The Platform of European Social NGOs: ideology, division and coalition

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ABSTRACT   *This paper explores the role of ideological division in complicating collaboration between third sector organizations working to influence European Union (EU) policy processes. The Social Platform, the largest alliance of social justice groups working at EU level, is studied to illustrate how a coalition of ideologically disparate organizations cope with internal tensions that are often exacerbated by external shifts in the political opportunities available for mobilization. The alliance is successful at mediating the most significant sources of ideologically based division. However, the external political context for mobilization requires coalition members to compete for recognition and resources available at EU level. The reordering of EU equality legislation and initiatives has most recently exacerbated a series of competitive dynamics in play across the EU third sector and has stretched the ability of the coalition to maintain unity among member organizations.*

Introduction

Third sector organizations at national and international levels shape and are shaped by the opportunities and resources made available by intergovernmental organizations (IGOs).[1] The European Union (EU) is an important target and terrain for third sector actors from a variety of ideological perspectives eager to gain access to EU funding and shape the trajectory of policies, which affect their constituents. Third sector organizations based in Brussels who work to influence policies and compete to carry out EU-funded projects have developed patterns of collaboration requiring them to negotiate their differences on ideological issues. Such collaboration has enabled them to consolidate resources and orchestrate common campaigns. However, while third sector coalitions are developing shared social critiques, organizations and identities of resistance, these are often superficial and unstable bases for coalition. Ideological fault lines within such coalitions can be transposed onto conflicts over resources, organizational form and ultimately coalition goals. Such conflicts can be exacerbated by the role

of political institutions in conflating, endorsing or denying claims for recognition of particular ideological positions and attendant claims for resources.

EU social non-governmental organizations (NGOs) claim to represent the interests of EU citizens and partly base their demands for inclusion in EU political processes on their capacity to diminish the long-debated democratic deficit. In addition, they also claim expertise in helping policy makers strike a defensible balance between social and economic aspects of European integration.[2] However, EU social NGOs have been characterized as elite focused with weak links to grass root constituents and have on this basis been discounted as significant agents in closing the gap between European citizens and EU policy makers. Scholars also point to the EU funding and project support these NGOs receive as evidence of their co-optation and inability to maintain independence from EU policy imperatives.[3] EU NGOs have also been categorized as lacking the critical distance required to mobilize for a radical shift in EU policy and of participating in consensus-oriented consultation processes devoid of substantive opportunities for deliberation.[4]

Such critiques are, however, at best over-simplifications and at worst seriously misleading. While true that social NGOs have not proved capable to date of securing radical policy shifts, they have proved themselves able to exert modest pressures for policy adjustment, and constitute an arena for projecting voices which would otherwise be entirely absent from EU policy debates. Although organizations have indeed sometimes appeared 'cosy' with the official EU institutions, this does not amount to incorporation in relation to the sector as a whole. Both constrained and enabled by overarching structures like the Platform, large organizations have had to account for the values and beliefs of less powerful groups, albeit from a position of relative strength. The collective 'sector' that has resulted from these interactions has been anything but monolithic, but has instead involved lively, contentious and sometimes adversarial processes and relationships.

The case employed to examine these issues involves a coalition of international NGOs working to influence EU social policy making.[5] This coalition, known as the Platform of European Social NGOs (the Platform), was formed in 1994 with EU funds to build strategic alliances between NGO actors and EU officials. The Platform now numbers 42 EU social NGOs and although ideologically diverse, NGO members share a common focus on social change and a shared agenda to influence EU public policy processes. Since its establishment, the Platform has become a broker for the reorganization of consultative arrangements between EU NGO networks and the EU institutions.

Ideological differences between coalition members are a central component of such interactions. They also play an important part in shaping the internal dynamics of this coalition and have strained the ability of Platform members to collaborate. An enduring source of tension is the insistence of the women's rights NGO, the European Women's Lobby (EWL), that gender inequality be recognized by the Platform as a distinct and horizontal source of discrimination. This contest has its roots in recognition and redistributive issues raised by the extension of equal opportunities policies beyond gender issues at EU level to include initiatives to combat discrimination based on racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability,

