfers instead of online transfer.

The web-based payment also enabled an easy and good accounting mechanism, but most of the activists thought that the website was only used to disseminate information. A member of the NOC cited this example to illustrate this:

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

In the case of the ESF 2010, the web-based payment system was not prepared, instead a link was given on the webpage where people could connect to the PayPal service and transfer the fee there. The activists had problems with paying via this service, so later the Turkish Organizing Committee provided bank data for bank transfers. After the transfer of the payment, everyone had to send the receipt to an email address of the TOC, which enabled the organizers to follow which organizations had paid the fee.

6.6. Activity preparation

The organizations proposing the seminars are normally responsible for the structure and content of their activity. We have interviewed some seminar organizers to know their preparation details and their use of ICT. During the ESF 2008, the collaborative website "OpenESF" was used by some organizers to prepare their seminars. A workshop on the topic of "research on social movements" was the result after having merged two other activities, namely the "Librarians for informational commons and another Europe" and the "Who writes our history?" The participants did not know

each other, so they created a project on the “OpenESF” collaborative website and discussed the details and structure on the wiki pages. One activist involved in this workshop described her experience in the following words:

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

She commented her experience in another couple of activities, which were proposed around water dams, and where they were not able to use this collaborative tool as follows:

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

Similar concerns were raised by another French activist who held a workshop on “Initiating a process to connect research and citizenship” during the ESF 2008:

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

Another German activist described privacy concerns of discussing sensitive information on the collaborative site as follows:

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

Most commonly the number of activity organizers is limited (normally 2–6), some of them know each other beforehand; others find themselves after merging. Instead of exchanging emails, telephone contacts were more suitable to plan the details of activities. The main media for preparation the ESF 2008 were emails and telephone communication and in some cases the partial use of the collaborative “OpenESF” website. As for the ESF 2010, this collaborative website was not present, so emails and phone calls were the main source for

preparing the activities. Describing her communication practice, one Norwegian activist said the following:

We have been merging two different activities into one and we are four organizations collaborating on this seminar and we make some calls and also email between us, so it is quite small and easy to maintain.

6.7. Mobilization activities

One of the main objectives of the ESF is to attract new activists in the movement. This makes mobilization activities quite critical. During the ESF 2008, there were two working groups responsible for carrying out the mobilization. The mobilization working group was responsible for the mobilization within Sweden, the contact group for Europe and the world was responsible for the mobilization all over Europe, excluding Sweden. The target was to mobilize 20,000 people to the ESF 2008. Members of these mobilization groups travelled across Europe and Sweden to held meetings and seminars, so that more organizations became motivated to attend the ESF 2008. A Facebook group was also launched, which had nearly 2,500 members.

In the case of the ESF 2010, the organizing committee was not supported by many people. Just 1 month before the forum there was only one individual, who was mainly working for the ESF. The target of the committee was to attract 5,000 people from Europe and nearly 20,000 people from Turkey. In order to mobilize the locals, organizations involved in the Turkish Organizing Committee carried out some activities. In order to improve this situation, some activists formed an all European mobilization committee to initiate the mobilization of especially Eastern European countries. But the Turkish Organizing Committee could not decide in advance on how much money they would refund in lieu of travel costs of the Eastern European countries, so the participation of Eastern European countries was very doubtful. At the last moment, they received some funding from different organizations and the travel expenses of some Eastern Europeans were reimbursed from that money. A Facebook group was also present, which emerged by merging a group of Turkish activists and the group of someone else. Currently, it has around 3,000 people. This group was also short on information, so some activists copied information from the mailing list and pasted it there. In total, around 3,000 people attended the ESF 2010, less than during the ESF 2008, where there had been around 8,000 paying participants.

6.8. Interpretation facilities

An important aspect of the social forum is the provision of multiple languages for communication during the forum. Conventional conference interpretation systems are quite expensive, so during the preparation phase of the ESF in Athens, a

radio-based interpretation system was developed, known as “ALIS”. A group of professional volunteers, “babels”, carried out interpretation services for the fora. During the ESF 2008, the interpretation equipment did not work as there were not many people with technological knowledge to set up the system and the interpreters had to form the groups during seminars and do the translations. The volunteer interpreters were promised a refund for their travel expenses, but after the ESF 2008, the NOC was bankrupt. It was only in February 2010 that different European organizations paid the outstanding dues to the “babels”.

