Research work - Early-stage PhD students
Extended abstract

Collective Business Model: Rethinking the 'O' of the RCOV Model through Multi-stakeholder Meta-organization for Agroecology.

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1 - Outlining the research question

Faced with the climate emergency and the unprecedented collapse of biodiversity, our current agricultural model is showing its limits. Industrial agriculture, inherited from the modernization of the last century and highly dependent on fossil resources and chemical inputs, is increasingly recognized as both a primary driver and a major victim of these disruptions (Wezel et al., 2018).

To address these challenges, a transformation of agriculture is required *transition*
Far from a marginal 'greening,' agroecology demands a fundamental redesign of production systems (Deverre & De Sainte Marie, 2008). It proposes a shift in agency: instead of seeking to dominate nature, the model relies on a strategic partnership with natural processes, replacing chemical inputs by enhancing functional biodiversity and biological regulations (Deguine et al., 2016). Ultimately, this move from domination to collaboration aims to foster resilient, autonomous, and socially just agrifood systems (Lacey & Lefèvre, 2015).

However, the success of this transformation does not rest solely on the shoulders of individual farmers isolated in their fields. Because ecological processes do not stop at farm boundaries, agroecology must be conceived at the landscape and territorial scale (Deguine et al., 2021; Ewert et al., 2023). It requires cooperation among a plurality of local stakeholders, including farmers, local authorities, cooperatives, citizen associations, and researchers (Ewert et al., 2023; Lamine, 2017). The territory thus becomes the privileged arena where these actors ally to invent new solidarities, pool risks, and organize food resilience (Angeon et al., 2024; Gasselin et al., 2020).

Indeed, research and public policies currently lack the appropriate analytical tools to fully grasp these placebased cooperations (Angeon et al., 2024). Because current monitoring instruments primarily focus on individual farms and monetized transactions, these informal and collective networks remain largely invisible to institutions, forming a 'silent agroecology' operating below the radar of traditional agricultural development frameworks (Lucas, 2021).

While the prominent literature on socio-technical transitions attempts to address such systemic shifts through the analysis of lock-ins and levers, it frequently adopts a top-down and highly structural perspective. These approaches tend to conceptualize transitions as linear pathways, thereby underestimating the enduring coexistence of multiple agricultural models and the actual agency of actors (Goulet & Meynard, 2012). By focusing primarily on macro and sectoral dynamics, this overarching literature remains fundamentally aspatial (Angeon et al., 2024) and largely overlooks the concrete governance issues, power dynamics, and daily interactions that characterize these local, silent cooperations (Lucas, 2021).

To bridge these analytical gaps, this research turns to theories and conceptual frameworks from management science, which provide a more grounded perspective on actors' strategies, structures, and institutional environments (Valiorgue, 2020). Specifically, mobilizing the Business model concept offers a analytical tool to investigate how different stakeholders capture, share, and redefine value within complex agrifood chains (Jacquet et al., 2022). The Business model concept offers a detailed method for analyzing the fundamental interests of the actors involved, their strategic networks, and the range of values (economic, social, ecological) that motivate their coordinated actions (Schaltegger et al., 2016).

However, The Business model literature remains deeply anchored in a firm-centric paradigm, primarily focused on the competitive advantage and profit maximization of a single focal organization (Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008). As sustainability and agroecological transitions represent systemic "wicked" problems. Value can no longer be created or captured in isolation (Pedersen et al., 2021). It requires the collective action of interdependent stakeholders operating within territorial systems (Bocken, Short, Rana, & Evans, 2014).

Yet, transposing Business model thinking to these collective structures presents a significant theoretical challenge, as the concept was originally built on an intra-organizational logic and a commercial perspective (Demil, Lecocq, & Warnier, 2018). Traditional frameworks struggle to capture the complex "organizing" dynamics, the governance without subordination (Ardiet, 2025), and the continuous orchestration and resource pooling necessary to align divergent actors around a shared purpose (Ardiet, 2025; Orbell et al., 2025). Consequently, there is a critical need to understand how these diffuse territorial cooperations acquire an organizational actorhood and achieve long-term viability (Ardiet, 2025; Pedersen et al., 2021).

This leads us to the core research question of this study:
How do heterogeneous actors within a territorial collective organize and negotiate a collective business model to sustain the agroecological transformation?

2 - Theoretical background

To address the research question, this study explores the dialectic between Business Model (BM) literature and Meta-organization (MO) theory. Rather than static entities, these pillars are approached through the lens of *organizing*. The continuous process of structuring collective action in the absence of formal hierarchy (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008).