age or sexual orientation. The elaboration of EU competence in these areas was accompanied by a reconfiguration of funding for NGOs and the creation of specific budget lines for 12 NGOs working on areas covered by EU anti-discrimination legislation. The perception that these organizations now monopolize EU funding streams has created significant resentment from Platform member NGOs who have found it difficult to reintegrate their organizations into EU funding priorities. In this article, interview data and analyses of the communications of NGO actors and EU officials are used to examine the tensions arising between Platform members, the role of the EU political context in shaping these divisions and the challenges facing NGO collaboration at EU level. EU social NGOs experience two forms of contest. The first takes place between the European Commission and the NGO community and focuses on whether social NGOs are different from other interest groups and is linked to EU efforts to acquire legitimacy. The second contest occurs within the NGO community where competing ideological priorities are debated and is related to internal competitions between NGOs for funding and access to policy makers. While there exists a third ideological conflict between advocacy and service-delivery NGOs, space does not permit a discussion here. These contests are shaped by internal and external mechanisms. External mechanisms include selective incorporation of specific NGOs and institutional structuring of opportunities and threats to NGO mobilization by the European Commission. Internal mechanisms include efforts by NGO leaders to manage conflict through strategies of issue avoidance and the production of campaigns, and use of strategies aimed at highlighting shared values rather than ideological differences.

Using these empirical materials, this paper examines the efforts of the Platform to manage internal divisions rooted in ideological and resource-based contests. Section two contextualizes the preceding discussion with an overview of the origins of the coalition, its membership and predominant mechanism of engagement with EU operatives known as the civil dialogue. Civil dialogue, a tradition of relations between EU social NGOs and the EU institutions, is detailed as indicative of the EU approach to NGOs working on social policy and equality issues. Sections three and four expose and explore the role of ideology in structuring relations between NGOs and EU institutions and by extension internal coalition dynamics. Section three details the major cleavages across Platform membership, and examines how a reordering of EU equality legislation, initiatives and attendant funding streams has triggered defensive and strategic dynamics among the coalition's diverse membership. Section four explores how coalition efforts to craft a common position on the revision of EU equality legislation resurrected ideological disagreements between social NGOs on the weight assigned by the coalition and the EU to various dimensions of discrimination. This case also illustrates how advocacy around EU equality and anti-discrimination legislation requires organizations to articulate and engage with contested definitional issues on the sources of and remedies to different forms of discrimination and the appropriate strategies to be employed to pursue the goal of equality. EU social NGOs, in addition, receive important funding from EU programmes associated with EU anti-discrimination and equality law. Finally,

section five documents how the Platform works to manage its—at times—adversarial dynamics and argues that while significant ideological and strategic divisions continue to shape relations between organizations, collaboration remains a popular strategy deemed by many NGOs as an essential counterweight to the real politik of national governments and the lobbying of economic interests.

NGOs are recognized here as important contexts for ideological expression and debate, and as possessing the capacity to influence broader political discourse and ultimately policy formulation. The EU understood here as a multilevel political opportunity structure (POS) acts to configure patterns of NGO mobilization and coalition. The POS is the context within which NGOs gain access to policy processes, or in other words how open or closed IGOs are to NGOs seeking to influence policy making. At EU level, the POS varies depending on the specific organ of governance, the stage of the policy cycle and issue area targeted.[6]

In what follows, the emergence and consolidation of the Platform will be portrayed as a significant development in cooperative relations between European third sector organizations. Its development marks a departure for the EU in its recognition of NGOs as potential stakeholders in policy debates, conduits to EU citizens and as sites for the articulation of EU projects. This analysis of the Platform will illustrate, however, that such cooperation has only been possible because the Platform has developed tactics and strategies for coping with a range of ideational tensions often

Box 1: Significant events in the development of the platform of European social NGOs 1994–2009

1994	Original 9 NGO members meet to discuss EU Commission proposals on Social Policy.
1995	17 NGOs are given funding by the EU Commission to launch a debate on civil dialogue.
1997	Membership now 25. First membership survey and internal review of the Platform; Platform holds first bi-annual meeting with Commission; Platform launches website and holds a Second European Social Policy Forum.
1998	Internal divisions arise over the adoption of a values statement.
2000	Membership now 30; Platform holds first General Assembly in Stockholm and adopts formal legal status.
2003	The Platform participates in EU treaty debates but internal divisions remain over the content of the proposed revision of the EU legal architecture.
2004	Platform internal debates over membership criteria and new EU funding guidelines reach crises point. Platform secures new funding source.
2005	Platform rationalises secretariat and reforms management structures; Appoints new director and adopts new decision making apparatus.
2008–2009	Membership now 42 organisations, Platform re-launches website and adopts a new communication strategy; policy engagement includes the revision of EU anti-discrimination law, and a European economic recovery programme.

exacerbated by the complex and fractured character of the POS that are encountered. An examination of the Platform also illustrates how states and international governmental contexts exacerbate divisions between NGOs competing for political space and access to resources. Contests between members of the EU social NGO coalition are in addition reflective of long debated ideological and strategic divides between anti-poverty, family rights, feminist, gay rights and racial justice activists and organizations. As such, a focus on the Platform sheds light on how third sector actors can partake in their own forms of ideological production, which can be used to manufacture consensus across the ideological divide working in turn to challenge or in some instances legitimize dominant ideological constructs.

