

What is Solidarity About? Views of Transnational Organisations' Activists in Germany, Poland and Greece

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Abstract

The notion of solidarity plays an important role in debates about the future of Europe. Yet, it can be used in a diverse or even contradictory manner as contemporary discussions about refugees in Europe or the implementation of social rights at the EU-level well illustrate. While the focus of public attention is often on political leaders, the goal of this article is to deepen our knowledge about the understanding of solidarity by its practitioners at the grassroots-level of solidarity work. Our study is based on 97 individual interviews with representatives of transnational solidarity organisations (TSOs) located in Germany, Poland and Greece. We show how their understanding of solidarity varies across three basic themes: the rationale of action, the scope of beneficiaries and relations with and among beneficiaries. Most strikingly, our research reveals that the core understanding of solidarity among the TSOs under review reflects a progressive, transnational type of solidarity that emphasises universalism, connection-building between targets of solidarity and establishing group identities based on collective action and not pre-defined features. At the same time, our study shows how TSOs adapt to complex country-specific and field-specific contextual conditions.

Keywords: *social movements, solidarity, transnational civil society organisations, Europe, migration, unemployment, disability*

Introduction¹

In turbulent times of crises, solidarity work by civil society entities has increased remarkably (Kousis et al., 2020). This development has accompanied a growing political and academic interest in the role of civic solidarity engagement. However, despite civic solidarity ranking high on the agenda, little attention has been dedicated to the fact that the meaning of solidarity is highly contentious and varies substantially among civil society activists themselves. To some extent, social movement research has already advanced some analyses regarding how organised civic solidarity can be understood and practiced (Featherstone, 2012; Giugni and Passy, 2001; Waterman, 2001). Nevertheless, the understanding of solidarity held by civic transnational organisations working at the grassroots-level of solidarity action remains a relatively under-researched topic. These kinds of organisations are assumed to play an important role, though, because they may serve as a “laboratory” of solidarity in contemporary times. On the one hand, they have the potential to pursue universal, radically transformative approaches to practicing solidarity. On the other hand, they may, specialise in providing traditional charitable work to vulnerable people from dependent regions abroad.

The goal of this article is to contribute to the discussion with a qualitative analysis of Transnational Solidarity Organisations (TSOs), surpassing existing studies. Current works on

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transnational solidarity action are based, firstly, on critical cases highlighting practices that seek to challenge oppression (Brown and Yaffe, 2014; Featherstone, 2012; García Augustin, 2012; Siapera, 2019). These publications define the essence of transnational solidarity action in normative terms. Secondly, there are analyses of TSOs' universes that use predefined variables, such as the scope of action, characteristics of networks or types of communication (Lahusen et al., 2018). Both approaches can only partially help us comprehend the diversity of transnational solidarity understandings because they do not sufficiently account for the fact that solidarity understandings are decisively shaped by their context conditions and thus require comparative analyses. We thus propose a different approach. Our perspective is, firstly, systematic – because it considers numerous civic organisations from different countries and fields; secondly, inductive – as it tries to go beyond dominant variables used in quantitative research on civil society organisations; thirdly, interpretative – as we zoom in on how activists make sense of organisations' work and acknowledge the specificity of perceived opportunities and constraints (Giugni, 2001: 237-239; Statham, 2001).

We analyse the understanding of solidarity held by representatives of various civil society organisations that meet the criteria of transnational work and practicing solidarity (Kousis et al., 2016: 32). By “understanding” we mean how these organisational representatives define solidarity, make decisions about and make sense of their work within a broader context. Our work has exploratory goals and seeks to analyse how main themes and notions of solidarity revealed by TSOs' representatives may be placed in the theoretical debate about solidarity. Moreover, by focusing on organisations in the areas of migration, disabilities and unemployment from three European countries that have been quite differently affected by the past decade's crises, we seek to elucidate the country- and field-specific differences among TSO's solidarity understandings.

Diversity of Solidarity Action: The Main Dimensions

Through the literature, we can identify three research strands in social movement scholarship pointing to key dimensions of solidarity action. Firstly, scholars have argued that solidarity conceptions are tied to the rationale of collective action, as this rationale infuses actions with a certain meaning of solidarity (Eterovic and Smith, 2001; Passy, 2001). They proved that civic solidarity with people in need was traditionally organised by voluntary associations that acted out of altruism and compassion in order to offer assistance and relief to the suffering, and without a political mission. Collective solidarity typically took the form of direct help and support to others, i.e. to disadvantaged groups like the homeless, unemployed, poor, disabled or elderly. These solidarity movements were inspired by frames such as Christianity, enlightened humanism and socialism (Passy, 2001: 8-9).

In comparison, in contemporary solidarity movements emerging since the 1960s, assistance to the disadvantaged remained important, but collective action became politicised as new movements challenged political systems and sought to mobilise for social and political change (Eterovic and Smith, 2001; Passy, 2001). In addition to the traditional cultural repertoire, this process was grounded in the ideas of a profound democratisation of society and individual emancipation (Passy, 2001: 10-11). Such a political concept of solidarity was “informed by and positively articulated with equality, liberty, peace, tolerance, and more recent emancipatory or

life-protective ideals” (Waterman, 2001: 236). In line with these insights, existing research distinguishes between charitable and political objectives of solidarity movements and organisations (Giugni, 2001; Lahusen, 2016). On the one hand, there are organisations specialising either in direct, ‘neutral’ charitable action and the provision of services, or in advocacy, awareness raising and political claims-making with the purpose of changing policies; on the other hand, there are “hybrid” organisations (Minkoff, 2002) that cover both aspects (Baglioni and Giugni, 2014).

