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Alexandre Mortelette

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When Civil Society Plants the Seeds of Normative Change - the Role of Non-state Actors in the Adoption of UNDROP

*Alexandre Mortelette**

Abstract
On April 17, 1996, the massacre of nineteen landless peasants in Eldorado do Carajás, Brazil, became a symbol of rural oppression and sparked renewed international mobilization for the recognition of peasants' rights. The adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) in 2018 marked a milestone in international human rights, following nearly three decades of sustained advocacy by peasant movements and allied non-governmental organizations. This article examines how civil society actors, primarily La Vía Campesina, CETIM, and FIAN International, contributed to the co-construction of this instrument by translating grassroots demands into international legal standards through an inclusive, participatory, and iterative process. Drawing on the experimentalist approach to human rights and the concept of vernacularization in reverse, the study analyzes the extent to which UNDROP reflects bottom-up norm development. The analysis is based on UN documents, NGO publications, and eleven semi-structured interviews with key participants. The article applies the five core features of experimentalist governance as developed by De Búrca and colleagues, namely shared problem framing, open-ended goal setting, localized implementation, peer-like feedback, and iterative revision. It demonstrates how civil society actors shaped both the content and the legitimacy of the Declaration through dynamic forms of engagement. The analysis highlights the complementary roles of grassroots movements and professional NGOs, showing how political legitimacy grounded in lived experience was combined with legal expertise and diplomatic access. Despite internal tensions over language, legal format, and strategy, the coalition maintained cohesion through negotiation and coordination. These dynamics enabled the articulation of new rights, including the rights to seeds, land, and food sovereignty, within a flexible legal framework. The findings underscore how civil society actors, through recursive interaction and transcalar advocacy, acted not as passive participants but as active co-creators of an innovative human rights instrument.

Keywords: UNDROP, Civil Society, experimentalism, vernacularization, peasants' rights

*Doctoral researcher in political science at the UNESCO Chair in human rights, University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg

Introductory Remarks

The adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) in December 2018 marked a historic milestone in the recognition of peasants' human rights. It provided an international legal instrument to address the systemic vulnerabilities faced by rural populations following decades of mobilization catalysed by emblematic events such as the 1996 Eldorado do Carajás massacre in Brazil, which galvanized international advocacy (La Vía Campesina, 2020).

The foundations of UNDROP were laid in Indonesia in the late 1990s amid post-Suharto political reforms. The process gained international momentum under the leadership of La Vía Campesina (LVC), with support from CETIM and FIAN International. UNDROP became emblematic of a bottom-up norm-creation process in which localized demands, collectively articulated, and iteratively refined, were elevated to the international stage. This "vernacularization in reverse" challenged conventional top-down models and illustrated how grassroots actors shaped both the process and content of a global instrument.

CSOs from various regions and institutional contexts played a significant role in this dynamic. Their coordinated efforts combined grassroots legitimacy, legal expertise, and international advocacy. This paper distinguishes the role of LVC, as a transnational social movement grounded in lived rural experience, from that of its NGO allies, such as CETIM and FIAN International, whose contributions focused on legal framing, UN advocacy, and diplomatic mediation, supported by their consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

This strategy exemplifies the dual evolution of grassroots engagement and institutional advocacy, often described as NGO-ization. It raises important questions about how diverse knowledge holders and advocacy styles interact in the context of transnational norm-making.

This article examines how and to what extent civil society actors, particularly La Vía Campesina (LVC), CETIM, and FIAN International, reconciled grassroots demands with international legal standards during the negotiation and early implementation phases of UNDROP. It analyzes their roles and interactions through the lens of the experimentalist approach to human rights, not as a checklist but as an analytical framework to understand how flexible, participatory, and iterative processes contributed to the emergence of an inclusive international human rights instrument. This study contributes to debates on the legitimacy and effectiveness of international human rights mechanisms, particularly in contexts marked by legal pluralism and contested norm production.

The analysis draws on an extensive set of primary sources, including draft versions of the Declaration, reports from the Intergovernmental Working Group, and documents produced by NGOs and peasant organizations. It is further informed by eleven semi-structured interviews with key civil society and institutional actors. These sources enable an analysis of how civil society influenced both the process and content of UNDROP, as well as the translation of local knowledge into international legal strategies.

The experimentalist approach to human rights sees human rights systems as dynamic, participatory, and iterative. It emphasizes contextualization, mutual learning, and continuous revision. According to De Búrca (2017), experimentalism addresses major criticisms of the international human rights system, including ineffectiveness, weak enforcement, and hegemonic norm production. It offers a flexible framework grounded in practice-based learning and is adaptable to diverse contexts, making it particularly suitable for analysing a process like UNDROP.

This article applies the five core features of experimentalist human rights governance (De Búrca et al., 2014; O'Brien et al., 2022) to the case of UNDROP:

1. Openness to the participation of stakeholders who recognize a shared problem.
2. Formulation of broad, open-ended goals.
3. Localized and contextualized implementation by local actors.
4. Continuous feedback through peer-like review.
5. Periodic evaluation and revision based on outcomes.

By applying this framework, the article argues that UNDROP represents a paradigmatic shift in the production of international human rights norms. It demonstrates how inclusive, locally grounded, and iterative processes can not only reaffirm existing rights but also contribute to the recognition of new ones—such as the rights to seeds, land, and food sovereignty. It contributes to understanding both the significance of UNDROP and the evolving role of civil society in shaping international human rights law.

The article is structured as follows: the first section reviews the relevant scholarly debates on NGO-ization, localization, and transcalar advocacy. The second presents the theoretical framework. The third outlines the research design and methodology. The fourth offers an in-depth analysis of the UNDROP process based on the five experimentalist features. The concluding section discusses the broader implications of this case for international human rights governance.

1. Literature Review

1.1. From Activism to Advocacy of Human Rights

Understanding the broader transformation of civil society engagement is essential to analysing the advocacy dynamics behind the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP). In particular, the shift from grassroots activism to institutionalized advocacy, commonly referred to as "NGO-ization," offers insight into how diverse actors navigated institutional settings to influence international norm-setting. NGO-ization refers to the professionalization, bureaucratization, and institutional integration of social movements that were once more horizontally organized and rooted in mass mobilization (Lang, 1997, 2012). Initially theorized in the German feminist movement, it reflects a broader shift toward expert-based, strategic advocacy.

This evolution entails a reconfiguration of power and influence. As Gonzalez (2021) and Gupta (2014) argue, many NGOs have shifted from demanding systemic change to delivering services and policy proposals. Their ability to engage with decision-makers has expanded their reach, but it has also generated tensions. Gianni et al. (2021) observe a depoliticization of struggles, where technical advocacy replaces disruptive, mass-based activism. Roy (2014) and Meyers (2016) warn against disconnection from grassroots communities and local dynamics.

NGO-ization thus produces ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it grants greater access to decision-making and enhances the legitimacy of NGOs as political actors. On the other, it may compromise autonomy through reliance on donor funding and project-based logic (Alvarez, 1999; Jad, 2007), which tend to favour short-term outputs over long-term structural change.

