Evaluating community organizing: does the context matter? Evidence from the US, Germany, and the UK

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Abstract

Over the last decade, studies on community organizing in the United States have proliferated, covering a broad range of topics. Most studies, however, have been limited to an American context and cross-national comparative analyses have been virtually absent. In this paper I compare a similar model of community organizations in the US, UK, and Germany, and identify the underlying processes that explain the organizations’ mobilization capacity. The puzzle here lies in the similarity of the outcome: All three organizations have a strong capacity to mobilize members, even though they are embedded in very different institutional and socio-economic contexts. I show how the organizations adopt a “hybrid logic of organizing” – combining the logics of bureaucracy and social movements in both their organizational structure and culture – which encourages member participation. On the other hand, while these organizations adhere to the same model of organizing, they need to be dynamic enough to work in different landscapes. As a result, a process of creative borrowing and adaptation occurs. The data have been collected between 2008-2012 and are structured around three different methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and archival analysis.

Introduction

Concerns about the decline of civic engagement in the United States have been the topic of many highly contested scholarly debates. Almost two centuries ago, the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville was awestruck when he observed the high levels of “associationalism” and civic participation in the United States. According to Tocqueville, the weakness of a decentralized state brought with it a strong civil society, as opposed to the European system, in which a strong state perpetuated a weak civil society. In Democracy in America, he wrote that “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted,
enormous or tiny” (de Tocqueville 2002 [1835]: 181). Contemporary scholars, however, have taken contrasting positions on the matter. While some have highlighted a decline in American civic engagement since the 1960s (Putnam 1995, 2000; Skocpol 1999), others have indicated the surge and importance of local grassroots organizations in American cities, illustrating their fundamental role in reinvigorating American democracy and equality from below (Fine 2006; Orr 2007b; Swarts 2008).

If we now switch the lens to Europe, powerful traditional anchor institutions, on the one hand, such as trade unions, political parties, and (Christian) faith organizations, have been suffering from a weakened grassroots base. Trade unions suffer a continuous decline in membership, churches remain largely empty, and political parties inspire little trust and confidence in their citizens (Visser 2006; European Commission 2011). These institutions, once perceived as the backbones of society in addressing and articulating the people’s interests, have become ossified structures unable to mobilize their constituents (Turner 1996; Wills 2010). On the other hand, over the last three decades, new forms of civil society organizations have emerged, taking on new roles under the framework of “activating the welfare state” or helping to build a “Big Society” (Alcock 2010; Eick 2011). In the UK, for example, Heery, Abbot and Williams (2010) point out how civil society organizations are becoming increasingly active in employment relations while the traditional trade unions are losing ground. Most of these “new actors,” however, focus on advocacy and servicing rather than organizing or mobilizing workers. In Germany as well, civil society organizations have been increasingly involved in labor, poverty, or even security issues – previously a concern of the traditional welfare state actors – and leading therefore to critical debates about their function in society (Mayer 1994).
In this paper, I compare community organizations in the US, UK, and Germany, all affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) – a network of community organizations that started under Saul Alinsky in 1930s Chicago. More specifically, I examine the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), London Citizens (LC), and the German Institute for Community Organizing (DICO). While this form of broad-based community organizing is commonplace in the US, it is a rather new phenomenon in Europe. Contrary to the organizations studied by Heery et al. (2010) or Mayer (1994) the mission of the IAF is to organize people rather than focusing on servicing or advocacy. As a consequence, these organizations represent unique cases in the British and German context.

Even though this American style of organizing has spread to other countries, most studies have been limited to community organizing within the American context, and comparative analyses have been restricted to cases within the United States (e.g., Swarts 2008; Ganz 2009; for exceptions, see Warren 2009). I address this gap in the literature, by conducting a systematic comparative analysis of similar community organizations in Boston, London, and Berlin. Specifically, I examine what accounts for their sustained mobilization capacity, focusing on member mobilization. I address the following questions: To what extent can I explain the organizations’ mobilization capacity? Does this process differ, considering the distinct national contexts, or is it rather similar due to the direct propagation of a similar American IAF model? Are there strategic or tactical differences, and how do these factors relate to the mobilization capacity?

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1 I use the name London Citizens, although the organization started out as The East London Citizens Organization, or TELCO. The organization expanded to the West, the South, and recently the North of London and its umbrella name became London Citizens.

