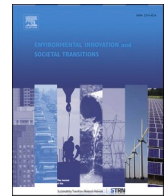




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Conceptualising institutional complexity in the upscaling of community enterprises: Lessons from renewable energy and carsharing

Thomas Bauwens^{a,*}, Taneli Vaskelainen^{b,c}, Koen Frenken^a

^a Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, Princetonlaan 8a, Utrecht 3584 CB, the Netherlands

^b Ruralia Institute, Lönnrotinkatu 7, 50100, University of Helsinki, Mikkeli, Finland

^c Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Sciences (HELSUS), Yliopistonkatu 3, 00100, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

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ABSTRACT

Community enterprises may play pivotal roles in sustainability transitions but have received limited attention in the transitions literature. This paper proposes a framework for theorising the challenges that community enterprises face as they scale up due to the rising institutional complexity of their organisational model, combining the institutional logics of community, market, and corporation. We conceptualise the upscaling processes of community enterprises by distinguishing between the community volunteerism phase, the niche creation phase and the niche expansion phase. We formulate nine propositions on how institutional complexity arises and on possible mechanisms to manage it in each phase of the upscaling process. Our theoretical framework is supported by empirical research on carsharing and renewable energy initiatives in Western Europe. The paper concludes with some avenues for further research on community enterprises in sustainability transitions.

1. Introduction

Sustainability transitions are necessary to tackle the pressing threats to global commons, such as climate and biodiversity, as well as the persistent economic crises and rising inequality (Geels, 2010; Grin et al., 2010). Sustainability transitions are generally defined as fundamental transformations in socio-technical systems towards more sustainable modes of production and consumption (Markard et al., 2012). Community enterprises (CEs), which can be defined as ‘enterprises whose social base lies in a community—understood most commonly as a community of place’ (Somerville and McElwee, 2011, p. 327), can play pivotal roles in fostering sustainable innovation diffusion by leveraging local knowledge and providing societal support for sustainability transitions. Typical examples of CEs include community-based sustainable energy projects, carsharing communities, and community-supported sustainable agriculture initiatives.

While market (Hockerts and Wüstenhagen, 2010) and governmental actors (Braams et al., 2021) have received considerable attention in the transitions literature, CEs have, so far, been under-researched. This may reflect the focus on market-based niches of technological innovations in the sustainability transitions literature (Geels, 2011; Smith et al., 2005). Yet, the major environmental threats faced today by human societies also require that ‘efforts must be directed at analysing new and different institutions and social

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: t.j.f.bauwens@uu.nl (T. Bauwens), taneli.vaskelainen@helsinki.fi (T. Vaskelainen), k.frenken@uu.nl (K. Frenken).

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arrangements' (Hoffman and Jennings, 2015, p. 22). An exception in the sustainability transitions literature is the research stream on grassroots innovations, which has provided new insights into sustainable innovations that, at least partly, stem from communities (Pel et al., 2020; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). However, such studies have paid little attention to organisational challenges in balancing commercial goals and efficiency requirements with their missions, especially as organisations scale up.

In this paper, upscaling refers to the process that focuses on offering access to CEs' products and services to a wider base of beneficiaries, either through reaching to different customer profiles or through expanding to new locations (André and Pache, 2016). From the perspective of transition studies, it is valuable to understand CEs' upscaling challenges. In mainstreaming sustainable goods and services, a lack of legitimacy, the development of larger-scale infrastructure or technology, and the know-how to offer high-quality goods and services are some of the hurdles that CEs can overcome through scaling up (Bauwens et al., 2020; Bomberg and McEwen, 2012; Vaskelainen and Münzel, 2018). Analysing CEs and their challenges to scale up is also becoming increasingly relevant, as innovation policies in Europe and elsewhere are being directed towards ambitious societal and environmental missions (Wanzenböck et al., 2020). Indeed, scholars have emphasised that mission-orientated innovation policies should combine top-down investments and regulations with support for bottom-up, mission-driven initiatives, such as CEs (Boon and Edler, 2018; Mazzucato, 2018).

This paper aims to bridge the streams of literature on CEs, institutional logics, and sustainability transitions. By using the perspective of institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012), we respond to recent calls for deeper theoretical anchoring of transition studies via institutional theory (Köhler et al., 2019), in line with previous theoretical work (Fuenfschilling, 2019; Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014). Institutional logics are the underlying fundamental sets of assumptions and principles that instruct organisations on 'how to interpret organisational reality, what constitutes appropriate behavior, and how to succeed' (Thornton, 2004, p. 70). Although by definition, CEs are initially embedded in the community logic, they tend to face challenges in integrating the market and corporate logics to scale up their operation. This creates institutional complexity, which refers to 'incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics' (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 317). The research question we ask is: how do community enterprises deal with institutional complexity as they scale up? The present paper thus contributes to understanding how local grassroots innovations 'undergo scale shifts and escape niche stasis' (Köhler et al., 2019, p. 11).

By bringing together the literature on CEs and institutional logics, we propose a conceptual framework of institutional complexity in the upscaling processes of CEs. We also outline the mechanisms that can be implemented by these initiatives to manage the institutional tensions arising from institutional complexity. We support our framework with extensive empirical evidence from the existing literature on examples in the energy and mobility sectors and end the paper with some avenues for further research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Community enterprises: definition and demarcation

CEs are enterprises that are collectively founded, owned, and managed by the members of a community of some kind (Hertel et al., 2019). Typically, it is a community of place or residence (Tonnie and Loomis, 2002), although other communities, such as communities of interest (Gilchreist, 2000), are possible. The key characteristics of a CE, according to Somerville and McElwee (2011), are that 'it has strategic goals that are simultaneously economic, social, and political, that these goals involve the self-expanding of value for the community, and that its activities point clearly towards the realisation of these goals' (p. 327). Regarding their economic goals, CEs, as enterprises, pursue an activity that produces value that can be expressed in monetary terms. Regarding their social goals, CEs involve sections of the community in important ways and pursue non-monetary benefits. As such, CEs can be regarded as a specific type of social enterprise insofar as they have both social and economic aims and are controlled by their members (Tracey et al., 2005). Regarding their political goals, much of their activity involves mobilising the community as citizens and lobbying and advocating on their behalf in governmental arenas at local, regional, and national levels. CEs include the so-called 'community-based enterprises' (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006), where the enterprise is identified with the community itself, but also enterprises whose membership includes only part of the community.

