
THE GLOBAL UNION RESEARCH NETWORK: A POTENTIAL FOR INCREMENTAL INNOVATION?¹

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One of the current paradoxes for trade unions is that organizing is an essentially local or national affair whilst the most pressing challenge for unions, which is globalization, can only be faced in a global context, i.e. beyond the local and national forums in which trade unions have traditionally focused their action and expertise. Globalization entails several dimensions: the increase of world trade during the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the industrialized world and a few developing countries; an acceleration of Foreign Direct Investment; the rapid integration of financial markets; technological change; and the transboundary integration of national production systems. All of these have resulted in various dramatic changes for workers and worker organizations. Globalization has also enabled large parts of the labour movement to communicate effectively and at relatively low cost. The Global Union Research Network (GURN) aims to contribute to research on topics that have become prominent due to globalization and by extensive use of modern technologies which are one of the driving forces behind globalization. Indeed, the International Labour Organization (ILO) in its follow up report on the World Commission Report on the Social Dimension of Globalization defines global knowledge networks as the most important approach to fill the 'gap in our understanding of the social and labour impact of global economic, financial, trade, technological and environmental policies' (ILO 2004: 54):

The challenge...can be met by a combination of approaches, the most important of which is to take advantage of the potential of globalization itself, in the shape of rapid communications and the ease with which global networks can be built (ILO 2004: 54).

The aim of this paper is to analyze to what extent the GURN has the potential to be regarded as an incremental innovation for research within the international labour movement. Incremental innovation means that an innovation is implemented gradually and will be further elaborated thereafter. I shall put forward the argument that the GURN can become an incremental

innovation and there are three stages to this argument. It is first important to contextualize the GURN within the international trade union movement. Secondly the term 'innovation' will be defined and the GURN will be presented as a potential, albeit incremental, innovation. The final stage will examine GURN sustainability and the barriers to its institutionalization. This paper represents both an opportunity to share with others some of the main features of the GURN and an opportunity to engage in critical self reflection about the potential for this kind of initiative to reinforce union actions in the context of globalization. My observations are based on participant observation during the development and the first year of existence of the GURN. In order to contextualise the GURN within the trade union movement it is important to look at the most important challenges of labour, i.e. the danger of being marginalized by the mainstream and globalization in general.

Cultural institutions, such as political parties and the media, create a compatible version of reality, which often favours the interests of elites. The theory of cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci suggests that the dominant ideologies put forth by these cultural institutions are made to seem so natural, or to such an extent 'of commonsense', that we do not even suspect the presence of the tacit assumptions made (Gramsci 1975). Such is the challenge currently faced by organized labour in various countries, where it risks being marginalized by the mainstream.

Deregulation, the internationalization of markets, restructured work organization as a result of new technologies as well as an identity crisis of trade unions have led to a decline in union membership (e.g. Fairbrother 2000, 1998; Hannigan 1998; Weil 1994; Dunlop 1990). In some trade union confederations, the resources are so limited that they are barely able to afford staff for carrying out many of the basic and indispensable tasks, as for example dealing with the most pressing problems of their members, let alone being able to afford research to be carried out on the solutions to these problems. One result of the decline in union membership across various countries is a subsequent reduction of staff. In some instances, research allocations are cut back since researchers are often on non-permanent contracts and research is seen as less essential than other organizational tasks by some trade union leaders. While the reduction of resources is sometimes seen as an opportunity for organizational change within the trade unions, it is often not a priority to invest scarce resources in organizational change. However, it is vital that detailed research on the impact and consequences of globalization is carried out so that organized labour can defend workers' rights and advance globalization and lobby effectively.

Parallel to a decrease in union membership, there is an increasing inequality on a global scale. The low or non-existing social standards especially in the 'South' are described by the dominant classes to be 'normal' and inalterable side effects of globalization. Trade unions and civil society in general

are increasingly facing an uphill battle for dignity and decent work. These changes also forge new alliances which are still in the experimental phase. Not only is a restructuring of the international labour movement taking place, but the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has resolved to work more closely with pro-labour and democratically legitimate actors within civil society.

