Challenging meta-organizations' "inertia": sources and forms

of power in the context of a collective digital innovation

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Résumé :

Cette contribution propose un cadre théorique pour identifier et analyser le pouvoir des méta-organisations, et comment elles utilisent ce pouvoir pour soutenir leurs membres à faire face à des défis émergents. Nous avons construit notre cadre à partir de deux fondations théoriques : la théorie des méta-organisations telle que proposée par Ahrne et Brunsson (2005, 2008); et une perspective sur le pouvoir inter-organisationnel développée par Huxham et Beech (2008). Nous avons testé notre cadre théorique à travers une étude de cas unique : un projet d'innovation numérique conduit par un collectif d'organismes de bassins versants en Amérique du Nord. L'analyse des sources et dimensions du pouvoir tout au long des deux années de projet révèle différentes formes de pouvoir activées successivement par la méta-organisation, selon sa propre appréhension des opportunités du projet. Notre cadre théorique peut être particulièrement utile pour comprendre les choix stratégiques des méta-organisations pour faire face aux défis de leur environnement.

Mots-clés : méta-organisations, organisation partielle, pouvoir, innovation numérique.

Abstract:

This theoretical contribution intends to propose a framework for identifying the power of meta-organizations, and how they use such power to support their members in adapting to emerging challenges. We built a framework out of two key theoretical foundations: the emerging theory of meta-organizations as proposed by Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008); and a perspective on inter-organizational power developed by Huxham and Beech (2008). Our theoretical framework is tested through an exploratory single case study: a digital innovation project conducted by a collective of watershed organizations in North America. By analyzing the sources and dimensions of power at play along a 2-year project, we shed light on various forms of power which were activated by the meta-organizations, according to its own apprehension of the project's evolving opportunities. Our theoretical framework can be particularly useful to understand meta-organizations' strategic choices towards external challenges.

Keywords: meta-organizations, partial organization, power, digital innovation.

Montréal, 3-6 juin 2024

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INTRODUCTION

"Organization requires power and, while not all power requires organization, most does. Power is to organization as oxygen is to breathing" (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 3). Organization scholars' interest is arguably driven by power: we want to understand, explain, and predict how organizations shape, impact, and change individuals' lives. Organizational power is thus commonly envisioned from the perspective of individuals' experiences, should they be positive (generating wealth, preserving peace, offering arenas of democracy…) or negative (marginalizing minorities, feeding violence and war, establishing dictatorships…).

While meta-organizations are present and active in virtually any field and topic, their power may be felt as less tangible from individuals' perspectives. The ongoing war in Israel offer examples where States demonstrate a utmost power to kill, while meta-organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union face criticisms for their inability to act – in the sense of saving lives (Al Jazeera Staff, 2023; Tocci, 2023). From individuals' perspective thus, meta-organizations are often viewed as frameworks of coordination, rather than as actors doted of their own capacity of action. This assumption seems to have influenced organization studies, and probably contributed in decreasing scholars' interest in meta-organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008).

With the concept of *meta-organization*, Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008) proposed a theoretical lens fit to reveal key features specific to a membership composed of organizations – instead of individuals. They especially shed light on members' willingness to preserve their autonomy, which results in meta-organizations characterized by relatively weak authoritative

centers, incapable of imposing hard laws (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018) or managing conflicts with and among their members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005). On the other hand, they pointed out that such characteristics could turn into strengths, when it comes to providing their members with spaces of coopetition needed to produce valuable outputs such as technical standards (Azzam & Berkowitz, 2018).

We argue that a better understanding of meta-organizations' strengths is key, but sufficient, to explain power dynamics within meta-organizations. We understand *strength* as a capacity to act, evolve, and resist external pressures. *Power* is understood as the use of strength to reach objectives, which entails taking decisions and implementing such decisions. In the context of meta-organizations, strength encompasses structural characteristics, and power the mobilization of such characteristics to pursue identified goals. For instance, the European Union's economic strength is composed of the aggregate GDP of its members, and benefits from the participation of industry leaders such as Germany. In the context of a trade facilitation agreement, the European Union benefit from an economic strength enabling it to set standards for protecting consumers and industries. Yet, this strength can be mobilized for various – and sometimes conflicting – goals (e.g.: preserving the environment or stimulating economic growth). The definition and prioritization of goals for which strengths will be mobilized depend on power dynamics: governments, policymakers, enterprises, civil society organizations, and even foreign States and stakeholders, take action to influence the European Union's economic policy. The strengths of a meta-organization can be assessed from characteristics such as their structure, membership, and human resources; while the power of a meta-organization should be studied from the perspective of interactions among stakeholders aiming to influence and control objectives and strategies.

