

Explorer la collaboration entre PME : étude exploratoire d'une plateforme centrée sur la RSE

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Résumé :

Les recherches sur les relations inter-organisationnelles (RIO), telles que les alliances et les partenariats intersectoriels, se sont considérablement développées au cours des cinquante dernières années. Plusieurs auteurs appellent aujourd'hui à une clarification conceptuelle, tout en soulignant le potentiel des collaborations intersectorielles à produire des connaissances et des solutions innovantes face aux enjeux de durabilité contemporains. Cette étude s'inscrit dans ce courant en se focalisant sur les RIO dans le contexte spécifique des petites et moyennes entreprises (PME) travaillant sur la responsabilité sociétale des entreprises (RSE).

Nos résultats montrent que les objectifs poursuivis par les membres d'un partenariat intersectoriel sur la RSE varient selon leur niveau d'implication. Les objectifs collectifs assignés aux groupes de travail semblent passer au second plan par rapport aux retombées du savoir (knowledge spillovers) et les échanges entre pairs en face-à-face. Les membres s'apportent mutuellement un soutien pour résoudre leurs enjeux individuels, tout en avançant également sur des objectifs partagés.

Mots-clés : relations inter-organisationnelles (RIO), PME, collaboration, RSE, qualitative

Exploring Collaboration among SMEs: Lessons Learned from a CSR Focused Platform

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ABSTRACT:

Research on inter-organizational relationships (IORs), such as alliances and cross-sector partnerships, has grown considerably over the past fifty years. Several authors now call for greater conceptual clarity, while also highlighting the potential of cross-sector collaborations to generate knowledge and innovative solutions to sustainability challenges. This study contributes to the field by focusing on IORs in the specific context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) engaged in corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Our findings show that the goals pursued by members of a cross-sector partnership on CSR vary according to their level of involvement. The collective objectives chosen by the working groups appear secondary compared to the knowledge spillovers and face-to-face peer exchanges. Members provide mutual support in addressing their individual challenges while also making progress on shared goals.

Keywords: inter-organizational relationships (IORs), SMEs, CSR, qualitative

Introduction

The ‘*wicked sustainability problems*’ point to the interdependencies between social actors and scholars suggest that “*cross-sector collaborations can co-create the knowledge and momentum that is needed*” (Pedersen et al., 2021). This has led to an increased attention on the nature and benefits of *inter-organizational relationships (IORs)* within and beyond the business sector.

Complex and multiple collaborative relationships between large organizations and their stakeholders have emerged as a response to address sustainability challenges (Vogel et al., 2022). Research suggests that firms are more likely to benefit from partnerships when they go beyond simple philanthropic donations, integrating expertise, access to strategic knowledge, and in-kind resources (Hess et al., 2002; Austin, 2000; Selsky & Parker, 2005).

Research on IORs, such as alliances, buyer-supplier relationships, and cross-sector partnerships, has grown significantly over the last fifty years (Salvato et al., 2017). Recently, authors have realized that more clarity is needed to define these important concepts. Castañer and Oliveira (2020) have systematically studied the IOR literature and have concluded that IORs are built around three distinct mechanisms: *coordination, cooperation and collaboration*. The authors argue that distinction among these terms remains unclear and are often used interchangeably in the literature (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020). Their review contributes to the theoretical development of these three terms and renders them distinct (see point 1.1. for distinction). Castañer and Oliveira (2020) have proposed the following definition of IORs: *purposeful, direct IORs that result from the direct negotiation among (the representatives of) all the organizations involved in the IOR and that remain legally independent for the access, exchange (including pooling or sharing), and/or generation (jointly develop new) of resources* (p. 971).

This study follows the call to further investigate and to advance theory development on IORs in the specific context of *small and medium enterprises (SMEs)*. It is largely recognized that SMEs play a fundamental societal role in the economic tissue around the globe (Ayyagari et al., 2007; Curran & Blackburn, 2000). In addition to the qualitative arguments, SMEs represent 99% of the economic landscape and account for 40% of all business sector greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption in the European Union (OECD, 2024). In OECD countries, SMEs typically comprise at least 95% of private sector firms and employ over two-thirds of workers (OECD, 2014).

The broad EU definition of SMEs include firms with fewer than 250 employees. This definition does not apply globally and may vary depending on other national or regional criteria. In Europe ‘SME’ seems to be largely recognized, but in the United States, for example, ‘*small business*’ is preferred. By SMEs we also refer to micro enterprises, having less than 10 employees.

Networks are considered to be strategic assets for smaller businesses to achieve greater innovation, resilience and growth (OECD, 2023). Nevertheless, many SMEs do not belong to any formal network and membership varies across sectors (OECD, 2023).

Literature on sustainability driven IORs among SMEs is nascent and remains rather limited. SME IORs are different from large firm IORs due to their specificities: the central role of the owner-manager, resource constraints, short term goals to cite a few (for detailed overview of SME specific characteristics see Table 1). SMEs have different networking patterns and learnings from large organization IORs cannot be directly applied to SMEs (Agostini & Nosella, 2019; Arino et al., 2008).

