**The Roles of Networks in Institutionalizing New Hybrid Organizational Forms:**

**Insights from the European Renewable Energy Cooperative Network**

**Abstract**

Hybrid organizational forms combine values and practices from different institutional domains, rendering them difficult to fit neatly into the structures of extant organizational forms. Since the work required to institutionalize a new hybrid organizational form may be beyond the resources and capabilities of individual organizations acting alone, we shift the focus to inter-organizational collective action. Using empirical data from a study of a European network of renewable energy cooperatives, we find that, in order to institutionalize the new hybrid organizational form, the network can contribute to overcome the legitimacy challenges inherent in organizational hybridity. In particular, the network builds field-level receptivity to institutional pluralism, collectively codifies the hybrid organizational form, and consolidates legitimation towards plural field-level audiences. In order to perform these institutionalization roles, the network itself becomes increasingly formalized and mobilizes mediating functions involving different types of resources, legitimacy and target audiences. The research advances knowledge of hybrid organizational forms and their collective institutionalization through inter-organizational networks.

**Keywords:** institutionalization, organizational hybridity, collective institutional work, inter-organizational network, renewable energy cooperatives

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**Introduction**

An organizational form is an ‘archetypal configuration of structures and practices given coherence by underlying values regarded as appropriate within an institutional context’ (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006, p. 30). Recently much attention has been devoted to organizational forms that combine values and practices from different institutional domains and thus embody organizational hybridity (Battilana & Lee, 2014). For example, social enterprise hybrids combine commercial business models with the social mission of the non-profit sector (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Doherty, Haugh, & Lyon, 2014; Dufays & Huybrechts, 2016). As they strive to combine potentially conflicting institutional demands, hybrid organizational forms are likely to suffer legitimacy deficits in terms of categorical confusion (Zuckerman, 1999), perceived paradoxes (Jay, 2013), and difficulties to align with multiple audience expectations (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Pache & Santos, 2013). The work required to institutionalize hybrid organizational forms is thus likely to be more complex than when the new organizational form can draw on established and domain-specific legitimacy (Battilana & Lee, 2014). Such work may be beyond the resources and capabilities of individual organizations (see Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011), rendering inter-organizational action, typically through networks, particularly useful for institutionalizing the new hybrid organizational form (Esparza, Walker, & Rossman, 2014; York, Hargrave, & Pacheco, 2016).

Collective actors, such as social movements and professional associations, are known to play an important role in institutionalizing new organizational forms because of their greater access to resources, discursive skills, and field-level connections (Hargrave & Van De Ven, 2006; Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000; Schneiberg, 2013). For example, in technology-oriented fields, several authors have shown how inter-organizational networks have been instrumental in sharing new knowledge and piloting the legitimation of new practices and attendant organizational forms (Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough, & Swan, 2002; Owen-Smith & Powell, 2004; Powell, White, Koput, & Owen‐Smith, 2005). While previous studies hint at the added-value of networks to institutionalize hybrid organizational forms (Huybrechts, 2010; York et al., 2016), little is known regarding how networks may successfully support the institutionalization process despite the legitimacy challenges inherent in organizational hybridity. Moreover, most studies have focused on established networks that use their central field position to balance the tension between innovation and field-level stability (Greenwood, Hinings, & Suddaby, 2002; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006). Thus, little is known about how the work to institutionalize a new hybrid organizational form is undertaken when the network is itself also under construction.

The empirical context of the research is the increase in the number of community-owned cooperatives in the renewable energy (RE) industry in Europe. Renewable energy source cooperatives (Rescoops) combine characteristics of commercial, community and environmental organizations, pursuing a broader scope of goals and involving more diverse stakeholders than traditional cooperatives (Bauwens, 2016; Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014). Rescoops have risen from a dozen in the 1980s to more than 3000 in 2016 ([www.rescoop.eu](http://www.rescoop.eu)). The Rescoop.eu network was established informally in 2011 and has since then supported the promotion and adoption of this hybrid organizational form across Europe in a rather successful way.

