

Inter-organizational Strategies to Break the Social Economy Out of its Niche : A Participatory Research Design and Multiple Case Study Analysis

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In response to transition challenges, the social economy (SE) is recognized for its potential, particularly through social or grassroots innovations (Bidet et al., 2024; Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). SE organizations, guided by principles such as profit limitation and democratic governance, offer a model and a pathway toward solutions that prioritize collective interest (including protection of natural and social capital) over individual interests (Krlev et al., 2023).

However, despite a longevity that is proof of concept, the SE remains largely marginal, functioning alongside the dominant economic system (Battilana et al., 2023). Given its potential to address major challenges, it is therefore essential to explore strategies that could enable SE organizations to break out of their status of « niche » (Vickers & Lyon, 2014).

Recent literature on both social economy (Miguel, 2023; Slitine et al., 2024) and transition studies (Kanda et al., 2024; Kivimaa et al., 2019) has shown a growing interest in inter-organizational dynamics to reinforce small scale initiatives and increase their chances of evolving beyond niche's level (Battilana et al., 2023; Lanzi & Maréchal, 2022). Additionally, empirical evidence indicates a growing number of "umbrella organizations" that bring together multiple social economy organizations across various sectors, such as energy, food, upcycling, housing, and cycle logistics. These organizations facilitate the exchange of best practices, the pooling of tools and resources, the strengthening of skills, and engagement in political advocacy.

Considering this theoretical and empirical trends, this study aims to deepen the understanding of inter-organizational scaling strategies by investigating examples of « umbrella organizations » within the Walloon social economy ecosystem. Building on a participatory research approach implemented within the ESCAP project (www.escap.be), we have brought together researchers and representatives of « umbrella organizations » to co-construct knowledge. Using this approach, we have examined the various forms of inter-cooperation happening within a sample of "umbrella organizations" and the scaling potential linked to these different forms of cooperation.

Using multiple data collection and analysis methods (semi-structured interviews, participative analysis, etc.) we've explored key questions such as: What defines social economy umbrella organizations? What commonalities and differences exist among them, particularly regarding governance? What are the best and worst practices, operational scopes, and safeguards associated with these structures? What are the impact of these activities in term of scaling SE out of its niches status .

The expected contributions are threefold. First, by linking social economy (SE) and transition studies, this research aims to deepen the understanding of SE's role in transitions. Second, by investigating inter-cooperation as a scaling strategy, this research also contributes to the transition studies literature, particularly regarding transition intermediaries. Third, we aim to highlight a range of practices within these umbrella organizations that can strengthen SE organizations and facilitate their shift beyond niche status.

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