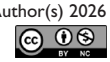
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Collaboration in civil society: relations between charities and trade unions in Spain and the United Kingdom

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Summary

This article examines collaboration between two important civil society actors – trade unions and charities – in both Spain and the United Kingdom. While previous research focuses on the implications of such collaboration for trade union revitalisation, this article aims to understand this collaboration on its own merits, with a view to improving services to members and clients. It examines how respondents view collaboration, the current state of collaboration, and the obstacles that must be overcome. Data from 63 interviews indicate that while collaboration generally was viewed positively, UK respondents expressed more caution than their Spanish counterparts. Obstacles, particularly in the United Kingdom, included charities' caution about collaboration due to both their dependence on state funding and the collective bargaining activities of unions within the charitable sector. The Spanish unions' greater institutional power resources and how they managed them explain the more positive approach to collaboration among Spanish charities.

Résumé

Cet article examine la collaboration entre deux acteurs importants de la société civile – les syndicats et les associations caritatives – en Espagne et au Royaume-Uni. Les recherches antérieures portant principalement sur les implications de cette collaboration pour la revitalisation syndicale, cet article entend la comprendre en soi, afin d'améliorer les services aux membres et aux bénéficiaires. Il analyse comment les personnes interrogées perçoivent cette collaboration, son état actuel et les difficultés à surmonter. Les données issues de 63 entretiens montrent que la collaboration est généralement perçue favorablement, mais que les répondants se sont

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montrés plus prudents au Royaume-Uni qu'en Espagne, en raison notamment de la réticence des associations caritatives britanniques à s'engager dans une collaboration, en raison de leur dépendance vis-à-vis des financements publics et des activités de négociation collective menées par les syndicats au sein du secteur caritatif. Les ressources institutionnelles plus importantes des syndicats espagnols et la manière dont ils les gèrent expliquent l'approche plus positive des associations caritatives espagnoles.

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht die Zusammenarbeit zwischen zwei wichtigen Akteuren der Zivilgesellschaft – Gewerkschaften und Wohltätigkeitsorganisationen – in Spanien und im Vereinigten Königreich. Während es bei den bisher vorliegenden Studien in erster Linie um die Auswirkungen einer solchen Zusammenarbeit auf die Erneuerung der Gewerkschaften ging, will das Autorenteam diese Kooperation auch unabhängig von ihrem Nutzen verstehen. Dabei geht es auch darum, die Dienstleistungen für Mitglieder und für die jeweilige Klientel zu verbessern. Der Artikel untersucht im Rahmen einer Umfrage, wie die Befragten diese Zusammenarbeit wahrnehmen, welchen aktuellen Status diese Kooperation hat und welche Hürden zu überwinden sind. Die Daten aus 63 Interviews deuten darauf hin, dass diese Zusammenarbeit zwar generell positiv gesehen wird, die Befragten aus dem Vereinigten Königreich jedoch mehr Vorbehalte äußerten als das spanische Panel. Dies lag insbesondere an den Bedenken der britischen Wohltätigkeitsorganisationen wegen ihrer Abhängigkeit von staatlicher Finanzierung und wegen der Aktivitäten der Gewerkschaften im Wohltätigkeitssektor selbst. Die größeren institutionellen Machtressourcen der spanischen Gewerkschaften und ihr Umgang mit diesem Potenzial erklären den positiveren Blick der spanischen Wohltätigkeitsorganisationen auf die Zusammenarbeit.

Keywords

Charities, unions, collaboration, campaigning, Spain, United Kingdom, power resources

Introduction

Two of the principal institutions of civil society, charities and trade unions, have had to face challenging environments in recent decades. In this context, the advocacy of greater collaboration between the institutions has developed (Tizard, 2017). This article presents the results of comparative research that examined how the actors view such collaboration, existing collaborations, and the difficulties that must be overcome to make further collaboration possible.

The article adopts a comparative approach based on data from two European countries, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK). Comparative case analysis, even if it involves the study of only two cases, is better than relying on a single case when it comes to external generalisation and understanding causation (Yin, 2003). The selection of Spain – which is characterised by a weak but enduring neo-corporatist and social dialogue model with consolidated labour market institutions – and the UK – a liberal market economy (LME) – was driven by the desirability to include countries with contrasting institutional characteristics, which facilitates comparative analysis and renders findings more robust (López-Andreu and Martínez Lucio, 2025).

The UK research includes national organisations registered as charities with the Charity Commission for England and Wales. There is no central registrar in Spain and so the research focuses on organisations that are members of the two major associations of national charities: the Platform of Third Sector Organisations and the Platform of Social Action NGOs. In both countries

the emphasis is on national-level activities, excluding development work. By concentrating specifically on charities, we avoid less precise terms such as civil society organisations, characterised by Hyndman et al. (2024) as a 'large baggy monster'.