2 Studies on community organizing outside the US have mainly highlighted the potential for trade unions to work together with those organizations. Please see, for example, Holgate (2009, and Holgate and Wills (2007) on coalitions between unions and a community organization in the UK, and Tattersall (2006) on community unionism in Australia.

3 I don’t refer to uninterrupted or permanent mobilization, but rather the capacity of an organization to mobilize its members when necessary. In other words, when an action or a meeting takes place, it gets its members out.
Expecting to find significant cross-national differences, I was surprised to note overwhelming similarities. Despite being embedded in very different institutional and socio-economic contexts, each organization has a strong capacity of mobilizing its members. I show how the organizations adopt a “hybrid” logic of organizing, adopting bureaucratic as well as social movement approaches in their structure and culture, which enhances the organizations’ sustainability over time as well as member mobilization. On the other hand, the organizations are not simply being carbon copied into a new context, but are the result of “creative borrowing” by the organizers.

**Institutional logics and organizing**

Comparative studies within the industrial relations literature will typically emphasize the differences in practices or organizations across countries. The *Varieties of Capitalism* framework, for example, bundles the coordinated market economies together, with Germany as the prototype, on the one hand, and on the other, liberal market economies such as the UK and the US. Because firms are embedded in distinct institutional environments (coordinated versus liberal economies), they will behave differently in the US and Germany (Hall and Soskice 2001). In linking social movement studies to institutional theory, Baccaro, Hamann, and Turner (2003) show that in countries in which unions enjoy only weak institutional or political support, unions have a greater incentive to organize their members and shift towards rank-and-file mobilization or social movement unionism. Unions in the US and the UK, for example, emphasize grassroots mobilization and coalition building as a result of their weak institutional position. Unions in countries such as Germany, Italy, or Spain, however, rely on a social partnership approach; their strong institutional position actually prevents them from mobilizing members or building coalitions, which could be
detrimental in the long run. In line with Hall and Soskice’s *Varieties of Capitalism* (2001), Baccaro, Hamann, and Turner’s analysis shows how “the degree and type of institutional embeddedness help account for the strategies unions adopt” (129), showing, in other words, the importance of institutions in shaping behavior. Going back to my cases, considering the distinct institutional environments in which they are embedded, I would have expected strong differences. I would expect it to be more difficult for a new community organization to mobilize its members in Germany, than in the US or the UK.

To explain the striking similarity among my cases, I emphasize the importance of the organizations’ adopting a similar “hybrid logic of organizing.” While early institutional theorists focused on the organization as the main institution or locus of action (Selznick 1948), “new institutionalism” locates individual and organizational behavior in a broader social and institutional context as a way to understand their actions (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1977). As part of the development of new institutional theory, the concept of institutional logic emerged, providing a bridge between institutions and actions (Thornton and Ocasio 2008). According to Friedland and Alford’s seminal essay, “society is composed of multiple institutional logics which are available to individuals and organizations as bases for actions” (1991: 253). Institutional logics are then defined as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (Thornton and Ocasio 1999: 804) or put more simply, society comprises different institutional orders, such as the state, the market, civil society, and family, and each order consists of material practices and symbolic systems available to individuals and organizations. As recent studies have shown, organizations will often draw from multiple logics. Whereas some scholars have pointed to
potential conflicts resulting from competing logics, e.g., the tensions that derive from nonprofits’ attempts to combine for-profit business practices and social services (Cooney 2006), others have shown how competing logics can co-exist, e.g., the logic of medical professionalism and business in the Alberta health care system (Reay and Hinnings 2009).

I show that the IAF organizations share a similar “hybrid logic of organizing,” combining bureaucratic and social movement approaches. This logic is noticeable in the organizational structure that they adapt – the IAF organizations fall somewhere between full-blown bureaucratic organizations and social movement organizations (SMOs) – as well as their organizational culture – the IAF organizations foster a relational culture, strengthening member commitment, as well as a more pragmatic culture, strengthening member accountability. By adopting this hybrid logic the organizations are able to transcend to a certain extent contextual differences.

**Methodology**

I compare three IAF community organizations: the GBIO, London Citizens, and DICO. The IAF network is the oldest network of community organizations in the US and the only one that has such a strong international presence. I selected these particular cases based on the following reasons: First, the three organizations are affiliated with the same network, IAF. The organization in London and the one in Berlin are the only IAF organizations in Europe. Although there are many IAF community organizations in the US, I selected the organization in Boston because it was created within the same decade as the others (during the 1990s), it is set in a global city, and because the organization shares many characteristics with the other American IAF affiliates and could therefore be considered a representative
American model. Finally, these three organizations make part of the same regional umbrella of the IAF, or METRO IAF.