Secondly, it has been claimed that solidarity differs strongly regarding with whom it should be practiced (Faber, 2005: 46; Wallaschek 2019; Waterman, 2001: 235-236). Here, in-group solidarity refers to a type of solidarity where civic groups and social movements lead efforts to establish, increase and maintain solidarity among their members, constituencies and allies. Out-group solidarity relates to a type of solidarity where civic groups enact solidarity with particular target groups, and where the providers and beneficiaries of solidarity action do not overlap (Eterovic and Smith, 2001: 198; Lahusen, 2016; Passy, 2001: 6).

The meaning of these two types of solidarity may differ depending on how a group’s borders are set. Many studies have highlighted the difference between solidarity based on pre-existing similarities and a shared identity of social actors and an open and praxis-oriented notion of the own group or target group. For instance, Brandy and Smith (2005) and Tarrow and McAdam (2005) emphasise pre-existing or attributed similarities as important facilitating factors for actors to participate in and sustain joint action. Of particular importance for solidarity and a shared vision of community are similarities grounded in collective identities, worldviews or ideologies (Bandy and Smith, 2005; della Porta and Kriesi, 1999; Hunt and Benford, 2004; Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Smith and Bandy, 2005). Relevant ‘pre-existing’ similarities are often: race, ethnicity, heritage, language, religion, nationality, citizenship, region, community membership, social class or gender (Bandy and Smith, 2005; Faber, 2005).

Yet, the role of similarities has also been challenged in recent scholarship. For instance, Featherstone (2012) argues that both solidarities, as well as perceptions of similarity, are actively constructed as a part of struggles over power relations. In this view, solidarity is an inherently generative, transformative process that creates new links between activists and social groups, as well as among different parts of the world, rather than simply interlinking pre-existing collectivities. Here, solidarity is created through the strategic efforts of political activists to “negotiate differences and align frameworks of grievance and action” (Bandy and Smith, 2005: 234, cf. also Smith, 2002: 506; Waterman, 2001: 236). In this perspective, identification is not required as an a priori condition. Instead, solidarity is part of a politicisation process through which collective identifications are actively created and shaped, mostly by contesting inequalities and oppression.

Finally, research has been interested in the relational dimension of organised solidarity. In this regard, scholars have pointed out that traditional, altruism-oriented solidarity approaches often implied solidarity relations characterised by power asymmetries and one-sided dependencies between providers and beneficiaries of solidarity action. This observation applies particularly to transnational solidarity in the global context and the relations between civil society organisations from wealthier “global North” regions, and their target groups in poorer regions of the “global South” (Bandy and Smith, 2005; Eterovic and Smith, 2001: 198-199, 216-217;

Hunter, 1995:6; Waterman, 2001: 235-237). In contrast, contemporary and more politicised civic groups and social movements have started to develop more reciprocal solidarity relations, shaped by mutualism and the recognition of (global) interdependencies, and seeking to avoid asymmetric top-down and dominance-based relations (Eterovic and Smith, 2001: 198-199, 216-217; Hunter, 1995: 6). This trend seems to point to “an important difference in the diagnosis of social problems and in the prescription for addressing them, compared to those of more traditional, altruistic action frames.” (Eterovic and Smith, 2001: 198)

Data and Methods

Starting from the abovementioned knowledge gap on transnational organisations’ understanding of solidarity, our study is dedicated to answering the following research questions:

- 1) Which themes are present in TSOs’ reflection on solidarity?
- 2) How do various aspects of solidarity understandings cluster?
- 3) How do solidarity understandings resemble one another or differ between organisational fields and countries?

Following basic assumptions of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we conducted an exploratory, inductive qualitative text analysis in order to find out how TSOs’ representatives define and understand their organisations’ work. Thus, instead of using pre-defined categories from the scientific literature, we look at the descriptions and explanations of solidarity work reported in our interviews and their cluster patterns. This is aimed at mapping the factual semantic diversity and unveiling the core understanding of (transnational) solidarity among TSO representatives, as well as tracing the dimensions of contention. The theoretical stances described above help us interpret and place our findings within the existing literature.

For this study, we conducted 97 individual in-depth interviews with German, Polish and Greek representatives of TSOs dealing with migration, disability and unemployment. The selection of interviewees followed a purposeful sampling designed to capture a broad range of TSOs engaging at grassroots level.² Our sample covers representatives from a variety of small- to medium-scale, local or regional voluntary organisations or civic organisations with few paid staff, including informal citizens’ and social protest groups, informal networks, non-profit, volunteer associations, social economy enterprises and local or regional branches of unions and other labour organisations. Moreover, it comprises service- and advocacy-oriented groups, thus covering both urgent needs engagement and political acts of solidarity. The choice of organisational representatives from Germany, Greece and Poland was motivated by the goal to encompass a variety of discourses about transnational solidarity, as these countries differ significantly in terms of civic traditions, welfare state regimes, and the impact of the economic and migration policy crises of the past decade. Interviews based on the same guidelines were

²Selected TSOs either involve organiser(s) from another country or supranational agency, actions that are coordinated in at least one other country, beneficiaries or participants/partners/sponsors/volunteers from another country, frames with cross-national reference and/or the organisation’s spatial reach at least across two countries (Kousis et al., 2016: 32).

conducted between August and November 2016 and lasted between one and two hours. They were recorded and transcribed.

