



# The Old and the Young: Configurational Niches Amongst Dutch Climate Civil Society Organisations

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**Abstract** Media reporting and academic research into young climate civil society organisations (CSOs) often focus on organisations using direct, confrontational and often controversial actions, but to what extent is this a true picture of young climate organisations? This paper examines the differences between young and old climate and environmental CSOs in the Netherlands. Drawing on niche theory, it uses set-theoretic typology building to examine the ways in which 39 young and old Dutch CSOs construct configurational organisational niches by narrowing down their membership and issue, using innovative strategies and developing stable financing sources. It finds that although there are significant differences between young and old CSOs in how they narrow down their membership and issues, their strategies are not significantly different: in other words, a focus on civil disobedience alone does not paint the whole picture of young climate groups.

**Keywords** Civil society organisations · NGOs · Netherlands · Niche theory · Climate policy

## Introduction

News headlines in 2022 and early 2023 featured a growing number of direct, creative and controversial climate actions. Most infamously, the organisation Just Stop Oil threw a tin of soup on Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* in October 2022 to draw attention to the climate crisis (Gayle, 2022).

Many recent studies of climate activists have focussed on the novel strategies of young climate organisations such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020). In addition to their main objective of calling public attention to the urgency of the climate crisis, such creative and controversial strategies may be one way for young organisations to develop a particular image or ‘brand’ as a group and carve out an organisational niche. But selecting strategies are only one way in which groups can develop such a niche: groups can also define themselves by targeting particular sections of the population or sources of funding, or narrowing down their issue focus. When we consider these elements, are young climate civil society organisations (CSOs) really so different from old ones?

Answering this question can help us understand whether—and in which way—the population of CSOs is changing and the range of actions and viewpoints they represent. Academic research often treats NGOs and civil society as a key part of climate governance, as they play important local and global roles not only in pushing for the development of stronger public regulation, but also in implementing quasi-private governance through strategies such as fossil fuel divestment (Ayling & Gunningham, 2017). Understanding the types of organisations and strategies that exist helps to understand how this governance plays out in practice. It has also been suggested that CSOs with diverse organisational forms may lead to a stronger movement overall (Bertels et al., 2014); understanding differences amongst organisations are the first step to being able to assess movement diversity and see whether it is related to effectiveness. The question also has theoretical relevance, helping to inform niche theory in organisational studies more generally by moving beyond an examination of individual niche types. By developing

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and qualitatively exploring the concept of ‘configurational niches’—examining how CSOs carve out an organisational niche by combining different types of resource partitioning—we gain a more holistic picture of organisational niche-seeking strategies and CSOs’ organisational form.

This paper therefore examines how climate and environmental organisations construct configurational niches. Using set-theoretic principles stemming from qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), I examine the combinations of ways that CSOs use to carve out niches for themselves. More specifically, I compare older and younger Dutch climate and environmental CSOs and how they differentiate themselves from other organisations. As a neo-corporatist system with a long history of interest representation, the Netherlands has a large population of CSOs, with older groups often supported by the state and professionalised, compared to a younger set of groups that face increased resource pressure (Hanegraaff et al., 2020). Similarly, climate and environmental policy provide a useful case study to compare old and new CSOs, as they are densely-populated fields where new organisations compete for resources and attention with existing—and often well-established—CSOs (Alcock, 2008; Berny & Rootes, 2018). The empirical section draws on documents and interview data and uses set-theoretic typology building to study 39 climate organisations, of which 15 were founded in the past 10 years and 24 founded more than a decade ago.<sup>1</sup>

The following section provides an overview of existing work on environmental and climate CSOs and explains why we might expect differences between the two groups. I then elaborate on niche theory and the idea of configurational niches. The empirical section presents a comparative overview of the 39 CSOs, using set-theoretic typology building and the principles of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to group CSOs by the combinations of niches that they use. I then discuss the results and their implications for our understanding of the CSO population and its features.

<sup>1</sup> Different terms are used in the literature for grassroots or citizen organisations. Scholars studying NGOs generally look only at organisations with the particular legal status of non-profit organisations (Vakil, 2018); on the other hand, social movement scholars examine social movement organisations as the formal representatives of broader, dynamic social movements (Snow et al., 2004). This paper uses the label ‘civil society organisations’ as a broader term covering both institutionalised groups, and those without a formal legal structure. When referring to literature that uses one of the other terms, the original terminology is used.

## Young CSOs, Old Challenges

Why would we expect young and old CSOs to differ in the first place? CSOs face a range of challenges at the beginning of their lives. They may lack formal legal structure, be volunteer-led and -staffed and lack funding. Young organisations tend to use a wider range of strategies than older ones, which converge towards more conventional strategies and organisational forms as they become more professionalised (Berny & Rootes, 2018; Bertels et al., 2014; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2019; Johansson et al., 2019; Zald & Ash, 1966). This is often attributed to pressures on groups to devote resources to conducting effective advocacy and fewer to communicating with members and including them in organisational governance (Bolleyer & Correa, 2022).

