

Four organizational layers: a guide for grassroots activists on organizing and organizations

§1. There are four levels of abstraction in analysing organizations. These are summarised in the following table.

Ideology / Theory
Politics / Programme
Strategy
Tactics

Ideology is the theoretical analysis of the underlying reasons for the issue the organization deals with. This issue can be as general as inequality, racism, exploitation, sexism, justice or war, or as specific as increased working hours in a single company.¹

Ideology is all about what people refer as “-ism”so. *The ideology is the lense through which an organization sees the world.* All organizations (and all individuals) have ideology: they may be implicit, incomplete or incoherent, but all organizations *objectively* have ideologies. Its denial can be an implicit way of recognizing the *status quo* or a simple refusal to methodically analysing the world.

Some examples are: capitalist, communist, democrat, ecosocialist, fascist, liberal, marxist, nationalist, neoliberal, social-democrat, and socialist.

Non-party and non-party-affiliated organizations generally unite people of various ideologies, so they tend to refuse identifying themselves with a single ideology or they may prefer to use vaguer terms. For instance, a neighborhood assembly may want to be welcoming to all the neighbors and may therefore refer to itself as a space for “direct democracy” or “active democracy” without any specific ideology. A political party, which by definition aims at changing the society as a whole, would need infinitely more clarity and solidity among its members, so the party militants would share the same ideology as well as the same programme. A political party should be able to respond to all kinds of social questions and therefore needs a guiding ideology to collectively analyse contemporary issues.

Generally speaking, only political parties would be required to organize at the ideological level.

My understanding is that Climáximo has an *anti-capitalist* ideological orientation. The word anti-capitalist was intentionally *not* included in my examples of ideologies above, because it is an umbrella term for several ideologies that identify capitalism as the root cause of the climate crisis while allowing for a range of possible alternative social proposals.

¹ Throughout this text, we will give examples mostly based on climate justice, and the organizational examples will be Climáximo and its activities.

Politics is the general political agenda of the organization. In the civil society terminology, this is generally referred as the *vision* and in political parties it is the *party programme*.

The political position of an organization is its answer to the issue it deals with. On climate change, some examples of political positions are climate justice, energy democracy, degrowth, green growth and sustainable development. Note that some of these items are incompatible with each other while others can be complementary.

Most social movements and civil society groups are organized at political level. They may accommodate a mixture of ideologies compatible with their political position.

Generally speaking, an organization's political position is the organization's declaration of when it would dissolve itself. In an oversimplified setting, a feminist group would become less relevant as gender equality advances.²

While there may be many grey areas, an organization's political stance is its *engine* and its *measure of success*: Climáximo moves towards climate justice, and it considers itself successful as closer as it gets to climate justice.

Since Climáximo has *some* degree of ideological clarity, it is capable of adopting several political alignments simultaneously (e.g. climate justice, energy democracy, just transition, etc.).

Strategies are the achievable steps towards an organization's political position.

Generally speaking, campaigns and alliances belong in this category. Some examples of campaigns from the climate movement can be Climate Jobs, Green New Deal, 100% Renewables, Fee and Dividend, and Divestment. A good example of an alliance is Plataforma Algarve Livre de Petróleo.

Strategies consist of objectives that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Ambitious, Actionable, Relevant, Realistic and Time-oriented. (See [SMART objective](#).) A good strategy has SMART objectives for the short-term and long-term as well as organizational objectives (objectives for a qualitative or quantitative improvement of the organization itself), and ideally the organization regularly controls and reviews its activities in view of its objectives.

Strategies are *informed* and *oriented* by the politics of the organization. Their soundness is *controlled* by the organization's ideology.

Tactics is real life.

Tactics include all kinds of initiatives like seminars, marches, direct actions and meetings. The reader can think of zillions of action examples. However, tactics can also include longer projects and action platforms.

An example of a project is Autarquias Livres de Petróleo e Gás, which united several groups to create pressure on the local election candidates in 2017. An example of an action platform is Parar o

² Obviously, this is not only a dynamic process but also a social construction: The feminist group may, while winning certain battles, expand its understanding of feminism and therefore remain as radical as it was some years ago; or, conversely, there may be a shift in the social perception and the society may decide that it already has enough gender equality (for instance, through conservative cultural engineering) and the feminist group may lose its social power.