TABLE 1
Small and medium sized enterprise (SME) key characteristics

Characteristics	Authors
SMEs are heterogeneous	Torrès and Julien, 2005; Curran and Blackburn, 2000
Central role of the owner-manager (explains the heterogenous character)	Julien and Marchesnay, 1992; Torrès, 1999
Lack of resources	Courrent and Gundolf, 2009
Proximity and existential approach to the firm	Torrès et al, 2022; Torrès, 2004
The owner-manager is often dealing with urgent, short term operational matters	Torrès and Julien, 2005
Informal decision making (often intuitive)	Julien and Marchesnay, 1992
Strategy is often defined by the owner-manager alone	Kearney et al., 2019
Magnification effect	Mahé de Boislandelle, 1996
Low levels of formalization, planning, and standardization	Gibb, 2000
Information systems (internal and external) are simple	Julien, 2009
The small-business owner–manager is able to enact values other than profit	Fassin et al., 2011

As part of the global and local value chains, SMEs are facing mounting pressures to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR). Although social responsibility among SMEs has been a flourishing topic of discussion over the last twenty years (Soundararajan et al., 2018; Spence,

2016), knowledge on IORs among SMEs for CSR¹ purposes is fragmented. Voluntary collaboration on CSR among SMEs is known as one possible path to finding innovative solutions to the inherent SME resource constraints (Murillo & Lozano 2009; Fassin, 2008; Fuller & Tian 2006). There is also evidence that SMEs gain access to complementary resources via collaboration with various stakeholders at the community level (Courrent et al., 2018; Jenkins 2009; Torugsa et al. 2012; Von Weltzien Høivik & Shankar, 2011).

Nevertheless, literature is limited on the specific types and modalities of relationships that SMEs put in place to work towards individual and collectively agreed goals. By using the distinctive *coordination, cooperation and collaboration* lens as proposed by Castañer & Oliveira (2020), our study is designed to answer the following research questions: **How do SMEs interact on CSR? How do SMEs coordinate, cooperate and collaborate on CSR?**

We propose to *explore* the process in which small firms interact with their peers on CSR, with special attention to the *types of goals* as part of that interactive process. Exploring these characteristics is essential for fully grasping how SME IORs unfold.

1. Literature Review

In this section we review the literature of IOR by providing the definitions of the above mentioned three IOR types: coordination, cooperation and collaboration. Special attention is also placed on SME IORs in the context of CSR.

1.1. *Cum ordinare, cum operare or cum laborare*: coordination, cooperation or collaboration?

¹ We use the term corporate social responsibility (CSR) for the purpose of this study although we acknowledge that in the case of SMEs, *small business social responsibility (SBSR)* is also used in the relevant literature.

Recently, scholars have recognized the need for greater clarity in defining IORs since lack of agreement on the used concepts leads to a loss of capitalization on existing literature on the subject across disciplines. As Salvato et al. (2017, p. 963) have pointed out, “The topic of “cooperation” is widely researched in the social sciences, but there has been little conceptual integration as to the various meanings of this term. Moreover, conceptual clarity is limited because cooperation and related terms that are not core synonyms are often used interchangeably.”

Castañer and Oliveira (2020) conducted a systematic review of the IOR literature and identified three primary mechanisms underpinning IORs: *collaboration*, *coordination*, and *cooperation*. Their work advances theoretical understanding of these mechanisms by providing clearer distinctions among them. Building on their review of definitions, they identified three interactional dimensions that are present to different extents in collaboration, coordination, and cooperation: *attitude*, *behavior*, and *outcome* but these dimensions did not allow for discrimination of the concepts. The authors pursued their analysis and identified two key dimensions that allow for differentiation of these three terms: the *temporal stage* and the *nature of the goal*. Their work contributes to theoretical advancement by providing a conceptual redefinition of these terms, making them distinct and thereby supporting the accumulation of knowledge and the progression of theory.

Based on the above analysis by Castañer and Oliveira (2020), we state here the definitions of coordination, cooperation and collaboration.

Coordination refers to the joint determination of common (IOR) goals, while *cooperation* refers to the implementation of those goals (p.984). *Coordination* refers to the attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes related to deliberation, negotiation, and agreement on a common goal. *Cooperation* refers to attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes related to the implementation of a common goal.

Collaboration refers to voluntarily helping other partners to achieve IOR (common) goals or one or more of their *private goals*. Hence, collaboration has a distinctive meaning from cooperation in that it might also concern *helping for partners' private goals* (p. 986).

To our knowledge there is no extant literature that would examine the SME IORs with the above conceptual lense. In the next session, we will provide review of literature on SME IORs in the context of CSR.

1.2. SME IORs and CSR

The topic of SME IORs has grown significantly to form a body of knowledge for the past 25 years. Agostini and Nosella (2019) have identified four distinct streams in the SME IOR literature: 1) SME strategic alliances; 2) social capital in SME networks; 3) SME networks and innovation and 4) SME networks and internationalization.

