**Friends of the Earth International: Agonistic Politics, Modus vivendi and Political Change**

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**Abstract**

Following criticism from some of its national member organisations that it marginalised Southern agendas, Friends of the Earth International engaged in heated debates in the 2000s which aimed to address its internal political differences. FoEI defined its positions on democracy, capitalism and social transformation, reorienting itself more towards the global South. The centrality to this process of debate about broad political ideas is unusual; well established and mature organizations do not usually change identities fundamentally. In practice, FoEI did not resolve its differences, but came to a political settlement which made those differences manageable. To interpret the changes in FoEI, the concept of agonistic politics developed by Chantal Mouffe and the idea of a *modus vivendi* associated with so called realist (liberal) critics of ‘moralistic liberalism’ are employed. A full account of the process nevertheless requires acknowledgement of the positive effect of solidarity as enabling changes in collective identity.

**Keywords**: Friends of the Earth, NGO, identity, transnational environmentalism, North-South.

**Introduction**

Unusually for a non-governmental organisation (NGO), Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) decided to address the big questions about the nature of politics and social and political change in the years after 2002. Up to this point the national FoE groups had worked together on the basis of a loose acceptance of common ground and with no clearly defined strategy (Suter 2002).The catalyst for change was an internal crisis over North-South differences following the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). Confronting this challenge brought to the fore deep political differences that had to be managed collectively. It also allowed FoEI to agree on the political criteria that defined the legitimate boundaries of its membership. Other than the four founding organisations in 1971, all FoEI national groups had independent histories before joining FoEI. Thus they are not franchises created by an international NGO but independent groups that choose to join FoEI, often retaining their original name in the process. This means that national FoE groups are politically diverse and have been largely self-determining. It was only when FoEI faced a crisis that it was required to define its common ground.

The catalyst for FoEI’s political debate over identity and strategy was the resignation of FoE Ecuador in 2002, in protest against what they argued was a marginalization of Southern and more radical perspectives within FoEI. FoE Ecuador argued that FoEI’s strategy was determined by its Northern members in a way that was simply taken for granted. Examples cited included seeking to make transnational corporations more accountable rather than demanding their abolition, and prioritising such campaigns over others that were more challenging, such as the campaign on the ecological debt owed by Northern countries to the South. It was argued that Northern groups were more concerned about media image and its implications for their membership and support than Southern groups. FoE national groups were divided over how to respond, but groups from both North and South felt that the crisis required an explicit discussion of where FoEI stood politically (Doherty 2006). At an emergency General Meeting in Colombia in 2003 it was decided to launch a ‘strategic vision and planning process’ to confront the deep political differences in the federation and define FoEI’s collective identity. Between 2005 and 2014 a series of statements of FoEIs’ shared strategy and orientation (Friends of the Earth International 2014) enabled a clearer definition of the legitimate boundaries of its collective identity with the result that one of its most longstanding members, FoE Italy, was expelled in 2014.

Here, we examine FoEI as a case in which environmentalisms from North and South interacted to define the collective identity of a major international non-governmental organisation (INGO). Stroup and Wong’s detailed comparison of the authority and influence of INGOs places FoE among the top 11, only surpassed among environmental NGOs by Greenpeace and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) (2017: 60). Yet, FoEI is more a federation than a single NGO and its authority depends more on the cumulative activity of its 75 national member groups[[1]](#endnote-1) than on its international organisation. It is the diversity and range of countries represented within FoEI, far exceeding that of Greenpeace or WWF, that makes FoEI important. It has only a thin organisational structure with a small central secretariat which typically operates on a budget of under €2m (FoEI 2015; Doherty and Doyle 2013). The role of the central organisation is primarily to co-ordinate joint activity, arrange meetings and disseminate analysis. There is therefore no major budget or centre of power for contending factions to capture. Rather, FoEI functions primarily on the basis of the voluntary engagement of its national member groups in international activity. For this reason, we view FoEI as a case of change driven mainly by internal debate about political ideas rather than questions of resource mobilisation (McCarthy and Zald 1977) or organizational interests (Clemens & Minkoff, 2004; Stroup & Wong 2017).

Our focus is on FoEI’s internal culture rather than its impact and authority externally. We have two main aims. First, to examine the implications of FoEI’s process for our understanding of whether diverse environmentalisms can develop a collective identity. The predominant view among scholars of social movements is that a strong collective identity is only possible in homogenous groups (Saunders 2008; Flesher Fominaya 2010: 401), but we argue that FoEI shows that it is possible to accommodate major political differences and the passions these arouse and still develop a strong collective identity. We argue that the familiarity developed over time within the organisational setting of FoEI’s meetings has enabled a trust and solidarity that enables FoEI to manage its political conflicts and differences.

Our second aim is to bring together recent perspectives in political theory that place conflicts over values and ideology as central to the political with an empirical case where such conflicts were manifested. FoEI faced the challenge of reconstructing its collective identity to accommodate major political differences and how it did so both reinforces and challenges some of the major claims made for understanding the place of conflict over political values.

