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# Exploring meta-organizations' diversity and agency: A meta-organizational perspective on global union federations



Pierre Garaudel

IAE Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne (Sorbonne Business School) : IAE 12, Rue Jean Antoine de Baïf, 75013, Paris, France

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore theoretically the issues of meta-organizations' diversity and agency through a cross-literature analysis, thereby establishing a bridge between two strands of literature that until now have strikingly developed in total isolation. I show that one of the most distinctive traits of global union federations relates to their meta-organizational activities that take place at the firm level and reflect a complex, multi-level meta-organizational configuration where the upper level interacts directly with second-order members but the intrinsic exteriority of global union federations to the corporate unions network positions them as "meta-organizational network brokers". I also elicit two main dimensions of differentiation among meta-organizations that have been only indirectly delineated in the literature and which could constitute useful analytical tools for characterizing meta-organizations from a comparative perspective: (1) the degree of consistency between the goals of meta-organization secretariats and the objectives pursued by meta-organization members; and (2) the degree and direction of asymmetrical interdependence between the meta-organization itself and its members. I argue that both dimensions strongly condition the capacity for agency of their secretariat, and ultimately the degree of actorhood and the capacity of meta-organizations to act as autonomous and influential organizational actors.

## 1. Introduction

The theory of meta-organizations was developed following the seminal contributions of Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008), who proposed the concept of meta-organizations (MO) to designate organizations that have other organizations as members. This new theoretical framework is underpinned by the argument that MOs present strongly specific characteristics compared to individual-based organizations: for example, MOs tend to be much more dependent on their singular members, their decision-making process is based more on consensus than hierarchy, and MOs and their member organizations typically compete for identity, autonomy, and authority. This new theoretical lens frequently translates into a shift of focus of interest as it provides an organizational perspective to phenomena that are usually analyzed with an inter-organizational perspective. Adopting a meta-organizational perspective highlights the organizational nature of social entities that are commonly considered mere instrumental devices or institutions, without actorhood or agency of their own, in support of inter-organizational collaboration and collective action. From this perspective, the organizational nature of MOs is taken seriously and MOs fully deserve to be investigated as organizational actors.

This analytical perspective has been applied to different kinds of

MOs, such as trade associations and a great variety of international organizations (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Brankovic, 2018; Kerwer, 2013; Malcourant, Vas, & Zintz, 2015). However, MOs present such a wide diversity that it is difficult to generalize empirical results based on a specific type to all kinds of MOs. This suggests the need to investigate as many forms of MOs as possible to gain still more knowledge about their distinctive traits and the main dimensions of differentiation among them. Indeed, if driven by the aim of contributing to MO theory, the study of a specific type of MO implies determining what fundamental characteristics it shares with the majority of MOs, and the peculiarities of the specific form investigated. On this basis, there are two main ways of addressing the issue of MO diversity. The first consists of outlining an ideal-typical depiction of the generic MO form and then assessing how each specific kind of MO differs from it. The second consists of identifying the various dimensions of differentiation among MOs, particularly the more critical ones, that is, those most suited to explaining how MOs carry out their functions and the key challenges with which they are confronted. Identifying the main dimensions of differentiation among MOs can help build an analytical framework that enables a comparative and systematic account of the full diversity of MOs. Ultimately, it could constitute the first step toward building a comprehensive MO typology.

E-mail address: [garaudel.iae@univ-paris1.fr](mailto:garaudel.iae@univ-paris1.fr).

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In this paper I apply this methodological approach to a specific kind of international MO, that is, global union federations (GUFs). GUFs are international union organizations with a sectoral basis and their membership is typically composed of national sectoral federations. They organize global thematic campaigns and also develop specific activities at the firm level through the negotiation and implementation of global framework agreements (GFAs). At the most basic level, a GFA is an agreement signed between a transnational company and one or more global union federations, whereby the multinational corporation (MNC) commits to respecting a number of social and societal engagements throughout its global operations. GFAs are frequently compared to codes of conduct, as they have an equivalent function of formalizing the MNCs' engagement with societal and social issues. However, they differ fundamentally in terms of procedure: codes of conduct are adopted unilaterally by companies while GFAs are the result of collective bargaining with trade unions, and especially GUFs (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018; Bourguignon, Garaudel, & Porcher, 2019; Egels-Zandén & Hyllman, 2007; Fichter, Stevis, & Helfen, 2012; Luterbacher, Prosser, & Papadakis, 2017; Lévesque, Hennebert, Murray, & Bourque, 2018; Sobczak, 2007; Thomas, 2011).

GUFs have received little attention from MO scholars. This is puzzling, since the industrial relations field presents many characteristics that should make it a natural object of investigation for MO researchers. Thus, by adopting a meta-organizational perspective on GUFs, this paper establishes a link between two strands of literature that until now have developed in isolation. Indeed, my argumentation is based on a cross-literature approach with a dual analysis of the MO literature and the international industrial relations literature. However, it is beyond the scope of this research to provide a systematic and exhaustive review of the two strands of works: instead, I focus on thematic topics that are simultaneously relevant for the two areas of literature and for which the related studies in both areas shed interesting light on the other's object of investigation. For this reason, the analysis of the international industrial relation literature rests on (1) studies that take GUFs as the main object of investigation and (2) on studies of GFAs with a specific focus on inter-organizational relationships at the MNC level.

In line with this, I show that while GUFs present many characteristics and organizational attributes commonly underlined by MO theorists they also present some very distinctive traits. I argue that the most singular distinctive trait of GUFs relates to their meta-organizational activities that take place at the firm level through the policy of concluding GFAs with MNCs' management, positioning them as externally based, legitimate bargaining partners and often leading them to act as external network-coordinators. Then, by combining insights from both the MO and the international industrial relations literature, I bring to light two dimensions of MO differentiation. The first is the degree of consistency between the goals of the secretariat of the MO and the objectives pursued by MO members. The second is the degree and direction of asymmetrical interdependence between the MO and its members. I argue that these two dimensions of differentiation are of specific interest as they relate to an overarching issue explicitly or implicitly underlying much of the MO literature and the theory of MOs, that is, the issue of MOs' agency and their capacity to influence their environment and their members' behaviors. In a similar way they condition their secretariat's ability to define and implement their own strategic objectives.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. First, I propose a brief overview of the positioning of GUFs and GFAs in the international industrial relations field. Second, I present the concept of MOs and discuss how the theory of MOs relates to other strands of work in organizational studies. Third, I discuss in more detail the issue of similitude and diversity in organizational studies and the theoretical motivations underpinning the methodological goal of establishing dimensions of differentiation among MOs. In the three next sections, I surveyed the international industrial relations literature in relation to GUFs and their GFA strategy from an MO perspective. This review is guided by a dual

focus on the key role of GUFs' secretariat and the (inter-)organizational implications of GFA-related activities. Finally, I draw on this cross-literature analysis by adopting a theory-building approach and expose the two main contributions of this paper with regard to our understanding of MO diversity. I conclude by returning to the broader theoretical implications of this research, especially with respect to our comprehension of MOs' agency, and the rationale for bringing together the theory of MOs and the international industrial relations literature.

## 2. The international industrial relations field, global union federations and global framework agreements

The concept of "international industrial relations" (Collings, 2008) relates to a broad research area that has been referred to in a variety of ways: global industrial relations (Thomas, 2011); international or transnational trade unionism (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012; Gumbrell-McCormick, 2013); transnational labor relations (Helfen & Fichter, 2011); transnational industrial relations (Luterbacher et al., 2017), trade union internationalism (Müller, Platzer, & Rüb, 2010b; Waterman & Timms, 2004); labor transnationalism (Anner, Greer, Hauptmeier, Lillie, & Winchester, 2006); international or global trade unionism (Fairbrother & Hammer, 2005; Fairbrother et al., 2013; Hyman, 2005); cross-border labor activism or new global labor studies (Brookes & McCallum, 2017). Scholars have also applied different theoretical perspectives from fields as diverse as geography, sociology, political science, economics and law (Brookes & McCallum, 2017).

Within the international industrial relations literature one distinct topic of interest relates to international union organizations. Among the most important are the International Trade Union Confederation—whose affiliates are national trade union confederations—and GUFs, which are related to specific trades or industries. Together the International Trade Union Confederation and GUFs have adopted the collective label of "global unions" (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012). GUFs, called International Trade Secretariats until the early 2000s, are the oldest international union organizations and have greatly reduced in number over time following a series of amalgamations (Ford & Gillan, 2015; Luterbacher et al., 2017; Waterman & Timms, 2004).

One specific mode of action of GUFs is their policy of signing GFAs at the company level. For GUFs, GFAs represent a means of globalizing labor-management relations in their own right (Helfen & Fichter, 2013). This company-directed approach may also be conceived as a response to the lack of global regulation of labor standards (Fairbrother & Hammer, 2005; Helfen & Fichter, 2011; Mund & Priegnitz, 2007; Thomas, 2011), along with the lack of an institutional framework for collective bargaining at the global sectoral and cross-sectoral level (Léonard & Sobczak, 2010; Helfen & Fichter, 2013). The first GFA was signed in 1989 by the Danone group (BSN), and some time passed before this pioneering lead was emulated. It was only at the beginning of the 2000s that the practice truly began to develop, mainly in MNCs with headquarters located in mainland Europe. The number of agreements signed has increased notably over the last two decades and there has been a clear development in their content.

Three defining attributes allow a negotiated agreement to be designated a GFA: (1) a global scope of application; (2) at the very least, an explicit recognition of the core International Labor Organization's labor standards; and (3) the agreement is signed by a representative of the MNC's central management and by at least a GUF (Léonard & Sobczak, 2010; Fichter et al., 2012; Hennebert, Lévesque, Murray, & Bourque, 2018). However, beyond these fundamental elements, GFAs reflect extremely diverse realities in their formal content and practical implementation (Barreau & Ngaha, 2013; Fichter et al., 2012; Léonard & Sobczak, 2010; Sobczak, 2007; Sydow, Fichter, Helfen, Sayim, & Stevis, 2014; Thomas, 2011).

### 3. The concept of MO, the MO literature and the theory of MOs

The concept of MO has a singular position in the vast field of organization theory. The term was coined relatively recently by Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008), who characterise MO as organizations that have other organizations as members, as opposed to individual-based organizations. The body of research that developed following their seminal contribution is often referred to as the “theory of MOs” (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2017; Cropper & Bor, 2018; Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015; König, Schulte, & Enders, 2012). This strand of research, however, has some connection with various academic works produced before and, for some of them, since the seminal contribution of Ahrne and Brunsson.