The close links and networks of interchange of opinions between researchers and trade unions also seem to be weakening. Union leaders and activists often feel that fewer younger researchers have pro-labour identities and that the world of work is increasingly moving out of their focus. Similar to broader trends with the rest of the work force, there is an increasing individualization and depoliticization amongst researchers. It is felt that researchers often prefer to study social realities from their ivory towers rather than in the field. Traditionally, left-wing researchers especially those within industrial relations had pro labour identities. Contrary to that, many young researchers today are part of the mainstream which often only means repeating the above cited dominant discourses. In Gramsci's terminology they would be regarded as 'organic intellectuals' of the mainstream who aim to generalise the values and norms of bourgeois lifestyle to working classes (see, for example an analysis put forward by the German metalworking federation, IG Metall, 2000). For the trade unions, it is therefore much more difficult to educate 'organic intellectuals' as they do not have the same access to power and resources. It is thus important for the international trade union movement to develop innovative approaches: 1) to improve communication channels among trade union researchers; 2) to improve communication channels between trade unions and pro-labour researchers; 3) to lead outspoken and innovative debates on current research and its implications for the labour movement; and 4) to challenge mainstream conceptions.

The GURN and the Masters programme on Labour Policies and Globalization, which is a qualification programme for young trade unionists to study labour policies and globalization are projects established to motivate trade unionists so that they can reflect upon and question the dominant discourses on globalization and economic restructuring.

THE CREATION OF THE GLOBAL UNION RESEARCH NETWORK

In 2001 the ICFTU, the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC), the European Trade Union Council (ETUC), several Global Union Federations (GUFs) (then called International Trade Secretariats) and the ILO's Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) conducted a major policy and strategic review of international trade-unionism referred to as Millennium Review. It concluded by stating the urgent

need to build research capacity and links between researchers, particularly in the Global South:

It is also important to strengthen research capacity among national centres in developing countries. This process could be assisted if we could overcome our own "digital divide" and ensure that union officials around the world have access to and training on the internet. We could then insure that all national centres have access to all trade union research on global economic issues' (TUAC 2001: paragraph 24).

The Global Union Research Network (GURN) was established in January 2004 as a follow up to the strategic review of the Global Unions Group. The initiative to establish such a research network was taken by the ICFTU and TUAC and was carried out with the assistance of ACTRAV and the ILO's International Institute for Labour Studies. The aim of the research network is to give union organizations better access to the research carried out within trade unions and allied institutions, while enabling them to exchange information on matters of joint concern and to develop the capacity to make analyses and take part in debates and policy formulation. The GURN aims to facilitate and initiate research which is relevant for the international labour movement.

More concretely, the GURN consists of several elements: research, resource webpages for research, online discussions, an inventory of research institutes, a research database and newsletters. I will now describe these different elements in more detail. The GURN is facilitated by ILO ACTRAV in close cooperation with the ICFTU and TUAC and other interested organizations which, as lead organizations, are responsible for different priority areas.

RESEARCH

In the first year an infrastructure has been created for the research network. In consultation with the lead organizations some new research was commissioned by the GURN. The long term viability of the GURN will depend on the genuine interest and active participation of researchers from trade unions and the broader research community. Even though the exchange and systematisation of existing research form an important task for the GURN, it is also important to facilitate and to carry out genuine research by its participants in order to stimulate and generate new ideas and debates.

RESOURCE WEBPAGES FOR RESEARCH

The priority issues have been determined by members of the network and according to the resources of the network members. That means that only topics

could be chosen which were seen as relevant and where a network organization volunteered to work on the topic. The following organizations committed themselves to conceptualizing research information packages on the internet on the following issues:

ICFTU Geneva/Brussels:	Bilateral and regional trade agreements
TUAC Paris:	Corporate governance
TUAC Paris:	OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises
International Institute of Social Studies, Netherlands:	Global value chains
ICFTU/ AFRO:	International financial institutions (IFIs) and poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs)
NALEDI, South Africa:	Economic alternatives and poverty eradication
ETUI, Brussels:	Collective bargaining and wages
ILO/ACTRAV, Geneva:	Migration
ILO/ACTRAV, Geneva:	Social Security
CRIMT/CLC, Canada:	Global trade union strategies (union renewal).

