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Transcalar and Intersectional Advocacy in a Super-Network: The Right to a Healthy Environment Coalition

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that the Right to a Healthy Environment (R2HE) coalition, a network of 1350 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and transnational advocacy networks (TANs), played an important role in the process leading to R2HE recognition. To explain in more depth how the R2HE coalition emerged and functioned, I conceptualize it as a ‘super-network’. The main argument presented here is that super-networks can be understood as a mobilization structure above individual TANs (using the Latin word ‘super’ for above). They emerge when brokering entrepreneurs connect collaborative TANs and NGOs from different policy fields. Super-networks apply intersectional and transcalar tactics, and increase their power vis-à-vis state actors to impact decision-making in international forums. Empirically, this paper is based on a case study of the R2HE coalition, building on a content analysis of primary documents, expert interviews with non-governmental key players in the coalition and with UN representatives, as well as a focus group discussion with UN and NGOs/TAN representatives.

Keywords: *transnational advocacy, intersectionality, right to a healthy environment, international organizations, United Nations*

“The final strategy is creating allies and not enemies.” (Representative Children’s Rights Network, Symposium ‘Recognising the Right to a Healthy Environment’, 20/09/2022).

Introduction

In 2022, the right to a healthy environment (R2HE) was recognized in the UN General Assembly. After 50 years of non-governmental advocacy for an international R2HE, often accompanied by governmental scepticism, UN representatives celebrated this achievement as

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a “historic accomplishment” (Representative OHCHR, Symposium ‘Recognising the R2HE’, 20/09/2022).

The recognition process, however, was not only an intergovernmental matter. In this article, I argue that the R2HE coalition, a network of 1350 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and transnational advocacy networks (TANs), played a powerful role in the process leading to governmental recognition of an international R2HE. To explain in more depth how the R2HE coalition emerged and functioned, I conceptualize it as a “super-network” (Schapper 2021; Schapper and Dee 2024). Derived from the Latin word “super”, which means *above*, super-networks can be described as mobilization structures *above individual TANs*. In a super-network, TANs and NGOs from different policy fields collaborate, define common advocacy objectives and work with the same framed message and advocacy material, employing a package approach. In contrast to earlier contributions on super-networks (Schapper 2021; Schapper and Dee 2024), this article highlights how the diversity of actors involved in cross-policy advocacy strengthened intersectional and transcalar tactics, which were crucial for mobilization and advocacy work of the R2HE coalition.

NGOs are non-profit entities participating in world politics. They are voluntary organizations that are usually operating independently from governments but claim to pursue public interests via advocacy work or providing welfare services. NGOs can be organized at the community, local, national or international level (Deloffre and Quack 2025). TANs can be grasped as communicative structures, in which a range of activist groups, like NGOs, which are guided by principled ideas and values, interact (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Within these networks, NGOs, foundations, the media, churches, trade unions, academics and even representatives of governments or international organizations (IOs) collaborate. TANs create new linkages, multiply access channels to the international system, make resources available to new actors and help to transform practices of national sovereignty by changing governmental policies. Super-networks emerge when different TANs or TANs and NGOs collaborate. These collaborative networks can better influence the existing political opportunity structure (POS) than individual TANs/NGOs due to their enhanced abilities to improve institutional access, to shift alignments, to work with influential allies, and to strategically use cleavages between state actors (Schapper and Dee 2024).

To explore the R2HE coalition in more depth, the main research questions addressed in this article are: *How did the R2HE coalition emerge and function? In which way can we understand*

the R2HE coalition as a super-network? The argument presented here is that super-networks, like the R2HE coalition, emerge when brokers bring together collaborative TANs and NGOs from different policy fields to optimize political opportunities, to mobilize across sectors and to apply new intersectional and transcalar tactics. If many diverse TANs/NGOs, from the Global South and North, speak with one voice and consistently convey the same message, via a package approach, it becomes more difficult for governments to ignore their concerns. Therefore, super-networks increase their power vis-à-vis state actors and can impact decision-making in international forums.

The objectives of this paper are threefold: I will *first* develop a framework to analyze super-networks highlighting the relationship between POS, mobilization and tactics. In this framework, I will emphasize the importance of intersectional and transcalar tactics. *Second*, I will present rich empirical details on the R2HE coalition and will analyze its emergence and functioning. And *third*, I will further discuss the relevance of the super-network concept in Global Environmental Politics (GEP).

Empirically, this paper investigates an in-depth case study (Gerring 2017) on the R2HE coalition that successfully advocated for the recognition of the international human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment in the UN Human Rights Council (HRC resolution 48/13, 2021) and in the UN General Assembly (GA resolution 76/300, 2022). This case study can be considered as a case of theoretical, empirical and practical significance (Gerring 2017): (1) The case study demonstrates how brokers link TANs/NGOs from various policy fields to establish a super-network that can optimize political opportunities and apply transcalar and intersectional tactics (theoretical significance). (2) The R2HE case study is empirically relevant as it provides explanations to the puzzle that civil society had unsuccessfully advocated for a R2HE for five decades but has now played an important role in persuading states to recognize the right (empirical significance). (3) Recognition of the R2HE has several legally and policy-relevant implications. After being recognized in the GA (2022), the R2HE became part of the Sharm El-Sheikh Implementation Plan (UNFCCC COP 27 outcome agreement) and the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. Furthermore, a new coalition, i.e. The Campaign for the R2HE at the Council of Europe, is now advocating for the recognition of a legally binding instrument, an additional protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights (HEE 2024), (practical significance).