#### 3.1. MOs and studies on specific (inter-) organizational forms

First, some connection may be found between MOs and different organizational forms identified by organizational scholars as peculiar, if not “unconventional” (Brès, Raufflet, & Boghossian, 2018), in that there has long been an implicit assumption in contemporary organizational theory that the members of the organization are individuals (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Einarsson, 2009). They include federations, confederations, multi-level associations (Einarsson, 2009, 2012), umbrella associations (Young, 2001) and intermediaries (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015; Radnejad, Vredenburg, & Woiceshyn, 2017). Most significantly, Ahrne and Brunsson (2011) subsequently developed a theoretical perspective centered on the concept of *partial organizations*, as opposed to formal and complete organizations that have simultaneously access to five core elements of organizations (membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring and sanction). From this perspective, MOs may often be conceived as *formal but incomplete organizations*.

#### 3.2. MOs and the inter-organizational network literature

Second, the theory of MOs may be considered with regard, and in contrast, to the inter-organizational network literature (Chiambaretto & Dumez, 2016; Corazza, Cisis, & Dumay, 2019; Ehlinger, Perret, & Chabaud, 2007; Fjeldstad, Snow, Miles, & Lettl, 2012; Géniaux & Mira-Bonnardel, 2003; Järvi, Almpanopoulou, & Ritala, 2018; Mountford & Geiger, 2018; Raab & Kenis, 2009). The MO perspective and the inter-organizational network perspective both highlight the dual nature of their focal object of interest: on the one hand, they imply some forms of inter-organizational relationships (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015a; Cropper & Bor, 2018)—relationships typically referred to in terms of cooperation, collaboration, cooptation or collective action—and, on the other hand, they are often conceived as social if not organizational entities on their own (Einarsson, 2009, 2012; Raab & Kenis, 2009). But what fundamentally distinguishes MOs from most inter-organizational network is there formal-organizational dimension. This dual nature of MOs is clearly suggested by Bor (2014) when she proposes that the concept of MO has three important elements: (1) an MO is essentially an organization; (2) the MO is an association, meaning that members collectively form the center of authority; (3) members of this organization are themselves organizations, that is, collective action units composed of individuals or organizations, who possess resources that they can (but not necessarily will) contribute to the collective (the MO) (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Bor, 2014). However, the network concept is much broader than the MO concept. Not every network can be considered an MO, especially networks that have an informal dimension (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Brès et al., 2018; Chaudhury et al., 2016) and, in the extreme case, networks that have not developed a collective identity and where there is no common consciousness among participants of having created a goal-directed entity (Raab & Kenis, 2009). Moreover, the formal organizational nature of MOs is associated with a clear membership base that strongly differentiate them from more

“fluid” (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010) “boundaryless” social arrangements and collectives (Ashkenas et al., 2015; Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015), as are many inter-organizational networks (Koschmann et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, and confusingly enough, since Ahrne and Brunsson, some authors (Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012) have proposed their own concept of MO by adopting an inter-organizational network perspective and focusing on the notion of *meta-organizational design*. The concept of MO developed by Gulati et al. has been at the center of many subsequent studies (Chaudhury et al., 2016; Malcourant et al., 2015; Radnejad et al., 2017; Solansky, Beck, & Travis, 2014; Valente & Oliver, 2018) and their perspective is even frequently referred to by MO scholars mostly building on the work of Ahrne and Brunsson (Berkowitz, Bucheli, & Dumez, 2017; Brankovic, 2018; Gadille, Tremblay, & Vion, 2013). However, the perspective developed by Gulati et al. includes different forms of networks that would not be characterized as MO from the Ahrne and Brunsson perspective. This has led Berkowitz and Bor (2018) to evoke the existence of a “European school” of MOs to distinguish the strand of studies building on the work of Ahrne and Brunsson that focus on more institutionalized forms of MOs and their formal organization and associative dimensions (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Bor, 2014), as opposed to the more US–UK based research community that takes Gulati et al. (2012) as its key reference.

The European school of MOs invites the adoption of a renewed, more in-depth view of MO phenomena, by highlighting their organizational dimension beyond the collective action and cooperative activities between members they foster and help implement. While some authors have pointed out the need to distinguish clearly between the inter-organizational relationships themselves and the inter-organizational forms that are intended to foster these relationships (Cropper, Ebers, Huxham, & Ring, 2011), the MO perspective directs attention toward the latter and their internal organizing. Indeed, a significant part of previous work has adopted a more relational, inter-organizational and network perspective rather than focusing on the formal organization in charge of coordinating and regulating relationships among organization members and between members and external shareholders. MOs can be viewed as a “tool” or a “device” (Azzam & Berkowitz, 2018; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Berkowitz, 2018) in support of the collective action of their members but they are also organizations in their own right and can be usefully analyzed as such. In other words, despite their being composed of a multitude of formal organizations, as empirical expressions of organization (Sjöstrand, 2000) MOs are suitable to be considered “as a whole”, that is, as a larger integrated entity and a coherent organization (Einarsson, 2009, 2012). This change in focus of interest is clearly illustrated by the notion of “secretariat” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Gadille et al., 2013), which relates to the formal structure composed of permanent MO employees continuously carrying out its meta-organizational mission. Most importantly, as well as the notion of the “organization-as-a-whole” (Greenwood, Hinings, & Whetten, 2014; Meyer & Höllerer, 2014), by emphasizing the organizational nature of MOs, the MO perspective is aligned with the “organization-as-actor” notion (Grothe-Hammer, 2018). Indeed, compared to most inter-organizational networks, MOs are not only characterized by a higher degree of *organizationality*, as I will discuss later, but also by a higher degree of *actorhood*. Actorhood refers to an organization’s autonomy and capacity for agency—that is, it implies that an organization must be capable of collective deliberation, self-reflection, and action (King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010)—and the extent to which the organization is attributed as capable of acting and conceived by others as an important decision-making entity in its own right (Grothe-Hammer, 2018; King et al., 2010; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Actorhood is therefore double-sided as it is externally attributed and implies addressability and responsibility as well independent decision-making capabilities (Grothe-Hammer, 2018). Indeed, even though MOs are also characterized by stronger independent decision-

making capabilities, it can be argued that, as formal organizations exhibiting a more distinct collective organizational identity (Brankovic, 2018; Einarsson, 2009; König et al., 2012; Young, 2001) and a crisp boundary (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Brankovic, 2018), it is in relation to the external dimension of actorhood that MOs greatly differ from most inter-organizational networks.

### 3.3. Studies of specific empirical types of MOs

The concept of MO relates to various empirical organizational forms that have been widely investigated in their own right, often without any reference to the MO concept. Nevertheless, the related studies have provided many useful and interesting insights into the generic form of MO. MO theorists often refer to these studies and have largely built upon them to bring to light some common characteristics of MOs. From this point of view, the theory of MOs, developed by scholars using the concept of MO proposed by Ahrne and Brunsson (the European school of MOs), may be seen as part of a more encompassing literature—the MO literature, in its broader sense—that refers to scholars adopting a wider conception of MOs (such as the network meta-organizational design perspective) and includes various works on empirical forms of MOs investigated through different theoretical lenses and with different focal subjects. Among these, a large number have focused on trade associations (Lawton, Rajwani, & Minto, 2017; Rajwani, Lawton, & Phillips, 2015; Spillman, 2017); inter-governmental organizations, extensively investigated by political scientists, including, among many others, Blankart (2007), Cremer and Palfrey (1999), and Nielson and Tierney (2003); and other international organizations such as international trade unions organizations.

## 4. Diversity of MOs and the sources of variability among them

While most theories about organizations assume, implicitly or explicitly, that organizational members are individuals, the so-called theory of MOs is fundamentally underpinned by the notion that MOs differ from individual-based organizations in important ways, which challenges the traditional theoretical framework of organizational analysis (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016) and calls for somewhat different theories (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005). Consequently, one main purpose of the theory of MO was initially to highlight the ways in which MOs are distinct forms of organizations, naturally leading scholars, for the purpose of analysis, to consider MOs as a homogeneous sub-category of organizations. Therefore, emphasizing the similarity among them, that is, their archetypal parameters (Greenwood et al., 2014), was substantial to the founding project of highlighting their common differences from other kinds of organizations.

This research is based on the notion that a promising avenue to further the theory of MOs consists in a more systematic investigation of the internal heterogeneity of this specific kind of organization. The MO literature already provides many insights concerning the ways specific kinds of MOs differ one another. However, our current understanding of MO diversity is more grounded on studies pertaining to a sub-category of MOs than systematic comparative investigations or wide-ranging comparative analytical frameworks. In this section, I review how the diversity of MO is currently addressed in the MO literature and I discuss in what way the identification of key dimensions of differentiation among MOs may lay the foundations for the building of a more encompassing comparative framework, if not of general typology of MOs.

### 4.1. The issue of similarities and differences in organizational studies

Some scholars have invited to study variations among MOs (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Berkowitz & Bor, 2018). However, while the issue of the similarity and heterogeneity of internal members has been a central topic of the MO literature, the question of how MOs differ among themselves has received much less attention. In the early stages of

development of MO theory, the initial focus on the distinctive attributes of MOs, and by implication their similarity, was neither surprising nor illegitimate. Emphasizing their internal differences could even have been viewed as potentially undermining the purpose of identifying MOs as a fundamentally distinctive and typical form of organizations compared to individual-based organizations. However, without calling into question the strong distinctiveness of MOs pointed out by MO scholars, it is fair to note that this category of organizations also presents a high degree of internal differentiation. It is important to note that the issue of similarities and differences among members of a defined category of organizations or social entities is not specific to the MO literature. This is a central topic of the general theory of organizations. A prime example is Greenwood et al. (2014), in which, discussing other important theoretical contributions (Aldrich, 2009; King, Felin, & Whetten, 2009, 2010; McKelvey & Aldrich, 1983), the authors contrast “the case for presuming *similarity*” and “the case for presuming *difference*” in organizational studies. They develop the argument that, in organizational studies in general and institutional studies in particular, the presumption should be of organizational difference, not similarity, and the guiding framework should be comparative analysis. However, in contrast to the call in this paper for closer investigation of the heterogeneity of MOs, Greenwood et al. call for a return to the way organizational studies initially developed, with a presumption of difference, an emphasis on comparative analysis and, correlatively, a significant efforts given to the construction of typologies and taxonomies (McKelvey, 1982; Miller, Friesen, & Mintzberg, 1984) in order to capture and understand both similarities and differences (Blau & Scott, 1962; Perrow, 1967; Pugh et al., 1963).

