

# **Collective business modeling of multi-stakeholder meta-organizations for social innovation : the infeasible equation ?**

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## **Résumé :**

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In this paper, we analyze the attempts of collective business modeling of multi-stakeholder meta-organizations for social innovation, through the study of four empirical territorial cooperations in France. Our contribution seeks to answer the following question: how is collective business model built for MSMOs ? The aim of this study is to analyze how MSMOs for social innovation develop a collective business model that considers the business models of their members, as well as the value they produce for the MSMO, its members and more broadly the territory. Our study shows that collective business modeling of MSMOs can be seen as “bricolage” and temporary solutions as well as difficulties between members and with external stakeholders, both pointing out to an infeasible equation. This paper sheds light on specific economic and values conditions of MSMOs to develop social innovation through socio-economic activities. This also sheds light on difficulties and failures developing a collective business model of MSMO on a permanent basis, making it impossible to answer to grand challenges.

**Mots-clés :** meta-organization, multi-stakeholder, business model, social innovation, territory

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# **Collective business modeling of multi-stakeholder meta-organizations for social innovation : the infeasible equation ?**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent global and national crises, whether ecological, economical, geopolitical, or health-related, are plunging organizations to face with the need to respond to these grand challenges (George et al., 2016) while ensuring the development and sustainability of their activities. To doing that, some organizations are opting to establish territorial cooperations that can be assimilated as multi-stakeholder meta-organizations (MSMOs) for social innovation (Berkowitz et al., 2020).

These MSMOs challenge existing management tools, processes and practices in the literature, due to their inter-organizational, territorial and social innovation features. On a theoretical level, a number of studies have investigated their specific features, such as: the long time it takes to create them, the animation and implementation of exchange spaces between structures of different legal nature and sectors of activity (Coulombel & Berkowitz, 2024 ; Cropper & Bor, 2018) ; the forms of meta-organizations engaged on a social level (Laurent et al., 2019; Sanioossian et al., 2022) or on an ecological and environmental level (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019).

Despite the development of numerous studies on MSMOs, the scientific literature and professional documentation remain silent on how a collective business model can be implemented to allow the development of socio-economic activities through MSMO. The “collective business model” can be understood as an integrated business model, simultaneously considering all the resources, skills, organizations and value propositions (Demil et al., 2018)

of the MSMO, its members and their added value for the territory and the response to grand challenges. However, the business model, like many tools in management science, is a tool built on an organizational rather than a multi-organizational logic (Demil et al., 2018; Zott & Amit, 2010). As a result, this tool does not allow processes and practices to be adapted within the framework of MSMOs for social innovation.

Our study aims to answer the following question: How can a collective business model be built for MSMOs on a permanent basis ? We analyzed the way in which MSMOs can develop a business model that considers the business models of their members, as well as the value they produce for the territory. We study four territorial cooperations in France, through a research-action approach (Aggeri, 2016; Gilbert et al., 2018) as established MSMOs for social innovation, in their willingness to develop a permanent, sustainable and collective business model.

The first section of the paper reviews key challenges related to business models, focusing on how meta-organizations navigate and influence these challenges. Next, the paper presents the methodological framework adopted and the selected case studies. The results section unveils the findings of research-action, presenting the outcomes of the case analysis. It emphasizes patterns, relationships, and key observations linking meta-organizations to their business model challenges. Finally, the discussion contextualizes the results within the broader academic and practical landscape. It examines their implications for theory, practice, and future research, shedding light on unresolved questions and avenues for further exploration.

## **1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **1.1 SOCIAL INNOVATION DEVELOPMENT BY MULTI-STAKEHOLDER META-ORGANIZATIONS**

Recent crises and transformations at both global and local levels have driven organizations to collaborate and organize collectively within local territories to enhance their influence and

efficiency or to capture, create, and share value. Scholars and practitioners alike have shown a growing interest in understanding how diverse organizations collaborate within ecosystems to drive local development. These collaborative frameworks are proving particularly effective in fostering social innovation (Silva-Flores & Murillo, 2022) and addressing critical sustainability challenges.

A specific organizational form has emerged to observe these cooperations: the multi-stakeholder meta-organization (Berkowitz et al., 2020), which are the creation of a new collective organization, comprising a diverse array of stakeholders (Battisti et al., 2022; Kretschmer et al., 2022). Indeed, MSMOs bring together heterogeneous actors, including businesses, institutions, civil society, and local NGOs (Laurent et al., 2019 ; Sanioossian et al., 2022) in a collective organization without merging them, and with free membership to enter or leave this collective organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). The aim of these MSMOs for social innovation is to develop concrete, sustainable answers to grand challenges.