Our investigation was designed to address three questions:

i How do respondents from the two main actors perceive collaboration between charities and trade unions?
ii What is the state of collaboration at present?
iii What obstacles must be overcome for collaboration to be effective?

In examining these questions, the research is informed by power resources theory (Refslund and Arnholz, 2021). Three key implications arise from this. One is the need to examine the potential for collaboration between unions and charities to develop into coalition power resources. Second, given the contrasting institutional frameworks of trade unions in the two countries, the research should provide evidence of the impact of institutional power resources on the nature of collaboration. Third, the focus on charities and unions' reciprocal perceptions means that the research may provide insights into understanding the two actors' legitimacy and ideational power resources.

Discussion of (union) power resources is often linked to the question of trade union 'revitalisation', which concerns how unions might regain (some of) their lost power, which can involve coalition-building with other kinds of organisation (Tattersall, 2010; Visser, 2024). This article is predicated on a less union-centric approach, however; one that focuses on understanding the significance of collaboration for both unions and charities. Nevertheless, given that coalition power resources can contribute to such revitalisation (Frege and Kelly, 2004), the Conclusion offers some reflections on the implications of the findings for revitalisation.

The research findings indicate an interest in collaboration among actors in both countries. National differences are, however, identified in the approach to collaboration and the type of collaboration developed. A considerable number of collaborations are identified, but it is important to recognise their limits. Collaboration is not a major priority for either actor. Charities, for example, are cautious about developing relations with unions. Most collaborations seem unlikely to develop significant coalition power resources and the characteristics necessary for sustainable, long-term coalitions (Tattersall, 2010).

The data suggest that the more substantial institutional power resources available to the Spanish unions – including collective bargaining and union structures, the legal system and corporatist relations (Frege and Kelly, 2003) – and how the unions manage them play a key role in explaining national differences in terms of propensity to collaborate and types of collaboration identified. There is also evidence that collaboration can confer increased legitimacy on the actors involved, contributing to ideational power resources (Madi, 2024). The research suggests a synergy between institutional and ideational power resources. In Spain, for example, union institutional power resources provide a basis on which legitimacy could be claimed by the actors concerned.

The challenging environment of trade unions and charities

Civil society is typically seen as comprising all non-market and non-state organisations outside the family. It is considered to play a positive role in the maintenance of democratic societies, providing a balance between market and government sectors. Concerns have been expressed about the future of civil society for some time. Putnam (1995), for example, argued that civil society was in decline, while the Baring Foundation (2018) highlighted the threats posed by an increasing democratic deficit and the rise of authoritarian/nationalist politics. Other observers are more optimistic, suggesting

that civil society is changing rather than declining because of increased digital engagement, the rise of social movements and a focus on social justice (Sheila McKechnie Foundation, 2018). Nonetheless, unions and charities both currently face challenges, and given their importance to civil society, they need to be resilient in meeting those challenges.

Trade unions

In most Western European countries trade union movements have been operating in a difficult environment since the 1980s, with weak structural and associational power. Their traditional constituency – industrial workers – has declined steadily with the movement from manufacturing to services. An increase in the small-firm sector and the growth in the proportion of workers on atypical contracts have also made union recruitment more difficult. Simultaneously, globalisation has created an increasingly competitive environment for business, hardening employer responses to trade union representation and encouraging governments to adopt (economic) liberal regimes less favourable to unions.

The effect of these developments on the UK union movement has been dramatic. Union density declined from 54% in 1979 to 22% in 2024 (Department for Business and Trade, 2025), and bargaining coverage from 86% in 1976 to 27% in 2024 (Statista, 2025). Unions have increasingly had to seek recognition and bargain on an organisation-by-organisation basis. Only 12% of the 50 largest charities publicly recognise a union (Brown, 2024). Unions have also seen their political influence diminish as relations with the Labour Party have become more complicated, and as such tripartite bodies as had previously existed have now been abolished (European Commission, 2016). The institutional resources enjoyed by the trade union movement after the Second World War thus did not survive the competitive environment of the 1980s. Although these changes were largely a result of global, structural and political developments, it has also been argued that the unions' failure to fully appreciate the strategic importance of institutional power resources contributed to these developments (Rigby and García Calavia, 2023).

The Spanish trade union movement has faced similar structural challenges, including a changed labour force and a more competitive business environment. It has also had to operate in economic conditions characterised by a high proportion of SMEs and of temporary contracts, both of which render union organising more difficult. Nevertheless, bargaining coverage and the unions' representative status have not deteriorated significantly. Bargaining coverage has remained high, at around 70%. The two main unions typically gain 70% of the delegates in works council elections, enabling them to negotiate sectoral agreements, which are extended to all employees. Their power to represent workers therefore derives from election results rather than from membership, which is now historically low, at below 20%.