Environment and climate organisations are no exception to this rule. A range of different typologies have been created to classify the different types of environmental NGOs that exist and the range of strategies and approaches used by the environmental movement (e.g. Alcock, 2008; Bosso, 2005; Dalton et al., 2003; Halpin, 2014). Studies of national and transnational environmental NGOs have highlighted that—like other types of interest groups—NGOs are in competition for scarce resources: members, funding and policymakers’ attention (Asproudis, 2011). As more NGOs are formed, they face more competition for resources, in what has been termed the ‘NGO scramble’ (Cooley & Ron, 2002). Groups that may have started as grassroots, volunteer-run ‘challenger’ movements may end up becoming more institutionalised and conventional as time passes, and they gain new resources (Berny & Rootes, 2018; Bertels et al., 2014; Bosso, 2005). As older CSOs gradually expand their agendas, they tend to become more generalist and also more conventional (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2019; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Sharman, 2022; Stroup & Wong, 2018). In turn, new organisations arise to supplement the old, institutionalised ones and address different issues using new strategies (Berny & Rootes, 2018). For instance, the first action by Extinction Rebellion in 2018 was to occupy Greenpeace’s offices in London to distinguish themselves from older direct action environmental organisations (Taylor, 2018).

A large amount of research has therefore been undertaken on the differences between young and old (climate) CSOs, yet most of this research focuses on the differences in strategies—and to some extent ideology—between young and old groups. Yet, much of this research is based on comparative case studies; there have been few population-level studies that examine systematic differences amongst CSOs within one policy field.

## Configurational Organisational Niches

Population ecological approaches and niche theory can help to examine the systematic, wide-ranging differences between groups and therefore, also help to explain different patterns of CSO action and relations with the wider public and policymakers. Niche theory centres on groups' dependence on scarce resources: organisations within the same system (in this case, climate policy and action) are in competition for these resources and try to avoid competition by partitioning resources and creating 'niches' for themselves (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998; Carroll, 1985; Gray & Lowery, 1996).<sup>2</sup> As the population of interest groups in a particular field becomes more dense, groups face more resource competition and carve out these niches. Previous research highlights that groups often do this without really trying, as choices made by the organisation for their survival at different points accumulate and become institutionalised (Berny, 2018; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2019; Halpin & Jordan, 2009). These niches in turn have implications for CSOs' strategies and interactions with policymakers, as practices become embedded and path dependence means that CSOs' activism follows a similar pattern once institutionalised.

In the field of social movements, similar approaches have been used to examine how SMOs gain and maintain resources. Soule and King (2008), for example, draw on resource mobilisation theory and resource partition theory to examine specialisation amongst SMOs, finding that competition increases specialisation particularly amongst new organisations. Social movement identity approaches also highlight the importance of specialisation for groups to mobilise resources and adherents, and studies have shown that groups with a narrow niche and strong identity are more likely to survive (Olzak & Johnson, 2019). Yet, in contrast to the trend of focussing on individual niches in the interest group literature, social movement scholars tend to focus on the overall 'identity' that a social movement organisation develops for itself, which determines the potential members that a group can mobilise, and in turn the organisation's goals and tactics (Heaney & Rojas, 2014; Meyer, 2004). Identity thus affects groups' potential to access their key resources: members and policymakers' attention (Cannon & Kreutzer, 2018). First, group identity determines what sort of members join a group. By creating an identity for itself that appeals to a particular subset of the population, groups reduce competition with other NGOs for potential members (Halpin, 2014). Similarly,

developing a particular identity ensures that decision-makers know what to expect when they deal with the organisation—for example, subject-specific expertise or knowledge about public opinion. This creates a reputation for the group in its interactions with external audiences, a 'brand' that it can sell to the outside world (Barakso, 2010). Just comparing the different images that spring to mind when thinking about established NGOs, such as Greenpeace or WWF, demonstrates the power of this type of identity niche in explaining variation in relations with policymakers and the broader public and capabilities for different types of action.

The concept of 'organisational niches' is therefore not new. However, most studies examine only one type of resource partitioning—usually a group's issue focus, goals or tactics—rather than examining whether and how groups can combine different types of resource partitioning to develop their niche. This is particularly striking given that the Gray and Lowery's original paper discusses the concept of a 'multidimensional space' and highlights the multiple ways in which groups can establish an identity (1996, p. 95). For this reason, this article aims to examine *configurational* niches: how CSOs combine different types of resource partitioning to carve out a multidimensional niche. This can be compared to the idea of 'identity' in social movement studies, yet tries to break down this concept into the different ways that groups can narrow down a particular organisational identity. It builds on two studies with a similar approach. First, Halpin (2014) used the concept of 'organisational form' to examine the extent to which generic organisational forms, deductively based on different combinations of features, are present amongst UK environmental groups. In contrast, the present study's use of set-theoretic typology building examines multidimensional niches in a more inductive way, rather than predefining combinations of features. Second, Heaney (2004) also examined the extent to which interest groups in the US combine different niches. He examined each niche individually and provided averages for the number of resource types combined by organisations, rather than examining the specific configurations of niches that each groups uses. Yet, without an examination of configurations of niches, we fail to understand the scope of civil society activism and organisational differences.