Furo, which used open source organizing to articulate the popular opposition to the Aljezur drill in 2018. Both of these examples were oriented by the “fossil-free Algarve” strategy of the groups involved.

Generally speaking, tactics are designed to mobilize, inspire and unite large numbers of people.

Ideology	capitalist, communist, democrat, ecosocialist, fascist, feminist, liberal, marxist, social-democrat, socialist etc.
Politics	justice, freedom, equality, etc. climate justice, green growth, degrowth, etc.
Strategy	campaigns, alliances
Tactics	actions, projects, platforms

A simplistic summary of this layout is: *Ideologies make heavy books, politics make books, strategies make reports, and tactics make posters.*

§2. One essential remark I want to make is that ideology is factual, not optional. Some ecology organizations try to avoid ideological labeling. The honest ones do this as they intend to propose “something new” to the society, something that previous ideological organizations did not try. This is not the negation of ideology. What they mean is that they are trying to build an ideology of their own which is not yet as clear as the previous ones. Other ecology groups outright deny ideologies *per se*; but this is part of the post-modern intellectual confusion. No organization can function without a guiding world analysis. Refusing to identify and clarify this worldview is called populism, which also ironically ends with an *-ism*.

§3. Here are two examples to apply some of these terms.

We identified Plataforma Algarve Livre de Petróleo (PALP) at the strategy level above. Its activities are compatible with various political stances, and it has a rather broad ideological orientation.

However, PALP consists of tens of organizations. Let us shift our angle and look at PALP from these organizations’ viewpoint: Sciaena has its own political position and several campaigns. As a strategic choice it decides to work on oil exploration. It forms an alliance with other groups, called PALP. This alliance now has an existence of its own, and can build its own strategy together with the other groups in the platform.

In this sense, PALP is a permanent platform. It is an entity and has its own strategic and operational principles.

The action camp Camp in Gas lives in the tactical layer. It is an action platform: it involves different groups; it has its own escalation plan until the camp, with several preparatory actions; and it will last for several months. In this sense, Camp in Gas is a temporary platform. While it does create a

collaborative space for various groups and individuals, it has only very basic organizational structures.

§4. Within social movements, we find platforms, alliances, projects, networks, etc. Naming an organization and identifying its layer are not purely academic considerations. It clarifies how an individual can (or cannot) get involved and how another organization can relate to it. An organization *joins* an alliance, *endorses* a campaign, *participates* in a network. These imply different degrees of duties and responsibilities. An individual can join a network but cannot participate in an alliance.

§5. No organizational layer is categorically better than others. Each layer has its advantages and drawbacks, and successful social change requires coordinated effort of agents at every layer.

The higher we go in the table (tactics → strategy → politics → ideology), the more consolidated a group we find. In general, members of organizations formed at the ideological level have more opinions in common. Having ideological affinity, these people can reach consensus more smoothly, and take action more rapidly.

Also, generally, the higher levels imply more clarity within the organization. New situations and developments can be interpreted collectively as the organization possesses common theoretical tools to analyse them.

On the other hand, the lower we go in the table (ideology → politics → strategy → tactics), the more tangible the issue becomes. Through concrete proposals it is easier to inspire and mobilize the population.

Furthermore, generally, more people would identify themselves with a particular action rather than a complete pack of ideas. Each activist can participate in an action for a different reason. (Ask anti-austerity protesters why they are on the street and you will hear hundreds of different answers.)

§6. *Spontaneous* and *structured* control mechanisms are essential to keep an organization on the right track. Each tactic should be double-checked with the strategy and politics, and each strategy should be double-checked with politics and ideology. For every new proposal, one standard question is “*What does it serve for?*”.

This may seem obvious but in practice it is definitely not simple. Tactical manoeuvres may corrupt an organization’s political stance: Successive reformist tactics – each of which was a success on its own – made the European socialist parties into social-democrat bourgeois parties. At any given point, legal activities were more yielding than investing in illegal organizing; and thus many revolutionary organizations of the past got integrated into the *status quo*.

