

In Whose Name Are You Speaking? The Marginalization of the Poor in Global Civil Society

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Abstract

Global civil society is often uncritically seen as a democratic force in global governance. Civil society organizations claim to hold states and intergovernmental institutions accountable and channel the voices of the world's poorest people in policy making. Yet to what extent do they succeed in performing that role? This article assesses the representation of the poor in global civil society, with a focus on the negotiations of the Sustainable Development Goals, a process widely hailed as one of the most democratic ever organized by the United Nations. We first analyse how the poor and their local representatives are procedurally included in global civil society (*procedural representation*). We then quantitatively assess the actual representation of civil society organizations from the world's poorest countries in the civil society hearings of the SDG negotiations, where civil society was invited to speak on behalf of their constituencies (*geographical representation*). Finally, we evaluate the extent to which global civil society representatives who claim to speak on behalf of the poor legitimately represented the interests of these people (*discursive representation*). We found that global civil society fails to fully represent the poor on procedural, geographical and discursive terms, and eventually perpetuates postcolonial injustices in global sustainability governance.

Policy Implications

- In international institutions, civil society representation from the Global South must be drastically increased.
- This requires, among others, global funding mechanisms to enable participation of, and prior regional consultation among, Global South constituencies.
- Operational rules of global civil society networks must be radically transformed to allow for transparent, fair, and meaningful representation by organizations based in the Global South.
- The United Nations and other agencies must ensure through clear rules and supportive funding mechanisms that civil society participation is geographically balanced. As an example, the majority of speaking slots for civil society in negotiations must be reserved for organizations based in the Global South.

Global civil society is often uncritically seen as a force for democracy and as a solution for a perceived democratic legitimacy deficit in global governance; a deficit that arises, some argue, from the lack of responsiveness of intergovernmental norms and policies to collective concerns and preferences. Because the conditions for electoral democracy do not exist at the global level, we would need, as some contest, other ways of 'thinking democracy' in international organizations and institutions (Keohane, 2006).

One solution often proposed is to further strengthen the representation of societal interests and citizen groups outside the formal channels of governments and intergovernmental agencies. Usually, representation is defined as 'substantive acting for others' (Pitkin, 1967); at the international level, this would imply that all citizens with a stake in intergovernmental negotiations contribute through their representatives to the making of decisions that affect their lives (B ckstrand, 2006; Macdonald, 2008). In the early 1990s, the United Nations (UN) developed the system of

'Major Groups', which still exists as the main institutionalized mechanism for civil society representation in UN settings. Nine Major Groups have been defined, ranging from 'women' to 'business', 'science', 'farmers', 'youth', and 'indigenous peoples'. In practice, this representation is supposed to occur through 'organizing partners' that act as facilitators between their local constituencies and the intergovernmental policy process. Local, national and globally operating civil society organizations are expected to channel to these facilitators the countless voices of local groups and citizens that cannot directly take part in UN negotiations. In an ideal sense, these civil society organizations and especially the organizing partners are assumed to bring seven billion voices to the UN negotiation table.

This participation of civil society organizations in intergovernmental negotiations has grown tremendously in recent years, especially regarding global policies on the environment, development and sustainability. While in 1972, only 250 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) took part in the

first global environmental summit of the United Nations in Stockholm, four decades later almost 10,000 civil society representatives were accredited to the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro (Bäckstrand, 2015). The negotiations on the 17 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) that were adopted by the UN in September 2015 mark the most recent phase in the long-term trend towards increased civil society participation in global governance (Fox and Stoett, 2016), bringing the Secretary-General of the UN at that time, Ban Ki-Moon, to the enthusiastic conclusion that the political outcome was 'a truly We The Peoples Agenda' (United Nations, 2015).

In theory, the current approach of representing individual citizens through the system of Major Groups should bring forward also the voices of the world's poorest people to the highest levels of global decision-making. But is this really the case? Are the views and interests of the global poor effectively represented through this system? When it comes to the representation of the poorest countries, most research so far tends to analyse the extent to which their *governments* manage to represent their people in global negotiations. Such studies have looked into intergovernmental negotiations on a range of global issues, including climate change (Allan and Dauvergne, 2013; Biermann, 1998; Roger and Belliethathan, 2016; Schroeder et al., 2012; Williams, 2006), biodiversity (Miller, 1995; Rosendal, 2000; Sell, 1996), desertification (Najam, 2004), or trade (Biermann, 2001; Helleiner, 2002; Narlikar, 2006). Little is known, however, about whether and how global civil society organizations legitimately represent the world's 'Bottom Billion' in intergovernmental negotiations.¹

This is a major shortcoming in current research, which we address in this article: we provide a first detailed empirical analysis of the actual representation of the global poor within the Major Groups system, focusing on the important 2013–2015 UN negotiations on the SDGs. To what extent did the huge civil society participation in these negotiations really represent the world's poorest people who are disproportionately affected by global sustainability challenges? Have civil society organizations successfully managed to channel the voices of the 'Bottom Billion' to these negotiations and reduced the legitimacy deficit in global governance?