My data collection is structured around three different methods: participant observation, interviews, and archival analysis, increasing the validity of my findings. First, as a participant observer I was involved in the activities of GBIO, London Citizens, and DICO, generating field notes and documenting my direct experiences (Whyte 1943). I have spent 2 summers in London with London Citizens, six weeks in Boston working with GBIO, and six weeks in Berlin with DICO. I attended internal meetings of GBIO and London Citizens and participated in intensive training sessions (3-5 days) of the three organizations. Second, I conducted “structured and focused” interviews, or in other words ask a set of standardized, general questions while focusing on the specific research objective, to enhance the systematic comparison of my cases (George and Bennett 2005). I have conducted between 30-40 interviews with key actors at each site, including the director, lead organizers, and members of the organizations. To understand more about the “organizing environment” I interviewed trade union representatives, organizers from other organizing networks, and scholars as well. Finally, I use archival documents to construct a historical record based on written documents. In addition to the internal organizational reports, I coded and analyzed over 600 newspaper articles that have been published on the organizations between 1997 and 2012.

During the process of data collection and analysis, I adopted the “grounded theory” approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and refined by Corbin and Strauss (2008), collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously, rather than sequentially. I conducted “constant comparisons,” going back and forth between my codes, renaming and modifying my concepts. In addition, I used “theoretical sampling” or, in other words, the direction of
my data collection is determined by ongoing interpretation and emerging conceptual categories, rather than a priori hypotheses (Suddaby 2006). Through systematic case study analysis (Yin 2003) and process-tracing (George and Bennett 2005), I try to identify the underlying causal processes that explain the relative mobilization capacity of these three organizations.

The Roots of Community Organizing

Community organizing has been defined in many different ways (e.g., Milofsky 1988; Marwell 2007), but in general, it refers to a process and strategy of engaging people and communities to build political power with the goal of improving the living and working conditions of the people within those communities. Community organizations operate mainly at a local level by confronting, negotiating, and working with public and private actors (Orr 2007a).

The origins of modern community organizing, or broad-based organizing, go back to Saul Alinsky’s model in 1930s Chicago. In 1939, when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a federation of trade unions, under the leadership of John L. Lewis was trying to organize the meatpacking district in Chicago, Alinsky founded his first organization, the Back of Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) as a platform to support the workers. The BYNC was revolutionary bringing together the CIO and Catholic priests from the neighborhood in order to help organize the workers.

When Alinsky died in 1972, Ed Chambers took over and built a more modern, institutionalized community organization network, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). During the 1970s-80s, the lead IAF organizers decided to take a break from Chicago and try to build regional anchors. They split up and went off to Queens, Baltimore, and San
Antonio, establishing the first three modern IAF groups. Eventually during the 1990s, the model spread to Boston, London, and Berlin. Even though the early community organizations began as coalitions of community groups and trade unions, the declining vitality of the US labor movement pushed Alinsky to intensify the ties with faith-based groups and to steer away from the trade unions. In the US, therefore, the majority of IAF organizations consist primarily of faith-based or, even more specifically, church-based groups.

Today there are 51 IAF affiliates organizing in 15 US states, as well as in Australia, Canada, Germany and the UK. The member organizations include faith-based organizations, trade unions, schools, universities, immigrant societies, parent associations (IAF 2012). The main characteristics of IAF organizations are 1) they are deeply rooted in geographic communities 2) their dues-paying members are civil society institutions, such as congregations, schools, or unions 3) these organizations revolve around multiple-issue campaigns, considering labor market concerns a by-product of their larger agenda 4) their goal is to accrue power and bring social change, mostly through the use of public advocacy and collective action 5) their core activity for gaining power and strength is leadership development.

**A Hybrid Logic of Organizing: Enhancing Member Mobilization**

The goal of IAF organizations is to improve the living and working conditions of local communities. As non-bargaining actors, their fundamental source of power lies in grassroots mobilization (Warren 2001; Osterman 2002; Swarts 2008).
The meetings, actions, and delegate assemblies that I attended spoke for themselves. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of members were present, spanning a variety of religious, ethnic, and class backgrounds. Every member or organizer I approached, whether in Boston, London, or Berlin, mentioned the importance of turnout as a measure of success and regularly attended actions and meetings. Newspaper articles on these organizations invariably mentioned with awe the number of people the organizations were able to turn out. The organizations are indeed able to mobilize hundreds of members overnight. I argue that combining the logics of bureaucracy and social movements in both the organizational structure and culture is likely to lead to strong mobilization capacity.