Focusing on strengths and weaknesses can thus leave some dimensions of power in the blind spot of academic research. This gap is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the existing

theoretical framework seems mainly mobilized to support studies focusing on meta-organizations' assets to host, organize, and reinforce their members' power (see for instance: Carmagnac et al., 2022; Megali, 2022). Although extremely valuable, this approach does not address Ahrne and Brusson's (2005) long-standing regret that "[m]eta-organizations are often perceived as arenas for the actions of other organizations rather than as actors in their own rights" (p. 446). Second, we observe that several empirical studies have documented and analyzed evidence of power embedded in meta-organizations' activities. However, their perspective is generally loosely connected to the theory of meta-organizations, leading to a relative fragmentation of knowledge. For instance, one can hardly explain which specific structural strengths enabled a Quebec meta-organization to integrate in response to external competition in the funerary sector (Audebrand & Barros, 2018) but prevented German meta-organizations in the press industry to do so (König et al., 2012); or which characteristics lead meta-organizations in the textile industry to take their own strategic initiatives (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018) or, on the opposite, to mobilize their strengths at the benefits of their stronger members against smaller players' interests (Carmagnac et al., 2022).

We aim at addressing the identified gap through the following research question: what is the power of meta-organizations, and how does it relate to their strengths and weaknesses identified by previous literature?

This contribution is structured as follows. In a first section, we propose a framework mobilizing two theoretical bricks: Ahrne and Brunsson's (2005) theory of meta-organizations – and subsequent research; and Huxham and Beech's (2008) there-dimensional concept of inter-organizational power. In a second section, we introduce our empirical research aimed at testing and improving this framework. We chose as a single case study a North American meta-organization which, in the context of a digital innovation project led by some of its members, conducted diverse and sometimes ambiguous strategies. Our results, presented in the third

section, focus on the identification of four successive strategic postures, to which correspond evolving strengths within the meta-organization and its membership. The last section is dedicated to our discussion, in which we explain how the multi-dimensional concept of inter-organizational power helped us in identifying strategic postures which the meta-organization actively decided to adopt in regards to an evolving context affecting its own strengths, and that had tangible impacts on its members' ability to conduct a collective project.

1. THEORIZING THE POWER OF META-ORGANIZATIONS

Along this section, we explore the power of meta-organizations in relation to their members. The section is structured around two angles proposed by Huxham and Beech (2008): the *dimensions* of power, and the *sources* of power.

1.1. DIMENSIONS OF META-ORGANIZATIONS' POWER

With respect to the dimensions of power, Pitking (1972) proposed a useful theoretical distinction between *power to* and *power over*, which was later reviewed and presented succinctly by Göhler:

> *Power over means power over other people, enforcement of one's own intentions over those of others, and is thus only conceivable in a social relation. Power to, on the other hand, is not related to other people. It is an ability to do or achieve something independent of others. It is not a social relation. This distinction corresponds to a different normative judgment of power.* (Göhler, 2009, p. 28)

1.1.1. POWER OVER

The *power over* dimension was further theorized by organization scholars such as Fleming and Spicer (2014), who broke it down into four "faces": coercion, as one's ability to pursue political objectives; manipulation, as the capacity of controlling an agenda; domination, referring to the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of discourses; and subjectification, i.e. a person's ability to influence another person's identity. *Power over* is often associated with a negative

connotation. In the context of inter-organizational relations, *power over* entails "a concern by the organization that is seeking to take control to gain benefit for itself" (Huxham & Beech, 2008, p. 8) rather than for the benefit of all parties.

The theory of meta-organization has especially insisted over the lack of *coercive* power over their members, as a distinctive structural feature of meta-organizations with respect to individual-based organizations: "[t]he relatively weak central authority in a meta-organization makes it more difficult for the centre to initiate, terminate, discover or control changes in its members' activities, and this applies even to areas where the members have agreed to act in a certain way" (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, p. 443). This weak central authority also comes with a heterarchical and consensus-based governance, as well as a financial and political dependency, all contributing to disactivate meta-organizations' coercive power at the benefit of their members'.

Yet, meta-organizations are also known to develop other faces of *power over* their members. First, this lack of *coercive* power should be nuanced, as some meta-organizations are effectively doted with capacities of control and sanctioning. This is the case of the United Nations' security council, able to allow war at a State infringing international rules.

Meta-organizations' very purpose can be seen as a tool *subjectify* organizations of their respective field by acting on their very sense of self, as they are "formed in order to create, reinforce, or at least confirm a certain identity among their members" (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, p. 70). The utmost level of power of *subjectification* would be when "the only way for organizations to be seen as belonging is to be accepted as a member of this meta-organization" (*ibid.*, p. 72). For instance, Palestine has had a hard time to be recognized as a State without being admitted as a full member of the United Nations.

Meta-organizations can also produce discourses intended for *dominating* their field and broader. It is for instance the case of standards, typically produced within the framework of a meta-organization such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) or SWIFT in the banking sector, which can be seen as discourses aimed at organizing society (Brunsson et al., 2012, p. 620). Organizations can voluntarily decide to adopt a standard to further benefit from related network externalities (e.g.: FSC standard for the forestry sector); when a standard has reached a certain level of institutionalization (and power), organizations feel constrained to comply to a given standard to survive in an industry (e.g.: Web standards for the IT sector).