CEs present similarities with other types of actors, such as social movements. These can be defined as 'coalitions that engage in sustained action to promote ideas and preferences for changing prominent social, cultural and business practices' (Georgallis, 2017, p. 736; cf. McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Just like CEs, social movements can act as catalysts for the formation of markets for sustainable products, such as renewable energy, organic food, and recycling, by inducing institutional change to create higher legitimacy for these products (Georgallis and Lee, 2020; Hargrave and Van De Ven, 2006; Lounsbury and Schneiberg, 2008). Social movements act as collective institutional entrepreneurs, shaping markets from the outside either by objecting to firms' current products or practices (King and Soule, 2007) or by creating new institutions for products or practices (Pacheco et al., 2014). However, they typically do not trade goods and services in markets.

Social movements are not immune to commercial interests. While seeking legitimacy and impact through collaboration with corporations, for example, social movements have to tread a fine line between compromising their goals to promote cooperation and being co-opted as a greenwashing façade (Trumpy, 2008). However, because they are not market actors themselves, the commercial pressures come from outside and not within the organisation. Unlike CEs, they are less subject to distributional issues, such as which actors benefit from the economic surplus or what kind of power investors are given in the organisation. Thus, they do not suffer from institutional complexity as CEs do. However, the fear of corporations co-opting and commercialising the symbols and practices of social movements (Frank, 2007; Lounsbury et al., 2003) can lead to spin-off CEs, which can enable activists to lead the commercialisation on their terms (Rao et al., 2000).

The activities of CEs have also been studied in the literature of grassroots innovations, defined as 'a network of activists and

organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development and sustainable consumption; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved' (Seyfang and Smith, 2007, p. 585). Clearly, many grassroots innovations, such as community currencies, community energy organisations, and community-based agriculture projects, engender organisations that would qualify as CEs as per our definition. However, grassroots innovations have so far been analyzed through the lenses of transition theories (Hossain, 2016), such as strategic niche management (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012) and the multi-level perspective (Ornetzeder and Rohracher, 2013). While this literature makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of how sustainable niche innovations can diffuse in regimes, it overlooks management challenges, in particular, the institutional complexity faced by the organisations delivering these innovations.

2.2. The roles of community enterprises in sustainability transitions

From a sustainability transitions perspective, CEs are important to study for four main reasons.¹ First, CEs may play a pivotal role in market formation for sustainable products and services which are not provided by private companies or the public sector—for example, due to too high transaction or distribution costs (Bowles, 2006)—thereby acting as essential enablers of sustainability transitions in contexts that would be hard to access for other kinds of actors. For example, in Germany, CEs were pivotal in the emergence of the carsharing sector (Vaskelainen and Münzel, 2018) and the renewable energy industry (Punt et al., 2021). What is more, their impact is not restricted to their economic output in this market formation phase. Indeed, they also tend to create moral expectations that spill over to other market participants, fostering an impetus to operate more sustainably. Thus, even when these markets attract new players, they must adhere to these expectations to a certain degree (Hedberg and Lounsbury, 2021).

Second, particular forms of CEs may go beyond sustainable market formation by 'decommodifying' the resources they provide, that is, partially removing them from market mechanisms and selling them for their use value rather than their exchange value (Dardot and Laval, 2014; Feola, 2020; Peredo and McLean, 2020; Polanyi, 1944). Accordingly, CEs do not consider the resources they provide as mere market commodities, but rather as 'commons' (i.e. 'shared resources that are accessible, inclusive and democratically managed by and for communities'; Meyer, 2020, p. 1) that are important for individual and collective fulfilment (Peredo et al., 2018). An example is community supported agriculture initiatives, whose notions of time (slow and cyclical vs. linear and quick), space (origin of the product is more important than its function), and human-nature relation (humans as part of the nature) differ from those usually comprehended within capitalistic systems (Koretskaya and Feola, 2020).

Third, CEs may contribute to higher societal acceptance of and support for sustainability transitions. Many sustainability transitions projects, such as wind energy farms, have sparked local conflicts and resistance, given their impacts on communities and biodiversity (Velasco-Herrejon and Bauwens, 2020; Warren and Birnie, 2009). However, evidence suggests that this resistance is lower if local communities are meaningfully involved in the decision-making of projects and receive a fair share of their benefits (Bauwens and Devine-Wright, 2018; Bomberg and McEwen, 2012). Thanks to their embeddedness in local communities, CEs can contribute to these fairer procedures and outcomes.

Fourth, sustainability transitions are complex processes, whose outcomes are crucially dependant on local and context-specific bio-physical, institutional, and social conditions (Vermunt et al., 2020). CEs are anchored in local contexts. Thus, they can be more effective in using accumulated local knowledge to devise rules that are better adapted to local needs and address local problems than enterprises with a one-size-fits-all approach. These rules are also generally perceived as more legitimate because local actors design them and monitor their compliance, encouraging higher conformance (Andersson and Ostrom, 2008).