Given the legitimacy challenges of organizational hybridity, the successful work towards the institutionalization of the Rescoop form in a relatively short time may appear surprising. We find that the network managed to transform the challenge of organizational hybridity into an opportunity throughout the institutionalization process. To do so, the network built field-level receptivity to institutional pluralism, collectively codified the new hybrid organizational form, and consolidated legitimation to the demands of plural field-level audiences. To perform these institutionalization roles, our findings show that the network, in the course of its own formalization process, used a set of mediating functions: at the informal stage, the network acted as a forum to raise the members’ collective reflexivity and integrate multiple discourses into a collective voice; the formalized network coordinated conciliation between members' rules and practices; and as the network acquired federative capacity it amalgamated the members’ connections with plural field-level actors.

The research makes three contributions to the literature. First, we explain how the initial legitimacy challenges of the new hybrid organizational form can be overcome and transformed into institutionalization opportunities by the network. We find that the network builds field-level receptivity to institutional pluralism to avoid categorical confusion, uses the experience of an anchor form (in our case the cooperative) to avoid appearing as paradoxical, and legitimizes the new hybrid form across multiple audiences (Xu, Lu, & Gu, 2014). In doing so, our study shifts the focus away from organization-level strategies for responding to exogenous, conflicting institutional demands (Battilana, Sengul, Pache, & Model, 2015; Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014; Pache & Santos, 2013) towards network efforts to legitimize a new hybrid organizational form as ‘an institution in its own right’ (Kraatz & Block, 2008, p. 257). Second, we identify mediating functions that enable emerging networks to perform institutionalization roles and thereby theorize the added-value of collective, rather than single-actor (Tracey et al., 2011), institutional work for hybrid organizations. Finally, we theorize the symbiotic process through which the institutionalization of a new hybrid organizational form and the formalization of a network progress hand-in-hand.

The paper is presented in four sections. Section one situates new organizational forms and organizational hybridity in the literatures on institutional work and inter-organizational networks. Section two describes the context and the research methods employed. In section three we present the findings concerning the roles and mediating functions performed by a network to contribute to institutionalizing a new hybrid organizational form. In the final sections, we discuss the contributions to theory and conclude with suggestions for future research.

**Theoretical Background**

We first summarize the main insights of the burgeoning literature on hybrid organizations, and the institutionalization challenges they pose. Then we review the literature on inter-organizational networks to identify their potential for overcoming these challenges and supporting the institutionalization of a new hybrid organizational form.

*Hybrid organizational forms and institutionalization*

Institutionalization of a new organizational form describes the process through which the organizational form becomes embedded within society and gradually taken for granted (Ruef, 2000; Suchman, 1995; Überbacher, 2014). Full institutionalization, leading the new organizational form to be recognized as legitimate and worthy of support across most audiences (Suchman, 1995; Überbacher, 2014), requires sustained institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) that can be decomposed into three main stages (Greenwood et al. 2002; Greenwood et al. 2006; Lawrence et al. 2006): problematization, theorization, and legitimation. First, problematization delegitimizes and diagnoses the failures of extant institutional arrangements and emphasizes the need for alternatives (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004). Thus for example, the lack of treatment facilities for HIV/AIDS patients stimulated activists in Canada to start imagining solutions to provide treatment to sufferers (Maguire et al., 2004). Second, theorization requires framing the new organizational form as superior to alternatives in overcoming the diagnosed shortcomings and therefore a worthy recipient of support (Greenwood et al., 2002; Perkmann & Spicer, 2014). For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), the use of market resources by a social enterprise hybrid was theorized to be a more efficient solution than other interventions that address the lack of employment opportunities for the unemployed (Tracey et al., 2011). Third, legitimating accounts (Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002) are developed to persuade audiences that the new organizational form is appropriate and provides them with advantages over extant organizational forms (David, Sine, & Haveman, 2013).