Conversely, rigid political considerations may block up tactics altogether: All sufficiently big demonstrations carry the risk of being hijacked by the opposite political camp; or, all actions may be – potentially – contained by the *status quo*. Historically, many organizations turned into discussion groups or journalist collectives through continuous preoccupations for political hygiene.

§7. Nothing I said above is new for party militants. As one goes further up in the layers the more theoretical understanding of organizing a member needs. A person participating in tens of actions starts to feel the necessity for a strategic framework for these actions. (“What does it serve for?” is a natural question.) Someone participating in several campaigns realizes the connections between these issues. A natural tendency to integrate these brings about a political contemplation. Finally, a political activist starts to analyse the root causes of the problems, which brings her slowly to party lines. (The party she looks for may or may not exist around her. That’s a totally different conversation.)

§8. A well-functioning organization of each layer requires a different kind of **organizational culture and leadership**.³

At the tactical level, good organizing requires practical people with a clear plan. Think about an action or a conference organizing team. All participants should know what will happen and when, they should know the logistical and political needs, and there should be a clear definition of roles among the members. It should also be clear to everyone what a successful action is. Leadership at this layer principally needs *communication skills*: she should inspire for action; communicate clearly; and be able to deal with different kinds of people. A tactical leader should also be *flexible* and a *quick decision-maker*, as she would face unexpected problems and opportunities.

At the strategy level, good organizing requires resourceful people with a long-term plan and structure. Think about a campaign. The organizers should know the demands, the objectives and the functioning of the campaign. If we are talking about a platform consisting of various organizations, it should be clear how decisions are made. The leadership needs strong *orchestration skills*. A campaign attracts people with actions ideas, the leader would thus make sure the resources are used wisely and effectively, without alienating the newcomers. Also, she should *know how to delegate* tasks to various people of different skills, and should be able to guide newcomers through practical know-how of the campaign (how to paint banners, who knows where to organize a meeting, etc.).

At the political level, good organizing requires strategists that trust each other and know each others’ skills. Think of an activist group. The group would have different tasks ranging from technical maintenance (website, materials etc.) to political organizing (preparing meetings, launching campaigns etc.) and it may assign fixed roles to some people. If the group has several lines of action, the degree of autonomy of each campaign should be clear. Leadership at the political level needs strong *coordination skills* as she would need to intertwine several campaign calendars. A certain sense of *diplomacy* may be needed as groups often talk to other groups or entities, with the aim of negotiating or cooperating.

At the ideological level, good organizing requires versatile people with a shared worldview. A good amount of organizational time and energy should be dedicated to theoretical and political discussions, in order to create a collective identity. An organization formed at the ideological level should have tools to build opinions about all kinds of issues. Members might not be fluent at all

3 Here, I do not mean leadership in any structural sense. The organization can be fully horizontal. By a leader, I mean anyone who leads others ideologically, politically, strategically or tactically – depending on the layer. Leadership can come with experience or skills, acknowledged by the group as a whole. A leader in social movements should ideally thrive for stopping to be a leader. This is only possible by distributing power and initiative, and this is only possible by sharing skills and training others. Life starts vertical because we live in alienated, class societies. To make it horizontal, we need to acknowledge that life is vertical and address this issue consciously.

political fronts simultaneously, but should definitely know how to surf through them. For instance, in a socialist political party, all members would be expected to react to racist or sexist attitudes almost naturally, while only some members would be the spokespersons on these subjects. It is hard if not impossible to identify one single talent or skill to highlight for good leadership at this level. Maybe two notes are worth mentioning: Firstly, a leader should know how to attract and create other leaders, and should *know how to supervise* political processes without getting fully engaged in their execution. Secondly, a leader at the ideological level should have *a strong sense of strategy*. (I sometimes say that people who don't have several active social media accounts should not be allowed in the central committee of a political party in today's world. A leader should have direct experience of the direction the society is taking and should be well-versed in contemporary culture.)

Layer	Culture	Leadership skills
Ideology	Versatile people. Shared worldview.	Training leaders. Strategizing.
Politics	Strategist. Group trust.	Coordination. External communication.
Strategy	Resourceful people. Long-term plan and structure.	Orchestration. Delegating tasks.
Tactics	Practical people. Clear plan.	Communication skills. Flexible. Quick decision-making.