### 4.2. Dimensions of differentiation among MOs

One way of addressing the internal diversity of a given category of organizations is through the identification of dimensions of differentiation among them. Indeed, as far as MOs are concerned, different dimensions of differentiation have been put forward in the MO literature. Drawing on the extant literature, it is possible to discern three main dimensions of differentiation highlighted by MO scholars.

#### 4.2.1. The degree of organizationality

Organizationality is defined by Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) as the degree to which a social collective displays three characteristics of organization: (1) interconnected instances of decision-making, (2) actorhood, and (3) identity. However, especially with regard to the first characteristic put forth, it also closely relates (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016) to the theoretical perspective of Ahrne and Brunsson (2011), which is centered on the concept of partial organization. While many organizations meet all five criteria of a complete organization (membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanction), MOs, which consist of a specific kind of formal but partial organization, often meet one or several criteria but rarely all five criteria simultaneously. The most fundamental and systematically present criterion is membership (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015b) while, due to their structural characteristics, the organizational elements of hierarchy and power to sanction members are the most frequently absent from MOs (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Berkowitz, 2018; König et al., 2012). The degree or level of organizationality is especially important as it determines the capacity of an organization to act and effectively fulfil its mission and helps determine its organizational identity and degree of actorhood (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Grothe-Hammer, 2018; Järvi et al., 2018). MOs are generally characterized by an intermediate level of organizationality, lower than complete organizations but higher than other less formal forms of organizing, although a substantial degree of differentiation may be observed among them. However, even if the partial organization dimension of MOs has been emphasized, especially by Berkowitz and Dumez (2015a, 2015b), the focus has so far been more on the prevalence of each organizational attribute in MOs rather than, in a

comparative approach, on the differences in terms of degree of organizationalness among MOs. Indeed, this conceptual framework has been mainly applied to organizations (or even “non-organizations”) that typically have a lower degree of organizationalness than MOs: fluid social collectives (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015), knowledge ecosystems (Järvi et al., 2018), organizations without actorhood (Grothe-Hammer, 2018).

#### 4.2.2. The degree of similarity/heterogeneity among members

One important way in which MOs differ is through their membership base. One may discern four principal membership dimensions. The first is the specific identity and nature of members, especially with regard to the degree of similarity or heterogeneity among them and to the common attributes or purposes they share (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015a, 2015b; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Brankovic, 2018). The second dimension is the degree of openness of MO boundaries (Gulati et al., 2012; Malcourant, Vas, & Zintz, 2012). This is particularly relevant to the more network-oriented MOs considered by Gulati et al. (2012) and MOs with different types of membership status—full or ordinary members, associate or affiliate members, observer members, etc. (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Brankovic, 2018; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Cropper & Bor, 2018). The third dimension is the presence of important members, especially the “strong” and more influential actors in the field (Einarsson, 2012). The fourth membership dimension is the degree of coverage among all the field organizations, which in extreme cases may lead to class saturation (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015b). The first of these four dimensions is probably the most determinant. In particular, a high degree of heterogeneity among members can have significant implications in terms of decision-making, due to the presence of members with diverse interests, goals and preferences (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Brès et al., 2018); identity tensions (Bonfils, 2011); and potential for conflict, bringing to the fore issues around membership and organizational goals/tasks (Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015).

#### 4.2.3. The level of specificity of purpose

MOs, as I discuss in more detailed later on, may have very distinctive general purposes and accomplish numerous functions of different nature. This degree of heterogeneity, obviously makes it difficult to subsume the diversity of MOs’ purposes in one unidimensional dimension. However, one way to fruitfully characterize the heterogeneity of MO purposes is that adopted by Berkowitz et al. (2017) in their study on CSR in the oil and gas industry, that is, with regard to the specificity of the MO’s topic of concern. For example, in more general terms, the level of specificity of purpose may lead to a broader distinction between, on the one hand, MOs aiming at representing collectively (and acting for) a whole class of organizations—federations, confederations, national or international associations—and, on the other hand, MOs set up in order to achieve a more specific purpose. These might include issue-oriented business-only MOs and multi-stakeholder MOs (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015a; Berkowitz et al., 2017); territorial MOs (Ehlinger et al., 2007; Gadille et al., 2013); CSR and sustainability MOs (Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Chaudhury et al., 2016; Corazza et al., 2019; Valente & Oliver, 2018); or even specific task-oriented international organizations (Malcourant et al., 2012, 2015). Actually, the first kind of field-level MOs may also show diversity in terms of functional scope. Rajwani et al. (2015) thus sort trade associations according to whether they focus on internal industry activities, or also place strong emphasis on engaging directly and frequently with external stakeholders.

#### 4.3. Further characterizing MO diversity by articulating dimensions of differentiation and by adopting a classification approach: the quest for a general MO typology

Each of the three dimensions of differentiation among MOs highlighted above suggests that the notion of MO diversity is not only about

similarity and differences in a dichotomic perspective but may often also be expressed in a more gradual way with regard to a continuum ranging between two extreme poles. The concept of organizationalness clearly illustrates this notion with the idea of gradual differentiation ranging from partial (if not “non-organization”, Järvi et al., 2018) to complete organization (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016).

Moreover, the different dimensions of variability among MOs are not necessarily independent. For example, MO researchers have unveiled some typical patterns of relationship between the profile of the membership base and the general purpose of MOs: (1) close boundary and exclusive membership status-driven MOs, characterized by the high status of their members, claims to superiority in terms of their quality and seek to establish themselves as representatives of a distinct and superior sub-category (Brankovic, 2018); (2) MOs that aim to influence law-makers tend to be “inclusive groups” with as many members as possible (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Olson, 1965); (3) multi-stakeholder MOs are well suited to dealing with some specific sustainability and CSR issues (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Chaudhury et al., 2016; Valente & Oliver, 2018). Yet, the fact that different dimensions of differentiation may be practically and logically connected is not inherently problematic. In an organizational studies context, Greenwood et al. (2014) note that both taxonomies and typologies seek to identify, classify and so explain differences between organizations; but while typologies emphasize ideal types based on *a priori* distinctions (Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings, 1993), taxonomies seek to uncover organizational differences through multivariate empirical classification (McKelvey, 1982)—the underlying assumptions being that organizations strive for internal consistency and coherence (Miller et al., 1984). In other words, the fact that different dimensions of differentiation, even described in gradual terms, are interdependent is consistent with a configurational approach and consonant with the classical argument that the theoretical merits of typological research arise directly from the inherently configurational nature of types (McKinney, 1966; Meyer et al., 1993).

From an MO perspective, this suggests that the identification of dimensions of differentiation may lay the groundwork for another way of addressing the issue of MO diversity, i.e., through a classification approach. As a fact, the idea of classifying MOs is not absent from the MO literature. Some typologies have been proposed but, as yet, most are specific typologies pertaining to a more or less closely defined sub-category of MOs and are not intended to be general typologies. For example, in their study of corporate social responsibility (CSR) MOs in the oil and gas industry, Berkowitz et al. (2017) characterize MOs along two main dimensions. The first is the degree of cohesiveness/heterogeneity of members with regard to their form (companies, governments and civil society actors) and their sectoral level (cross-sectoral MOs, supra-sectoral MOs, sectoral MOs); the second is the degree of specificity of their scope of action. This also allows them to classify the MOs studied into three groups: traditional MOs (trade associations); specialized business MOs (business-only association dealing with specific problems for which firms collectively research solutions); and multi-stakeholders MOs (those that group together companies, governments and civil society actors). Similarly, Rajwani et al. (2015) categorize trade associations into four types (fast followers, powerhouses, orators, campaigners) along two dimensions: their size (small vs. large) and their functional features (internal engagement with members vs. internal engagement with members *and* external engagement with socio-political actors). For example, *orators* trade associations tend to be small in size and focus mainly on communicating effectively with their members, while *campaigners* are also small in size but focus largely on external campaigning and communication.

To conclude, the construction of a general typology of MOs appears to be an ambitious but potentially fruitful goal for MO researchers. But, while much progress has been made in this direction, I would also suggest that, at this relatively early stage in the development of MO theory, it still lacks key building blocks that enable a consistent and

encompassing classification of MOs, if indeed this is a realist and attainable objective. With the aim of contributing to this theoretical quest, in this paper I draw on the extant MO literature and the literature on GUFs to bring out two potentially generative dimensions of differentiation. The first concerns the degree of consistency between the goals of the MO secretariat and the objectives pursued by MO members. The second pertains to the direction and degree of asymmetrical interdependence between the MO and its members. These two dimensions are inherently independent but it may be useful to consider them conjointly in order to examine the capacity of MOs to influence their environment and their members' behaviors. Indeed, while the goal-consistency dimension influences the degree of members' commitment to the MO's activities, the asymmetrical interdependence dimension relates to the benefits of affiliation for members and how the MO is dependent on the practical commitment of its members to exert its meta-organizational functions.

## 5. GUFs as MOs

Many kinds of MOs have been investigated from an MO perspective. However, even if, interestingly, [Ahrne and Brunsson \(2005\)](#) cite labor unions as a typical example of an MO and employers' associations and union associations are depicted by [Ahrne, Aspers, and Brunsson \(2015\)](#) as examples of "buyers and sellers" MOs acting as "market organizers" in the labor market, no MO related to the industrial relation field, to my knowledge, has yet been specifically studied through this theoretical lens. This may point to a lack of interest in the industrial relations field among organizational theorists. However, one may argue that the absence of such studies is somewhat paradoxical as the industrial relations field is particularly rich in different kinds of MOs and meta-organizational activities. This is especially true at the international level, where many MOs related to the industrial relations fields coexist, corroborating the observation of MO scholars who have emphasized the central role of MOs both in the globalization process and in international relations ([Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008](#); [Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016](#); [Berkowitz, 2016a, 2016b](#); [Malcourant et al., 2012](#)). One contribution of the theory of MOs is to provide an organizational perspective on the international relations field. For example, with regard to inter-governmental organizations, [Ahrne, Brunsson and Kerwer \(2016\)](#) note that the meta-organizational perspective contrasts with approaches that view inter-governmental organizations merely as an arena or a design feature of international regimes in which the representatives of member states act but the organization itself does not. This echoes a similar argument concerning GUFs and the international industrial relations field: [Ford and Gillan \(2015\)](#) point to the need to think of GUFs as institutional industrial relations actors with their own distinct historical origins, organizational forms, internal governance and strategic goals and methods, which determine the limits of their capacity to act. All this, once again, points to the dual nature of MOs—as devices for collective action and as autonomous organizations in its own right—but also to the intrinsic intertwining between the two dimensions. In other words, as far as the international industrial relations field is concerned, a full recognition and understanding of the organizational nature of GUFs is needed to give a comprehensive account of how national unions may collectively impact working conditions at the global level.