The article proceeds as follows. The next section introduces our analytical framework. The subsequent three empirical sections analyse the extent to which the global poor are represented in important United Nations civil society hearings and whether their interests are represented by the organizations that claim to speak on their behalf. The final sections discuss the findings and conclude the analysis.

1. Analytical framework

Conceptually, our inquiry is about the democratic legitimacy of global policies, that is, the extent to which citizens – including the poor – can discuss and decide the direction of global governance and hold decision-makers accountable. Democratic legitimacy is operationalized most prominently

as input legitimacy, which refers to the inclusiveness of governance (Bäckstrand, 2006; Biermann and Gupta, 2011; Scharpf, 1997, 1999), along with criteria of throughput and output legitimacy (Bursens, 2009; Höreth, 1999; Schmidt, 2006), relating to the accountability and effectiveness of governance arrangements (Haas, 2004; Nanz and Steffek, 2004).

We understand the poor, following the United Nations definition, as people suffering from 'a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information' (United Nations, 1996, p. 38). As a representative sample of the 'global poor', we focus on one group of especially impoverished countries and their people: the so-called 'least developed countries' (LDCs). This is a country classification that was introduced in the UN system in 1971, with the goal of channelling extra funding and vital support to the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries. In 2021, 46 countries were classified as an LDC, with a total population of roughly one billion (World Bank, n.d.).² Although poverty is global and affects an increasing number of people also in industrialized and middle-income countries, people in LDCs, with 13 per cent of the world's population, still represent large parts of the global poor. Recent research has shown that most of the nearly one billion people who live below the extreme poverty line of US \$1.90 a day live in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia (Kashwan et al., 2020; Sumner et al., 2020), which is where most of the 46 LDCs are located. Over 35 per cent of people live off less than US\$ 1.90 a day in the LDCs. In 13 of these countries, the rate of extreme poverty is above 50 per cent, and in four countries even 70 per cent. In comparison, in only seven countries outside the LDC category is the percentage of extremely poor people above 30 per cent (World Bank, 2020).³ Not only do people in LDCs face greater deprivations than in other regions of the world: they are also disproportionately vulnerable to environmental hazards, due to their high exposure and poor resilience. Between 1991 and 2005, nearly 90 per cent of deaths related to natural hazards were in developing nations; 25 per cent of these deaths occurred in LDCs (Silbert and Useche, 2011). Although our focus on the LDCs as a proxy for the global poor does not allow us to fully account for the many different experiences of poverty across North and South, this clear-cut country category of LDCs enables us to engage in meaningful empirical research that scrutinizes, and criticizes, the representation of the global poor in global activism.

Empirically, we study here the Major Groups system of the United Nations, focusing in two sections further on the negotiations of the 17 SDGs that were adopted by the UN in September 2015. These negotiations provided civil society with many participatory channels, including face-to-face participation through the Major Groups system, global online surveys, 11 global thematic consultations, and more than 90 national and regional consultations. Among these many channels, the Major Groups system served as main participatory mechanism in the Open Working Group, an ad hoc negotiation body where government representatives drafted

the SDGs. The Open Working Group met 13 times between January 2013 and July 2014 and provided at these meetings several opportunities for interventions by civil society representatives, such as speaking slots in its plenary sessions (13 sessions and 63 interventions delivered as statements); hearings between the Major Groups and other stakeholders with members and co-chairs of the Open Working Group before the beginning of each meeting day (34 hearings, 273 interventions delivered as statements); 125 side events in New York; along with numerous multilateral or bilateral meetings with members and co-chairs of the Open Working Group. Altogether, civil society representatives were able to make 877 interventions (Sénit, 2020).

Due to the breadth of these data, we focus on the statements by civil society representatives within the Major Groups hearings in the Open Working Group. We select these hearings because the data were publicly available on the website of the UN (United Nations, n.d.). Contrary to side events or multilateral or bilateral meetings with governments and co-chairs, the interventions in the hearings were visible and well documented, allowing us to extensively collect and analyse data on the extent to which the global poor were represented. In addition, civil society organizations made in the hearings the highest number of statements, which were also much longer than for example the merely two minute interventions by civil society in the plenary sessions of the Open Working Group.

Building on conceptualizations derived from global, or 'planetary', justice scholarship (e.g., Biermann and Kalfagianni, 2020; Fraser, 2009; Kalfagianni et al., 2020; Leach et al., 2018), we study representation at three levels. First, we analyse qualitatively how the global poor and their local representatives were procedurally included within the Major Groups at the global level (*procedural representation*). Second, we quantitatively assess the geographic distribution of opportunities for participation of civil society organizations from the LDCs in the civil society hearings of the Open Working Group (*geographical representation*). The study of both procedural and geographical representation allows us to assess the degree of procedural justice in these negotiations, that is, the actual capacity of the global poor to participate in policy and decision-making. Third, we evaluate the extent to which the representatives of Major Groups who claim to speak on behalf of the global poor legitimately represent the interests of these people (*discursive representation*). This analysis informs about the degree of recognitional justice, that is, the extent to which the concerns of the global poor are visible in global activism.