Researchers on social movements have devoted much attention to deliberative processes in the internal life of movements, which has produced rich accounts of how movement groups debate and make decisions (Polleta 2002; Smith et al 2007; Maeckelbergh 2009; Wood 2012; della Porta and Rucht 2013; Giuigni and Nai 2013: Kennis 2016; Doerr 2018). Most focused on the social forums of the global justice movement in the first decade of the 2000s but one of the defining features of social forums was that they were not aiming to define an ideological position or a common strategy and so the stakes were arguably lower than they were for an NGO such as FoEI. Others have examined the the direct action networks of the early 2000s and Occupy, showing that they favoured practical rather than normative justifications for consensus-based decision making (Polletta 2002: 198) and rejected formalising ideology because that would risk sectarian in-fighting and reduce the chances for successful ‘outreach’ to other allies (Graeber 2009).

FoEI found itself in a rather different position. Its failure to confront its political diversity led to the crisis of 2002 and, as a federation of formal organisations with professional staff and funding, it was structurally different from the social forums and direct action groups. There is much less research on the internal politics of international NGOs[[2]](#endnote-2) but FoEI is also distinctive in this field because its structures are decentralized and prevent domination by the largest or wealthiest groups (Doherty and Doyle 2013: 123-5). Its commitment to openness, which enabled this research, is also unusual for major INGOs.

Formal agreements on policy are rare for social movement organizations, which usually operate without formally defined ideological statements. We argue that the pressure on FoEI to define its position and the conflicts that produced this makes perspectives which address the centrality of conflict to politics more obvious sources for interpretation than the predominant focus on deliberation within social movements. To understand this kind of politics, two concepts from recent debates in political theory – the idea of agonistic politics developed by Chantal Mouffe and the idea of a *modus vivendi* associated with so called realist (liberal) critics of ‘moralistic liberalism’ – are particularly useful. In what follows, we first outline the value of agonism and modus vivendi to an understanding of the internal politics of movements. We then provide an account of the debates around the strategic plan within FoEI and the outcomes of the plan in the years that followed, including the expulsion of FoE Italy.

**Deliberation, agonism and modus vivendi**

Agonistic politics and a politics of *modus vivendi* both emphasise the centrality to politics of conflicts over values and the impossibility of conceiving of a politics that finally resolves the question of difference. From this perspective, the challenge becomes how to manage political processes in a form that preserves the stability that is their precondition. FoEI’s survival as a transnational federation was certainly in danger in the early 2000s, and understandings of the political that make the challenges of managing conflict and creating conditions for a political settlement are especially appropriate for an investigation of its politics in recent years.

For the principal theorist of agonistic politics, Chantal Mouffe, ‘the political’ refers to the antagonism that underlies conflicts between groups over fundamental values, whereas politics refers to the practices that seek to establish an order. Any such order is necessarily an (hegemonic) exercise of power because it requires decisions over conflicting political values that exclude other opposing possibilities. The political involves working with others collectively to define a ‘we’, which necessarily entails that we are different from ‘them’. While a we/them distinction is inherent to the political, when conflict becomes too deep and the common framework for resolving difference is rejected, it can turn into an antagonistic friend/enemy distinction, making politics impossible (Mouffe 2013: 3).

 Agonistic politics is Mouffe’s response to the challenge of avoiding we/them conflicts becoming the kind of friend/enemy conflicts that Carl Schmitt first articulated (Mouffe 2000: 57; Schmitt 2007 (1932): 26). An agonistic politics is one where opponents are recognised as having the right to defend opposing ideas, even if ‘we’ think those ideas should be opposed (2013: 7). Her explanation of agonistic politics is closely connected to a defence of the institutions of liberal democracy, that she sees as providing the necessary conditions in which politics can take place. However, her interpretation of democracy as always existing in the context of potential group antagonisms distinguishes her from two classic liberal versions of democracy: one, in which democracy is based on aggregation of the expressed interests of individuals, resolved through votes and bargaining between organised interests; and a second, where democracy is a process of deliberation and debate by individuals that ideally leads to consensus (Mouffe 1993: 49). The first approach treats interests as fixed and so misses the fluidity of politics, based on continuous articulation and transformation of collective identities, while the second fails to recognise the role of emotion (‘the passions’) and commitment in driving political engagement and underlying ‘the political’.

Advocates of deliberative democracy argue that Mouffe and others have misunderstood aspects of their theory particularly in relation to consensus. Rather than a perfect consensus, deliberation is more commonly seen as producing a better understanding of others’ reasons for holding different ideas. Curato refers to this as meta-consensus (2017: 31). The influence of critical theory on deliberativists means that they accept that inequalities and domination constrain the kinds of communication that are possible, and indeed argue that contestation is in itself an aim of deliberative democracy. Hammond argues that deliberative democracy depends on a culture that demands an open-ended process in which those in authority continually justify their actions (2017). Deliberative democracy can then be seen as agonistic. The major disagreement with agonism is over whether it is justifiable to pursue a politics that is oriented towards seeking agreement with opponents. Mouffe challenges the idea that consensus agreements have a normative value, whereas deliberativists believe that by being as deliberative as possible, the chances of overcoming constraints on equal discussion are minimised. In the strategic planning process within FoEI, there was certainly an attempt to reach agreement and to be as deliberative as possible, but we argue that it also evidences the role of the passions and we/them conflicts that Mouffes articulates, the outcome of which is better understood by using another concept, *modus vivendi.*