2.3. Scaling in transition studies

While CEs can play crucial roles in sustainability transitions, they tend to face severe difficulties replicating or scaling up solutions and impacts across contexts. Indeed, the durable and personal contacts that characterise communities may require CEs to remain small-scale (Bowles and Gintis, 2002). The issue of upscaling has received much attention in the sustainability transitions literature, initially with a strong focus on technological innovations. Accordingly, growth is understood to be driven by learning curves leading to lower prices (Grubler et al., 2016; McNerney et al., 2011). Indeed, cost reductions and product improvements are key supporting factors in technology diffusion in the long run. Yet, innovation in socio-technical systems should not be considered solely in terms of the development of physical technologies but as a process in which technologies and institutions co-evolve. Accordingly, the main conceptual frameworks in transitions studies, such as the multi-level perspective (Geels, 2005), strategic niche management (Kemp et al., 1998; Schot and Geels, 2007), technological innovation systems (Bergek et al., 2008; Hekkert et al., 2007), user innovation (Grabher et al., 2008; Hyysalo et al., 2013), and recent innovation policy frameworks (Schot and Steinmueller, 2018; Wanzenböck et al., 2020), have drawn emphasis on socio-institutional factors and the active role of users in shaping the diffusion trajectories of technological innovations.

The increased emphasis on the social aspects of innovation has led scholars to advance the concept of grassroots innovation which departs from the traditional focus on market-based niches (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Other researchers have advanced the notion of 'transformative social innovations', defined as 'social innovation that challenges, alters or replaces dominant institutions in the social

¹ This is not to say that all CEs necessarily contribute to fostering sustainability transitions. For example, community-based pubs, while fully qualifying as CEs (Hertel et al., 2019), may not substantially contribute to sustainability transitions as understood by Markard et al. (2012) and others. However, we argue that this organisational form may be instrumental in achieving certain objectives in sustainability transitions processes.

context’ (Avelino et al., 2019, p. 196). As mentioned above, these studies most often approach these innovations from a transition perspective (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). However, the challenges related to institutional complexity in upscaling processes are left mostly untapped.

Acknowledging the complex interplay of technological and social dynamics, various scaling typologies have been proposed (Loorbach et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2015; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Smith, 2007; Smith and Raven, 2012; van den Bosch, 2010). In a recent review of the approaches to scaling the impacts of sustainability initiatives, Lam et al. (2020) propose a typology of the main ‘amplification processes’ that are put forward in resilience, social innovation, and sustainability transitions research, including: amplifying ‘within’, amplifying ‘out’, and amplifying ‘beyond’. Amplifying within consists of processes which generally seek to increase the impact of one specific initiative by, for instance, stabilising its existence (i.e., prolonging impact) or speeding up the way it impacts (i.e., accelerate impact). Amplifying out includes processes which generally seek to increase the impact of initiatives by involving more people and places through a greater impact range and a higher number of initiatives. Amplifying beyond consists of processes that generally seek to increase their impact by scaling up to reach higher institutional levels or by scaling deep to change values. However, these typologies do not yet provide an understanding of the dynamics that trigger and fuel this upscaling process.

Key mechanisms identified in the sustainability transitions literature for niche upscaling are umbrella organisations, intermediary organisations, or loose networks (Kivimaa et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2015; Smith and Raven, 2012). Such translocal organisations and networks play a key role in aggregating knowledge from local initiatives, storing and circulating this aggregated knowledge within the network, coordinating actions on the ground, and brokering and managing partnerships with external actors, such as policy-makers, corporations, NGOs, and the media (Geels and Deuten, 2006; Hargreaves et al., 2013). As the roles of such umbrella organisations in managing institutional complexity have not been explored in the sustainability transitions literature, they will be discussed in Section 3 of this paper.

2.4. Institutional logics, institutional complexity, and community enterprises

To understand the institutional challenges in upscaling processes, institutional theory can complement sustainability transition approaches (Fuenfschilling, 2019; Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014; Wittmayer et al., 2020). The institutional logics perspective distinguishes seven types of logic ideal types: family, religion, state, market, profession, corporation, and community (Thornton et al., 2012). Of these seven, three are central to the institutional complexity of CEs: the community, market, and corporate logics. The sources of authority, basis of norms, and basis of strategy of these logics, as described by Thornton et al. (2012), are presented in Table 1.

Initially, CEs rely on a community logic, whose norms stem from group membership, which usually includes explicit elements such as rules, practices, and non-verbalised principles that are commonly agreed upon (Thornton et al., 2012). Members who do not respect the norms are penalised or even ex-communicated from the group, guiding community members to honour them. Additionally, the expectation of reciprocity guides members to work for the community because it is assumed to benefit them later.

As CEs seek to scale up and expand their operations, they may encounter challenges once they adopt elements of the corporate and market logics that clash with their community ideals. CEs may turn to the market logic because they generally need financing as they start selling their goods and services on a larger scale. Similarly, CEs may adopt elements of the corporate logic because, as they scale up, they start hiring full-time employees; consequently, formal hierarchical and professional management structures tend to emerge. As we will demonstrate in Section 3, this introduces institutional complexity to these organisations, which they have to manage.

Institutional complexity has been discussed widely in management literature. Much of this literature has focused on the organisational field or sectoral level, examining how different institutional logics coincide or struggle for dominance (Greenwood et al., 2011). This is also the analytical level on which transition scholars have observed institutional complexity, focusing on how different logics structure the regimes and how they moderate actors’ agency (Fuenfschilling, 2019). This literature has examined various phenomena, such as the degrees of regime structuration (Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014), the sequence of institutional complexity upon regime transition (Hacker and Binz, 2021), and mainstreaming processes (Wittmayer et al., 2020).

While studies at the organisational field level provide valuable information on how organisational agency is inhibited and induced, they do not explain well the actual organisational responses to institutional complexity. Some of these responses have been studied in the literature on hybrid organising (Battilana et al., 2018). This body of literature has highlighted that the degree of complexity experienced by hybrid organisations depends on three factors: (1) the degree to which the logics moderate the same jurisdictional spaces, (2) the degree of agreement upon prioritisation of logics, and (3) the compatibility of the prescriptions of different logics (Raynard, 2016).