In this regard, the MO theoretical perspective appears as particularly well-suited to explore the organizational dimension of GUFs. In the next three sections, I show how this theoretical framework provides a complementary and insightful account of many organizational features and practical challenges brought to light in the international industrial relations literature. More specifically, consistently with the general analytical approach I adopt in this paper, in the present section I draw on both the MO literature and the international industrial relations literature to examine what fundamental characteristics GUFs share with most MOs, and, where relevant, their peculiarities with

regard to the dominant organizational attributes elicited by MO scholars. I first discuss the meta-organizational functions of GUFs and show that many of them correspond to those highlighted in the MO literature, even though the function of supporting singular members appears quite distinctive with regard to those most frequently emphasized by MO scholars. I next underline the fact that GUFs are not the only kind of MOs acting in the international industrial relations landscape and that this plurality of actors has translated into a division of labor between GUFs and the prevailing international cross-sectoral union confederation. Last, I show that GUFs present many characteristics that have been identified as typical of MOs but also present specific features, especially with respect to the singular ways they depend on their members.

### 5.1. Meta-organizational functions of GUFs

The issue of GUFs' functions has received much attention in the international industrial relations literature, in the same way that MOs' functions and purposes have been widely investigated by MO scholars. [Ford and Gillan \(2015\)](#) depict five main domains of GUF activity and repertoires of actions: (1) knowledge production and dissemination; (2) education and training; (3) formal worker representation and participation in various global institutions or transnational initiatives; (4) resource for workers and local trade unions; (4) direct engagement in trade union formation and/or recruitment of union members in various locales and industries; and (5) negotiation and implementation of global agreements with MNCs. [Croucher and Cotton \(2009\)](#) suggest that the work of global unions can be divided into three main areas: the first is the defense of affiliated unions, usually through direct solidarity action in response to a particular dispute or problem; the second is to further the interests of trade unions within international and inter-governmental organizations, in recent years mainly by pursuing international negotiations with employers, using company networks and GFAs; the third is capacity-building for unions in less developed parts of the world, carried out primarily through long-term development work, in particular education programs ([Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012](#)). According to [Luterbacher et al. \(2017\)](#), the principal activities of GUFs consist in: (1) disseminating information on working conditions to all members globally employed by MNCs; (2) organizing international support for affiliated national unions involved in disputes with MNEs; (3) providing assistance to specific categories of workers through specialized committees; and (4) interacting with international governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations to promote the interests of GUF-affiliated unions. Other authors have linked the topic of GUFs' functions with a typological approach to international federations ([Platzer & Müller, 2011](#)).

More generally, [Müller et al. \(2010b\)](#) assert that GUFs basically have two practical options available to them for promoting workers' interests: (1) lobbying national governments and international global governance institutions in order to influence basic political and economic conditions; (2) negotiations with employers at the enterprise and federation levels. However, although the international multi-employer collective bargaining area has experienced some progress since the early 1990s, particularly at the sectoral and the European level ([Léonard & Sobczack, 2010](#); [Müller, Platzer, & Rüb, 2010a, 2010b](#)), it has been quite limited. Indeed, as I discuss in more detail later, the two main spheres of activity of international union organizations are actually those of institutional representation and of transnational company-level bargaining.

Both these activities relate closely to some meta-organizational functions highlighted in the MO literature. While the general purpose of MOs is to serve the interests of their members ([Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016](#); [Cropper & Bor, 2018](#); [Lawton et al., 2017](#); [Rajwani et al., 2015](#)), [Ahrne and Brunsson \(2008\)](#) present three general purposes for which an MO may be set up: (1) regulating interaction among members; (2) promoting and coordinating collective action among members; and (3) creating a collective identity. MO researchers also report many specific

functions and roles. However, beyond their great diversity, many of the functions identified in the literature can be classified according to whether they relate to cooperation, coordination and regulation among members, or whether they relate to the management of relationships with external stakeholders, such as NGOs, policy-makers, etc. (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2017; König et al., 2012; Rajwani et al., 2015) The former correspond to inward functions of MOs while the latter correspond to their outward functions (Laurent, Garaudel, Schmidt, & Eynaud, 2019).

In the international industrial relations field, the activities of GUFs mainly relate to outward meta-organizational functions since, by their very nature, they aim at influencing the behavior of external decision-makers, whether at the company or at the sectoral level. However, GUFs also carry out activities that correspond to inward meta-organizational functions. First, they fulfill activities that can be viewed as inward meta-organizational functions when they push their members to develop certain practices or adopt certain structures at the company level: for example, when they set up formal international union alliances within MNCs (Bourque, Hennebert, Lévesque, & Murray, 2018; Fichter, Helfen, & Schiederig, 2013; Hennebert & Dufour-Poirier, 2013; Müller et al., 2010b) or when GUFs pushed for the creation of global company councils (Da Costa & Rehfeldt, 2011; Fairbrother & Hammer, 2005; Müller et al., 2010b).

Second, GUFs fulfill an inward meta-organizational function when they give their members direct support, for example, by developing education and training activities from a union capacity-building perspective. It should be noted that these direct support activities, which point to the international solidarity dimension of GUFs, correspond to a function distinct from the traditional functions highlighted by MO scholars. Indeed, this issue of direct support has been more explicitly reported in consideration of how MOs may foster and support the creation of new organizations at the local or national level, generally intended to become their own members (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Einarsson, 2012; Malcourant et al., 2012; Skocpol, Ganz, & Munson, 2000).

Third, inward meta-organizational functions also relate to the “creating a collective identity among members” purpose of MO identified by Ahrne and Brunsson. The motivation for members to join a global union is, in part, a “social-communicative approach” (Caporaso, 1992), as affiliation provides an important sense of group identity and GUFs provide an opportunity for socialization, particularly important for developing country unions that are often isolated and lack experience of operating at international and often diplomatic levels (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012).

## 5.2. The division of labor between GUFs and the prevailing international cross-sectoral union confederation

The international industrial relations field offers a prime example of a meta-organizational landscape involving a variety of MOs. It comprehends: GUFs and the (cross-sectoral) International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC); European Trade Unions Federations and the (cross-sectoral) European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC); the Federation of International Employers (FedEE); the International Labor Organization (ILO, a United Nations tri-partite agency that is also a tri-partite organization); the Trade Union Advisory Committee of the OECD (an interface for trade unions with the OECD and its members); and, more generally, other international institutions such as the European Union.

These various MOs do not act independently and are connected to each other by many kinds of interactions: membership, influence, negotiations, competition, cooperation, etc. Beyond negotiation in the form of collective bargaining, which constitutes a kind of interaction between MOs that is especially relevant in the industrial relations field (Ahrne et al., 2015), competitive if not rivalrous tensions can exist between industrial relations MOs. This was observed in the past when

three global unions confederations coexisted until 2006 (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2013). However, interactions among MOs in the international industrial relations field are mainly characterized by cooperation. For example, observing that within the International Labor Organization’s tripartite structure, the International Trade Union Confederation and its predecessors have always effectively controlled the workers’ side, Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick (2012) note that the International Trade Union Confederation and the International Labor Organization confer legitimacy and recognition on each other and that this relationship has become increasingly important in recent years. A significant level of cooperation also exists between the federation and confederation structures and among international sectoral federations themselves.

A specific form of cooperation between federations and confederation structures is the tacit division of labor (commonly known as the Milan agreement) that emerged in the 1990s between GUFs and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, followed in 2006 by the International Trade Union Confederation. This division of labor can be described as a split over the taking in charge of meta-organizational functions in the international industrial relations field. While the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions focused on traditional lobbying at international institutions and international campaigns over labor rights, GUFs focused on sectoral issues and negotiations with transnational corporations (Collombat, 2009; Fairbrother & Hammer, 2005; Helfen & Fichter, 2011). This translated into an external orientation of the International Trade Union Confederation, which focused on a more general and political level and engaged with other actors at international level, especially the International Labor Organization and other United Nations institutions (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012). GUFs, conversely, gave more attention to union organizing and labor-management relations over a primary reliance on traditional lobbying at international institutions (Platzer & Müller, 2011). In other words, while strengthening cooperation and coordination among members, on the one hand, and acting as a collective representative of its members in relation to external stakeholders (policy-makers, media, NPOs, etc.), on the other hand, have been identified as two main functions of MOs, these two functions tend to be dissociated in the new international industrial relations landscape.

## 5.3. Meta-organizational attributes of GUFs

Beyond their meta-organizational functions, GUFs present several characteristics that have been identified as typical of MOs. These relate to the autonomy of members and the strong dependence of GUFs on their national affiliates, their decision-making processes and the inequality of power and influence among members.

### 5.3.1. Members’ autonomy and the dependence of GUFs on their national affiliates

Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008) have emphasized two main defining characteristics of MOs. The first is that their members are autonomous organizations that are free to adhere and to leave the MO whenever they want. The second is that MOs’ members are much more differentiated than the members of individual-based organizations. The combination of these two characteristics has significant consequences in many respects. One is that MOs are much more dependent on their organizational members compared to individual-based organizations.

The autonomy of members is also a central organizational attribute of GUFs. GUFs are federations. They have statutes, which regulate membership, income, leadership elections, internal divisions of labor and the delegation of authority; and their periodic congresses set the programmatic agenda for the leadership (Helfen & Fichter, 2013). As federations comprised of autonomous organizations, that is, as “second-order organizations” (Müller & Platzer, 2017), GUFs are largely dependent on the resources and inputs of their members, especially their most powerful and internationally active affiliates (Ford & Gillan, 2015;



Helfen & Fichter, 2013; Müller et al., 2010a). GUFs are dependent on their members for funding and also in terms of affiliates' implication in the collective activity. They are especially dependent on the commitment and resources of network participants at decentralized levels (Müller et al., 2010b).