In line with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we started our analysis with an open coding of interview transcripts in order to grasp and cluster a variety of semantic elements in the material (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007: 18). Following the Weberian tradition of interpretative sociology, we included not only those passages that spoke expressly about the definition of solidarity, but also those where interviewees described how their organisations make action choices. Interpretation and comparison of our codes within and between country cases led us to selective coding with the use of a salient set of codes. Through integration and abstraction, we allocated them to broader categories and themes (see Table 1). Finally, we applied axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) in order to identify relationships between codes, categories and themes.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews allowed us to identify three major themes that we interpret as the basic dimensions constituting and organising the understanding of solidarity among our interviewees. These are the rationale of organisations' action, the scope of beneficiaries and relations with beneficiaries. Each theme is inductively constructed from a set of codes and more general categories addressing the understanding of solidarity and its practices as described by interviewees.

Table 1 Themes, categories and codes in our analysis of interviews with TSO representatives

theme	category	code
rationale of organisations' action	purposes of action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ pragmatic, service-oriented purposes ○ political-idealistic purposes
	value orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ humanistic values ○ philanthropic values ○ social values
scope of beneficiaries	openness or closeness of the circle of beneficiaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ in-group (beneficiaries as TSO members) ○ out-group (beneficiaries external to TSOs)
	role and nature of (target) group identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ pre-existing similarities of beneficiaries ○ a posteriori definition of target groups' communalities ○ universalistic understanding of beneficiaries
relations with and among beneficiaries	collective forms of interaction with/among beneficiaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ bottom-up approach (symmetric-horizontal and participatory) ○ top-down approach (asymmetric-vertical, one-sided, non-participatory)
	organisational aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ empowerment, emancipation and self-determination ○ equality, equity and inclusion ○ charitable help/charity

The rationale of organisations' action

This first theme entails the purpose of organisations' action and expressed underlying values. These two aspects were discussed by our interviewees very often conjointly, pointing to affinities between them.

As regards the interviewees' description of the purpose of their organisations' action, we could identify two approaches: The first approach highlights that the organisation's action pursues *pragmatic, service-oriented purposes*, which manifest themselves as direct help and practical assistance. Typically, help and assistance take the form of providing support in case of urgent needs, such as free food, clothing and other goods, accommodation, health care and psychological support, but also counselling, legal advice or training. Interviewees explained that they seek to solve problems and improve specific living conditions, as in this case:

The logic behind the social clinic was to adopt a holistic approach, so that a person coming for medical support will also receive social, psychological and legal support in order to overcome his overall vulnerability. Since the outbreak of the crisis, this holistic approach also meant being able to satisfy basic needs, food and shelter (GR, migr5, 09/2016).

This pragmatic approach was particularly salient among Polish TSOs. Indeed, the statements of their representatives were often characterised by an assumption of objectivity and neutrality:

We aimed to operate in such a fashion that we respond to what we carefully observe, [...], try to look at the trends and respond to them. For example, [...] there was such a wave of Poles going abroad to other EU countries that we undertook educational programmes to keep people here (PL, unemp1, 08/2016).

Interviewees from Polish TSOs were sometimes hesitant about whether their organisations' work can be labelled as solidarity action. In some instances, solidarity was even rejected as an organisational principle because it was not regarded as professional enough.

Secondly, in contrast to pragmatic purposes, many interviewees emphasised *political-idealistic purposes of solidarity action*. They explained that their organisations follow a political mission, seek to raise public awareness about certain issues, give voice to the concerns of their target groups in the public sphere and aim to promote social or political change. Interviewees highlighted that they want to “bring about social change”, “make people aware of the problems of some groups” or “make some groups visible”, as in the following passage:

One of our major aims is to shift attention to the existing grievances [...]. I believe we are one of those few associations that continue to touch raw nerves (DE, migr5, 10/2016).

While we could differentiate between a pragmatic, service-oriented and a political-idealistic approach analytically, they were not empirically mutually exclusive. In many cases, pragmatic and political purposes appeared to be variously interlinked, especially in Germany and Greece, where few TSOs focused exclusively on either practical provision of help or political advocacy, protest and awareness raising. Many Greek TSOs were inclusive of both of these goals due to the urgent needs and a context shaped by economic and refugee crises. In Germany, the interweaving of pragmatic and political aims was particularly underscored in the migration

field. Given the arrival of large numbers of refugees in 2015 and 2016, the provision for urgent needs became crucial for many TSOs, though political objectives remained on their agenda.

When speaking about solidarity in terms of the purpose of their organisations' engagement, many interviewees reported that their work was guided by specific values. This was the case particularly in Germany and Greece, while in Poland, perceiving TSOs' work as pragmatic and not value-driven was more salient. From responses expressing a *value orientation*, we could reconstruct three groups of values. Firstly, we identified *humanistic values* which were most strongly emphasised. In particular, representatives of migration and disability TSOs stated that their activities are motivated by humanistic values and principles like human rights, respect for all human beings, dignity, tolerance, multiculturalism, respect for difference, self-determination and individual freedom, exemplified by the following:

[Our] understanding of global solidarity is that one appreciates one another as equals. [...] You may call this humanism (DE, migr4, 10/2016).

Secondly, *philanthropic values* were addressed by our interviewees, however, with different connotations. In rare instances, compassion, altruism and neighbourly love were discussed as guiding principles of the organisation's work. This occurred almost exclusively in the statements of some church-related TSOs from Poland. In contrast, values that have traditionally accompanied charitable help, like neighbourly love and compassion, were often regarded as inappropriate, in particular by activists from migration and disability TSOs. In this context, humanistic and philanthropic values were also discussed jointly by interviewees. Many respondents highlighted that their organisations pursue the enforcement of existing rights, which, according to them, is opposed to being viewed as pitiable. This links in with their emphasis on human rights, as described above.

