

# The multi-territorial entrepreneurial ecosystem

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## Résumé :

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This article conceptualizes a multi-territorial entrepreneurial ecosystem (MTEE), i.e. an entrepreneurial ecosystem which covers several territories. This article aims to reply to the following research question: How do territories interact within a multi-territorial entrepreneurial ecosystem? This article is based on a single case study involving 29 semi-structured interviews with different types of actors from the three territories concerned, as well as secondary data. The results show that there are converging forces, such as the actions each territory performs individually for the MTEE to function and the actions all the territories perform collectively, and diverging forces such as different political visions among territories, favoring individual interests and the lack of knowledge of actors in other territories. This article contributes to the spatial perspective of entrepreneurial ecosystems by providing a definition and model of the MTEE, and showing the interactions between territories.

**Mots-clés :** Entrepreneurial ecosystem, Territory, Spatial Perspective, Boundaries

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# **The multi-territorial entrepreneurial ecosystem**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Economic development and value creation on territories are of prime importance, and largely depend on entrepreneurship (Stam, 2015). Entrepreneurial ecosystem is an increasingly used concept for understanding the context for entrepreneurship in particular territories (countries, regions, cities) (Stam & Van De Ven, 2021). Entrepreneurial ecosystem is defined as “institutional and organizational as well as other systemic factors that interact and influence the identification and commercialization of entrepreneurial opportunities. Systems of entrepreneurship are geographically bounded (...).” (Audretsch & Belitski, 2017, p. 1031; Miles et al., 2020) or as “all the interdependent actors and factors that enable and constrain entrepreneurship within a particular territory.” (Stam & Van De Ven, 2021, p. 809). We chose these definitions because they encompass all forms and stages of organizations, not only high growth ones (M. P. Miles et al., 2020), they are grounded on place, and they highlight the interaction and interdependence of the actors and factors.

Territories are defined as “specific institutionalised forms of social representation and domination based upon bounded geographic spaces and/or its populations” (Perkmann, 2007, p. 9). As politics can be seen as the strategic and political actions underlying the formation of territory (Perkmann, 2007; Steinberg, 1994), in this article, we will consider territories as administrative units.

The literature anchors EE in a territorial dimension (Acs et al., 2017; Audretsch & Belitski, 2017; Bruns et al., 2017; Theodoraki & Catanzaro, 2022). EEs are spatially bounded (Audretsch & Belitski, 2021; Malecki, 2018; Stam, 2015). However, their boundaries are not clearly identified (Fischer et al., 2022; Phillips & Srari, 2018; Schäfer, 2021). If some authors anchor

EE in cities (Audretsch et al., 2021), states, metropolitan areas, megaregions or countries (Qian et al., 2013; Stam & Van De Ven, 2021), recent literature emphasizes that EE boundaries do not follow administrative boundaries (Fischer et al., 2022; Schäfer, 2021).

Therefore, we could envision that an EE could span across several administrative regions, i.e. several territories, and thus be a multi-territorial entrepreneurial ecosystem (MTEE). Extant literature on EE have not explored, to our knowledge, such a possibility, which constitutes a gap. Therefore, this article will aim to answer the following research question: How do territories interact within a multi-territorial entrepreneurial ecosystem?

To answer this question, we used Stam's (2015) model of entrepreneurial ecosystems as our theoretical framework because it can be adapted to rural settings (M. P. Miles et al., 2020) and because it is modelling the elements of the EE (Stam & Van De Ven, 2021) that are territorial and can be examined in a multi-territorial setting.

We performed a single-case study with qualitative semi-structured interviews among the actors of a MTEE, namely the GR 736. The GR 736 is a hiking trail following the Tarn river from its spring to Albi in the south of France, across three departments (which are administrative sub-regions) that are distinctive territories presenting differences in their needs, culture regarding nature-based tourism and politic vision. This GR 736 has been created to foster economic activity and entrepreneurship in this particularly depleted region. We consider the GR 736 to be an EE because it encompasses interdependent institutional, organizational as well as other systemic factors (such as departments, communities of municipalities, town councils, tourist offices, hikers' associations, hospitality businesses, mountain guides, canoes rentals, etc.) that interact and influence the identification and commercialization of entrepreneurial opportunities (hospitality opportunities, activities opportunities, etc.) and it is geographically bounded. It thus responds to the definition from Audretsch and Belitski (2017).

The results show that this MTEE exists because it presents an interest for all the involved territories, and that all the actors of GR 736 are interdependent because if one actor in a territory do not want to act for the GR 736, the whole ecosystem is at risk. We find that, in MTEE, the different territories deploy two levels of action. First they act separately on the actions they are responsible for, such as legal work, maintenance and the proposition of relevant accommodation and complementary activities, and second they act collectively with the other territories regarding funding, communication, and logistics. These are the converging forces. The diverging forces would be differences in the political visions, conflicts among decision makers, differences in resource endowments, administrative procedures and operating methods, favoring its own territory at the detriment of the others and finally an absence of links with actors from the other territories. To keep the cohesion among actors and among territories, it may be relevant to recruit a project manager to coordinate the actions and organize cohesive events.