With regard to the dependence on funding and financial resources, a specificity of the international industrial relations field should be noted. GUFs are characterized by limited resources and they face important budgetary constraints to accomplish their task. While some MO scholars have underlined the low cost of membership (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015a; Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015) and the low costs associated with the setting up and maintenance of an MO (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Berkowitz & Bor, 2018), the issue of financial resources appears much more critical for GUFs (Ford & Gillan, 2015; Müller & Platzer, 2017). There are several reasons for this. GUFs have greatly enlarged their scope of activity (Ford & Gillan, 2015); unions in most developed countries have experienced a steady decline in the number of workers paying subscriptions, resulting in a reduction of payments to global union organizations; and GUFs have simultaneously experienced a dramatic increase in the number of affiliated organizations and geographic scope since the 1990s, leading to the affiliation of less resourceful members from developing countries (Fichter et al., 2013; Platzer & Müller, 2011). In other words, GUFs are victims of their own success in bringing in more affiliates, since demands increase as resources diminish (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012; Croucher & Cotton, 2009; Müller et al., 2010b).

### 5.3.2. Decision-making processes in GUFs

As a consequence of the autonomy of members and the dependence of MOs on their members, MOs largely rely on consensus rather than hierarchical decision-making processes (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008; König et al., 2012). They may also develop some form of delegation and mandating procedures (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Brès et al., 2018). Moreover, decisions about MO members' activities often take the form of voluntary self-regulation: they are implemented through non-binding rules such as standards, guidelines and directives (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Gulati et al., 2012; Malcourant et al., 2015). This is not exclusive to the international level but one major way in which MOs contribute to the regulation of globalization is through the production of "standards" (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008; Dumez, 2008; Vifell & Thedvall, 2012; Malcourant et al., 2015). Standards are common for MOs, especially in inter-governmental organizations where they are often called "recommendations," "best practices," "guidelines," or "benchmarks" (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016).

GUFs present similar characteristics with regard to their decision-making processes. They may receive a mandate from their affiliates to carry out given tasks (Da Costa & Rehfeldt, 2011; Ford & Gillan, 2015; Léonard & Sobczack, 2010; Müller et al., 2010a). Yet, due to their inability to draw on formal authorities (Ford & Gillan, 2015; Helfen & Fichter, 2013) they are also consensus-building structures (Müller et al., 2010b) and often resort to the establishment of procedures and guidelines for their members (Bourque et al., 2018; Da Costa & Rehfeldt, 2011; Fichter et al., 2013; Fairbrother & Hammer, 2005; Hennebert & Dufour-Poirier, 2013; Müller et al., 2010a, 2010b). For that matter, since, at the very least, they always include a reference to the core International Labor Organization's standards, GFAs may also be seen as a vehicle for the diffusion of such basic standards at the MNC level.

### 5.3.3. Inequality of power and influence among members

The fact that MOs' members are much more differentiated than individual-based organizations is often associated with a significant degree of heterogeneity among members. This heterogeneity may be considered in two different ways. First, with regard to the

organizational nature (firms, government bodies, NGOs, etc.) and sector of activity of members, as illustrated in many goal-directed or issue-oriented MOs specifically focus on a predefined task (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015b; Chaudhury et al., 2016; Valente & Oliver, 2018). Second, the heterogeneity of members may relate to their degree of differentiation in terms of size, statute, resources, power, influence, etc. in particular in the context of collective representative and field-level organizations. When MO members differ greatly in terms of size and the resources at their disposal, this can have important implications not only in terms of formal power—for example, when voting rights depend on the individual member base and the financial contribution of each state member (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016), as it does in many international governmental organizations—but also in terms of informal power. This raises the issue of influential members and the possibility that the strongest members could be in a position to push their own agendas and promote their own interests (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Barnett, 2013; Lawton et al., 2017). In some cases, a high level of differentiation among members can lead to different types of membership: full or ordinary members, associate or affiliate members, candidate members, observer members, etc. (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Brankovic, 2018; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Cropper & Bor, 2018).

International trade union organizations comprise numerous affiliates with marked differences in membership strength and material resources, and conflicting ideologies and identities (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012). The issue of inequality of power among members is all the more important in international union federations, given their structural problems of insufficient resources (Müller et al., 2010a) and the significant differences among members in terms of financial contribution. In some GUFs, such as the IUF, differences in contributions are so substantial that they distinguish officially between "representative membership" and "financial membership" (Müller et al., 2010b). Trade unions from OECD countries are the main contributors to GUFs. More specifically, European national unions play a prevailing role in transnational federations. All of them are headquartered in Europe and are largely influenced by their European affiliates with regard to financing, voting rights, and the nationality of elected representatives and permanent staff employees (Collombat, 2009).

## 6. GUFs' agency and the role of their secretariats

Due to their paradoxical nature as autonomous actors with autonomous actors as members, MOs and the members compete for autonomy, leading to severe and intricate problems of actorhood: Ahrne, Brunsson and Kerwer (2016), for example, observe that an international inter-governmental organization is permanently competing for actorhood with its member states, and this competition has far-reaching implications for the ways they perform as agents of global governance. It has been argued that MOs suffer from a "structural weakness" (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Dumez, 2008) due to the reluctance of their members to relinquish some of their autonomy and given that the relative power of each member does not allow MOs to establish a strong hierarchy and formal authority. However, although MOs serve their members and are governed by them, MO theorists state that MOs can develop a certain degree of agency independent of their members and may regulate their members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Cropper & Bor, 2017).

In this section, I show that GUFs as MOs also suffer from a structural weakness that constrains both the definition and the achievements of their goals. This structural weakness directly originates from their meta-organizational attributes previously exposed and, more specifically, from the strong heterogeneity of their membership base. The resulting challenge for GUFs especially takes the form of dealing with what is known, in the international industrial relations literature, as the issue of transnational solidarity. In this context, GUFs secretariats often strive to develop solidarity among their members as an ideologically based ideal.

### 6.1. The challenge of actorhood and agency for MOs

Not only can MOs gain a degree of autonomy, and become recognized as organizations in their own right but also their structural weakness does not necessarily mean they have little influence on their environment (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Cropper & Bor, 2018; Dumez, 2008). Their capacity for agency has been explained in various ways. MOs may have “informal authority,” which is based on their expertise, reputation, status, gate-keeping privileges and control over key resources (Gulati et al., 2012; Malcourant et al., 2015). Similarly, Ahrne, Brunsson and Kerwer (2016) suggest that the very characteristics that make MOs weak actors constitute one of the reasons for their “hidden strengths”: although MOs have problems in using many of the organizational elements of hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions, they are less challenged when it comes to the use of membership. Much of the strength of an MO comes from its gatekeeping power, that is, its ability to decide who can become a member, which is a major instrument for influencing its environment. Formalization of activities through published standards and action plans (Vifell & Thedvall, 2012) and formalization of organizational attributes (governance mechanisms, membership rules, goal and task of the organization, etc.), such as those laying down in action plans or a constitution, can also have positive effects in terms of an MO's presence and agency (Cropper & Bor, 2018). Besides, MOs' dependence on their members may be compensated when members are themselves strongly dependent on the MO and when MOs are in a real position to exclude recalcitrant members. However, in practical terms, an MO's capacity for agency is closely linked to its secretariat, that is, its formal structure composed of permanent employees.

Secretariats of MOs are “centers of authority” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008), responsible for decision-making: they are in charge of preparing the drafting of standards and members' decision making (Dumez, 2008; Gimet & Grenier, 2018). They may also receive a delegation of authority from their members to accomplish certain tasks (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Ehlinger et al., 2007; Gadille et al., 2013). Most importantly, as permanent structures, they are in a position to carrying out an MO's functions continuously, while organization members tend to have discontinuous relationships (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Dumez, 2008; Gadille et al., 2013). Along with the continuity of their activity, the efficiency of MO secretariats often comes from a legitimacy based on expertise (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Dumez, 2008; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Gimet & Grenier, 2018).

### 6.2. GUFs and the challenge of overcoming the dilemma of transnational solidarity

The general assertion that the purpose of MOs is to serve the interests of their members (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Cropper & Bor, 2018; Lawton et al., 2017; Rajwani et al., 2015) and that, as member-driven organizations, MO functions follow from the reasons members participate (Lawton et al., 2017), needs to be nuanced in several ways.

First, MO secretariats might pursue their own objectives and goals. For example, Carmagnac and Carbone (2019) suggest that communication is also a tool for an MO to pursue the main objective of its own survival and development. In the same vein, Shin (2017) states that business associations as MOs have a duality of purpose by their nature: their own prosperity and survival, and the prosperity and survival of their members.

Second, even if they are linked by a common general purpose and an overarching goal (Gulati et al., 2012), members' motivations and incentives for participation in an MO may differ (Valente & Oliver, 2018). Their heterogeneous preferences may even lead to a lack of consensus about the concrete goals of the MO. When MOs involve members with diverse interests, goals and preferences (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Brès et al., 2018; Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015), a major task for MOs is the goal-alignment process through which clear and consistent

common goals are defined (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2017; Chaudhury et al., 2016; Solansky et al., 2014).

Finally, despite, or perhaps because of, their lack of formal authority, secretariats of MOs may try to influence members' activities by playing an active role in the process of defining an organizational identity and promoting values. Indeed, the fact that MOs are member-driven organizations does not mean that their goals and activities are only expressed in terms of the narrowly defined self-interest of members. This is especially true for multi-stakeholder CSR and sustainability MOs (Berkowitz, 2018; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015a, 2015b; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Chaudhury et al., 2016; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Valente & Oliver, 2018; Vifell & Thedvall, 2012) and for civil society MOs (Bonfils, 2011; Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015; Laurent et al., 2019). More generally, organizations' choice to join MOs tend to be characterized by intrinsic and pro-social motives rather than salary incentives or extrinsic motivation (Malcourant et al., 2012).

The international industrial relations field provides an interesting context in this regard since values can have an important counteracting role in the process of resolving tensions arising from the divergent interests of members. As trade unions, and beyond the interests of their organization members, GUFs seek to represent both the economic and social interests of workers and their broader human rights (Ford & Gillan, 2015). A consequence of their explicitly international scope, however, is that GUFs are confronted with the challenge of overcoming the dilemma of transnational solidarity (Ford & Gillan, 2015; Helfen & Fichter, 2011). Organizing transnational solidarity, indeed, is the “Achilles heel” of trade unionism, particular in today's world of global production and competition (Fichter et al., 2013). For members of global unions, solidarity involves the commitment to support other members in response to conflicts with employers, both locally and internationally, in order to protect standards for working people everywhere (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012). However, Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick note that there are two contrasting concepts of solidarity: first, as a normative or moral principle that creates an obligation to support other workers and their unions in case of need; and second, as a form of enlightened self-interest (Logue, 1980; Ramsay, 1997) with only weak ethical underpinning, motivated by the belief that an injury to one is (sooner or later) an injury to all. Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick (2012) further observe that tension between these two concepts of solidarity has generated dilemmas for international trade union organizations, in part because the practical benefits of solidarity actions are often difficult to identify and take many years to bear fruit. At the firm level, Luterbacher et al. (2017) add that the high degree of heterogeneity in preferences within GUFs fundamentally constrains their bargaining position vis-à-vis MNCs, whose decision-making capability is often relatively more centralized and unified.