Unlike “traditional” organizations, MSMOs challenge existing management tools, processes, and practices as discussed in the literature, due to their inter-organizational (Berkowitz et al., 2022), territorial (Gadille et al., 2013), and social innovation characteristics (Sanioossian et al., 2022).

Theoretically, several studies have explored their distinctive features, such as the lengthy time required for their creation, the animation and facilitation of exchange spaces between entities of different legal forms and sectors (Cropper & Bor, 2018), forms of meta-organizations engaged in social issues (Sanioossian et al., 2022) and environmental issues (Berkowitz et al., 2022), the challenge of securing funding and achieving economic balance for the meta-organization and its stakeholders (Dumez & Renou, 2020), the deployment of innovative experiments with high economic, ecological, and social value, and territorialization (Gadille et al., 2013).

However, research on MSMOs does not consider their business model. This gap in the literature is significant, as a well-designed business model is essential for the long-term survival and effectiveness of these types of organizations. MSMOs for social innovation bring together diverse stakeholders, to tackle complex, systemic issues known as grand challenges, including climate change, public health crises, and global inequality. These challenges demand not only strategic coordination but also a sustainable economic framework that supports the MSMO's activities and ensures its impact on territories.

The absence of business model considerations in the MSMO research leaves a crucial blind spot. Without a viable mechanism to generate, allocate, and sustain financial and non-financial resources, MSMOs risk failing to meet their objectives or dissolving entirely. This is especially critical as MSMOs navigate competing stakeholder interests, resource constraints, and the unpredictability of addressing grand challenges. A robust understanding of how business models function in MSMOs could provide valuable insights into their capacity to scale impact, innovate solutions, and adapt to evolving demands, ensuring their resilience and relevance over time.

## **1.2 BUSINESS MODEL LITERATURE**

The impressive literature on business models over the past fifteen years considers the importance of resource, skills and organization to develop a specific value proposition for a firm, in a particular industry (Demil & Lecocq, 2010; Zott & Amit, 2010).

Several research streams have been developed to enlarge and specify particular business models. First, researchers developed business model for social innovation (Carayannis et al., 2021, p. 1), including “*the social mission, which needs to be defined in order to be able to move forward with the strategy, the value proposition, and the best practices of the business*”.

Moreover, other researchers develop business model for specific organizations such as circular business models (Kanda et al., 2021) or business model for non-profit organizations (Ballesteros & Gatignon, 2019). However, while circular business models in line with circular economy, consider uniquely how private companies and firms can develop resources and funds for each other, without taking into account the social innovations and impacts of their developments, studies about business model for non-profit organizations points out uniquely the way in which non-profit organizations can develop funding through fundraising and sponsorship.

Then, researchers consider some development in business model concept to allow its use for ecosystems (Demil et al., 2018), cross-sector partnership (Dentoni et al., 2021), meta-organizations (Battisti et al., 2022) or cooperations (Calmé et al., 2016). This stream is in line with the importance of sharing value between organizations (Porter & Kramer, 2011). However, these studies do not consider the collective business model, keeping the trajectory of the organization's business model influencing by other organizations. Indeed, they only point out the interests and limits for the organization members to share resources with other organizations in order to reinforce or sustain their own business model.

Finally, a stream of research in business model consider the dynamic perspective of business model – named as business model creation (Ahokangas & Myllykoski, 2014), business model design (Amit & Zott, 2015) or business modeling (Bojovic et al., 2018; Cosenz & Noto, 2018). This specific stream takes into consideration the importance of the dynamic and evolutive processes of business model throughout the organization's life cycle.

### **1.3 CHALLENGES FOR THE STUDY OF MSMO BUSINESS MODELING**

Considering both the challenge to develop business models for MSMOs and their sustainability and the need to develop specific business models in creation through cooperation between multi-stakeholders, we propose to study the hypothesis of collective business modeling for MSMOs. The collective business modeling for MSMOs can be understood as the construction of an integrated business model, simultaneously considering all the resources, skills, organizations and value propositions of a MSMO, its members and their added value for the territory and the response to grand challenges. Collective business modeling goes beyond individual organizational strategies by focusing on the collaborative construction of an integrated business model.