For all the issues and topics dealt with, gender, labour rights and employment are seen as cross cutting issues throughout the network.

INVENTORY OF RESEARCH INSTITUTES

The GURN has developed a list of research institutes and trade union departments dealing with research in several countries in the different regions throughout the world. Currently more than a hundred research institutes are listed.

MODERATED DISCUSSIONS

In the spring of 2004, ACTRAV organized a moderated discussion on migration as a pilot project for a system of online conferencing. The discussion focused on the migration report which was submitted by the International Labour Office in preparation of the 92nd International Labour Conference in June 2004. The online forum enabled a focused and inspiring preparation for the International Labour Conference (ILC). During the ILC, various delegates emphasised that they found the early and systematic preparation very helpful. As a follow up to the discussion, ACTRAV compiled best practice cases of trade unions dealing with migration (Schmidt 2006). In the spring of 2005, ICFTU

Geneva conducted a further online discussion on bilateral and regional trade agreements, the report on which can be found on www.gurn.info/topic/trade/index.html.

LIST SERVE

The GURN list serve is used for the exchange of information and regular newsletters, summarizing research on above key areas and on general union research. It has been developed for union researchers as a tool for information sharing on new research, new reports completed, etc. Information is currently shared through the list serve to some extent. However, it is hard to find a compromise between sending out enough information and overwhelming the busy GURN members with too many e-mails.

DATABASE

A database for existing research on the priority topics of the GURN is being designed to give easy access to pro-labour articles.

NEWSLETTERS

The GURN issues regular newsletters where new research results are disseminated and to update GURN participants on the activities of the network.

THE GURN AS AN INCREMENTAL INNOVATION?

In order to assess the GURN initiative and GURN achievements to date, I seek to apply the concept of incremental innovation. In everyday usage, the term "innovation" is used to describe artefactual novelties, for example, a new technology or a new model of a car or a new process. Innovations can take different forms. Zaltman et al. regard innovations as 'any idea, practise or material artefacts' perceived to be new by the relevant unit of adoption (Zaltman et al. 1973: 10). The Executive Board of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) has also sought to use an extended definition of innovation. It insists that innovation should not be focused on technology but should rather include the so called soft factors like education, knowledge and the capability to work in a team. The private sector is criticized for using the term in too narrow a sense by limiting innovation to technology while the DGB affirms that only people can bring forward and implement innovations (DGB 2004).

The scholar Hauschildt (1993) developed four dimensions to understand innovation: content assessment, subjective assessment, processual and normative assessment. These four dimensions are in line with what the DGB has defined as an inclusive approach to innovation. In terms of content, the question is what is

new? The subjective dimension asks for whom the innovation is new? The processual dimension examines the boundaries of an innovation, i.e. where it starts and where it ends. Lastly, the normative dimension asks to what extent “new” also translates into “success”? This latter normative dimension will not be examined here as it is both too early to assess the success of the GURN and such an assessment can more reasonably be accomplished by GURN participants as opposed to a member of the ILO ACRTAV team facilitating the GURN.

The *content* dimension asks what is new about the GURN. I argue that the GURN is the first attempt of the international trade union movement to build a global research network comprised of scholars and trade union researchers. There are a variety of existing networks. For example, the International Network for Regional and Local Development of Work and Labour (RLDWL) aims to foster the “improvement of labour conditions, the development of innovative employment relations, the organization of work as well as economic questions” (RLDWL 2004). The RLDWL was founded around the 1998 World Congress of Industrial Relations and comprises some trade unionists but appears to consist mostly of researchers. The ICFTU has some specialized discussion forums like the Trade and International Labour Standards (TILS) forum and this comprises both trade unionists and researchers. However, its prime aim is not to discuss research but rather to discuss policy initiatives of the ICFTU in addition to the exchange of information.