At the international level, NGOs embody both the promise and the limits of institutional engagement. While Yacobi (2007) presents them as key agents of good governance, others argue they can become instruments of donor or foreign agendas (Hearn, 1998; Harvey, 2007). In Kenya, for example, NGOs have sometimes prioritized donor expectations over local needs (Hearn, 1998).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) shows how institutionalized NGOs have leveraged professionalization to influence global legal processes (Meyers, 2016). Conversely, in fields such as women's rights in the Arab world or peacebuilding in the Caucasus, the disconnect between project logic and grassroots realities has led to the marginalization of local voices (Ragetlie et al., 2021; Dilanyan et al., 2018).

Palestinian civil society illustrates this evolution. Dana (2013) distinguishes an early phase of community-based resistance from a later phase dominated by professional NGOs acting as intermediaries. This shift was accompanied by managerialism, hierarchization, and financial dependence, trends that risk diluting transformative goals.

These dynamics are directly relevant to the UNDROP process, which exemplifies a hybrid model of advocacy. It brought together grassroots movements, such as La Vía Campesina, with strong local anchoring and professionalized NGOs, like FIAN International and CETIM, which contributed to legal expertise and facilitated access to UN institutions. Rather than undermining grassroots legitimacy, this collaboration suggests that professionalization and grassroots engagement can coexist in a productive manner.

UNDROP demonstrates coordination of efforts and mutual recognition among actors, enabling professionalization to serve grassroots demands rather than dilute them. This hybrid model of advocacy, based on shared objectives and differentiated expertise, has strengthened the process of international norm-setting. The experimentalist approach to human rights adopted in this article offers a valuable framework for analysing these dynamics. The emphasis on inclusive participation, mutual learning, and iterative revision of standards helps to explain how local movements and institutionalized NGOs have co-produced rights. In this context, NGO-ization did not dilute demands but helped amplify and institutionalize them within the international legal order.

1.2. Localization of Human Rights and Reverse Vernacularization

Understanding how international human rights norms take root in local contexts is a central concern in contemporary human rights scholarship. In the case of UNDROP, however, local actors played a key role in shaping global norms. The notion of localization emphasizes that rights are most meaningful when grounded in specific contexts. Human rights violations are often experienced locally, and it is at this level that individuals and communities mobilize to claim them (De Feyter et al., 2011). Localization involves not only applying international standards to local situations but also translating and reshaping them in response to cultural, political, and social realities (Merry, 2006). This process demands active engagement by actors with situated knowledge, such as CSOs, grassroots movements, religious leaders, and Indigenous communities (Goodale & Merry, 2007; Wilson, 1997).

Traditionally described as vernacularization, this process refers to the downward translation of international norms into locally resonant frameworks (Merry, 2006). While necessary for legitimacy, vernacularization can also raise concerns about the dilution of principles or their co-optation by conservative or regressive agendas (Merry & Levitt, 2017). In some cases, it may reinforce local hierarchies or marginalize vulnerable groups under the guise of cultural specificity (Goodale & Merry, 2007; Mutua, 2002).

In the case of UNDROP, however, the direction of translation was reversed. Rather than norms being imposed from above, rural and peasant movements projected their demands upward through a process Claeys (2018) and Edelman and Claeys (2019) describe as reverse vernacularization. This concept captures how local actors, grounded in lived struggles, shaped international standards. Rights related to land, seeds, biodiversity, and food sovereignty emerged from these localized demands and reflected a normative gap identified by the affected communities themselves (Claeys, 2018).

This transformation was not spontaneous but driven by sustained mobilization from transnational movements such as La Vía Campesina, supported by NGOs like FIAN International and CETIM. These actors combined local legitimacy with international legal expertise to integrate new rights into global discourse. The open-ended Intergovernmental Working Group at the Human Rights Council provided a platform where these claims were translated into legal language without losing their transformative aims.

This bottom-up dynamic resonates with the experimentalist approach to human rights adopted in this article. Experimentalist governance sees norm development as an iterative process of problem-solving, in which stakeholders articulate needs, propose solutions, test them in practice, and revise through feedback mechanisms (de Búrca, 2017). Reverse vernacularization fits within this framework, as local actors contribute directly to the construction and refinement of norms.

This process also challenges the assumption that universality must flow from the top down. As Huizenga (2022) argues, the right to refuse externally imposed standards and articulate alternative visions represents a powerful form of agency, especially for marginalized groups like peasants and Indigenous peoples. However, tensions remain. Wilson (2022) warns of the risks that local concepts may be distorted or lost when scaled globally. The ability of grassroots actors to participate meaningfully often depends on intermediaries who can navigate institutional arenas without diluting core political demands. In the UNDROP process, such risks were mitigated through strong coordination between social movements and NGOs, and by inclusive procedures in the negotiations.

Ultimately, the UNDROP process demonstrates that the local is not only a site of implementation but also of normative innovation. Localization is not merely adaptive but productive, showing how local struggles can reshape global standards through sustained engagement, dialogue, and institutional experimentation. This challenges linear and hierarchical models of norm diffusion and reaffirms the significant role of civil society as both translator and co-creator of international human rights norms.

1.3. Transcalar Advocacy

The case of UNDROP illustrates how advocacy efforts unfold across multiple, interconnected levels, local, national, regional, and international, through what scholars describe as transcalar advocacy. This concept highlights the capacity of civil society actors to navigate between arenas, link struggles across borders, and coordinate collective action beyond territorial confines (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow, 2005). More recently, Pallas and Bloodgood (2022) have argued for a shift from transnational to transcalar advocacy, stressing the need to account for more dynamic and multi-level interactions across governance arenas.

Early work on transnational advocacy networks (TANs) emphasized how local actors could bypass unresponsive or repressive states by appealing to international allies, creating a "boomerang effect" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Subsequent models such as the spiral model conceptualized this dynamic as iterative, involving cycles of norm emergence, contestation, and internalization (Risse, Ropp & Sikkink, 1999). Tsutsui and Smith (2018) later proposed a "sandwich model" in which simultaneous pressure from above and below constrains state inaction and enables norm diffusion.

These frameworks resonate with experimentalist governance, which views norm-setting as a recursive process involving diverse actors, local knowledge, and adaptive learning. Transcalar advocacy provides the infrastructure for this experimentation by facilitating sustained interaction among grassroots movements, NGOs, states, and international institutions. In the UNDROP case, organizations such as Serikat Petani Indonesia mobilized for the recognition of peasants' rights at the national level. These demands were taken up by La Vía Campesina, a transnational movement representing over 180 peasant organizations across more than 80 countries. They were then elevated to the global stage through partnerships with professionalized NGOs like FIAN International and CETIM, who contributed legal expertise and access to UN mechanisms.

This upward mobilization was supported by key state actors, particularly Bolivia under President Evo Morales, which helped convene a coalition of

Global South countries and pushed for the creation of the Intergovernmental Working Group at the Human Rights Council. These collaborations exemplify transcalar advocacy in practice: local demands strategically leveraged international institutions to apply pressure on reluctant states and achieve the codification of new rights.