In this framework, the business model of an MSMO is not simply a sum of its parts but a system of interconnected mechanisms that create and share value at multiple levels. By focusing on this integrated approach, our study aims to identify the key mechanisms by which MSMOs connect their members, govern their operations, and share resources and skills to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Specifically, our research will examine how collective business modeling supports the sustainable transition of organizations and territories. This includes analyzing how MSMOs facilitate cooperation among stakeholders with different interests, create governance structures that ensure equitable decision-making, and develop resource-sharing practices that enhance collective impact. For instance, we aim to understand how an MSMO might balance the economic objectives of a private company with the social mission of a nonprofit, all while contributing to regional development. Through this lens, collective business modeling becomes a critical tool for enabling MSMOs to navigate complexity, leverage their unique strengths, and respond effectively to pressing societal, economic and ecological challenges.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 CONTEXT OF THE CASES STUDIED

In order to observe the collective business modeling of MSMOs, we choose to study the territorial clusters of economic cooperation (*in French, Pôles Territoriaux de Coopération Economique – PTCE*). These PTCE are defined by the Social and Solidarity Economy French Law (article 9, 2014) as “*formed by the grouping, in a single territory, of social and solidarity-based economy companies, as defined in Article 1 of the present law, which join forces with other companies, in association with local authorities and their groupings, research centers, higher education and research establishments, training organizations or any other natural or legal person to implement a joint and ongoing strategy of pooling, cooperation or partnership in the service of innovative, socially responsible economic and social projects, that promote sustainable local development*”.

These PTCE can be seen as MSMOs for social innovation (Sanioossian et al., 2022). They are approximately 200 in France, self-decided by members, frequently in rural areas, aiming to develop socio-economics activities on territories such as craft entrepreneurship, soft mobility, local food, reindustrialization through cooperative companies, etc.

This type of MSMO for social innovation often relies heavily on European, national, and regional funding at the early stages of cooperation. These initial grants and subsidies are typically aimed at supporting the establishment of the PTCE, funding activities such as feasibility studies, pilot projects, and initial capacity-building efforts. For instance, a PTCE might receive regional support to set up its governance structure or launch its first collaborative initiatives. While such funding is crucial for kickstarting operations, it tends to be short-term, with little to no follow-up mechanisms to ensure continued support once the initial phase ends. Funders often fail to consider the long-term needs of these cooperations, such as the development of sustainable revenue models or the ability to self-finance ongoing activities.



Without adequate mechanisms to support their evolution, PTCEs are left to navigate financial sustainability on their own. This situation raises critical questions about their long-term viability: How can a PTCE continue to operate effectively once the initial funding dries up? What economic strategies can ensure the sustainability of both the PTCE itself and the diverse organizations members? For example, a cooperative or nonprofit within the PTCE may struggle to contribute financially if it is also grappling with its own funding challenges. These concerns highlight the importance of designing funding frameworks that not only focus on the startup phase but also enable MSMOs to transition toward self-sufficiency and resilience over time.

## **2.2 RESEARCH METHOD**

The research methodology employed is a research-intervention approach (Aggeri, 2016) based on the questions, observations, and challenges encountered by MSMOs throughout the research process. Specifically, we utilize a cyclical research-intervention process (Gilbert et al., 2018; Sanioossian, 2020) consisting of: problem identification, data collection, scientific analysis, model proposal, testing, adaptation and validation of the model, and identification of new underlying problems. This entire process is carried out in close collaboration with four territorial economic cooperation clusters in France, in order to jointly identify issues and analyses, with the aim of business modeling tailored to their needs. The initial aim of this research was to suggest an analytical framework and model of a collective business model of MSMO for social innovation.

The four PTCE cases studied are:

- PTCE A, structured as a local NGO, including 10 members (NGOs, sheep farmers, craft entrepreneurs, unemployed people), aiming to structure the wool industry in a rural area in the last 10 years. This is an established PTCE with 4 strategic themes, significant

mutualization and provision of services, questioning about governance and boundaries between the PTCE and one local NGO;

- PTCE B, steered by a local NGO, including five other local organizations (NGO, consultant in industrial economy, territorial community, , aims to structure the territorial industrial economy approach. This is an emergent PTCE which is animated by several steering committees (and workstreams), state funding in progress, start-up of a business club to finance the project;
- PTCE C, steered by a local NGO as a territorial cluster after the failure of the collective organization because of lack of their own resources. This is an established PTCE, questioning about governance and boundaries and research of fundings for the secretariat of PTCE;
- PTCE D, piloted by an agrifood network, aims to stimulate local distribution channels and promote local production and consumption. start-up with search for funding, collective NGO being created (project-based governance), search for a service offering to finance PTCE.