This institutional framework that underpins Spanish unions was established in the wake of the Franco regime by the Workers' Statute (Estatuto de los Trabajadores, 1980). It has survived pressures for change from the Troika (European Central Bank, European Commission and the International Monetary Fund) during the financial and economic crisis (2008–2014), when the unions prioritised maintaining the integrity of their institutional power resources – sectoral agreements and extension mechanisms – at the expense of accepting worse agreements to maintain employer engagement (Cruces Aguilera et al., 2016). The maintenance of this institutional power also reflects the status unions have enjoyed in the post-Franco settlement, and the reluctance of Spanish employers to decentralise bargaining and increase competition between companies (Rocha, 2018).

The structures of Spanish and UK union movements can also be contrasted. The UK movement has a relatively weak central confederation, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), and some

independent unions, which limits the central confederation's ability to provide leadership and the unity of purpose necessary for it to be a significant power resource. The Spanish movement is more centralised, dominated by two national confederations, *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO) and the *Union General de Trabajadores* (UGT), initially aligned with the Communist and Socialist parties, respectively. The importance of party links has declined since the 1990s, however, and the two confederations collaborate on most significant issues (Köhler, 2021). Historically, they have pursued a broader political and social agenda than UK unions, especially in the case of CCOO (Barranco and Molina, 2019).

Charities

Charities in both countries face a difficult financial environment. In the UK, 26% of their income comes from the state, 48% from public donations, and the rest from investments, voluntary sector activities and the private sector (National Council for Voluntary Organizations [NCVO], 2024). The Covid-19 pandemic weakened their financial position, reducing income streams such as charity shops. Periods of government austerity have also negatively impacted funding. Charitable giving has not grown to compensate for these shortfalls. Meanwhile, charities are experiencing increased demand for their services and are having to spread themselves more thinly (New Philanthropy Capital, 2020).

Increasing dependence on government contracts over the past two decades has raised questions about the sector's autonomy and freedom to criticise the government agencies that fund it, especially as politicians have become more hostile to charity campaigning (Milbourne and Murray, 2017). A further concern for UK charities is corporate governance (Belal et al., 2023). Attention has focused on charities' internal culture and treatment of staff. Whistleblowing reports have increased by 75%, which suggests that their behaviour does not meet staff expectations (Hargrave, 2021).

The expansion of charities in Spain came later than in Northern Europe. Traditionally, the state and the family were expected to resolve social problems (García-Mainar and Marcuello, 2007). From the 1990s onwards, the number of charities grew rapidly, although the sector remains fragmented and somewhat polarised. Large organisations such as Caritas, Cruz Roja and ONCE account for 25% of volunteers and a third of the sector's income (Rodríguez Cabrero and Pérez Yruela, 2023). Some important charities were initially established with religious links – for example, Caritas is the social and charitable arm of the Catholic Church – but post-Franco there has been a trend towards secularisation (Chaves-Avila et al., 2016).

In the 1990s, attention focused on development, including an active campaign to increase the Spanish contribution to development aid to 0.7% of GDP. Both CCOO and UGT established development charities, although their relations with other Spanish charities were not easy and they often preferred to work with local, less conservative charities (ISCOD, 2025). With the 2008 financial and economic crisis, attention turned to Spain and the role of local charities. There was notable growth in charities concerned with disability, children, women, poverty and the elderly, facilitating the establishment of common goals with unions (Rodríguez Cabrero and Pérez Yruela, 2023). The establishment of the 'Social Summit' by unions and charities in 2012 reflected this, even though it was criticised for its cautiousness and for excessive union influence (Ribón Seisdedos and Roca Martinez, 2022).

Like their UK counterparts, Spanish charities have experienced financial challenges. During the Spanish financial and economic crisis of 2008–2014, some were obliged to reduce staffing levels. In 2023 state funding provided 47% of charity income, higher than in the UK (Rodríguez Cabrero and Pérez Yruela, 2023). It is therefore important for Spanish charities, as in the UK, to maintain good relations with the state administration. Unlike the UK, Spanish charities do not appear to have

had major problems of corporate governance. Most are covered by sectoral collective agreements, and union presence is limited at establishment level.

Collaboration and its advocacy

Relations between unions and charities have a long history, with collaboration, conflict and indifference coming to the fore at different periods (Magat, 1994). Contemporary expert opinion increasingly advocates collaboration (Gallin, 2000; Tizard, 2017). Gallin emphasises the similar challenges both institutions face; Tizard advocates collaboration in areas such as advice/advocacy services, campaigns, research and policy development; and Schmidt (2005) points out that alliances with charities offer unions the opportunity to extend influence and improve their image, as well as the possibility of increasing membership and tapping into specialist resources.