Authors who study SME IORs in the context of social responsibility often focus on the *social capital theory* (Putnam, 2000). Evidence shows that SME owner-managers are often integrated in personal and professional networks and relationships, and they rely on their social capital to surmount the inherent resource constraints and to fight the feelings of isolation (Spence & Schmidpeter, 2003). Promoting formal networks has become key support policy to SMEs in Europe since the 1990s (Gibb, 2000). Gibb (2000) argues that “managing the relationships with the stakeholder networks (internal and external) is the very essence of management of the small company” and should not be considered as an extra activity to the business (Gibb, 1997). Based on Gibb’s view, various networks that the SME owner managers are faced with, are “wholly overlapping and grow both via the day-to-day management of the business and via its strategy” (Gibb, 2000). Networking and the ‘*know-who*’ is the very essence of small business management and key to the survival and growth of the small business.

Some scholars have observed, that to counter their shortages in resources, small businesses depend heavily on their social capital to work on their CSR, which they acquire through inter-organizational networks (Meyer et al., 2017; Fuller and Tian, 2006; Nisim and Benjamin, 2008). Oldham and Spence (2021) recognize that small firms, owing to their heterogeneity, have immensely differing sets of resources. This allows for a significant variance in their strategic capability which has a considerable impact on firm social responsibility engagement. However, due to limited resources in areas like finances and specialized skills, SMEs often rely on external networks (social capital) and partnerships to overcome these constraints. SMEs with stronger internal and external resource bases are more likely to successfully implement sustainable practices and integrate CSR into their business strategy (Oldham & Spence, 2021). Another stream of knowledge on SME networks on CSR has origins in the SME networks and innovation literature. There is a growing recognition that collaboration is a key source of new knowledge and innovation in SMEs (Audretsch et al., 2023). Voluntary collaboration on CSR among SMEs is known as one possible path to finding innovative solutions to the mounting pressures on CSR (Murillo and Lozano 2009; Fassin, 2008; Fuller and Tian 2006).

Studies have shown that inter-organizational collaboration among large firms can be an important driver for innovation performance (Powell et al., 1996; Bogers & Radziwon, 2019). However, SMEs might be reluctant to engage in collaborations for innovation because of their lack of time, financial resources and expertise and skills (Dubouloz et al., 2021). But paradoxically, as pointed out by Dubouloz et al. (2021), these same barriers also represent SMEs main drivers to collaborate. SMEs might also face a cultural barrier linked to the fear of opening up (which is seen as a risk) due to SME vulnerability (Dubouloz et al., 2021).

In conclusion, literature on SME IORs has grown over the past years but the specific area of SME IORs regarding CSR is nascent and rather limited. Authors have studied the drivers for SME collaboration on CSR but not the process and micro level of those interactions (formation,

goal deliberation etc.). Our study intends to address this gap by exploring SME interactions on CSR. Our research aims to address the following questions: **How do SMEs engage with one another regarding CSR? In what ways do SMEs coordinate, cooperate, or collaborate on CSR initiatives?** Specifically, we seek to examine the processes through which organizations interact with their peers on CSR, focusing particularly on the types of goals that shape these interactions. Understanding these aspects is crucial for advancing research on how IORs among SMEs develop and evolve.

2. Methodology

We designed a qualitative research, based on a single case study of a regional SME-driven CSR platform in France. Since collaboration among SMEs on CSR is still a relatively underexplored topic, we were eager to study the ways in which SME owner managers participate in a collaborative process in a voluntary manner. The creation of an independent CSR platform called '*CSR Occitanie*' ('*RSE Occitanie*' in French) gave us the opportunity to explore various voluntary interactions among SMEs. The cross-sector setting facilitated collaborative relationships with three levels of participation (starter members, premium members and partners) that allowed us to observe different goals and intensity of interactions based on the type of membership (premium members and partners had regular touchpoints and thus more interactions).

2.1. The case

The platform is a privately owned membership initiative, founded by two independent individuals (a CSR consultant and trainer and an owner manager of a small communications agency) and it was supported by local institutional actors, both private and public. The platform was launched in 2020 with the ambition to connect organizations committed to CSR in the Occitanie Region, France. It regroups organizations that are already committed to CSR and thus

gives us direct access to organizations that are open to collaboration and strive to implement CSR. 65 organizations (mainly SMEs but not only) from different sectors have joined the platform to advance their CSR.

Membership is open to organizations with some preexisting CSR orientation in place (self-declared best practice or labelling certification is required upon subscription). Three types of members exist: starter; premium and partners. Starter members have their logo and best practices published on the website. Premium members, in addition to the starter level, have access to thematic workshops, seminars and working groups. Partners have all the previously mentioned benefits in addition to more visibility.

Thus, members have access to different types of resources based on their membership level:

- a) on-line directory of member organizations displaying their company description, logo, labels if applicable and best practices;
- b) listing of members' job offers;
- c) access to technical workshops, conferences and working groups (face to face and on-line) and networking events;
- d) access to online members' space with webinar recordings and presentation materials following the events.