Transcalar advocacy also relies on a diverse repertoire of strategies. Keck and Sikkink (1998) identify four core mechanisms: information politics (using credible data to shape agendas), symbolic politics (mobilizing emotionally resonant imagery or events), leverage politics (calling on powerful allies), and accountability politics (exposing norm violations to international scrutiny). All four were mobilized during the UNDROP campaign. Information politics included legal briefs and reports documenting violations of peasants' rights. Symbolic politics was embodied in the institutionalization of April 17, the anniversary of the Eldorado do Carajás massacre, as the International Day of Peasant Struggles, frequently cited during UN sessions. Leverage politics involved alliances among Bolivia, South Africa, and Indonesia to advance negotiations. Accountability politics continues today, as grassroots actors invoke UNDROP to monitor government compliance and demand implementation.

Despite its strengths, transcalar advocacy is not without challenges. Scholars have noted the risk of asymmetrical power dynamics within networks, where Global North actors may dominate decision-making and resource allocation (Pallas & Uhlin, 2014). Others point to co-optation, where states or corporations adopt the language of rights to neutralize criticism (Hale, 2002). Diverging priorities between actors at various levels may also lead to fragmentation (Tarrow, 2005). In the UNDROP case, these risks were mitigated by strong coordination, clear political messaging from grassroots movements, and the leadership of peasant organizations themselves.

What distinguishes the UNDROP campaign is its ability to combine horizontal mobilization with vertical engagement. Rather than a linear process from local to global, or vice versa, transcalar advocacy reveals a complex architecture of iterative negotiation, adaptation, and feedback. This structure aligns directly with experimentalist governance, where advocacy strategies evolve in response to context, resistance, and opportunity. It is this dynamic, flexible, and inclusive form of action that ultimately enabled the recognition of peasants' rights as a new frontier in international human rights law.

2. The Experimentalist Approach to Human Rights

To understand how civil society actors contributed to shaping the UNDROP, this paper employs the experimentalist approach to human rights as an analytical framework. This perspective draws from experimentalist governance theory (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012), initially developed to explain multilevel governance in complex systems where no central authority can impose uniform rules. Experimentalist governance is "a recursive process of provisional goal setting and revision based on learning from the comparison of alternative approaches to advancing them in different contexts." (Ibid, p. 133; Sabel & Zeilin, 2011) In transnational settings, where local diversity and legal pluralism are the norm, experimentalist approaches offer a way to produce flexible, context-sensitive, and adaptive human rights instruments.

Applied to the field of international human rights, this approach has been notably developed by De Búrca (2017; 2021), who argues that many of the systemic shortcomings of traditional human rights regimes, such as ineffectiveness, weak enforcement, and lack of contextual fit, can be addressed by moving toward a more dynamic and participatory model. This model relies on five core features (De Búrca, Keohane & Sabel, 2014):

1. Openness to the participation of stakeholders who recognize a common problem, regardless of formal hierarchies.
2. Formulation of a broad, open-ended framework that sets common goals rather than rigid rules.
3. Contextualized implementation by local actors, who can adapt the framework to their specific realities.
4. Continuous feedback and mutual monitoring, including mechanisms such as peer review.
5. Periodic revision of the initial goals based on empirical learning and shared reflection.

Together, these principles define a governance model that is adaptive, deliberative, and inclusive, well suited to the complex political realities that surround human rights advocacy, especially in cases like UNDROP, where the actors involved span different institutional levels and geopolitical contexts.

The experimentalist framework is particularly relevant to the study of UNDROP for several reasons. First, the Declaration did not emerge from a top-down, normative process but from an iterative and participatory campaign led by peasant movements, such as LVC, in collaboration with specialized NGOs like FIAN International and CETIM. These actors operated within a transcalar framework that combined grassroots mobilization with institutional advocacy, exemplifying the kind of stakeholder interaction

emphasized by experimentalism. Second, the content of the Declaration, including novel rights such as the right to seeds or food sovereignty, was shaped through ongoing engagement, legal reinterpretation, and sustained dialogue between civil society actors, states, and UN bodies. This process reflects the iterative norm elaboration and feedback loops that are central to experimentalist theory.

Moreover, CSOs played a pivotal role not only in articulating demands but also in translating local grievances into legally recognizable claims. De Búrca (2021) identifies four key functions of NGOs in human rights experimentalism: monitoring and surveillance, follow-up advocacy, cultural translation of norms, and direct service provision. These roles are all visible in the UNDROP process. For instance, NGOs documented violations, proposed new legal standards based on lived experiences and helped maintain alignment between grassroots demands and institutional processes through technical expertise and strategic mediation.

This dynamic is further captured by De Búrca's "triptych" of human rights reform actors: domestic civil society, independent institutions, and international bodies. The UNDROP case involved all three. Peasant movements interacted with national governments, human rights experts, and the UN Human Rights Council in a sustained, iterative process of advocacy and norm construction. This model transcends traditional notions of norm diffusion or "boomerang" advocacy (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), providing a more cyclical and negotiated understanding of how new rights can emerge.

While other theoretical frameworks could have been applied, such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994) or global governance theories (Rosenau, 1995; Keohane, 2001), they appear more limited in explaining the iterative, bottom-up, and locally anchored nature of the UNDROP process. The ACF framework emphasizes competition between coalitions and policy subsystems. However, it underestimates the importance of the local scale and lacks tools to conceptualize the open-ended, experimental nature of norm creation. Similarly, global governance theory tends to focus on institutional arrangements and rules, offering less insight into the pragmatic, adaptive dynamics of transnational advocacy.

In contrast, the experimentalist approach enables a deeper understanding of how civil society actors co-produce human rights norms across various levels of governance. It captures the importance of contextual learning, feedback, and adaptation, key features in the UNDROP campaign, and recognizes the creative agency of grassroots actors in international norm-making. It also helps explain how professionalized NGOs, often criticized under the concept of NGO-ization, can act as effective intermediaries without displacing local voices but instead amplifying them.

In sum, this approach provides the conceptual tools necessary to analyze UNDROP as both a legal innovation and a participatory political process. It highlights the role of civil society actors as agents of transformation who contribute not only to the implementation but also to the development of international norms. The following section will examine how the experimentalist features were implemented in practice during the negotiation and post-adoption phases of UNDROP and how civil society actors navigated the tension between local legitimacy and institutional effectiveness.

2.1. Research Design and Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative design, combining document analysis and semi-structured interviews (n = 11), framed by an interpretative approach rooted in the human rights perspective. The objective is to analyze how civil society actors contributed to the adoption and early implementation of UNDROP with particular attention to iterative, adaptive, and transcalar dynamics of advocacy.

2.2. Sampling Strategy

A purposive and convenience-based sampling strategy was applied for both documents and interviewees (Patton, 1980; Lijphart, 1971). The selection was guided by six adapted criteria derived from Bowen (2009), Scott (1990), and Ames, Glenton, and Lewin (2019):

1. Relevance to the research objective.
2. Credibility of sources and interviewees (recognized NGOs, institutions, or key participants).
3. Richness of content for understanding advocacy strategies and norm development.
4. Representativeness of diverse actor types and perspectives.
5. Geographic and temporal alignment with the UNDROP process.
6. Accessibility and availability of data.

Documents and interviewees were categorized in line with De Búrca's "triptych" of international human rights advocacy (2021), encompassing (a) domestic activists (e.g., LVC, FIAN International, CETIM), (b) independent domestic institutions, and (c) international institutions and transnational networks (UN bodies, Human Rights Council). Sources include advocacy reports, campaign materials, UN working documents, state interventions, and NGO legal briefs.