 Although rooted in liberal theory, the idea of a *modus vivendi* shares some ground with agonistic politics. Its advocates criticise mainstream liberal theory for its unrealistic ideal moralism, which they see as disconnected from the imperfections of everyday politics (Gray 2000; Horton 2010; Newey 2010). They share with Mouffe the view that some security is a necessary condition for politics, and that this must be based on some degree of acceptance of the political framework by those who are party to it, as distinct from an order imposed only by force (Horton 2010: 439); but in contrast to ‘moralistic liberalism’, this is much more likely to be based on pragmatic compromise and acquiescence than a consensus on a shared view of justice (Gray 2000: 5-6). Like Mouffe’s hegemonic order, *modus vivendi* is never definitively established; it is always an ongoing achievement. Like Mouffe’s agonistic politics, there is a shared stress on the conditions that provide the security for politics to be possible. Where agonistic politics and *modus vivendi* differ most significantly is in Mouffe’s (2000) emphasis on the limiting effects of structural inequalities of power on any challenge to forms of domination. As realists, the advocates of *modus vivendi* acknowledge that politics is affected by inequality, but their liberalism precludes them from analysing this in terms of constraints on reason. A second difference concerns the *telos* of political life. In *modus vivendi* civil order and security is an end in itself, where self and group interests are likely to play the major role, and pacification is a necessary process. Agonistic politics, in contrast, celebrates the contestation of plural political ideas and passions as central to politics.

We proceed to describe how in a series of general meetings FoEI addressed the challenges posed by its internal differences. We argue that in these debates FoEI developed a settlement based on a form of *modus vivendi* but that reaching this point depended on a process that was essentially agonistic. We therefore partly endorse both these ways of framing the political, but we also argue that the case of FoEI also evidences a feature of politics that both underplay, notably the positive value of solidarity in generating a collective commitment to work together to manage differences (Featherstone 2012).

**FoEI’s Biennial General Meetings and the Development of a Strategic Plan**

Our study of FoEI was based on theory-driven observation of FoEI meetings (principally its biennial general meetings in Croatia in 2004, Nigeria 2006 and Honduras 2008), interviews with 34 Directors or International Coordinators of national FoE organisations and members of the International Secretariat between 2004 and 2008, and follow up interviews in 2015.[[3]](#endnote-3) We also drew on archives and records of meetings generously provided by FoEI.

The general meetings (BGMs) of the network take place biennially. It is on these occasions that the key face-to-face debates occur and so the timetable of general meetings dictates the rhythm of FoEI. It is at its BGMs that FoEI takes key decisions on political positions, campaigns, membership and elects the Executive Committee and Chair. A small Secretariat with a staff of around 14 and an Executive Committee (Ex-Com) of 8-9 representatives from national groups meets three or four times a year. The role of the Secretariat and Ex-Com is to coordinate and implement FoEI’s agreed campaigns.

The BGMs usually last six or seven days and are preceded by a two-day pre-conference on a major strategic theme chosen by the host organization. This creates a fairly intense atmosphere among the attendees; the expense of travel means that there are usually fewer than 80 attendees in total.[[4]](#endnote-4) This scale means that regular participants get to know each other and familiarity is reinforced over time as the same individuals often attend each BGM. This enables the development of a sense of community among FoEI’s small cadre of internationalists, all of them professionally employed members of staff from national groups (usually the Director or International Coordinator) and the International Secretariat.Tilly and Tarrow point to the gap between ‘small cadres of cosmopolitans at international level’ and national groups embedded in a domestic context with its own opportunities and threats (2007: 179). In FoEI the cosmopolitan cadres are mostly leaders of national FoE groups, but the decentralised structure of FoEI creates a tension between internationalism and its translation to domestic campaigns. A principal aim in the internal debates over FoEI’s strategy was to define it in a way that more accurately reflected the diversity of national member groups.

Like most face-to-face communities, FoEI has leading personalities; many have been members of Ex-Com and Chairs of FoEI. By 2017 one of those most prominent in calling for FoE Ecuador’s criticism to be taken seriously, Karin Nansen of FoE Uruguay, was appointed Chair of FoEI, following in the footsteps of Ricardo Navarro (FoE El Salvador 2000-2004); Meena Rahman (Foe Malaysia 2004-2008); Nimmo Bassey (FoE Nigeria 2008-12); and Jagoda Muni (FoE Croatia, 2012-16), who were all also supportive of the orientation of FoEI towards Southern agendas. However, the Ex-Com of 8 or 9 members also includes representatives from the most influential Northern groups such as FoE England Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI). The crucial feature that sets FoEI apart from other large NGOs is that each national organisation has equal weight in formal decision-making, irrespective of the size of its membership or income. As Southern national member groups grew to outnumber Northern groups in the 2000s this equal weighting enabled change in FoEI but not so much a consequence of voting numbers, as FoEI prefers to make decisions by consensus where possible, as it was achieved through a process of debate and compromise in which the voices of Southern groups were prominent. As we observed, this debate was often confrontational and emotional and the compromise was based on achieving a pragmatic settlement that allowed FoEI to develop a multivocal position.