Methodologically, the research for this paper is based on a qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2014), deductively using the categories highlighted in the analytical framework presented here. Primary materials analyzed comprise advocacy documents, website content (UNEP/OHCHR/R2HE coalition), HRC and GA resolutions and tweets under #HealthyEnvironmentForAll. Furthermore, 13 problem-centered expert interviews, directly focusing on each interviewee's approach to the problem or subject to be analyzed (Witzel and Reiter 2012), in this case the R2HE coalition, were conducted online in August and September 2022, just after the R2HE had been recognized in the GA (July 2022). Interviewees comprised the initiator/broker of the R2HE coalition, TAN/NGO representatives from the Global South and North, OHCHR and UNEP experts as well as UN Special Mandate-Holders. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study. The interviews conducted were semi-structured in-depth expert interviews (Witzel and Reiter 2012) and I evaluated them via a qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2014), using the categories highlighted in the analytical framework. The questions in these expert interviews focused on the emergence and functioning of the R2HE coalition, collaboration among network partners, local-global interactions, challenges the coalition had to face and tactics that proved to be successful. In addition to this, I used materials gathered during an online symposium on "Recognizing the R2HE", which I had co-organized shortly after R2HE recognition in the GA (2022). The symposium brought together relevant TAN/NGO actors of the coalition from the Global South and North, as well as key UN representatives involved in the process. It can be understood as a focus group discussion, providing key stakeholders with the opportunity to critically reflect on the recognition process (Hennink 2014).

This article is structured in the following way: It presents a short literature review on TANs with a focus on research gaps, before elucidating an analytical framework for examining super-networks. The following section introduces and analyzes the case study on the R2HE coalition. The article then discusses the relevance of the super-network concept in GEP.

Transnational Advocacy: Brief Literature Review and Research Gaps

Since Keck and Sikkink's seminal contribution from 1998, TANs have been studied in a range of policy fields, including human rights (Reiners 2022; Joachim 2003), human security (Carpenter 2014; Murdie 2014), migration and trafficking (Noyori-Corbett 2017), the environment and climate change (Balboa 2018; Fuentes-George 2016; Park 2005), cluster

munitions, landmines and nuclear disarmament (Bolton and Nash 2010). Thus, the concept of TANs still plays a significant role in International Relations (IR) and GEP until today.

TANs bring local societal concerns into international governmental negotiations (Schapper 2020), they serve as a “transmission belt” (Steffek and Nanz 2008, 8) between society and IOs. The emergence of TANs is likely when political entrepreneurs actively promote networking and when international conferences create a platform for exchange (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12).

In more recent scholarship, the increasing professionalization of TANs/NGOs (Stroup and Wong 2014; Smith and Jenkins 2011) has been described as “NGOization” (Alvarez 2009) or “TANization” (Schapper 2025). This often goes hand in hand with a shift towards more hierarchical structures with managing directors, permanent staff, project managers and fundraisers that can lead to depoliticization and demobilization (Norman 2017). TANs and NGOs professionalize to attract more funding and increase access to IOs, but they can also reproduce hierarchies and hegemony instead of challenging them (Deloffre and Quack 2025; Cheng et al. 2021; Carpenter 2014; Ford 2003).

From Transnational to Transcalar Advocacy

Since publication of the seminal contribution by Keck and Sikkink (1998), transnational advocacy has significantly changed. It has become more diversified (Smith 2022; Rodríguez-Garavito 2017), complex and multidirectional, with new forms of actor constellations and advocacy campaigns emerging (Schapper and Dee 2024; Reiners 2022; Mitchell, Schmitz and Bruno-van Vijfeijken 2020). New forms of networks can operate mainly in virtual spheres or combine online activities with work in presence (Hall 2022), which is a decisive change from classic advocacy strategies and in-presence engagement (Evans and Rodríguez-Garavito 2018). Via information technologies, including email, social media and video conferencing, large networks can be mobilized in a cost-effective way. This leads to the emergence of larger networks but also diversifies the partners included (Smith 2022); various actors from the Global South can be part of transcalar advocacy (van Wessel 2024; Evans and Rodríguez-Garavito 2018). Although well-resourced NGO partners from the North often still occupy privileged positions leading to power imbalances within TANs, initiatives from the Global South as well as South-South partnerships are on the rise (van Wessel 2024).

The terms multi-scalar (Scholte 2005) or transcalar (McKeon 2017) refer to advocacy across different scales, but reject the assumption that local actors need international partners to bypass restrictive state governments (Pallas and Bloodgood 2022a). Instead, advocacy can flow in various directions and can include North-South, South-South or South-North activities. International outreach can magnify local power and local expertise can strengthen international campaigns (Pallas and Bloodgood 2022b; Schapper 2021).

Research Gaps

Despite of the comprehensive research undertaken on TANs, two important research gaps can be identified. On the one hand, we know very little about TAN-TAN or TAN-NGO interaction and collaboration (Deloffre and Quack 2025; Schapper 2025; Balboa 2018). On the other hand, we lack an understanding of intersectionality in relation to the work of TANs/NGOs. This means that intersecting disadvantages within these networks (and of those they are representing) need to be considered in more depth.

TAN-TAN Collaboration

Empirical analyses so far have mainly focused on individual TANs in specific policy areas, despite of the concern that this would “artificially enforce [boundaries]” and prevent us from understanding networks as a collective whole (Cheng et al. 2021, 3). As TANs regularly compete over resources and over public and media attention, we can assume that networks confined to single-issue areas operate in a more competitive environment than those collaborating across policies fields (Schapper and Dee 2024). Therefore, scholars have highlighted our limited knowledge on NGO-NGO and/or TAN-TAN cooperation as a research gap (Deloffre and Quack 2025; Schneiker 2017).