Finally, meta-organizations are known to be able to *manipulate* the course of events in controlling the agenda. An example of powerful manipulation was observed in the palm oil industry, where a meta-organization catalyzed civil society pressure towards smaller producers – hereby protecting its largest members (Carmagnac et al., 2022).

1.1.2. POWER TO

Gölher (2009) and Huxham and Beech (2008) have two different understandings about the concept of *power to*. Göhler's approach being focused on the individual, it conceives *power to* as one's ability to achieve something – independently of any social relationship. On the other hand, Huxham and Beech approach power as being embedded within inter-organizational relationships: *power to* is thus envisioned as one organization's ability to achieve something unilaterally (concentrating power) or in coordination with others (sharing power). As organizations composed of other organizations, meta-organizations' actions are inextricable from their relations with their members, which lead us to adopt Huxham and Beech's approach – which we further develop here.

Firstly, as organizations, meta-organizations constitute an "authoritative center" (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, p. 46) for their field: they *concentrate* some power from their members to

perform activities which would be hardly achievable by a single organization, or even a coordinated group of organizations. As representatives of their respective fields – and of the sum of their organizational members, meta-organizations demonstrate a *power to* influence their external environment. Examples of actions conducted by meta-organizations and considered powerful include influencing collective opinion about their field (Harter & Krone, 2001), successfully advocating for a change in legislation (Audebrand & Barros, 2018), and improving performance at an industry level through the production of new standards (Steinfield et al., 2005). On the contrary, a meta-organization is viewed as weak when it is unable to activate its power against external economic pressures (König et al., 2012).

Secondly, meta-organizations can act in concert with some of their members to achieve common objectives. *Power-sharing* activities are observed when meta-organizations are established to pool their members' resources to benefit from economies of scale or offer integrated services, such as second-level cooperatives. Power-sharing can also take the form of coordinated activities, as demonstrated by NATO-coordinated military interventions. Power-sharing is also observed in situations which require a combination of institutional influence with an operational follow-up: for instance, Google served as a watchguard for emerging standards produced and issued by the Coalition for Better Ads (Megali, 2022).

1.1.3. POWER FOR

Huxham and Beech (2008) propose a third dimension, labelled *power for*, referring to strategies performed to empower an organization. According to the authors, expressions of *power for* are comprised along a spectrum between two concepts: collaborative empowerment and unilateral empowerment.

A typical expression of *collective empowerment* can be found in the meta-organizations' and their members' collective quest for social status. Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) offer prolific

examples in this respect, such as the Community of European Management Schools and International Companies (CEMS) whose membership is exclusively composed of the so-called top one European management schools. The CEMS represents "an example of an attempt by a meta-organization to establish a status order that has not existed previously or has not been particularly strong" (*ibid.*, p. 73). Other expressions of collective empowerment can be found in the admission of new members to a meta-organization: when joining the European Union or the World Trade Organization, States access to social status, benefits and resources reserved to members. In this regard, the strength of meta-organizations becomes particularly tangible when they engage a strategy of collective disempowerment: Brexit negotiations offered an illustrative example of a European Union's demonstration of power towards a newly isolated actor.

Forms of *unilateral empowerment* can be observed when a meta-organization establishes a new member organization. Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) give the example of BirdLife International, a transnational meta-organization which had to create national ornithological associations where none existed, to be able to monitor bird migrations for instance. Meta-organizations can also establish new meta-organizations to conduct emerging specialized activities, such as the production of technical standards (Steinfield et al., 2005): in this case, the originating meta-organization empower a new actor by providing it with social status and membership.

1.2. SOURCES OF META-ORGANIZATIONS' POWER

Along the previous sub-section, we presented three *forms* of power which can be activated by meta-organizations in their relations to their members. Yet, such forms of power can take very different expressions depending on the meta-organization. Some meta-organizations demonstrate a high capacity to activate very tangible forms of power, while others appear to limit themselves to shier expressions. For instance, in the 1990s, while the Nebraska Cooperative Council supported its members in adopting emerging Internet technologies (Harter

& Krone, 2001), German industry associations failed to take action towards emerging online competitors (König et al., 2012).

Such divergences may be explained by mechanisms enabling or preventing meta-organizations to access and activate such power. Again, Huxham and Beech's (2008) contribution offers a useful framework to identify and analyze such mechanisms. The authors propose four *sources* of inter-organizational power: need imbalance, importance imbalance, structural position, and day-to-day activities. Those four dimensions are further exposed along the following paragraphs.

"The first type of power source derives from an organization having some sort of resource that another needs" (Huxham & Beech, 2008, p. 925). Through their activities of coordination, research, and public representation, meta-organizations have access to information from their members and partners to a level that can be hardly reachable by an individual organization: it is thus capable to build a knowledge valuable for their members, such as statistics about its field. Yet, the quality of information can also vary depending on the level of collaboration between the meta-organization: since most of the field information is controlled by its members, meta-organizations' knowledge is generally dependent on each organization's willingness to share such information.