**Mobilizing Structure**

The IAF organizations have a hybrid organizational structure. On the one hand, they have offices and paid professional staff, but on the other, they rely heavily on member volunteers or so-called leaders to do much of the work, such as organizing assemblies, doing research on the issues, and preparing action proposals. These hybrid organizations have a sufficiently robust structure, providing legitimacy and resources, while they are also able to take advantage of the informal networks connecting people and organizations (Table 1). In line with social movement theory, while hierarchical organizations tend to become overly conservative, locked-in, bureaucratic structures, lacking any mobilizing capacity, the anarchist counter model, based on extremely loose ties, often lacks the necessary coordination to act (Tarrow 2011). A hybrid structure can therefore counter these tendencies. Tensions, however, can occur between building an organization based on participatory or grassroots democracy and, at the same time, having in place a (hidden) hierarchical structure.

As a member in Berlin illustrates,
“When things become a little bit difficult, or when the organizing team thinks, ‘this will be an important meeting,’ Leo Penta [director of DICO] comes in. He comes in, listens for a while and then says something like: ‘You should pay attention to this, and therefore you should do it like this.’ He has this authority. In German we say, he has the Graue Eminenz, the gray brain behind everything. By the end of the day, they say it is all on us, we can vote on anything, but they try to push it in a way they want it.”

Being too organizer-driven is not a complaint only in Berlin, but can be heard across the IAF organizations. Indeed, while the organizers don’t force any decisions on the members, they do try to guide the members in certain directions towards winnable issues. As Polletta (2002) described, this model of participatory democracy has a strong “guided” character and is based on tutelage.

In addition, the organizations are affiliated with an international network, IAF. Each organization, therefore, has a so-called supervisor/mentor, who will participate in the organization two to three times a year, attend meetings and actions, teach IAF principles, and closely monitor and train the young organizers. Being part of a larger network is important, especially to keep the more “remote” European organizations on track, providing the organization with legitimacy on the one hand, and levels of accountability on the other.

According to a member of London Citizens,

If it hadn’t been for Jonathon [mentor LC], I think London Citizens would have spun off and would have become a campaigning organization…What Jonathan did was fundamentally… he kept it anchored to the principles of IAF…There is a basic principle that says ‘this is about leadership development’ and if you only do the spectacular razzle dazzle, you hollow the organization out and you got to constantly go back to those basic principles and so if it hadn’t been for that anchoring, it would have gotten off like a hot-air balloon in its own direction
Mobilizing Culture

IAF organizations combine a “relational” culture based on values and trust, fostering a sense of commitment, with a more pragmatic culture based on strategic decision-making and negotiations, fostering a sense of accountability. Again, in line with social movement theory, cultural dimensions, which in turn produce solidarity, motivate participants, and thus spur collective action (e.g., Goffman 1974; Snow et al. 1986; Polletta 2006; Valocchi 2008). The fundamental building block of every IAF organization is the one-to-one, or relational, meeting, a face-to-face conversation between an organizer and a member with the aim of exploring or strengthening the ties between the community organization and the particular institution. These conversations are the means of building and maintaining relationships by understanding the other party’s reasons and motivations, and of building trust. Members become strongly commitment towards the organization, develop a sense of shared responsibility and are likely to actively participate in the organization (Kanter 1968, 1972; Lawler et al. 2009). As a member in Boston told me,

It is important to realize the depth of how real a one-on-one is, how real that is as a tool, how potent… Doing individual meetings up and down the organization and across… When I was in East Harlem, I could get 150 people out of 550. I’d get them. I had done my one-on-ones with a lot of people, I had enough moments of relationships. Sometimes they did it because they were convinced [in the issue] sometimes they did it because they were convinced in me.

The organizations are not, however, merely about dialogue; IAF leaders and organizers consciously combine nurturing deep faith and democratic values with building a powerful organization that has the ability to act. For example, during campaigns, the organizers rely heavily on member accountability and discipline. In addition, organizers will keep track of how many new relationships they have made through one-to-ones. It is this combination of
moral values and pragmatism that makes the organization work, that makes it effective and sustainable. According to a member in Boston,

What we are accountable for is not our inputs, it’s our outputs. So when I work with this team, it’s not how many calls did you make, it’s how many people committed to come.