Thus the GURN is unique because of its ownership by the International Trade Union movement and its global character. Roughly a third of those who subscribe to the GURN mailing list and almost half of those who attended the first workshops are from non-OECD countries. The decentralized and voluntary aspect of the network is an important feature, i.e. that even though some researchers are asked by their leadership to participate in the GURN, others do so on their own initiative. The informal communication channels of the GURN constitute an important addition to the traditional channels of communication among the international trade union movement and between trade union and university researchers.

Of course, there are different kinds of innovations in content. The GURN can be defined as a resource-induced innovation. This means that the needs have changed and that new resources are offered in order to fulfil needs. Rickards describes this process as follows:

Innovation is a process whereby new ideas are put into practice [...] Innovation as a creative, or open-systems process. To be more specific it is the process of matching the problems (needs) of systems with solutions which are new and relevant to those needs, and which can be supplied by the innovating organization [...] (Rickards 1985: 28).

The GURN addresses the negative effects of globalization on workers (referred to by Rickards as 'problems' or 'needs') by facilitating the exchange of research and debates to find global solutions to the problems.

The open-systems process referred to by Rickards is indeed an important element of the GURN. While the participants of the first GURN workshop in Turin in January 2004 were invited based on their institutional adherence, the workshop in Porto Alegre in January 2005 was open to all trade union and university researchers. In a first step, this workshop had a self selection criterion built in that only those can attend who are committed enough to submit a paper. In a second step, the participants will be selected by means of a peer review. One important element of networks is that latent relations can be mobilized by various actors. By means of global commitment, the relations between actors are maintained without being in constant cooperation. This enables actors to contact partners in the network with little effort (Westerbarkey 2004). For the GURN this means that when one cooperating organization is looking for research collaborators they can either contact other network members directly or they can make an open call via the list serve to find trade union experts on a particular area of research.

The GURN is also defined as a potential incremental innovation in as much as the innovative elements are implemented by gradual changes rather than by radical steps. Incremental innovation is more closely related to the existing capabilities of organizations and existing knowledge and demand structures in the environment. For example, more extensive innovation might not be possible without detailed knowledge of specific organizations so the incremental character allows the innovation to start from the present state of organizations and individuals. This is especially important when making the link between researchers in the North and the South.

The *processual* dimension of innovation examines where the innovation starts and where it ends. Research was carried out by the international trade union movement before the GURN. It can be suggested that innovation starts when information on research is shared in a systematic manner and/ or when research begins to take on a more international perspective. As it is easier to discuss ideas with international partners due to the GURN, researchers might be more encouraged to look beyond national debates in their research but also to learn from others' experiences. The aim of the GURN is to institutionalize the network in a way that when a trade union researcher is looking for information on a topic, she or he finds the GURN resources a helpful starting point.

The *subjective* dimension deserves particular attention because this concerns for *whom* this innovation is new, for example individual actors or particular organizations and groups. It is particularly important to take this individualist perspective into account. As suggested by the DGB, only people can implement innovations. An actor may introduce a new product in his or her

work environment. This was the case of the new research network in our context. From the micro perspective, the test is not just whether it is introduced in a particular organizational setting, such as a union or Global Union Federation, but the degree to which individuals are able to access it. Are individual actors familiar with the GURN? Do they regard it as something new and useful? Do they intend to use it actively and develop it further? In other words, the GURN could not be regarded as an innovation if its construction is limited to a few lead organizations and only a few trade union researchers know about it or are able to use it. In other words, we must judge its relevance and degree of diffusion to individuals.

The GURN is of course still a very young network and we cannot reasonably expect it to be widely known as yet. The feedback we receive on the GURN is mostly positive. Some trade union researchers and policy makers have informed us that they started to use the GURN webpages as resources when they prepare a paper. Another indicator for success of the GURN is the increasing number of links to the GURN site (www.gurn.info) from national and international trade union confederations. The GURN has been criticized that the information is only available in English and that too few topics are represented. This represents an important challenge for the GURN. One of the tasks of a network is to motivate its members to participate actively as it is very much a decentralized network which depends on the commitment of the member organizations. The spectrum of interests in a network should correlate with a well defined audience so that the audience i.e. the cooperating organizations see a benefit in being a member of the network. The GURN participants have defined a relatively open and broad spectrum of interests and there is a multitude of audiences of the GURN such as trade union researchers, trade unionists who want to use the GURN for readily accessible information and pro-labour university researchers. The unifying factor of these different audiences, which hopefully results in a sustainable commitment on their part, is the quest for social justice and the fight for dignity and decent work.