Another body of literature focuses more specifically on coalitions, their formation and their different manifestations (Frege et al., 2004; García Calavia and Rigby, 2022). Tattersall (2010) argues that union coalitions with civil society organisations can result in such successful outcomes as realising target goals, developing the ability to influence political structure and increasing the capacity of each partner to act. However, she also admits that unions are likely to form transactional coalitions with charities and other civil society organisations (short-term, utilitarian and with limited membership involvement) (Foley, 2011).

There are also several obstacles that must be overcome if collaboration is to be effective. Conflict on industrial relations issues can complicate collaboration when unions represent charity employees (Peters and Masoka, 2003). As already pointed out, in the UK a minority of the largest charities publicly recognise a union, while in Spain charities are either party to a sectoral collective agreement or, in larger organisations, have a company-level agreement. In recent years there have been significant disputes in both countries. In the UK, Shelter, Oxfam and the RSA – among others – have experienced strike action, while in Spain, Cruz Roja has experienced labour conflicts over several years (El Pais Valencian delegation, 2026; Whitehead, 2023).

Value differences can also complicate relations. From a charity's perspective, unions may appear too narrowly focused, concerned primarily with members' pay and employment conditions. In their desire to maintain at least the semblance of neutrality for funding reasons and compliance with charitable law, charities may also regard unions as too political, given their connections with social democratic and left-wing parties (Leather, 2004). Arenas et al. (2009) suggest that unions may rank their legitimacy more highly than charities because they enjoy electoral mandates. They may also consider charities to be somewhat arrogant because of their unwillingness to compromise with potential allies.

There are also pragmatic obstacles to increased collaboration. Charities may consider unions to be rigid and bureaucratic, wedded to their rulebooks and reluctant to champion workers outside their core membership (Spooner, 2004). Public sector unions may be worried about the encroachment of the voluntary sector on areas of work occupied by union members.

Consideration of collaboration between unions and charities is an identifiable strand of literature associated with union renewal. Frege et al. (2004) point to the potential for unions to build coalitions, whether for one-off actions, intermittent joint activity or continuous collaboration. Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013) suggest that the range of issues appropriate for common action can be placed in five categories: supporting vulnerable workers; obtaining consumer support; promoting the equality agenda; furthering sustainable development; and campaigning for international solidarity.

A case has been made for further research on collaboration between charities and trade unions (Heery and Williams, 2020; Zulo, 2011). Existing research tends to be rather dated and neglects

changes in the actors' contexts and the increased challenges they face. Examples of collaboration between trade unions and other elements of civil society focus largely on campaigning and tend to be local in scope (see Holgate, 2015). Further research is needed to widen the focus beyond liberal market economies and to include collaborations with a national, and not just local community, dimension to lay the basis for more robust theory.

Methodology

Judicious selection of a limited number of cases – as adopted for the present study with the choice of Spain and the UK – can play a useful role in exploratory analysis or theory construction (Herron and Quinn, 2016). The intensive comparative analysis of a few cases may be more promising than a superficial statistical analysis of many cases at the exploratory stage of research (Liphart, 1971).

The selection of cases was based on one independent variable, the institutional resources of the trade union movements. Seawright (2016) argues that choosing cases based on an independent variable is more broadly applicable than – and superior to – selecting cases with different values of the dependent variable. Focusing upon one independent variable avoids the complexity and conceptual stretching of studies incorporating many variables (Collier, 1993). In the varieties of capitalism literature (Hall and Soskice, 2001), the UK is characterised as a liberal market economy with a low level of labour market regulation and institutionalisation. It can be contrasted with neo-corporatism in Spain. Although the latter has been weakened by deregulatory pressures, it displays an institutional resilience based on actor agency (López-Andreu and Martinez Lucio, 2025). Selecting very different cases makes it easier to observe contrasting data patterns (Fletcher et al., 2018) and makes it possible to establish a framework for interpreting how parallel processes of action play out differently in contrasting contexts (Collier, 1993).

A qualitative method was adopted, based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024-2025. This was appropriate given the focus on concepts that typically are not part of respondents' day-to-day work and required some explanation and reflection. The interviews were designed to collect data about actors' perception of collaboration, its nature and purpose, and any obstacles that might hinder collaboration. Respondents were asked only about collaboration within their own country. In most cases, respondents were national officers with responsibilities in areas such as policy, external relations and campaigning, giving an overview of union/charity relations. In Spain, union interviews took place with officials of CCOO, UGT and CIG, the majority union in Galicia (having been offered the CIG interview, the researchers accepted it as providing a regional perspective on collaboration while recognising that it may not reflect the views of other regional unions in Spain). In the UK, selected respondents were officials of individual unions and of the TUC. Additionally, a limited number of 'expert' interviews were carried out; in the UK, with the current and two former CEOs of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), and in Spain, with two authors of recent research studies on the third sector. In both countries interviews were conducted with officials responsible for collective bargaining in the charity sector (from CCOO and Unite). In total, 63 interviews were carried out (36 in the UK and 27 in Spain). Contact was made with union respondents with the help of peak organisations (TUC, CCOO, UGT). Charity respondents were identified via a scoping survey in the UK, and in Spain with the help of a national platform of charities, '*Red Europea de Lucha contra Pobreza*'. In identifying charity respondents, emphasis was placed on organisations working in the areas of poverty, migration, health, equality, housing and climate change, on the basis that these would be more likely to have an affinity with union priorities.