We contribute to the EE literature by providing a model of MTEE and by showing for the first time an EE that span several territories. This contribution is important for managerial reasons since cooperations among territories are increasingly pushed, notably by the European Union (Medeiros et al., 2023). This contribution is also important for theoretical reasons because EE evolve with time (Fischer et al., 2022; Mack & Mayer, 2016; Theodoraki & Catanzaro, 2022), and as they become mature their geographic scope increases (Brown & Mason, 2017), and it would result in EE being more and more multi-territorial as they grow and extend beyond their initial territory to incorporate adjacent territories. Therefore, understanding the intertwining of territories inside EEs is a real stake.

In the first section we detail extant research on the spatial perspective of EE and Stam's (2015) model in which we anchor this study. In the second section we explain the single case study, in

the third section we show the converging and diverging forces that are discussed in the fourth section. In conclusion we display theoretical and managerial implications, followed by the limits and perspectives of this study.

## **1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this literature review, we will first delineate the literature on the spatial perspective of EE, then explain our theoretical framework: Stam's (2015) model.

### **1.1. THE SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS**

The spatial perspective of EE literature emphasizes the territorial anchoring of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Acs et al., 2017; Audretsch & Belitski, 2017; Bruns et al., 2017; Stam & Van De Ven, 2021; Theodoraki & Catanzaro, 2022). This perspective examines the consequences of territorial specificities on the durability of the EE (Theodoraki & Catanzaro, 2022).

EEs are spatially bounded (Audretsch & Belitski, 2021; Malecki, 2018; Stam, 2015), and present different abilities to connect entrepreneurial stakeholders, generate knowledge within specific cognitive, geographical, organizational and social proximities (Boschma, 2005) depending on the territory (Schäfer, 2021). Phillips and Srai (2018) explored ecosystems' boundaries, but adopted an agent-centered approach that did not consider the geographical nature of linkages. In the literature, the nature and type of territory covered by EE are different depending on the studies. The spatial unit considered in empirical papers may be the country, the region, the city, or something smaller, such as a university, an incubator, or an accelerator (Spigel et al., 2020), depending on the available data (Schäfer, 2021), on the targeted audience,

or on which spatial unit of analysis most adequately covers the relevant mechanisms in the context of entrepreneurship (Stam & Van De Ven, 2021).

EE are place-dependent mechanisms that need to be studied in their geographical context (Martin & Sunley, 2006), and Qian et al. (2013) state that EE should have identifiable boundaries, but they don't help in defining these boundaries. Indeed, there is a conceptual and empirical ambiguity around the spatial boundary of ecosystems (Wurth et al., 2022). Some authors argue that EE boundaries do not follow administrative boundaries (Fischer et al., 2022; Schäfer, 2021), and should be studied according to their formative processes, rather than reflect predefined political or administrative boundaries (Carayannis et al., 2018). For Schäfer (2021), studying the spatiality of EE would disconnect them from administrative areas (nations, states, counties, cities), would enable researchers to think of EE in new spatial settings (e.g., across borders, transnational connections) and to consider the spatial characteristics within entrepreneurial ecosystems.

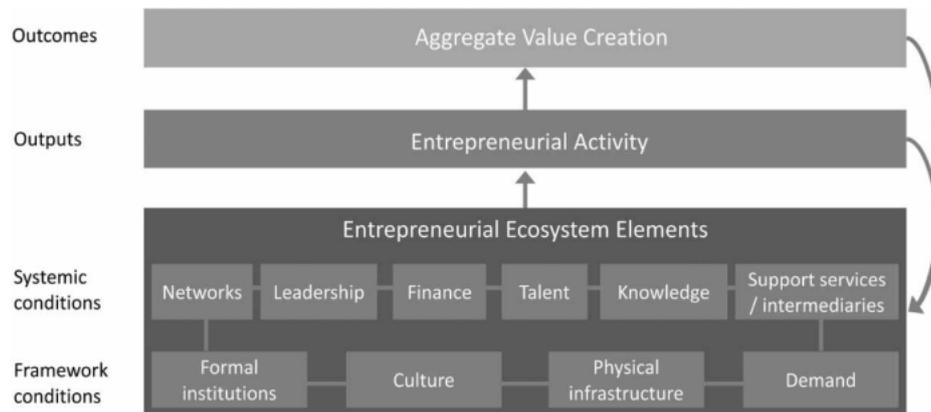
Some authors therefore argue in favor of considering an extended spatiality of EEs, as their spatial reach evolves over time and maturity stages (Brown & Mason, 2017; Mack & Mayer, 2016). The digital economy also extends the boundaries of the EE (Autio et al., 2005), as well as the transregional or transnational relationships between entrepreneurial ecosystems through knowledge (Bathelt & Henn, 2014), migration (Drori et al., 2009) or the financing of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Schäfer, 2021).