The Social Platform, the EU social policy context and civil dialogue

The Platform states that its members 'are committed to the advancement of the principles of equality, solidarity, non-discrimination and the promotion and respect of fundamental rights for all; the promotion of social justice and participatory democracy by voicing the concerns of its member organisations'.[7] Member organizations include both advocacy and social service provider NGOs.[8] Since its inception, the Platform had included organizations holding dissimilar ideological profiles. Family rights and conservative anti-poverty organizations had allied themselves alongside women's rights, and anti-racist, lesbian and gay rights associations. By early 2004, newer members had joined the Platform. Some of the newer members were from faith-based NGO sectors and were focused less on service provision than on advocacy on policy issues. From the beginning of the coalition, disagreements had arisen over issues including proposals to formalize the Platform in legal terms, the criteria for coalition membership and strategies to be employed towards achieving the objective of equality. Some of these disputes had threatened to fracture the alliance. However, by the late 1990s, reforms including a rationalization of the Platform's work programme, a formalization of procedures to elect representatives from its members and the professionalization of its secretariat had enabled the coalition to endure and mobilize in coherent campaigns. External threats, including periodic EU funding crises, also created sources of cross-sectoral solidarity between diverse NGO coalition members eager to present a united front to EU officials.[9]

EU social NGOs are constrained by the dynamics of EU social policy making which are closely guarded by national governments and which generate EU level programmatic initiatives rather than a framework for the redistribution of resources. EU social policy has evolved from a period from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s of relative expansionism in social policy making and the inclusion of NGOs in policy setting processes to a more recent closed door approach with fewer opportunities for NGO involvement.

EU policy makers have shifted towards a conception of economic policy that equates productivity and growth with labour market flexibility, with specific implications for EU social policy. Under this model, a minimum of social protection is understood as vital in enabling EU economies to compete in a low cost and

deregulated global economic environment. EU social policy from this perspective should not create any impediments to EU member state efforts to attract economic investment and should rather support a broader neo-liberal agenda that subordinates efforts at decommodification to the demands of the flexible labour market. EU social policy making is accordingly now defined less as a mechanism to provide social protection and promote social solidarity and more as a set of processes aimed to promote productivity and social integration through employment. This is best illustrated by the EU's move towards social policy instruments of a non-binding nature focused on benchmarking and policy comparison rather than policy imperatives which require member states to implement programmes which may involve higher 'costs' for employers. The PROGRESS initiative is a notable example. PROGRESS, which provides funding for many Platform members, is the EU's employment and social solidarity programme and is tasked in part with delivering policy on combating discrimination and promoting equality.

EU social NGOs have in turn been drafted into these non-binding policy processes through a range of consensus-oriented mechanisms for policy consultation and the elaboration of EU projects. This said, EU project funding must be applied for annually amid intense competition. The EU also offers no formal system of NGO accreditation. EU officials have indeed resisted formalizing a system of NGO consultation and as a result a collage of *de facto* practices including the civil dialogue has evolved.

The civil dialogue between EU officials and EU social NGOs: consensus or contestation?

It is generally recognized that the Platform was the first point of contact for the emergence of the civil dialogue. Civil dialogue is best understood as a loosely configured tradition of bi-annual meetings between the Platform and the Commission, a budget line which provides funding for the Platform secretariat and a collection of—at times—unpredictable invitations to consult on the formulation of EU policy proposals. This collage of practices is, however, an important component of the POS for NGOs interested in influencing EU policy makers. It is also the site upon which EU social NGOs collaborate and compete for access to EU political space and resources and is therefore an important backdrop to this analysis.