### 6.3. Agency of GUFs and the central role of their secretariats

In the international industrial relations literature, the issue of agency has been mainly discussed in general terms with reference to the agency of actors, workers or labor (Brookes & McCallum, 2017; Brookes, 2013, 2017; Ford & Gillan, 2015; Lévesque & Murray, 2010) rather than with reference to the agency of GUFs themselves. Ford and Gillan (2015) observe that studies of global unions have always been relatively scarce, perhaps because of perceptions of the marginality of the GUFs as labour movement actors in their earlier incarnations, as well as the tendency toward methodological nationalism in industrial relations. However, GUFs have also been depicted as “institutional entrepreneurs” (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012) and the crucial role of their secretariats has since been strongly emphasized.

As for MOs in general, the continuity of their secretariats and their actions is also a source of their efficiency. At the European level, Müller et al. (2010a) note that the secretariats of European Union Federations are in a certain sense the vehicles for the historical, organizational and political experience and knowledge of the federations and represent

them in the day-to-day working processes at the Brussels level. The level of agency of GUFs, however, should be assessed not only with regard to the practical activities of their secretariats but also with regard to their ideological influence and the way they can impact their members' values and priorities. This is especially obvious when they come to deal with the dilemma of transnational solidarity, which results from the fact that cross-national cooperation is structured by competition: in each sector, national and local trade unionists fight to retain jobs, accepting the logic of worker-to-worker competition and potentially leading to competitive tension between unions (Anner et al., 2006). One may find this argument somewhat paradoxical, as economic self-interest can itself be seen as a motivation for international activism: according to a classic explanation of transnational trade unionism, the purpose of international solidarity action is to eliminate competition over labor costs within a given company or industry (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012). However, Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick (2012) note that there is a striking lack of argument and energy devoted to the problem by national affiliates within their own structures and decision-making bodies, perhaps reflecting an ambivalence toward membership of global unions. The policy itself is virtually unchallengeable among trade unions but, beyond the façade of unity, there is nothing automatic about effective cooperation and far less consensus about the specific and demanding actions needed to implement it at global level (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012; Hennebert et al., 2018). In this context, strategic and discursive capacities appear to be of special importance for GUFs in developing solidarity as an ideologically based ideal (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012; Cotton & Royle, 2014). As a power resource conditioning the ability of unions to shape and put forward their own agenda (Lévesque & Murray, 2002, 2010), these capacities enable GUFs to promote and enhance cross-border solidarity, especially through the channeling of solidarity funds from one national union to another (Ford & Gillan, 2015) and the development of transnational alliances at the corporate level (Bourque et al., 2018; Dehnen, 2013; Hennebert & Dufour-Poirier, 2013; Hennebert et al., 2018; Lévesque & Murray, 2010).

## 7. Global framework agreements as meta-organizational activities of GUFs

The division of labor that emerged in the 1990s between GUFs and the cross-sectoral International Trade Union Confederation (and its forerunner, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions), goes hand-in-hand with an important evolution in the international industrial relations field: the development of international collective action at the MNC level. Some authors suggest that the immediate need for a new concerted approach grew out of the unsuccessful attempt to incorporate the International Labor Organization's standards into the World Trade Organization sanction mechanisms, after global unions had sought legal regulation via the "social clause" campaign (Fairbrother & Hammer, 2005; Fichter et al., 2013). Ford and Gillan (2015) also note that it was in recognition of the need for change that the International Trade Secretariats changed their names to GUFs and began initiating a number of amalgamations in 2002. This new orientation mainly translates into an attempt to negotiate transnational agreements at the MNC level in the form of global framework agreements (GFAs).

In this section, I emphasize the multifold implications of this new strategic orientation from an organizational point of view. On the hand, it provides GUFs with an enhanced status and recognition as a legitimate negotiating partner at the global level. On the other hand, it confronts them with difficult challenges that partially mirror the classical meta-organizational issues previously discussed but takes a very specific form and a specific meaning in the MNC context.

### 7.1. The GFA strategy of GUFs

GUFs created GFAs as negotiated agreements with MNCs (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). They have identified GFAs as a strategic lever for their influence on MNCs and have crafted them into a "GFA strategy" (Fichter et al., 2013; Helfen & Fichter, 2011). GFAs have thus been developed as a tool for trade unions to be involved in framing, implementing and monitoring companies' regulation of international core labor standards; furthermore, GUFs see those agreements as a way to strengthen trade unions at the local level of the company (Dehnen, 2013; Hennebert et al., 2018; Luterbacher et al., 2017; Miller, 2008; Thomas, 2011). This process has stimulated a new area of work for GUFs (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012; Mustchin & Martinez Lucio, 2017), leading to a significant extension of their functions (Müller et al., 2010b), and have provided an opening for establishing company-related "fields of contestation" or "arenas" of global labor relations (Fichter et al., 2013; Helfen & Fichter, 2011; Sydow et al., 2014). For GUFs, GFAs are also a means of securing trade union recognition, providing space for organizing and influencing the human resource management practices of MNCs throughout global production networks (Helfen & Fichter, 2011). This helps them be seen as the legitimate representatives of global labor and take a prominent role in the emerging global labor governance architecture (Fairbrother et al., 2013; Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). It also enhances the status of the transnational federation level as a place where agreement is reached on aims, standards and procedures, and upgrades the status of GUF secretariats as information service providers, (co-)negotiators and (co-)signatories of agreements, and, in some instances, conflict mediators between enterprise managements and federation members (Müller et al., 2010b).

### 7.2. The quest for internal and external legitimacy

Legitimacy is a central topic in the MO literature. Scholars have stressed the need for MO legitimacy for access to external funding and for successful influence on their environment and external stakeholders, especially when it comes to interacting with public authorities (Chaudhury et al., 2016). But many scholars have also underlined the importance of legitimacy with regard to MO relations with their own members. The issue of MO legitimacy is thus double-sided as it implies both an internal dimension, related to the management of relationships with their own members, and an external dimension, related to the management of relationships with external shareholders (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2017; Laurent et al., 2019). Of course, internal and external legitimacy are interconnected since internal legitimacy depends on the way an MO fulfills its outward meta-organizational functions and, reciprocally, the MO will strengthen its ability to influence its external environment if it is perceived as the legitimate representative body by all the actors in the field (Laurent et al., 2019).

With regard to GFAs, the issue of legitimacy may be considered from two perspectives: the legitimacy that GFAs confer on GUFs and the legitimacy challenges that GUFs face when carrying out their GFA strategy. The signing of a GFA can involve several signatories representing the workers' side but in all cases GFAs are signed by a representative of the MNC's central management and a GUF (at least). This not only gives the GFA a global dimension, it also provides the GUF with recognition and legitimacy (Helfen & Fichter, 2011, 2013). At the same time, to have its corporate adversaries voluntarily offer recognition and bargaining is in itself a challenge for GUFs (Fichter et al., 2013). However, the main challenge is to build their internal legitimacy toward the other actors representing the workers' side at the company level.

### 7.3. The need for GUFs to cooperate with other MNC internal labor-side actors

While a great number of studies have investigated GFAs in terms of the degree and explaining conditions of their effectiveness (Barreau & Ngaha, 2013; Bourque et al., 2018; Egels-Zandén & Hyllman, 2007; Hennebert et al., 2018; Lévesque et al., 2018; Mustchin & Martinez Lucio, 2017) and their diversity in terms of content and implementation processes, a growing body of work relates to the inter-organizational relationships that they imply at the MNC level. In a general way, legitimacy and authority are the foundations of trade union power (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012). Yet the need for legitimacy is an even more critical issue in the case of GFAs as they entail “external actor involvement” (Fichter, Helfen, & Sydow, 2011), with an external actor playing a leading role in the negotiation and implementation processes of these agreements.

The negotiation stage of GFAs is a crucial step for GUFs. Negotiations between management and employee representation bodies are typically preceded by intra-coalition-building (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980) and intra-organizational bargaining (Walton & McKersie, 1991) between GUFs and other employee representation entities, leading to different actor constellations for negotiations with management (Dehnen, 2013). In this context, different GUFs have adopted distinct strategies for approaching the negotiation process and the involvement of MNCs’ internal actors during this initial step (Dehnen, 2013; Fichter et al., 2013).

However, cooperation between GUFs and internal actors is also needed after the negotiation stage when it comes to implementing and monitoring the application of GFAs. Indeed, the effectiveness of GFAs, in both their procedural and normative dimensions (Bourque et al., 2018; Fichter & McCallum, 2015; Niforou, 2012, 2014), is often based on some kind of inter-union cooperation and coordination at the MNC level. In facilitating this, unions are confronted with enormous demands for horizontal and vertical policy coordination (Fichter et al., 2013). GFAs therefore involve a complex and heterogeneous set of actors with several kinds of relationships that can be divided in two broad categories: those built around actors who are more centrally positioned at the headquarters level (home country unions, European work councils, etc.) and those that link these centrally positioned actors with the periphery (Helfen & Fichter, 2011).

### 7.4. GUFs as network coordinators

Cooperation is the condition for unions to generate effective collective action (Bourque et al., 2018; Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012; Hennebert & Dufour-Poirier, 2013) and for the exercise of their coalitional power, which is one of the three types of power, along with structural and institutional power, that workers can exert to compel employers to improve or maintain wage levels, working conditions, or labor rights at the transnational level (Brookes, 2013, 2017). However, cooperation at the transnational level represents a complex challenge and often requires centralized leadership. This can be exerted by specific affiliates or members, often a small group of union actors from the GUF and a few national unions (Bourque et al., 2018), who may then be described as “missionaries” or “political entrepreneurs” (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012; Croucher & Cotton, 2009; Greer & Hauptmeier, 2008). However, almost all transnational corporate union networks involve GUFs as a relevant constituent (Ford & Gillan, 2015). The main tasks of GUFs then consist of providing the transnational trade union networks with an organizational framework, expertise and logistical support (Müller et al., 2010b). Thus, GUFs act as “network coordinators” for union actors (Helfen & Fichter, 2011, 2013).