The data collected is presented on the following table 1. It includes the presence on strategic steering committees, regular exchanges on the PTCE's progress with those leading the approach, semi-structured interviews with members of the steering committee, coordinator of PTCE, and stakeholders involved in PTCE activities.

<b>Case</b>	<b>Semi-structured interviews</b>	<b>Informal interviews</b>	<b>Observations</b>
<i>PTCE A</i>	9	2	12h
<i>PTCE B</i>	5	3	9h
<i>PTCE C</i>	3	2	3h
<i>PTCE 4</i>	9	4	14h
<b><i>TOTAL</i></b>	<b><i>26</i></b>	<b><i>11</i></b>	<b><i>38h</i></b>

*Table 1. Detailed data collection*

The data collected was coded and analyzed using “grounded theory” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 5), designed “*to develop a set of well-integrated concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of the social phenomena under study*”.

### **3. RESULTS<sup>1</sup>**

The first key observation highlights the phenomenon of resource bricolage in the development of the 4 PTCEs’ business models. Members often rely on local and informal resources, including human, material, and financial contributions, to advance their projects. For instance, a local nonprofit may recruit its volunteers to support collective initiatives, or a small business might donate surplus materials to help launch a new activity (PTCE B). Similarly, innovations often emerge from the active involvement of members, such as co-developing sustainable practices or sharing technical expertise (PTCE C). However, the lack of formal structures to coordinate these efforts can slow down the pace of development. In PTCE D, for example, delays occurred because no central mechanism existed to pool financial contributions, leading to frustration among members. Such situations can create tensions when expectations about contributions and benefits are not clearly aligned or equitably distributed.

The second result concerns conflicts between PTCE members and the secretariat, which typically functions as the operational team responsible for daily management. These conflicts often arise from communication breakdowns or a perceived lack of transparency. For example, in PTCE A, members expressed dissatisfaction when the secretariat allocated project funding without consulting them, fueling mistrust. Similarly, unequal distribution of decision-making power has been a recurring issue (PTCE B and C). In some cases, members feel excluded from strategic decisions, which undermines their sense of ownership and commitment to the collective (PTCE D). These tensions are exacerbated when the secretariat is seen as prioritizing

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<sup>1</sup> The results are currently being analyzed, and here is an initial synthesis.

administrative efficiency over member engagement, highlighting the need for more inclusive governance practices.

A third challenge lies in fostering internal exchanges and sharing resources among members. These difficulties are often rooted in a lack of trust, inadequate tools for collaboration, or misaligned organizational cultures. For example, a cooperative and a small business within the same PTCE may have different priorities — one focused on social impact and the other on profitability — which can lead to misunderstandings or hesitancy in sharing resources. Additionally, the absence of robust communication tools can limit opportunities for collaboration. In PTCE C, members struggled to implement joint training programs because members had no centralized system to coordinate schedules and share information. These barriers not only hinder the exchange of knowledge but also prevent members from fully leveraging the benefits of collective action.

Finally, obtaining external funding presents a significant hurdle for PTCEs. Securing financial support often requires organizations to demonstrate measurable impact, align with funder priorities, and navigate complex and competitive application processes. For example, PTCE D attempting to secure regional grants faced challenges in quantifying its social impact, as many of its outcomes were qualitative and long-term. Furthermore, funding criteria often favor projects with immediate, tangible results, making it difficult for PTCEs with experimental or capacity-building initiatives to compete. These challenges can be further compounded by the administrative burden of preparing grant applications, which diverts resources from operational activities. In some cases (PTCE A and B), PTCEs have had to abandon promising projects due to insufficient funding, highlighting the need for simplified processes and greater support for collaborative organizations.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Our contribution has led us to identify several major points of contribution and opening to answer to our research question.