The following sections provide a detailed assessment of the representation of the global poor in UN settings, starting with procedural representation.

2. Procedural representation

What is the role of procedural rules in shaping the representation of the poor in global activism? To address this question, we analyse the procedural rules that the Major Groups have developed to increase democratic legitimacy.

Legitimate procedural representation of the global poor would entail clear rules that allow civil society representatives speaking on behalf of the global poor to be accountable to these constituencies. Accountability we define here as the capacity of the global poor to exercise oversight and constraint on the activities of civil society representatives (Biermann and Gupta, 2011; Keohane, 2003).

To evaluate procedural representation, we combined desk research with qualitative interviews. We collected qualitative data from primary documents related to the procedural rules of the Major Groups as regards input from, and accountability to, their constituencies in LDCs. We complemented this information with data from interviews⁴ with the regional organizing partners of the Major Groups in Africa, the region with most LDCs. We selected seven Major Groups for our study: 'Children and Youth', 'Farmers', 'Indigenous Peoples', 'NGOs', 'Science and Technology', 'Women' and 'Workers and Trade Unions'. We excluded from our study the remaining two Major Groups, 'Business and Industry' and 'Local Authorities', because we do not consider these commercial actors or locally elected governments as part of civil society in the common sense of a self-organized and not-for-profit entity.

The procedural rules that are currently in place have already been revised in response to past criticisms of alleged lacking transparency in the governance of Major Groups. In 2013, a report had complained about the absence of a formal structure and clear rules within Major Groups, arguing that this could lead to power imbalances when those present decide without going through open and transparent consultations with their constituencies (Adams and Pingeot, 2013). Because of this lack of transparency, the practices within the Major Groups had led to the disengagement of some national or local organizations, in particular in Africa.

In responding to these criticisms in 2013, most Major Groups have developed more elaborate governance procedures and reported those to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. To date, five Major Groups have filled in a detailed reporting form with twenty questions on their internal procedures and shared this form on the UN website. These five Major Groups were Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples, Science, Women, and Workers and Trade Unions. Two other Major Groups (of NGOs and Farmers) have not filled in or not shared the governance reporting form, even though the Major Group of NGOs has developed specific terms of reference to define the work of their organizing partners.

We now explore the core mechanisms that Major Groups have developed and analyse the role of LDCs (and other developing countries) in the operation of these mechanisms. We look at mechanisms to select the Major Groups' global and regional organizing partners; analyse how the Major Groups channel the inputs from the constituency to global processes; assess whether the Major Groups' statements represent a broad range of views in the constituency; and study how they ensure fair participation and speaking opportunities in global negotiations.

Selection of major Groups' global and regional organizing partners

First, the Major Groups function with so-called 'global organizing partners'. These are organizations that try to liaise between global negotiations and the constituencies at the grassroots and national level. Each Major Group has their own rules. Many global organizing partners are elected for a two-year term, and often may extend it. Some, however, have restricted the length of such mandates to allow for a larger turnover and enhance the legitimacy of representation. The Major Group of Children and Youth, for instance, does not extend the term of global organizing partners once they reach the age of 30, to always mirror the demographic characteristics of their constituency.

As for the appointment of organizing partners, most Major Groups have defined procedures that follow a list of criteria set by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Many have set up special governance bodies that are responsible for appointing their organizing partners and set additional criteria for this position, including the Major Groups of Children and Youth, NGOs, and Women. For instance, the Major Group of NGOs has created a nomination committee to develop a slate of candidates for elections of global and regional organizing partners, taking into account the balance in terms of geography, gender and represented issue areas (such as the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainable development). In principle, all members of the Major Group of NGOs can be nominated by their organizations for membership on this nomination committee, as well as for the positions of global and regional organizing partners. According to the reporting forms, only three Major Groups (Indigenous Peoples, Science, and Workers and Trade Unions) are not transparent about the procedural rules they apply to appoint their organizing partners.

So, at first glance, all seems democratic and well organized. And yet, the system set up works against the representation of LDCs and to some extent of all developing countries. In fact, several criteria exclude in practice the organizations from the Global South, and specifically those based in the poorest countries.

To start with, to be elected as an organizing partner, applicants need money and time to do what comes with such functions, because there is no financial compensation. The Major Group of NGOs, for instance, requires that the application includes an endorsement letter from the management of the candidate's organization that shows that the organization commits the candidate to work three to four days per week for the Major Group, for a period of two years. This comes close to the secondment of a fulltime senior staff member without any financial compensation for the greater common good of global civil society representation – a major financial investment. Needless to say, such requirements favour the election of organizing partners from highly professionalized and well-resourced NGOs that are not only based in the Global North but that are also (mostly) financed through Northern governments, wealthy

philanthropists with a business background, or general donations from the rich middle-class in the North. Unsurprisingly, among the 16 global organizing partners of the seven Major Groups that we studied and which are publicly available on the UN Major Groups website, 15 come from a transnational or national civil society organization with headquarters in the Global North. This is 94 per cent representation for less than 20 per cent of the global population.