We should move away from compassion with disabled people and towards the inclusion of people with disabilities (DE, disab10, 11/2016).

Third and finally, *social values* like social cohesion, social justice, equality and inclusiveness emerged as value orientations of solidarity work. Across the three countries, social values were most typically addressed by TSOs working in the (un-)employment field. These interviewees highlighted that they act for labour rights, good working conditions and for stronger labour market inclusiveness:

Our goal is to strengthen the sense of identity among our employees, respond to the issues of labour market flexibilisation, and strengthen the labour struggle generally (GR, unemp1, 09/2016).

In comparison to (un-)employment TSOs, a few TSOs from the migration field addressed the role of social integration, and some disability TSOs underlined the need for social inclusion. However, in their statements, the social dimension was usually only one element within more general discourse about human rights and equity.

Regarding the interrelations between action purposes and values, it was striking that humanistic and philanthropic values were typically discussed in those instances where interviewees reported political-idealistic purposes of action. However, while humanistic values were used in an affirmative manner, statements about philanthropic values usually underlined a negative-critical stance towards them, putting them in contrast to humanistic values. In comparison,

social values were often mentioned in instances where interviewees spoke about pragmatic, service-oriented purposes of action.

The scope of beneficiaries

The second theme involves various understandings of the scope of beneficiaries. Here, two specific approaches can be distinguished, forming the main categories within this theme. On the one hand, respondents referred to the openness or closeness of the circle of beneficiaries. On the other hand, they discussed their understanding of group identity. With regard to the first category, we identified two crucial codes. In line with the notion of in-group solidarity, some interviewees defined the scope of their organisations' *beneficiaries as their own group members with whom they share common grievances, needs and interests*. Across the three countries, this view was present mainly among labour unions and self-help groups. In comparison, other TSOs of our sample perceive their activities as action towards *external beneficiaries who are not members of the organisation*. This approach, resembling out-group solidarity, was characteristic for refugee help organisations, but it also occurred in the unemployment and disability fields.

As regards the second category, TSOs of our study expressed different understandings of the role and nature of (target-)group identity. Overall, we could identify three different approaches, namely basing group identity on beneficiaries' pre-existing similarities, building group identity of beneficiaries on a posteriori established similarities and universal solidarity. In all three countries, there were interviewees who emphasised the relevance of shared *pre-existing similarities* of their beneficiaries. This understanding was typical of many disability organisations, and particularly of self-help organisations in this field. Here, membership was often related to specific forms of disability or disease. Sameness was also defined with regard to specific life situations or people's status resulting from social policy regulations. In addition, some TSOs, mainly from Poland, pointed to competition between disability TSOs addressing different target groups because of a low level of social protection in this field:

Generally, there is no solidarity between [the different groups of] people; everybody is focused on their own issue (PL, disab6, 9/2016).

In comparison, many other respondents from the three countries explicitly *rejected pre-existing similarities as a means of defining their target groups and preferred to define them on the basis of a posteriori similarities*. In this context, interviewees stated that their organisation seeks to provide support for all those in need, regardless of characteristics.

We do not reject anybody. [...] Everybody who needs our help is warmly welcomed here. [...] We also show solidarity with people who cannot find a flat anymore [in this city] because of gentrification, in the same way that refugees cannot find a flat at affordable prices due to gentrification. That does not make a difference to us (DE, migr5, 10/2016).

Moreover, across all three countries, interviewees drew attention to the need to identify overlapping concerns, to join forces and to fight together for common causes. Their organisations opened up their constituencies to a larger circle of people enduring social and economic pressure, and promoted a broad solidarisation across different social groups. This approach was most prominent in the (un-)employment field. Here, TSOs also supported, for

instance, precarious atypical workers, migrants, disabled people or other disadvantaged groups, which one interviewee explained:

For me, a crucial approach is to identify common interests of different groups. If we walked around in a t-shirt claiming 'more money for long-term unemployed' [...] this would gain disapproval. Highlighting interrelations helps much more. [...] To simply ask: Who is benefitting from this policy? Who is losing out because of it? And then it would be helpful if the losers united and tried to enforce their interests in solidarity (DE, unemp1, 08/2016).

Similarly, membership-based TSOs, like trade unions, led efforts to renegotiate their membership base and to bridge differences between different target groups by focusing on overriding issues, such as working conditions or social citizenship. This indicates a praxis of a posteriori identity building among different addressees:

Recipients of our actions are all people who are in some way connected with the labour market, regardless of the professional statute or contract, whether they are employees or the unemployed (PL, unemp5, 10/2016).

At the core of the union's rationale is [the idea] to unite the industry's employees beyond the divisions [...] Our aim was to unite the employees of the sector beyond separations, [to overcome the divide] between employees and the unemployed, between employees and students or between employees and the self-employed (GR, unemp1, 09/2016).

Overall, interviewees from (un-)employment TSOs highlighted similar justifications for such an approach, with country-specific nuances. In Germany, TSOs were coping with the problem that long-term unemployment and poverty had disappeared from the public and political radar due to the remarkable improvement of the German economy and labour market since 2010/2011. This was also accompanied by the emergence of new cleavages between the permanently employed, the precariously employed and unemployed people.

Since about 2011 we have continuously grown official employment figures. In my view, this leads to a decrease in solidarity because the public is under the impression that the problem has resolved itself. [...] And for those who are still jobless, it must certainly be their own fault (DE, unemp1, 08/2016).