The Turkish Organizing Committee initially proposed to use a conference interpretation system, but was advised to use the “ALIS” system during the EPA meeting to save money. Two Greek people from the “ALIS” system made tests at the venue in 2009 and the system worked well, so the Turkish organizers wanted to use this system. The “ALIS” people asked the Turkish organizers to buy radio equipment early enough, but the Turkish Organizing Committee did not have money at that time and wanted to buy the equipment later, so the “ALIS” team refused to offer their services, foreseeing a repetition of the problems during the ESF 2008 where the equipment was not properly installed. Similarly, the “babels” also refused to participate in the forum, stressing the problems with the equipment and their experience during the ESF 2008. As a result, the Turkish Organizing Committee itself had to find volunteer interpreters and translating equipment. A Turkish company offered to develop a radio system, but that was not realized until the forum. As a result, there were interpreter boxes in every seminar room, but no equipment, as can be seen in Figure 6. TOC personally requested volunteers from the “babels” contact database to help the ESF and also requested other organizations to bring interpreters along with them. As a result, there were few interpreters and before the start of each seminar a fair amount of time was wasted on resolving language issues and matching relevant groups in the room.



Figure 6. Snapshot of a seminar during the ESF 2010 (Interpreter is left most in speakers; interpretation box behind her is empty).

6.9. Publication of the program

Keeping in mind the large number of activities at the forum, it is very important to master the program of the ESF. During the ESF 2008, a complete program was available on the website and people were able to customize it, based on a specific location or specific theme. Furthermore, participants received a paper-based copy where they could find detailed information about the venues as well. In the case of the ESF 2010, the program was only available via excel file on the website and the link to the program was floated on the European mailing list. The paper-based program, available on the venue, did not hold any information about opening and closing ceremonies of the forum. Moreover, the room locations were coded and the information explaining the codes was missing on the program booklet. This information was sent to the mailing list, so either you had to find it in your email or you had to ask some other person who knew the coding convention.

6.10. Documenting activity and setting of political agendas

A lot of brainstorming and political information exchange takes place during the ESF fora, which is also important for activists, who could not make it to the forum. During the ESF 2008, there was not any documentation of the proceedings of the seminars, so people who had not been to the forum could not benefit from these discussions. However, a minor documentation activity was carried out by recording the outcomes of the seminars. Such outcomes could have been for example, any initiative or initiated network or any statement agreed upon by the participating organizations. The organizers of activities published their outcomes on the ESF 2008 website, using the activity code. It was also possible to submit these paper-based forms, which were then inserted on the website by volunteers. Overall, there were 43 different initiatives published on the website. Furthermore, there was a final assembly which agreed upon a joint statement.

In the case of the ESF 2010, there was not any documentation for the results of the seminars, either. However, on the second last day thematic assemblies were held where a manifesto was approved by each assembly. Typically, a group of people would have prepared this text. This was read out in the subassembly without distributing any copies to the other participants. That is why people raised their concerns during the subassemblies and tried to agree upon a common proposal for that assembly. Each subassembly's text was read in the closing assembly. Moreover, a text for the closing assembly was finalized. People were to comment on this text before its finalization. One Norwegian activist described this process in the following words:

I had been to some ESFs before Istanbul so I knew that on the final assembly and at the thematic assemblies we usually have some kind of document that we agree upon and I also knew before that someone is writing a proposal. I knew that there is someone who is going to write the proposal, but not everyone knows this and this is not democratic at all, because I mean there were some posters hanging around that

there is going to be a thematic assembly and it was also in the program and there were some posters about a meeting before the thematic assemblies to plan how it was going to be. But you were not informed that this is the meeting for planning the thematic assemblies on Saturday, and that in this meeting we were going to discuss a draft proposal to agree upon, this information was never spread. So at these meetings you planned the thematic assemblies and wrote the proposal. These meetings were also late in the evenings after you had been to three seminars, during the whole day and you were very tired, and maybe you were on the way to go out to have dinner with your friends. Where these draft writing meetings were, I did not know, maybe they were only meant for people of the inner circle, who normally decided things and this is very bad, I believe, because if you are new to the process and new to a forum you do not understand these structures and you just come to the final assembly or the thematic assemblies and then you are confronted with the text and you do not know who wrote it and what were the political discussions in advance.

The unclear writing procedures and the lack of transparency during the whole documentation process led to a considerable discontent of those participants who did not belong to the inner circle.