Table 1. Hybrid Logic of Organizing

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Logic of Bureaucracy</th>
<th>Logic of Social Movements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td>- Office; paid staff</td>
<td>- Volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Consultancy contract IAF</td>
<td>- Part of IAF Network</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Culture</strong></td>
<td>- Pragmatic; strategic</td>
<td>- Values; Mission</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Negotiations with policy makers</td>
<td>- one-to-one relationship;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Accountability</td>
<td>Trust</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Commitment</td>
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**Mechanisms of Creative Borrowing**

While important similarities are noticeable in the structure and the culture of the organizational model, the organizations do not simply copy the model, but apply creativity and resourcefulness to make the model work in each context. This is what I call the mechanism of creative borrowing: each organization must adapt to a new environment and will be challenged to overcome internal or external pressures in order to survive. The strategic decisions that the organizers make are bound by the realities of the external context in which the organization is embedded. Next, I illustrate the different challenges that had to be overcome in Boston, London, and Berlin to make this model work.
Organizing in Boston: Scaling up the efforts

The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), launched in 1996, consists of 53 member institutions, the majority of which are Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith-based organizations. The organization comprises no more than six paid organizers of a total staff of 11. Among GBIO’s greatest accomplishments is its role in the passage of Massachusetts’ Health Care Reform.

The main actors creating the GBIO had experience with poor people’s movements. Jim Drake came from long experience organizing farm workers. Once hired by IAF, he worked in Texas and set up a new IAF organization in the South Bronx. The Rev. John Heinemeier was a key leader for the IAF organization in Brooklyn as well as in the South Bronx, districts composed of poor, working-class people. In Boston, however, their strategy changed: organizing the Greater Boston area meant not organizing just the poor, but people from the richer suburbs, as well. Overcoming the inevitable challenges brought by this diversity has, however, strengthened the organization, forcing it to innovate: GBIO has been able to fight for change not just locally but even at a state level.

Boston has always been a neighborhood oriented city, historically divided across class and racial lines. The school busing crisis of the 1970s only exacerbated these divisions, pitting neighborhoods against each other.4 Given Boston’s historic divisions, GBIO was a first attempt to bring people together across denominational, racial, and class lines. According to Father John Doyle, GBIO founder Jim Drake would state “how to make greater Boston greater” as one of his main goals. This innovative vision of creating a “greater Boston,” transcending spatial and socio-economic boundaries, appealed to many.

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4 On June 21, 1974, Federal Judge Arthur Garrity issued an order to desegregate Boston’s schools: through busing, children from the all-black Roxbury neighborhood would be integrated with the all-white South Boston high schools. The desegregation by busing, although aimed at creating equality, brought enormous controversy, with violent anti-busing demonstrations still vivid in the memories of many.
Furthermore, despite the hard work of many grassroots community organizations in the Boston area, “the whole was smaller than the sum of its parts,” resulting in fragmented, neighborhood-based efforts that remained isolated one from the others. GBIO’s effort from the start was thus to transcend this neighborhood-based fragmentation and build a comprehensive organization.

Similar to other IAF affiliates, the GBIO had been founded with the strong support of the Catholic church. Over time, however, GBIO became religiously diverse, which is again unique among American IAF affiliates. Jewish, Protestant, and even Muslim participation grew stronger over time. The variety of religions brings a certain power to the organization and its members. A Jewish leader explains how she got up to speak in a black church. She was used to the synagogue, where people sit quietly and listen. Nervous but thrilled at the opportunity, she gets her first sentence out and the pastor, sitting in the first row, starts responding, “that’s right, aha, you tell them,” creating a powerful moment of merging traditions. The faith-based identity is moreover considered a powerful driver of member participation. During campaigns, the congregational leaders will often refer to their sacred texts to re-affirm what they stand for, legitimizing and reinforcing their engagement. In meetings regarding GBIO’s anti-usury campaign, for example, in which the organization targeted big banks to get them to lower their interest rates, religious leaders would refer to the Bible, the Torah, or the Quran, explaining to their members that their scripture states that usury is wrong, or that taking advantage of the vulnerable by charging exorbitant interest rates is unacceptable. According to one GBIO organizer, “It was incredible to see the reaction of people who were like, oh yeah, that seems like a legitimate argument to me, that makes sense, that grounds it for me.”
Finally, when GBIO was set up, it was unique in its intent to organize on a metropolitan level. GBIO has therefore been innovative in trying to take on not just neighborhood, but even State issues. Among GBIO’s greatest accomplishments is its role in the passage of Massachusetts’ Health Care Reform. During 2005-2006, GBIO was one of the principal members of the coalition “ACT!,” Affordable Care Today, ensuring that Massachusetts’ universal health care legislation would become law.