The rest of this paper therefore works to operationalise and examine *configurational* niches. Climate change is a useful case study for this exercise: environmental and climate organisations encompass a broad range of issues and organisational forms (Olzak & Johnson, 2019). Moreover, the growth in organisations over the past years provides leverage for a comparison between older and younger CSOs that move beyond the differences in strategy discussed above. By examining configurational niches and

<sup>2</sup> Population ecological niche theory therefore differs from strategic niche management (SNM) approaches, which examine innovation niches and the conditions under which grassroots innovations, including by civil society, can become robust and widespread (e.g. Seyfang et al., 2014)).

comparing how they are used by young and old organisations, this paper presents a more complete picture of Dutch climate CSOs and can highlight potential differences in how young and old organisations develop, particularly in a dense organisational landscape.

### Operationalising Niches in Climate and Environmental CSOs

In their original paper on niche theory, Gray and Lowery (1996, p. 96) highlight five resource dimensions that can define groups' niches: membership; selective benefits for members; financing; access to the policymaking process or issues; and something to lobby for. This section digs deeper into these niche types, and how these will be identified amongst climate and environmental CSOs.

When discussing *membership*, the key question is where potential supporters come from—how narrow is the target constituency of the organisation? In the social movement literature, the concept of 'ideology' has often been used to capture this idea, as groups' ideology defines the subset of the population that it draws upon for supporters: more radical groups draw on a smaller, but more committed, section of the population (Dalton et al., 2003; Dzhengiz et al., 2021; Yaziji & Doh, 2013). Yet, ideology also affects strategies and is a different aspect of groups' identity. CSOs can define their potential supporters in other ways, such as by specifically narrowing down their constituencies to a particular demographic, profession or age group (Chamberlain, 2009). Most of the CSOs examined here do not have 'members' in the strict sense of the word, as they rely on a loose group of volunteers or supporters. However, this paper keeps the term 'membership' in order to better speak to and build on existing theory and studies. 'Membership niche' therefore refers to whether a group defines itself and aims to get supporters from a particular subsection of the population.

CSOs can acquire *financing* from various sources, including public funding, foundations and individual donors. Previous work has highlighted that funding sources do change groups' actions and characteristics: for example, several studies have found that groups that receive public funding tend to be more institutionalised and professionalised (Heylen et al., 2018). Similarly, amongst British environmental NGOs, funding from business and elites has been found to channel NGOs' advocacy into more institutionalised strategies, whilst membership funding facilitates public-facing strategies (Chewinski & Corrigan-Brown, 2020). For this reason, Greenpeace (in)famously refuses to accept public funding to retain its independence. More broadly, groups need a stable source of funding—whether public or private—to ensure their survival and facilitate their advocacy. 'Financing' niches therefore refer

to the extent to which the group has a stable funding source, measured by whether their financial reports show that they have received repeated subsidies or grants over the past 3 years.<sup>3</sup>

*Access and strategies* refer to whether organisations seek access to the policymaking process. This relates in part to the extent to which organisations actually specialise in lobbying and advocacy compared to other functions (Hanegraaff et al., 2020), but also to the extent to which groups choose different strategies for this advocacy. Although the pool of environmental CSOs in general uses a wide range of different strategies, individual organisations tend to specialise in certain tactics (Meyer, 2004). Along with the policy issue (discussed below), this is one of the aspects of niche-building that has been most discussed in the literature on CSOs as an important way that groups differentiate themselves (Barakso, 2010; Berny & Rootes, 2018; Dalton et al., 2003; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2019; Johansson et al., 2019). Tactical specialisation has also been linked to stronger organisational identity amongst social movement organisations (Soule & King, 2008). But strategic differentiation is not just about the contrast between direct action and more traditional advocacy strategies; CSOs can also specialise in other types of strategies, such as litigation (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Sharman, 2022). Therefore, a strategic niche here refers to the extent to which the CSO relies upon innovative, non-conventional strategies: either direct action and confrontation, or legal mobilisation. Most CSOs use a mix of strategies, and many established NGOs combine traditional advocacy with occasional innovative strategies; the use of a strategic niche is therefore coded 1 when innovative strategies form a core part of their work.

*Something to lobby for* refers to the issue(s) that groups work on and advocates for. This is again one of the more common types of niches analysed, usually through the breadth of organisations' policy agendas (i.e. the number of different issues that an organisation lobbies on, or whether it is a generalist or a specialist group). For example, LGBT organisations in the US create issue niches for themselves in order to reduce competition by narrowing down LGBT rights to one sector or a particular type of rights (Chamberlain, 2009; Haider-Markel, 1997). Other scholars have labelled this 'goal specialisation', the different issues that a group aims to influence in a particular year (Soule & King, 2008). The number of issues and the breadth of a group's issue niche has been shown to be an important type of specialisation amongst different types of groups, including

<sup>3</sup> A second measure of financial stability is also included in the dataset and code in the online appendix as a robustness check: groups for whom subsidies made up over one-third of their finances for the past years. The results were not significantly different from the first measure.