7. Discussion

In our long-term field study of the European Social Forum we focus on the understanding of coordinating activities within the ESF organization process and on the usage of ICTs to support these activities.

Our observations and interviews brought some insights into the highly complex conditions of organizing ESF events. Given the international and intercultural setting and the high diversity of involved (groups of) actors, the whole process would not work without the support of ICTs (such as mailing lists, websites, newsletters). We analyzed the development, appropriation and use of these ICT tools in the organization practice, the problems, challenges and limitations of the usage of different tools and found some hints for improvements and design recommendations. Furthermore, our analysis of ICT usage shed light on the high complexity of the involved organization and coordination tasks of the ESF committees.

According to our research questions and the empirical data, we first discussed our findings with regard to the structural conditions of ESF organizing and the characteristics of the involved tasks. Second, we focused on the practice of ICT usage during the process and came up with some design recommendations and possible improvements.

7.1. ESF organization as a meta-coordinative activity

Although Stoll et al. (2010) already looked at coordination aspects between nonprofit organizations; they did not focus on holding political gatherings. While

collaborating initiatives, to support victims of human trafficking can be hampered by different political agendas and priorities of individual organization (Stoll et al. 2010), our findings indicate that scheduling large scale gatherings which discuss on political directions, plans and initiatives are even more vulnerable to such issues. Holding ESF events is a complex political endeavor in which the success of organizing and coordinating activities seems to be highly dependent on particular social, cultural and technical settings. Other than in well-defined communities, ESF organizing processes have to deal with a large number of different participants and organizations, following their own interests, agendas, profiles, and strategies. The involved actors are highly disparate in their structures and cultures; they differ in local and historical background, in experiences and competencies, in personnel, infrastructure, and resources. Being a gathering of very different NGOs and civil society actors, ESF events cannot be characterized as community meetings focusing on a shared goal or practice, but as a network of events for very diverse individuals, groups, organizations, and networks. The continuous scheduling of the ESF with a new set of organizing actors also affects the sustainability and learning with regard to organizing tasks. The new set of actors each time responsible for organizing the ESF may not have been previously active, so they may lack knowledge about past activities.

CSCW researchers have looked at different aspects in nonprofit settings such as the inter-organization collaboration in field settings (Stoll et al. 2010), information management (Iverson and Burkart 2007; Volda et al. 2011) and technology management (McPhail et al. 1998; Farooq et al. 2005; Merkel et al. 2007; Goecks et al. 2008), but there is no comprehensive study describing coordination practices when all of these different tasks merge in conducting a large scale gathering. Organizing the ESF does not mean to deal with one collaborative practice but has to do with coordinating a diversity of social and cultural practices facing the challenges of:

- personal and organizational discontinuities,
- informal processes and a “hidden leadership”
- “nomadic knowledge” transfer (Saeed et al. 2010)
- lacking financial and human resources
- lacking technological infrastructure
- scattered information sources
- a high diversity of ICT applications and communication channels,
- missing documentation and lacking transparency of (decision-making) processes.

Due to the lack of resources, organizational complexity and political nature of work, the whole process is full of tension which leads to long discussions and debates. Furthermore, over the different ESF instances and across the respective responsible (regional) committees, the ESF as a whole lacks a binding “shared history” or common story to frame its collective identity. The shortage of financial resources hinders ESF activists to invest in dedicated IT support. Kavada 2005

came to a similar finding. She further highlighted that IT usage is influenced by cultural factors and organizational goals.

Compared to traditional work settings the cooperation within the ESF is mainly limited to holding periodical events, creating political manifestos, exchanging information, learning, and coordinating distributed political activities. However, the ESF's inherent diversity and its lack of resources lead to coordination practices of a rather unique type. As Schmidt (2011, p. 298) points out: "what we, in the context of CSCW, focus on are computing technologies at the 'level' of cooperative work practices". These cooperative practices are determined by the division of labor (and therefore by coordination mechanisms) and by control functions (Schmidt 2011, pp. 299 ff.). With regard to Schmidt's understanding of "coordinated cooperative work" (Schmidt and Simone 1996; Schmidt 2011), such somehow sophisticated pattern of co-operations could probably be found on the level of certain (local or regional) political activities of social activists. In this paper, we focus on the meta-level of organizing ESF events as gatherings of political activists and organizations to promote political discourses, to facilitate discussions and agenda settings. Having said that, we are dealing with two different levels of coordination: Schmidt's level of "coordinated cooperative work practices" and the mentioned meta-level of organizing opportunity structures for such cooperative practices. In the next paragraph, we elaborate on the ESF organization to be understood as a "meta-coordinative" activity.