Admittedly, some Major Groups also have regional organizing partners or focal points who liaise between their regional constituencies and global negotiations. Nevertheless, the fact that *the crucial positions of global organizing partners are almost all occupied by civil society organizations from industrialized countries shows the shocking underrepresentation of the global poor in global activism.*

Provision of input into statements by major groups

The official rationale behind the Major Groups system is the representation of a variety of concerns from diverse stakeholders from all countries. They are, in other words, to channel the views and voices of the local people to the highest levels of rulemaking in the UN headquarters in New York City. This requires transparent procedures for constituencies to provide such input into global negotiations. Have Major Groups developed such procedures?

All Major Groups rely on broadly similar tools to transmit the input of their constituencies into global processes and to participate in the drafting of position papers and statements. All have set up mechanisms to collect input, such as in-person meetings before the start of the negotiations, social media and electronic mailing lists. Most information is in English, but at times later translated into other UN languages such as Arabic, French or Spanish, depending on the capacities of each Major Group. However, there are also differences in the extent to which Major Groups are transparent and really bottom-up. Three Major Groups – the ones of Farmers, Indigenous Peoples and Workers and Trade Unions – are elusive about the process by which they draft their statements. Conversely, the four Major Groups of Children and Youth, NGOs, Science, and Women have set up clear and detailed procedures to draft position papers and statements.

For example, the Major Group of Children and Youth follows a five-step process. They first organize a brainstorming phase in which the organizing partners reach out to the mailing lists with a summary of the thematic inputs needed, along with a link to a Google document. The organizing partners then set a conference call with organizations interested to become part of the drafting team to refine the inputs collected on this document and transform it into a short statement based on the speaking time allocated. In a third phase, the draft statement is sent to the constituency to check whether it reflects their priorities, with all members of the Major Group being able to suggest edits. In the closing phase, these suggested edits are considered by the drafting team, leading the organizing partners to close the document for any further inputs. In a final phase, the

organizing partners circulate this statement among the constituency for any remaining 'red flags', that is, whether any elements of the statement lack consensus. If discussions between the organizing partner and those that raised the red flag do not yield a compromise, the problematic text element is removed. The revised, final statement is sent to the constituency.

Other input mechanisms, however, are not as bottom-up oriented as this one. The Major Group of NGOs, for instance, requires its members to send in comments only after a draft document has been prepared and shared by the organizing partners. Even though this approach might be more time-efficient, it is less inclusive, with organizing partners becoming more powerful given their central role in the drafting process. They become more 'steering' partners than what they are supposed to be, that is, facilitators between their constituency and global negotiations. Eventually, statements drafted on the basis of such exclusive and centralized input mechanisms are less likely to fairly represent marginalized voices, all the more since global organizing partners largely come from well-institutionalized civil society organizations based in the Global North.

Furthermore, all mechanisms for input provision exclude large communities of the poor, especially all those who are illiterate, who live in rural areas, who do not speak English or another UN language, and who lack Internet access. Excluded are hence billions of people, many of them in LDCs. Just in terms of Internet access, half of humanity – 3.6 billion people – are still offline; in LDCs, only one out of five people have regular access to the Internet (ITU, 2019). In those countries, affordability and lack of digital skills or basic computer skills, such as copying a file or sending an email with an attachment, are still key barriers to the uptake and effective use of the Internet. Therefore, if civil society organizations do not organize in-person workshops with the unconnected, the voices of these people will be missing from civil society statements. The regional organizing partner of the Major Group of Women for francophone Africa, Cécile Ndjebet, hence mentioned communication as a key challenge that limits participation:

Many African countries have a poor Internet connection, and many countries do not even have access to electricity in rural areas. We are trying to have national focal points that cover the rural areas of their countries, but with limited resources it also becomes difficult. So, we work with those who can get access to WhatsApp, to webinars, with those who have telephones or computers. But how can we reach out to women in the villages? How can we get them on board? That is a great challenge. Last time when we planned a webinar for 40 people, we ended up with 20 people because in most countries access to Internet becomes challenging. (Cécile Ndjebet, interview 28 January 2020)

In short, despite all efforts by well-meaning staff of global civil society organizations, the provision of input to

statements of global civil society is still heavily biased in favour of those who speak English, can read and write, have regular Internet access, and can afford the spare time to engage in 'global democracy'. In a word: the current system still strongly favours the middle-class of the Global North.

Procedures to ensure the representation of a broad range of views

How do the Major Groups, then, ensure that the statements they deliver to governments represent a broad range of views? Have they developed specific procedures to include the most marginalized communities?