**Table 1** Operationalisation of the four niche types

Niche	Characteristic	Question(s)	Selected examples of use of niche
Membership	Type of members or supporters	Does the CSO target a particular subset of the population as supporters?	Groups focussing on students, teachers, scientists, or a particular generation
Financing	Stable funding	Does the CSO have a stable source of financing?	Recurrent (at least 3 years) subsidies from the Nationale Postcode Loterij (National Postcode Lottery), city council or national government
Access	Innovative strategies	Does the CSO use innovative strategies to achieve its goals?	Use of non-violent direct action, protest camps, civil disobedience, litigation or cases at local tribunals or national courts (either to enforce existing laws or as strategic litigation)
Something to lobby for	Issue breadth	Does the CSO work on a narrow topic or on a range of climate and environmental issues?	Focus on one aspect, e.g. conservation, anti-hunting, trees and forests, the North Sea

environmental organisations (Olzak & Johnson, 2019). In this paper, issue niches are measured by determining whether a CSO works on environment and climate issues in general or whether it narrows down the issue in some way—for instance, by focussing on a particular sub-issue such as biodiversity.

Finally, Gray and Lowery (1996) also identify *selective benefits*: whether the group provides particular benefits for supporters or members, such as services, trainings and publications, to encourage membership. Even the most well-established CSOs here do not have ‘members’ like most interest organisations, so there are few ‘selective’ benefits. Even though organisations may provide some non-advocacy services such as webinars or other activities—and most do—they do not have the same function as selective benefits that can only be accessed after official membership. Moreover, activities such as seminars or workshops are often part of CSOs’ political activity as they demonstrate public attention and mobilisation, thereby overlapping with strategies. ‘Selective benefits’ are therefore not examined here, as they are consistently absent amongst CSOs.

Table 1 summarises the four niche types examined in this paper, along with selected examples from the data. All examples and complete coding information are available in the online appendix.

## Data and Method

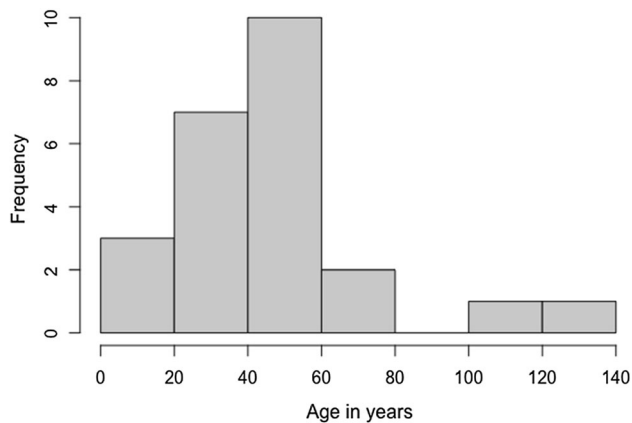
This paper examines 39 CSOs in the Netherlands. The Netherlands was chosen as a case study because two features of its interest group system increase the chances of an interesting comparison between older and younger CSOs. First, it is a mature democracy with a long history of interest representation; previous authors have found that older Dutch interest groups are professionalised

(Hanegraaff et al., 2020), and this is likely to be similar amongst CSOs, providing an interesting comparison between older, professionalised CSOs and their newer counterparts. Second, the Netherlands is at the neo-corporatist end of the scale of interest group representation (Lowery et al., 2008) and specifically funded NGOs from the 1980s in order to increase societal representation in environmental debates (Berny & Rootes, 2018, p. 949). This increases the chances of being able to compare more established CSOs—which may have particular advantages in terms of access—and newcomers. However, this also means that the differences amongst Dutch organisations may be more extreme than in more pluralist systems, where older CSOs may not have the same level of structural access.

Organisations were selected through snowball sampling, with the goal of covering a broad range of CSOs working at national level in the Netherlands (excluding CSOs that only exist as local or regional groups). I started with a sample of well-known CSOs, before expanding the number of groups based on common networks, joint letters, and campaigns. The groups range from legally established foundations (*stichtingen*) to volunteer associations and cooperative associations; most have non-profit status (*ANBI*). Although some very new CSOs may have been missed, most organisations came up more than once in the search, indicating a good coverage of the population of CSOs.<sup>4</sup>

CSOs were split into two groups: ‘old’ and ‘young’ CSOs. ‘Young’ CSOs are those established in the past

<sup>4</sup> Climate and environmental CSOs were included, defined as any CSO working mainly on environmental issues. Organisations with climate as one goal but not their main objective (e.g. *Fietsersbond*, the Cyclists’ Union) were excluded. Although this leads to a large range of organisations, they do tend to work together for different campaigns (e.g. signing letters to government), implying that they share broad goals and therefore a similar resource space.



**Fig. 1** Distribution of ages amongst old CSOs

10 years, since 2013 (min = 2, max = 10, median = 4). ‘Old’ CSOs have a much larger age range (min = 13, max = 124, median = 45; see Fig. 1 for distribution). Although the design of this study makes it difficult to distinguish between differences that may occur because of the *maturity* of an organisation and those that may occur due to the specific historical period in which the CSO was founded, the wide range of ages amongst old CSOs in the dataset allows for stronger conclusions about the effect of age itself.