**Organizing in London: Innovation through imitation**

London Citizens, launched in 1995, is the oldest and largest broad-based community organizing association in Britain. The organization expanded from the original East London Citizens to West, South, and recently North London Citizens networks, representing over 200 member institutions. In addition, it is setting up new organizations in other cities across the UK. One of the greatest achievements has been the living wage campaign, winning over £70 million of living wages for workers across the city.

Community organizing started in the US in the 1930s, in Britain, however, not until the late 80s. As a consequence, it is much more deeply rooted in American society, since it has a longer tradition. Especially at the outset, it was hard to get institutions into membership in London Citizens and get them to believe in the organization.

According to an LC organizer,

In the early days it was very difficult because we didn’t have any stories of our own so we used to talk about what people did in America, which didn’t go down very well, it wasn’t very helpful. Although the stories were still creative, it was much better to tell stories what we did in Bristol, what we did in Liverpool and eventually what we are doing in London.
The two main elements that were adopted from the American model of community organizing are the organizational structure and the unique strategy. First, the structure of the organization is unusual in that the members are not individuals but institutions. In the US, IAF membership consists mainly of faith-based groups. In the UK, churches are much poorer and emptier than in the US. In addition, even though mosques have started to mushroom in London, they don’t have abundant resources. The British organizers, therefore, had to be creative concerning their sources of funding, causing them to become more diverse from the start. According to an LC organizer,

IAF is getting broader and more diverse, but it wasn’t. It was mostly Christian in membership and a few trade unions but not many…While we knew we couldn’t sustain this, nor was it attractive to build a sectarian alliance, it had to be civic in Britain, because faith is so small and effectively so insignificant, plus the fact that Islam in 1989 was just beginning to flex its muscles, the mosques were sprouting up all over the place and it was attractive to try to recruit mosques. So [London Citizens] has always been more diverse in alliances because Britain is and London is very diverse, but then so is New York and so is Chicago. But we had the privilege to start off later and learn from it that if you don’t start diverse it is quiet difficult to go diverse. So that has been helpful.

The second element that was adapted from the US model of community organizing is the strategy, or the combination of institutional capacity building and specific actions or campaigns. In the UK, there is still a need to establish this type of organization. The organization must demonstrate its ability to win campaigns to gain legitimacy and recognition from the public and its funders. Since the UK organization struggles to get sufficient funding, it needs to conduct high-profile campaigns in order to satisfy potential donors or foundations. The latter want to see concrete results, for example, winning a living wage campaign at the university of Queen Mary. These actions often come at a cost, since less time will be devoted to actual leadership development and institution building.
One element does play in their advantage though: In the UK, London Citizens is unique. Population ecology theorists (Hannan and Freeman 1977, 1989), show how organizations that can establish a niche for themselves are more likely to survive than organizations that can’t. In the US, many models of community organizations exist. As a result, there is relentless competition for funding. According to a London Citizens organizer:

They [IAF affiliates] look enviously on the fact that we don’t have any competition. That is such a relief. In Chicago there are 5 training institutes. There is some evidence that Gamaliel [another model of community organizing], which is one of them, has been seen in Manchester [UK]. In fact I know Gamaliel has been invited by some people by a Church action on poverty to come and train them in Manchester, which is very frustrating, because the last thing we need is another American network doing a slightly different sort of organizing here. But only history will tell whether or not this is going to work. I can’t stop it, this wouldn’t be appropriate, but it is unfortunate, because it will confuse the foundations from which we try to get the money out of, particularly if they suggest that they are the nice face of organizing and we are the nasty face. Because that is how sometimes people treat us.

Finally, organizers were well aware of the geographical differences between the US and the UK. Being based in London rather than an American city had some clear advantages:

Because we are such a small and centralized country, we can do actions, which I know our American colleagues are very envious of. We can get to Westminster in half an hour from here, so we can reach significant politicians, cabinet level politicians, we can reach corporations that are based in Canary Wharf and the City of London in 20 minutes. We can reach the main media outlets in 10 minutes, so we have the benefit and privilege of working in an area in the country, which is like the center of media, business and politics, in some cases for Europe, in some cases for the world.