While EU social NGOs have consistently participated in these arrangements, they are constrained by the significant investment of resources required to cultivate relations, prepare policy submissions and attend meetings. Research also supports the conclusion that there is a considerable gap between the official EU discourse about its relationship to civil society or civil dialogue and its actual practice of consulting citizens and their representatives in third sector organizations.[10] Civil dialogue has also been characterized by a tendency on the part of EU officials to avoid consultation with NGOs on controversial issues. The quality of civil dialogue is also in general terms contingent on the EU's overall commitment to the development of EU social policies. The European Commission, in the past a key actor in the expansion of social policy, presently illustrates little support or capacity for an ambitious EU social policy agenda or civil dialogue.[11] This said, civil

dialogue has provided ideational and political opportunities for NGOs to engage in EU policy debates. Research does also confirm that despite significant shared political socialization and interchange between individuals working as NGO professionals and then as EU officials (and vice versa), there exists considerable social and ideological distance between EU officials and NGO activists. While NGO actors have worked to differentiate their status as distinct from business interests, who routinely lobby the European institutions, NGOs still face obstacles in this regard.

Many Senior Commission officials remain sceptical of NGO claims to represent the public interest and continue instead to view them as primarily lobbyists representing narrow constituents.[12] Officials often seem to view social NGOs as similar to private interests, as sources of technical information and as vehicles to sell the EU to EU citizens. Interviews with EU officials and analysis of communications support the assumption that the European Commission frames the role of NGOs more generally as that of 'Communicating Europe'.[13] This perspective does not require the involvement of stakeholders (including NGOs) in the framing and implementation of policy. Rather NGOs are conceived as occasional consultants and cheerleaders for European integration.

The European Commission programme on Active Citizenship, currently funding the Platform, fits with this formulation. This programme's main purpose is to promote and spread EU values and objectives and to bring citizens closer to the European institutions though conferences, seminars, workshops, networking, exchanges of experience and education and training events. The alternative framing most associated with the EU social NGO community has been termed *Democratizing Democracy*. This perspective begins from a different vantage point and implies both a crisis of representative democracy and a democratic deficit at EU level. Minorities and the disadvantaged are central to this formulation; their engagement and representation are seen as a direct result of the potential for a form of participatory democracy to deliver developmental benefits. This requires financial support for relevant civil society organizations to build the capacity for engagement among European citizens.[14] NGO efforts, including social NGOs, to resist the demobilizing aspect of the EU's framing require coherent and strategic campaigns to assert alternative framing which combines strong value-based statements with concrete and credible solutions for an alternative policy trajectory. A key challenge then for the Platform remains keeping its diverse membership on message, cohesive and united in its efforts to resist Commission attempts to use the coalition merely to legitimize EU policies.

Ideological and strategic imperatives underlying EU policy and practice towards social NGOs have profound implications for dynamics of competition and alliance across the NGO sector. EU consultative practices including civil dialogue that privilege professionalized NGOs have worked to marginalize organizations with a poorer ideological and strategic fit and contribute to tensions across the NGO sector, ultimately undermining NGO efforts at cross-issue mobilization. In addition, the EU's uneven and contradictory legal framework for promoting equality and anti-discrimination has exacerbated ideological divisions among NGOs advocating for

different equality agendas.[15] Both aspects of the POS work to inhibit the articulation of diverse claims and the construction of holistic campaigns while triggering strategic and defensive dynamics within which ideology plays a significant role.

The Platform: a house divided and the struggle for coherence and solidarity

The topography of the coalition is a complex one with a large and diverse membership generating ideological, functional and strategic cleavages that overlap and intersect with micro-political dynamics and interpersonal histories. That said, the main fault lines within the coalition rest on distinctions between older service-oriented faith-based/disability NGOs and newer EU-funded advocacy organizations; within the community of NGOs advocating for different forms of equality and between those organizations receiving EU operational support and those choosing to remain independent of EU monies. Organizations interested in collaboration must then navigate ideologically rooted disagreements on issues including the definition of the family unit, gender roles, the conceptualization of and strategic approach to equality, and the merits of dependence on EU funds. Such contests invoke deeply held convictions regarding the nature of systems of stratification, the politics of recognition, and redistribution and attendant claims for the privileging by institutions of one form of disadvantage over another. Ideological divides are made explicit in debates about issues including membership criteria, the coalition's organizational rules, and stated vision and Platform campaigns to influence EU social and equality policy agendas.