This article focuses on non-state actors, primarily on three core civil society organizations: La Vía Campesina (LVC), FIAN International, and CETIM. These organizations were consistently involved throughout the

negotiation process, from initial agenda-setting to the final adoption of the Declaration. Their respective roles, as a grassroots movement, a legal advocacy NGO, and a Geneva-based interface with UN institutions, offer a rich and complementary lens for understanding transcalar advocacy and experimentalist norm development. Additionally, they represent the best-documented and most active components of the civil society coalition, enabling a robust empirical reconstruction based on interviews, internal documents, and public reports.

2.3. Data Analysis Strategy

The analytical strategy combines narrative-based analysis and the application of experimentalist governance criteria. Rather than relying on coding or discourse analysis, the goal is to reconstruct the chronology of events, identify key turning points, and assess the dynamic interaction between actors through storytelling and iterative norm construction (Lang, 2012; Mayer, 2014).

The empirical material is examined through a twofold lens:

(a) Narrative Construction

This step seeks to identify how civil society actors framed their claims, constructed legitimacy, and mobilized support. Attention is paid to the role of narratives in overcoming resistance, shaping legal imagination, and embedding grassroots demands into legal frameworks.

(b) Experimentalist Features

The documents and interviews are analysed to identify the five core features of the experimentalist approach (De Búrca, Keohane, & Sabel, 2014) mentioned in the theoretical part. This lens allows us to explore the iterative nature of the advocacy process, its adaptability, and the integration of local knowledge into international norm-building. It also enables us to highlight the interdependence and interaction of various actors across scales, hallmarks of experimentalist governance.

2.4. Analytical Goals

By linking narrative dynamics with experimentalist criteria, this method facilitates a nuanced understanding of (1) how local struggles informed global norm-making (vernacularization in reverse); (2) how advocacy networks adapted across levels (transcalar governance), how NGO-ization influenced the capacity of civil society to operate across institutional arenas without losing connection to grassroots movements.

This integrated analytical framework is especially suited to a process like UNDROP's, which involves a hybrid and evolving constellation of actors, strategies, and institutional interfaces.

2.5. Strengths and Limitations

This dual methodological strategy enables the triangulation of rich empirical material, mitigating several limitations inherent to qualitative research. However, a few constraints remain and in particular source bias, as most documents reflect organizational perspectives; access limitations, particularly to internal negotiation processes; interview coverage, which, although diverse, does not exhaust all actor categories.

Nevertheless, the complementarity of interviews and documents, along with the alignment of the method with theory, ensures a solid empirical foundation. The approach is well-suited to assess whether and how the UNDROP process illustrates experimentalist dynamics and how civil society actors actively contributed to norm innovation in the international human rights system.

3. Analysis and Findings

This section analyzes how civil society actors influenced both the adoption (1990s-2018) and early implementation (2018-2023) of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). Drawing on the experimentalist human rights framework (De Búrca, 2021), we examine how advocacy strategies evolved through iterative, multi-level engagement and how civil society actors co-constructed the norm through adaptive legal and institutional processes.

3.1. The Role of Civil Society in the Normative Emergence of UNDROP

The adoption of UNDROP in 2018 marked the culmination of nearly three decades of mobilization led by peasant movements and allied CSOs (Coudurier, 2023). At the heart of this process was a strategic shift from direct action towards legal advocacy, and a deliberate effort to build an international standard grounded in rural lived experience but articulated in the language of human rights. The normative trajectory reflects a tension between universalist interpretations of rights and the demand for category-specific recognition, revealing the significant role of civil society in shaping both the content and legitimacy of the Declaration.

From the mid-1990s, LVC positioned itself as a key actor in defining the peasant condition as a matter of human rights, particularly after the 1996 Eldorado do Carajás massacre in Brazil, now commemorated as the International Day of Peasant Struggles (La Vía Campesina, 2022). By the early 2000s, its Indonesian chapter had spearheaded the drafting of a national Declaration of the Rights of Peasants (2001), which soon gave rise to a global demand for a UN instrument, based on widespread consultations and systematic documentation of violations. This initiative was strongly supported by FIAN International and CETIM.

Interviewees emphasized the critical role of Henry Saragih, leader of the Indonesian peasant union SPI and a founding member of LVC, in linking grassroots mobilization with the UN system (Interviews 4, 11). The 2009 Declaration of the Rights of Peasants, Women and Men, adopted by LVC, served as the normative foundation for UNDROP. Allied NGOs such as CETIM and FIAN translated these grassroots claims into legal and policy language that could resonate with UN mechanisms (Interviews 1, 4, 5).

Institutional traction grew after the UN Human Rights Council Advisory Committee released two reports (2010 and 2011) on discrimination against rural populations (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2010; 2011)[1]. These reports explicitly recommended the recognition of peasants' rights as a new area of international human rights law. Following these recommendations, the Human Rights Council adopted Resolution 21/19 in 2012, creating an Intergovernmental Working Group (OEIWG) (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2012). Civil society actors immediately seized this opening: LVC and its allies were not only observers but co-drafters of successive versions of the Declaration, submitting amendments and advocacy materials across the six annual negotiation sessions (Interviews 1, 3, 4, 9).

The open-ended nature of the OEIWG allowed advocacy and negotiation to unfold across multiple scales. In total, 27 CSOs took part in the sessions (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2013-2018). Interviewees described this process as "iterative" and "multi-level," reflecting an experimentalist logic of evolving goals shaped by participation and feedback (Interviews 1, 3, 5, 9).

A key tension within the coalition concerned the legal format of the instrument. While some grassroots actors initially favoured a binding Convention, fearing that a Declaration would lack legal force, FIAN and CETIM advocated for a non-binding but politically feasible Declaration,

[1] Although the Advisory Committee's report is a UN document, civil society actors such as CETIM and FIAN contributed indirectly by sharing legal and empirical materials that helped frame the issue of discrimination against peasants (Interviews 1-3; 4-6).

inspired by the precedent of UNDRIP (Interviews 1, 4, 5). As one interviewee recalled, "We had to balance ambition with realism, the Declaration was a compromise, but a strategic one" (Interview 5). This negotiation illustrates the pragmatic adaptation capacities of the coalition, consistent with experimentalist principles of flexibility and provisional goal setting.

Support from several Global South states, Bolivia, Cuba, South Africa, Ecuador, proved essential. Their alignment with food sovereignty and anti-imperialist discourses made them natural allies (Interviews 7, 8). In contrast, several Global North countries, including France and Germany, resisted the project. They argued that creating group-specific rights contradicted the principle of universality, a concern echoed in the 2018 opinion of the French National Human Rights Commission (CNCDH, 2018).

Despite these political and institutional obstacles, the final text of UNDROP achieved a delicate balance between universality and specificity. It recognizes both individual and collective rights and explicitly refers to smallholders, landless workers, Indigenous peoples, and artisanal fishers. As one participant put it, "The Declaration is not a gift from states: it's the result of persistent mobilization and careful legal craftsmanship" (Interview 3; Hubert, 2019).