Exploratory interviews were conducted with six of the young CSOs to triangulate publicly available information, and to dig deeper into the organisational challenges they perceived and how their organisation differentiated itself. These interviews showed that publicly available information was consistent with CSOs’ own statements, allowing for relative confidence that information on CSOs’ websites and in annual reports was sufficient to determine the types of niches that they use. Data therefore stems from the CSOs’ websites and supporting documentation, including manifestos, ‘About Us’ pages, annual reports and press releases, supplemented by the semi-structured interviews with representatives from six of the CSOs. All raw data are available in the Annex.<sup>5</sup>

The method used is set-theoretic typology building, which uses principles of Qualitative Comparative analysis (QCA) (Ragin, 1987) to group cases and uncover core features that differentiate the cases (Colli, 2019). A crisp-set QCA is performed with each niche type used as a condition, coded 1 for the use of that niche and 0 for the absence. A dummy outcome of 1 is coded for all cases, to allow for logical minimisation using the R package SetMethods (Oana & Schneider, 2018). The advantage of this method is that whilst it generates ‘core’ features that

distinguish each type of group, it maintains combinations of conditions in the final outcomes, thereby capturing the idea of configurational organisational niches.

The rest of this article proceeds in three parts. First, I present the results of the typology when all CSOs are included. This result is most useful for comparing older and younger groups. Then, I present the typology of young climate CSOs, before presenting the typology of older organisations, which are better to show the different types of CSOs within each sub-group of CSOs. The goal of presenting both the combined and separate analyses is to highlight the key differentiating elements amongst each group of organisations. I conclude by comparing the findings and discussing key features that emerge from the typology.

## Configurational Niches in Dutch Climate CSOs

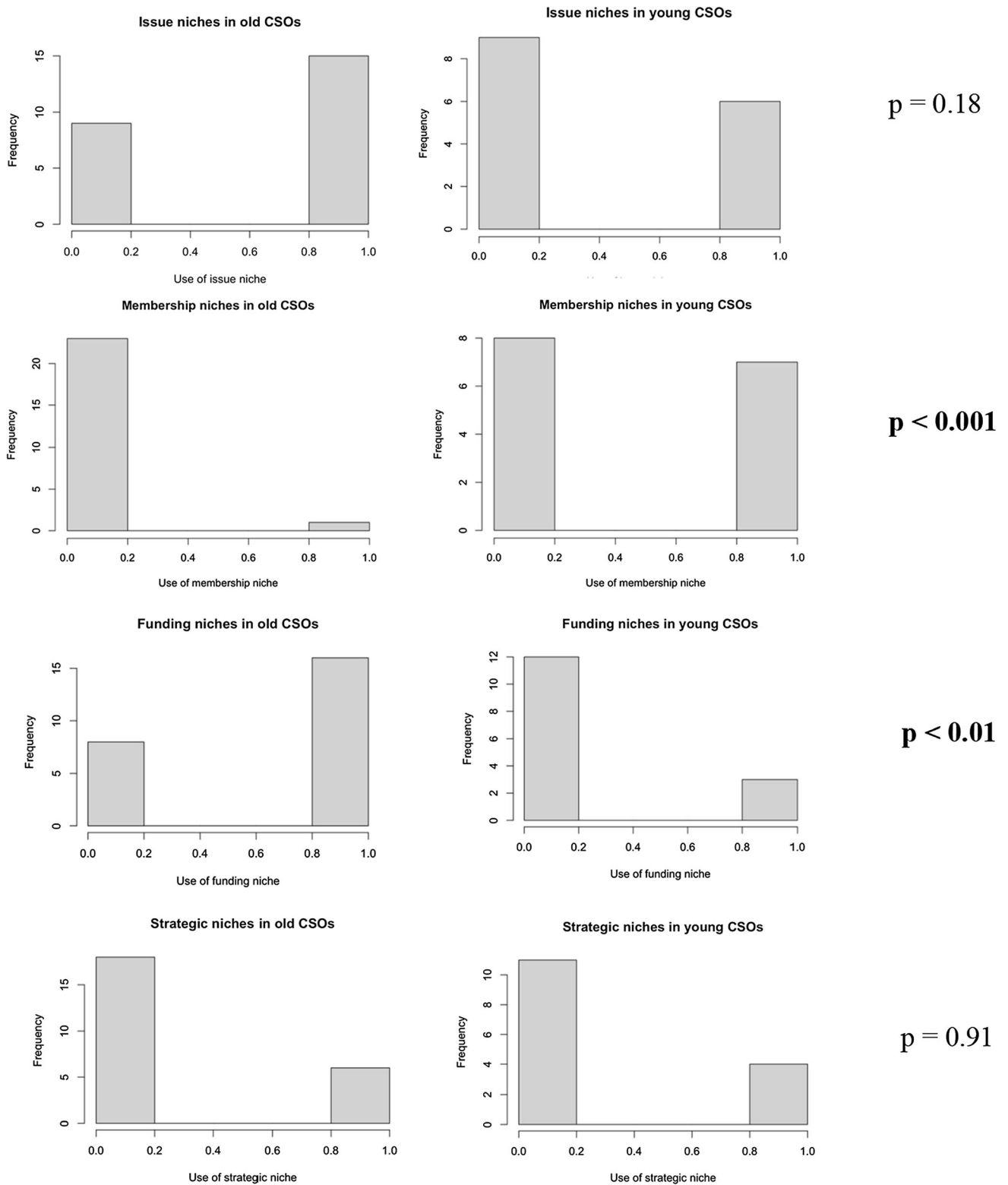
### All CSOs

Histograms comparing the use of issue niches, membership niches, and funding niches in younger and older CSOs are shown below (Fig. 2). Two-tailed *t*-tests were conducted to identify significant differences between older and younger groups. Older groups overall tend to appeal to the general population more than younger groups, which tend to narrow down their membership ( $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, over 50% of older groups have a stable source of funding, whilst only 20% of young CSOs do ( $p < 0.01$ ). Perhaps surprisingly, there is no significant difference in old and young CSOs’ use of strategies, or the issue that they focus on. This is discussed in detail below.