As mentioned above, efforts to improve the inclusivity of the coalition swelled its ranks to include a greater proportion of service providers and faith-based organizations with direct consequences for patterns of collaboration and conflict. Reacting to the shift in the ideological complexion of the coalition, one NGO director stated that 'The Platform has become ideologically diverse yet we continue to engage in majority voting on contentious issues, ignoring the fact that there are fundamental disagreements. This is not a sustainable strategy.' The Platform's 2004 general assembly, marked by an intense debate about applications, illustrates these dynamics. Caritas, a Catholic organization, had suggested an Italian faith-based organization *European Association of Catholic Families* for membership. The application was vetoed by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association – Europe (ILGA) and the feminist NGO, the EWL. The director of Caritas commented that a refusal to admit this organization was *tantamount* to 'prejudice' on behalf of other networks. The coordinator of the feminist NGO, the EWL, a founding member of the Platform, assessed the debate on membership criteria commenting 'We decided to take an important stand here and to acknowledge that some of our "colleagues" will never agree with our ideological position'.

Interviews conducted with the EWL in November 2007 suggest that ideological distance between the women's rights NGO and many Platform members remains a significant source of contention within the coalition. Referencing long debated disagreements over the adoption of a values statement by the Platform members, the former EWL coordinator stated, 'we all knew that we had to revisit this issue of what

we stand for and how we define equality but not at the expense of disappearing [seriously downgrading the profile of] women which was basically the agenda of many of the other organisations'. While faith-based and feminist organizations were predictably at odds on a variety of ideologically rooted issues, the ILGA and the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) were also critics of the EWL's 'disproportionate clout with EU officials and within the coalition'. Both NGOs have battled with the EWL on the position that gender inequality should command within Platform policy statements. From her perspective, the EWL coordinator suggested that her organization 'had been submitting the same amendments to the Platform for ten years, nothing is automatic, every document has to be read or gender will not be included as a specific issue'. Platform elections for the management committee in 2005 had been 'a disaster in terms of gender balance'. The acting director added that a proposal to include gender parity in the Platform statutes had been grudgingly accepted by Platform members, however, the process of raising and lobbying on the issue had been a marginalizing experience.[16]

Ideological disputes within the Platform are intrinsically linked to the political opportunities for individual NGOs to mobilize on their respective policy areas. At EU level, the role that the Commission plays in the certification and decertification of policy issues can shift the playing field for social NGOs, creating new opportunities and threatening previously established resource streams. Such resource contests can be transposed over ideological divisions between NGOs. How have NGOs handled these divisions? Some NGO respondents including Caritas and Solidar, both long-established European NGOs involved in development and anti-poverty, have been open in acknowledging their positions on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum and their past contests for Commission support. These contests were, however, exacerbated by shifts in EU financial regulations that condense funding streams and reconfigured traditional secure forms of EU funding for long-established development, social service and family rights NGOs.[17] Indeed, some smaller organizations suggested that a few privileged NGOs managed to escape the punitive affects of the financial changes. The large core-funded NGOs established to influence EU policy including the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) and the EWL admit that their 'privileged' position relative to other NGO sectors has insulated them from some of the most significant cutbacks. Some Platform members were particularly critical of organizations like the EWL, the EAPN and other core-funded coalition NGOs for their 'cosy' relationships to the EU institutions, suggesting that they pander to the EU's agenda rather than following their constituent's lead. Other Platform members who have found a relative safe haven are those included under the Commission's anti-discrimination initiatives. Tensions continue within the Platform between the funded NGOs organizations and those that are now a poor fit with EU funding priorities.

Competitions for funding aside, shifts in EU policies on equality and discrimination have generated dynamics of inclusion/exclusion among Platform members advocating for different equality agendas.[18] From the EWL perspective, then, gender inequality now linked to non-binding legislative processes was being neglected in the wake of the EU's interest in developing anti-discrimination policy

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on race, disability and sexual orientation. According to the EWL coordinator, 'For policy makers gender inequity is now solved as a source of discrimination, other forms of disadvantage have eclipsed the need to privilege gender as a policy area'. The anti-discrimination agenda and its NGO players had from her perspective been developed at the expense of the gender equality unit. The adoption of new legislation in particular to combat racial discrimination was also indicative of how gender equality legislation was being left further behind. For the EWL, 'The Commission simply provides more logistical, research and programmatic support to the anti-discrimination NGOs because their work is linked to legislation not the soft processes associated now with gender equality'. The European year for Equal Opportunities held in 2007 was cited as an example where women's issues were ignored while organizations working on racial and ethnic discrimination—namely another Platform member, the ENAR—had benefited significantly from the funding opportunities and publicity surrounding the year.