Table 1
Sources of authority, the basis of norms, and the basis of strategy.

	Community	Market	Corporation
Sources of authority	Common beliefs and values	Investor activism	Board of directors and top management
Basis of norms	Group membership	Self-interest	Employment in the firm
Basis of strategy	Work for the community and honour the members and norms	Increase efficiency and profit	Increase the size and diversification of the firm

Adapted from Thornton et al. (2012).

If the different institutional logics touch separate jurisdictional spaces, different organisations can adopt separate logics; thus, the complexity does not have to be dealt with at the organisational level. When the prioritisation of the logics is clear, organisations can often selectively decouple their prescriptive structure from their operations—that is, ceremonially emphasise some organisational activities to stakeholders requiring adherence to conflicting logics (Pache and Santos, 2013). However, in many fields, these are not viable options, and thus organisations have to deal with institutional complexity internally. In these cases, organisations can structurally compartmentalise logics into separate units or integrate them at the task or process level (Battilana and Lee, 2014). However, this kind of persistent complexity within an organisation is risky and might lead to its demise (Cappellaro et al., 2020).

The institutional complexity that CEs face is persistent and cannot be easily resolved because scaling up requires CEs to embed the market and corporate logics into their operational structure. This makes managing the institutional complexity a constant balancing act (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014). Thus, the institutional complexity resurfaces in different stages of the CEs' upscaling trajectories and these organisations must create different management mechanisms to cope with it.

The management of persistent institutional complexity has been studied extensively (Battilana et al., 2018; Raynard, 2016). Furthermore, the idea of balancing a societal mission with commercial goals typical for all kinds of social enterprises is not new and has been examined by many scholars (Battilana and Lee, 2014). However, CEs warrant special attention due to their embeddedness in the community logic, which creates unique challenges regarding institutional complexity. Hitherto, studies on hybrid organising have focused especially on social enterprises that can be seen both as a business and as a charity (e.g., microfinance organisations). Additionally, there are studies on hybrid organisations embedded in the state logic (Glynn, 2000; Reay and Hinings, 2009) and the religious logic (Gümüşay et al., 2020). However, CEs have received limited scholarly attention. The community logic has been researched, but primarily as a moderating logic affecting how corporations act locally (Lee and Lounsbury, 2015; Marquis et al., 2007) and how strong the community logic can resist the influence of corporations in local contexts (Marquis and Lounsbury, 2007). The lack of interest in CEs might be due to communal organising being seen as a transitory phenomenon characteristic of early phases of the industry life cycle but expected to be replaced by private corporations as the industry matures (Thornton et al., 2012). Thus, CEs' challenges created by institutional complexity are poorly conceptualised.

3. Upscaling of community enterprises: a theoretical framework

3.1. Theoretical approach

To answer our research question, we formulate theoretical propositions of the causes of institutional complexity and how CEs manage it. Before laying out the propositions, we highlight the research gaps in the hybrid organisation literature that the propositions address. We connect each proposition with a stage in the CEs' upscaling process to highlight the common order in which the institutional complexity is experienced.

To conceptualise the upscaling process of CEs, we rely on observed upscaling trajectories in the carsharing and community energy sectors and distinguish between three main phases: the community volunteerism phase, the niche creation phase and the niche expansion phase. The community volunteerism phase refers to the gestation process taking place before the actual creation of a formal CE organisation, in which the initial founders recognise an opportunity to meet a felt need within the community or society, articulate the initial idea, mobilise the first resources, and start providing a service to community members. The niche creation phase takes place when the CE seeks to reach out to an audience which does not subscribe fully to the founders' initial community values. The niche expansion phase takes place when the CE expands to new geographic locations. However, progression through these phases is not prescriptively evolutionary or sequential, and some CEs may arrest their development before reaching the niche expansion phase.

As CEs go through these different upscaling phases, they are likely to engage in actions that embed them in the market and corporate logics to attract important stakeholders that are outsiders to the community or to overcome the limitations related to the community logic. The introduction of market and corporate elements may lead to institutional complexity. The sources of institutional complexity manifest both at the intra-organisational level (e.g. within an energy cooperative) and at the inter-organisational level (e.g. between energy cooperatives), as depicted in Fig. 1. The intra-organisational aspect refers to the relations between individual members within CEs. In contrast, the inter-organisational level refers to relations between similar CEs.

Generally, CEs are confronted with intra-organisational challenges in the niche creation phase, while inter-organisational ones usually unfold in the later phase of niche expansion. Indeed, in the niche creation phase, CEs' operations are still mainly embedded within their geographic community and thus do not generally engage in relationships with other similar organisations. In contrast, in the niche expansion phase, CEs expand to other geographical locations and therefore usually engage in interactions with other similar organisations that are a potential source of institutional complexity.²

² However, these temporal dynamics may vary depending on the maturity of the field and of the organisation considered. If the organisations considered are the pioneer organisations in the industry, then the market grows in relatively similar pace with the organisations and the inter-organisational complexity challenges come indeed after the intra-organisational ones. However, if the organisation considered is a late-comer (e.g. a carsharing organisation that starts its operation decades after the emergence of the sector), the order might be different. The competitors might be there upon the founding of the organisation and customers might expect a professional service.