We posit that Meta-organizations provide the necessary 'decided social order' to coordinate autonomous peers, while the Business Model acts as a critical mediation tool. It transcends the 'black box' of collaboration by translating shared agroecological values into operational strategic choices.

2.1. Business Model Conceptualizations : From Firm-Centricity to Collective Action

The Limits of Firm-Centric Business Models

In strategic management, the Business Model (BM) concept is widely used as a analytical framework to explain the underlying logic of how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value (Teece, 2009). As this research program progressed, frameworks such as RCOV (Resources, Competences, Organisation, and Value) emerged to analyze the internal alignment and dynamic consistency of an organization's assets (Demil & Lecocq, 2010). Historically, these conceptualizations have been predominantly micro-structural and firm-bounded, focusing on how a single focal organization navigates its competitive environment to generate performance (Lecocq, Demil, & Warnier, 2006).
However, this traditional firm-centric approach reveals profound limitations when confronted with the complex, systemic challenges characterizing ecological and territorial transformations. Classical modeling frameworks frequently omit the broader systemic context and the biophysical constraints of the natural environment (Upward & Jones, 2016). Tackling "wicked" sustainability problems requires resources and knowledge that transcend the capacities of individual organizations, making isolated, single-firm business models insufficient (Pedersen et al., 2021). This narrow focus on positive externalities for the organization often obscures the degradation of collective commons and the systemic instability inherent in industrial agricultural models (Corazza et al., 2019; Valiorgue, 2020).

The "Collective Buisness model.

To transcend these firm-bound limitations, contemporary research advocates for the development of collaborative or "collective" business models (Pedersen et al., 2021). Unlike traditional frameworks designed to optimize private value capture, collective business models emerge from cross-sector partnerships. By uniting private firms, public institutions, and civil society to address systemic sustainability challenges through a shared purpose (

Pedersen et al., 2021). In this paradigm, value creation is no longer an isolated endeavor but a multi-stakeholder process of resource pooling, joint orchestration, and mutual value generation within an ecosystem (Orbell et al., 2024). This collective approach transforms the business model from a standalone competitive tool into a cooperative architecture designed to generate shared economic, social, and ecological value (Schaltegger et al., 2016). However, operationalizing and sustaining such a collective model requires rethinking how these diverse, autonomous actors actually coordinate their daily activities.

The "Practice Turn" and the "O" in RCOV framework

To capture this complex coordination, contemporary business model research embraces a significant "practice turn" in organization studies, emphasizing that strategy and collective value creation are not static designs but rather "situated activities" performed through habitual practices and daily interactions (Ardiet, 2025). Embracing this processual view implies that the very mechanisms of "organizing" must be recentered within business model conceptualizations. While various theoretical frameworks exist in the literature, capturing these dynamic activities requires an approach that explicitly underlines the organizational architecture as a driver of value creation. For this reason, this research chooses to mobilize the RCOV framework, which specifically establishes "Organisation" as a fundamental component constantly interacting with Resources/Competences and Value propositions (Demil & Lecocq, 2010). However, because this framework was originally designed to analyze the internal structure and external supply chain of a single focal firm, this theoretical redirection necessitates a re-investigation of the "Organisation" (O) component within the classic RCOV framework (Demil & Lecocq, 2010). Instead, it must now account for the continuous "organizing" of collective action across organizational and sectoral boundaries (Pedersen et al., 2021)

In collective arrangements such as multi-stakeholder meta-organizations, this redefined "O" must manage high levels of heterogeneity, diverging objectives, and governance without subordination (Ardiet, 2025). Consequently, this evolution highlights the need for intentionality and formalization in inter-organizational cooperation, mirroring the shift in collective action literature toward the construction of "decided social orders."

2.2. Collective Action to Decided Social Orders

Collective action literature focused upon individual dynamics or the governance of common resources among individual agents (Ostrom & Baechler, 2010). However, facing complex transformation, action shifts toward the inter-organizational level (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018). To comprehend how autonomous entities cooperate permanently without merging, organizational theory has moved toward the conceptualization of "decided social orders" rather than merely emergent informal networks (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008).

The Inter-organizational Dimension of Action

Introduced by Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008), a Meta-organization (MO) is defined as an organization whose members are themselves organizations. This framework elucidates how collectives function in the absence of classical hierarchy, relying on authority that is granted by members rather than imposed from above. Key structural pillars include:

(i) Foundational Autonomy: Members maintain their legal identity and strategic independence, which creates a permanent tension between individual and collective agency (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005).