Intersectoral collaborations can increase the power of TANs (Mitchell, Schmitz, and Bruno-van Vijfeijken 2020). Biographical overlaps, personal relationships and common experiences seem to play a crucial role in establishing TAN collaboration but remain understudied (Deloffre and Quack 2025). Recent research has shown how TAN collaboration across policy fields can lead to the establishment of more powerful networks (Schapper 2021; Schapper and Dee 2024). Therefore, one can assume that cross-policy TAN-TAN collaboration can be attractive under certain circumstances (Schapper 2025).

Intersectionality

Collaborative TANs bring together different(ly) affected people who share their unique experiences with environmental challenges, for example, as Indigenous Peoples who are severely affected by disrupted ecosystems or as women responsible for water provision in the household confronted with droughts. If networks start considering the unique experiences of Indigenous women, for instance, strong intersectional networks can emerge.

The concept of intersectionality, mainly coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), has gained prominence as a critical response to earlier feminist ideas that mainly highlighted discriminatory experiences of white women. In her original work, Crenshaw argued that it is relevant to recognize the intersecting patterns of discrimination, in particular of gender and race, to comprehensively grasp the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences (Crenshaw 1989). Today, intersectionality relates to race, class, gender, sexuality, culture, ethnicity, ability, nation, language, age or other factors not as separate entities but as interacting phenomena that mutually construct complex social inequalities (Collins 2015).

In her work, Crenshaw differentiates between structural intersectionality, political intersectionality and representational intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). *Structural intersectionality* refers to multiple, interacting disadvantages that shape the unique experiences of individuals and groups. For example, experiences of gender and class domination can be compounded by racially discriminatory employment, health and housing practices (Crenshaw 1991). *Political intersectionality* addresses a situation, in which the collective identity, agendas and strategies of a particular group are often determined by its dominant members and not by those affected by multiple disadvantages. This can lead to intersectional disempowerment and confined political action (Crenshaw 1991). Political intersectionality, therefore, should aim at inclusion and preventing power competition between movements (Roth 2021). *Representational intersectionality* refers to the fact that confined discourses are less effective in challenging existing power imbalances; interaction between disadvantages and how to address these should be acknowledged (Crenshaw 1991).

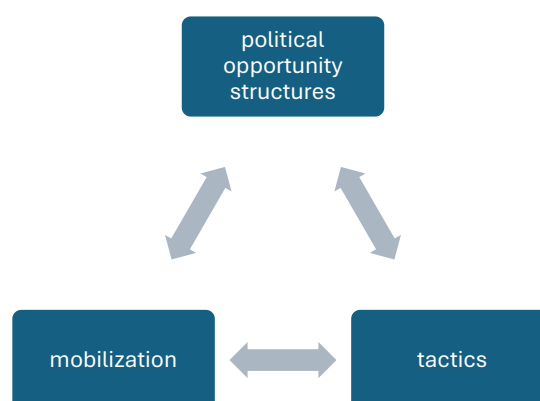
The potential of intersectionality as an analytical perspective but also as a political practice (Collins 2015; Roth 2021) has not yet been explored in TAN research. However, it could be very helpful in gaining a better understanding of networks representing marginal groups (Ciplet 2019, 2014) as well as intra-network power dynamics. In this article, I argue that it is particularly relevant to learn more about intersectional TANs in GEP as environmental issues

strongly interact with health, race, gender, indigenouness, geography, ability, age and other factors.

Analytical Framework

In the following, I propose an analytical framework to study super-networks. This framework considers interactions between POS, mobilization and tactics. I argue that super-networks emerge if POS can be optimized, brokering entrepreneurs mobilize TANs/NGOs from different policy fields and intersectional and transcalar advocacy tactics can be applied. This relational framework is built on previous insights about dynamic interactions between POS and mobilizing structures (Joachim 2003), and between POS and network tactics (Giugni and Grasso 2015). Departing from these insights, I argue that not only POS and mobilization, or POS and tactics interact, but that interactions between all three elements, political opportunities, mobilization and tactics, are important for analyzing super-networks (figure 1). Only certain forms of cross-policy mobilization, like super-networks, can optimize opportunities by shifting alliances and cooperating with other TANs/NGOs, and can apply particular tactics, like the package approach, in which all participating TANs and NGOs consistently repeat the same core message, using the same wording and advocacy material. This would be impossible in single-issue TANs/NGOs, and means that the relationship between POS, mobilization and tactics is important to consider. Figure 1 presents the relational approach.

Figure 1: Relational approach



Source: own compilation

Political opportunity structures can be understood as access to (state) institutions and the broader institutional context that can provide opportunities or obstacles for political influence. According to Tarrow (1996), POS are defined as:

“consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent or national – signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements [...] The most salient kinds of signals are four: the opening up of access to power, shifting alignments, the availability of influential allies, and cleavages within and among elites” (Tarrow 1996, 54), italic in original).

Although the term POS suggests that these are fixed elements, it is important to note that Tarrow (1996) proposes that several POS components are fluid and can be subject to change.