Representation of a broad range of views, first, would entail communication in languages other than English. In that regard, some Major Groups fare better than others. For instance, the Major Group of Women systematically translates English-language documents related to the negotiations into both French and Spanish. And yet, all native and non-native speakers of English, Spanish and French together only add up to 27 per cent of the world population (Eberhard et al., 2020). About three quarters of the global population had no chance to give any input as they lacked the language skills to read the statements or follow the discussions. To counter this basis, the Major Group of Women has set up in underrepresented regions like Africa one regional organizing partner for each of the most important linguistic groups of that region. Three regional organizing partners represent the constituencies of francophone Africa, anglophone Africa, and Arabic-speaking Africa. Yet within African countries, proficiency in English, French or Arabic again varies substantially. Many Africans, mainly in rural areas, speak only one of the roughly 2,000 African languages, and not the language brought in the 18th or 19th century by colonial invaders. Without translation, the views of these communities will hardly be represented. Other Major Groups, like the one representing children and youth, rely on some 150 young people to translate documents in as many languages as possible. However, time constraints seldom allow these volunteers to translate all documents in a prompt fashion. Overall, translation mainly relies on the regional organizing partners and depends on their skills and resources. This may prove challenging, as Cécile Ndjebet, the regional organizing partner of the Major Group of Women for francophone Africa, noted during our interview:

Next Friday we have a three-hour webinar with all organizing partners. It is in English; I will need to translate the outcomes into French to be able to disseminate it to my constituency. Almost all documents of our Major Group are in English. I try to translate these documents as much as I can but it is not easy, since we do not have any budget for this. [...] Globally I love my role as organizing partner for francophone Africa though sometimes it is a very demanding role. (Cécile Ndjebet, interview 28 January 2020)

Then, representation of a broad range of views entails specific procedures to reach out to the most underrepresented people. However, most Major Groups did not mention any specific outreach mechanism targeted to underrepresented regions in the reporting form they sent to the United Nations. Only the Major Group of Women reported that they try to identify the most underrepresented regions in the inputs they receive and to specifically reach out to the members in those regions by email. The other eight Major Groups remained silent on this point.

Finally, representation of a broad range of views entails the expression of divergent preferences within a statement. Two Major Groups, representing women and NGOs, allow here for reservations and objections in footnotes whenever a statement does not find consensus among members. The Major Group of Children and Youth, as mentioned, allows its members to raise a 'red flag' whenever they seek to include or exclude specific text within a statement; but it then excludes any divergent views in the end because all statements require consensus from all group members.

Procedures to ensure fair participation and speaking opportunities

Who is then speaking on behalf of a Major Group as the face and voice of their societal interest in global negotiations? In the end, all nine Major Groups need to select one person from their membership to present the final statement on behalf of their constituency during the negotiations. How is this selection organized in each Major Group? Do selection procedures guarantee fair participation and speaking opportunities for all – including for organizations based in the Global South?

Surprisingly, we found that for granting speaking opportunities to its members, only the Major Group of Children and Youth has developed a procedure that is based on a clear and exhaustive set of criteria. Here, a selection committee of fifty member organizations first decides whether funding is available for bringing one member to read the group's statement at the UN. Then, the selection committee votes on the member organization that is to receive this travel support, based on criteria of age, motivation, experience, and region.

All other Major Groups, however, lack a clear decision-making process and criteria for selecting their spokesperson, eventually excluding some constituencies from participating in and speaking at UN negotiations. The Major Group representing NGOs, for instance, selects their spokesperson simply at the UN 'on the spot' based on a quick consensus decision among the member organizations present in the room. Of course, such a process automatically excludes all organizations that lack funding to attend the negotiations in New York. 'On the spot' elections are also likely to benefit assertive, eloquent, and often Anglophone speakers. Consequently, highly professionalized and well-resourced organizations based in the Global North – and often with experienced resident personnel in New York City – dominate the speaking opportunities. For example, at the Fourth

Interactive Dialogue of the UN General Assembly on Harmony with Nature, the global farmers' view was brought in by an eco-farmer from Maine and science was represented by a professor from New Hampshire, both needing merely a bus ticket. The Major Group of Women has set selection criteria that exclude in a different way: here, the group selects their spokeswoman following not only their expertise and region but also their experience with UN processes. Also this disadvantages grassroots organizations with extensive field experience but little standing in New York circles.