Yet, while the spatial perspective of EEs is oriented towards an examination of the territorial expansion of EEs, to our knowledge no research has investigated the internal spatiality of EEs, which constitutes a gap. To fill this gap, we chose Stam's (2015) model explained in the next section.

## 1.2. THE ELEMENTS OF EE

The constituting elements of EE, such as resources, institutions, and networks including small firms, larger incumbents, universities, venture capitalists, culture and governments, are embedded in geographical settings (Fischer et al., 2022; Malecki, 2018; Stam & Van De Ven, 2021).

The elements are grouped in Stam's (2015) model, that is reproduced in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: Key elements, outputs and outcomes of entrepreneurial ecosystem, reproduced from Stam (2015)**

According to Stam (2015), the framework conditions enabling or constraining human interaction includes formal institutions, that are the rules of the game in society, culture, physical infrastructure as the physical context enabling actors to reach physical proximity, and demand for the goods and services. These framework conditions are linked to systemic conditions that lead to entrepreneurial activity, such as networks of entrepreneurs providing an information flow, enabling an effective distribution of labour and capital, leadership providing direction and role models for the entrepreneurial ecosystem, finance that is crucial for the success of the EE, talent that is the presence of a diverse and skilled group of workers, knowledge as a source of opportunities, and support services by a variety of intermediaries to

the lower entry barriers for new entrepreneurial projects. These framework and systemic conditions lead to entrepreneurial activity as an output, that leads to aggregate value creation as an outcome.

This model have later been used by Miles et al. (2020) who develop their model of rural EE and adapt Stam's (2015) model to the leadership and market creation specificities of rural settings. Stam and Van De Ven (2021) also used this model and demonstrate the interdependence between the ten observable entrepreneurial ecosystem elements, an upward causation, i.e. that the these elements explain the levels of entrepreneurial activity in a territory, and a downward causation i.e. prior entrepreneurial activities feedback into entrepreneurial ecosystem elements in a territory. This framework therefore seems promising to examine a MTEE, its elements and the interactions among its constitutive territories.

To sum up the literature, there are calls for research on the spatiality of EE (Stam et al., 2022), and extant research concentrates on the territorial expansion of EEs. To our knowledge, no research has studied EE spanning across several territories, which is important to investigate because of the evolution of EE over time (Fischer et al., 2022; Brown & Mason, 2017), leading to multi-territoriality as they incorporate neighboring territories. Stam's (2015) model is relevant to examine the MTEE and reply to our research question : How do territories interact within a multi-territorial entrepreneurial ecosystem?

## **2. METHOD**

To answer the research question, we implemented a single case-study of the GR 736. The context and the data collection and analysis are presented below.