Most interviews took place online and lasted one hour. Transcripts were analysed by framework analysis (Ritchie et al., 2003). After familiarisation with the interviews a selection of transcripts

was coded by two researchers, bearing in mind the research questions, but also employing open coding to ensure that unforeseen aspects of data were not missed. Subsequently, all the researchers met to compare labels, and a set of codes was agreed upon and applied to all transcripts. In presenting the data below, a limited number of quotations from respondents are used to illustrate relevant key themes, such as caution on the part of the charities and the complications of climate change collaboration.

Presentation of data

Charities' perception of collaboration

Charity representatives were asked how they perceived unions and collaboration with them. Respondents in Spain viewed collaboration favourably. A representative of ONCE, the major charity for the visually handicapped responded:

> This Saturday ONCE has an important conference – we have left space for the UGT General Secretary to speak – we work a lot with the Fundación 1er de Mayo (CCOO) and the Fundación Francisco Largo Caballero (UGT).

> The charity sympathises with union activities; they are natural allies; we would like closer relations with the unions; it will not damage our image.

The institutional power resources exercised by the Spanish unions since the establishment of democracy has given them a status that is reflected in the respect charities show them:

> [. . .] even the Right in Spain do not really attack the unions. (respondent from 'Provivienda', a housing charity).

Charity respondents were asked about their relationships with the unions. They saw them as relationships of affinity, based on recognition that they need one another (Oxfam-Spain). A respondent from the EAPN (the Spanish European Anti-Poverty Network) emphasised the compatibility between his organisation and trade unions: both are committed to the welfare state, defence of the public sector and protecting the vulnerable. Collaboration with unions is emphasised in the charity's strategic plan. The charity co-ordinator of the Zero Poverty campaign in Valencia stressed the importance of a common agenda for charities and unions so that they could campaign together.

The Spanish government has recognised the potential for collaboration between the two sectors and thus has given charities and unions an official role in helping migrant workers progress their applications for resident status and employment rights.

Of the two unions, CCOO was mentioned more often in the context of collaboration:

> Charities and unions have 80% of their values in common. In Cataluña CCOO appears to me closest to the charities. (Fundación Autónoma Solidaria)

> Collaboration is strongest with CCOO. Our Director General meets the General Secretary of CCOO to exchange views. (Oxfam)

These comments reflect CCOO's greater emphasis on a broader political and social agenda.

Charity respondents made few critical comments about the unions as partners, although some envy was expressed regarding their status. Charities have been unable to obtain a seat on the Social

and Economic Council, the national social dialogue forum. Charities felt that the unions' role in social dialogue provides them with an opportunity to get a better hearing from the government (EAPN).

Charity respondents were mostly critical of unions for one main reason: they perceived unions had failed to effectively represent the growing number of vulnerable workers. They claimed that it was rather charities that tend to possess the necessary knowledge to represent such workers. Areas of conflict that sometimes needed to be managed included union criticism of the externalisation of public services to charities and situations in which unions and charities compete for the same funds, e.g. training resources.

Trade union representation of charity staff did not tend to create tensions because, except in the case of the largest organisations, bargaining takes place at sectoral level, as a representative of Médicos del Mundo pointed out:

> The bargaining role of unions for our staff is not a problem for collaboration – it is a separate area of activity.

In the UK, respondents agreed that trade unions and charities have similar objectives and that they should therefore cooperate. According to a respondent from Friends of the Earth:

> The unions are able to get into spheres of influence and circles of the general public where we, the environmental movement, won't be operating.

The slow response to the survey to identify respondents on the part of charities, however, suggested some caution on their part. This became more evident in the interviews and was related to charities' dependence on government contracts. A former CEO of the NCVO confirmed this; unions could not be seen as neutral because of their links to the Labour Party. A representative of the Royal National Institute of Blind People emphasised the importance of their relationship with government:

> We would not want to compromise our neutrality when working with government; it is important to maintain the role of critical friend – anything more than that will be a risk for us. It is not that we are in principle against what unions are asking for; it is just it is important to us that our voice is strong and uncompromised.

UK charities also encountered some practical problems in working with unions: the number of committees proposals had to go through; finding the right person to talk to; the slowness of democratic processes; and the difficulty of building general support. The union emphasis on the observance of rules and procedures was a major cultural difference between the two sectors. This lack of flexibility was pronounced in the approach to migrant and vulnerable workers.