Looking at the implementation of innovations from a rational choice perspective (Abraham 1999), innovations have two important characteristics. First, innovations are almost always linked to investments on the part of the innovating actor. This investment can consist of time, money or efforts to learn something new. Secondly, innovations contain risks for the innovating actor, not least because innovations can fail. This is mostly linked to the investments made by the actors, as referred to above. It is important to distinguish between the interest of the organization and the interest of individual actors within the organizations. An innovation can be beneficial for the whole of the organization while this might not be the case for every single actor within the organization and vice versa. Ideally the GURN should be beneficial to everyone and should not create an extra burden on the scarce resources of trade union researchers.

However, this is not realistic. The GURN can be seen as a collective good. Its output can lead to better information dissemination and social capital for all, notably in terms of networking opportunities between trade unionists and researchers and exchange between them on issues of common concern. However, this assumes the adaptability of all within this new structure and the willingness to share specific knowledge within the network. The researchers need to invest time and effort to build up the network before it will be really beneficial for everyone.

GURN SUSTAINABILITY AND BARRIERS TO FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

In order to institutionalize the fledgling GURN as a sustainable innovation, it is important to take into account the strategic triangle which was developed by Levesque/ Murray (2002 and 2003) for trade union work but can be transposed to the GURN. The strategic triangle consists of strategic capacity, internal and external solidarity. Most importantly, the *strategic capacity* of the GURN needs to be developed. It is essential to use the GURN to foster genuine research and discussions about current issues which are of relevance to trade unions. The *internal solidarity* means that the adherents of the GURN have various ways to participate and that there are clear communication channels between the members, the outside world and those organizations that are responsible for particular subject areas within the GURN. The *external solidarity* refers to the capacity to link with the community at large, including researchers outside trade unions but also the public at large. It is a major challenge for the GURN to strengthen the links with researchers within universities and to build up close relationships between the labour movement and academia.

It is also important to assess critically the potential impediments to the success of such a research network. The most important difficulties are language barriers, technological barriers and resistance to change. Language barriers are one of the key issues for the network. A research network which strives to be global needs to communicate in more than one language in the medium term. This problem will be partially addressed by translating the web index pages of the GURN into French and Spanish and by including article in other languages than English into the research database. Technological barriers include insufficient experience with new technologies due to educational barriers and limited access to the internet due to scarce resources and insufficient infrastructure. In order to help overcome the lack of experience with new technologies, training courses on technology within trade unions are of prime importance. ACTRAV, for example, offers such courses an integral part of its workers' education training. A variety of strategies are being pursued in order to address the problem of limited access to new technologies due to scarce resources. ACTRAV designed a programme for online conferencing which has

an offline component so that it is easier for trade unionists from the South, who do not have ready or continuous Internet access, to participate in the discussion. The entire GURN website and in the future also the database will be copied to a CD to enable offline access at regular intervals. Furthermore the web site is designed as “plain” as possible in order to facilitate uploading of pages on slow and erratic internet connections. Organizational inertia, the third barrier to the GURN, is undoubtedly the most difficult to address. All researchers have various resources on which they rely regularly. A preselection of knowledge resources decreases investment costs to learn about new resources and also reduces complexity. To overcome this inertia, it is important to facilitate interesting research and debates in order to create a critical mass of participants to make an initial investment to the GURN.

CONCLUSION

The GURN has been portrayed as an incremental innovation by being a new and unique project within the international labour movement through which trade union researchers and academics are encouraged to share their work in a systematic way. In order to institutionalize the GURN, it is important that the international labour movement has ownership of the GURN and uses it as one of its primary resources for research and policy background information – in particular when more topics and possibly more languages have been added. The most important challenge for the GURN will be to involve trade union researchers and scholars from different streams and orientations in order to contribute to interesting and creative debates and thereby create enduring synergistic effects on trade union research.

NOTES

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