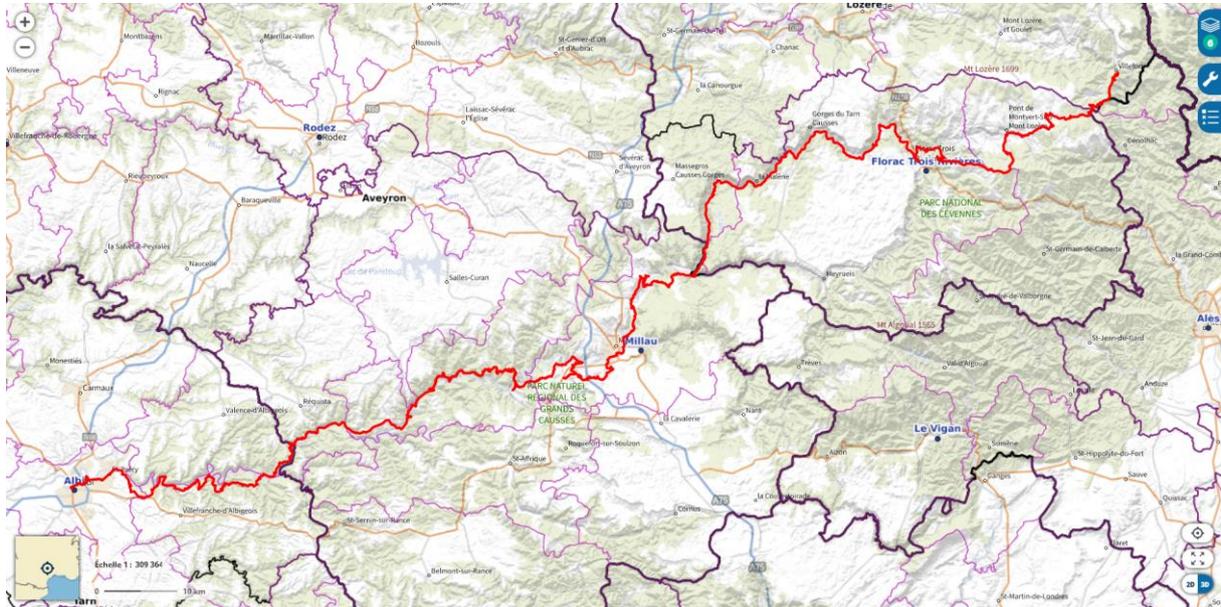
### **2.1. CONTEXT**

We chose to perform this study in France because it is a country where the institutional setting is particularly interesting, with many scales and each scale having its share of specific responsibilities. The administrative scales of the territory in France start with the Municipality, that are grouped in Communities of Municipalities, that are grouped in “Departments”, that are grouped in Regions, which together constitute the French State.

The GR 736 is a trail known as a "Grande Randonnée" (Great Hike), which means a marked hiking trail of considerable length, designed for multi-day or even multi-week journeys. These trails crisscross a region or several “departments”, sometimes incorporating historical routes or being established due to notable geographical elements of interest. In France, they are overseen by the French Hiking Federation (Fédération Française de Randonnée). The cumulative distance of the GR hiking trails in France exceeds 60,000 km.

We chose to study the GR 736 because of its potential attractiveness. It runs for 310 km, following the river Tarn from its spring to Albi, spanning three departments (Lozère, Aveyron, Tarn), connecting Mount Lozère to the episcopal city of Albi in 15 to 17 stages. This trail passes through few urban areas, standing out for the diversity of its landscapes and its itinerary along the Tarn River. It crosses magnificent sites of high tourist value, such as the narrow passages of the Gorges du Tarn, the Cévennes National Park, the Grands Causses Regional Natural Park (PNR in French for Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses), Millau and its Viaduct, the Larzac Plateau, the cliffs of the Raspes, and the isthmus of Ambialet. Notably, it is characterized by its multimodal nature, as the trail can be undertaken by canoe, flat boat, mountain bike, or horseback on certain stages. Figure 1 shows a map of GR 736 across the 3 departments, namely Lozère, Aveyron and Tarn. The departments of Lozère, Aveyron, and Tarn are in the southern part of France, in the Occitanie region. These predominantly rural areas are characterized by low population density and preserved natural heritage. Tourism plays a significant role in these

departments. The “Comité d’itinéraire” is the governance structure of GR 736, gathering representatives of the three departments.



**Fig. 1: Map of the GR 736**

## 2.2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

We implemented a single-case study (Eisenhardt, 1989) because it allows to understand complex phenomenon involving multiple actors. We conducted 27 semi-structured interviews in 2023 with town councils, communities of municipalities, departments, local offices of the French hiking federation, tourist offices, hotels, stopover lodge, grocery store, complementary activities, mountain guides and hikers. We gathered 27 hours of interview. The interviews are presented in Table 1.

The selection criteria for choosing respondents are that they are directly linked with the GR 736, either by using it (hikers), by getting some business from it (hotels, mountain guides) or by acting to develop it.

**Table 1: Respondents of the GR 736 case study**

<b>ORGANIZATION OF AFFILIATION</b>	<b>POSITION OF THE RESPONDENT</b>	<b>LENGTH OF THE INTERVIEW (IN MIN)</b>
<b>Territorial Attractiveness Agency (Lozère)</b>	Director	73
<b>Territorial Attractiveness Agency (Lozère)</b>	Technician	96
<b>European Stevenson Network (Lozère)</b>	President	101
<b>Tourist office 1 (Lozère)</b>	Communication Manager	39
<b>Town council 1 (Lozère)</b>	Tourism Delegate	66
<b>Hotel 1 (Lozère)</b>	Owner	10
<b>Hotel 2 (Lozère)</b>	Owner	5
<b>Hotel 3 (Lozère)</b>	Owner	5
<b>Hotel 4 (Lozère)</b>	Owner	5
<b>Hikers (Lozère)</b>	Hickers	2
<b>Canoe rental company 1 (Lozère)</b>	CEO	22
<b>Canoe rental company 2 (Lozère)</b>	CEO	19
<b>Boatmen (Lozère)</b>	Co-leader	63
<b>French Hiking Federation (Lozère)</b>	President and technician	78
<b>Mountain guides (Lozère)</b>	CEOs	64
<b>Lozère Department</b>	Outdoor activities and sensitive natural areas manager	106
<b>Town council 2 and Community of municipalities (Aveyron)</b>	Mayor and vice-president of the community of municipalities (same person with two roles)	100
<b>French Hiking Federation (Aveyron)</b>	President and technician	104
<b>Hotel 5 (Aveyron)</b>	Owners	62
<b>Departmental Hiking Committee (Tarn)</b>	President	130
<b>Departmental Hiking Committee (Tarn)</b>	Animateur	14
<b>Stopover lodge (Tarn)</b>	Owner	222
<b>Hotel 6 (Tarn)</b>	CEO	92
<b>Grocery store (Tarn)</b>	Vendeuse	3
<b>Tourist office 2 (Tarn)</b>	Director	30
<b>Tourist office 3 (Tarn)</b>	Director	93
<b>Community of municipalities (Tarn)</b>	Soft mobility department manager	16
<b>Total length of the interviews</b>		<b>27h00min</b>