The set-theoretic typology building sorted CSOs into three main types, each covered by one combination of niches. Some CSOs fall into two different types; this is accepted in set theory and reflects the reality that different types of CSOs are not clear-cut, but rather loose and overlapping.

From this typology, we can see that most CSOs (Type 1, 31/39) do not narrow down their membership, but rather construct niches in other ways. Examining the dataset and comparing across types show that most of these actually narrow down the issue that they work on: all CSOs that fall into Type 1 and not Type 2 or 3 actually use an issue niche. Type 2 use non-innovative strategies and work on a general issue. Eight of the eleven CSOs in this category are young organisations, including Grootouders voor het Klimaat (Grandparents for Climate) and Jonge Klimaatbeweging (Young Climate Movement). However, one of the largest older CSOs also fits into this category—Milieudefensie (Friends of the Earth Netherlands). Type 3 consists of CSOs without stable financing and working on a general

<sup>5</sup> Available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/R3QUYV>.



**Fig. 2** Differences between young and old CSOs: histograms and t tests

issue. Seven of the ten CSOs here are also young organisations, which are less likely to have a stable financing source. The older groups that fall into this category—

Mobilisation for the Environment, Stichting Aarde (Foundation Earth) and Vereniging Leefmilieu (Federation

**Table 2** Typology of all CSOs. Young organisations are listed in bold

Type	Configuration	Coverage	Cases covered
1	~MEM <sup>a</sup> general membership	0.80 (31/39 groups)	A SEED, ARK Natuurontwikkeling, Bomenstichting, Both Ends, Bureau Burgerberaad, Code Rood, Comité Schone Lucht, Das&Boom, Extinction Rebellion, De Faunabescherming, Fossilvrij NL, Greenpeace, Kust & Zee, Land van Ons, Landschappen NL, Milieudefensie, Mobilisation for the Environment, Natuur en Milieu, Natuurmonumenten, Sea Shepherd NL, Stichting Aarde, Stichting de Noordzee, Stop Ecocide, Surfrider NL, Tree Union, Urgenda, Vereniging Leefmilieu, De Vlinderstichting, Vogelbescherming NL, WWF NL, Zoogdiervereniging NL
2	~STR*~ISS non-innovative strategies, general issue	0.28 (11/39 groups)	Grootouders voor het Klimaat, Jonge Klimaatbeweging, Milieudefensie, Mobilisation for the Environment, Scientists 4 Future, Studenten voor Morgen, Teachers for Climate, Youth for Climate, Zorg voor Klimaat
3	~FIN*~ISS no stable financing source, general issue	0.26 (10/39 groups)	Code Rood, Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, Mobilisation for the Environment, Stichting Aarde, Scientists 4 Future, Teachers for Climate, Vereniging Leefmilieu, Youth for Climate, Zorg voor Klimaat

<sup>a</sup>In Boolean notation, ~ indicates the absence of a feature, whilst \* indicates logical AND (the presence of two different features at the same time)

**Table 3** Post-QCA cluster analysis

	~MEM (1)	~STR*~ISS (2)	~FIN*~ISS (3)
Proportion of old groups covered	0.96	0.21	0.13
Proportion of young groups covered	0.53	0.40	0.47

Environment)—are all smaller CSOs that are based on grassroots mobilisation and volunteer work (Table 2).

Backing up the qualitative findings above, a post-QCA cluster analysis (Table 3) shows that old CSOs overwhelmingly fall into the first type, i.e. CSOs with a general membership. On the other hand, young CSOs fall relatively equally into the third and first types, and less into the second.

### Young CSOs

Young CSOs fall into four types (see Table 4). Type 1 is made up of young CSOs with a specific membership and using non-innovative strategies, whilst type 2 consists of young CSOs working on a specific issue and using non-innovative strategies. Type 3 is made up of young CSOs with a general membership and no stable financing source. Together, the first three types show that young groups *either* narrow down their membership (type 1, 6/15 CSOs) or narrow down the issue that they work on (types 2 and 3, 6/15 CSOs); no young CSOs do both.

Interestingly, the only group that falls into type 2, but not type 3 is Land van Ons (Our Land), a CSO that purchases agricultural land conduct ecological farming and restore biodiversity. It therefore works on a specific issue with non-innovative strategies, yet has a stable financing source—unlike the groups in type 2. This can be explained by its unique structure as a cooperative, which allows it to

have a stable source of financing from cooperative members.

Finally, type 4 is made up of three general-issue groups that use innovative strategies with no stable financing source. This groups three quite new and well-known CSOs that use different forms of civil disobedience: Extinction Rebellion and Code Rood (Code Red), both of which use non-violent direct action, and Fridays for Future, using school strikes.