ESF offers a structure to facilitate the establishment of cooperation, the discussions on strategies, and the planning of activities and concrete political projects. These activities would be realized as "collective actions" (cf. Tarrow 1994) in the sense of different kind of protest activities (such as street protest rallies, political events, flash mobs, campaigns, petitions, sit-ins, blockades). Usually, these collective actions are supported by efforts for mobilization, campaigning, agenda setting, lobbying etc. Crucial preconditions for the success of political collective actions are "political opportunity structures (POS)" (Kitschelt 1986). These POS are e.g. an identifiable political party that is the addressee of protest, that is responsible for a particular grievance or imbalance, an opportune public opinion, a public political agenda that is sensitive for the respective protest issue, some resources (such as people, knowhow, engagement, money, posters, media contacts) (Kitschelt 1986).

In this sense, ESF meetings can be understood as a facilitating meta-structure. ESF is organizing a process of political discourses and a structure (loosely-coupled network of actors, social movements, NGOs, Civil Society Organizations, activist networks) for discussing and planning activities (preparing collective actions). Therefore, organizing ESF events might not be "coordinative cooperative work" per se in Schmidt's (2011) understanding—because it is too fragmented, poorly institutionalized, characterized by very informal division of labor, fluid and barely regulated, hardly planned or controlled (cf. Schmidt 2011, pp. 383 f.)—but instead organizing these ESF events might be described as a

“meta-coordinative practice”. This meta-coordination is focusing on organizing a process and a structure to facilitate (the planning of) collective actions by collective actors—but might not be primarily a coordinative effort for direct collective action (in sense of cooperative work) itself. Organizing an ESF event would mean to facilitate collective action by creating political opportunity structures (POS). Moreover, since responsibilities for ESF organization are “nomadic” and moving from one organizing committee to the next, it can be characterized as a fragmented process. ESF organizing, then, could be seen as a *fragmented process of meta-coordination* focusing on facilitating political collective action by creating (political) opportunity structures for collective actors and social activists.

Furthermore, organizing an ESF event is highly influenced by political incidents, or more precisely: a complex interplay between political incidents and local responses to them. Some topics are politically very important for some regions and not so for others. As an example the problem of migrants was very important for activists from Greece and Italy but the Eastern Europeans do not have such big problems and on the other hand racism is considered to be a more important topic for them. The program of 2008 ESF in Malmo focused on issues such as the wars in Georgia, Iraq and Afghanistan while the program of ESF 2010 in Istanbul was focused around global crisis. So, political incidents can have an immediate impact on the selection of topics and activities during the event as well as on the conditions for mobilization. While most members of ESF follow long-term political strategies, their joint actions are shaped in a complex interaction between their strategies and given incidents. As Davis and Zald 2005 describe, ICTs have changed the grass root organizing. However, it was observed that despite the considerable role of IT, traditional mobilization mechanisms such as physical meetings and personal and organizational networking were also quite important.

In our discussion we would like to reflect on some recommendations that could help to cope with the identified organization and coordination challenges in this particular setting. We have already discussed problems of knowledge sharing and learning between two (or more) events (Saeed et al. 2010). In the following we would like to focus on requirements for technical support with regard to some central tasks of ESF organization (coordination activities, proposal merging, process documentation, visualization of decision-making). Providing ICT tools of this type would be in our opinion a crucial success factor for a transparent and democratic ESF coordination process.

7.2. ICT usage in the ESF organization process: problems and design recommendations

With regard to ICTs appropriation in the ESF process, our findings indicate that an improvement of the technological system(s) alone will not lead to more

efficient and stable practices. Instead it is the availability of appropriately designed tools coupled with human actors capable of applying and tailoring these tools which may enable better coordination and higher transparency in the process. Lacking technical competency and financial resources made the Malmo ICT infrastructures unavailable in Istanbul. This fact led to a different set of practices in organizing ESF 2010. The merging process, which was carried out by using the web-based system in Malmo, was handled in Istanbul by emails and Microsoft Excel sheets. The practice resulting from the poor computer support introduced problems such as the loss of information. While the ICT resources were not optimally employed, still the activists managed to organize the forum. However, problems of meta-coordination, already existing in Malmo, got more severe. Participants complained about problems of limited information availability and lacking transparency. At this point the paper is in line with earlier findings which looked at the way practices changed when their technical infrastructure vanishes (Pipek and Wulf 1999 and 2009). However, earlier finding still pointed to the fact that there is a certain moment of stability in practices even beyond the existence of a given technical infrastructure. In this case study, the nomadic nature of the ESF organizing process diminishes the stability of these practices. While ICT could play a stabilizing role with regard to the organizing practices, its very existence is, at the same time, threatened by the nomadic nature of the process (Saeed et al. 2010).