This geographical advantage led to ambitious actions and campaigns fighting for issues at a national level such as the immigration system or asylum policy, something American IAF affiliates had never done before.

Organizing in Berlin: Finding the right translation
In 1999, “Organizing Schöneweide” (OS) was created in the southeast borough of Berlin, representing 16 groups. One of its successes was to bring the main campus of the University for Applied Sciences to Schöneweide. In 2008, with over 40 organizations, the community organization “Wir sind da” (we are there), encompassing the northwestern boroughs of Wedding-Moabit, was created. A third community organization in Neukölln representing about 40 institutions held its founding assembly in January of 2012. These three community organizations are supported by DICO (Deutsches Institut für Community Organizing) and led by Leo Penta.

Germany doesn’t have a legacy of community organizing. In order to set up an IAF organization in Berlin, challenges in terms of re-defining the role of the state and non-for-profits, finding the right funding channels, attracting member institutions, and coming up with the appropriate translation, had to be overcome.

When Prof. Leo Penta illustrated during a training session that IAF organizing is part of the civil society, or the so-called “third sector,” which is separate from “the state” and “the market,” confusion arose among the participants. “Isn’t civil society part of the state?,” one of the participants asked. In Germany, there is a very strong notion of “the state” and the idea that the government is responsible for shaping civil society. Even though, according to the organizers, this social-democratic welfare system is quietly crumbling, many people hold on to the idea that the state is taking care of its citizens. Furthermore, the state seems to be always there. One organizer illustrated this with the parable of the hare and the hedgehog running a race, in which the hedgehog – even though slower – outsmarts the hare and wins. The hedgehog represents the government; “wherever you go, government is already there.” Even in those places, like Schöneweide, that seemed completely abandoned
by the government, “you have a sleeping government, which as soon you want to do something, you obviously wake up.”

In addition, Germany’s strong welfare system is provided not only by a public or private system, but also by a strong intermediary, non-for-profit sector. Germany has a highly institutionalized third sector, closely tied to the state and the market. The main umbrella associations, such as the Catholic German Caritas Federation (Deutscher Caritasverband), the Service Agency of the Protestant Church in Germany (Diakonisches Werk der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland), the German Red Cross (Deutsches Rotes Kreuz), and the German Welfare Association (Deutscher Partitätischer Wohlfahrtsverband), comprise numerous decentralized agencies and organizations all over the country. Between the 1970s and 1990s, these non-profit welfare organizations have grown faster than the manufacturing and services sector, employing over one million full-time workers. The bulk of their income comes from public funds, contracts and grants, and about a third of their revenue comes from private fees and payments directly from the customers (Bauer 2003). These non-profits focus mainly on delivering services and in most cases are highly dependent on the state. Similarly, the trade unions, still powerful players in Germany, are considered closely tied to the state apparatus. As a consequence, when Penta first came to Schöneeweide, he ran into resistance – he got labeled as a sect and part of scientology – and most citizens were unfamiliar with a type of organization that acts independently of the state.

A big challenge in those beginning years was therefore to find the right funding. As a principle, in order to retain independence, IAF organizations are not supposed to accept government funding. During the mid 1990s, however, when Penta first started to organize in Germany, he accepted money from a so-called “Quartiersmanagement,” or neighborhood
management, in Neukölln. Penta’s experience with the neighborhood management ended up being a “disaster” so he decided never to take funding from it again. According to Penta,

“Nothing constructive could take place because there was a constant battle over, you know, what we should do and what we should not do... I had ... a meeting with the person who is in charge with neighborhood management at the time and literally she asked the question: ‘Why are you meeting with all these tenants?’ And I was ready to say - I bit my tongue - but I was ready to say, ‘well would you like to have maybe a scholarship to our training so you can come and understand what neighborhood work is all about.’”

Traditionally, IAF affiliates receive the majority of their funding from member institutions and foundations. In Berlin, the situation is different. The community organization runs on a budget of only $75,000 (or 50,000€), primarily from small and medium businesses located in the community, which provide about 75% of the budget, the member institutions providing the remainder. These businesses, however, have no say regarding the issues the community organization takes on or the strategy it pursues (interview organizer). Having businesses fund the organization is an innovative approach compared to other IAF affiliates.