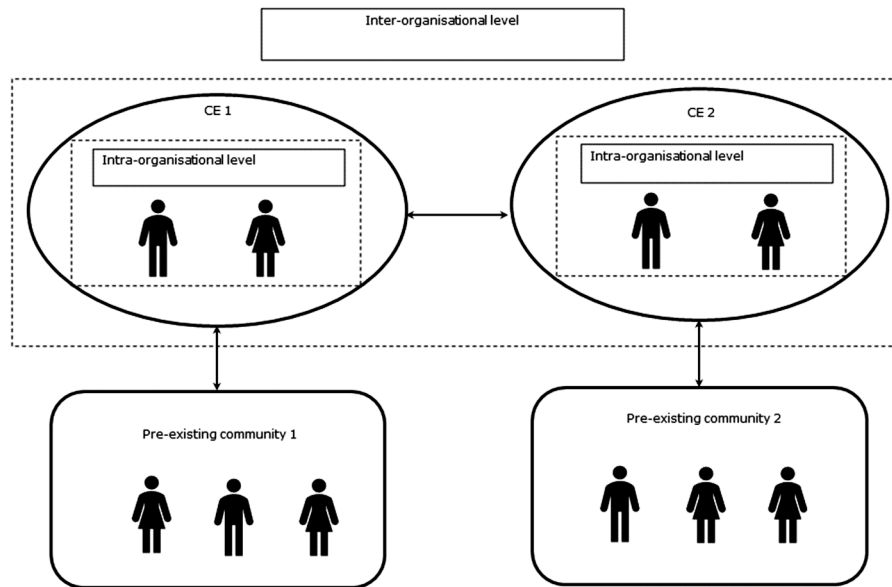


Fig. 1. Intra- and inter-organisational levels of community enterprises.

3.2. Phase 1: community volunteerism

Founding a CE requires gathering a variety of resources, including human, social, cultural, physical, financial or technological resources (Vestrum, 2016). Initially, they are primarily accessed and mobilised through pre-existing social networks within the community, as CEs often lack a track record and power to access external professional resources. As such, CEs tend to rely on voluntary resources and, occasionally, government subsidies. For instance, three reports surveying sustainable energy communities in the United Kingdom (Low Carbon Communities Network Annual Survey Results, 2012) show that a majority of them are entirely volunteer-run, demonstrating ‘the strongly informal and grassroots basis of these initiatives’ (Seyfang et al., 2013, p. 979). Equally, almost all car-sharing initiatives in Germany and Switzerland were launched using voluntary resources provided by community members, as it was very difficult to make them profitable in the first years of operations (Breindl, 2014; Loose, 2014; Truffer, 2003).

CEs usually start organising their activities based on a flat hierarchy without formal differences in members’ levels of authority (Bauwens, 2016; Chowdhury et al., 2018; Vaskelainen and Münzel, 2018). For example, a study surveying 190 UK-based sustainable energy communities (Seyfang et al., 2013) reported that one-third of the organisations were operating as informal groups (i.e., without any formal organisational structure). The group of individuals involved usually consists of the founders and their friends, relatives, and neighbours who share common beliefs and values. In this group, the community logic tends to dominate, with no major tension with other logics.

If an initiative does not grow beyond the community volunteerism stage, either by choice or constraint, it is unlikely to experience substantial institutional complexity because the community logic remains dominant in structuring the behaviour of its members. Many community gardens serve as primary examples of such organisations. One of their primary purposes is to embed people in their communities and neighbourhoods, often stemming from local initiatives (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004). Since their primary aim is local development, they usually do not have the impetus to grow beyond their initial scope.

Proposition 1: in the community volunteerism phase of upscaling, a community logic tends to dominate within the community enterprise, with no major tension with other logics.

3.3. Phase 2: niche creation

CEs that do seek to expand are generally motivated by a societal goal, which pushes them to aim for impact beyond the immediate community (Martin et al., 2015). While, in the niche creation phase, these organisations are deeply embedded in their geographic communities, they are also motivated to bring their products and services to a wider audience. This upscaling process can be supported by the growing reputation of the initiative, attracting the attention of public authorities and individuals outside of the immediate community who value the initiative and wish to use its products or services.

3.3.1. The intra-organisational level and the market logic

Initiatives that seek to scale up are generally limited by the fact that new members are not willing to put in voluntary efforts and private resources, as the early founders did. To widen their contributor base and mobilise additional resources, CEs often resort to practices and strategies stemming from the market logic, increasing institutional complexity. For example, initiatives may offer

members the possibility of obtaining private benefits from their participation in the form of monetary compensation or specific services. The initial voluntary resources thus gradually give way to external commercial resources and private benefits received by members. Doing so, the CEs seek to transform the public good they produce into a ‘joint product’ (Cornes and Sandler, 1984), which provides both private benefits to individual members and promotes the societal goal of the organisation. For example, renewable energy cooperatives, by enabling members to receive dividends from the exploitation of renewable energy assets, turn the public good of renewable energy diffusion into a joint product and contribute to triggering investments in and public support for sustainable technologies at the community level (Bauwens, 2016).

Previous literature has documented the institutional complexity stemming from the adoption of the market logic in social enterprises, for example, in the form of a mission drift when acquiring external financing (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Martin, 2015). However, because of embeddedness in the community, CEs experience institutional complexity differently compared to other kinds of social enterprises. CEs have to deal with a member base whose contribution motivation is highly diverse. For example, when starting to retail electricity directly to its members, a renewable energy cooperative in Flanders attracted a new wave of members interested in benefitting from the advantages of electricity supply (e.g. low prices) in addition to the early members who were highly vested in the organisations’ environmental mission and who contributed strongly to its development (Bauwens, 2016). Though the surge in members marked an essential impetus for increasing the market share, the underlying market logic undermined the community logic in its organisational model.

Proposition 2: in the niche creation phase of upscaling, a tension between the community logic and the market logic at the intra-organisational level is created by the acquisition of external commercial resources and the provision of private benefits to members.