3.2. Experimentalist Features in the Adoption and Implementation of UNDROP

The adoption and early implementation of UNDROP illustrate several key features of experimentalist governance. By applying the framework developed by De Búrca (2017; 2021), we analyze the extent to which the UNDROP process has followed a logic of problem-based, participatory, iterative standard-setting, and adaptive implementation, through the five dimensions of the experimentalist approach.

(1) Common Problem Framing: Shared Diagnosis of Systemic Peasant Vulnerability

The first experimentalist feature refers to a broadly shared understanding of a social problem requiring collective attention. The genesis of UNDROP was rooted in the recognition, by peasants' movements, allied NGOs, and certain states, of the structural discrimination, land dispossession, food insecurity, and climate vulnerability affecting rural populations. This shared diagnosis was the outcome of decades of mobilization by LVC, supported by human rights NGOs such as FIAN and CETIM.

Interviewees from CETIM (1-3) and FIAN (4-6) stressed that the initial impulse came from the empirical documentation of human rights violations

and legal invisibility: "There was a clear sense of injustice, but also of invisibility at the international level" (Interview 1). Reports by the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee (2010; 2011; 2012) consolidated this consensus, confirming widespread and systemic violations. The 1996 Eldorado do Carajás massacre in Brazil was cited as a foundational moment by LVC (La Vía Campesina, 2022), later recognized each year as the International Day of Peasant Struggles.

This shared problem framing was crucial in uniting actors across ideological and geographic divides. As Interviewee 4 recalled: "Even states who were reluctant to grant new rights could not deny the depth of rural poverty and exclusion." The vulnerability narrative served as a unifying discursive frame, albeit with tensions. For instance, while LVC initially preferred the legally binding format of a Convention, NGOs like FIAN and CETIM persuaded them to pursue the more pragmatic Declaration path, inspired by the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Interviews 1, 4, 9)[2].

This alignment with the first experimentalist feature is particularly visible in how the articulation of the problem transcended ideological positions to generate a shared baseline for action. The variety of actors involved, grassroots, legal, and diplomatic, points to a collectively constructed diagnosis that shaped the content and form of the Declaration. The empirical data thus corroborate the notion of open-ended deliberation based on a common normative concern, rather than pre-fixed interests.

One of the striking features of the process leading to the adoption of UNDROP is the strategic complementarity between civil society actors. LVC, as a transnational peasant movement, brought forward the demands of peasant organizations in the South and European collectives, emphasizing the politicization of struggles and the legitimacy derived from lived experience. FIAN International, for its part, acted as a legal interface, translating these demands into human rights language. CETIM, with its consultative status with ECOSOC, provided diplomatic mediation with States and institutional continuity in the UN negotiations. A member of FIAN International emphasizes: "LVC had the capacity to mobilize, but someone also had to transform this energy into structured legal language; that's where our role was indispensable." (Interview 4) For his part, a representative of LVC emphasizes the importance of not allowing oneself to be dispossessed:

[2] UNDROP draws partially from the structure and normative ambition of UNDRIP (2007), particularly in its articulation of collective rights, although the two processes involved distinct constituencies and advocacy strategies (Bessa & Gilbert, 2022).

'We didn't want our struggle to be translated without us. We needed co-construction, not delegation.' (Interview 7)

Despite this complementarity, several tensions emerged between the diverse types of actors. LVC, rooted in peasant struggles, sometimes expressed mistrust of the institutionalization process led by its NGO allies. The growing professionalization of campaigns, the technical formats of negotiations in Geneva, and diplomatic requirements could appear to be obstacles to radical demands. A European NGO official acknowledges this: "Sometimes we had to play for time. Some of LVC's demands could scare key states; we had to reformulate them without betraying them." (Interview 6) This need for strategic reformulation sometimes generated frustration: "By constantly transforming everything into UN-compatible language, we lost some of our anger," notes a peasant representative (Interview 9).

However, these North/South and activist/expert tensions did not lead to a breakdown. On the contrary, collective negotiation of roles, made possible by spaces for horizontal coordination, helped to stabilize the campaign. CETIM, in particular, was described as a "diplomatic translator" between peasant and UN language (Interview 2), playing an essential interface role in the preparatory meetings.

Beyond the often-celebrated synergy between grassroots movements and professional NGOs, the process also revealed deeper, sometimes unresolved tensions within the civil society coalition. While differences in positionality (North/South, activist/expert) have been acknowledged, more strategic and ideological disagreements also surfaced, particularly regarding the ultimate goals of the Declaration, the framing of rights, and the representation of constituencies.

An interviewee recalled internal debates about the extent to which market mechanisms should be denounced: "Some partners wanted to keep anti-capitalist language, others thought it would alienate key states." These strategic disagreements often required compromises that, while tactically effective, generated frustration among certain segments of the movement. As Interviewee 9 noted, "We feared losing the radical dimension of our struggle. Rights language is useful, but it can also depoliticize our fight." These divergences also extended to the terminology itself, particularly the central term *peasant*. Some delegations and NGO actors considered the term outdated, pejorative, or inadequate to capture the diverse realities of rural workers in the Global South and North. However, many within La Vía Campesina strongly defended its political significance. As Edelman and James (2011) note, while the term *peasant* is contested and has been abandoned in some national contexts due to its negative connotations, peasant movements have reclaimed it as a unifying identity and a marker of resistance against

neoliberal agricultural policies. This semantic debate highlights the complex balance between legal pragmatism and symbolic affirmation that shaped the framing of the Declaration.

Such tensions were not merely circumstantial but reflected structural differences in mandates and constituencies. For example, while LVC claimed a direct link with grassroots peasant organizations, some NGOs represented more diffuse networks or operated primarily through legal advocacy. Interviewee 5 emphasized: "We were sometimes accused of speaking 'on behalf of' communities without their direct mandate, which raised questions of legitimacy."

These divergences point to a more complex picture of civil society collaboration, one shaped by negotiation, rebalancing, and occasional contestation rather than full consensus. Far from undermining the process, however, they reveal an important feature of experimentalist governance: its ability to accommodate pluralism and mediate normative tensions through iterative dialogue and role differentiation.

(2) Open-ended Goals: A Flexible Legal Framework With Red Lines

The second feature of experimentalist governance involves defining open-ended objectives that can evolve and be adapted over time. The UNDROP content reflects this through its flexible wording and iterative formulation, allowing for normative adaptation while preserving core principles. Its provisions are not rigid prescriptions but frameworks for context-sensitive implementation, anchored in fundamental "red lines" such as the rights to land, seeds, water, and food sovereignty (La Vía Campesina, 2018).

Several interviewees (3, 5, 9) emphasized that the rights recognized were seen not as endpoints but as evolving standards to be interpreted and refined through use and feedback. "The wording was deliberately not too technical so that countries and communities could adapt it," noted one legal expert (Interview 5). Between 2012 and 2018, five successive drafts of the Declaration were produced, enabling iterative negotiation and legal reinterpretation, particularly on contested notions such as food sovereignty and seed autonomy (Golay, 2020; Interview 9).