The respondents were asked about their activity and their role on the territory, their links with other actors involved in the GR 736, and what the GR 736 represents for them. They were

questioned about how to make a good hiking trail, the seasonality of the activity on the GR 736, the potential competition between the different segments constituting it, and the difference between the GR 736 and other hiking trails. Then they were asked about the role they play in the emergence of the GR 736, the governance of this GR, the coordination between the actors of different segments, the involvement of institutions in its development and the perspectives. These interviews were conducted face-to-face, except for one which took place by videoconference.

We also used secondary data, i.e. archival data gathered from the respondent's websites and documentation, in order to increase the reliability of the results. We used thematic coding (Huberman & Miles, 1994) because it allows both an overview of what has been said and a clear vision within each thematic node. These primary and secondary data were triangulated to ensure the robustness of our results (M. B. Miles et al., 2019).

### **3. RESULTS**

#### **3.1. RAISON D'ÊTRE OF THE MTEE**

The results show that this multi-territorial EE exists because it has an interest for the different territories, as stated by Town council 2: *"I think that it's above all the result of the will, the political will in particular, to try to do something for this sector of our territories, not of our: of our territories. [...] One of GR's virtues is to keep everyone from going off in all directions, and to try to think collectively and collegially"*. The GR 736 is very important for the economic development of these territories, and one of the leaders of the Stevenson Trail, another well-known hiking trail in the same region explains the outcomes of the Stevenson Trail on the territory: *"We're talking about €7,000,000 in economic impact for the entire Trail, every year, maybe even a little more. [...] Hospitality businesses are the main beneficiaries, of course, but*

*they are not the only ones: there are also the bistros, the shops that open, the public services that reopen or are maintained, thanks to the trail. It has a considerable impact on the territory.”*

Town council 2 explains that the actors of the different territories are totally interdependent: *“If a town council, or a local authority, is no longer interested ... That's a bit of a risk too. If tomorrow I tell everyone in [Town council 2] that we don't give a damn about tourism, that we will do something else, it's complicated. We've tried, I'd like to say, to row in the same direction as the others”* and also that the various actors are interdependent: *“All actors are essential. We can't do without landowners, we can't do without maintenance, we can't do without local shops, we can't do without accommodation”*.

### **3.2. ACTIONS**

Each territory has to implement some actions independently for the GR 736 to succeed. Each territory is responsible for the legal aspect of the GR 736, and has to act to obtain the right-of-way for the hiking trail on private land. Each territory is responsible for trail development, clearing, marking, etc., which is the responsibility of the communities of municipalities and often delegated to hikers' associations, as stated by the Territorial Attractiveness Agency: *“All this work was carried out by the Communities of Municipalities”*. Each territory has to put in place logistics to get hikers from one point to another, so that they can get to the start of their hike or to another stopover point. Each territory must provide the necessary services in terms of accommodation, grocery stores and complementary activities, as explained by Town council 1: *“The difficulties are more of a private nature, because it means that there has to be accommodation available on these trails”*.

The territories also have to implement collective actions in terms of promotion, to choose a logo, create a website, think about the storytelling of the destination and produce a touristic map and the elements of the “topoguide” a book with all the indications of the hikers as

explained by Tourist office 1: *“At the tourist offices, we talk about it, we learn about the GR, where it goes, even in areas we don't know. Because there are areas that are outside our territory, and it's true that we're on a GR that's 300 km long, so we can't know the whole trail. But [...] the idea is to promote the whole trail”* and by the Territorial Attractiveness Agency: *“And then set up marketing/communication operations. We're in the process of setting up a website, we're working on the storytelling of the destination [...] And it was at this point that we became aware of the importance of bringing together the tourist offices in particular, in conjunction with the professionals, to promote tourism on the itinerary”*. Part of the logistics is also common, with the appointment of a company specialized in the transport of luggage from one stopover to another, as explained by Tourist office 1: *“There is always this possibility with the Malle Postale”*. The financing of the hiking trail is also common, as described by the Territorial Attractiveness Agency: *“We held a meeting of the Comité d'Itinéraire, financial applications were submitted through the GIP Massif Central, and we obtained subsidies from the European Union, FEDER, regional and departmental levels, as well as from the French government, FNADT. The project was set up collectively, and in the end it was the local authorities who carried out the work, but this still enabled us to benefit from almost 80% funding for the work”*. Finally there is also a shared improvement process with collective suggestion boxes in the tourist offices, as explained by the Territorial Attractiveness Agency: *“Start working collectively, have idea boxes managed collectively and not for each Tourist Office, and set up working tools to make things easier for hikers”*.