Hybrid organizational forms face three types of legitimacy challenges that require specific institutionalization strategies (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Doherty et al., 2014). First, since they bridge established organizational categories, hybrid organizational forms are likely to suffer cognitive legitimacy deficit, or categorical confusion (Zuckerman, 1999), leading them to be poorly recognized within, or even denied membership of, the extant organizational landscape. Second, hybrid organizational forms may be perceived as inefficient, or pragmatically illegitimate, because they face tensions and paradoxes associated with potentially conflicting values and practices (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Jay, 2013). Third, the more the new organizational forms embody hybridity, the less they can align with the legitimating criteria of one single audience (Ebrahim et al., 2014) and the more they require support from plural audiences that each employ different legitimacy criteria (Tost, 2011). For these reasons, hybrid organizations must engage in specific institutionalization work and influence dominant field actors to legitimize their hybridity (Kraatz & Block, 2008). However, such action is likely to lie beyond the capabilities of individual organizations when resources are committed to day-to-day operations (Maguire et al., 2004; Tracey et al., 2011). Thus for example, in the case study of the social enterprise hybrid Aspire (Tracey et al., 2011), institutionalization of the new hybrid organizational form was achieved at the expense of organizational survival. In the same vein, Greenwood and Suddaby (2006) documented how the institutionalization of a new organizational form bridging the law and accounting professions was successfully achieved only thanks to a coalition of particularly resource-rich actors.

In this context, collective institutional work through social movements (Rao et al., 2000; Schneiberg, 2013) or professional associations (David et al., 2013; Greenwood et al., 2002) may be a solution to pool the necessary resources and competences for overcoming the legitimacy deficits of, and successfully institutionalizing, a new hybrid organizational form. When such established actors are not taking the lead in advocating for the new organizational form, we suggest that this role can be endorsed by bottom-up networks created by new form adopters themselves (Huybrechts, 2010; York et al., 2016). However, how such networks, which are themselves under construction, contribute to institutionalizing the new organizational form embodied by their members, has not been fully explained yet.

*Networks and institutionalization*

A network is comprised of a set of nodes, in our case organizations (Jones & Van De Ven, 2013), and the relational ties that connect these nodes (Nohria & Eccles, 1992). Inter-organizational networks encompass a broad range of configurations that vary in terms of the extent of connectivity, formalization and member homogeneity (for a review, see Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Wenpin, 2004). In this paper, we focus on formalized, homogeneous networks such as federations (Toubiana, Oliver, & Bradshaw, forthcoming), that have earned the mandate to act and speak on behalf of their members.

From an institutional perspective, inter-organizational networks are located at the interface between organizations and broader institutional fields (Owen-Smith & Powell, 2004; Powell et al., 2005). Whilst looser networks may ultimately forge connections across a whole field (Powell et al., 2005), we suggest that for more homogeneous networks, such as those structured around a specific organizational form, their interests remain focused on a subset of the field that shares a distinctive identity (Montgomery & Oliver, 2007) (in our case, cooperatives within the RE field). This focus enables inter-organizational networks to filter institutional pressures that impinge upon individual organizations – typically, reducing institutional complexity in a way that can be more easily ‘managed’ by individual organizations (Toubiana et al., forthcoming).

However, beyond this inwards perspective, networks, after securing legitimacy from their own members (Human & Provan, 2000), are also useful from an outwards perspective to foster the legitimation of new organizational forms and practices (Greenwood et al., 2002; Lee & Pennings, 2002; Ruef, 2000). Although formalized networks at the center of a field have been traditionally portrayed as guardians of institutional stability (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), more recent studies have noted their role in creating new (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994) and reconfiguring established institutional fields (Greenwood et al., 2002; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In contrast to the study of well-established and central networks, our study shifts the focus towards networks that are being constructed by adopters of the new hybrid organizational form.