The proposed further revision of EU equality and anti-discrimination legislation, an issue in which all Platform members share an important stake, further demonstrates how ideological divisions can produce territorial reflexes, making collaboration difficult. This legislation and its associated programme

Box 2: Significant events in the development of the EU anti-discrimination legislation

1975–1986	Working from the original EC treaty of 1957 laws prohibiting discrimination on equal pay and equal treatment of men and women in employment, training and social security are implemented.
1997	EC Member States approve unanimously the Treaty of Amsterdam. Article 13 of the new Treaty grants the Community new powers to combat discrimination on the grounds of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.
1999	Two new EC laws are adopted on the basis of Article 13 the Racial Equality Directive, 2000/43/EC, which implements the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin and the Employment Equality Directive, 2000/78/EC which establishes a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation.
2000	Anti-discrimination laws to protect people being discriminated against on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation are agreed by all EU countries.
2009	The European Parliament passes a bill banning discrimination on the basis of age, disability, sexual orientation, belief or religion extending discrimination protection beyond the labour market to goods and services as well as to other areas of life such as education, health, social protection and social security. Sexual or gender based discrimination is not included. The bill now requires unanimous approval by Member States.

PROGRESS, mentioned above, is widely acknowledged as of potential significance for legal and social change across many European countries and is of particular import for organizations looking to pressure member states to expand and strengthen protections for their constituents. The challenge for the Platform rested in negotiating between organizations most recently covered by EU anti-discrimination initiatives, including those representing racial and ethnic minorities, sexual orientation as a source of discrimination and disability rights, the EWL, eager to have gender included in the bill and service providers holding the view that they stood to gain the least from an aggressive campaign to shape the content of the legislation. Faith-based organizations in line with opposition from religious groupings and states including Poland and Malta were notably uncomfortable with proposals included in the legislation, which they perceived to strengthen the rights of sexual minorities and open religious organizations up to charges of discrimination.

Equality and non-discrimination: contention and collaboration

The Platform adopted its first common position on the proposals for new EU equality and non-discrimination legislation in October 2007.[19] The possibility of concrete legislation affecting a wide range of constituents and increasing resistance from member states claiming that the proposed laws would interfere in national social policies and prove costly to employers created impetus for organizations to collaborate on the issue. As the Platform director noted 'The NGO sector recognized the enormous impact that a new initiative could have and they had to be coordinated because they were going to be played off one another'. The director of ILGA played an important role, convening a series of bilateral meetings with smaller numbers of organizations to debate the content of the position enabling organizations to deliberate and avoid for the most part open confrontation over differences in perspective on the European Commission's planned initiative.

Importantly, a tacit agreement between ILGA and the EWL to put aside their disagreement on gender equality resulted in the adoption of the common statement. The document advocates for the recognition of the concept of multiple discrimination, the relationship between social policies and equality, and the relative comprehensiveness of a new 'Race Equality Directive', compared to other EU legislation, which 'creates an unacceptable hierarchy of protection'.[20] In ideological terms, the inclusion of the concept of multiple discrimination represents a shift within the core group of Platform members most vested in equality issues towards recognizing the constitutive and multiple dimensions of inequalities.[21] Workshops around the concept provided a space to consider questions about the relations and connections between different forms of diversity and discrimination, and created some sense of solidarity and reciprocity around strengthening EU policies in this area. Longer established anti-poverty and social service provider NGOs remained on the margins of these debates considering them irrelevant or at odds with the values held by their constituents.

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Aware of the need to draw support from social service NGOs and anti-poverty organizations, the Platform president launched a campaign, which connected 'decent' social standards to the equality agenda. This strategy was aimed at encouraging social NGOs to make the link between their respective platforms reinforcing the notion that equality as a goal could not be achieved in the absence of strong anti-poverty policies and comprehensive social services and supports. In formal terms, the Platform states that it 'acts a vehicle for its member organizations to express their shared values and shape these into a strong voice for the social NGO sector'.[22] Faced with a membership that was in danger of increasing factionalization, the Platform's 2008 strategic plan emphasized three major objectives: 'strengthening the sector, reinforcing participatory democracy and shaping social Europe'.[23] The transversal nature of these objectives is aimed at supporting the construction of a loosely configured collective agenda emphasizing the EU social NGO sector as a coherent and decisive actor at European level invested in common goals, transparent and democratic practice and therefore qualified to shape the trajectory of EU social policy. This collective agenda is not simply aimed at external audiences but is rather generative of a form of trust which allows most members to bracket their ideological differences when required.