## 8. Contribution to the characterization of MO diversity

In the last three sections, I have shown that GUFs display many

organizational attributes typical of the generic form of MO depicted by MO theorists. However, the cross-literature analysis has allowed me to point to several strong and distinctive traits of GUFs. Some of these are idiosyncratic and inherent to the specific purpose of GUFs and the peculiar nature of their activities, in particular their function of supporting singular members and their GFA-related activities. Other distinctive traits can be depicted with regard to the continuous and gradual dimensions commonly underlined in the MO literature, in particular, the degree of the MO’s dependence on its members and the degree of inequality of influence and power among members.

In this section, I analyze these specificities by adopting a theory-building approach and consider in what way they may illuminate our understanding of MO diversity. First, I return to the singular characteristics of the meta-organizational activities of GUFs that take place at the firm level by apprehending them from a meta-organizational architecture perspective. This especially allows me to propose that these activities reflect a multi-level meta-organizational configuration where the upper level interacts directly with second-order members and that the intrinsic exteriority of GUFs to the corporate unions network positions them as meta-organizational network brokers with delegated authority. Next, I come back to a more classical, dyadic perspective focused on the nature of relationships between GUFs and their direct national union members. By combining insights from both the MO and the international industrial relations literature, I bring to light two dimensions of differentiation of MOs that have been largely unexplored in the MO literature and which, I suggest, could constitute useful analytical tools for characterizing MOs from a comparative perspective.

### 8.1. The accomplishment of a singular MO function through GFA-related activities

The most distinctive trait of GUFs relates to their meta-organizational activities that take place at the firm level through their “GFA strategy”. This company-level bargaining approach has led to a significant extension of their functions and has provided them with recognition as a legitimate transnational bargaining agent both among their affiliates and by management within MNCs. From a meta-organizational point of view, the GFA-related activities of GUFs correspond to the common conceptualization of MOs as a formal organization specifically in charge of coordinating and regulating relationships among organization members and between members and external stakeholders. However, the network coordination role of GUFs also results in the accomplishment of a meta-organizational function that presents very uncommon characteristics. First, GUFs operate as external actors, coordinating the collective action of internal worker-side actors within a specific company-related arena. Since, inherently, GUFs are not internal stakeholders of MNCs, it has even been argued that their prominent role positions them as “network brokers” with delegated authority (Provan & Kenis, 2008) and consequently corporate union networks can be depicted as GUF-facilitated networks (Ford & Gillan, 2015; Helfen & Fichter, 2011, 2013). Second, they do not engage only with their direct organization members, that is, national sectoral union federations, but also with their members’ own local company-based affiliates. This points to a multi-level meta-organizational configuration where upper level MOs interact directly with their second-order members and not only through the intermediation of their immediate members. Finally, the network coordinating role of GUFs occurs within the boundaries of a specific organizational entity, the MNC, meaning that they have to interact with actors other than their own members and members’ affiliates: not only do they have to be recognized as a legitimate negotiating partner by the MNC management but they also have to engage with other labor actors, especially non-affiliated unions and European/group work councils.

### 8.2. Specifying two dimensions of differentiation among MOs

In the following, I build both on the extant MO literature and the literature on GUFs to highlight two dimensions of differentiation among

MOs: (1) the degree of consistency between the goals of MO secretariats and the objectives pursued by MO members; and (2) the degree and direction of asymmetrical interdependence between the MO itself and its members.

Both dimensions are connected to the reason why organizations join MOs—the motivation for membership—and determine the capacity of MOs to effectively carry out their meta-organizational functions. However, the first dimension has more to do with the degree of members' commitment to the values and fundamental objectives advocated by the MO, while the second relates more to whether and to what extent the benefits of membership contribute to offsetting the dependence of the MO on its members.

The parameters of the underlying scales also differ. The degree of consistency between the goals of the MO secretariat and the objectives pursued by MO members is conducive to a unidimensional scale ranging from low to high. By contrast, the asymmetrical interdependence dimension is more complex, as it encompasses both the degree of dependence of MOs and members on the other party but also, and above all, ultimately to the extent to which the MO is relatively more dependent on its members than its members are on the MO. In other words, the scale ranges from strong asymmetrical interdependence in favor of the MO to strong asymmetrical interdependence in favor of its members.

### 8.2.1. *The degree of consistency between the goals of the MO secretariat and the objectives pursued by MO members*

Organization members often choose to adhere to an MO in view of the goal and activities the latter defends, because they share both its purpose and interests, and because they value the activities undertaken and the results achieved (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005). However, there is not always complete understanding about what the practical activities should be; furthermore, even if there is consensus about the overarching goal to be pursued this does not imply a similar degree of commitment to it (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Malcourant et al., 2012). Moreover, MO scholars have emphasized the fact that MO members can differ greatly in terms of values, goals and interests, but it is also important to stress that the goals and the specific purpose of some MOs can be quite independent from those of their members. Some MOs have been depicted as internal institutional entrepreneurs striving to create self-regulation within a field and to regulate their members' practices (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2017; Rajwani et al., 2015). But some may also be conceived as such when they are performing "meta-governance" by playing an active role in giving meaning to powerful concepts that shape organizations' and individuals' reality and activities (Vifell & Thedvall, 2012) or when they strive to bring about a "specific type of purposeful collective identity" whereby the leaders of the organization intervene to try to create a sense of belonging, commitment and loyalty (Moufahim, Reedy, & Humphreys, 2015; Webb, 2018). Values—which may be defined as subjective notions of the desirable or as what is worth working towards or fighting for—have an integrative dimension that can bring together divergent interests and inform what people work toward together (Breuer & Lüdeke-Freund, 2016; Webb, 2018). Values often emerge in organizations through interactions among members (Webb, 2018) but the MO secretariat may also play a central role in the process of defining an organizational identity and promoting values.

Obviously, the determining role of secretariats as the promoters of values and institutional entrepreneurs (acting internally to try to influence members' behavior toward a specific purpose to which they are not spontaneously and inherently inclined to commit), is not observed equally among all MOs. In many trade associations, for instance, it is usually taken for granted that the fundamental purpose of the MO is to defend the interests of its members, even if those members may have divergent interests and disagree about the practical actions that should be taken to defend the overall interest of the sector. Conversely, it can be argued that GUFs score lower on this front. In particular, the purpose

of developing transnational solidarity is confronted—because of its very nature—with the strong heterogeneity of GUF members and their conflicting interests. Moreover, even if there is a common understanding among members about the value-driven discourse of transnational solidarity, the degree of commitment to the behaviors and actions this ideal implies is hindered by the fact that national unions are strongly embedded in their national institutional setting and tend to be much more focused on domestic than international matters. For example, in the strongly institutionalized French social relations context, unions are not only naturally more concentrated on directly impacting domestic socio-economical and political debates but the plurality of national union organizations is also conducive to a competitive situation where one central concern is to develop their individual-membership base and to achieve good results in the electoral contests determining the composition of the various representative bodies at the firm and national level. The fact that many unions are still focused on national perspectives (Luterbacher et al., 2017) and, more generally, the difficulties encountered by international union organizations may also reflect the orientation of individual workers, who, it has been argued, are "biased toward parochial concerns" (Hyman, 2005) and are usually unaware of the existence of international trade unions (Waterman & Timms, 2004).

Of course, in contrast to this view of MO secretariats as value-driven internal institutional entrepreneurs, a more skeptical (if not cynical) perspective could interpret the propensity of GUF secretariats to put forward their own agenda with regard to the notion that MO secretariats are inclined to protect and pursue their own interests. Referring to what he calls the "bureaucratic model" of international trade unionism, Hyman (2005) notes that a distinctive career pattern seems set to become the norm for professional trade unionists and that organizationally embedded interests can acquire their own dynamic. This is especially why, he adds, one would expect those whose careers are rooted in cross-national union activities to be persuaded themselves, and to seek to convince others, that such activities are highly valuable.

### 8.2.2. *The degree and direction of asymmetrical interdependence between the MO and its members*

The contention that, compared to individual-based organizations, MOs are more heavily dependent on their members is a common one in the MO literature and is abundantly documented. However, it requires some refinement. First, the notion of dependence is not unidimensional and the dependence of MOs on their members has been expressed with respect to different kinds of resources. MOs are dependent on their members for funding (Einarsson, 2009) but also for strengthening their legitimacy (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Dumez, 2008; Einarsson, 2009); for status (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005); and the identity of an MO is defined by its members to a much greater extent than an individual-based organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015). Concretely, the dependence of MOs on their members for status, legitimacy and identity also means that MOs are dependent on their members for their membership itself. As the specific identity of individual members is less important than that of organizational members, members may be less easily replaced in MOs (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005), especially the more important ones (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2012; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Einarsson, 2009). Strong members are also necessary in order to recruit other members (Einarsson, 2009) and the departure of one single significant member can undermine the MO's legitimacy, attractiveness and ultimately its power of influence, even calling its very existence into question (Dumez, 2008).

Second, the dependence between an MO and its members is not unidirectional. The members of an MO may also be dependent on the MO to a certain extent for some resources. For instance, Ahrne and Brunsson (2005) note that the status of an MO is dependent on its members' status, and vice versa: the high status of its members reflects upon the status of the MO itself, which in turn reflects back on the status of the members. But, of course, the existence of mutual

interdependence does not mean that the MO and its members are always equally dependent on each other. The issue of mutual dependence, and more specifically of “asymmetrical interdependence” (Knorr, 1977), is important since it is closely connected to the notion of power: as power resides implicitly in the other’s dependency, potential power accrues to the less dependent actor in a relationship (Baldwin, 1980; Dyke, Edwards, McDowell, Muga, & Brown, 2014; Einarsson, 2009; Emerson, 1962; Keohane & Nye, 1987; Soegaard, 1994; Wagner, 1988). This theoretical connection between asymmetrical interdependence and power has been widely discussed by students of inter-governmental relations and also, although often in different terms, in (inter-)organizational studies. More specifically, in his theoretical framework of multilevel associations, explicitly building on the concept of MOs, Einarsson (2009) identifies mutual dependence as a key variable determining the distribution of power among different levels. He notes that membership of an MO might also affect the member’s social status at the same time as it is important for the member’s identity. He further argues that this may have important implications with regard to the fact that the reason why organizations join MOs can sometimes compensate the imbalance of power due to the low formal power of MOs and their own dependence on their members.