In Greece, according to interviewees, it were the recent austerity, liberalisation and flexibilisation measures imposed since the crisis of 2008 that led to intensified cleavages within the labour market, increased antagonism, individualism and weakened unionism. New marginalisations, unequal opportunities (e.g. for the youth), unequal rights (e.g. between employees with different contractual statuses) and discrimination (e.g. pay and compensation) emerged. This ran alongside a conspicuous rise in unemployment and poverty:

In the early years of the crisis, people became isolated. They felt competitive with those who stayed out of the job market due to their fear of losing their work. There were also tensions between permanent employees and precarious workers. It took us some time to realise that we all have same interests in common (GR, unemp4, 09/2016).

Similar to the Greek case, Polish TSOs underlined the impact of liberal, flexibilisation-oriented labour reforms and austerity measures that had been implemented since 2008 in order to prevent

the economic crisis effects. These policy changes led to high levels of precarious employment, freezing of salaries in the public sector and cuts in unemployment benefits. Against this backdrop, it was representatives of the Polish labour unions who expressed the need to struggle to unite antagonised groups active in specific fields, to overcome exclusive in-group solidarities of specific categories of employees and include new groups of workers, like manual workers, into the labour unions:

We understand solidarity primarily through the lens of class, that is: of all people [...] no matter the trade, the position, the kind of working agreement [...]. So exactly here is the solidarity [...] beyond branches [...]. Many groups that previously used to define themselves as middle class, like artists, creative people, those from civil society organisations and public administration, they now tend to see themselves through the categories of employee and solidarity (PL, unemp5, 10/2016).

Finally, a number of statements could be subsumed under the third category. Across all three countries, some organisational representatives emphasised the need of a *universalistic understanding of beneficiaries* and of pursuing *global solidarity*. Rationales based on similarities of beneficiaries, be they a priori or a posteriori ones, were rejected. In this view, solidarity and equality are basic human rights. In the universality-based approach, the circle of potential beneficiaries was typically referred to as “all people”, “the whole society” and “humankind”. This universal approach was mainly shared by organisations active in the migration field:

I believe that we pursue the aspiration of global solidarity. For us it is out of the question that we do not make any distinction between citizenship, regional, continental provenience or affiliation. [...] Some call it humanism (DE, migr4, 10/2016).

Relations with and among beneficiaries

Finally, when discussing solidarity, our interviewees reported the relations towards and among beneficiaries within their group or organisation. Two categories emerged: Interviewees spoke about collective forms of interaction with and among beneficiaries, and they also addressed the organisational aims associated with these interaction forms. Our respondents described these two aspects mostly together, linking specific organisational aims to particular forms of interaction, and vice versa.

As regards organisational interaction forms, we identified a *bottom-up approach* and a *top-down approach*. The bottom-up approach was addressed very often by our interviewees. It privileges *symmetric-horizontal and participatory forms of interaction with and between beneficiaries at eye-level* as in the following:

The point is to communicate with people, bring them into action and incite their active participation – and indeed they do participate by joining in either cooking or food distribution activities (GR, migr4, 09/2016).

Interviewees put emphasis on diverse aspects of bottom-up solidarity. For instance, representatives from TSOs practicing in-group solidarity underlined the idea of reciprocity. This is particularly true for self-help groups, an important type of actor among the interviewed disability TSOs:

What I mainly understand as solidarity is cooperation or mutual support, or that the people concerned mutually support each other (DE, disab6, 10/2016).

In many cases, when speaking in favour of a participatory bottom-up approach, interviewees emphasised their rejection of power asymmetries and unequal dependencies between providers and receivers of solidarity action. Indeed, many interviewed organisations providing help for other target groups underscored their critical stance towards traditional top-down charitable forms of solidarity. According to interviewed activists across all three countries, symmetric, equal relationships are what make solidarity different from charity:

The notion of charity has the bad thing that we give from above. It is connected with the image of the rich lady who gives her cheque [...]. We do not want to see people with outstretched hands, but powerful citizens standing proudly on their feet (GR, disab3, 09/2016).

We understand solidarity in the way that we do not look top-down [...]. We do not look at who is bigger, who is smaller, who is the recipient, who has to say 'thank you', who says 'welcome'. Instead, the services that we promote [...] are a realisation of existing human rights. [...] We do not look at our work from the charity perspective (DE, disab3, 10/2016).

In this context, solidarity is interconnected with the intention to overcome asymmetric and paternalistic relations characterised by a divide between active helpers and passive receivers of charitable help:

Often the term 'helper' is used. But we reject this. [...] This project stood out because of the attitude to meet at eye-level (DE, migr4, 10/2016).

This critical stance on top-down relations seeks to avoid that solidarity takes the form of “substitution” (Waterman, 2001), where one side speaks and acts on behalf of the other. Accordingly, interviewees distance themselves from the idea that beneficiaries are just passive objects of help or victims who have to beg for pity or alms.

The bottom-up approach was most salient in interviews with representatives from politically-oriented TSOs from Greece and Germany. Nevertheless, there were also pragmatic justifications, particularly by Polish respondents. For them, involving beneficiaries in the planning and implementation of activities was important in order to solve complex social problems successfully. Close, integrative relations with the addressees of their action were regarded as essential:

When we build an assistance centre for people with illnesses or disabilities [...], the main issue is [...] to show [...] that you can work with [these people] [...]. It's the issue of starting to be familiar with them and the issue of cooperation (PL, disab2, 08/2016).