"A second set of power sources relates to mismatches in the importance of a collaborative relationship to the partners; that is, to the level of mutual dependence" (*idem*). This echoes meta-organizations' ability to shape a collective identity for their field, and embodying such an identity towards external partners, hereby reinforcing the field's cohesion and agency. In this respect, meta-organizations can actively shape their members' identity, and impose newcomers to adopt field standards through admission processes. Yet, meta-organizations also must take into consideration their members' willingness to preserve their autonomy, which may be

understood differently depending on the organizational field. For instance, European States may be more attached to assert their unique identity towards the European Union, than agricultural cooperatives towards their second-level cooperative.

"The third set of power sources evident in the literature relates to the structural relationships between partners" (*ibid*, p. 926). Huxham and Beech (2008) specifically mention a formal acknowledgement of one organization's authority over another. In the context of meta-organizations, this situation is typically found in standardizing activities: companies operating in the Web industry have explicitly recognized the W3C legitimacy to issue Web standards, and issuing competing standards would be considered as a risky bet. This being said, most meta-organizations cannot claim to have reached the W3C's level of institutionalization and recognition: issuing technical standards require a level of resources, expertise, and legitimacy out of reach for most of them.

In addition to those forms of power observable at a meta level, Huxham and Beech (2008) propose to take into account micro forms of power, i.e. observable at the level of individuals' day-to-day activities. This dimension is particularly interesting as the theory of meta-organization tends to leave little space to the role of individuals, focusing rather on organizations' interactions. Yet, the importance of individuals' actions can be observed in meta-organizations' activities. For instance, meta-organizations are known to be able to control their members' collective agenda, especially to structure responses to external pressures in a way that was already decided by the meta-organization itself (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018). Staff and representatives can feel the legitimacy to act in this respect from a culture of elitism (König et al., 2012), justifying their choices in light of a "better" understanding of the situation – compared to their less-informed members operating on the field. Yet, meta-organization staff members and representatives must also compose with members who have de facto more influence and power than them. In this respect, the meta-organization's capacity to control the

agenda depends on its alignment with key members. For instance, it is easier for the United Nations to disregard ambitions expressed by Southern countries than by permanent members of the Security Council: with respect to the ongoing war in Gaza, UN staff may be thus more prompt to consider contributions from US representatives that from Zimbabwe representatives.

Importantly, Huxham and Beech recognize that this list of sources is not exhaustive, and invite scholars to challenge and complement it.

1.3. A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING THE POWER OF META-ORGANIZATIONS

Table 1 summarizes our theoretical development presented in the previous section. It also serves to categorize meta-organizations' practices of power in relation to their members. Practices are categorized according to the three dimensions (power *over*, *to*, and *for*); factors enabling or hindering such practices are then identified, and allows to categorize said practices according to the sources of power (power based on *need imbalance*, *importance imbalance*, *structural position*, and *day-to-day activities*).

Although convenient, we observed one key limitation to this framework: it does not reveal the relations between each dimension of power, and how such dimensions co-evolve. Relations among power dimensions can be counterintuitive. For instance, Ahrne and Brunsson (2008, p. 127) note while standards are typically used by meta-organizations due to their relative lack of authority over their members (weak power *over*), they are effective as they ensure member organizations' autonomy, and favor engagement through mechanisms such as peer-review processes (strong power *to*). On this basis, it is hard to predict whether increasing a meta-organization's power *over* its members (e.g.: through the issuance of directives rather than standards) would result in a stronger power *to* (e.g.: higher ability to coordinate collective

action) or, on the contrary, in a weaker power *to* (e.g.: members' resistance through retention of information).

Thus, the research question addressed along this communication is the following: what are the relations among the three dimensions of meta-organizations' power? To answer this question, we chose to study the case of a meta-organization whose powers evolve along with a digital innovation project.

		Dimensions of meta-organizations' power		
		Power *over*	Power *to*	Power *for*
Sources of meta-organizations' power	**Power based on *need imbalance***	Influencing members' perceptions about their environment Enable: information and research activities, acting as a platform Hinder: limited environmental intimacy	Circulating knowledge and innovations among their members Enable: coordination platform, education activities Hinder: most expertise lies in members' hands	Increasing members' efficiency and competitiveness Enable: coordinating members' activities, integrating value chains Hinder: similarity disactivating need imbalances among members
	Power based on importance imbalance	Influencing members' identity Enable: monopolistic position, admission process Hinder: competition over identity with its members, weak control over members once admitted	Embodying a unique voice towards external actors Enable: incorporated as an organization Hinder: competition with its members over autonomy	Offering higher social status to their members Enable: production and promotion of an identity as a new social order Hinder: added value for the weak rather than for the strong organizations
	Power based on structural position	Standardizing members' structures and activities Enable: legitimacy, member engagement processes Hinder: standards as voluntary rules, requiring complex processes	Strategies of field "self regulation" Enable: anticipation of institutional demands Hinder: protracted decision-making processes	Strengthening members' recognition among their environment/market Enable: production of technical and/or non-technical standards Hinder: standards as voluntary rules, difficulty to monitor and sanction
	Power based on day-to-day activities	Controlling members' collective agenda Enable: culture of elitism among staff and representatives Hinder: member representatives have usually higher influence	Generating economies of scale Enable: ability to catalyze and pool members' resources Hinder: dissimilarities among members preventing coordination and mutual understanding	Establishing new members Enable: organizations can be created (not individuals) Hinder: organization members are more difficult to manage than individuals

Table 1. Examples of meta-organizations' expressions and sources of power.