CEs often try to address institutional complexity stemming from the introduction of the market logic by changing their organisational form (Bauwens, 2016; Truffer, 2003), for example, to a cooperative or similar organisational form (e.g. community interest companies in the UK; Defourny and Nyssens, 2008; Peredo et al., 2018; Schneiberg, 2013). These organisational forms enable communities to restrict individual investors’ decision-making power and maintain many of the principles of the community logic. First, unlike capitalist corporations, they are controlled by their members/users and are not investor-owned (Gui, 1991). Second, the profit distribution as a return on share investment is subject to a cap. This constraint on individual profit distribution acts as a ‘screening device’ (Rose-Ackerman, 1996)—that is, as a guarantee against potential opportunistic members who do not share the founders’ convictions and would enter the CEs with a solely lucrative purpose, threatening the organisations’ community logic. Third, the cooperative governance structure is democratic, involving democratic member control following the ‘one person-one vote’ rule instead of the ‘one share-one vote’ rule in capitalist corporations and the absence of barriers to entry for new members (Spear, 2000). Such democratic control ensures that no single investor can buy their way to having significant power over the cooperative, making the financing effort more aligned with the community logic (Balestri, 2014).

Proposition 3: To manage institutional tensions between the community and market logics at the intra-organisational level, community enterprises can use organisational forms limiting the influence of opportunistic investors.

3.3.2. The intra-organisational level and the corporate logic

A tension between the community and corporate logics arises from the introduction of hierarchical management, including a higher involvement of paid staff (Hwang and Powell, 2009) and professional management (Alexander and Weiner, 1998; Bazzoli, 2004). Reasons for this introduction can stem from internal or external pressures. Internally, as operations grow, managing the CE using only a voluntary workforce becomes increasingly difficult. The increased workload calls for a division of labour into distinct job roles, which is very hard to achieve using a flat hierarchy (Breindl, 2014; Dart, 2004; Hwang and Powell, 2009). Externally, CEs may be required to adopt a formal legal structure to comply with the requirements of political or financial institutions, to fulfil accountability needs, or to acquire resources, such as grants and subsidies (Harmer et al., 2013). External pressures may also stem from an expanding user base that expects a reliable service provision, unlike the early adopters who tolerate improvised services of varying quality (Bauwens, 2016; Grinevich et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2015).

To address this challenge, CEs often hire full-time paid professional staff to manage the service they provide, which embeds them in the corporate logic. This is illustrated by the case of a Flemish energy cooperative which had to rationalise its management procedures, acquire new capabilities and resources, streamline its organisational structure when it started retailing electricity, and, consequently, attract members primarily interested in electricity retail (Bauwens et al., 2020). The introduction of professional management often helps to address the limits related to voluntary work and the demand for increased quality of service. However, it also often introduces institutional tensions in CEs due to the shift to the corporate logic.

The adoption of the corporate logic in hybrid organisations and the institutional complexity that follows have been studied before, for example, in the non-profit sector literature. This literature has mainly discussed corporate-like practices in reporting, measuring, and governance processes (Dart, 2004; Ganesh and McAllum, 2012; Kreutzer and Jäger, 2011; Maier et al., 2014). However, the adoption of hierarchical management has not been presented as a source of institutional complexity, probably because many hybrid organisations, such as healthcare organisations (Reay and Hinings, 2009) or work integration enterprises (Pache and Santos, 2013), already have a hierarchical structure when they are founded. Therefore, unlike CEs, hybrid organisations do not have to make the transition from a flat hierarchy to professionally managed organisations. In addition, they are often not expected to institute democratic decision-making principles. In CEs, centralising the power to a few members of the community degrades the belief in the shared values (Martin et al., 2015; Slade Shantz et al., 2019). In the flat hierarchies typical of the community logic, different members of the community can stay informed of the daily operations and also co-develop the service. In the centralised hierarchies inherent in the corporate logic, the information is increasingly siloed into specialised work roles with professional management’s daily decisions (Martin et al., 2015).

Proposition 4: in the niche creation phase of upscaling, a tension between the community logic and the corporate logic at the intra-organisational level is created by the introduction of hierarchical management.

The introduction of hierarchical structures and professional management seems to be an almost unavoidable consequence of upscaling. There are no documented examples of CEs that have grown very large using a purely voluntary workforce and a flat structure. Again, the cooperative structure or similar organisational forms may also help manage the institutional complexity stemming from this development. Indeed, the democratic governance structure (the ‘one person-one vote’ rule and the absence of barriers to entry for new members) ensures that, even though the role of some members of the community might diminish in connection to operational decisions, such members can still influence the direction of the initiative by participating in annual membership meetings, in which major strategic decisions are subjected to the vote of all members (Spear, 2000). Additionally, the cooperatives’ active members can rotate the operational power to members representing different ends of the corporate-community logic continuum to ensure both organisational efficiency and deep embedding in the community logic (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014).³

Proposition 5: To manage institutional tensions between the community and corporate logics at the intra-organisational level, community enterprises can use organisational forms reinforcing democratic participation in decision-making.

3.4. Phase 3: niche expansion

While in the former niche creation phase, CEs grow beyond their initial member communities, in the niche expansion phase CEs start to expand to new locations either through starting operations in new places or through consolidation with other CEs. This introduces new sources of institutional complexity between the community logic and the market and corporate logics.

3.4.1. The inter-organisational level and the market logic

As CEs expand to new locations, the likelihood increases that they start competing in the same markets or for the same resources as other similar organisations. Although similar CEs often share the same mission, this can lead to a situation where one organisation’s success is detrimental to that of the others. Competition can occur spontaneously as a market matures, or it can be intertwined with political decisions. For instance, recent shifts in support mechanisms in various European countries, from feed-in tariffs to more market-based instruments, have pushed sustainable energy communities to increasingly compete with one another for market resources (Bauwens et al., 2016; Herbes et al., 2017).

The idea of institutional complexity stemming from competition between similar organisations is new to hybrid organising literature. While inter-organisational relationships have been identified as a potential source for institutional complexity, it is perceived to emanate from seeking legitimacy with, or from outsourcing organisational activities to, organisations embedded in different institutional logics (Battilana and Lee, 2014). Although CEs start their operations by providing products or services to their immediate communities, their mission usually transcends them. For example, the mission of many of the German carsharing initiatives was to reduce the overpowering position of the private car in society by offering a realistic alternative for it (Loose, 2014b; Warmke and Dannheim, 2014). Thus, competing with similar CEs can be detrimental to the community values because they work for the same goals.