The BGMs we observed were a mix of political drama and confrontation on the one hand, with the passions of agonism very much in evidence, and relatively mundane formal business on the other, reflecting the need to sustain an international organisation with bureaucratic and fiduciary responsibilities. Routinely, time was set aside for general political discussion on broad themes such as globalization or gender and power. In these sessions the aim was to encourage deliberation and those present were not necessarily speaking or acting as representatives of their national groups but instead speaking from a personal perspective. In the formal sessions, however, when the aim was to agree FoEI’s policy, those present became national representatives again.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The debates within FoEI addressed three classic questions of political strategy for social movements: What needs to be changed in society and politics? Who is going to take the action to achieve that change? what are the best means by which to achieve such change?

There were divisions over the degree of FoEI’s critique of the dominant model of society, but especially over the nature of capitalism and corporate power, most Southern groups favouring a more explicit anti-capitalist and anti-corporate position than Northern groups. There were differences over whether FoEI was mainly seeking to influence the general public (or global civil society) on the one hand (mainly Northern FoE groups), or seeking to align itself with resistance to injustice, principally manifested in the struggles of particular local communities resisting development, on the other (mainly Southern FoE groups). On the means of change, the main division was over the nature of democracy: could existing democratic institutions suffice to achieve the kinds of radical transformation envisaged in the strategic plan? Many Southern groups favoured radical reconceptualization of democracy, while Northern groups came out in defence of features of existing liberal democracy.

**On capitalism, Economic Justice and Resisting Neoliberalism**

Unlike other major environmental NGOs such as WWF and Greenpeace, FoEI seeks system-wide change, and has made political economy a central plank of its strategy. For many FoE groups in the global South, capitalism is the main source of multiple forms of domination that directly, often violently conflict with surviving pre-capitalist modes of existence. Capitalism is therefore to be resisted and replaced as a matter of survival. In particular, neoliberalism has become code for post-colonial domination by trans-national corporations (TNCs, Almeida and Johnston 2006; Dangl 2010; Strawn 2009). In the global North, there was reluctance to use anti-system language, and in the early stages of FoEI’s internal debates Northern groups emphasised holding particular corporations to account. For many in the South, corporate accountability sounded too soft and side-stepped the need of broader critique of TNCs and capitalism.

The different perspectives adopted by different FoEI groups were apparent when FoE met in Penang, Malaysia in 2005. Two entire days were spent discussing the federation’s positions on capitalism, neoliberalism and TNCs to see if ‘there are fundamental differences in beliefs’ within FoEI. Meena Raman of FoE Malaysia, Chair of FoEI said there would be ‘space to discuss issues that we always say we don’t have time for usually and there is anxiety about what this will lead to’. For the Chair to openly acknowledge this indicated how much was at stake.

In the first session the question was ‘can capitalism and neoliberalism allow for sustainable societies?’ Speakers from each region gave short presentations that highlighted differing perspectives. A Nigerian delegate highlighted the connections between capitalism and violence in Africa, saying: ‘We can’t possibly support capitalism, living in the African context.’ A Colombian delegate highlighted inequalities of wealth and concentration of power produced through global capital, and argued for challenging this by building practical utopias through collective action. In general, speakers from the South argued that the welfare states of Europe depended on exploiting the South and that in the South ‘there are informal sectors, indigenous cultures, other economic systems, being eaten up by the capitalist system’ (FoE Malaysia speaker).

A countervailing perspective was provided by an Estonian delegate, who highlighted the fact that Estonians preferred capitalism as the lesser of two evils. This spoke to the experience of many who had experienced the material deprivations of Soviet-style political economy. Similarly, a German participant feared that any discussion about ending capitalism risked the accusation of supporting the return of communism. European speakers in general, whilst not arguing that capitalism was sustainable, were more likely to argue for the possibility of taming and moderating capitalism than replacing it.

 A *modus vivendi* emerged based on agreement on long-term objectives such as campaigning for social equality while criticizing current forms of capitalism, which provided sufficient common ground for groups to work together without needing further agreement on the status of capitalism. This hybrid form was reflected in the programme that emerged in 2007 as the statement of FoEI’s policy on economics that replaced the previous three separate economic campaigns (on trade, on ‘corporates’ and on international financial institutions). It was agreed that the campaigns would be merged to avoid overlaps, and that a new name be given to the single campaign. The difficulty of finding a name for this campaign was revealing. Debated at a FoEI meeting in Swaziland in 2007, a long list of names for the new programme was drawn up. One of thosee proposed was ‘Resisting Neoliberalism’, as the Latin Americans insisted on having neoliberalism in the name. However, the Europeans argued that ‘Economic Justice’ was more appropriate to their campaigning and so the end result was a hybrid of the European and Latin American preferences – Economic Justice, Resisting Neoliberalism or, as it became known, EJRN. FoEI’s then Communications Director commented that ‘it was a bit of a shock to learn later from Asia Pacific groups that they don’t use the term resisting neoliberalism’.[[6]](#endnote-6) The discussion had focused on achieving a resolution of the differences between the two most powerful regions, but this left at least one region stuck with an FoEI programme name it was uncomfortable with. This outcome fitted the non-ideal elements of the political stressed in *modus vivendi*. It also evidenced the passions of an agonistic process that drives political commitment. One interviewee told us the discussion that led to FoEI’s mission statement included walkouts and tears. Another, from the Philippines, commented on the emotional-charge and sensitivity of the naming of EJRN:

If you feel alienated by a word that’s in the title of a program, yeah that can be really hard. And every time you look at that, you don’t just read ‘neo-liberalism’, you think of all the discussions that have happened, the heated discussions that have happened over the years about this, and a lot of hurt feelings.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The question this begged is what then held FoEI together? Despite these hurt feelings, there was a countervailing sense of solidarity that enabled the participants at the BGMs to work together at least enough to fashion a compromise outcome. This combination of agonism, solidarity and *modus vivendi* was again evident when FoEI met at the BGM in Abuja, Nigeria in 2006.

**Whose democracy? Changing FoEI and FoE national groups.**

At the 2006 BGM FoEI focused on defining the means by which it would fulfil its strategic vision and mission. Delegates had prepared by organizing working groups, with representatives from FoEI’s four official regions - Latin America and the Caribbean (ATALC); Europe; Asia-Pacific and Africa. Each group had drafted a series of ‘maps’ based on three broad themes: mobilization, resistance and transformation (see Figure 1). *Mobilization* focuses on strategic alliances with other movements, support for local communities and seeking to mobilize and influence publics. *Resistance* includes mapping the forces FoEI opposes, responding to requests for support from affected communities and pursuing political gains through advocacy. *Transformation* entails recovering lost knowledge and creating new ideas, building new democratic structures and influencing existing ones. Implicit in this is the suggestion of a position of anti-capitalist resistance on the one hand, and a more reformist and accommodationist stance on the other.

Insert Figure 1. about here.

On the day of the plenary debate, representatives from more than 50 national groups met in a small hotel on the outskirts of Abuja, in physically cramped and uncomfortable conditions. It was an intense atmosphere. Debate moved to the issue of how to define the kind of democracy that FoEI wanted to see in the world. Discussion was based on the poster presentations that participants had developed on this theme the day before. When presented to the plenary session, it became apparent that the facilitator of those sessions had failed to achieve consensus. A core difference between groups in the discussion had been the attachment of some to creating and building new democratic structures, including acknowledging the existence of other, non-parliamentary forms of democracy. Latin American groups were the strongest advocates of this position. In contrast, other national groups, predominantly European, wanted to acknowledge the value of liberal democratic institutions. Failing to take into account that much of the work of these groups was done precisely by influencing liberal democratic processes and institutions undervalued the meaning of their work and failed to acknowledge the diversity between places and groups. Asia-Pacific representatives tried to get around the impasse by suggesting the circumvention of the question entirely by stressing ‘legitimate participatory processes’ instead.

Eventually, after intense debate, a compromise was reached in the form of an awkwardly phrased statement that read: ‘Create and build new democratic structures. Influence existing ones.’ Including both positions in one sentence had proved impossible. To have said ‘and influence existing ones’ (as the secondary phrase) would have been to prioritize building new structures. Since there was partial consensus on this point – but not on the legitimacy of influencing existing ones – this would perhaps have been justifiable. However, as more than one speaker said, FoEI was not seeking to resolve this difference, rather it needed a declaration that captured the diversity of the contexts in which the federation worked and took account of differences of ideology, hence the need for two distinct sentences. Even the positioning of a full stop was important.

At the end of the debate, an incident further exposed some of the passions the debate had evoked. Just as agreement was reached between the builders of new democracies and the influencers of existing ones, the discussion became personal when a prominent European representative accused a Latin American of having pushed too hard on the democracy issue, forcing his organisation to accommodate ‘10,000 compromises’. He was not disputing the outcome, but expressing unhappiness with the process by which it had been reached. In return, the Latin American defended her right to her ‘political position, the position of my region’.

It was late and the kitchen wanted to serve dinner, but emotions were raw, and no one wanted the issue to be left unresolved. A European said ‘solidarity is missing in the room’. Another thought that one of the great strengths of FoEI was its ability to negotiate its way ‘through its diversity to strong political positions’. Then someone else from Europe said ‘we should not make political points in personal ways’. The European who had made the initial attack on the Latin American then apologized unreservedly and, with some emotion, explained that he had named a person because he didn’t want to say, ‘You Latin Americans’, thinking that would fuel regional tensions. At last, one of the hosts from Nigeria said that the only way forward in FoEI was to negotiate with each other, and that if representatives didn’t calm down, this couldn’t be achieved. ‘We are heavily in solidarity in this room. Our solidarity is not in doubt,’ he said to strong affirmations of support (Doherty and Doyle, 2013: 93-94).