This openness was not only textual but also procedural. The open-ended Intergovernmental Working Group provided a deliberative space in which 27 CSOs formally contributed to the negotiations (Human Rights Council, 2013–2018). Regional branches of La Vía Campesina fed into the Geneva sessions through internal consultations, creating an ongoing feedback loop between local realities and international lawmaking (Interviews 9, 11).

Such iterative exchanges required a high degree of role differentiation within the civil society coalition. The strategic complementarity between

LVC, FIAN International, and CETIM was essential to ensuring both continuity and adaptability throughout the process. While LVC brought political legitimacy and grassroots mobilization capacity, FIAN and CETIM provided legal expertise and diplomatic navigation.

NGO-ization in this context did not manifest as the creation of new organizations but as the increasing professionalization of advocacy practices. FIAN International and CETIM, although rooted in activist traditions, adopted a legalistic language, participated in formal UN sessions, and reframed political claims within a human rights discourse. This allowed them to serve as effective intermediaries between grassroots movements and institutional venues. As one CETIM representative noted, "Our role was to make the message understandable in diplomatic settings. Some adjustments were necessary." (Interview 2)

This evolution led to a functional division of labour within the coalition. As a FIAN staff member reflected, "Without us, some states would not have grasped the legal depth of the claims. But without LVC, the text would have had no soul." (Interview 4)

However, this process was not without its share of friction. Some peasant activists expressed concern over how their demands were reframed to fit UN formats. "Sometimes we felt our words were being reshaped to fit UN norms. It was necessary but also frustrating," said one LVC representative (Interview 8). These tensions illustrate the delicate balance between adaptability and political clarity, a central feature of open-ended norm-setting.

The iterative negotiation of content, facilitated by complementary roles, shows how open-ended objectives can adapt to differences without compromising the collective effort. The evolution of the definition of rights and the flexibility of institutional language have allowed the coalition to preserve its fundamental demands while adapting to the constraints of international diplomacy. This is emblematic of the experimentalist ethos: revisable commitments that respond to diverse contexts while holding onto principled red lines.

(3) Context-sensitive Implementation by Decentralized Actors

UNDROP's implementation phase reflects the third feature of experimentalist governance: the decentralized realization of goals by local actors. While the Declaration itself is not legally binding, it explicitly encourages states to adapt its principles to their own legislative and institutional systems. Article 2 calls for the development of appropriate measures, including legislative and administrative ones, in consultation with peasants and rural workers.

The interviews highlighted multiple cases of such bottom-up implementation. In Ecuador, peasant organizations from the CNC Eloy

Alfaro contributed directly to the national ratification of UNDROP in 2023 (Interview 11; Defending Peasants' Rights, 2023a). In Nepal, the 2019 Peasants' Rights Act incorporated core elements of the Declaration. In Indonesia and Senegal, legal reforms have integrated principles of food sovereignty and seed autonomy (Golay, 2021; Interview 7). In each case, implementation was context-sensitive and driven by national or local civil society mobilizations. The process of appropriation also includes grassroots assessments, such as La Vía Campesina's 2021 report compiling experiences of local implementation (La Vía Campesina, 2021). Also, in Africa, a recent analysis has documented how the right to seeds is being interpreted and mobilized in various countries, building on traditional knowledge and farmer-led practices (Peschard et al., 2023). This reflects the third feature of experimentalist governance, decentralized implementation by contextually grounded actors, who adapt overarching norms to fit institutional and cultural realities (De Búrca et al., 2013).

These examples demonstrate the concrete activation of experimentalist logic at the domestic level, where situated actors reshape abstract international norms. Rather than relying on enforcement from above, the UNDROP framework relies on mobilization and appropriation from below, an observation that interview data make particularly vivid.

Interviewees also highlighted the cultural and political challenges associated with implementation, reaffirming the importance of local adaptation capacity in ensuring relevance and uptake. As Interviewee 8 remarked: "The text does not implement itself. It needs to be explained, defended, and translated, literally and politically, into local realities." This is where the role of CSOs becomes essential, particularly in legal training, public communication, and follow-up on compliance (Interviews 1-2, 5-6, 9).

Such practices reinforce the experimentalist emphasis on iterative learning and contextual sensitivity. They also show that implementation is not merely technical, but involves discursive, symbolic, and strategic work by actors who reinterpret the Declaration's meaning in their own contexts.

(4) Feedback Mechanisms and Monitoring Through Peer-like Review

While UNDROP does not include a formal peer-review system, various feedback mechanisms fulfil similar functions. In 2023, the UN Human Rights Council created a new Working Group of five independent experts to support implementation and monitoring (FIAN International, CETIM, La Vía Campesina, 2024). This outcome resulted from sustained advocacy by civil society actors, including personalized lobbying by FIAN Belgium and CETIM, which also engaged with reluctant states such as Belgium and Germany (Interviews 2, 5, 6).

Feedback also occurs through informal channels. As Interviewee 4 explained: "We used concrete case studies, for instance, in Madagascar and Eastern Europe, to pressure governments that were dragging their feet." Documentation of abuses linked to European companies (e.g., Tozzi Green, Aldi) was used strategically to challenge opposition and reorient state positions (Farmland Grab, 2024; Ouest-France, 2020).

Other feedback tools include engagement with UN Special Rapporteurs and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. Several interviewees mentioned how they submitted shadow reports or made oral statements linking national violations to UNDROP provisions (Interviews 3, 5, 6). For example, in 2022, LVC submitted a formal complaint regarding violations in Colombia, invoking UNDROP to mobilize UN mechanisms (La Vía Campesina, 2022). Although such mechanisms lack binding power, they serve as soft forms of accountability and iterative learning. This illustrates the fourth feature of experimentalist governance, feedback and peer-like review, whereby non-binding monitoring enables revision, responsiveness, and norm clarification over time (De Búrca et al., 2013).

The fourth experimentalist feature, iterative revision, and mutual learning was evident throughout the multi-year negotiation process of UNDROP. Between the first draft submitted by the Advisory Committee in 2012 and the final adoption in 2018, the text underwent numerous revisions driven not only by intergovernmental debate but also by reflexive adjustments from civil society actors.

Interviewees described a learning curve among both state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As Interviewee 4 (FIAN) noted, "We had to learn how to make legal formulations acceptable to states without watering down the demands. It was constant calibration." This process took the form of internal simulations prior to formal sessions, bilateral discussions with sympathetic states such as Bolivia, and informal debriefings to assess how particular formulations were received in Geneva.

LVC, for example, shifted from demanding a Convention to accepting a Declaration format following exchanges with experts and NGOs about feasibility and precedent. Interviewee 9 recalled, "At first, we were suspicious, but we saw how Indigenous Peoples gained traction with a Declaration, so we adapted our strategy."Beyond strategic shifts, the process generated new capacities and trust among coalition members. CETIM and FIAN developed briefing notes and draft language, which were tested and revised after each negotiation round. As Interviewee 6 explained: "After each session, we came back together to see what worked and what did not. It was an iterative loop." These meetings served as horizontal learning spaces where legal, political, and movement perspectives converged.

This dynamic of mutual learning extended to states as well. Some initially hesitant delegations began to support the process after exposure to concrete testimonies and adjusted proposals. For instance, Switzerland's shift from passive observation to partial support was attributed by Interviewee 2 to "their gradual understanding of the link between peasant rights and global food security."