A group of 23 member organizations (see Table 3) had chosen to pay a higher fee and to become 'premium' members with access to collaborative activities, such as technical workshops and working groups. We were most interested in this group of organizations since their membership status allowed for continuous direct interactions, touchpoints and collaboration during the organized face-to-face and on-line meetings.

TABLE 2
“CSR Occitanie” platform’s premium members and partners

	Informants	N° employees	Sector
	SMEs		
1	Informant 1	3	Consulting & training
2	Informant 2	200	Engineering design services
3	Informant 3	180	Urban planning
4	Informant 4	1	Consulting & training
5	Informant 5 (Founder)	10	Communications agency
6	Informant 6	1	Consulting & training
7	Informant 7	37	Investment fund
8	Informant 8	14	Translation & training
9	Informant 9	30	Cleaning company
10	Informant 10	1	Lawyer
11	Informant 11	4	Lawyer
12	Informant 12	90	Engineering in ecology
13	Informant 13	40	Consulting & certification
14	Informant 14	17	Energy cooperative
15	Informant 15 (Founder)	1	Consulting & training
16	Informant 16	37	Accounting experts
17	Informant 17	4	Events and travel agency
	Other		
18	Informant 18	1100	Cartography/topography
19	Informant 19 (Partner)	1200	Standartization/Certification
20	Informant 20 (Partner)	1500	Banking
21	Informant 21 (Partner)	11	Cluster
22	Informant 22 (Partner)	130	Public service
23	Informant 23 (Partner)	200	Academia

2.2. Data Collection

Our key informants were thus the premium members of ‘*CSR Occitanie*’ platform: owner-managers, managers, CSR consultants and the founders of the platform. In parallel, we also interviewed external CSR experts who were active in the CSR arena locally.

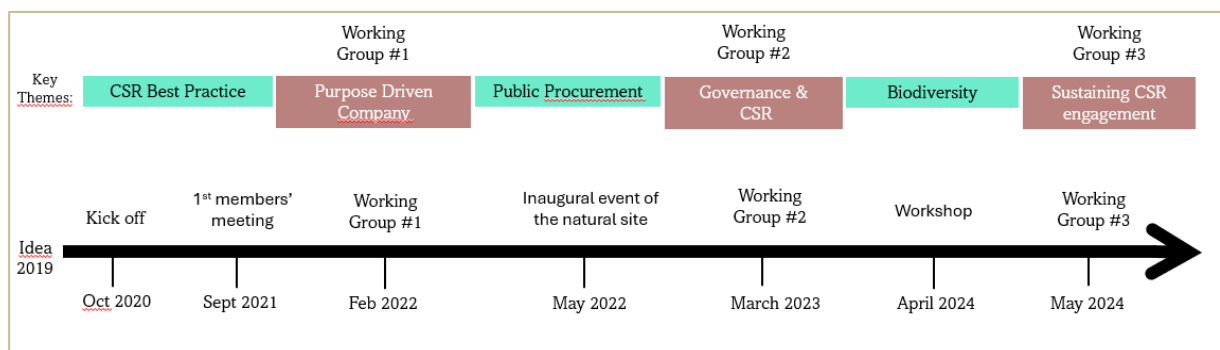
Semi-structured interviews with 21 premium members and both founders were conducted between November 2022 and May 2024 (25h in total). To facilitate the interviews, we used a guide focused on the following key themes: general information about the interviewee and the organization, CSR, innovation that spurs from CSR, collaboration on CSR, participation in

'CSR Occitanie' platform (eg, motivation to join the platform, the ways it is used, how much time is allocated etc.), regional support on CSR, and future of CSR and future of growth.

Direct participatory observations were made on a regular basis, as we were involved in targeted meetings (see Appendix A for overview of a working group) and programs proposed to the 'CSR Occitanie' premium members (72h+ between September 2020 and December 2024, ongoing). Figure 2 serves as a timeline to show key dates and themes since the creation of the platform. Secondary data was gathered to achieve triangulation. A case study database was built over time comprising field notes, interview transcripts, documents from working groups, company CSR and annual reports, media articles etc.

FIGURE 1

Timeline of 'CSR Occitanie', Key Themes and Working Groups



2.3. Coding and Analysis

We applied qualitative, iterative, and abductive analysis approach (Gioia et al., 2013). Our reasoning is abductive as we went back and forth between literature and our empirical outcomes, resulting in multiple interactions between theories and 'CSR Occitanie' platform (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then coded using MaxQDA software following a thematic content analysis method (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Findings were triangulated with secondary data (meeting notes, field notes, deliverables from the collective work sessions, members' communication materials).

3. Preliminary Findings

In this section we share initial findings from this ongoing study that explore SME IORs within a cross-sector partnership on CSR. First, we examine the goals that member organizations aim to achieve through peer interactions, categorized as individual, collective, or both. Second, we identify facilitating mechanisms analyzed through the lenses of formation and governance, trust, interactions, and space. Finally, we present an overview of three IOR types based on the members' involvement levels with the CSR platform.