In addition to these formal and informal procedures, funding plays a key role in explaining the lack of representation of civil society actors from the Global South. Regional representatives of Major Groups have named lack of resources as a constraining factor for the engagement of activists from LDCs. For instance, one regional organizing partner of the Major Groups for Africa explained:

Africa is underprivileged. In Europe, there are so many foundations that fund the activities of the European organizing partners of the Major Group. European activists go to HLPF [High Level Political Forum] meetings with their own funding. They can afford to meet all the costs, such as tickets, accommodation, and food. In Africa, this is not the case. We are not even able to fly over a single person from our constituency. Even we, as regional organizing partners, have to struggle to raise money to be there. Sometimes we cannot even buy our own ticket and when that happens, there is no other person to represent Africa. (Regional organizing partner for Africa, interview 22 November 2019)

To summarize this section, procedural rules for civil society participation in global sustainability governance are heavily biased against people from LDCs, and from the Global South more generally. They lead to a larger representation in global sustainability governance of those communities that speak English, that have access to the Internet, that have the means for professional organization including salaried staff, and that can afford regular travel to, and living costs in, New York and other UN cities.

Overall, this favours the rich middle class in the industrialized countries, from North America to Europe, Japan, and Australia.

3. Geographical representation

How are then civil society organizations and activists from the Global South, and in particular from the LDCs, represented in international institutions where 'global civil society' has a voice? To address this question, we analysed the participants and speakers from LDCs – including representatives of organizations based in those countries – in the hearings with Major Groups in the Open Working Group.

We collected disaggregated data by age and country of residence based on a web survey that we designed and emailed to all participants listed in a document shared by the Department for Economic and Social Affairs of the

United Nations, which organized the hearings. As the answer rate in our survey was only of 31 per cent, further research on the websites of professional social networks allowed us to eventually cover 86 per cent of all participants in the hearings. We also examined the level of institutionalization of the participating actors, differentiating between well-structured, highly formalized and presumably well-funded civil society organizations operating at the international level, and other actors operating mainly at national and local levels (grassroots organizations) (Kaldor, 2003; Tarow, 1998).

We consider representation of the global poor as legitimate, in our quantitative analysis, when the formally commissioned mechanisms for civil society participation included at least 13 per cent of participants from LDCs (which would be equal to their part in the world population) and if these participants broadly matched the demographics of LDCs in terms of age categories. Both criteria, however, were by far not matched by the data.

To start with, almost 140 countries were *not at all* represented in the hearings. The data showed 216 representatives speaking on behalf of 159 civil society organizations,⁵ but these representatives came from only 57 countries. Many of the non-represented countries were from the group of LDCs. Only 4 per cent of all civil society participants in the hearings were based in a LDC, and these few participants came from only five countries, namely Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Nepal and Uganda. All the other 44 LDCs had not even one speaker or civil society representative in the hearings.

More broadly, the entire group of developing countries – including all middle-income countries – contributed only 26 per cent of the civil society participants in the hearings of the Open Working Group with Major Groups, even though this entire group of countries represents 83 per cent of the world population (2015) (United Nations Population Dynamics, n.d.). Rather strikingly, Brazil, India, China and South Africa contributed only 3 per cent of all civil society speakers in the hearings, while these four countries account for over 40 per cent of the world population, and 42 per cent of people living off less than US\$ 1.90 a day globally (World Bank, 2020).

Conversely, civil society representatives based in OECD countries took up 73 per cent of all speaking slots in the civil society hearings, even though these countries account for only 17 per cent of the world population (OECD, n.d.). To make it more extreme, if not bizarre: 30 per cent of all civil society representatives in the hearings of the Open Working Group who responded to our survey were citizens of the United States of America. So much, one might conclude, for global democracy.

The formal representatives of civil society are also advanced in their age, including those few who came from LDCs. Only 20 per cent of the civil society representatives from LDCs were young (under 29 years old), even though 69 per cent of their citizens fall into this age group. Conversely, 35 per cent of speakers who took the floor on behalf of civil society from LDCs were 45 or older. This age

group, however, amounts to only 14 per cent of the population in these countries.

In addition, the negotiations of the SDGs favoured the participation of highly institutionalized civil society organizations. Fifty-eight per cent of civil society representatives spoke on behalf of an internationally operating NGO or an international coalition of NGOs and 26 per cent on behalf of a nationally operating NGO. Only 10 per cent spoke for a grassroots organization. The remaining participants spoke on behalf of an international or national unions' coalition (3 per cent) or an academic institution (3 per cent). A striking finding is that a staggering 117 of the 159 organizations that made a statement in the Open Working Group were based in the Global North. Only eight out of these 159 organizations had their international or national secretariat in an LDC (namely Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nepal and Uganda), and an additional 34 were running their operations from another developing country.

To place these data further in context: these six civil society organizations from LDCs delivered only seven statements in the hearings. This is lower or equal to the number of statements delivered by, for example, the International Chamber of Commerce, representing major corporations (eight statements) or World Animal Protection, a London-based global organization (seven statements). Hence, Northern-based private foundations for business or for animals managed to deliver more statements than all organizations based in a LDC combined.

In sum, the empirical analysis of the hearings in the Open Working Group with Major Groups shows *that the vast majority of civil society organizations that participated in the negotiations of the SDGs were internationally operating NGOs based in the Global North*. Global democracy, we argue, looks different.