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2. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

As presented above, this communication builds on the cornerstone theoretical work from Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008), further developed by a subsequent prolific literature, combined with a theoretical framework on inter-organizational power proposed by Huxham and Beech (2008). We feed our reflections with empirical evidence, in a deductive approach.

Our empirical data was collected and analysed following a nested-type single case study strategy (Yin, 2014). The case study strategy allowed us to delve into expressions of power identified among interactions between a meta-organization and its members, and to explore how the different dimensions of power coevolve over time within the context of one meta-organization.

In practice, we selected one case: a North American federation of watershed organizations (referred as Watershed Federated for the needs of the present paper). The meta-organization conducted a digital project aimed at facilitating collaboration with and among their members through a common data-sharing infrastructure: at the time of our data collection, it had launched a platform for geomatic data. Our data collection took the form of one-hour, one-to-one interviews, and totalled 15 hours of recordings. It involved four types of participants: employees of the meta-organization, representatives and employees of member organizations, employees of governmental agencies, and external actors (IT providers, former employees, etc.). We made sure that our sample covers at least 25% of the meta-organization's membership.

As for this specific communication, we can present only preliminary results since only part of the data was effectively transcribed and analysed.

3. FINDINGS: META-ORGANIZATION'S EVOLVING POWER

We present the results around four key strategic postures adopted by the meta-organization, at four stages of the project evolution: dismissal, support, join, and takeover. For each phase, we unfold the dimensions and sources of power revealed by our data.

3.1. PHASE 1: DISMISSAL

Watershed Federated was established under a national law mandate to ensure smooth exchange of information between watershed organizations and governmental services. This mandate provides Watershed Federated with a certain degree of ***power over*** its members: to receive government support and funding, watershed organizations must report to their meta-organization and comply with processes set by the latter. This mandate also provided Watershed Federated with a ***power to*** influence policymaking, by representing its field and transmitting information (needs and demands) from its members. The meta-organization's *power over* its members and *power to* influence policymakers finds its source in an *importance imbalance*: Watershed Federated benefits from a unique (no other actors can compete with its functions) and monopolistic (all watershed organizations must be members of Watershed Federated) position secured by the law.

In the eyes of some of its members, Watershed Federated's role was however not limited to its strict governmental mandate. They viewed in their meta-organization a broader function consisting of facilitating watershed organizations' own mandate to produce and circulate open water-related knowledge, especially by supporting coordination among them and fostering the emergence of new projects strengthening their collective efficiency. Namely, some watershed organizations developed an expertise in geomatic, and initiated collaborations among themselves to support exchange of data and tools in view of reinforcing their collective knowledge and efficiency. Geomatic experts quickly identified an opportunity to consolidate

such collaborations through a common information system, aimed at standardizing geomatic data to facilitate its collective sharing and processing. Since such an inter-organizational information system was intended to be used by and benefitting the whole network of watershed organizations, geomatic experts expected Watershed Federated to support the initiative.

> *"When the Ministry of Environment began to recognize us as partner organizations, and we were able to access geomatics data under various agreements [...] the only role for [Watershed Federated] was to redivide the data for our territories. They didn't have any geomatics platform to allow us to get that data [...]. It was really very minimal, they were just a smuggler. Because, according to them, it wasn't relevant that a geomatics resource be dedicated to support watershed organizations, or to help them."*
> (geomatic expert 1, staff member of watershed organization 1)

Yet, Watershed Federated adopted a conservative position: instead of developing its own geomatic expertise and capitalizing on pooled resources, it limited its contribution to its initial role of fostering information exchange between its field and the government. The demand was also viewed by the meta-organization as being expressed by a small minority of its members, who performed activities in the field of geomatic. At this stage, Watershed Federated dismissed the proposal to implement a strategic activity focused on geomatic.

> *"The initiative started from our specific needs as watershed organizations. [...] It's been about ten years that the watershed organizations have been asking [Watershed Federated] for something similar, but it never emerged."*
> (geomatic expert 2, staff member of watershed organization 2)

Thus, member organizations granted Watershed Federated with a ***power to*** coordinate geomatic activities and pool geomatic resources from its members, which power was based on its *structural position* of coordination platform for watershed federated. But the meta-organization decided not to activate such a power, as it considered geomatic activities were not part of its mandate.

3.2. PHASE 2: SUPPORT

As years passed, Watershed Federated observed that geomatic was gaining momentum among its network, as more and more of its members were developing geomatic activities and competences. It chose to support such a dynamic by establishing a community of practice providing a space for geomatic experts to meet, share ideas and tools, and take collective initiatives. This community of practice allowed leading geomatic experts to promote their idea of a common inter-organizational information system, and to mobilize other members around this project. It resulted in a proof-of-concept platform, which was collectively designed, developed, hosted and maintained by leading watershed organizations themselves. In this example, Watershed Federated benefitted from its network centrality (*power based on structural position*) to identify growing needs from its members, and responded to it by activating a ***power for*** stimulating collective action.