Another challenge arose in terms of member institutions. Traditionally, IAF organizations started off with strong support from the Catholic church. But again, in Germany the situation was different. First, the country is much more secular. Berlin, a relatively young city, rather than being founded on religious pillars, has been known as the cradle of the industrial revolution for its innovativeness in electricity and the invention of the S-bahn. Second, the Christian churches are closely linked to the state through the so-called “church tax.” This tax, of about eight percent, is automatically collected from citizens of religious communities by the state and is then distributed to the major denominations to support their activities. Christian churches are thus maintained and survive mainly through
the automatic collection of taxpayers’ money, rather than through donations. As a consequence, few people see the need to be involved in community organizing (interview organizer). Membership consists of schools, a senior center, garden communities, a group of “independent” citizens, and Methodist Church groups or “free churches.”

Finally, the question arose of how to translate key concepts such as leadership, relational meeting, or community organization into German words that made sense. The IAF strongly emphasizes the role of leaders. In its history, Germany has known one leader or “Führer,” and no one wants to be reminded of him. As a consequence, rather than using the literal translation of leader, “Führer,” the organization uses the words “Multiplikatoren” (disseminators) or “Schlüsselpersonen” (key people). The relational meeting, or one-to-one meeting, has been introduced as “Einzelgespräch,” or one-to-one conversation, and community organization has been loosely described as building a “Bürgerplattform,” or citizens platform. While the first organization “Organizing Schöneweide,” created under Leo Penta still retained some of the English names, it has been a conscious decision to leave out the English terms in the more recently built organizations such as Wir Sind Da (We are there) in the boroughs Wedding-Moabit and Bürgerplattform Neukölln.

Beyond these issues of literal translation, however, it has been even harder to make the concepts resonate within the German context. During the IAF training in Berlin, participants were wary about the role of leadership. Not just the term “leader”, but why the organization would need a leader in the first place, was questioned. Again, Germany’s history, and its infamous leader, remain vivid in the memories of many. Not just people who witnessed World War II, but also the younger generation would be very cautious when talking about leaders. Furthermore, one of the strengths of IAF organizers is to tell success stories of previous organizations to encourage its members, and so Penta would tell stories
about Saul Alinsky in Chicago and the Nehemiah houses in Brooklyn. While impressed, people living on the other side of the Atlantic in a remote borough of Berlin have a hard time identifying with these stories. Therefore, the first real victory for Schöneweide – bringing the campus to the borough – has been critical in terms of storytelling. This was a success story that happened in their own neighborhood with their very own people.

**Conclusion**

While community organizations might not be very well known, as Heidi Swarts argues, “they play a critical role in agenda setting, representation, and policy making from below” (2008: xiv). They are important actors in reinvigorating democracy, relying on an active grassroots base as they fight for social change. While these organizations have a long legacy in the US, they are quite a new phenomenon in Europe. In this paper I compare a similar model of civic engagement in the US, UK, and Germany, and try to identify the underlying processes that explain the mobilization capacity and development of these three organizations.

I show how their similar organizing practice across countries is due to their adaptation of a “hybrid logic of organizing,” or, in other words, the organizations combine practices and principles of bureaucracy as well as of social movements in their organizational structure and culture, enhancing the organizations’ mobilizing capacity. Differences, however, come to the forefront as well, as organizers need to adapt each model to fit within a specific context. Indeed, while these organizations adhere to the same IAF model of organizing, at the same time, they try to be dynamic enough to work in different contexts.

With this cross-national comparison I contribute to the theoretical debates on the role of alternative forms of collective representation, the development of organizations, and the factors affecting their relative success. By bridging different theoretical approaches from
industrial relations, social movement, and organizational studies, I emphasize the importance of the interaction between structure and agency, or, more specifically, the external environment, the internal organizational structure, as well as the organizational culture and the strategic capacities of the organizers to explain the emergence and success of the organizations.

Furthermore, in terms of policy implications, this study offers important insights regarding the role these grassroots organizations play in society. Even though they are relatively small, they have contributed to important social changes, such as bringing the living wage or improving the healthcare system, and have as well been a critical force in revitalizing certain neighborhoods or cities. Indeed, this model of civic engagement should be seen as an important precondition for a well-functioning democracy. This study also provides practical value in terms of cross-national learning. When Leo Penta came to Berlin in 1996, his audience listened to his stories but was skeptical. That’s all very well, “but it won’t work in Germany,” people said. As of today, three IAF organizations have been built in Berlin, encompassing in total over 100 local member institutions.
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