The *macro political context* refers to the broader political economy and unequal external power structures (Ford 2003, Ciptet 2019), whereas the *micro political context* of mobilization can be understood as the social and organizational environment, in which networks are embedded (Meyer 2004). *Institutional access* is defined as formal admission to international negotiations for making written and oral contributions with the aim to participate in decision-making (Lang 2014). *Alignment shifts* can be grasped as a change in support for or close collaboration with a particular group, nation or party. *Influential allies* are powerful partners/collaborators and *cleavages* are disagreements between state actors/negotiators that can be strategically used (Tarrow 1994). I consider all these elements relevant in the analysis of super-networks (figure 2).

Tarrow’s definition clearly emphasizes that the POS contains consistent elements, but also more fluid elements, like alignment shifts, availability of allies, or emerging cleavages. Thus, at least certain elements of the POS are dynamic, and if they can be optimized, super-networks may be able to increase their power vis-à-vis state actors.

Mobilization comprises agency, network composition and strategic collaboration between actors involved in TANs. McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) define mobilizing structures as “[...] those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action”. These collective vehicles can be considered as the source of criticizing current (inter-)governmental practices, of developing new ideas and promoting change. Mobilizing structures comprise key network actors, including political entrepreneurs, a heterogenous international constituency and experts (Joachim 2003).

To understand how super-networks emerge, I suggest looking at the role of brokers that can link TANs/NGOs from different policy fields and mobilize collaborative TAN/NGO activity. Brokerage is still a relatively new concept in the network literature on TANs (Cheng et al. 2021). Brokering processes have been described as bridge-building in the social movement literature (Burt 1980). They are also relevant for understanding how super-networks emerge as they explain the establishment of links between different network partners. Mobilization occurs when the ideas of a broker resonate and activate or strengthen ties between different TANs/NGOs (Deloffre and Quack 2025, Breen and Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2024). Brokers can take on different brokerage roles (Cheng et al. 2021), they can speak to divergent audiences (Stroup and Wong 2017) or form sub-networks within a TAN (Hervé 2014). However, brokerage positions could potentially also foster power inequalities within networks (Ford 2003) by facilitating exchange of material and immaterial resources between certain groups within a network, while neglecting others.

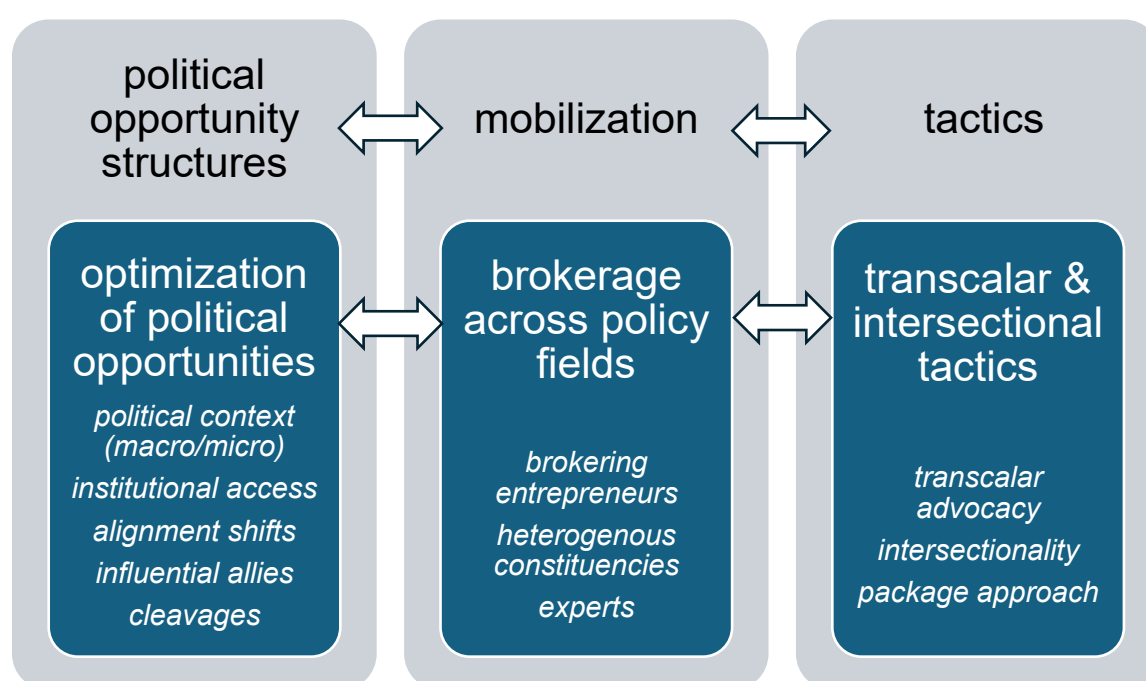
In this article, I extend previous research on brokerage in TANs by arguing that the role of brokers and political entrepreneurs can get merged. Political entrepreneurs are those who actively establish networks to initiate advocacy action (Keck and Sikkink 1998). These entrepreneurs can simultaneously act as a broker linking networks from different policy fields. I introduce the term *brokering entrepreneur* to acknowledge that actors take over both functions: initiating campaigns and linking diverse networks to engage in these.

Brokering entrepreneurs can mobilize a *heterogenous constituency*. This strengthens the overall mobilizing structure because it weakens arguments that a network only represents particular interests (Tarrow 1994). *Experts* can further strengthen mobilizing structures as affected population groups providing knowledge and testimonials or as part of an epistemic community (Haas 1992).