### **3.3. DIVERGING FORCES**

Actors and territories are interdependent, but diverging views can threaten cohesion between them. These may be different political visions. The territories have differing needs of this GR 736 for their economic activity, differing path dependency and historical industries and differing problems to overcome. For instance, the Lozère territory at least for the Mont Lozère

part, is already well known of the hikers because a lot of hiking trails cross this territory, such as the Stevenson trail, sharing a part of the itinerary of the GR 736. The problem in this part of Lozère is that there is not enough accommodation for all the hikers, as explained by Town council 1: *“It competes with the Stevenson on the first part, on the "Haut Tarn" part, and we've clearly seen that it's going to be complicated”*. The Aveyron territory tries to develop nature-based tourism and lacks hiking trails, they have a specific need for this GR 736 and have been developing nature-based sportive events such as the Templier's trail, as stated by the Territorial Attractiveness Agency: *“In Aveyron, there was perhaps a certain lack of GR [...] They felt a particular interest in promoting this GR in terms of tourism, and so they took the lead”*. Finally, the Tarn territory do not have a real need of the GR 736 and historically develops more agriculture than nature-based tourism, as explained by Town council 2: *“Everyone's trying to make tourism in France. [...] Then perhaps in the Tarn valley, further down, there are municipalities that are less sensitive than we are here, for a whole lot of reasons”*.

There can also be conflicts between decision-makers in different areas, as stated by Town council 2: *“Depending on the elected representatives at the head of the structures, either you have people who get along well and things work out, or you have people for whom things don't work out so well or who don't get along, in which case everyone risks going off to do something else”*. There may be differences in resource endowments, with some territories being richer than others, or in the amount of resources allocated to the MTEE. Nevertheless, the Territorial Attractiveness Agency explained that it has not been the case for GR 736: *“Difficulties often arise from financial problems, and here a good point in relation to the PNR is that they raised the money to enable us to carry out operations, both in terms of restructuring and mediation etc., and they have been very successful, which has made things easier in terms of implementation and continuity”*. There may be differences in the way administrative

procedures operate from one territory to another, as stated by Tourist office 1: *“[The meetings allow us] to gather people from all sectors so that we can hear what everyone has to say and how things work in their area, which may be different from another, because they don't have the same infrastructure or the same operating methods”*. Each territory may be tempted to get more benefits from the GR 736 than the others, as explained by the Territorial Attractiveness Agency: *“Of course, when we work together, there are always times when we all want to promote the interests of our heritage and landscape, and to sell "our" pros on "our" destination, so we're all defending our piece of the pie, which means we have to make compromises, and look at the collective interest rather than the personal one”*. Finally, not all the players in the various territories know each other, as illustrates Town council 2: *“I don't really meet people from the Mont Lozère area, and I don't get much contact with people downstream from Millau Grands Causses. But on the other hand, with the elected representatives from Florac to the Community of municipality of Millau, yes of course we meet and talk”*.

The actors leading the actions are heterogeneous depending on the territory, as explained by the Territorial Attractiveness Agency: *“In the Tarn department, it was the Département, but for us[in the Lozère Département], it was the Community of municipalities, because we were already well ahead in terms of nature sports activities, and it was almost a natural thing to do, and I don't think the Département wanted to get involved, and in the Aveyron department, it was the PNR. [...]The idea was to go with the most motivated structures, the ones with the most drive, to get the others on board”*.

The GR 736 has reached cohesion, but is only at the beginning of its development. The Territorial Attractiveness Agency explains that *“I think the PNR's ambition is to create this cohesion between us all, and that's what it claims. [...]And through this Comité d'Itinéraire, we find the Tarn, Lozère and Aveyron. Now they need to keep up this collective momentum across*

*the whole itinerary” and that to overcome the potential diverging views and keep cohesion, a possibility would be to recruit a project manager to coordinate the actions and organize cohesive events on the GR 736 “ If at some point we can manage to propose a full-time position for a project manager, to help us create a link between all these territories, that would be really fabulous. But then there's always the financial argument... And if we manage to get a funded position, that'll be more interesting, but what I'm advocating is that in order to promote tourism, we need someone who can ensure coherence between all the actors and between all the territories”.*

Finally, according to our results, we build the MTEE model presented in Figure 2.