The respondents' emphasis on bottom-up organisational interaction forms was repeatedly associated with two different groups of organisational aims. The first group involves aims such as *empowerment, emancipation and self-determination*, while the second comprises aims like *equality, equity and inclusion*. Regarding the first group of aims, respondents often underscored the objective to foster the active participation of beneficiaries in planning and implementation of activities in order to *empower* them and promote *self-determination, self-initiative and*

independence. In this sense, solidarity action is seen as a means to encourage and support target groups' self-help. This entailed a rejection of overprotectiveness that impedes any self-initiative:

'Giving alms to a beggar' [...] this concept has changed completely. [...] People need to try and drag themselves out of the mud instead of waiting for help from outside; help for self-help (DE, unemp12, 11/2016).

Organisations targeting people in need in other countries often discussed empowerment in terms of capacity-building. In this spirit, TSOs cooperate closely with local organisations in the target country, helping to create the financial, structural or knowledge-based background conditions for local self-organisation, and transferring as much responsibility as possible to the local partners:

Implementation is always carried out by local NGOs. [...]. We want to give priority to the identity and the empowerment of the local actors. [...] And we seek to transfer more responsibility to [the target countries in] the south (DE, disab3, 10/2016).

In comparison, some other interviewees underlined that their group or organisation applies a bottom-up approach in order to promote *equality, equity and inclusiveness*. In this regard, a representative of a Greek labour union underlined:

We are all equal, and we strive to have this reflected through equality in the assignment of roles, either in production or in representation. Direct democracy is our modus operandi (GR, unemp7, 09/2016).

Finally, hierarchical *top-down* directed forms of interaction with beneficiaries were barely manifested in our interviews. Even if out-group solidarity action may involve a predisposition towards power asymmetries between the initiators and addressees of solidarity action, our interviewees appeared mostly dismissive of paternalistic relations. Asymmetric forms of solidarity motivated by charity, compassion and neighbourly love were often referred to critically. Nevertheless, *charitable help* – as the aim linked to top-down interactions with beneficiaries – was in rare cases discussed in a positive manner, for instance, by a church-related charity organisation from Poland:

A flood, a typhoon, we are there: Haiti, Nepal, Philippines, Japan. We are present there. Above all, this is an expression of solidarity, I think. And the people we help make us feel that they are thankful for it (PL, migr7, 09/2016).

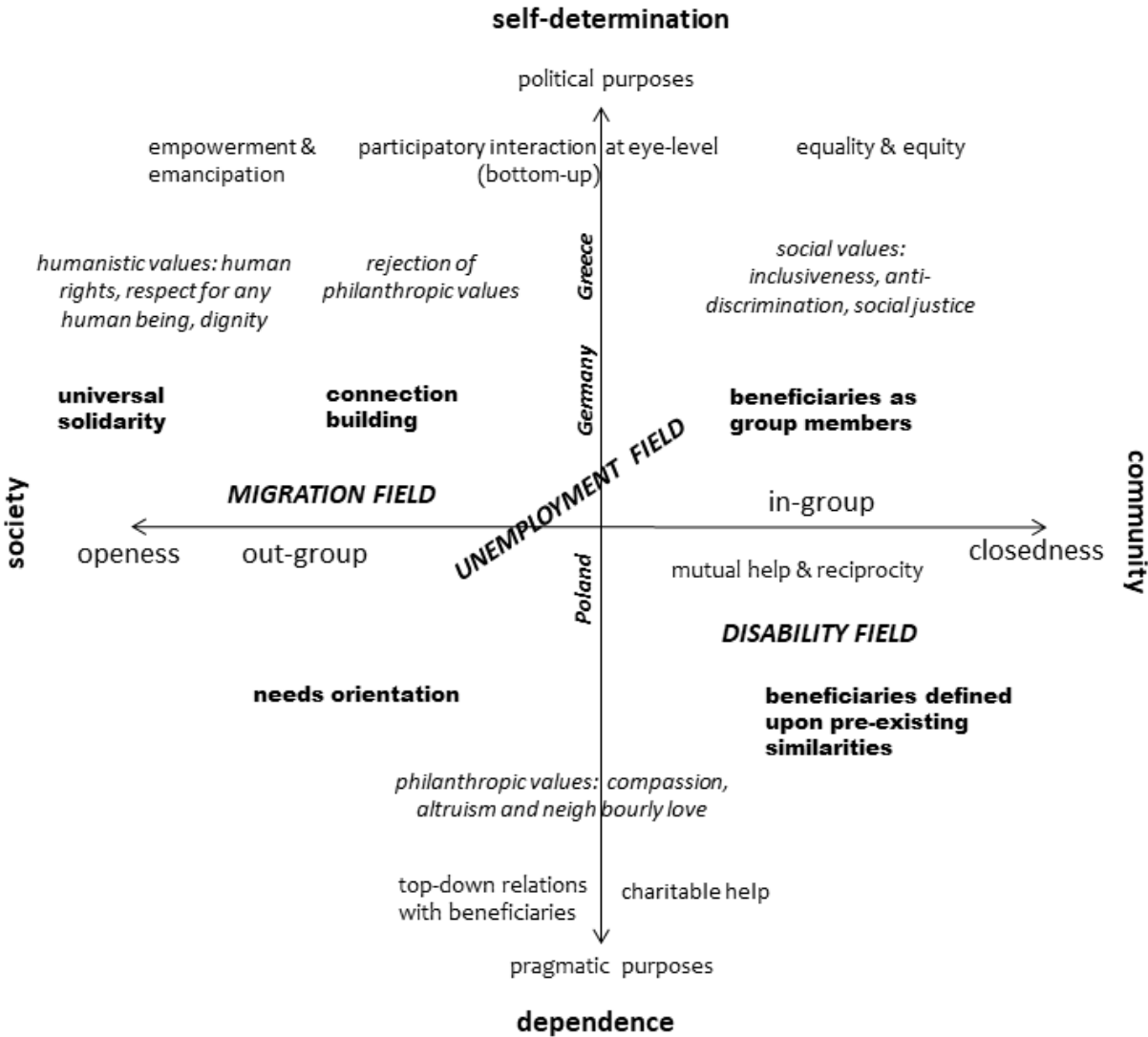
Moreover, among the interviewed Polish TSOs there was a professional service provider from the disability field whose approach may be described as top-down because of the way in which the organisation defines its goals and standards, and how it perceives its beneficiaries as passive clients or recipients.