The questions that FoEI considered in these years are familiar to every radical movement on the left. In the past, socialist parties when divided on such issues were for the most part able to make decisions through formal decision-making processes based on votes. Although it has provisions for voting, in practice FoEI’s processes are more akin to those of the global justice movement and its predecessors in post-1960s social movements than they are to political parties, avoiding formal votes wherever possible (della Porta 2005; Polletta 2002). Consensus decision-making is favoured and references to political theorists and texts are completely absent. The meetings are thus more like those of social movements or social forums than a left-wing political party, except that unlike a social forum FoEI set itself the task of *agreeing* a statement on the most divisive strategic questions of the day.

The agreement to have two ways of viewing democracy and the incident that followed illustrate first how FoE has developed to accommodate the different political values of its national groups and second, how those who are part of its relatively small international community work hard to maintain the space and culture that enables an agonistic politics. The agonism described in the account of BGMs above is not unique: similar process has been observed in meetings of the global justice movement and social forums and can also be claimed as part of deliberative democracy. For example, the collective and cooperative work of participants to resolve tensions when conflicts become personal is taken to indicate a feature of deliberative process (Giugni and Nai 2013: 155). But if deliberation in democratic theory is usually defined as a process that enables the most rational debate in order to maximise the chances of agreement among participants, this was not really what was happening in the case above. Rather, when one participant failed to recognise another’s right to a voice, others in the room intervened to maintain the solidarity of the group. This took place after the decision had been made on democracy and was not about enabling deliberation so much as maintaining solidarity and collective identity, preventing agonism from developing into antagonism.

**The Consequences of FoEI’s Re-Orientation towards the Global South**

The outcome of the Strategic Vision and Mission Process was that FoEI’s discourse was reconfigured, with a more prominent role for Southern strategies. This is evident from the language of the summary of the Strategic Plan (Figure 1) which includes terms specific to Southern contexts such as neo-colonialism and a radical emphasis on resistance, empowerment of indigenous communities, and participation in political struggles. This is closer to the social movement ethos of many Southern groups than the more conventional environmentalism of most Northern groups. Since this was FoEI’s first ever statement of its political position it cannot be compared with a pre-existing statement, but since it emerged as a consequence of several years of criticism of the marginalization of Southern agendas by Northern groups it was clearly a product of this clash. Part of this critique had been aimed at exposing the taken for granted assumptions that the repertoires of Northern groups were appropriate; for example, the emphasis on getting good media coverage in practice meant coverage that was mainly seen by supporters or wider publics in the global North.

The Strategic Plan did not replace Northern with Southern strategies, but included the Northern ‘Mobilizing public support’ alongside the Southern ‘Mobilization and support to local communities’. The document as a whole therefore reflected FoEI’s multivocal diversity. Furthermore, this did not map neatly onto a North-South divide. Some Southern groups were not as aligned with the critical political economy discourse as others, while some Northern groups with a more radical tradition aligned themselves with pro-Southern agenda. For example, FoE Australia and FoE France both supported the call for a major debate about the marginalization of southern groups in the wake of the 2002 Johannesburg WSSD (Doherty 2006).

FoE national groups are subject to influences from other social movements nationally and internationally. The strength of the anti-neoliberal discourse in Latin American groups reflects the influence of social movements and the ALBA bloc of governments in Latin America. Debates about North-South relations were also informed by the participation of national FoE groups from South and North in the World and regional Social Forums in the 2000s. This movement crossover was reinforced when global justice activists in Europe began to campaign on climate change, particularly from 2007 onwards (Hadden 2014; Scholl 2013). At the 2007 UN Climate Change Conference in Bali[[8]](#endnote-8) FoEI joined Southern-based networks such as La via campesina in breaking with the Climate Action Network (CAN), the umbrella co-ordination for around 800 NGOs. CAN was criticised for marginalising Southern perspectives and for its focus on technical policy and insider strategies at the expense of arguments about justice and neoliberalism. Even Northern groups in FoE were increasingly sceptical of the value of insider lobbying strategies within UN processes (FoEI 2010). The critics of CAN, including FoEI, formed an alternative network, Climate Justice Now (CJN) which, along with the European direct action network Climate Justice Action, was at the centre of protests outside the Copenhagen CoP in 2009 (Hadden 2014). Of the major environmental NGOs, FoEI was viewed as taking the most critical position towards the process, aligning itself with climate justice activists protesting outside the Bella Conference Center.

By the time of the 2007 and 2009 COPs, FoEI had debated extensively on questions of political economy and justice. Thus its strategic orientation to ally with Northern and Southern critics of the UNFCC process from the global justice movement was based on several years of intensive debate around the strategic plan, itself informed by parallel participation in global justice networks. Importantly, this included Northern FoE groups such as FoE EWNI who were increasingly adopting a social justice framing of their national campaigns (Rootes 2006). After the financial crisis, staff from FoEI reported that there was more discussion of the conflict between capitalism and sustainability in Northern FoE groups. At FoE EWNI’s 2015 ‘Basecamp’ for local groups numerous workshops addressed international questions with a consistent stress from those involved with FoEI processes on the need to think of campaigns in terms of accountability to sister FoE groups. In Germany BUND responded to a decline in its membership with an increase in protests and engagement in solidarity actions with FoE members in the global South, seen as more likely to attract younger members. FoE USA has long focused on lobbying in Washington DC, but for the first time in many years FoE groups engaged in local canvassing around 2015[[9]](#endnote-9) and, following the election of Donald Trump, FoE Director Erich Pica unequivocally attacked the new Administration. The process of change in FoEI was a result of the combination of a push from internal debate and the pull of external influences: some contingent, such as the election of Trump; others such as a sense of solidarity with allies in other movements were a result of relationships developed in social forums and mobilization at summits (de Moor 2017) as well as within FoEI itself.