First, the concept of collective business modeling for MSMOs often resembles “bricolage” (Do Vale et al., 2021) to describe a process where organizations make do with available resources, piecing together solutions that are imperfect or temporary. In the context of MSMOs, this bricolage arises from the challenges of articulating a clear value proposition for all stakeholders involved. Members of MSMOs may have different expectations, goals, and understandings of the organization’s purpose, which can lead to misunderstandings and fragmented efforts. The value proposition, i.e. the collective benefit offered by the organization to its members and the broader community, may not be effectively communicated or demonstrated. As a result, the business model created through this process is often provisional, shaped by the immediate needs and available resources, rather than being a well-defined, long-term strategic plan. This temporary nature can undermine the sustainability of the MSMO and its capacity to address long-term challenges.

Second, while the creation of a collective business model is essential for the long-term viability of MSMOs, particularly in their efforts to address grand challenges, such as climate change, social inequality, and sustainable development, its implementation is far from straightforward. A collective business model is key to enabling MSMOs to define shared goals, allocate resources, and sustain their operations over time. However, a major challenge in this process arises from the cultural differences between the diverse members of the MSMO. These differences can manifest in various ways, such as differing organizational values, management practices, and expectations regarding collaboration. These cultural divergences can hinder the development of a unified, cohesive business model. Therefore, while collective business

modeling is critical for the ongoing existence of MSMOs, overcoming these cultural barriers is essential for creating a model that works for all involved.

Third, the collective business modeling approach appears to be more practical and feasible when applied to specific social innovation projects created by the members of the MSMO rather than the organization as a whole. Each project may have its own distinct goals, resources, and stakeholders, which allows for a more targeted and manageable business model. However, when attempting to apply this approach to the entire MSMO, the complexities of coordinating a large, multi-stakeholder organization with varying objectives and capacities make the collective business model more challenging to implement. The larger the MSMO, the more complicated the relationships, decision-making processes, and resource-sharing mechanisms become. Given these complexities, attempting to create a single, integrated business model that encompasses all members and activities may be an infeasible goal. Instead, a more pragmatic approach could involve developing tailored business models for each initiative or project within the MSMO, while maintaining an overarching framework that ensures alignment with the MSMO's broader objectives.

Thus, this detailed breakdown clarifies the various challenges and considerations involved in the collective business modeling of MSMOs, highlighting the complexities of aligning diverse stakeholders and building sustainable models.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has explored the complexities of developing and sustaining business models for multi-stakeholder meta-organizations (MSMOs), with a particular focus on their role in social innovation. The findings highlight the challenges MSMOs face in creating cohesive, long-term business models that can support their sustainability and effectiveness in addressing grand challenges. In particular, the bricolage approach often observed in the stage of MSMOs'

development reveals the difficulty of properly demonstrating their value proposition and securing long-term financial viability. The reliance on external funding in the initial phases — while essential for getting projects off the ground — fails to account for the long-term resource needs and the evolving nature of the organizations involved.

Moreover, the creation of a collective business model is essential for the long-term existence of MSMOs, as it facilitates cooperation, resource sharing, and collective governance. However, this process is not without significant challenges, particularly due to cultural differences among the diverse stakeholders involved. The varying organizational cultures, objectives, and approaches can create friction, making it difficult to align all parties around a single, unified business model. This highlights the need for flexible, adaptable frameworks that can accommodate the diversity of interests while still working toward shared goals.

Our study also suggests that while collective business modeling is critical, its application might be more feasible on a project-by-project basis rather than at the level of the entire organization. The complexity of coordinating multiple stakeholders with differing priorities and capacities makes it difficult to implement a single, integrated business model for the entire MSMO. Instead, tailoring business models to specific social innovation projects allows for greater focus and alignment, ensuring that each initiative can achieve its objectives while contributing to the broader goals of the MSMO.

Thus, the paper sheds light on specific economic and values conditions of MSMOs to develop social innovation, e.g. societal, ecological and political problems, through socio-economic activities. This also sheds light on difficulties and failures developing a collective business model of MSMO on a permanent basis, making it impossible to achieve sustainably and to answer to grand challenges on territories.

Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of developing sustainable, adaptable business models for MSMOs, not only to ensure their ongoing viability but also to enhance

their capacity to respond to grand challenges. Future research should focus on identifying best practices for bridging cultural differences, optimizing resource-sharing mechanisms, and creating governance structures that promote long-term cooperation. By advancing collective business modeling practices, MSMOs can better navigate the complexities of their operations and contribute more effectively to the pressing challenges of our time.

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