Discussion

Our study demonstrates that the rationale of action, the scope of beneficiaries and relations with and among beneficiaries constitute crucial themes in TSOs' understanding of solidarity. Axial coding helped us to reconstruct interrelations between the different codes, broader categories

and themes. We have illustrated these interrelations by allocating the codes across four semantic fields within a two-dimensional space. As shown in Figure 1, we propose to organise them along two dimensions: a horizontal dimension marked by the contrast between *society* and *community*, and a vertical dimension characterised by the contrast between *dependence* and *self-determination*.

Figure 1: Solidarity understandings across a two-dimensional semantic space



We interpret all four quarters of the graph as ideal types of solidarity understandings. The upper-left quadrant refers to *progressive, transnational solidarity*. It assumes that solidarity is motivated by humanistic values, defines targets of action in open to universalistic terms, and centres on political action aimed at progressive social and political change within society. The upper-right quadrant stands for the *political mobilisation of a group*. It involves action aimed at social and political change that is beneficial for a predefined and enclosed group of members. The lower-left quadrant represents the idea of *helping people in need*. This is motivated by philanthropic values, but sometimes also for pragmatic reasons. In both cases, solidarity action starts with the neediness of people regardless of their group affiliation or other characteristics. Finally, the lower-right quadrant refers to a *targeted goods- and service provision* to pre-defined

groups, including various forms of care and assistance. In both lower quadrants, solidarity is typically shaped by one-sided *top-down relations with beneficiaries*, seen as clients or passive “objects” of support.

The interviews with TSO activists indicate that the way in which solidarity is conceived within these dimensions is characterised by a complex pattern of field- and country-specific features. Our study revealed considerable diversity in the TSOs’ rationale of action. On the one hand, similar to the dichotomy between political advocacy and service-orientation described in earlier studies (for instance, Baglioni, 2001; Giugni, 2001), we could distinguish between activists whose engagement was based on political and moral concerns, and those who distanced themselves from any political agenda or specific values, understanding their work as the neutral provision of goods or services. On the other hand, our interviews showed that many TSOs combine a needs-oriented provision of goods and services with a political or value-driven mission and forms of political activism (also Karakayali and Kleist, 2016; Speth and Becker, 2016; Sotiropoulos and Bourikos, 2014). This observation corroborates previous research showing that collective action may take on hybrid forms in order to respond to complex social challenges and demands (Baglioni and Giugni, 2014; Minkoff, 2002).

Yet, this finding does not equally apply to all three countries of our study. Almost all TSOs from Greece and Germany stated that they would pursue political objectives or perceive their help as a political statement. This also applies to those that address urgent needs, because of a strong interlinkage of providing support and political activism among the Greek and German TSOs (also Kanellopoulos et al., 2021; Misbach, 2015; Schmid, 2019; Vathakou, 2015; Zamponi and Bossi, 2018). In comparison, only a few TSOs from Poland admitted to having any political motives or objectives (also Petelczyc et al., 2021).

Differences in the degree of the TSOs’ politicisation can be related to distinct experiences with the impact of the economic and migration policy crises in the analysed countries (Kousis et al., 2020; Lahusen et al., 2021;). In Greece, the harsh impact of the economic and so-called refugee crisis and the austerity policies led to an unprecedented emergence of grassroots solidarity initiatives (Kanellopoulos et al., 2021; Zamponi and Bosi, 2018). In a similar way, insufficient state responses to the arrival of high numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in 2015/2016 triggered a significant rise in grassroots TSOs in support of refugees in Germany (Speth and Becker, 2016). These TSOs were also coping with pressing needs of their target groups, but were simultaneously inspired by political motives and goals (Zschache, 2021). In comparison, Poland was less evidently affected by the recent economic and migration policy crisis (Rae, 2012). In contrast to Greece and Germany, momentum for enhanced politicisation of TSOs was thus rather weak. Among the established TSOs, a considerable part seeks to operate in a neutral, professional manner and abstains from taking a political stance in order to secure their access to public funds, on which many rely regularly (Petelczyc et al., 2021).³

While we found country differences in the degree of politicisation noteworthy, it is striking that politically-oriented activists are guided by similar normative principles across the three countries. Basically, among those who referred to specific values in their work, all three basic

³ Forms of political action in favour (but also widely against) refugees do nevertheless exist in Poland (Narkowicz, 2018). However, there seems to be a stronger divide between protest- and practical-help-oriented civil society groups in this country.

frames discussed in the scholarly literature (Passy, 2001) are present. Yet, our findings indicate that value orientations vary according to the TSOs' fields of activity. Values of humanism and human rights were emphasised by interviewees from migration and disability TSOs. This orientation is also reflected in the fact that these respondents rejected philanthropic, charity-based values the most (also Mann, 2018; Köbsell, 2006; Siaperä, 2019), whereas representatives from unemployment TSOs referred mostly to social values, including social justice, equality and inclusion.