Such examples illustrate that the UNDROP process was not linear or top-down but adaptive and dialogical, hallmarks of experimentalist governance. The final text is best understood not as a static consensus but as a dynamic construct shaped by feedback loops, experimentation, and negotiation.

(5) Periodic Re-evaluation and Progressive Revision

The fifth feature of experimentalist governance, periodic review, and adaptation, remains aspirational. As Interviewees 1, 4, and 10 noted, implementation is still slow, and formal revision mechanisms are not yet in place. Nevertheless, civil society actors have promoted reflexivity through workshops, training sessions, and platforms such as the Defending Peasants' Rights website (Defending Peasants' Rights, 2023b). Interviewee 11 emphasized the importance of translating and popularizing UNDROP in local languages and formats to enable real appropriation by rural communities. These efforts are not only educational but also revisionary, as they identify ambiguities and obstacles that can inform future adjustments and improvements.

More recently, a formal institutional mechanism was introduced through the creation of the UN special procedure on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas. This expert group is expected to gather implementation data, highlight structural challenges, and formulate evolving recommendations (Golay, 2024). As Interviewee 5 (FIAN International) explained, "This mechanism had been demanded for years. It is now a key tool to strengthen the implementation of UNDROP." A CETIM representative added, "The idea is that the special procedure becomes a space of constructive pressure and dialogue with states." Although its long-term effects remain uncertain, this mechanism lays the groundwork for periodic evaluation and adaptive governance at the international level.

A promising example of iterative feedback emerged during the debates on the proposed EU seed regulation. Article 19 of UNDROP, which affirms the right to seeds, was mobilized by LVC Europe and the Geneva Academy in their critiques of the draft law. These actors advocated for greater alignment with peasant seed autonomy, invoking UNDROP to exert normative pressure (ECVC, 2021; Golay & Batur, 2021; Interview 9).

Some interviewees also noted the relevance of other UN mechanisms, such as the Universal Periodic Review, where UNDROP has recently appeared in state recommendations. As FIAN Belgium highlighted, "We saw during Switzerland's UPR that the Declaration is now being mentioned in official recommendations. It is an important lever going forward."

In parallel, civil society organizations have initiated exchanges on good practices, lessons learned, and implementation challenges. A hybrid event organized by LVC, FIAN, and CETIM gathered institutional and diplomatic actors to reflect on how to operationalize the Declaration. As a representative from LVC stated, "We want to document practices, create tools from the field, and strengthen UNDROP's legitimacy through concrete examples" (Interview 11). Translation efforts into non-official UN languages and local dialects are central to this process of appropriation. UNDROP is also increasingly interpreted in connection with other legal instruments such as the ICESCR, CEDAW, ILO Convention 169, and UNDRIP. As FIAN International emphasized, "The Declaration must not remain isolated. It should engage in dialogue with other texts, especially those concerning Indigenous peoples and rural women."

In sum, while the dynamic of periodic revision remains incipient, the conceptual and institutional foundations are in place. Its future development will depend on the proactive engagement of the expert mechanism, the willingness of states, and the continued involvement of social movements in participatory monitoring and adaptive norm-setting (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022).

3.3. NGO-ization and Transcalar Advocacy Strategies

The case of UNDROP illustrates how the professionalization of NGOs, or "NGO-ization," can enhance rather than displace grassroots engagement in international norm-making. Rather than marginalizing peasant voices, professionalized NGOs such as FIAN and CETIM complemented LVC by translating grassroots demands into international legal language and navigating institutional spaces. This hybrid model, grounded in transcalar strategies and sustained by feedback loops, reflects experimentalist governance through flexible and participatory norm development.

NGO-ization s Strategic Capacity-building

Multiple interviewees emphasized that engagement with UN processes depends on legal and procedural expertise. FIAN and CETIM, with consultative status and longstanding presence in Geneva, enabled peasant

organizations to access negotiation spaces otherwise out of reach. Without such mediation, rural participation would have remained minimal.

Rather than disempowering local actors, these NGOs played a facilitating role. CETIM assisted in preparing advocacy materials and coordinating events, while FIAN financed travel and provided training on UN procedures. This strategic support allowed peasant delegates to participate meaningfully. NGOs adapted to institutional expectations while staying aligned with grassroots priorities, a dual positioning characteristic of experimentalist governance, where affected actors shape and revise norms at all levels.

Transcalar Advocacy in Action

UNDROP's evolution exemplifies transcalar advocacy, where coordinated mobilization spans local, national, regional, and international levels. Interviewees described how LVC's decentralized structure enabled iterative communication, with draft articles developed in regional assemblies, refined by legal allies, presented at the OEIWG in Geneva, and returned to grassroots groups for feedback.

This illustrates not only bottom-up norm creation, or vernacularization in reverse, but also mutual adjustment based on institutional feedback, a key experimentalist feature. As one interviewee explained, "It was never one-way. We constantly adjusted based on what states would accept, but without betraying the core demands."

NGOs leveraged their multiscalar positioning to increase pressure on reluctant states. FIAN Belgium mobilized parliamentarians to influence national stances, while LVC's regional chapters built Global South coalitions to secure broader backing. These tactics correspond to what Keck and Sikkink describe as leverage politics and accountability politics. Symbolic politics also played a key role, as narratives of food sovereignty and historical injustice helped frame peasant rights as morally urgent. "We needed to show this was about more than farmers, it was about resisting exclusion and dispossession," recalled one activist.

Reinforcing Legitimacy Through Feedback

Feedback mechanisms enabled iterative adjustment within and beyond civil society. After each negotiation session, actors reassessed language and tactics at local, national, and international levels. This helped sustain cohesion across diverse coalitions, a central tenet of experimentalist governance, where peer-based feedback drives learning and revision.

Although asymmetries of power persisted between Northern and Southern organizations, and between professional NGOs and grassroots movements, internal deliberation and functional role-sharing helped manage these

tensions. For example, when some African states expressed reservations about land rights provisions, LVC Africa, CMCR and FONGS conducted targeted advocacy using field testimonies and policy briefs. CETIM then revised the legal wording to respond to diplomatic concerns while preserving the article's meaning.

This co-constructed process demonstrates the experimentalist principle of inclusive stakeholder engagement and supports the claim that civil society plays an essential role in designing, refining, and implementing international human rights norms.

3.4. Synthesis

These empirical findings not only illustrate how UNDROP was co-constructed through iterative advocacy but also shed light on the potential and limits of experimentalist governance in the human rights field. The following section provides a more detailed discussion of these insights and their implications.

4. Discussion

This article contributes to the growing literature on the elaboration of human rights standards by showing how the adoption and early implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP) illustrates a form of experimentalist governance. Unlike traditional human rights treaties, which are negotiated primarily by states, UNDROP emerged from the sustained advocacy of civil society actors who engaged in iterative, transcalar processes that shaped both the content and legitimacy of the norm. Drawing on a combination of interviews, documentary analysis, and theoretical insights, this paper shows that UNDROP offers a hybrid model of norm creation that challenges conventional understandings of how international human rights evolve.