To support the institutionalization of a new organizational form, networks pool and develop a wide range of resources from members (Baraldi, Gressetvold, & Harrison, 2012; Jones & Van De Ven, 2013). First, networks are able to integrate the viewpoints of multiple organizations beyond the specific strategy of any single organization (David et al., 2013), thereby increasing collective knowledge and reflexivity (David et al., 2013; Owen-Smith & Powell, 2004). Second, networks enable information about members’ practices and rules to be exchanged and collectively theorized (Greenwood et al., 2002). Third, through pooling discursive skills and building alliances across the field, networks ‘may exert major pressures on the normative order […] to actively proselytize’ for the new organizational form (Suchman, 1995, p. 592). In this way, the capabilities of inter-organizational networks, as collective institutional actors (Hargrave & Van De Ven, 2006; Wijen & Ansari, 2007), extend beyond those of individual organizations (Greenwood et al., 2002; Rao et al., 2000).

We suggest that these capabilities are particularly useful for hybrid organizational forms, given the legitimacy challenges they face (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). However, as networks acquire such capabilities only gradually (Human & Provan, 2000), little is known about the ways through which institutionalization roles are played by emerging networks in the course of their own formalization. Therefore, our research is guided by the question: *How do networks, while under construction, support the institutionalization of new hybrid organizational forms?*

**Methods**

To answer this question, the research adopted a qualitative methodology and a longitudinal case study method (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). The decision to research the Rescoop.eu network was guided by two criteria. First, Rescoop.eu was created to promote the awareness and adoption of Rescoops – a new organizational form which combines the pursuit of commercial, community and environmental goals. Second, since the informal network started operating recently (2011), the institutionalization process could be examined in real time.

*Data sources*

To understand how Rescoop.eu operated in practice, data was gathered by participant observation between 2011 and 2015, and a follow up visit in 2016. Participant observation involved attending initial informal gatherings while establishing the network (2011), meetings to prepare a major application for funding (2012), and meetings and events after securing the first EU funding ‘Rescoop20-20-20’ (2012-2015). Meticulous field notes were written to document attendance at network meetings (n=16), skype conference calls (n=24), and seminars and conferences (n=18) (referred to in the analysis as ‘MEETINGx’, ‘CALLx’ and ‘CONFx’). The access to about 1200 e-mail exchanges also brought important information about strategic discussions, interactions between members, and mediation by network representatives.

Second, at the inception of the network in 2011, interviews were conducted with the pioneer members (n=6). In 2013 and 2014, when the formal network was fully operational, interviews were conducted with network managers (n=2), non-executive members of the board (n=3), and member Rescoops (n=12). For the latter, Rescoops active in the network but more recent or originating from other regions or countries than the founding pioneers were specifically chosen to bring complementary insights to the analysis. Within each organization, interviews were held with the Rescoop representative most involved in Rescoop.eu. In 2015, the network managers were interviewed for the third time. In addition, we interviewed three representatives from community groups mentored by established Rescoops and preparing to apply to join Rescoop.eu. Finally, a further ten interviews were conducted with informants from other cooperative and environmental networks. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Six transcripts in French and Dutch were professionally translated into English.

Third, 97 texts were carefully read to develop an overview of the discourse and arguments of both Rescoop.eu and its stakeholders. The texts included 49 Rescoop.eu documents (such as press releases, project documents, online communications, later mentioned as ‘RESCOOPDOCx’); 19 reports from individual Rescoops and support groups (‘REPORTx’); 12 renewable energy (RE) policy documents from the EC (‘EUDOCx’), and 17 newspaper articles from six participating countries that explicitly mentioned the Rescoop.eu network (see Supplementary Table III for more details). Document extracts were manually selected that described the network’s discourse and institutionalization activities and they were added to the data structure when developing the codes. The document analysis was also particularly important to describe the research context set out next.