This model shows that the elements are identical for an MTEE as for a uni-territorial EE, but that there is an additional sub-level at the territorial scale. This additional sub-level entails that the action takes place at two levels, a territorial level and a collective multi-territorial level. The converging forces (actions undertaken by the territories for the MTEE to function and succeed), and the diverging forces (that can threaten cohesion between territories) are represented in grey arrows on Fig. 2.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

This article aims to investigate how the different territories interact within a multi-territorial entrepreneurial ecosystem. The results highlight that the different territories act separately on the actions they are responsible for, such as legal work, maintenance and the proposition of relevant accommodation and complementary activities, for the MTEE to function and succeed. They also implement collective actions regarding funding, communication, and logistics.

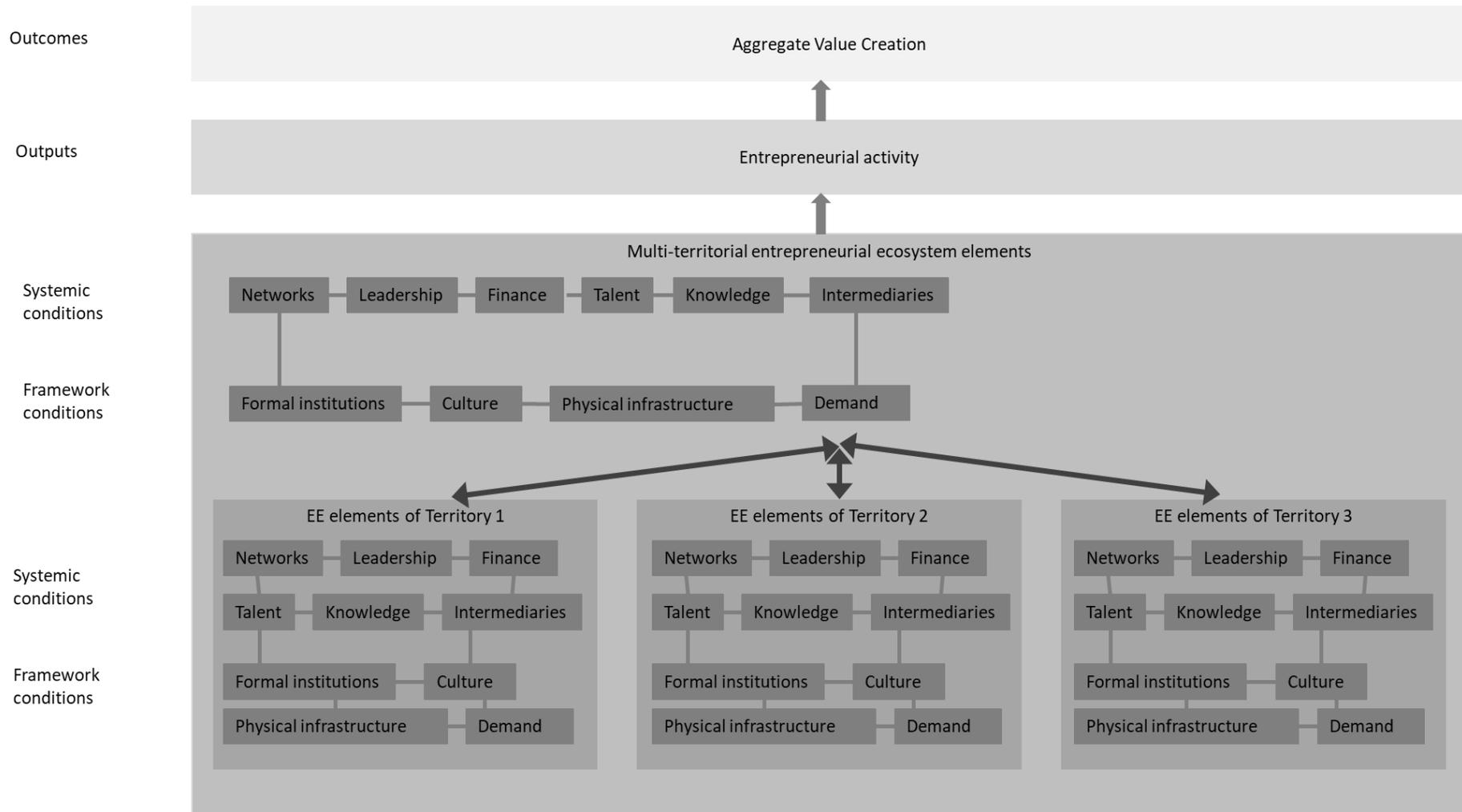
We also found that there can be diverging forces threatening the MTEE, such as different political visions, conflicts among decision makers, differences in resource

endowments, administrative procedures and operating methods, individual interest and finally an absence of links with actors from the other territories. To facilitate cohesion among actors and among territories, recruiting a project manager to coordinate the actions and organize cohesive events may be necessary.