MO scholars have shown that most MOs are more dependent on their members than the other way around, especially as members typically have access to more resources than the MO (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; König et al., 2012) and many members of MOs are more resourceful and have a higher status than their MO (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2012). However, the asymmetrical interdependence in favor of members, and therefore the imbalance of power in their direction, is less marked in some MOs. A prime example is the one of professional leagues and international sport federations, where MOs are really in a position to exclude recalcitrant members and therefore have access to the organizational element of power to sanction members. The high dependence of members in this kind of MO is also underlined by Einarsson (2009): without the Swedish Football Association, its club members would not have any tournaments to play in or would have to coordinate tournaments among themselves. Another example is status-driven MOs, such as some of the university associations studied by Brankovic (2018). When membership of this kind of status-driven MO is highly valued by members, the MO can use its gatekeeping power to impose standards of action and influence its actual and even potential (aspiring) members’ behaviors.

The concept of asymmetrical interdependence thus provides a useful theoretical basis for characterizing another important dimension of differentiation among MOs. GUFs correspond closely to the common picture depicted by MO scholars. They bring direct support to their members, especially the weakest ones, but are strongly dependent on their strongest ones. It can even be argued that GUFs score particularly low on this dimension if one considers the specific ways in which they are dependent on their members.

First, the issue of financial resources appears much more critical for GUFs than is usually pointed out in the MO literature. Their structural problems of insufficient resources strengthen the dependence of GUFs on their national members, especially the more resourceful ones. Significantly, given the great diversity of their membership base, GUFs have developed a graduated contribution system in accordance with country categories and national economic indicators (Collombat, 2009; Müller et al., 2010b). Similarly, the benefits of affiliation often vary among members (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012). GUFs also vary significantly in terms of resourcing and the differences among them in terms of size and resources influence their strategic orientation: for example, the limited staffing capacity of their secretariat imposes relatively narrow limits on the quantitative expansion and qualitative development of member-oriented activities (Müller et al., 2010a, 2010b) and may lead some GUFs to rely more on their national affiliates to exert international activities such as campaigning (Ford & Gillan, 2015).

Second, GUFs are strongly dependent on the willingness and practical commitment of their members to engage in international activities. As Müller et al. (2010a) stress, an assessment of the allocation of resources to the secretariats of union federations must take into account the financial and personnel capacities of the secretariats but, above all, the intensity with which the national affiliates participate in transnational cooperation via the federation and in effect invest their own know-how and (personnel) resources in the work of the federations. In other words, effective trade unionism requires not just a “willingness to pay” but also a “willingness to act” (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012; Hyman, 2005; Offe & Wiesenthal, 1985). Altogether, this supports the notion that resource acquisition affects the organizing and working of MOs (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Bor, 2014). In addition to the cost structure of activities, one channel through which the functioning of MOs is impacted is resource dependency, which depends on the source (internal or external) of resources, and the extent of control the MO gets over resources (Bor & Cropper, 2016).

## 9. Conclusion and discussion

In this paper, based on a cross-literature approach, I develop an analysis of GUFs and their GFA strategy through the lens of the theory of MOs. While I also report significant characteristics consistent with the archetypal MO form portrayed by MO scholars, my main focus is on the distinctive traits of MO since my ultimate objective is to address a more general theoretical topic, that is, the issue of MO diversity. Consequently, through a dual cross-analysis of the MO literature and the international industrial relations literature in relation to GUFs and their GFA activities, the first methodological step was to determine both what fundamental characteristics GUFs share with most MOs, and what are the peculiarities of this specific kind of MO.

In doing so, I also bring together two areas of research that until now have been developed independently and I argue that this bringing together may be fruitful for both areas. On the one hand, the international industrial relations field can gain from an understanding of GUFs as MOs. On the other hand, the international industrial relations field presents many characteristics that should make it a natural object of investigation for MO researchers. Some of these characteristics intrinsically relate to the industrial relations area in general. Particularly, trade unions organizations, as many MOs, are inherently confronted with the dual challenges of organizing collective actions and being recognized as a legitimate representative of a given category or group of organizations. However, the international perspective is also of special interest, given the extended multi-level dimension (local, national, regional, global) that characterizes and structures the industrial relations meta-organizational landscape at the international level. This is why this paper is also in line with studies emphasizing the multi-level dimension of MOs in which different embedded but autonomous organizational levels are interconnected by a meta-organizational architecture (Brankovic, 2018; Einarsson, 2009, 2012; Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015; Malcourant et al., 2012). From this point of view, some connections may be found with the works of international industrial relations scholars building on the multi-level governance perspective, which initially originated in political science to help understand the more complex forms of interdependence between different levels of regulation (Lévesque et al., 2018) and shares with the MO perspective an interest in the dynamics of decision making in a complex, multi-level structure (Kerwer, 2013). This has especially led to highlight the central role of international trade union organizations within the context of a multi-level system of governance (Muller et al., 2010a; Lévesque et al., 2018) and industrial relations (Müller and Platzer, 2017). It is yet worth noting that multi-level structures do not only follow a principle of territorial differentiation and, consequently, adopting a multi-level perspective also prompts lines of questioning about the linkages between levels that echo similar considerations pertaining to the industrial relations meta-organizational landscape at the national level.

For example, Collombat (2009) mentions the specificity of the British and north European industrial relations contexts where, in contrast to other countries, it is the central cross-sectoral confederation which is the emanation of the powerful, highly autonomous sectoral federations, and not the opposite.

The territorial, multi-level dimension of the international industrial relation field has been addressed in different ways by industrial relations scholars. A prime example is the spatial perspective underlying the networked view of scale developed by labor geographers, who see scales not as hierarchical like ladder rungs or nested like concentric circles but as interconnected, interwoven, interdependent networks that are contingent upon particular historical and geographical constellations of social relationships (Brookes, 2013). However, most of these approaches tend to adopt a more structural and institutional perspective and are more focused on labor agency and the labor movement considered as a whole rather than on the specific and concrete organizational actors acting in the industrial relations field.

By contrast, the meta-organizational perspective calls for paying closer attention to the rationale for action of these actors. It also requires a closer investigation of the nature and modalities of the relationships that actors situated at different scales develop each other. Thus, the two main contributions stemming from our cross-literature analysis both relate to the framework of interactions and the factors affecting the relationship that GUFs establish with other actors when they carry-out their meta-organizational activities.

The first contribution is centered on the interactions that take place within the scope of a given MCN. Indeed, one strong specificity of GUFs relates to the context in which they carry out some of their meta-organizational functions. This distinctive feature may be described as idiosyncratic, in the sense that it derives from the specific purpose of GUFs as international union organizations. As union organizations, their mode of action involves an oppositional stance in interaction with an adversarial counterpart, which may lead them to engage in a negotiation process. At the international level, in the absence of a regulatory apparatus and a legal basis for collective action, this has led them to focus on direct relationships with MNC management through their GFA strategy. But this company-level bargaining approach also requires cooperating and coordinating with various worker-side actors within the boundaries of a specific company-related arena. GUFs have to interact with different actors that are often only their own members' affiliates or even have no institutional connection to them. Besides, they may act as external network coordinators of union actors but their intrinsic exteriority to this company-based network is a challenge for them. In other words, the GFA-related activities of GUFs somehow mirror at the micro/MCN level, in a fractal-like manner, the multi-level dimension of the international industrial relations field, but their third-party organizational context has strong implications in terms of the array of actors involved and in terms of the nature of their interactions. From a more MO theory perspective, MO scholars have established a conceptual distinction between the management of relationships with MOs' own members and the management of relationships with external stakeholders. However, the meta-organizational function of GUFs carried out through their GFA-related activities offers an uncommon picture where the boundary between internal and external stakeholders is somewhat blurred. This fuzziness in some way results from the fact that they perform within the framework of a company-based network some functions (for example, as provider of information and information-sharing facilitator, Luterbacher et al., 2017) that MOs typically perform in direct interaction with their own members.

The second main contribution is more focused on GUFs' interactions with their direct members but has a wider scope in terms of theoretical implications. Drawing on the extant theory of MOs and on international industrial relations studies, I brought to light two dimensions of differentiation among MOs that have been only indirectly delineated in the literature. The elicitation and characterization of these dimensions is partly grounded on the identification of the salient characteristics of

GUFs revealed in studies pertaining to international trade unions organizations. However, these dimensions have implications that echo and connect to important theoretical and practical issues addressed by MO scholars. Most importantly, they are relevant for the general reflection on what constitutes an MO as a unique, autonomous and strong social actor. This fundamental questioning has its roots in the broader field of organization studies (Grothe-Hammer, 2018; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; King et al., 2010) but has a singular and even more acute resonance when applied to MOs, given their structural characteristics. The meta-organizational form thus requires a twofold effort from MO scholars to provide a better understanding of both the determinants of the structural weakness of MOs and of the room for maneuver at the disposal of their secretariat for defining and implementing their own strategic objectives. The goal-consistency and the asymmetrical interdependence dimensions elicited in this research are more intended to inform the first research focus ("What factors limit or enhance the scope of agency of meta-organizational actors?") than the second one ("What are the resources and the levers at their disposal to overcome the obstacles inherent in their structural weakness?"). However, the two issues are not independent as the answer to the first question has direct implications for the second. This is clearly illustrated by the dilemma of transnational solidarity: the role of GUF secretariats as institutional entrepreneurs promoting transnational solidarity as an ideologically based ideal is all the more pivotal because they are strongly dependent on the practical commitment of their members to develop effective collective action, while their members tend to be much more committed to domestic issues than international activities.

To conclude, the characterization of the two dimensions of differentiation among MOs elicited in this paper is, of course, to be seen as only a step toward building an analytical framework allowing a comparative and systematic account of the full diversity of MOs. Other important dimensions have yet to be conceptually elaborated. Moreover, each dimension needs to be applied to other kinds of MOs in order to assess more precisely the extent to which they constitute a significant discriminatory source of variability among MOs. Most importantly, one further essential development is to appraise the generalizability of their explanatory power with regard to core issues such as decision-making processes and how MOs are in a position to effectively carry out their meta-organizational functions. This involves investigating how these dimensions combine with other dimensions of differentiation identified in the MO literature. Ultimately, combining these intermediate theoretical constructs from a configurational perspective should help develop a more encompassing theoretical explanation of what determines MOs' capacity for agency and their degree of actorhood.

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