(ii) Decided Social Order: The MO institutes a center of authority, defines boundaries via membership criteria, and establishes common rules. This transition from a fluid network to a formal organization provides the collective with the capacity for strategic action or actorhood (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Garaudel, 2024).

(iii) Heterarchy and Consensus: Coordination relies upon horizontal processes and consensus-based decision-making. This ensures member engagement and legitimacy but potentially induces decision-making inertia or organizational boredom when confronted with the requirement for rapid adaptation (Dumez, 2009; König, Schulte, & Enders, 2012).

Meta-organizational dynamics are characterized by an unstable equilibrium between common action and individual interests. A structural tension exists between autonomy and authority, where members cede a portion of their decision-making power to gain collective impact while simultaneously striving to preserve independence. To mitigate these tensions without fracturing the collective, MOs employ soft law (consisting of voluntary standards, charters, or norms of best practices) rather than coercive directives (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016).

Governing Multi-Stakeholder Complexity

To ensure the efficacy and continuity of the collective, the literature highlights the critical role of a coordination entity (such as a secretariat or network facilitators) which orchestrates action, manages communication, and maintains dynamic momentum (Roux & Lecocq, 2022). The secretariat acts as a fundamental stabilizing force, providing the administrative continuity required for long-term strategic projects while navigating the risks of over-centralization (Roux & Lecocq, 2022).

When collectives integrate heterogeneous actors (such as farmers, NGOs, and local authorities), they are categorized as Multi-Stakeholder Meta-Organizations (MSMOs) (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Saniossian et al., 2022)). Their functioning is marked by multi-referentiality, where members adhere to divergent institutional logics. Success depends upon a continuous process of translation (aligning systemic objectives with

individual needs) and the redefinition of roles within an equitable collaborative framework (Valente & Oliver, 2018).

2.3 . Understanding Collective Organising of Business Model

The concept of the Business Model enriches the literature on meta-organizations by providing much-needed tools and answers for understanding value creation and sharing within these collective entities.

By applying Meta-organization theory, we can analyze how collective bodies reconcile diverse operational logics to meet both shared strategic goals and environmental imperatives. This framework, particularly the concept of Meta-organizations (MOs), improves the comprehension and management of multi-actor organizations. It brings to light "invisible elements" often omitted in conventional Business Model (BM) analysis, such as shared values, trust, and common norms, thereby aiding in the clear definition of collective strategy (Bardon et al., 2020).
Consequently, the literature on Meta-Organizations (MO) provides a valuable perspective for understanding the organizing of a Collective Business Model. This perspective allows the "Organisation" (O) component of the RCOV framework to be viewed not as a fixed, firm-centric structural element (Dumez, 2009), but as a dynamic process of collective orchestration and meta-organizing. Thus reconceptualized, the "O" represents the collective's strategic capacity to establish and maintain a defined social order that supports the sustainable co-creation and equitable redistribution of value within the broader ecosystem.

3 - Methodology :

To investigate the "organizing" processes within collective business models, this research adopts a qualitative, multiple, and embedded case study design. This approach allows for capturing the idiosyncrasies of each local context while identifying cross-sectoral patterns and regularities in meta-organizing dynamics.
The field of this research is made up of developed place based activities where actors collaborate to implement agroecological practices and principles. Part of the funding for the thesis comes from the European project "ACROPICS". This project facilitates access to this research field. This funding includes the possibility of conducting mobility abroad in territories defined as Sustainable Agroécological System (SAS) for a maximum duration of 12 months during the thesis.
We have selected a diversity of cases, which allows us to exploit the variation of contexts (Timmermans & Tavory, 2014), with the aim of producing generic knowledge on placebased organizational modalities. These fields share a common dynamic: the implementation of agroecological practices involving a diversity of actors: research, production, distribution, advisor, local institution etc. However, these SAS have very different production and

distribution objectives, and the stakeholders involved are also very diverse. The table below summarizes the main cases and their specificities.

Case Study	Location	Core Crop	Market Orientation	Collective Structure
ALM	Almeria, ESP	Intensive Greenhouse (Tomato/Pepper)	European	Bio-factory Network
CAP42	El Bolsón, ARG	Polyculture (Berries/Hops/Vegetables)	Local & National	Rural Agency Network
CREA	Mendoza, ARG	Intensive (Vine/Olive/Plum)	International	Water Management Coop
FDGP	Grasse, FR	Perfume Plants	Local to International	Peasant Organization
ODE	Odemira, PT	Intensive Greenhouse (Berries)	European	Producer/Distributor Alliance
OGC	Curicó, CL	Intensive (Vine/Fruit)	International	Producer/R&D Alliance
SFLIA	Troyes, FR	Sainfoin & Oilseeds	National	Peasant Cooperative

We adopt a qualitative methodological approach based on multiple and embedded case studies (Fitzgerald & Dopson, 2011). This method allows us to grasp the complexity of each local context while enabling the identification of cross-cutting similarities and differences.