Tactics employed by super-networks can be described as *transcalar*. This includes South-South, North-South and South-North collaboration. Instead of local partners reaching out to international NGOs, the latter often depend on local expertise and knowledge to enhance the legitimacy of their advocacy activities (Pallas and Bloodgood 2022b; Schapper and Dee 2024). *Intersectional* tactics relate to interacting disadvantages that shape the unique experiences of individuals and groups. If these can be used to identify common concerns and demands, the diversity of these interacting experiences can be turned into a key strength. Previous research has identified the application of a *package approach* as a particularly powerful tactic (Schapper

and Dee 2024). The package approach is unusual because it means that each TAN/NGO partner is not only lobbying for their own ideas but also for those other, very different, groups have suggested – and that have been agreed on in one message package (Schapper and Dee 2024). Whereas framing describes the longer process of agreeing on one message (Snow et al. 1986), the package approach describes how a framed message is “packaged” and used consistently, reverting to the same advocacy materials, during specific negotiations. In this way, states cannot pick and choose which advocacy message they find convenient to engage with, but they are confronted with the agreed package (Schapper and Dee 2024). Figure 2 summarizes the analytical framework.

Figure 2: Analytical framework: Emergence and Analysis of Super-Networks



Source: own compilation on the basis of the literature cited

Case Study on the R2HE Coalition

Since the adoption of the Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment in 1972, which first discussed environmental concerns as a major issue for human wellbeing, NGOs have started advocating for the recognition of environmental human rights.

The R2HE was first incorporated in regional human rights treaties, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1981), the Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1988) and

the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention, 1998).

Following these legal developments, the relationship between human rights and the environment gained more prominence in UN forums. In 2012, the mandate of an Independent Expert on human rights and the environment was initiated at the HRC. The first officeholder, John Knox (appointed in 2012) became UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment in 2015 (OHCHR 2023). His mandate focused on drafting the 2018 *Framework Principles on Human Rights and the Environment* (HRC 2018). The Framework Principles set out the legal obligations of states under existing human rights law in relation to a safe, healthy and sustainable environment (Atapattu and Schapper 2019) and state that: “[...] the Special Rapporteur recommends that the HRC consider supporting the recognition of the right in a global instrument.” (HRC 2018).

From August 2018 on, the mandate of the second UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, David Boyd, concentrated on the recognition of an international *Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment*. This new right was then recognized by governments with an overwhelming majority in the HRC in October 2021 and in the GA in July 2022 (OHCHR 2024).

Institutionalization processes linking human rights and the environment at the UN were accompanied by and accelerated via TAN/NGO mobilization. In 2012, with the appointment of John Knox, a core group of international human rights and environmental NGOs started regular, but informal, discussions on advancing a R2HE – in close collaboration with the Special Mandate-Holder (Interview Global South TAN, 10/08/2022). Regular consultations with the Special Rapporteur continued until the introduction of the *Framework Principles* boosted alliance-building among TANs/NGOs (Interview Human Rights Organization, 09/08/2022).

Following consultations with David Boyd in October 2018, a core group of TANs/NGOs decided to build a large and diverse coalition to promote worldwide recognition of the R2HE. This core group initially comprised 9 partners, among them, Amnesty International, the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), CIVICUS, Child Rights International Network, Earthjustice, Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Greenpeace International, the Interamerican Association of Environmental Defense (AIDA), Human Rights

Watch (GI-ESCR 2020)². Other partners joined shortly after, such as the faith-based organization, Franciscans International. The idea of the core group was to include a variety of TANs/NGOs to demonstrate that a broad range of organizations speaks with one voice in demanding R2HE recognition (Interview Human Rights Organization, 09/08/2022). Framing a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as an international human right, which is “essential for human life and dignity” (OHCHR 2024) brought together many diverse groups worldwide – and this frame guided further collective action (Goffman 1974; Snow 1986 et al.; Tarrow 1994; McAdam et al. 1996; Joachim 2003). In 2020, when the R2HE coalition published the ‘Call for the Global Recognition of a Right to a Healthy Environment’, a web-based sign-on letter, 1350 TANs and NGOs from 75 countries became part of the coalition (R2HEcoalition 2023a).

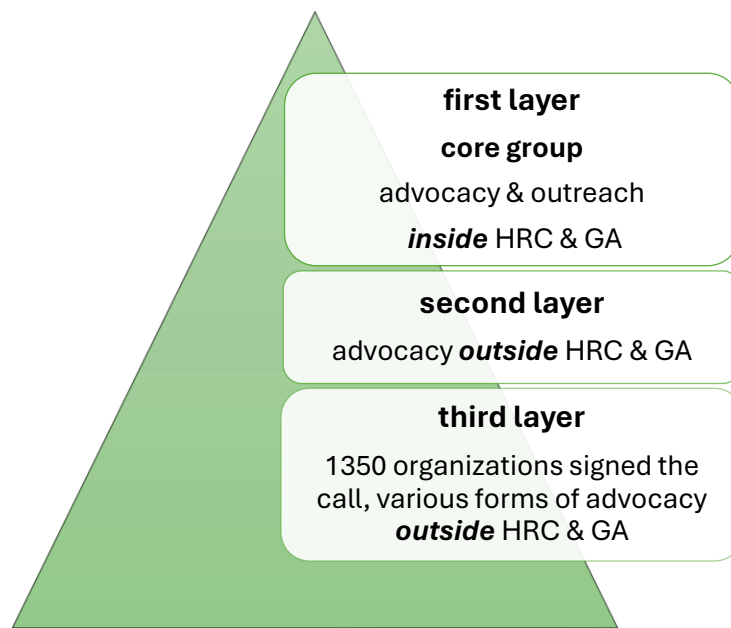
The R2HE coalition had a three-layered structure. The first layer comprised the core group of 16 international TANs/NGOs that had informally exchanged on ways to advance the R2HE and then decided to build the coalition (CIEL, Earthjustice, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, AIDA, Franciscans International, etc.). This first layer of organizations directly addressed governments and advocated for the R2HE *inside* the HRC and GA negotiations. The core group (first layer) also took over the main planning and coordination activities mainly using online calls (Interview Children’s Rights Network, 10/08/2022).