However, ideological differences cannot be disregarded. When the Platform generates common positions that suggest a privileging of some organizational agendas and correspondingly some ideologies over others, problems arise. Three working groups constituted to deliver upon the strategic plan objectives, Social Policy, the Fundamental Rights and Non-Discrimination, and a Services of General Interest (dedicated to resisting EU policy on deregulation in the area of public and social services), had contributed to a silo effect among the membership concentrating like-minded organizations and providing fewer opportunities for cross-sectorial communication. The later working group had in itself become a source of tension in the Platform. Some social service provider NGOs, particularly those in the disability arena, suggested that they were unsure if they could support the Platform's position on this issue. Frustrated with unsatisfactory relations with the state, their own members had raised the notion that private enterprise could in fact be a more transparent and reliable partnership. While this represents a minority position within the Platform, it indicates the considerable ideological and strategic divide between organizations on major issues and the potential for such divisions to fracture hard-won consensus.

The Platform: ideological diversity, contestation and collective mobilization

NGOs holding diverse perspectives and collaborating at EU level provide an interesting case to examine the role of ideology as a structuring element with the potential to simultaneously divide and/or unify associations navigating a multilevel political terrain. Pace Warleigh (2001), Monaghan (2008) and Kroger (2008), an implicit or explicit map of ideologies is argued here to require inclusion

of civil society actors including NGOs as significant politicizers, instigators and bridges into diverse constituencies of interest. In this regard, rather than seen as the pawns of policy makers, NGOs are acknowledged as agentive and possessing the capacity to shape political language and influence policy trajectories. In addition, this work treats supranational institutions like the EU as a multilevel POS, which shapes the strategies and, by extension, the dynamics of coalition and conflict among NGOs seeking access to policy-making contexts and resources.

As a context for NGO mobilization, the EU has been characterized by Greenwood as a distinctive brand of neo-pluralism, understaffed for its policy reach, deficient in representative democracy and as a consequence, dependent on interest groups for expertise and on NGOs in particular to generate legitimacy by acting as conduits to European publics.[24] The analysis presented here is resonant with Greenwood's account, but goes beyond it in problematizing the issues of expertise and knowledge brokerage, and attending more explicitly to distributional issues as they relate to NGOs, especially the distinction between large and small groups. We have seen that political considerations are ubiquitous, not just in the sense that the 'external' POS's construction strongly shapes the possibilities for NGOs' engagement with policy, but also in the sense that internal tensions between members help determine what actions and policies are seen as feasible and desirable. As a result, relationships are much more messy and contested than the clean language of 'interest groups' favoured by Greenwood seems to imply.

So far, EU social NGOs collaborating to influence EU social policy have faced obstacles in the form of internal conflict and external social and political conditions, both of which interact to disrupt the power of the coalition to promote social change. For EU social NGOs, creating internal unity and launching common campaigns requires a focus upon a small number of clearly defined and least divisive issues. This is a difficult task for ideologically diverse organizations working in a crowded, competitive and resource-poor environment such as the EU. Some EU NGO activists also assert that the cost of maintaining a united front viewed as the production of campaigns based on a high level of generality has rendered the coalition toothless while allowing its most powerful members to control the agenda and bolster their 'privileged' position with their institutional sponsors. Dissimilar perspectives across the Platform now require significant investment by Platform leaders to anticipate sources of division and promote sufficiently resonant objectives to sustain collaboration. Complicating efforts to sustain internal solidarity are increasing competitions between organizations to retain the EU's focus on the various forms of disadvantage and oppression they claim to represent and to found claims to EU resources on the basis of these forms of recognition. Platform members' recent efforts to embrace the concept of multiple discrimination signal an attempt to transcend ideological divides in pursuit of a coordinated and strategic response to the uneven development and contradictory nature of EU equality and anti-discrimination policy. However, EU practices including operating competing policy units for different dimensions of inequality, poverty and discrimination militate against NGO efforts at cross-issue mobilization, generating instead competitive and exclusive dynamics. In this environment, organizations

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who differ in ideological terms along fault lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, age and able-bodiness invest in protecting their constituents from displacement from the EU policy agenda rather than collaboration. Platform efforts to connect equality issues with broader anti-poverty and social justice concerns have also met with resistance from organizations who find little common ideological ground or strategic merit in pursuing such a holistic approach to the EU social policy agenda.