TABLE 3

Overview of goals by type and by membership type

Goals	Individual	Collective	Starter	Premium	Partners
Visibility	x		x	x	x
Learning	x			x	x
Brand image	x		x	x	x
'Sticking together'		x		x	
Authenticity and legitimacy	x	x	x	x	x
Risk management and long term investment strategy	x			x	x
Global sustainability agenda		x		x	

3.1. Goals

Each participant of the platform, including founders, has their specific goals and agenda in mind at specific stages while participating in the IOR process. Some of those goals are individual and some are collective. We propose to break down these goals according to the type of goal and type of membership (see Table 4).

3.1.1. *Visibility – individual goal*

First, SMEs seek to show their CSR engagement to other market players and thus attract new clients. That is achieved by having their firm logo and their best practices or labels posted on the platform's website and using networking opportunities.

The quote below illustrates this goal:

“We came up with the idea of a directory to specifically list committed organizations, both to make them visible and to provide them with a tool for sharing best practices in an open-source approach. This means allowing free access to best practices for organizations that are either just starting out and unsure where or how to begin, or those that are more advanced and can contribute by co-creating and helping. This fosters a community-driven dynamic aimed at creating momentum.” (Informant #5)

3.1.2. *Learning – individual goal*

Second, SMEs strive to improve awareness, knowledge and skills on CSR. This includes learning from best practice of their peers and thus sourcing new directly applicable ideas and tools. Monitoring new or upcoming regulation on CSR seems also an important feature that allows them to accelerate decision making while working on their CSR strategy.

The quote below illustrates this goal:

“A kind and considerate exchange of experiences aimed at helping each other grow, without any notion of competition.” (Informant #3)

3.1.3. *Brand image – individual goal*

Third, they also consider that their brand image is improved by promoting their involvement in a community of committed regional actors on CSR, thus attracting talents (CSR is seen as a response to recruitment challenges, especially after Covid-19).

The quote below illustrates this goal:

« I think the market has reached a point where everyone realizes that, if we want to retain employees, we have to work on our employer branding and take positive actions, whatever they may be. This is being demanded by employees, by clients, and by consumers. People want to know how things are made: are there chemicals involved? Does it come from the other side of the world? » (Informant #17)

3.1.4. 'Sticking together' – collective goal

SME owner managers stress the importance of 'sticking together' in order to escape the sense of isolation and to create social proximity and reassurance in the face of growing uncertainty in the market. The collective provides members with a feeling of security in the face of uncertainty (emotional factor) and creates a sense of community.

Partners, that are large organizations with a set of stable resources at hand, are less in the search for this sense of community and thus participate less actively in the collective work such as working groups where this feeling of belonging is cultivated.

The below quote illustrates this goal:

« A leader might face isolation while dealing with daily operations, managing their business, and often handling not only successes but also doubts. This is precisely why the community we've created around the CSR Occitanie platform exists. It allows leaders to avoid being completely isolated by connecting them with others who might be facing the same challenges and difficulties. Together, they can find solutions. » (Informant #5)

3.1.5. Authenticity and legitimacy – individual and collective goals

Another key reason to join the platform is the quest for authenticity and legitimacy. Members are driven by a common value-based desire to work on a 'true' CSR versus 'greenwashing'.

Members often mention their willingness to have a genuine positive impact on the local territory and people and the planet.

The quote below illustrates this goal:

“What I really appreciate about them (the founders) are their values. Compared to other players in the broader Occitanie region, whom I won’t name, I feel they genuinely have these values deeply ingrained in them. It’s not just about business - that’s what I mean. That’s what I like about them, and it’s a completely personal feeling.” (Informant #19)

On the other hand, founders (as separate business players) need members and partners to build their legitimacy and legitimacy for the platform to attract new members. Partners are seeking legitimacy on the given territory so that the members give priority to establishing partnerships or business relationships with them and to be their ‘first choice’.

3.1.6. Risk management and long term investment strategy – individual goals

Their investment of resources on CSR is being validated by seeing that other local market players are also investing financial and human resources to advance the ‘true’ CSR (financial factor) without immediate regulatory enforcement or return on investment (ROI). In this sense, exchanges among members are perceived as a possibility to discuss CSR as risk management and long-term investment strategies.

The quote below illustrates this goal:

« I know that the laws and standards coming into effect, particularly for large corporations, the ESG criteria...I’m trying to remember the name... CSRD, that’s it, don’t apply to small businesses. But I’m well aware that the issue is that large companies working with us, the smaller ones, will eventually ask us for figures and indicators in order to comply. So, indirectly, we’ll be affected as well. That’s why we’re being cautious. » (Informant #17)

3.1.7. *Global sustainability agenda - collective goal*

Members find it important to being able to advance the global sustainability agenda collectively as they believe that it serves a common purpose. There is a feeling that SMEs need to show their strong ethical values in the face of the environmental crisis.