The second layer involved a larger number of TANs/NGOs that engaged in advocacy activities and addressed governments *outside* the HRC and GA. These organizations interacted with governmental delegations they had established good working relationships with.

The third layer consisted of all the 1350 TANs/NGOs that had signed the Global Call with varying capacities and resources to engage in advocacy. These organizations often took part in social media campaigns or other forms of advocacy *outside* the UN forums without directly interacting with governmental delegations (Interview Human Rights Organization, 09/08/2022). Figure 3 introduces the three-layered composition of the R2HE coalition.

² Members of the R2HE coalition comprised NGOs, e.g. WWF, and TANs, e.g. Child Rights International Network.

Figure 3: Three-Layered Composition of the R2HE Coalition



Source: Own compilation on the basis of interview material

Political Opportunity Structures

The *macro political context* in which the R2HE coalition operated was/is determined by structural inequality, which leads to unequal access to resources and institutions for Global South networks. The *micro political context* in 2021/2022 was conducive to negotiating and recognizing the R2HE. One reason was the 50th anniversary of the Stockholm Declaration in 2022, which created a unique momentum for reaffirming the relationship between human rights and the environment:

“[...] it was very important to have this momentum of the 50th anniversary of Stockholm. We started to call and coordinate with other people and tell other people [...] about the fact that this was getting momentum at the UN.” (Interview Global South TAN, 10/08/2022).

Another reason is the significantly increased awareness of the triple environmental crisis, comprising climate change, pollution, and biodiversity depletion. Recognizing the R2HE was considered an important step in countering the crisis (Interview UN Special Mandate-Holder, 08/09/2022).

Furthermore, there were five core states, including Costa Rica, the Maldives, Morocco, Slovenia and Switzerland, willing to push the process and to table respective resolutions in the HRC and the GA (ibid.).

The three-layered structure of the R2HE coalition ensured that a broad and diverse alliance could be built, although *institutional access* varied for the different layers of actors. Prior to the actual negotiations in the HRC and GA, each network layer could participate equally in strategic online calls. During the negotiations in Geneva (2021) and New York (2022), only the first layer was present. These were all organizations with permanent offices in Geneva or New York, with many years of experience in interacting with state representatives in the HRC and GA, and with long-established contacts among governmental delegations as well as key UN experts (Interview Human Rights Organization, 09/08/2022). Therefore, the core group had *optimized institutional access* over several years by gathering important insights into effective lobbying in these forums.

At the same time, however, some partners from the Global South felt left out. They did not have permanent offices in Geneva and New York, could not afford to be present at the actual negotiations, and struggled with English as the main negotiation language (Interview Global South Campaigner, 16/08/2022). At least some of these issues and power imbalances could be addressed during the campaign: “We were not shy highlighting privileges and differences; had a lot of uncomfortable conversations [...]” (Representative Global South TAN, Symposium ‘Recognising the R2HE’, 20/09/2022). As a result of these discussions, more effort was put into interpretation and translation, with the Global Call being translated into Spanish, French, Arabic, Portuguese allowing TANs/NGOs worldwide to add significant issues that were relevant for the success of the campaign (ibid). Consequently, some participants highlighted the unity between North and South organizations was remarkable: “I was always struck by the extent to which we were a North-South coalition” (Interview International Environmental NGO, 08/08/2022), whereas others claimed that certain challenges remained (Representative Global South TAN, Symposium ‘Recognising the R2HE’, 20/09/2022).

Instead of concentrating on lobbying activities with state actors only, the coalition engaged in an *alignment shift* and mainly focused on collaboration among non-state actors from various policy fields, including environmental and human rights groups, gender advocates, trade unions, youth organizations but also Indigenous Peoples’ representatives, etc. In this way, the R2HE coalition did not compete with other TANs/NGOs for governments’ limited attention.

Although some representatives of the coalition insisted that they were solely non-governmental (Interview Broker R2HE Coalition, 07/09/2022), others saw their close collaboration with *influential allies*, especially IO representatives of the OHCHR (including the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment) and UNEP, as crucially important and considered them to be part of the R2HE coalition (Interview Human Rights Organization, 09/08/2022).

In the end, *political cleavages* between states were strategically used by the coalition. One example of a government opposing the R2HE recognition was Russia. Although stipulating the R2HE in its national constitution, the Russian delegation feared that the resolution would be used to create a legally binding international treaty with monitoring mechanisms (Interview UN Special Mandate-Holder, 08/09/2022). In the case of the UK, for example, the R2HE coalition strategically used cleavages between Russia and the UK (caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine) and asked the UK: “[do] you really want to be aligned with Russia on this?” (Interview Human Rights Organization, 09/08/2022). These and other political cleavages were instrumentalized by the coalition. In the end, no state opposed the R2HE in the HRC or in the GA; only few governments (4 in HRC, 8 in GA) abstained.

Summarized, the R2HE coalition *optimized existing political opportunities* by improving institutional access, by strategically shifting alignments through TAN-TAN and TAN-NGO collaboration, by working with influential allies, and by exploiting cleavages between state delegations. The coalition, therefore, strategically utilized the more fluid elements of the POS to establish a super-network.