**From Agonism to Antagonism: the Expulsion of FoE Italy**

Of course, not all FoE groups followed the same path. FoEI Ex-Com in 2012 noted that some groups, while not openly dissenting from the new strategy, simply ignored it. Prior to 2002 FoEI had no extended statement articulating its common ground but once national groups had invested the time and emotion to develop the strategic plan, the stakes were changed. It was now possible to define the terms for a *modus vivendi* in which conflict over values and ideas was accepted as normal, even inevitable, but held in check by mutual solidarity. Failure to respect this new context led one national group into what, in terms of agonistic politics, was an antagonistic relationship with the network. The expulsion in 2014 of FoE Italy (*Amici della Terra*), which had been a member of FoEI since 1978 was a major event. Expulsion is very rare in FoEI and only two FoE national groups have ever been expelled for political reasons.[[10]](#endnote-10) .

FoE groups are required to be independent of all political parties. The legitimacy of FoE Italy had been gently questioned over the years as it was seen as too close to the Radical Party. Viewed as one of the more conservative groups in the federation, FoE Italy was very critical of the support given by the federation to FoE Palestine, accusing it of being a PLO group. FoE Italy had close ties with FoE Middle East, which had begun as a group including Jordanians, Israelis, Palestinians and Egyptians but was viewed as effectively an Israeli-only group by the time Palestine was accepted as a separate member in 2006.

What moved this beyond the scope of *modus vivendi* was the flat rejection by FoE Italy of commitment to the discourse of economic justice that agreed in the strategic plan, coupled with its support for ‘clean coal’. The conflict was picked up by the Italian press’ *Il Corriere della Sera* reporting that FoE Italy ‘does not share the turn towards radicalisation of environmental battles’ (Taino, 2014).[[11]](#endnote-11) The refusal of FoE Italy to reconsider its position led even other Europeans to accept that Italy could not remain a member of FoEI.

In January 2014, FoEI’s Ex-Com agreed to undertake a formal evaluation of FoE Italy at the request of the Executive Committee of FoE Europe. In the ten years prior to this, FoE Italy had already been subject to two evaluations from FoEI. Internal evaluations only occur when there is concern that a national group can no longer meet the criteria for membership of FoEI. However, according to its President, Rosa Filippini, FoE Italy received no adverse findings, and even had an apology from the committee for the previous cases. On this third occasion, however, FoEI proposed the expulsion of Italy at the 2014 Biennial General Meeting in October in Sri Lanka. The Italians refused to attend.

An announcement on the FoEI website merely noted that ‘the vision of environmental justice shared by the federation and the mission and vision of *Amici della Terra* have come to diverge to such an extent that *Amici della Terra's* membership is no longer tenable.’ (FoEI 2014). However, at its Congress in Rome in July 2014 FoE Italy stated that there had been a change of course in the international federation in the previous ten years, since around the time of the development and approval of the strategic plan (*Amici della Terra* 2014). The Italians clearly felt they were being victimised, but this third evaluation in ten years was different because it was driven from FoE Europe, which had previously defended Italy within FoEI. The Italians argued that the strategic plan had changed the federation in a way they could not accept: FoEI ‘desires to define and approve one single Mission and Vision for all the networks, and now is using these as ideological tools to achieve the “alignment” of every national group.’ There was also a bitter attack on FoE Europe which FoE Italy alleged ‘cannot stomach FoEI, but nevertheless conforms’ (*Amici della Terra*, 2014). The truth was rather that other European groups had accepted the political settlement that underpinned the strategic plan; the refusal of the Italian organisation to engage with the process meant that it had, in the language of agonism, chosen to become antagonists to FoEI.

**Conclusion**

The strategic plan that FoEI agreed in 2006, and has since developedg into a ‘System Change’ plan (2014), is not a strategy in any real sense, but more a map of the worldviews contained within the federation (see Figure 1), one that importantly includes, even prioritises, Southern perspectives. Cam Walker, of FoE Australia, likens FoEI’s orientation to the South ‘as havingundertaken “a hand-brake turn” with some - but surprisingly little - blood-letting and political carnage…’.[[12]](#endnote-12) With the exodus of Ecuador in 2002 and the expulsion of Italy in 2014, the more extreme fringes of the federation were trimmed. The process of agreeing the 2006 plan was as important as its content. The debates, difficult and emotional as they were, deepened the commitment of member groups to each other, albeit unevenly and with varying impacts beyond the cadre of FoE internationalists most engaged. This allowed the principles to be felt as something owned by most national groups, despite their differences, and moved FoEI on from its rhetorical celebration of difference and diversity.