> "*In the community of practice, we've managed to – in fact, it's a few watershed organizations who have managed to bring out in an almost pro bono way, the [inter-organizational information system] initiative.*"
> (staff member of Watershed Federated)

However, Watershed Federated staff did not develop their geomatic competences which confirmed the meta-organization's conservative posture, seeing itself as a facilitator of inter-organizational collaborations rather than as a potential hub of collective knowledge and tools for geomatic expertise (non-activated ***power to*** develop a new strategic activity).

> "*We thought: instead of putting them [Watershed Federated] on the committee right away – they will just slow us down, ask questions, we won't be able to move forward, and then it will be a stress for them who are overwhelmed.* […] *Let's take this out of the communities of practice led by [Watershed Federated], we're going to build the initiative, go as far as we can.*"
> (geomatic expert 3, staff member of watershed organization 3)

On their end, leading geomatic experts assessed Watershed Federated staff's skill gap as a barrier preventing their meta-organization to successfully support their digital innovation: from

their point of view, staff members in charge of supporting the community were not able to conduct relevant actions (lack of *power based on day-to-day activities*). In response, they took the decision to pursue the inter-organizational information system initiative outside of the meta-organization's boundaries: it established a non-incorporated executive committee in charge of taking collective decisions to pursue the development and maintenance of this common tool. The committee quickly addressed the question of maintenance and development costs, and established a new membership system including an annual fee payable by watershed organizations willing to use the system. The meta-organization was consequently excluded from a decision-making body concerning its members' activities (reduction of **power over** its field).

3.3. PHASE 3: JOIN

As the geomatic inter-organizational information system developed and gained momentum, leading experts faced increasing work and responsibility, creating a need to identify an organizational structure able to sustain this initiative in the long run. Member organizations felt this activity was not part of their mission, and governmental agencies presented constraints which were viewed as incompatible with the system's objectives.

> "*[Watershed Federated] was the ideal level where we could begin to institutionalize a solution, to create interactions with the ministry without being bound by its entire bureaucracy.*"
> (geomatic expert 3, staff member of watershed organization 3)

Watershed Federated appeared again as a relevant organization for hosting and maintaining tools aimed at supporting its members. Among the resources presented by the meta-organization and needed to support the information system adoption (*power based on need imbalance*), leading experts mentioned: an easy access to the whole base of members; an expertise in communication and promotion; an organizational structure adapted to pool financial resources from its members; and an easy access to governmental services for obtaining

recognition and funding. In addition, Watershed Federated's newly appointed chief executive officer demonstrated higher interest than its predecessor towards this initiative, which resulted in higher staff commitment through dedicated human resources (*power based on day-to-day activities*).

> "*They [Watershed Federated] have interactions with watershed organizations with whom we are less connected.*"
> (geomatic expert 2, staff member of watershed organization 2)

Leaders responded in inviting Watershed Federated to take a formal role in the information system's executive committee, namely communications and budget management. In joining the executive committee, the meta-organization gained legitimacy to represent the initiative towards institutional actors. It increased its ***power to*** influence government agencies by opening new channels of discussion, for instance by lobbying the government to adopt open interoperability standards, open-source technologies, and adopt an open data strategy. It also made use of its existing ***power over*** its members to encourage a wider adoption of the system: it produced and promoted discourses based on its members' collective identity (mission of producing knowledge around a commons, sense of efficiency through the pooling of resources), and organized capacity-building sessions.

> "*Now that we've put them [Watershed Federated] in charge of communication, and then budgeting, they're the ones who follow up with the watershed organizations who said they were interested in pooling financial resources. And they're also the ones who make the important communications about the initiative.*"
> (geomatic expert 3, staff member of watershed organization 3)

3.4. PHASE 4: TAKE-OVER

As Watershed Federated pursued its involvement for supporting the emergence and adoption of the geomatic inter-organizational information system, leading experts called for further delegating its operational management. The growing number of users created additional pressure over technical maintenance and development, resulting in an additional burden over

leaders' shoulders. It was eventually agreed that the whole information system would be transferred to Watershed Federated. Since the meta-organization did not have possess technical capacity ensure technical maintenance, it sub-contracted the task to its usual IT provider already engaged in other information systems deployed by Watershed Federated.

> *"It [the information system] will be transferred to [Watershed Federated] in the coming weeks. So, it's going to be centralized soon. [...] we wanted it to no longer be on the shoulders [...] of a specific watershed organization, to do the administration, the management, everything that is information, the basic maintenance of all the infrastructure."*
> (geomatic expert 2, staff member of watershed organization 2)

> Interviewer*: "How was this technology partner chosen and where does your trust in this partner come from?"*
> Participant*: "I don't know them very well. This is the partner that the [Watershed Federated] already had in terms of the IT infrastructures they have at the moment."*
> (geomatic expert 2, staff member of watershed organization 2)

All-in-all, although it had originally dismissed the initiative, Watershed Federated eventually secured ***power over*** its members' inter-organizational information system. It gained such a *power based on a need imbalance*: leaders needed to delegate its maintenance to an organization specifically established to manage and sustain collective resources.