4. Discursive representation

How does this situation then affect the discourses of global sustainability as they are expressed in the key documents of civil society organizations? We now turn to this question of *discursive representation* and explore the impacts of flawed procedural and geographical representation of the global poor on the recognition of their interests in global sustainability governance.

Theories of participatory and deliberative democracy emphasize that for any policy outcome to be considered democratically legitimate, all affected groups must be able to bring in their perspectives. Regarding the input of civil society organizations in UN negotiations, legitimate representation requires that statements by global civil society representatives who claim to speak on behalf of the global poor mention the interests of these populations. This is the question of discursive representation.

In this section, we look at how the Major Groups framed their constituencies and stood for their views. Given the fine-grained discursive detail of this analysis, we had to limit our interrogation to a specific policy area. We chose climate change as one of the most pressing policy issues, with

important equity and distributional aspects that are critical to LDCs given their high vulnerabilities. We analysed the content of 33 statements with references to climate change delivered by Major Group representatives in the negotiations of the SDGs and paid specific attention to two sub-questions: who gets discursively represented in the statements delivered by civil society representatives? And how often and how centrally do Major Groups mention the global poor in their representative claims about climate change?

To start with, we found that the Major Groups that we studied claimed to represent vulnerable groups in 19 of their 33 statements about climate change (the Major Group 'Workers and Trade Unions' being the only exception). This is not surprising. It is, after all, the Major Groups' formal mandate to stand for unheard voices in intergovernmental processes on sustainability. In the other 14 statements, Major Groups did not claim to represent any specific groups but speak for 'humanity' as a whole, or even the 'Earth system'. Such broad claims of vague entities such as humanity or the earth system, however, make the special vulnerability of the poor and of the most vulnerable LDCs easily invisible.

Some Major Groups are more specific than others in terms of the constituencies they claim to represent. For instance, the Major Group of Farmers claimed specifically to stand for smallholder farmers, indigenous farmers, and rural dwellers. The Major Group of Women also claimed to represent different communities of women, such as girls and indigenous women. Conversely, the two Major Groups of NGOs and Science and Technology do not advance any pretention of representing a specific constituency within their communities; they rather claim to speak for civil society at large, including the global poor.

Overall, we note that only two statements of Major Groups made any specific reference to the global poor in highlighting their larger vulnerability to the impacts of climate change: the Major Group of Women (2013) stated that due to drought and desertification induced by climate change, 'the poor are suffering from degradation of their soils, agricultural land, forests, water supplies and biodiversity, and alteration of natural weather cycles'. Similarly, the Major Group of Science and Technology (2013) referred to inequality in the adaptive capacity of higher 'developed societies' compared to 'poorer societies that do not have well "developed" infrastructures and institutions', and the resulting prospects of 'rising social unrest and extreme human vulnerability exacerbated by the threat of climate change'.

In sum, many statements of global civil society in the UN system do not refer to specific communities or interests but simply claim to speak on behalf of 'humankind' and the larger common good, hence making the global poor invisible. In those statements where constituencies are mentioned explicitly and where vulnerable people are referred to, the Major Groups stayed vague about the constituencies they claim to stand for. To some extent, this is unsurprising and a consequence of the high degree of interest aggregation. Consensus statements on behalf of the 'women of the world' or the 'global youth' will never achieve high degrees

of specificity. And yet, this lack of specificity may also do a disservice to civil society.

With unelected representatives – as is the case with most Major Groups – and an undefined constituency, civil society becomes more vulnerable to criticisms by governments about the basis of their legitimacy. Governments and other actors – especially from least developed and other developing countries – might well use this critique to more fundamentally question the participation of civil society representatives in intergovernmental negotiations, if this participation is perceived as being heavily dominated by organizations or people from the Global North.

5. Discussion

Why are the global poor underrepresented or misrepresented in global sustainability governance? Is it simply a question of logistics that could be resolved by more human and financial resources for civil society organizations? Or do these imbalances relate to deeper structural issues? What are the underlying causes that explain the limitations and failures of representation of the global poor in global civil society activism?

Our findings show clearly how specific procedural rules related to both civil society and UN negotiation processes shape the distribution of power within global civil society. When we speak here of power we mean more than just formal authority or the direct ability of an actor to get another actor to do what this actor would otherwise not do; we also include the more subtle agenda-setting and ideational dimensions of power (Kashwan et al., 2019). For instance, actors in global civil society have different abilities to place concerns on the agenda or keep issues off the agenda. Actors also have different abilities to mould perceptions, create narratives or shape preferences in subtle ways that eventually may force some less influential constituencies to accept underprivileged positions in global governance (Lukes, 2005). For example, continuously portraying the poor merely as victims of global environmental change may contribute to minimizing their agency and strengthen and legitimize the position and main discourses of organizations from the Global North that claim to represent them.