As a result of our study, we will, in the following, identify design requirements for technological support of fragmented meta-coordination in networks of political activists. The ESF process suffered from lacking tailorability of the tools central to the organization process (Lieberman et al. 2006; Wulf et al. 2008). It was evident that the organizers of the ESF 2010 tried to deploy the Plone based content management system. However, they were not able to even modify the event specific texts and data. Therefore, they found it more convenient to set up another application which they had some experience with and that they could adapt to their needs. If the Plone based application had been better designed for tailorability, this would have had a positive impact on the whole organization process.

There is not any systematic way to transfer “nomadic knowledge” from the current organizing committee to the next one (Saeed et al. 2010). As a result, knowledge transfer is dependent on personal contacts among the members of the current and previous committees. While a personal contact of the Turkish organizers to the developer helped to transfer the Malmo event website (the one used to receive activity proposals), there was not any other active contact with the NOC. The activists involved in the preparation process of Malmo were not actively participating in the ESF activities after that event. Furthermore, the lacking engagement of the “babels” and “ALIS” teams also hindered the transfer of knowledge and technologies with regard to the translation equipment. The Turkish Organizing Committee had to find their local solutions.

The setup of the websites at both events highlights the similar set of problems which require a sustainable technological solution. It was evident that the application in the current state required the efforts of a software developer to even carry out minor changes in the web-based forms. Furthermore, the code writing style and the absence of technical documentation made code changes extremely complex. So the first technology requirement is the establishment of a logistical website which is easy to maintain and for each event its setup phase could be carried out by end users instead of software developers (cf. Lieberman et al. 2006). Since the majority of the logistics tasks required during the social forum remain the same (except for basic changes such as themes, organizing committee names etc.), these changes could be dealt with by end users. To design for a tailorable website in the appropriate dimensions, a case study covering different instances of the ESF is required (Stevens et al. 2006).

Despite the inherited shortcomings of email communication, it is still the main ICT application used among ESF activists. This was even the case with ESF 2008, when other collaborative applications, such as OpenESF, were available. This finding is similar to the observation of Torres-Coronase et al. (2010) who found that activists tend to adhere to a known technology despite its problems. So, it is well worse to think of features improving the coordinative usage of mailing lists. Looking at the local organization committees, we found that physical meetings played an even bigger role than email communication which is in agreement with the findings of O'Donnell (2001).

Furthermore, the language issue is quite important for political activists in transnational networks. This result is in line with findings from McIver (2004, 2004a) who found free, multiple language support and legally equivalent translations to be a relevant feature for technical support in multilingual civil society organizations. It was observed that during ESF 2010, the inability of the Turkish organizations to propose activities through the website was mainly due to their limited mastery of English. In order to have a functional website, it is important to set it up in a multilingual way, so that activists from many countries are able to access the information. Machine enabled translations (Yamashita and Ishida 2006) could be a solution to better involve activists from diverse language backgrounds. Furthermore a better report generation mechanism should be supported by the website, so that activists could customize information content based on their choice and interests.

The lack of information on the ESF websites was a major problem for activists as they did not know the current state of ESF affairs. Although some information was floated on the mailing list, activists who were not members of this mailing list could not benefit from this information. This was evident when during the ESF 2010 some volunteers created a blog to publish the information floating on the mailing list. An automated updating mechanism between mailing list and blog had helped. Displaying certain mails from the mailing list instantly on the blog would help to better disseminate information to activists. An appropriate filtering

mechanism may be needed, however, since the mailing list is somehow restricted to ESF activists.