4. DISCUSSION: RELATIONS AMONG DIMENSIONS AND SOURCES OF POWER

Huxham and Beech's (2008) allowed us to reveal a wide range of power dimensions and sources along the digital innovation project. We now propose to move the discussion one step further: we explore the relationships among such dimensions and sources, to make sense of the meta-organization's strategic decisions.

4.1. DIMENSIONS OF META-ORGANIZATION POWER

Our data not only illustrated the three dimensions of power proposed by Huxham and Beech (2008): it also revealed relationships among such dimensions.

Relation between *power to* and *power over* dimensions. As we saw in phase 1, Watershed Federated did not activate its **power to** support an emerging inter-organizational information system specialized on geomatic. This decision resulted in a loss of **power over** its members: the meta-organization was not involved in the emerging governance body in charge of the emerging inter-organizational information system (phase 2). From this perspective, by choosing not to activate its *power to* help its members, the meta-organization experienced a relative loss of *power over* their activities.

Relation between *power to* and *power for* dimensions. Watershed Federated was not absent from geomatic-related initiatives. Although it did not meet its members' expectations to support the emergence of an inter-organizational information system (phase 1), the meta-organization did use its **power to** foster networking and collaboration among geomatic experts through the establishment and facilitation of a dedicated community of practice. Stakeholders agree that this community effectively served as a coordination platform providing **power for** leaders to promote their ideas and mobilize a wider group of experts (phase 2), a step which was crucial in the emergence of a proof-of-concept inter-organizational information system. Thus, the meta-organization used its *power to* coordinate its members, which resulted in a stronger *power for* stimulating collective innovation among its members.

Relation between *power for* and *power over* dimensions. Watershed Federated pursued this empowerment strategy, by providing support in promoting the information system's adoption (phase 3) and ensuring its long-term sustainability (phase 4). As a result, its members developed a proof-of-concept inter-organizational information system designed by watershed organizations, and addressing the needs of watershed organizations. Although the meta-organization initially not invited in joining the information system executive committee, it still felt evident to anyone that such an initiative should eventually be delegated to the organization in charge of pooling resources among watershed organizations. Watershed Federated was thus

progressively attributed ***power over*** the inter-organizational information system, first by integrating the executive committee and assuming core responsibilities such as budgeting and communication (phase 3), and eventually by taking over the whole technical maintenance (phase 4). In this respect, the meta-organization used it *power for* its members which resulted in a relative increase of its *power over* its activities.

4.2. SOURCES OF META-ORGANIZATION POWER

Along this case, all four sources identified by Huxham and Beech (2008) were found within our data. Yet, they differ in their timings and results.

Power based on importance imbalance appears to have structured the overall relationship between the meta-organization and its members. The very fact that Watershed Federated is granted by law uniqueness in its field created a form of constraint over leaders. As they faced with dismissal from their meta-organization, geomatic leaders looked for alternatives at different levels, i.e. institutional (government services) and organizational (watershed organizations). After conceding that government services could not offer an appropriate support, the organizational level was selected as the less painful option to kick-start the project. Leaders were however aware about limitations presented by such an organizational level of action, and quickly established a new meta-organizational level through a non-incorporated executive committee. The inter-organizational information system executive committee was granted with several elements of organization, which could have eventually led to the establishment of a new formal meta-organization: it had members, rules for the actions of its members, and a form of hierarchy through appointed representatives. However, the establishment of a new meta-organization may have triggered some form of competition between Watershed Federated and leading watershed organizations, and potential conflicts

which would have been eventually more burdensome than simply attempting to convince the meta-organization to join in.

Power based on structural position provided Watershed Federated with important information, enabling it to make informed strategic decisions all along the way. During phase 1, the meta-organization was able to balance leading experts' requests with an understanding of the overall field's needs. Since most of its members were unaware of the very interest offered by geomatic expertise, it may have been riskier to conduct this project (which involved investing resources in an uncertain outcome) than dismissing it (and generating frustration for a small minority of members). Later on, Watershed Federated's structural position allowed it to constantly being informed about the actual evolution of this project, and with the momentum it gained from its members. Creating and facilitating a community of practice in the field of geomatic may also have directly allowed the meta-organization in accessing first-hand information about such dynamics, such as the actual interest expressed by geomatic experts, difficulties and challenges encountered by this project, and growth of geomatic expertise among its members. Such precious information enabled Watershed Federated to externalize most of the risk related to this project, and invest just enough resources to be able to capitalize on its success.

While Watershed Federated made constant use of its power based on importance imbalance and on structural position, it demonstrated a more careful use of its *power based on need imbalance*. Our data suggests that leaders had a clear view about resources needed for their project and controlled by the meta-organization, such as its capacity to mobilize users and budgets. Data also confirms that such an imbalance of needs resulted in power: leaders accepted that by dedicating resources to the project, Watershed Federated would gain control over the information system. Yet, the meta-organization responded to such needs only when it felt that it would be the "right time" to do so, i.e. when risks were mitigated.