As regards the TSOs' scope of beneficiaries, interviewees' approaches varied from an inclusive approach (Waterman, 2001; Featherstone, 2012) to a narrow definition of target groups, based on people's specific life situations. Overall, it was the former approach that was the most salient way of understanding solidarity with respect to the scope of beneficiaries.

On closer inspection, there are some field-specific traits. Interviewees who emphasised a universal or global understanding of solidarity are typically located in the migration field. Our interviews also showed that in all three countries, the idea of universal solidarity was expressed mainly by representatives from politicised, left-wing or alternative refugee TSOs that challenge the official government (Povrzanović Frykman and Mäkelä, 2020; Haaland and Wallevik 2019). These kinds of actors were particularly influential among Greek and German TSOs.

In comparison, the extension of solidarity towards new target groups, broad solidarisation across different constituencies and joining forces for common goals were salient among unemployment TSOs in all three countries. This finding resonates well with existing research showing that civil society organisations and movements rallying for labour and social rights adapt to new exigencies and challenges by bridging different grievances and claims. While bridging concerns and alliance building are strategies that are not new in the repertoire of social movements (e.g. Bandy and Smith, 2005; Snow et al., 1986; Statham, 2001: 136-139), diversification and extension seem to be responses that have received renewed attention in recent years. Labour unions, for instance, facing a considerable weakening of their membership base, maintain their influence by addressing new target groups and grievances that go beyond the traditional definition of labour rights, thus securing the support of broader and more diverse constituencies and renewing their legitimacy foundations (e.g. Diani, 2019; Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011; Marino, Penninx and Roosblad, 2015). A narrow understanding of target groups was only present among some TSOs from the disability field. Our interviews suggest that fragmentation and particularism seem to characterise this field, at least to some extent.

Finally, many of our interviewees expressed clear ideas about their organisations' relations with beneficiaries and the quality of relations between members. Most of the TSOs' representatives highlighted the importance of participatory, symmetric bottom-up relations, together with promotion of the beneficiaries' independence, capability and self-initiative (also Duru, 2020). Some differences appear with regard to the justification of such an approach. From a political, normative perspective, horizontal, symmetric relations with beneficiaries "at eye level" were linked to normative ideas of empowerment, emancipation and self-determination. In this context, TSOs rejected asymmetrical, top-down relations as an expression of paternalism and unequal power relations. From a service-oriented perspective, horizontal and inclusive, participatory relations with beneficiaries were regarded as suitable in order to work efficiently and effectively. Although we could not identify clear field-specific patterns regarding the

conception of relations with beneficiaries, the country context seems to play a certain indirect role. Our findings suggest that both the weight and the justification of bottom-up relations were influenced by the degree of TSOs' politicisation. In the Greek and German cases, the high degree of politicised TSOs went along with an emphasis on bottom-up relations and political, normative justifications. In Poland, where the interviewed TSOs were in part purely service-oriented, the bottom-up approach was less pronounced, and where so, partly with pragmatic, effectiveness-based justifications.

Conclusions

This paper aims to shed light on the solidarity understandings by smaller to medium-scale, grassroots-based, often locally-embedded and transnationally-oriented civil society organisations. Even though our approach was exploratory and inductive, the main categories in interviewees' reflections about solidarity turned out to mirror the main theoretical typologies in the field of civil society and social movement research (e.g. Featherstone, 2012; Giugni and Passy, 2001; Waterman, 2001). The rationale of action, the scope of beneficiaries and relations with and among beneficiaries emerged as relevant themes to distinguish between various forms of solidarity practised by TSOs.

Our study also revealed that the core understanding of solidarity among the TSOs under review reflects the progressive, transnational type of solidarity (upper left square in Figure 1). This solidarity conception is characterised by a combination of a rationale based on political purposes and progressive humanistic values orientation, and the openness to various groups of beneficiaries, which further translates as active connection building between different constituencies and practicing universal solidarity.

What is more, our research provides novel insights into the dynamics that shape the various dimensions of TSOs' understanding of solidarity as a practice. On the one hand, TSOs appear to react to contextual conditions and changing circumstances at country-level (also Anner, 2011; Baumgarten, 2014). This becomes particularly evident with regard to TSOs' country-specific experiences with the impact of unfolding crises, like the financial and economic crisis following 2008 and/or the so-called refugee crisis, and the respective policy responses, most notably austerity policies, the weakening of the welfare state and/or the lack of an adequate public problem-solving capacity. In Greece and Germany, such experiences contributed to the rise of a new culture of civic engagement and new solidarity practices. Especially due to the proliferation of informal and alternative grassroots civil society actors, organised solidarity engagement became much more politicised and contentious, thus changing – and politicising – the very understanding of solidarity. Indeed, this observation corroborates findings of recent studies analysing the enhanced politicisation of collective action as a reaction to insufficient and inadequate state responses to the recent financial and economic crisis (della Porta, 2015; Kriesi, 2016; Zamponi and Bossi, 2018).

On the other hand, field-specific conditions and frameworks seem to matter in many ways (also Diani, 2019; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011; Lahusen et al., 2021; London and Schneider, 2012; Schedin, 2017). Overall, our study paints a complex picture of the interplay between the various factors underlying TSOs' solidarity conceptions. Against this backdrop, and given the

limitations of a case study across three action fields and countries, further research would be useful to enhance our understanding of the factors and dynamics that shape the ways in which collective actors perceive and (re-)construct (transnational) solidarity.

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