Until 2002 FoEI had operated on the basis that it did not need to address the meaning of its values. Common ground was implicit and assumed until it was challenged by the resignation of FoE Ecuador, exposing the hitherto taken for granted dominance of Northern strategies. In similar vein it is very unlikely that Italy would have been expelled in 2014 without the difficult, agonistic, work on defining political values undertaken by other FoE groups in the intervening years. FoEI was undoubtedly changed as a result. Yet, while FoEI is arguably now Southern-oriented, and there has been some change in Northern groups as a consequence, the cultures of the relatively autonomous national groups remain very diverse; conflict and pluralism is endemic in an organization as politically centred as FoEI. The relative success in reconstructing its collective identity is indicative of how a transnational egalitarian environmentalism is possible even if, in accommodating major political differences, it inevitably falls short of the ideal of the unified global environmental movement that some hope for

The deep disagreements and passions within FoEI over basic questions of politics, often manifested in tensions between regional blocs, indicate that agonistic approaches have value in understanding politics within movement organisations as well as within political systems. In radical environmental groups there is a tension between the commitment to challenging opponents agonistically and the orientation towards deliberation in internal debate (Kenis 2016). But it is also important to recognise the inherently agonistic character of internal debate in any movement organization with a strong political culture. FoEI has not resolved its differences; rather, it has mostly accommodated them in a form that fits well with the non-ideal character of a *modus vivendi*. The stress in agonism on conflict and pluralism as axiological can make it hard to see how a political settlement can ever be reached; yet FoEI managed to achieve one. This settlement can be seen as a case of *modus vivendi* : a practical accommodation, based on a mix of self-interest and moral principles and values (Horton 2010: 440). But the weakness of *modus vivendi* is that in drawing attention to the non-ideal nature of political settlements it underestimates the capacity for more positive changes in values. FoEI was changed in the process of agreeing its strategic plan, and national organisations were also changed, by the joint endeavour to find new common ground. In this respect, FoEI’s processes attest to a further feature of agonism: the potential for creative reconfiguration of settled identities, when they are exposed to challenge (Connolly 2002: 192).

Nevertheless, a crucial aspect of FoEI’s experience is missing from the accounts of the political represented by both agonism and *modus vivendi*: the generative effects of friendship and solidarity. Friendship and solidarity were central to the settlement achieved in the original strategic plan of 2006 and later developments; it is not only the passions or rational calculation of interest that we need to account for, but also the ties of solidarity that bind movements together (Featherstone 2012).

Thus, although the realist approach to political theory expressed in the idea of *modus vivendi* is supported empirically by the compromises of FoEI’s strategic plan, the case of FoEI does not support the *modus vivendi* approach’s pessimism about the potential for political change. *Modus vivendi* can be viewed asimplicitly conservative insofar as its critique of ideal and moralistic approaches to politics tends to affirm the value of the status quo (Finlayson 2015). However, there is no necessary reason why acceptance of the perennial role of conflict, difference and emotion in politics means giving up on the quest for a better world. This aim, rather than simply the preservation of its organisation, was what drove FoEI activists to work so hard to define a collective identity.

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1. *Africa:* Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda. *Asia Pacific:* Australia, Bangladesh, East Timor, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Nepal, Palestine, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Russia (sic), Sri Lanka. *Europe:* Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Brussels), Belgium (Wallonia & Brussels, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine. *Latin America and the Caribbean:* Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Curaçao, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Uruguay. *North America:* Canada, USA. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Stephen Hopgood’s (2005) study of Amnesty International (AI) is an important exception but the differences in organizational structure between FoEI and AI make comparisons difficult. In effect, AI is more dominated by its overwhelming Northern membership than FoEI. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. We also carried out a questionnaire survey but have not drawn on that data here. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Not all groups always send representatives, (usually around 60 groups do), but while finance is provided to enable smaller groups to send a representative, some larger and wealthier European organisations sometimes send several representatives, even if their organisation only has one vote. See Doherty and Doyle (2013) for more detail on FoEI’s organisation and finances. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. There are very few, if any, non-FoEI attendees in the business parts of the BGM. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Interview with Communications Director, FoEI Secretariat, May 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Interview with an International Program Coordinator, FoEI Secretariat, May 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. 13th Conference of the Parties to the United National Framework Convention on Climate Change. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Interview with FoE USA staff member 20th April 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The first was an earlier branch of FoE South Africa, expelled in the 1980s because of its failure to deliver on the promise of a racially integrated group. In the second case, Friends of the Earth Hong Kong was expelled in 1990 because it was prepared to accept funds from pariah TNCs that other FoE groups were campaigning against. At that point, FoE Hong Kong said, ‘In Hong Kong we take the view that, while confrontation may have been the only posture available to environmentalists in the 1970s, times are changing and so too are industrial attitudes . . .We need to harness the organizational and financial resources of industry on our side’ (Letters, *New Scientist*, 9 March 1991, p2). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In May 2015 FoE Italy signed a letter sent by Italia Nostra to the President of the Republic of Italy, Matteo Renzi, and five ministers (Italia Nostra 2015) protesting against an impending decree from the Ministry of Economic Development granting further economic incentives to renewable energy, primarily wind energy. FoE Italy was concerned about the control of renewables by organised crime. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Interview with Campaign Co-ordinator, FoE Australia, 9th December 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)