### Old CSOs

Strikingly, all old CSOs except for one fall into type 1, using a general membership (see Table 5). Only Studenten voor Morgen (Students for Tomorrow) uses a membership niche (type 2). This means that type 1 is actually a relatively diverse set of CSOs, covering specific issue and non-specific issue groups as well as ones with and without stable funding. Focussing on Studenten voor Morgen, we can see that it is actually quite similar to the first type of young CSOs: it uses non-innovative strategies, works on a general issue, and targets a specific membership. Yet, it has found a stable financing source and managed to survive across the years. This is discussed in more detail below.



**Table 4** Typology of young CSOs

Type	Configuration	Coverage	Cases covered
1	MEM*~STR*~ISS Specific membership, non-innovative strategy and general issue	0.40 (6/15 groups)	Grootouders voor het Klimaat, Jonge Klimaatbeweging, Scientists 4 Future, Teachers for Climate, Youth for Climate, Zorg voor Klimaat
2	~MEM*~STR*ISS General membership, non-innovative strategy and specific issue	0.33 (5/15 groups)	Bureau Burgerberaad, Comité Schone Lucht, Fossielvrij NL, Stop Ecocide, Tree Union, Land van Ons
3	~MEM*~FIN*ISS General membership, no stable financing and specific issue	0.333 (5/15 groups)	Bureau Burgerberaad, Comité Schone Lucht, Fossielvrij NL, Stop Ecocide, Tree Union
4	~FIN*STR*~ISS No stable financing, innovative strategies and general issue	0.20 (3/15 groups)	Code Rood, Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future

**Table 5** Typology of old CSOs

Type	Configuration	Coverage	Cases covered
1	~MEM General membership	0.96 (23/24 groups)	A SEED, ARK Natuurontwikkeling, Bomenstichting, Both Ends, Das&Boom, De Faunabescherming, Greenpeace, Kust en Zee, Landschappen NL, Milieudefensie, Mobilisation for the Environment, Natuur en Milieu, Natuurmonumenten, Sea Shepherd NL, Stichting Aarde, Stichting de Noordzee, Surfrider NL, Urgenda, Vereniging Leefmilieu, De Vlinderstichting, Vogelbescherming NL, WWF NL, Zoogdierverseniging NL
2	FIN*~STR*ISS Financing niche, non-innovative strategies and specific issue	0.36 (4/24 groups)	ARK Natuurontwikkeling, Bomenstichting, Both Ends, Das & Boom, Landschappen NL, Natuurmonumenten, Stichting de Noordzee, Studenten voor Morgen, Vogelbescherming NL

## Discussion

Three main points emerge from the comparison of the different types and groups: the importance of stable financing; the relative irrelevance of strategies; and the mutual exclusivity of membership and issue niches.

First, the typology shows that younger groups are much less likely than older ones to have a stable financing source. This is of course at least partly because any cross-sectional sample will have survivor bias, as the only older groups included in the sample are those which have lasted. The need for a stable financing niche has emerged in previous literature (Berny, 2018; Heylen et al., 2018). The results here reinforce this, showing that for the most part, groups that endure are those that have found a stable funding source—whether public or private.

Second, and contrary to what one might expect based on previous research into the effect of age and professionalisation on CSO strategies (Berny, 2018; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2019), strategies did not differ significantly between

older and younger CSOs. Only a minority of CSOs use innovative strategies, whether young or old. Although a subset of younger groups does use innovative strategies (represented in type 4 of our typology of young CSOs), other young CSOs resemble more ‘traditional’ CSOs. This is particularly surprising in the Dutch neo-corporatist context, which was expected to increase differences in access (and therefore strategies) between young and old CSOs. Given that the strong difference in financing between young and old CSOs is not reflected in a difference in strategies, the results indicate that strategies may be a less relevant difference than we would expect. Although groups using novel and media-worthy strategies such as civil disobedience may get most attention in the media, they do not paint an accurate picture of young climate groups.

Finally, the results here actually showed that two of the most frequently studied niche types—issue and membership—are actually used almost mutually exclusively. There is only one group in this sample that uses both an issue and

a membership niche: Studenten voor Morgen (discussed below). All other groups either narrow down the issue that they work on and target a broad membership, or they target a specific subsection of the population and focus on climate more generally. They then further specialise based on the strategies that they use or the type of funding that they approach.

Moreover, the descriptive statistics and overall typology show that a key difference between older and younger CSOs is their use of membership and issue niches. This reinforces previous discussion of issue and membership as two of the most important ways that groups create their own niches (Heaney, 2004). Whilst around half of young CSOs narrow down their potential supporters, older CSOs overwhelmingly target a broad public, echoing previous findings that CSOs tend to target a broad membership in the early days of a policy field, and only later start to develop membership niches (Chamberlain, 2009). The opposite relationship exists for issue niches: 70% of old CSOs narrow down the issue they work on, whilst only 40% of younger CSOs do so. The fact that issue niches are so widely used, particularly amongst older CSOs, may explain why this is such a frequently studied type of niche in the existing literature (Browne, 2006; Soule & King, 2008).