Finally, *power based on day-to-day activities* appeared mainly as a second-hand source, resulting from previous strategic decisions. Watershed Federated staff's support to the project was directly dependent on the meta-organization's decision to support – or not – this project. Interviewees did mention that staff turnover resulted in less supportive individuals to leave the organization and being replaced by more supportive ones, which did help with involving the meta-organization in this process. However, this turnover also coincided with an overall diffusion of geomatic expertise among the network of watershed organizations. It is thus difficult to assess to what extent specific day-to-day activities resulted in an actual gain (or loss) of power for the meta-organization.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

From a theoretical perspective, our framework appears to provide a relevant tool to uncover and analyse different dimensions and sources of meta-organizations' power. While the dimensions of open up avenues to include a large array of activities (such as actions aimed at empowering members), the sources of power add up a rich ground to understand complex phenomena marked by strategic ambiguity. In our case, the meta-organization's uniqueness ensured by regulations provided it with a possibility to abstain from engaging itself in a risky digital innovation project (*power to*), preferring to indirectly support its members' initiatives (*power for*), and eventually taking control over this project when it reached a certain level of maturity (*power over*). We especially see an interest for management scholars who tend to analyse meta-organizations' activities from the perspective of their members (e.g.: König et al., 2012). In stressing on the different dimensions of power and the variety of sources, we were able to consolidate our data analysis, separating leaders' viewpoints from the meta-organization's self interest, and take into account a final result which was overall positive for the meta-organization's situation towards its members. It also appears that adopting a longer

timeframe can give room for data to express the full diversity of power dimensions, which may be revealed through punctuated activities along certain circumstances.

A key empirical takeaway relates to the idea of an "efficient" use of power. While the meta-organization was expected to mobilize its resources to support the emergence of a new inter-organizational information system, it rather preferred to strengthen its structures of collaboration while the digital project was tested and matured. From a pure strategic perspective, this choice seems to have successfully contributed to mitigate the meta-organization's exposure to risk, while increasing its overall capacity to address its members' needs in the long run. Such a strategy is however in tension with a collective understanding about the meta-organization's very *raison d'être*, i.e. to serve its members. This observation recalls us that the meta-organization is an organization with its own interests and challenges: its staff must take strategic decisions aimed at ensuring the meta-organization's viability, which involves a certain aversion for risks and uncertainties. In this sense, our results partly match with König et al.'s (2012) observations: meta-organizations demonstrate a poor ability to transform societal challenges into collective visions and transformative projects.

Practitioners may also benefit from this research by better understanding meta-organizations' behaviors towards bottom-up innovation. While one could expect that a meta-organization would blindly join an innovation benefitting its members, such an expectation should be balanced with other considerations such as a limited incentive to engage resources in uncertain outcomes. Anticipating such a behaviour may also help practitioners in tapping into other forms of support, such as activities aimed at strengthening inter-organizational collaborations.

This paper is however marked by two strong data-related limitations. Firstly, it relies on preliminary results out of a partial data: complementary data analysis may reveal mechanisms, or challenge our initial observations. Secondly, a single case study entails transferability issues.

We are aware that our case is marked by several specificities, such as a meta-organization benefitting from a unique position set in the law, or the bottom-up nature of this project conducted by individuals who are not elected at the meta-organization's board. Including other cases would be a good way to balance such specificities, and consolidate the transferability of our results.

CONCLUSION

Meta-organizations provide their members with frameworks of collective action, enabling them to conduct collective innovations by aligning their strategies and pooling resources. Yet, while several studies have pointed out meta-organizations' capacities to stimulate their field's adaptation to a changing environment (see for instance: Audebrand & Barros, 2018; Harter & Krone, 2001), others have pointed out their inability to effectively respond to external pressures through collective action (e.g.: König et al., 2012). Our contribution aims to overcome this apparent contradiction through a theoretical framework focusing on the power of meta-organizations. The framework is built by combining two theoretical bricks: specificities of meta-organization as identified by Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008); and characteristics of inter-organizational power as framed by Huxham and Beech (2008). We tested this framework through an exploratory qualitative research consisting of a case study: the emergence of an inter-organizational information system in the context of a meta-organization federating watershed organizations. Our data revealed that the meta-organization used its power in a diversity of forms along the project, which allowed it to consolidate its position while mitigating its risk exposure. Yet, strategic decisions generated frictions with project leaders, who had expected a more extensive commitment from the meta-organization. Our results confirm the relevance to develop theoretical frameworks allowing management scholars to adopt the meta-organization's point of view, rather than focusing on its members' expectations. It also shows that meta-organizations can activate a diversity of forms of power, and their decision to act is

motivated not only by their members' needs and expectations, but also by their own interests.

Lastly, we hope that such a study can help practitioners in better understanding meta-organizations' strategies, and anticipate their reactions to bottom-up digital innovation projects.

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