This article builds on previous research works, such as Stam (2015) and Stam and Van De Ven (2021) for the EE constitutive elements, and Fischer et al. (2022) and Schäfer (2021) for the spatiality of EE, to propose a new concept, that of MTEE. We define MTEE as an entrepreneurial ecosystem spanning several territories.

The MTEE is based on the elements of Stam's (2015) model, but declines them among the different territories. We can see that the different elements exist at the level of each territory, but also at the level of MTEE. For example, funding is handled at the level of each territory, but also at the level of the MTEE, with a collective submission of funding applications.

We acknowledge that spatiality is formed of several scales (Medeiros et al., 2023; Schäfer, 2021), and that on the GR 736 we could have chosen the scale of the communities of municipalities or that of the municipalities. We chose the departmental level because, while municipalities are responsible for providing their communal paths, and communities of municipalities are in charge of development and maintenance, decision-making takes place at the departmental level, with the designation of leaders for each department.



**Figure 2: Key elements, outputs and outcomes of MTEE**

↔ **Converging/diverging forces**

We agree with Fischer et al. (2022) and Schäfer (2021) that the EE boundaries do not follow the administrative boundaries. Here, the boundaries of the MTEE are 20 km on either side of a hiking trail that starts in Villefort in Lozère, crosses the Aveyron département, and ends in Albi in the Tarn, following the Tarn river. However, many of the actors who are part of it and act on it have their headquarters outside this MTEE, such as the legal services of the Lozère département, which are in Mende, or the Aveyron FFR, which is in Rodez, the capitals of the departments. As this study concentrates on the internal spatiality of MTEE, we leave for further research the examination of the external spatiality of MTEE.

Some elements of the MTEE are similar to a uni-territorial EE, such as the constituting elements. If the GR 736 was encompassing only one territory, it would still have formal institutions, hospitality businesses, networks, etc. Hence this study shows that in a MTEE, contrarily to a uni-territorial EE, there are diverging forces between the territories, in terms of political vision, resources endowments, administrative procedures, and the actors from one territory don't necessarily know the actors from the same MTEE that are in a different territory. Yet the actors are interdependent and thus have to overcome the fact that don't belong to the same local network, there are differences in the local culture, the talents are different, etc. There are also converging forces, such as common promotion, logistics, financing, and improvement process. Thus the MTEE is different from a uni-territorial EE and incorporates converging and diverging forces among interdependent territories with different characteristics.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

### **5.1. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This article contributes to the spatial perspective of EEs (Acs et al., 2017; Audretsch & Belitski, 2017; Bruns et al., 2017; Theodoraki & Catanzaro, 2022) and responds to a call from Stam et al. (2022) which recommends further study of the spatiality of EEs. Anchored in Stam's

(2015) model, our contribution is to produce the MTEE model and to look for the first time at EE that span several territories. As the spatial extent of EEs increases with age and maturity (Brown & Mason, 2017; Mack & Mayer, 2016), this case will tend to be more and more frequent, and our model will provide a conceptual framework for analyzing such cases.

## **5.2. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

We advise MTEE actors to focus on cohesion and on the adoption of the MTEE by each actor, in order to strengthen its identity and the commitment of each. The recruitment of a coordinator would be a good way of achieving this. This study shows that, apart from the leaders, the actors in the different territories know little about each other. A good idea for the GR736 would be to set up, as for the Stevenson at the time of its launch, a collective walk where the actors from all the territories walk all or part of the GR together, with an official reception at each stage bringing together local authorities, accommodation providers, shopkeepers and complementary activities. This would reinforce both the links and the feeling of belonging to an EE that goes beyond their own territory. Similarly, for EEs involving several urban areas, organizing an event with a reception on each of the territories concerned with local authorities, visits to companies, incubators and accelerators would be a good way of fostering cohesion within the MTEE.

## **5.3. LIMITS AND PERSPECTIVES**

The first limit is that the MTEE studied is located in a rural area (M. P. Miles et al., 2020), and the study would benefit from replication in an urban MTEE, with incubators, accelerators and other specifically urban actors, to see whether the constituent elements of the MTEE are different and whether the forces of convergence and divergence are the same. The second limit

is that this MTEE is strongly rooted in the French institutional setting, so an international comparison is needed to see if the model is reproducible. The third limit is that our study is static, and that this MTEE is only in its launch phase. We propose to extend this study longitudinally, in order to observe the evolution of this MTEE and contribute to the evolutionary perspective of EE (Mack & Mayer, 2016). Finally, this study focuses on the internal spatiality of the MTEE, and considering the external ramifications of an MTEE in comparison with those of a uni-territorial EE could be the subject of future research.

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