Proposition 6: in the niche expansion phase of upscaling, a tension between the community logic and the market logic at the inter-organisational level is created by increasing competition between CEs operating in the same market.

CEs may manage the institutional complexity stemming from direct competition in several ways. First, they may simply avoid it by delimiting their operations geographically. For example, in the German carsharing industry, organisations avoid entering cities where another carsharing initiative is already present because the community goals are already being promoted in the area (Vaskelainen and Münzel, 2018). Furthermore, carsharing organisations enable their customers to cross-use the cars of another organisation in another city to ensure that customers do not need to acquire memberships in many carsharing organisations (Vaskelainen and Münzel, 2018).

Furthermore, CEs may curb direct competition between them by sharing capabilities, information, and resources that could otherwise have brought about a competitive advantage to individual organisations. Doing so increases the odds of survival for other like-minded organisations. As an example, one study demonstrated how energy cooperatives have developed collaborations to supply power to their members to avoid direct competition over people willing to pay for renewable energy (Bauwens et al., 2020). Thus, the larger organisation can compensate for its relatively strong embeddedness in the market logic by collaborating with smaller cooperatives that have a local, community-based focus.

As a more formalised way to mitigate the detrimental effects of the market logic on the community logic, an umbrella organisation can be set up to facilitate the sharing of capabilities, information, and resources. In addition, such an organisation can act as the guarantor of the community logic as an additional mechanism (Lee et al., 2017). For instance, in the German carsharing sector, institutional tensions have been partially resolved by founding an umbrella organisation that guards community principles (Vaskelainen and Münzel, 2018). Any company that wants to join the umbrella organisation must adhere to the commonly agreed upon

³ The ‘Certified B Corporation’ (Stubbs, 2017) may also be seen as an explicit institutional attempt to reconcile the corporate logic and the community logic while avoiding the potential transaction costs associated with democratic decision-making (Hansmann, 1999). Indeed, Certified B Corporations are legally required to consider ‘the interests of all stakeholders, not just shareholders, when making decision’ (‘Certification Requirements | Certified B Corporation’, 2021). This extended stakeholder approach may arguably help preserve the community logic while providing autonomy for the management team, as it ensures that the wants and needs of workers and local communities are considered in the decision-making. However, it does not offer as strong an institutional safeguard as the cooperative form because voting power is not decoupled from stockholding and, therefore, additional institutional mechanisms might be needed.

business model that works towards the collective’s principles: reducing the number of private cars and kilometres driven. In return, the members benefit from services such as advice and political advocacy. Thus, such umbrella organisations distinguish themselves from average industry enterprises that drive their members’ benefits because they focus on guarding the community’s boundaries and goals. A member who deviates from this model risks being dismissed from the umbrella organisation and losing membership benefits.

Proposition 7: To manage institutional tensions between the community and market logics at the inter-organisational level, community enterprises can reduce competition by sharing resources and setting up an umbrella organisation as a guarantor of community values.

3.4.2. The inter-organisational level and the corporate logic

An issue that causes institutional complexity between the community and corporate logics at the inter-organisational level is consolidation. CEs are usually quite reluctant to merge because creating large centralised organisations can be detrimental to the connection to their geographic communities. However, major investments required for serving larger markets (e.g., in technology, call centres, centralised procurement, or brand marketing) increasingly push CEs to form alliances or mergers and acquisitions resulting in corporate structures. For example, at the turn of the new millennium, German carsharing organisations changed from personal key exchanges and booking via telephone to automatic locks and Internet-based booking systems (Latsch and Langendorf, 2014). This could not have been achieved if the small and local carsharing organisations had not created coalitions to develop and manage the new technologies (Vaskelainen and Münzel, 2018). Another illustrative example is provided by the merger processes that took place among Dutch wind energy cooperatives in the nineties (Agterbosch et al., 2004). Most of these mergers occurred between small cooperatives from the same region, which experienced problems due to a lack of human capacity and excessive reliance on volunteers (Agterbosch, 2006).

Consolidation processes reinforce the corporate logic by creating a few large organisations that dominate an organisational field, possibly to the detriment of the community logic in CEs. While the mergers of hybrid organisations have been studied, they have not been identified as a source of institutional complexity (Clark et al., 2010). This is probably because consolidation does not directly violate the principles of the institutional logics that many hybrid organisations are embedded in. However, for CEs embedded in the community logic, the centralisation of power which often follows consolidation weakens the social bonds among members and between members, and increases the costs of participation in the governance of organisations. It can then jeopardise a community’s identity and sense of solidarity, thus leading to the degrading of the community logic (Hind, 1997; Nilsson, 2001).

Proposition 8: in the niche expansion phase of upscaling, a tension between the community logic and the corporate logic at the inter-organisational level is created by consolidation processes between CEs.