The case confirms the central insight of the experimentalist approach: participatory and flexible processes can foster the co-construction of human rights norms in the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms (De Búrca, 2021). Through successive iterations, feedback loops, and strategic adaptations, civil society actors shaped the recognition of peasants' rights in both content and form. La Vía Campesina's grounding in local realities, combined with FIAN and CETIM's legal expertise and the utilization of transnational spaces, such as the UN Human Rights Council, facilitated this dynamic interaction. As multiple interviewees emphasized, it was precisely this recursive interaction between grassroots mobilization and legal

institutionalization that gave the Declaration its transformative potential (Interviews 1, 4, 9).

The findings also advance debates on NGO-ization and transnational advocacy. While the literature has often stressed the risks associated with professionalization, such as the dilution of demands or the primacy of technocratic language, the case of UNDROP presents a more nuanced picture. The adoption of UNDROP demonstrated that professionalized NGOs had not replaced social movements but rather complemented them by providing support and capacity-building. NGOs such as CETIM and FIAN have enabled peasant and rural organizations to enter the UN arena and pursue diplomatic channels, obtaining funding and translating demands into legal frameworks. They have played an important mediating role and have never replaced grassroots movements, which have thus always retained a certain degree of control over the circulation of demands. As Interviewees 5 and 6 noted, without CETIM and FIAN, participation in formal UN spaces would have remained out of reach. However, these NGOs were not isolated, as La Vía Campesina maintained close ties with the local level, ensuring that the normative basis of the Declaration was rooted in the realities on the ground and people's lived experiences.

This hybrid model suggests that "NGO-ization" is not automatically detrimental to the local level and that it can enable crosscalar collaboration and mutual learning. The notion of "mutual professionalization" seems particularly relevant here, as local movements acquired legal literacy and advocacy tools while established NGOs became more responsive to grassroots priorities. Interviewees from FONGS and SPI stressed the importance of training sessions, co-authored reports, and community feedback in shaping their engagement with international processes (Interviews 7, 11). These practices resonate with the experimentalist logic of problem-based, collaborative norm development, where actors learn from one another in a recursive and decentralized manner.

However, this case also raises important questions about the generalizability of the experimentalist approach. Can this model be replicated in contexts where civil society is weaker or where political regimes are less open to transnational advocacy? This raised the question of whether experimentalism in human rights requires minimal enabling conditions, such as institutional permeability or fundamental civil liberties, to succeed. De Búrca herself argues that experimentalist mechanisms are most effective when civil society is firmly engaged and when a degree of political liberalization exists (De Búrca 2017, 279). The UNDROP case, which benefited from strong networks, committed allies in the Global South, and a supportive UN framework, may not be easily transferable to more repressive environments.

In this regard, a comparative approach may be beneficial. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) offers an interesting parallel. Like UNDROP, CEDAW includes flexible standards and advocates context-specific implementation. Its emphasis on general recommendations and shadow reports provides feedback channels similar to those described in this document. However, CEDAW has also faced criticism for its limited enforcement and inconsistent implementation, highlighting the challenge of translating experimental structures into lasting accountability. A thorough comparison between UNDROP and CEDAW, particularly in terms of stakeholder participation, monitoring mechanisms, and the legal framework, would help refine the understanding of the experimental approach and better identify its limitations.

That said, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The analysis relies primarily on interviews with civil society actors and advocacy documents, which may overemphasize the role of NGOs while underplaying the contributions of sympathetic state actors, UN officials, or academic experts. As indicated in the methodology, triangulation of data partially mitigates this bias; however, a more comprehensive analysis of the adoption of UNDROP would require gathering the views of government representatives and institutional stakeholders.

The case of UNDROP illustrates a fundamental tension in the realm of human rights governance: the struggle to balance inclusivity with the need for effective implementation. While the process that led to its adoption received commendations for its openness and adaptability, the reality of its implementation remains uneven. In many instances, the actions taken have been largely symbolic, lacking the substantial impact that was initially hoped for. This raises a key question: Even when well executed, can an experimental approach to governance truly overcome the structural inequalities and political gridlock that hinder the transformative power of new human rights instruments?

In conclusion, UNDROP demonstrates how civil society actors can co-construct international human rights norms through experimentalist strategies that combine flexibility, participation, and iterative learning. While not without limits, this model broadens our understanding of how rights can be articulated and advanced in contexts of state hesitation or normative contestation. Future research should examine whether similar patterns can be observed in other rights regimes and under what conditions experimentalist governance can deliver both legitimacy and impact. As one interviewee reminded us, “This was never just about getting a text adopted; it is about creating a living framework that can evolve with us” (Interview 5).

5. Concluding Remarks

This article set out to examine how and to what extent civil society actors contributed to the adoption and early implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). Through the lens of the experimentalist approach to human rights, the study has demonstrated that the UNDROP process was characterized by inclusive participation, iterative negotiation, localized implementation, peer-like feedback, and gradual adaptation. The analysis has shown that La Vía Campesina, FIAN International, and CETIM played distinct but complementary roles in translating grassroots demands into international legal norms. Political legitimacy built on lived experience was effectively combined with legal expertise and diplomatic access, enabling civil society actors to actively participate in shaping the content of the Declaration and its legitimization.

These findings contribute to broader debates on NGO-ization, norm diffusion, and transnational advocacy by illustrating that professionalization can strengthen rather than displace grassroots agency, provided it is embedded in horizontal, transcalar collaboration. The UNDROP case confirms that vernacularization in reverse is not only possible but sustainable when supported by adaptive and participatory governance mechanisms. It also reveals that tensions between legal pragmatism and political radicalism, far from undermining the process, were negotiated constructively through shared learning and strategic compromise.

Although the article's strength lies in its confirmation of the potential of experimental governance of human rights, it offers an incomplete analysis with a strong emphasis on civil society perspectives. It leaves uncertainty about the long-term effectiveness of UNDROP. Its transformative potential depends on continued grassroots mobilization, political will, and institutional consolidation of monitoring mechanisms. This case thus illustrates a central paradox: The strength of experimental processes lies in their flexibility and inclusiveness, but their impact ultimately requires structural anchoring and sustained commitment.

Finally, this study confirms that civil society actors are not mere recipients of norms but can also assert themselves as active co-creators of international human rights norms. The seeds of normative change have been sown, and their future growth will depend on vigilance, adaptation, and mobilization at all levels.

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Appendix 1

List of interviews conducted (11)

#	Name of the organization	Type	Category	Geographical zone
1	*CETIM*	Human Rights NGO	Civil society	National / Europe
2	*CETIM*	Human Rights NGO	Civil society	National / Europe
3	*CETIM*	Human Rights NGO	Civil society	National / Europe
4	*FIAN International*	International organization / Network	Civil society	International
5	*FIAN Belgium*	NGO	Civil society	National / Europe
6	*FIAN Belgium*	NGO	Civil society	National / Europe
7	*FONGS, CMCR / LVC Africa*	Federation / Network	Civil society	National / Africa
8	/	Farmer / activist	Civil society	National / Europe
9	*Confédération paysanne / LVC Europe*	Agricultural union / International farmer organization	Civil society	National / Europe
10	*CFSI*	Collective of organizations	Civil society	National / Europe
11	*LVC / SPI*	Network / Union	Civil society	National, International / Asia