The quote below illustrates this goal:

« The second aspect is everything related to environmental preservation in the broadest sense. As an environmental consulting firm, we didn't wait for the challenges we're currently facing, such as climate change issues, to start thinking about these matters. In fact, we began addressing them as early as the 1990s. » (Informant #12)

3.2. **Facilitating mechanisms for collaboration**

3.2.1. *Formation and governance of the platform*

Founders are tied to CSR agenda based on their personal values, relationships and business models of their respective activities. Both were willing to pool their resources without merging their identities or creating a new firm. The Regional authority subsidized the creation of this entity but does not participate directly in the governance of the platform. Founders choose to keep the platform independent from all external influences despite the pressure from some members who desire stronger institutional presence in the Region. Founders engage members from their respective networks of clients and partners across sectors. SMEs often spread the word by word of mouth about the platform. Flexibility on the level of participation is important: on the financial level, timewise as members choose when they participate and degree of openness regarding information shared. Key decisions are taken by the founders but the working group agendas and events are co-created. Founders had their personal motivation in creating the platform linked to their respective business activities:

« This project really interested me because I quickly realized that in Occitanie, there wasn't much happening at the time in terms of CSR, particularly in our sector. It did fit perfectly into our strategy, both for our activities and for our vision. My goal was to develop and place CSR at the heart of our strategy. » (Informant #5)

3.2.2. Trust

Trust is another central theme as expressed by the platform members: trust to ensure open exchanges; trust regarding founders to build pertinent program and activities and finally building trust among regional actors. The decision to join the platform is made based on the trust regarding founders or on peer recommendation. In the absence of formal framework agreement, trust is crucial to provide a basis for this collaborative space. New business partnerships are established between members based on the shared values and their collective effort and vision on CSR:

« We don't want the platform to become a kind of endorsement for greenwashing. That's why we make sure to carefully monitor who joins, their level of commitment, and so on. We want to avoid being merely a token approval that doesn't align with the true principles of CSR. That's why we're very cautious about this and rather selective when it comes to entry. » (Informant #15)

3.2.3. Informal relationships

Membership to the platform is compulsory in order to participate in working groups or to take part in workshops or informal gatherings such as afterwork drinks. In addition to this, membership type (starter, premium or partner) defines who is authorized and invited to participate in respective activities. Nevertheless, it has been difficult to establish which member has really paid the membership fee and which member has been assigned the membership type

thanks to its *in-kind* contributions (such as help in preparing a workshop) or based on invitation to 'a key personality' on the territory in order to attract more members. It can also be historical personal ties between the founders and a member of the platform who has never paid membership fees but has been there from the beginning to support the project. Information on the basis of the membership type remains opaque and difficult to obtain from the founders. Informal links play an integral role in organizing membership and activities of the platform.

The quote below illustrates this point:

"It was done differently, I invested a lot (of time) in the platform, she (the co-founder) asked me to set up the platform's legal entity. We met, I did some training, and she told me: you know what, you're going to be part of the 'collective', it happened like that! And I didn't say that I was going to be part of the collective, I was so invested that she told me, well, basically you're part of the collective!" (Informant #10)

3.2.4. Interactions

Active members agree that the most enjoyable part of being a member of the platform is the human interactions when face-to-face workshops or working group meetings take place. They enjoy speaking 'the same language' and by sharing their current business challenges, often freely sharing their advice on the approach to be taken or a supplier to choose (or not to choose). The degree of openness during those exchanges is high and most members express their satisfaction in being able to advance the global sustainability agenda collectively as they believe that it serves a common purpose. Those face-to-face meetings serve as collective intelligence sessions on CSR and this format is rewarding as SME owner managers learn a lot, in a short period of time and social proximity is enforced. Most members also express their willingness to contribute to a strong territorial dynamic on social responsibility and support local actors as much as possible. The quote below illustrates this idea:

« For me, it's really about the debates we can have in the working groups. For example, the discussion we had about the term "label," defining it, and everything around that. It really enriches my thinking, and I find it to be incredibly valuable work - something I'd struggle to replicate just by diving into books. I'm not even sure the current literature on these topics would allow for such deep reflection. For me, there's a kind of think-tank aspect to it, and that's the major added value of the network. It's also a privilege to be part of it. » (Informant #9)

3.2.5. Space

Lastly, we can observe that members have access to three types of spaces: 1) interactions with members during their face-to-face or virtual workshops or working group meetings; 2) access to the digital resources depending on their membership type; 3) access and interactions that are organized at the *natural site* of the platform (a garden) with the aim to place participants in a natural environment in order to enhance their creativity and curiosity around environmental issues and to contribute to reconstruction of biodiversity in the given area:

« The CSR Occitanie natural site is a project within the project, aimed at creating a space dedicated to biodiversity preservation. It is also a space reserved for members, where conferences can be held, and members can gather at this location. » (Informant #15)

4. Discussion

Our study attempted to reveal some novel insights on SME IORs on CSR by using the type of goal as a lens to analyze SME interactions within a cross-sector partnership.