Yet, consolidation is a likely outcome to attain economies of scale and scope to make the products and services attractive and accessible to a growing number of customers. Consequently, CEs have come up with organisational solutions to avoid the weakening of local branches. For example, the German carsharing company Cambio has created a franchising-type structure in which regional offices benefit from services created by the central organisation, such as central procurement, IT systems, and call centres (Warmke and Dannheim, 2014). Branch offices then remain independent companies, which locally make critical operational decisions, such as customer relations and fleet management (Cambio, 2020). Additionally, the directors of the local branch offices own the central organisation (Warmke and Dannheim, 2014). Because strategic decisions are discussed collectively and due to the autonomy of branch offices, Cambio has managed to hold on to its local embeddedness (Cambio, 2020). Similarly, in Denmark, the not-for-profit company Vindenergi was created to purchase and trade electricity in the spot market on behalf of energy cooperatives and other private

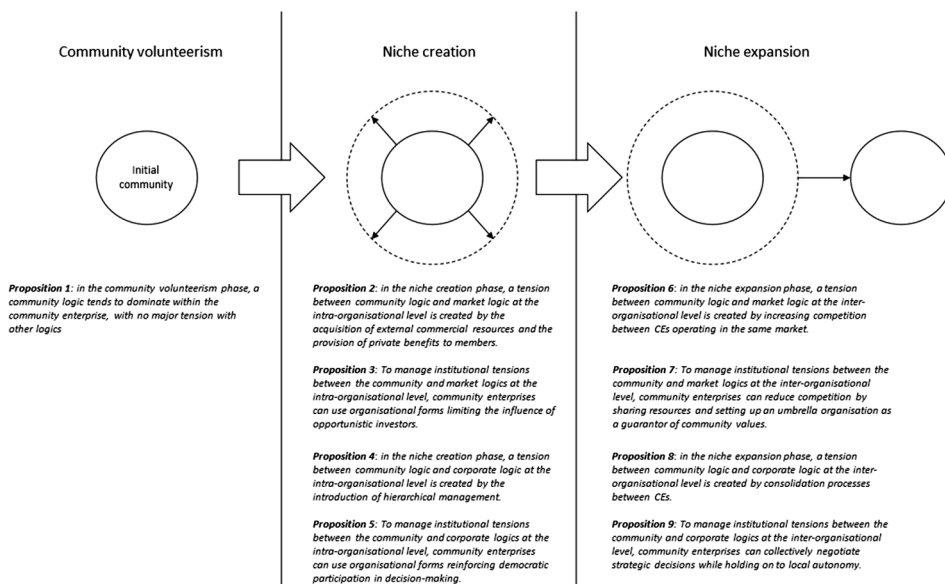


Fig. 2. The nine propositions in the three phases of upscaling.

producers. The organisation, which is owned exclusively by its members, assists small and medium-sized actors in decreasing their financial risk by collectively, instead of individually, trading in the volatile spot market (Bauwens et al., 2016; Mey and Diesendorf, 2017).

Proposition 9: To manage institutional tensions between the community and corporate logics at the inter-organisational level, community enterprises can collectively negotiate strategic decisions while holding on to local autonomy.

4. Conclusion

Community enterprises can be instrumental in fostering sustainability transitions, but the ways in which they manage institutional complexity have been under-researched. This paper addresses this gap by developing a theoretical framework of how CEs manage institutional complexity as they scale up. The framework highlights that scaling up embeds CEs in the market and corporate logics. As a result, CEs have to deal with the resulting institutional complexity by managing the tensions between such logics and the community logic in which they are rooted. Fig. 2 summarises the propositions on the tensions arising from multiple institutional logics that we highlighted, and the managing mechanisms to uphold the community logic with increasing commercial pressures.

While our propositions provide generic insights on the sources of institutional complexity common to most CEs, the managing mechanisms proposed here are only but a few possible. Furthermore, the propositions do not engage in identifying precise chains of causality. Given these limitations, avenues for further research can be organised along the dimensions of fields, time and space. In terms of fields, further research could work with the presented framework, testing and further refining the propositions in different organisational fields beyond energy and mobility. For example, banking and finance (e.g. community currencies) or food and agriculture (e.g. community-supported agriculture initiatives) could be studied to understand why certain solutions are favoured in specific contexts. In terms of temporal dynamics, longitudinal comparative studies could examine the antecedents that lead to different intra- and inter-organisational mechanisms for managing institutional tensions. From a spatial perspective, we emphasised that CEs are generally rooted in communities of place. Future studies could examine whether online communities, such as open-source innovation communities (von Hippel and Krogh, 2003), platform cooperatives (Scholz and Schneider, 2016), and online communities of green consumers (Meelen et al., 2019), are confronted with the same institutional tensions as those outlined in our framework and, if so, how they handle them. To address this issues, it would be insightful to engage with the literature on online communities' governance dating back to the 2000s (Benkler, 2006; Grabher et al., 2008; O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007).

While pursuing the topics for further research, it is helpful to keep in mind that organisational institutionalism and transition studies have divergent ontologies, epistemologies and empirical foci (Hacker and Binz, 2021). This is exemplified by the different levels of institutional pressures that the CEs face. On the one hand, they confront the universal capitalistic pressures of commercialisation and efficiency that embed them in the corporate and market logics. On the other hand, they are embedded in their organisational fields containing their local field logics (Fuenshilling and Truffer, 2014; Hacker and Binz, 2021). Using the terminology of the multi-level perspective, the former pressures come primarily from landscape level whereas the latter structure the regimes. While careful contemplation on how to overcome the onto-epistemological challenges is outside the scope of this paper, it is advisable for scholars to further familiarise themselves with literature aiming to bridge transition studies with organisational institutionalism (Fuenshilling, 2019; Geels, 2004).

We further acknowledge that our focus on CEs as drivers of scaling up niches can be understood as critical of the assumptions in most past transition studies. The multi-level perspective, the strategic niche management framework and the technological innovation systems framework, tend to consider market creation as one of the focal functions in upscaling (Dewald and Truffer, 2011; Hekkert et al., 2007) and tacitly assume that the systems of production and consumption replacing the existing regimes are largely the same from an institutional perspective, that is, commodity markets served by large corporations. However, CEs do not pursue growth for its own sake and they do not necessarily even aim to create markets, but rather to decommodify goods (Meyer, 2020). Thus, we call for developing transition frameworks that look at organisational forms embedded in different institutional logics (Vaskelainen and Münzel, 2018) and beyond the institutional logics dominant in contemporary capitalism (Feola, 2020). Embracing the diversity of organisational forms would partially answer the recent call to diversify the theoretical perspectives to study transitions (Hopkins et al., 2020).

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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