Unlike in Spain, collective bargaining was mentioned as an obstacle to collaboration. The chief executive of the NCVO felt that unions seemed 'mainly concerned about pay' and was critical of union efforts to persuade charities to use their reserves to improve pay, showing they do not understand charity finances.

Therefore, although UK charities recognise convergence with trade unions on social concerns, respondents were cautious about committing to collaboration. Collaboration seemed likely to be episodic rather than sustained, more dependent on individual initiatives than on structural factors. In Spain the status of trade unions means that their suitability as partners is less subject to question and the nature of their institutional resources, especially sectoral bargaining arrangements, means that a potential area of conflict with charities can be avoided.

Trade union perception of collaboration

In both countries, unions saw collaboration with charities as being valuable in terms of their credibility and reputation:

> In terms of what the charities bring to the union – social recognition, and legitimation in the social/political arena. (CCOO respondent)

> We run the labour group of the G7 (L7) and liaise with the NGOs in Civil Society 7 – this collaboration doubles our impact. (TUC representative)

In Spain, representatives of the two main union confederations typically had experience of campaigning with charities. The most recent CCOO congress approved a formal strategy of allying with charities and other civil society organisations. Collaboration fitted into the unions' broad social and political agenda.

We did, however, encounter some criticisms of charities related to specific contexts. The CCOO official responsible for a national collective agreement covering 100,000 workers in the charity sector stressed the unreasonable demands for working hours imposed on workers in the sector; while a respondent from a regional union, the *Confederación Intersindical Galega* (CIG), considered that national charities were involved in activities for which the state itself should be responsible, and that her union often saw things very differently from national charities, preferring to work with local ones.

The interviews with UK trade union representatives suggested support in principle for collaboration with charities, as reflected in this comment from the General Secretary of the Pharmacists Defence Association:

> We became aware of their work (Parkinsons's UK) and said this is a body where we share interests; we take the view you get things done by forming coalitions on the subject matter you are dealing with.

However, some difficulties were mentioned that resonated with the charities' concerns. The caution of the larger charities made it difficult for unions to establish relations with them. This was heightened by the Lobbying Act of 2014, which regulates charities' campaigning activities. Unions found it easier to work with smaller charities which were more flexible and less cautious. Unite's national officer for the not-for-profit sector gave an example from the housing sector:

> I remember dealing with Shelter when it was a much smaller organisation and Sheila McKechnie was chief executive – she was not bothered about anybody; if something needed saying she would say it. As they have got bigger, they have become less campaigning; smaller organisations are popping up – and you think, Shelter would have done that 30 years ago. (Unite Official)

Charities were also perceived to lack an understanding of the world that the unions inhabit. They do not always understand union democracy and the procedures that have to be implemented. They are also not always sensitive to the employment interests of workers in areas such as climate change and the outsourcing of public sector employment.

The experience of collaboration

Most collaborations mentioned by Spanish respondents were of a campaigning nature. Campaigns can be divided into those concerned with resolving universal problems and those associated with

more specific sectoral issues. The first category includes campaigns for Zero Poverty and Fiscal Justice which, alongside the two main trade unions, also involved charities such as Oxfam, Caritas, The Spanish Commission for Aid to Refugees (CEAR) and EAPN. The Zero Poverty campaign involved 200 charities and unions. The Campaign for Fiscal Justice was similarly broadly based. The second category includes campaigns associated with housing, the Centres for the Internment of Foreigners (CIEs) and vaccination. The housing campaign included a popular legislative initiative for Parliament involving the collection of at least 500,000 signatures, promoting the drafting of 'decent housing' legislation. The campaign on CIEs sought to close them. To encourage availability and take up of vaccinations, the unions collaborated with *Médicos del Mundo* and *Médecins sans Frontières*.

Collaborations involving the provision of services and policy development were less common than campaigning but were evident in relation to training. In collaboration with the refugee charity CEAR, union legal advisers provided training for migrants on employment contracts and general employment advice. ONCE collaborated with the unions in the development of training programmes on disability, covering areas such as the inclusion in collective agreements of commitments in relation to disabled workers, and the retention in employment of workers with new, unexpected disabilities.

The approach to joint campaigning reflected the desire of some of the bigger charities to maintain some independence from the unions. Here we can contrast ONCE, which is party to formal agreements with the unions involving joint campaigning, with Caritas, which prefers to identify less formally with campaigning. Charities, in any case, prefer to meet minsters separately from the trade unions. They also value 'safety in numbers', being more comfortable operating in groups of campaigning organisations rather than being identified as being in a close relationship with a particular union.

Campaigning also figured prominently among the forms of collaboration mentioned by UK respondents. One union, the Pharmacists' Defence Association, collaborates with several health-related charities to exempt patients suffering long-term health issues, such as Parkinsons, from prescription charges. There has been a growth of single-issue coalitions in which unions and charities collaborate in specific situations and then go their separate ways when that issue is no longer active. One example of this was the successful campaign to keep open railway ticket offices threatened with closure.