Why do we see this pattern in membership and issue niches? I suggest two potential explanations. One is based on the historical period and the state of environment/climate policy at the time of groups' foundation. Older groups led the way by carving out niches by issue; this was probably relatively natural as the main issues on the agenda at this time were conservation and environmental protection, allowing groups to narrow down issues accordingly (Berny & Rootes, 2018). For example, all the CSOs dealing with conservation were founded in or prior to the 1980s, including specific groups for the protection of birds, butterflies and dragonflies, rodents, trees, marine life, and badgers. A new conservation organisation would have difficulty establishing itself amongst these older groups. On the other hand, climate by itself is now a more salient policy issue. It is now a viable strategy to narrow down potential membership instead, of course made easier through the Internet, allowing members of a similar population to communicate easily.

The second explanation is based on organisations' age and survivor bias. It may be that groups that use membership niches struggle to survive over the long term. Narrowing down membership not only narrows down the potential pool of volunteers to carry on the organisation, but it may also make it more difficult to get subsidies or general funding for the organisation, as funding bodies may prefer to fund groups that reflect the broader population. Groups may indeed have used membership niches in the

past, but it is difficult to confirm this given the lack of historical or modern lists of existing NGOs. Examining Studenten voor Morgen—the only older group to use a membership niche—can help to examine the extent to which this might be true. Established in the 1990s, Studenten voor Morgen now receives ongoing subsidies specifically from two broader networks that it belongs to (Coöperatie Leren voor Morgen (Learning for Tomorrow) and DUO). Yet, the organisation is still trying to get more financial independence by finding other sources of financing (Organisational Strategy Studenten Voor Morgen 2020, 2020). Moreover, being a student-led association could be considered a relatively well-defined and natural niche—more students will always arrive, and students as a group tend to have more time to devote to volunteer activities—which could help to explain the longevity of the organisation. It is more difficult to imagine other professions or less well-defined groups that would be able to continue working with volunteers for such a long time.

## Conclusion

This paper started from the observation that there has been a rise in CSOs working on climate policy since the rise in salience of the climate crisis, with direct actions and confrontational strategies often in the public eye. The typologies presented here show that older and younger climate CSOs in the Netherlands do seem to differ significantly, namely through the membership/issue divide: half of young organisations use membership niches, whilst older organisation tend to narrow down an issue niche. Moreover, older groups are much more likely to have found a stable financing source. Yet, contrary to what one might expect and what some previous literature has found in other contexts (Berny, 2018; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2019), strategies did not differ significantly between older and younger groups. The Netherlands was chosen as a most-likely case for differences between old and young CSOs in part because of public funding for older CSOs. In more pluralist contexts, funding differences may therefore be somewhat less important. Yet, this also makes it all the more surprising that the difference in strategies was less pronounced amongst Dutch CSOs, when this is so frequently highlighted in the literature.

The current results invite future research into several dimensions. The crisp-set conditions used here mean that some measurements are relatively rough: for example, the use of a financing niche does not distinguish between public or private financing, which may have different effects (Chewinski & Corrigan-Brown, 2020). Future studies could refine these measurements for further qualitative and quantitative research, for instance by using

fuzzy-set QCA or factor analysis. Moreover, one potential organisational that is not discussed here is that of the involvement of members in CSOs' governance, even though existing research tells us that older, more professionalised groups tend to have less membership democracy (Bolleyer & Correa, 2022). Whilst data were collected on this condition and is available in the online appendix, not all groups had publicly available information on their governance practices; moreover, there was diversity in how members were included, making systematic coding difficult. Follow-up research could qualitatively compare governance practices in CSOs and the extent to which they contribute to organisational niches. Finally, the discussion in the previous section shows that the current study's design cannot fully differentiate between explanations that are based on organisations' *age* and those based on the *historical period* in which they were founded. Future research could adopt a historical perspective to examine and compare current 'young' groups with groups that were 'young' in another historical period, building on similar studies that take a historical angle to study organisational development (e.g. Berny, 2018; Halpin, 2014).

The results presented in this article paint a more nuanced picture of the landscape of climate and environmental CSOs. Whilst some young CSOs do use controversial strategies to carve out a niche and a 'brand' for themselves, they are not as common as media coverage would indicate. This reflects positively on the diversity of climate CSOs, indicating that a range of groups are still able to form and take action, at least in the Netherlands, using both innovative and more conventional strategies. This may have positive implications for the effectiveness of actions: as others have suggested, the overall success of a movement may be enhanced by a range of different organisational types and actions (Bertels et al., 2014). Policymakers at various levels should work to listen to groups with a range of different organisational forms and build on their different insights, whilst scholars studying the climate movement should be wary of overly focussing on the groups that get the most media attention and ignoring diversity in the CSO population. Gaining a more complete understanding of the overall population of CSOs is vital to understand how these organisations can work to impact climate policy and governance for the future.

### List of Interviews

1. Jonge Klimaatbeweging, 17 November 2021 (videocall).
2. Grootouders voor het Klimaat, 22 November 2021 (videocall).
3. Extinction Rebellion Nederland, 24 November 2021 (videocall).
4. Zorg voor Klimaat, 24 November 2021 (videocall).
5. Scientists4Future Nederland, 26 November 2021 (videocall).
6. Stop Ecocide Nederland, 30 November 2021 (videocall).

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