We have seen that SME owner-managers are eager to learn on CSR by engaging actively with their peers and partners of the platform to benefit from the knowledge spillovers but that their involvement depends on the goals that they have determined upon subscription to the platform.

Their membership type defines their level of engagement and the type of interactions they choose to be involved in (see Table 2).

TABLE 4

Findings by member type (starter, premium and partners)

	Literature (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020)	Starter Members	Premium Members and Partners
Coordination	Coordination refers to the attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes related to deliberation, negotiation, and <i>agreement on a common goal</i> .	Coordination is limited between the SME owner-manager and founders in order to agree upon membership type and information that will be displayed on the digital space of the platform.	Coordination is undertaken to agree upon membership type and information that will be displayed on the digital space of the platform. Coordination is part of the work undertaken by the working group members to agree upon common objectives and deliverables.
Cooperation	Cooperation refers to attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes related to the <i>implementation of a common goal</i> .	-	Cooperation takes place during working group sessions while working towards the commonly agreed objective or deliverable.
Collaboration	Collaboration refers to voluntarily helping other partners to achieve IOR (common) goals or <i>one or more of their private goals</i> .	Occurs in case a starter member participates in a workshop and shares best practice or give advice to his peers and thus helps to achieve their private goals. Some members have also informal exchanges in helping each other with advice outside the activities of the platform.	Collaboration takes place during working group sessions while working together towards the commonly agreed objective or deliverable. Openly shared best practice, information and discussions help achieving the members' private goals. Collaboration might take place also during other types of interactions (workshops or informal gatherings). Informal character of relationships foster personal links between members.

Starter members choose to benefit from the visibility to improve their brand image and benefit from the authenticity of the platform to build their legitimacy in the Region. They do not engage in regular interactions and choose not to share openly their knowledge on CSR. They engage in coordination as their interactions with founders are limited to agree upon membership type and information that will be displayed on the digital space of the platform. Their goals are individual, and their participation is limited unless they decide to join the collective events of the platform where they might engage in open sharing of knowledge. Collaboration might occur in this case when a starter member participates in a workshop and shares best practice or give advice to his peers and thus helps to achieve their private goals. Some members have also informal exchanges in helping each other with advice outside the activities of the platform. Starter members thus do not participate in cooperation as they are not involved in the working group sessions and do not work towards a commonly determined common goal.

Premium members participate on a long-term basis and have regular interactions with their peers and partners of the platform. They engage in open knowledge sharing and learn from knowledge spillovers on CSR to compensate for their resource constraints and in their search for an efficient way to engage in CSR and to translate their values into action within their firm. Coordination is undertaken to agree upon membership type and information that will be displayed on the digital space of the platform. Coordination is part of the work undertaken by the working group members to agree upon common objectives and deliverables. Premium members engage in cooperation during working group sessions while working towards the commonly agreed objective or deliverable. Premium members are those that engage most in collaboration. Collaboration takes place during working group sessions while working together towards the commonly agreed objective and, directly or indirectly, they help each other to

achieve one or more individual goals. Openly shared best practice, information and discussions help find actionable solutions to their CSR challenges. Collaboration might take place also during other types of interactions (workshops or informal gatherings). Informal character of those relationships fosters personal links between members and founders. SME owner-managers thus fight their feelings of isolation and form a sense of community. The shared knowledge of upcoming regulation on CSR, CSR management tools and best practices form a solid basis for the decision-making process on CSR and help shaping their CSR strategy. This way they are able to foresee upcoming risks and find and direct resources if necessary. Despite their short-term planning habits, those intensive interactions help them plan and realize upcoming challenges on CSR topics. From the transaction cost theory (TCT) perspective their interactions, especially collaboration, may replace expensive formal consultancy firm services. The informal nature of their interactions fosters open exchanges and open new avenues for easily accessible solutions. Often their openness is argued by the fact that everyone will benefit from a more responsible business and their willingness to contribute collectively to the global sustainability agenda on their local level is high.

Finally, we have a perception that the most value is created during the working groups where the most of the open exchanges take place and the most valuable item are the *exchanges and interactions per se* and not the collectively agreed objective or deliverable of the working group. Thus, we can conclude that the action of collaboration and thus helping on each other's' individual goals is valued more than cooperation on a collective goal due to their heterogeneity.

Partners of the platform benefit from the visibility and from improved brand image by supporting socially and environmentally engaged local actors. Their interactions take place mainly at larger gatherings where they can build their legitimacy on the given territory, find partners for their corporate CSR activities or provide solutions to the local market players that

form their direct market base. Nevertheless, they strive to participate in the collaborative space during the working group sessions and engage in knowledge exchanges based on their capacity to allocate time.

5. Contributions

This study explores the types of interactions among SMEs within the context of a CSR platform. Our research contributes to the existing literature on inter-organizational relationships (IORs) by exploring the characteristics of SME interactions on CSR. First, we analyze types of goals that SMEs wish to achieve through interactions with their peers. Those goals can be individual, collective or both. Second, we have observed some facilitating mechanisms that we explore via following lenses: formation and governance, trust, interactions and space. Third, we propose an overview of the three types of IORs based on the degree of involvement of the SME owner-managers.