For data collection, we apply the principles of methodological triangulation (Yin 2018): collection and study of interviews, collection and study of archives, and direct observations

of organizational life moments (meetings, field collaborations), or even participant observations when possible depending on the cases. This choice aims at finely understanding the activity and identifying daily interactions without limiting ourselves to formal discourses and structures. We prioritize the practice of shadowing to follow the actors in their daily activities; the interviews offer moments of reflection on their activities and the organizational modalities implemented in the SAS. We are part of a collaborative research logic and mobilize the dialogical model (Parmentier Cajaiba & Avenier, 2013). In practice, we share daily life and provide occasional help to the actors. This thus reduces the researcher/actor distance and allows for co-construction/or uncovering the practical issues faced by the actors.

4 - Expected contribution

Although the empirical focus of this research is anchored in the transformation through Agroecology , the underlying mechanisms of collective business modeling explored herein are not strictly bound to the agricultural sector. The necessity for cross-sector, multi-stakeholder cooperation to address systemic "wicked" sustainability challenges is a defining feature of transitions across various industries, including energy, mobility, and circular manufacturing (Pedersen et al., 2021; Snihur & Bocken, 2022). By unpacking how heterogeneous actors negotiate and orchestrate a shared business model without formal subordination, the insights generated by this study can be theoretically generalized. Ultimately, the findings are expected to inform the broader literature on sustainability-oriented meta-organizations and sustainable business model , providing a conceptual framework applicable to any sector undergoing profound transformations that require place-based collective actiont…

<u>Contribution to the "O" in the RCOV Framework:</u>

The primary theoretical contribution resides in the refinement of the Organisation (O) component within the RCOV framework (Demil & Lecocq, 2010). Traditionally, the "O" is conceptualized as a structural element defining a single focal firm's internal activities and formal supply chain partnerships. However, this firm-centric view frequently fails to capture the complexity of systemic, multi-actor collaborations required for sustainability. By mobilizing Meta-Organization theory (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005), the "O" is redefined as a dynamic process of inter-organizational governance. This shift illuminates the black box of collaboration, enabling an analysis of the "O" through the lens of a decided social order where autonomous peers interact without formal subordination or traditional hierarchy. The "O" is thus transformed from a static architectural component into the strategic capacity for collective orchestration.

The Collective Business Model: Bricolage and Processual Dynamics

Beyond the structural reconfiguration, a second contribution highlights the emergent processes underlying the Collective Business Model. The viability of these territorial networks does not stem from shared ideals and formal planning alone, but from a pragmatic necessity to manage the complexity of "wicked" ecological and social transformations (Pedersen et al., 2021). The research demonstrates that collective business modeling relies heavily on strategic bricolage and continuous trial-and-error experimentation to adapt to territorial constraints (Sosna, Trevinyo-Rodríguez, & Velamuri, 2010). By analyzing this ongoing process, the study reveals how meta-organizations dynamically navigate tensions, align divergent institutional logics, and transform dormant local resources into sustainable value. Ultimately, this reconceptualization offers a grounded framework for understanding how collective models are negotiated and stabilized over time to achieve systemic impact.

Methodological and Narrative Contribution

Finally, this research highlights the role of the BM as a narrative instrument. By utilizing integral and literal transcriptions of inter-organizational interactions, the texture of collective action is captured, preserving the hesitations, tensions, and valuation trials that define the transformation. This methodological ensures that the research does not merely document formal structures but uncovers the daily interactions and negotiations that constitute the organizing process.

This research aims to show that the Business Model concept serves not only as a structural blueprint but also as a powerful mediation tool, facilitating the emergence of a collective actorhood capable of navigating the uncertainties of the ecological transformation (Ardiet, 2025 ; Doganova & Eyquem-Renault, 2009). By documenting these valuation trials, the study provides a granular account of how territorial collectives manage inherent tensions to reconcile competing multi-stakeholder interests (Pedersen et al., 2021) with strict planets boundaries (Upward & Jones, 2016). Consequently, this narrative contribution is essential for legitimizing the agroecological transformation. It offers a tangible representation of collective action that goes through traditional, firm-centric industrial paradigms. Ultimately, the resulting insights provide a theoretical and practical roadmap for other territorial initiatives, highlighting the critical role of inter-organizational "organizing" in achieving systemic and strongly sustainable outcomes .

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