Such power asymmetries are further fuelled by the inherent limits of global representation. Indeed, already in 2005 scholarship from the Global South recognized that 'practices of representation in general and representatives in particular possess a great deal of autonomy from those who are represented, or rather from the interests of those who are represented' (Chandhoke, 2005, p. 361). The interests of the poor, rather than being represented, are often constructed by global actors through a process of selective representation. Neera Chandhoke (2005) argues that this situation is only possible inasmuch as the representative has the discretion to sort and articulate multiple, and sometimes competing interests, and in this process to prioritize some while marginalizing others – and hence to exercise power.

These power asymmetries, finally, create imbalances in the representation of the poor in global civil society owing

to the lack of external accountability of civil society organizations to their constituents. This problem is not new; it is related to the simple fact that NGO donors are not the same as their beneficiaries. In other words, the continuous and possibly growing dependence of 'global civil society' on Northern donors may continue to shape their priorities and affect their accountability towards the poor (Kaldor, 2003), unless structural reforms in global civil society counter the dominance of the lopsided financial dependency.

6. Conclusion

In short, our analysis of civil society activism in global sustainability governance has shown huge imbalances between the representation of civil society actors from the Global South and the Global North. Taking the negotiations of the SDGs as an empirical example, we found that the poor have been clearly underrepresented in quantitative terms: people from LDCs make up only 4 per cent of all participants in formal civil society representation in these negotiations. Also the procedural rules for civil society participation in negotiations on global sustainability are heavily biased against people from the Global South. The Major Groups system, which claims to help the representation of nine constituencies, lacks accountability when it comes to LDCs. With the exception of the two Major Groups that claim to represent women and youth, all other Major Groups lack clear and formal procedures to allow the represented to fully channel their inputs to, and be held accountable by, those they claim to represent. In discursive terms, although all Major Groups state to give a voice to the vulnerable and poor people of the world, they often present a generic one-humankind discourse. Only rarely do they concretely refer to the global poor in their statements or do they prioritize their situation.

We do not imply, of course, that *all* civil society organizations generally work against LDCs. Many of these groups are important in supporting the poor, which are otherwise easily forgotten in the dominant neoliberal, Western-centric worldview. In climate governance, for instance, the leaders of the alliance of LDCs and of small island countries often rely on support of some of the more radical NGOs (Khan et al., 2020). Yet, these strategic alliances in global negotiations between the leaders of the LDCs and the more radical environmentalist or climate justice activists in the Global North do not take away the fundamental legitimacy problem that we identified in this article: global civil society is largely organized and funded by people in the Global North. There is simply no effective control by Southern actors of those civil society organizations that speak in their name.

How, then, could the concerns of the world's poorest people be more actively represented in global sustainability governance? This requires, for one, appropriate funding from the UN and governments to ensure the effective participation of civil society organizations from the LDCs in intergovernmental negotiations. Second, the UN needs to engage in a more open and explicit debate on the role that 'civil society' is playing in the implementation of global agreements such as the SDGs. Too often do we observe that

the win-win rhetoric and the participatory promise associated with 'multi-stakeholder' processes in fact mask the inherent and often less visible processes of shifting responsibility to powerful Northern NGOs or the vested interests of business actors (Mert, 2019). The rhetoric of participation in the UN must move away from neoliberal values of efficiency towards truly embracing principles of democratic legitimacy.

These findings call, finally, for more research and data collection on the actual participation of civil society and on the effective representation of vulnerable people in global sustainability governance. Future studies could explore for example how the global poor have been included in more recent assessments on the implementation of the SDGs, nationally in the voluntary reviews by countries and internationally during meetings of the High Level Political Forum. As the Covid-19 pandemic still spreads, research must also delve deeper into the impacts of technology-enhanced participation on the representation of the poor in global governance. Will the now pervasive use of online videoconferencing promote active and democratic participation and representation of the global poor? The turn to online meetings makes reforms from the UN and civil society organizations ever more important and urgent in order to address new imbalances and to work towards true global and inclusive democracy.

Notes

1. Even though some studies have explored the representation of voices from the South in human rights international NGOs (Chandhoke, 2005) or the implications of poor-led transnational grassroots movements for the accountability of global civil society (Batiwala, 2002), no research to date has focused on the extent to which the global poor are represented in international institutions where global civil society has a voice.
2. There are currently 46 countries defined by the United Nations as 'least developed'. Vanuatu graduated on 4 December 2020. At the time of the negotiations of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2013–2014, there were 49 countries defined as 'least developed' (Equatorial Guinea and Samoa graduated since then). These changes since 2014 do not affect our results, as none of the participants to the hearings analysed here came from Equatorial Guinea or Samoa.
3. These countries are: Congo Republic, Kenya, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe.
4. Interviewees are indicated by their name or their function, depending on whether they chose to have their anonymity protected in the consent form they filled in before our interview.
5. A total of 238 civil society actors representing 175 organizations participated in the hearings of the Open Working Group. From this initial sample we excluded participants representing business actors and local governments, and ended up with a sample of 216 participants representing 159 organizations.

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