Our study reveals that all platform members may be involved in coordination and collaboration but only those who participate in the working groups are involved also in cooperation. Our study shows that SME IORs are influenced by informal nature of interactions and are characterized by flexibility, proximity, openness, trust and value alignment. The types of goals are linked to the cross-sector partnership member type. Those that are less involved in direct interactions seek mainly visibility and brand image and are involved mainly in coordination activities. Those members who have chosen to dedicate time to regular interactions, seek most of all learning on CSR from knowledge spillovers. The objectives of the collective work during working groups seem secondary compared to the face-to-face interactions where coordination, cooperation and collaboration take place while members help each other in finding solutions to their individual goals while advancing also on their collective goals.

Our study has its limitations. Our empirical setting is bound to cross-sector partnership in a given region. Future research on SME IORs is welcome to explore other IORs types (such as alliances and buyer-supplier relations) in different empirical settings. Sustainability orientation of members' interactions and types of goals might also be an influential factor and future studies might explore other types of SME IORs.

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APPENDIX A
Overview of a completed working group (WG) of the platform for illustration

N° of meetings	1	2	3	4	5	6
Purpose Driven Company (PDC)	17/02/2022	18/03/2022	10/05/2022	06/07/2022	08/09/2022	02/11/2022
N° of Participants	5	6	8	8	7	6
Time	9h30-11h30 (2h)	08h30 – 11h00 (2h30)	14h00 - 16h00 (2h)	14H00 - 16H00 (2h)	10H00 - 12H00 (2h)	10h00 – 12h00 (2h)
Format	In person meeting @ founder's office	In person meeting @ member's office	In person meeting @ Capdeville meeting space	In person meeting @ (cooperative space provided by a member)	In person meeting @ member's office	In person meeting @ member's office (lunch to conclude at a local restaurant).
Agenda	1) Round table of participants and everyone's expectations. 2) Set the theme of the GT in platform connection with the purpose-driven company as well as the associated deliverables.	1) Common agreement on the objective of the WG; 2) Feedback from two members of the PDCs; 3) Reflections around the different areas of work linked to the objective of the WG.	1) Consultancy firm presentation on the departmental "Purpose Driven Territory" project led by the Chamber of Commerce of Hérault Department. 2) Discussion on the specific areas of work to achieve the overall objective of the GT	Working session on the PDF document.	Share the writing of the support between WG members - Deadline to be validated: finalize support at the end of November 2022 - Brainstorm regarding the means of dissemination of the deliverable or organize a dedicated event	1) Complete the working document 2) Discuss the communication plan
Outcomes	WG members wish to contribute to consolidating the status of a purpose-driven company (PDC) over time. The objective is to provide a clear vision of the expectations of a commitment with the PDC with the specificities of the Occitanie Region.	WG members agreed to focus on the following objective for the WG: "How to make the purpose-driven company flourish in the Occitanie region?" Members seek indicators to assess progress on PDC. WG members suggest to focus on following specific areas: 1) the evaluation of the independent third party auditor; 2) establish human and financial resources that are necessary; 3) communicate/raise awareness via the media & events; 4) PDC in Occitanie d. communicate with stakeholders.	Digital space on Google Drive launched for the WG. Proposals: a. Create an exhaustive list of PDC in Occitanie b. List the independent third party auditors in Occitanie. c. Restate the feedback from existing PDC in Occitanie d. Provide our recommendations.	1. We welcome a new member to the WG (same consultant who presented at the last WG) 2. We have listed the independent third party auditors in the Occitanie region. 3. The objective of the GT is to produce a PDF document that is now detailed by chapters.	Working session on the content of the deliverable	Comms plan: Request an editorial from the office of the Occitanie Region President Carole Delga to strengthen the impact of the deliverable. Organize a webinar with contributors.
Deliverable	A guide on purpose-driven company status (PDC) that suggests how to do it, why to do it and the means to keep PDC alive over the long term. There needs to be a link between PDC and CSR. A questionnaire: Are you ready to become PDC? A guide that is useful to micro and SMEs.	To be defined according to the areas of work that will be chosen. The deliverables will be aimed at micro and SMEs in Occitanie.	A PDF addressed to micro and SMEs in Occitanie	Content for the deliverable: 1) Know the purpose-driven company: Why PDC? What PDC is and what it is not. 2) How to become PDC? Timeline and where to source information? 3) How to choose my independent third party auditor? 4) Activate my business with PDC - Glossary: ABCedary (on specific terms)	Description of the Deliverable: A5 format; with visual blocks and text; 12 Pages, to be used on LinkedIn via the creation of a carousel to be shared on social media 1) Target: SME managers & stakeholders 2) Target: journalists; accounting experts 3) Objective: Raising awareness of the PDC (all)	Deadline to finalize the content of the deliverable is set for November 18. Founder's communication's agency is nominated to create (pro bono) the graphic design of the deliverable after validation by the group.