The UK responses revealed a wider range of collaborations than had been evident in Spain, with unions making good use of charities' skills and knowledge. For example, the Unite union has commissioned research from charities to help with campaigning and bargaining, while the TUC has commissioned research from charities for advocacy and policy work in support of investment in green public transport. Maternity Action has also provided training to union representatives on maternity benefits. The CPAG has supported USDAW (the shopworkers' union) in providing guidance to members on the Universal Credit social benefit, while the union has provided the charity with cases to use for advocacy in tribunals. Another major union, UNISON, funds a telephone advice service for migrant worker members staffed by the charity the Migrant Rights Network.

Several collaborations involve client support, such as the preparation of toolkits. Thus, the National Association of Probation Officers union (NAPO) and the Travellers' Movement (which supports the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community) have produced a toolkit to help officers writing pre-sentencing reports for courts, encouraging them to consider the disadvantages and circumstances of Travellers. NAPO used its political contacts – which the charity lacked – to facilitate the toolkit's passage through Parliament. The Equality Trust combined with several trade unions to develop a toolkit on equal pay. The Migrant Rights Network developed a

negotiating toolkit for union representatives on immigration checks and workplace raids. Finally, the Unite union, helped by the charity Prostate Cancer UK, has developed a toolkit on prostate cancer to be used by union negotiators and made available to members a risk checker provided by the charity.

Can collaboration improve union capacities? Spanish respondents indicated that union members are periodically mobilised in campaigning activities but stressed the difficulty of obtaining concrete evidence of the extent to which this happens. One respondent emphasised that they did not see the development of relations with charities in various campaigns in terms of organisational benefits, such as membership gains:

> We do sometimes make gains, but they are often lost if the new member loses their job or doesn't have the money to maintain the subscription – we are involved [in collaborations] because of our social compromise. (UGT respondent)

UK union respondents discussed collaboration in terms of its value for the development of union policies and services to members rather than as a means of mobilising members. The helpline funded by UNISON was aimed at migrant workers who were already union members. The expertise gained by collaboration with the Child Poverty Action Group and Prostate Cancer UK was used for the benefit of existing union members too.

The difficulties encountered by partners in implementing collaborations reflect those reported in the literature. In both countries collaboration on climate change appears to be more complicated than on social matters. In Spain, Galician trade union the CIG indicated it has had problems in collaborating with Greenpeace because of the latter's support for wind turbines, which the CIG opposes as damaging to the local environment and the economy.

In the United Kingdom, unions indicated there was a general problem with climate change charities that in their view do not put sufficient emphasis on job creation within climate change policy:

> So, around aviation there is obviously an area of tension. Theoretically all unions are signed up to action on climate crisis, but where the rubber hits the road is how the pain of transition is shared, which gets complicated. (TUC Public Sector official)

In Spain, difficulties included the importance some charities attach to their campaigning autonomy, alongside the occasional competitiveness between charities and trade unions regarding the relative influence and status they enjoy in campaigns. Union representatives also mentioned several relational difficulties. Sometimes a charity's expectations were unrealistic, seeming to assume that unions had unlimited time and resources. It was therefore important to set realisable objectives which all organisations agreed upon, and to establish clarity about the required resources.

UK union representatives reiterated that the caution exercised by charities when it comes to getting involved in campaigning can be the biggest problem. For their part, charities worried about trade unions making unsustainable demands in collective bargaining, alongside communication problems with unions. Respondents from both sides reported that the fragmented and competitive nature of the charity sector did not encourage a culture of collaboration.

Respondents from both countries also mentioned some process challenges. Collaboration was not a priority for either actor, and sometimes scarce resources resulted in a failure to meet the expectations of a collaborative partner. On occasion, the priorities of a partner changed and undermined the importance of a collaboration. Finally, a common difficulty concerned how to avoid repetition by giving new impetus to a campaign that was several years old.

Sectoral differences did not feature strongly in the data, except for the climate change collaborations noted above. In the case of the UK, inevitably charities reliant on union funding for collaborative activities were extremely positive about relations with unions, including Maternity Action, the Migrant Rights Network and the Equality Trust. There is also evidence that charities valued unions with a professional background as partners. Thus, the Campaign against Prescription Charges was able to put out literature emphasising the impact of charges on both patients and pharmacists, supported by the pharmacists' union (PDA). It achieved over 150 pieces of media coverage. The Travellers' Movement similarly valued the professional expertise and political contacts in the Probation Officers' Union.

Discussion and conclusions

The research examined three questions about collaborations between unions and charities in Spain and the UK: the actors' perception of collaboration; the nature of collaboration; and difficulties the collaborating partners had to overcome.