§9. We hear stories of a political party taking over a civil society organization, or an activist group dominating a campaign. This can be very frustrating for the people involved. Such situations happen for several reasons, many of which are well-intentioned and honest. I will address three cases.

First reason is a lack of understanding of the organizational layers. The cultural environment needed at each layer is different and that culture needs to be created. Activists of one layer sometimes fail to adapt to the new layer and therefore try to reproduce the culture they are familiar with. For instance, they might ask for an exaggerated degree of political clarity (e.g. “We are denouncing this oil company with this action, but is it because we think other corporations are nicer, do we defend green capitalism?” or “We want to stop this oil drilling, but do we consider nuclear energy as an alternative?”). This blurs the focus of the organization, which results in splits and divisions, thereby leaving only a certain kind of opinion inside the organization. There is a simple but difficult solution to this, which is to have clear guidelines about the aims and functioning of the organization. If we are talking about a platform of organizations, it should be clear what it means to endorse the cause and how decisions are made. If we are talking about a neighborhood assembly, it should be clear if members can be representatives of other organizations or if they must participate individually.

Another reason is assigning wrong tasks to the people with wrong skills: a good leader at one layer stands out; as part of her political training, the organization gives her tasks at a lower layer; the confusion starts. An activist with strong diplomatic skills can fail to make a powerful speech at a rally. A personal tendency to look at the big picture can be constraining when working on logistics of an action. Examples of such situations abound in all social movements. This problem can be

solved with self-awareness, together with the support of the organization reviewing people's performance.

Finally, each layer needs its own authentic leaders. Campaigners cannot prepare an action without practical people who take initiative and participate in the decisions: you need someone to tell you if a certain action is technically possible and how to go around practical obstacles. A committee consisting solely of delegations of organizations would need either extremely talented people or a proactive facilitator; otherwise it would turn into a negotiating table because the different priorities and sensibilities of the delegates would kill the synergy. But perhaps most crucial is the following: A member of an organization has inner motivation to run campaigns, and a campaigner feels the need to do actions that feed the campaign. A person that belongs to a higher layer comes with a sense of self-discipline to a lower layer. In time, the natural tendency is that these people assume the roles that others don't want, and they slowly evolve into the leaders of the organization. Later, someone notices that all the leadership of a campaign is centralized in one or two organizations, or that all the leadership of an organization is taken up by political party militants. The trick here is to acknowledge that this is a *natural* tendency, and not necessarily some infiltration plan of one group or another. This lack of capacity at each level is perhaps the most difficult to resolve. I don't know any simple solutions to this problem, but the next paragraph will exercise a few ideas.

§10. I have not seen an organization at any layer that didn't have serious concerns about its capacity in terms of human resources. All organizations that want to grow feel the need of recruiting and training leaders. They also struggle to allocate the existing leadership in an effective way.

We need more people.

How do we get them?

There are organic ways of training new leaders, about which millions of books are published for business settings. Very little of these "Find the leader inside you" books apply to activism, because corporations use money to educate, tame and motivate in a competitive environment while we depend on volunteer work in a cooperative environment. Even so, it is possible to accompany a person gaining more confidence and experience, using bits of practical tools suggested in these books on coaching.

While very limited, there exist some activist tools, such as the [Ladder of Engagement](#) that guides organizers to identify the level of engagement of each member and to help them get further engaged in a comfortable way. Another approach is to simplify tasks into concrete tiny steps, and delegate them to new people together with basic guidelines. [Checklists for Activists](#) in Climáximo's website are an attempt in this direction, breaking tasks like taking notes in a meeting, sending out a press release, taking photos in an action, etc. into minuscule operational parts.

Finally, this very article aims at giving a somewhat theoretical framework for organizing. I understand that some people need intuitive and social tools, while others may prefer a more methodical approach. I am aware that this kind of articles are helpful for the latter kind of activists only.

Even so, I believe that schematic simplifications can help clarify and tidy up the structures and discussions in social movements. As we say in mathematics: you have to fully comprehend $2+2=4$ in order to understand that in modular arithmetic $2+2$ can equal $1 \pmod{3}$ or $0 \pmod{4}$ too.