Mobilization

Among the core group of the coalition, there was one broker who played a central role in the mobilization process. Experienced in participating in the HRC and equipped with legal expertise at the intersection of human rights and the environment, the main initiator of the R2HE coalition linked TANs/NGOs from various policy fields.

All interview partners emphasized the role of the main broker in uniting diverse partners and mobilizing them around the demand to recognize a R2HE (Interview Global South TAN, 10/08/2022). Because they took over a brokering and an entrepreneurial role at the same time, their work can be described as that of a *brokering entrepreneur*.

In addition to the main broker who also acted as political entrepreneur, all members of the core group (first layer) took over a brokerage role by reaching out and including actors from various scales and policy areas. This helped to broaden and diversify the coalition, and to constitute the second layer of the network (Interview Human Rights Organization, 09/08/2022). Finally, many organizations acted as multipliers to make links between actors that were previously unconnected and to build the entire coalition (including the third layer).

With a view to involving a *heterogenous constituency*, the first layer of the R2HE coalition initiated and drafted the “Global Call for the UN Human Rights Council to urgently recognise the Right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment” (R2HEcoalition 2020). All other partners were then able to provide input and add significant issues. The call was launched in September 2020 in English, French, Spanish and Arabic and could be signed electronically by organizations around the world. The first and second layer of actors used their mailing lists to disseminate the call and to ask further organizations around the globe to sign on.

Eventually, 1350 TANS/NGOs signed the call. These comprised local, national and international organizations from the Global South and North, working on a range of issues, including peace, justice, development, heritage, fisheries, health, energy, etc. (R2HEcoalition 2021). These signatories built the third layer of the coalition demonstrating that a *heterogenous constituency* had mobilized to demand R2HE recognition.

The R2HE campaign heavily relied on *experts*. In the call, scientific evidence of the global assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services is referenced. In addition to this, UNEP reports, human rights and Indigenous Peoples’ rights instruments are mentioned (R2HEcoalition 2020). The expertise of the Special Rapporteur also played a major role, particularly in relation to his own research on the R2HE in national constitutions (Interview Broker R2HE Coalition, 07/09/2022). Furthermore, the role of local experts was important as it provided empirical evidence on challenges caused by environmental change or environmental policies on the ground, which substantiated the need to recognize the R2HE (Interview Global South Campaigner, 16/08/2022).

Tactics

One of the main tactics applied by the R2HE coalition was to launch the Global Call. By utilizing the Call as one key message and instrument at various scales of advocacy activities,

the R2HE coalition employed a *package approach*. As the Global Call was consistently used by a broad range of diverse actors, it became difficult for states to ignore this demand:

“[...] when things got to the table in Geneva or got to the table in New York, they were hearing the same thing from a multitude of organizations.” (Interview Environmental NGO, 23/08/2022).

And, although the Global Call was about one core message, i.e. the recognition of the R2HE, it comprised many different ideas and aspects, like protecting environmental human rights defenders, or empowering particularly affected persons, which TANS/NGOs did not advocate for in isolation but together. The Global Call was a meaningful tactic because so many partners could sign on digitally without being present at the actual negotiations in Geneva and New York.

The R2HE coalition clearly engaged in *transcalar advocacy tactics*. Activities were multi-directional; with actors of all three layers taking over crucial responsibilities (Evans and Rodríguez-Garavito 2018). Expert knowledge and testimonies from local community groups adversely affected by environmental challenges or environmental policies (often engaged in the third layer) were crucial to establishing the coalition, and to launch a powerful advocacy campaign. Advocacy activities targeted at state governments outside the negotiations (second layer) were often important to inform lobbying inside the negotiations (first layer).

In addition to this, the combination of digital advocacy strategies (i.e. the Global Call) and classic in-person lobbying during the actual negotiations, made transcalar advocacy particularly successful (Hall 2022; Evans and Rodríguez-Garavito 2018). The diversity of actors involved, operating from local to global scale (Pallas and Bloodgood 2022b), significantly increased the legitimacy of the R2HE coalition and demonstrated that this is not only a demand emphasized by the big NGOs players, such as Human Rights Watch or Greenpeace, but by a large number of actors across the world. Therefore, the 1350 signatories of the Global Call (third layer), many of them based in the Global South, were a crucial tactical step demonstrating that civil society worldwide is united in demanding R2HE recognition.

Another key strength in the tactical repertoire of the R2HE coalition was their use of *representational intersectionality*. The partnerships between Indigenous Peoples' groups, gender advocates, human rights and children's rights networks, environmental organizations, youth representatives, development NGOs, and many others, helped to identify, raise and discuss the multiple dimensions and experiences of environmental inequality (Crenshaw 1989).

Some interacting factors, such as being female, Indigenous and disabled at the same time, exacerbate situations of environmental injustice:

[...] then there is the connections to the environmental justice concerns, the intersectionality concerns [...] The way the Global Call was framed deepened those connections between normative standards and justice concerns that emerge from lived realities. (Interview Human Rights TAN, 04/08/2022).

Applying an intersectionality approach meant that not only the dominant members of one affected societal group, e.g. women, or Indigenous Peoples, or youth, shaped the tactics of the coalition. Instead, the interacting disadvantages, for example of Indigenous women in the context of environmental challenges, were discussed. Thus, the tactical approach went beyond the collaboration of diverse groups, it also considered the unique interacting factors *within* these groups. The Global Call specifically refers to the need to protect and empower particularly affected persons “due to intersecting forms of discrimination” (R2HEcoalition 2020). Many affected individuals and groups face higher risks and burdens in the context of environmental challenges due to pre-existing inequalities and discrimination. The coalition demonstrated that R2HE recognition is one common demand from civil society that could lead to better protection and empowerment of those facing intersecting forms of inequalities.