Since not everybody interested in the ESF movement can join the gathering and meetings, a documentation mechanism has to be revived to increase the visibility of the activities. Repository based approaches could be employed to store information about ESF discussions (cf. Huysman and Wulf 2006). In earlier ESFs different approaches were tried. In one forum volunteers attended seminars and made notes and those notes were compiled at the end. In another forum, workshop organizers provided information about their seminar beforehand. Afterwards they created a summary of what went on during the forum. This type of information could be updated for those activists who cannot be physically present at the forum. Beyond that a wiki could be added to the website containing the program in which people who attended the seminar, presenters, collaborators and discussants, could document aspects of the discussion (cf. Farooq 2005). Web 2.0 applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, could be appropriated by setting up an organizational profile and by continuously spreading information through them. This does not involve additional costs and is not technically difficult to do, but it could be important in mobilization. For both, ESF 2008 and 2010, some activists created event pages on web 2.0 applications, but not much information was provided. So this channel for information dissemination could be strengthened. It is attractive to the ESF movement since it is easily usable and does not require maintaining an own ICT infrastructure.

The agenda setting is one of the main activities in preparing for the forum. Activists in this heterogeneous network, involved in different application areas, different regional and political issues, with different political ideologies are involved in this process. It is vital to have transparency in the procedure to create trust among the stakeholders. This was an important point, especially in preparation for ESF 2008, when the proposed number of activities was larger. Some activists were worried that big organizations and people participating regularly in the program group meetings had a better chance to keep their activities unaffected by potential mergers. This concern could be better dealt with in case the merging process was more visible so that everyone could see what is happening in the different thematic areas. The lack of information to the people who were not present in the preparatory meetings makes the process look suspicious. If there was a kind of visualization which highlights the relationship between the proposed activities and the finally merged activities, activists could better understand how the whole process happened.

While ESF attracts actors from the anti-globalization movement, our findings indicate a certain lack in wider participation. The selection of the main themes of ESF 2008 was open to participation since everyone could make suggestions via the web. In case of ESF 2010 only people present at the physical meetings in Turkey were able to have their say in the initial proposals. Furthermore, the draft

writing procedure for the manifestos was quite closed, since initially only selected activists knew who could contribute in writing the sample text. Web-based tools have the potential to make these processes more transparent and include more actors. A representation of the writing process in the program and a wiki functionality on the website could have enabled wider participation. However, the appropriation of such tools could have an important, though maybe undesired by some, impact on the outgoing manifestos. Anyway, such a process transparency and opportunity for participation would have prevented heated discussion in the thematic subassemblies and the final plenum. ICT infrastructures play an important role in preparing for the ESF gatherings. They allow for meta-coordination, mobilization and information dissemination around ESF events. They have, moreover, the potential to make internal decision processes more transparent and democratically legitimized. Whether these potentials will turn out finally depends on the pattern of appropriation within the heterogeneous network of political actors. Our investigation indicates lacking technical capabilities combined with bad documentation of the code and missing tailorability to be serious obstacles in appropriation work (cf. Pipek and Wulf 2009).

8. Conclusion

Social movements and other voluntary organizations play an important societal role. This application domain has recently gained special attention from CSCW researchers, studying their cooperation is interesting due to limited resources, diverse organizational forms and volunteer workforce. Information management, technology sustainability, and inter/intra organizational collaboration are major challenges in these settings (cf. McPhail et al. 1998; Pilemalm 2002; Rohde 2004; Farooq et al. 2006; Stoll et al. 2010). We took these studies a step further and looked at how coordination happens when multiple collaborative tasks like political agenda setting, inter-organizational coordination, fundraising and public mobilization, converges into multi-cultural and heterogeneous political environments. This paper contributes to this aspect by providing a detailed analysis of collaborative work practices of the European Social Forum, which is an important platform for social movements and civil society in Europe. Our study highlights some problems and obstacles in the ICT support during the ESF 2008 and ESF 2010 held in Malmo and Istanbul. The paper provides a better understanding of activists' practices and appropriate design requirements for technological support. Other fora working at different geographical levels could benefit from these findings when working on their ICT strategy. Furthermore, our ethnographic study highlights some design scenarios which could improve and facilitate the work practices of this civil society network. Currently, for every forum a new website is launched and the people responsible for the establishment of this website in the organizing committees are unsure with regard to the requirements for the website. The empirical study also highlights problems in transferring ICT

artifacts from one event to the other and shows how a weak ICT infrastructure seriously affects political activities. Our findings could serve as a baseline to develop prototypes which are easy to install, maintain and tailor to the requirements of this community. Following our design case studies approach (Wulf et al. 2011), the presented ethnographic analysis of the ESF community marks a starting point for developing an appropriate support for this particular transnational CSO network. After an evaluation of the ESF prototypes, these prototypes could be further enhanced to develop generalized tools for similar organizational setups.

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