In principle, there was support for collaboration and a recognition that trade unions and charities share common ground. There were, however, differences between the two countries. Spanish charity respondents were very positive about collaboration with the unions and saw them as natural allies – a view reciprocated by most union respondents. UK charity respondents expressed reservations. They were concerned to establish a non-political and neutral image to maintain their funding relationship with government. Some respondents also saw the involvement of unions in staff representation in the charity sector as a potential obstacle to collaboration.

The collaborations included various examples of campaigning, reflecting the literature discussed earlier. Most collaborations mentioned by Spanish respondents were in the campaigning category, whereas UK collaborations embraced a wider range of activities. This reflected the complementary nature of the actors' resources and included the preparation and launch of toolkits; knowledge transfer and research; skills training; and risk assessments (Van Dyke and McCammon, 2010). This difference can be related to the Spanish unions' broader social and political identity. The central role of the union confederations in Spain also means that the focus in collaboration tends to be on national activity that involves the whole union, which points towards campaigning activity. The decentralised union structure in the UK, often associated with particular sectors, gives scope to a wider variety of collaborations.

In respect of the difficulties faced in collaborating, concern about the caution of charities engaging with unions was common to both countries, though more marked in the UK. Process difficulties could be related to cultural differences and the actors' different expectations.

Although significant collaboration between charities and trade unions was identified, the collaborations lacked the features necessary for long-term coalitions (Tattersall, 2010). As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of the research reported in this article is to better understand collaboration between charities and unions, eschewing a union-centric focus on what collaboration means for union revitalisation, an approach that dominates existing work in this area. Nevertheless, the study's findings do have some implications for union revitalisation. Perhaps most importantly, they suggest that collaborations with charities, and the coalition power resources these engender, are likely to have a limited impact. Most of the collaborations identified were related to finite projects or campaigns, with little evidence that they have played a role in extending engagement with the union to wider groups of workers.

In the UK, collaborations fitted Tattersall's characterisation of coalitions involving unions as being often short-term, transactional and with limited membership involvement. Although collaborations in Spain tend to be longer-term, little evidence was found of the training, joint planning and

capacity development Tattersall considers necessary for sustained coalition relations. In neither country did the union respondents see collaboration with charities as part of their revitalisation. Spanish union respondents recognised that collaboration could help unions to meet their social and political objectives and improve their image and identity, but not as having any organisational and membership implications. UK unions saw their collaborations in pragmatic terms, aimed at achieving quite specific objectives.

The differences between the two countries regarding collaboration may be related to how the two trade union movements have taken advantage of, and managed, the institutional power resources available to them. Peters (2019) suggests that institutionalisation occurs in a formative moment of a given organisation, and that institutions persist until they reach a critical juncture. In Spain, no such critical juncture has been reached, and the institutional power resources established during the post-Franco period have persisted. As a result, unions continue to enjoy a well-established position in society and are attractive collaborative partners for charities. Collective bargaining, largely located at sectoral level, also does not 'interfere' with such collaboration. The unions have managed these power resources actively, working to ensure that relations with employers and government continue to follow the normative regime of the Transition, and they have maintained their own structures as centralised confederations, emphasising trade union unity. This embeddedness, together with the maintenance of a wider social and political project, has provided a stable identity to which charities can relate.

UK unions faced their critical juncture in the 1980s and could not maintain the institutional power resources previously available in the period after the Second World War (sectoral bargaining and social dialogue) in a hostile business and political context. The result was fragmentation and the decline of institutional relations with employers and governments. As Frege and Kelly (2003) note, the weakness of the UK confederation (TUC) means that unions are unable to make the most of their own institutions as a power resource, making coherent responses difficult. It is therefore unsurprising that UK charities do not have the same clarity about the value of unions as collaborative partners as do their Spanish counterparts.

The data present a mixed picture in relation to ideational power resources. The role of collaboration in conferring more legitimacy on the actors came through clearly in the Spanish case. Union respondents were explicit about the reputational advantages gained from working with charities, while the latter emphasised the status of the unions as a factor in collaborating with them, indicating that ideational power resources can be linked to institutional power resources. In the UK, there were some examples of collaboration conferring legitimacy, such as Parkinsons UK's recognition of the value of the Pharmacists' Defence Association in their campaigning. However, this was exceptional. Charities raised question marks about the reputational value of union relations, while union respondents focused primarily on the more immediate implications of collaborations for their members.

In both countries it emerged that there is the potential to develop collaboration further. In Spain, greater leadership is required from trade union confederations to encourage the federations to examine the scope for collaboration in specialist areas and sectors. In the UK, areas in which scope for more collaboration has been identified include joint funding initiatives, as well as union support for HR staff in charities in areas such as diversity management and mental health.

Future research would be useful to test the findings of this exploratory study. A survey approach would make it possible to examine the conclusions of the research empirically on a wider basis, while an in-depth examination of selected collaborations would increase our understanding of the processes involved in collaborations and the factors influencing their success.

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