The R2HE coalition, therefore, shows how political intersectionality focused on inclusion and collaboration, instead of competition and confined discourses, can empower social movements (Roth 2021). Acknowledging interaction between disadvantages and how to address these, taking a representational intersectionality approach (Crenshaw 1991), can be described as one of the tactical strengths of the coalition.

What is New About the R2HE Coalition as a “Super-Network”?

I suggest understanding the R2HE coalition as a super-network or a network structure *above* already existing TANs. Super-networks optimize the more fluid elements of the POS for establishing a unique mobilizing structure and more sophisticated tactics to increase power vis-à-vis state actors (Schapper and Dee 2024). Super-networks are initiated, interlinked and guided by brokering entrepreneurs with unique thematic expertise and meaningful relationships to various TANs/NGOs from different policy fields. This also means that norms from one policy area are transported into another area, e.g. environmental concerns into the policy field of human rights (Schapper 2021). What is special about a super-network, in contrast to other

NGO coalitions, is the close collaboration of networks across policy fields that agree on a collective goal, but also a common advocacy strategy and employ a package approach, consistently using the same framed message and advocacy material (Schapper and Dee 2024).

The case study on the R2HE coalition has revealed how super-networks can strategically use transcalar and intersectional tactics. Via a transcalar advocacy approach, they bring local environmental concerns to the international negotiation table (Schapper 2020). By highlighting the situation of those who are already marginalized in society *and* affected by environmental challenges most severely, an intersectional advocacy approach can be employed. This includes political intersectionality, via inclusion instead of power competition between networks, and representational intersectionality, by speaking with one voice in the negotiations.

What makes a super-network, like the R2HE coalition, particularly powerful is the package approach – using one core message and the same advocacy material, such as the Global Call, in all interactions with state negotiators. This is a unique tactic because it means that there is a consensus on advocacy objectives and a single packaged message is being used. Whereas framing can be described as a discursive process that happens over a longer period of time negotiating frames and counter-frames (Snow et al. 1986), the package approach describes how a framed message can be effectively used in specific negotiations. When diverse actors from different policy fields consistently use the same packaged message, wording and advocacy material, it becomes more difficult for state actors to ignore this message. If a large number of TANs/NGOs from Global North and South, that operate at various scales and across sectors, collaborate in a super-network and speak with one voice via a package approach, their legitimacy increases, and it is much more difficult for states to deny or neglect their concerns.

Conclusions

In this article, I have introduced the R2HE coalition as a super-network and have presented an analytical framework to study further super-networks. This framework highlights the relationship between POS, mobilization structures and transcalar and intersectional tactics. Taking up the critique emphasized by TAN researchers, more emphasis should be placed on intersectoral collaboration (Mitchell, Schmitz, and Bruno-van Vijfeijken 2020), networking across policy fields (Cheng et al. 2021), as well as transcalar advocacy (Pallas and Bloodgood 2022a). I have argued that these new forms of TAN-TAN and TAN-NGO collaboration are

particularly meaningful in GEP as people on the ground, who are affected by environmental challenges, are exposed to interacting factors and experience multiple dimensions of environmental inequality, which can be addressed by political and representational intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) and collective demands via super-networks.

The analytical framework introduced here adds to previous analytical underpinnings on TANs (Joachim 2003; Giugni and Grasso 2015; Hadden and Jasny 2019) by considering how fluid elements of the POS, such as alignment change, influential allies and cleavages, can be optimized to enhance institutional access for super-networks. Guided by experienced brokering entrepreneurs, this can lead to improved mobilization resulting in more complex networks, and the application of intersectional and transcalar tactics. By integrating various perspectives and speaking with one voice via a package approach, super-networks work with enhanced legitimacy, better material and immaterial resources, and improved access via core state actors and IO experts.

Due to the high degree of mobilization required for super-networks to emanate, it is more likely that they will emerge when landmark decisions and important international agreements are negotiated. In most cases, they will evolve around ideas and values different TANs can agree on, such as human rights, environmental or sustainability concerns. With many future questions in GEP being relevant across policy fields, we will see more super-networks emerge in the future. Therefore, further empirical (and comparative) research is necessary to comprehensively understand super-networks.

In 2023, the R2HE coalition received the prestigious UN Human Rights Prize “[...] for its essential role in advocating for the recognition of the right to a healthy environment” (R2HEcoalition 2023b). After decades of advocacy for the R2HE, the award highlights the meaning of collaboration (instead of competition) among diverse TANs/NGOs. Although recognition does not necessarily lead to an impact or prompts governmental action (Ciplet 2014), the HRC and GA resolutions are not the endpoint of the R2HE. UN Special Mandate-Holders, TANs and NGOs are now working on establishing a legally binding human right, on governments adopting the R2HE into national legislation and on implementation (Interview UN Special Mandate-Holder, 08/09/2022). In a follow-up campaign, more than 470 diverse TANs/NGOs advocate for the recognition of a legally binding instrument, via an additional protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights, in the Council of Europe (HEE 2024). The Campaign for the R2HE at the Council of Europe can be analysed as a new super-network

operating in a different forum. Other super-network cases to investigate in the future are, among others, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Alliance's efforts in shaping the post-2020 CBD framework (2022) or the #breakfreefromplastic movement engaging in the negotiations of the Global Plastics Treaty (2024/5).

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