While the Platform remains a site of EU third sector collaboration, it remains vulnerable to the demobilizing and divisive aspects of working at EU level. Global economic recession and the periodic mobilization of European citizens at national level has also raised the stakes for EU social NGOs to remain relevant sites for the critique of EU policy agendas. Recent attempts by EU member state governments and economic interests to abandon the revision of EU equality legislation as too costly a burden for business during economic recession and the omission of any reference to social policy as part of a European recovery plan may provide new impetus for NGO collaboration across ideological divides. The Platform may in fact provide the 'free space' to facilitate an open debate, which could in turn generate a source of renewed commitment among EU social NGOs to set aside their ideological differences and advance the transformative policies required to deal with the complex realities of inequality, discrimination and disadvantage.

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5. This work draws from analyses of NGO and EU documents and 25 interviews with activists and officials conducted between July 2004 and November 2007. The fieldwork emphasized organizational strategies and relations between the EU institutions and the NGO activists. Interviews and documents were analysed in order to highlight the micro-political interactions between organizations active in the Brussels context.
6. The EU as a context for NGO mobilization possesses relatively few formal access points, is limited in aim and scope by a strong economic imperative and narrow legal structure and by extension lacks a system of formal NGO accreditation.
7. Social Platform, *Platform of Social NGOs, Strategic Plan* (Brussels: Social Platform, March 2006), p. 2.
8. These include NGOs such as COFACE, a family rights NGO; the European Women's Lobby (EWL), a liberal feminist organization; anti-poverty organizations such as the faith-based social service NGO Caritas and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN). Anti-discrimination organizations include Age Europe and the European Network Against Racism (ENAR). Disability NGOs are also a strong presence including the European Disability Forum (EDF), the European Blind Union and Mental Health Europe.
9. P. Cullen, 'Conflict and cooperation within the Platform of European Social NGOs', in J. Bandy and J. Smith (Eds) *Coalitions Across Borders: Negotiating Difference and Unity in Transnational Struggles Against Neoliberalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 71–94.
10. Kroger, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, pp. 6–7; Cullen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 134–147.

11. For EU NGOs, civil dialogue at its best has meant benign neglect, with EU officials oscillating between symbolic commitments and sporadic material support and at its 'worst' civil dialogue has meant the substitution of face-to-face contact with Internet or 'virtual' consultation and an increase in the conditionalities attached to NGO project support.
12. Cullen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 134–147.
13. Beate Kohler-Koch, 'Debating the Union's Participatory Democracy and the European Constitution', *Economic and Social Committee Conference: Participatory democracy: current situation and opportunities provided by the European Constitution*, 8–9 March (Brussels: Economic and Social Committee, 2004).
14. Kohler-Koch, *ibid.*, pp. 12–14.
15. M. Verloo, 'Multiple inequalities, intersectionality and the European Union', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(3) (2006), pp. 211–228.
16. The Platform revised its internal rules and statutes in April 2008 including a commitment to gender parity.
17. The PROGRESS initiative mentioned above is indicative of these shifts in that it marks the consolidation of five separate funding sources into one central funding scheme.
18. E. Lombardo and M.Verloo, 'Stretching gender equality to other inequalities: political intersectionality in European gender equality policies', in E. Lombardo, P. Meier and M. Verloo (Eds) *The Discursive Politics of Gender Equality. Stretching, Bending and Policy-Making* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 67–84.
19. The directive aims to implement the principle of equal treatment between persons on the grounds of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation in areas outside employment. The scope of the directive includes social protection and health care, social benefits, education and access to goods and services, including housing.
20. Social Platform, *Equality and Non Discrimination: What Role for the EU? Social NGOs Recommendations for Further Actions* (Brussels: Social Platform, 2009).
21. Notably, the EWL remains committed to the notion that multiple discrimination is still a hierarchical phenomenon defined as different forms of discrimination added to structural discrimination based on sex.
22. The Platform's formal value statement lists a series of commitments to specific goals including the eradication of poverty and social exclusion, promotion of equality and non-discrimination and practices of participatory democracy and participation of members in an enhanced civil dialogue.
23. Social Platform, *Strategic Plan 2008* (Brussels: Social Platform, 2007), pp. 1–3.
24. J. Greenwood, 'Institutions and civil society organizations in the EU's multilevel system', in Jutta Joachim and Brigit Locher (Eds) *Transnational Activism in the UN and the EU: A Comparative Study* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 90–101.