*Data analysis*

The analytical process is guided by thematic analysis (King, 2012) and the principles of grounded theory (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In thematic analysis, the study of the primary data is structured by themes that have been derived from a detailed analysis of a subset of the primary data (King, 2012). To stay close to the data and avoid premature forcing into categories, the analysis was conducted manually. To begin, the large volume of primary data consisting of field notes from participant observation, interview transcripts and documents was read through by each author.

In the next stage the data was systematically analyzed to identify and label all references to the institutionalization of the Rescoop organizational form, without specifically focusing at this stage on distinctive network features. The individual extracts were then compared, contrasted and allocated first-order codes, consistent with Gioia et al.’s (2013) method. To move from empirical analysis to theorization on the roles of networks in this regard, the first-order codes were critically evaluated by the research team and then grouped into clusters of similar codes. The clusters were then allocated second-order conceptual codes that made a clear connection with the case analysis. These codes were chronologically ordered according to three main periods, and aggregated to distill the three institutionalization roles (one for each period) that constitute the framework we advance (see Figure 1). For each period, illustrative quotes were selected both from documents and interviews within and beyond the network (e.g. EU legislation) that indicated audience responses to these network’s efforts – contemporaneous or delayed. In the final stage of analysis we returned to the two Rescoop.eu managers to present the analysis and framework in 2016. The feed-back helped to validate the analysis, notably the structuration of the case narrative in three main periods, and yielded more fine-grained insights on the added-value of ‘networkedness’ for the institutionalization of the Rescoop form.

*Research context*

Interest in the development of RE emerged in the 1970s (Sine & Lee, 2009) and since then the RE industry has developed rapidly together with technological advances for capturing new RE sources (namely wind, solar, hydropower, biomass and geothermal). Encouraged by social movements such as Greenpeace, the rise in public awareness of the climate change phenomenon supported the development of innovative RE projects and increased public endorsement, favorable legislation, fiscal incentives, and entrepreneurial activity in the industry (Sine & Lee, 2009; York et al., 2016). For example, the European Union (EU) 20-20-20 strategy aims to reduce carbon emissions, develop RE production and increase energy efficiency in member states by 20% by 2020. Over time the RE organizational landscape has diversified away from dominance by public sector organizations and now includes large corporations, smaller businesses, households and community cooperatives.

Originally established in the 19th century, the cooperative organizational form is founded on seven principles, among which are democratic decision-making and attention to the community (Nelson et al., 2016). Although energy cooperatives have operated in Italy, Austria and the United States since the beginning of the 20th century, RE source cooperatives (Rescoops) are a more recent development (Bauwens, Gotchev, & Holstenkamp, 2016). A Rescoop is defined as ‘a group of citizens that cooperate in the field of renewable energy, developing new production, selling renewable energy or providing services to new initiatives’ ([www.Rescoop.eu](http://www.Rescoop.eu), viewed on 16 November 2014). Most Rescoops generate energy from solar and wind farms; biomass and hydro generation are less common.

Rescoops are positioned as environmental social enterprise hybrids (Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014; Vickers & Lyon, 2012) in that they simultaneously pursue community development, environmental activism and financial sustainability (See Table 1). To do so, Rescoops simultaneously engage in activities typically performed by three distinct organizational forms – respectively community groups, environmental NGOs and corporations. First, Rescoops typically emerge from community groups that mobilize local citizens in RE, and other domains, e.g., agriculture and housing, to stimulate local development and foster social cohesion. Second, endorsing the ‘energy transition’ agenda, Rescoops advocate for RE development and rational energy use, and protest against nuclear energy and corporate domination of the energy sector. Third, in addition to citizen mobilization and environmental activism, Rescoops mainly develop income streams from energy production, and in some cases supply, using the same technology and management methods as energy corporations. These three types of activities are developed so as to achieve synergies: for example, community engagement is particularly useful for raising the capital and increasing social acceptance for RE production projects, which in turn provides an opportunity to engage members to support environmental activism.

Hybridity is also reflected in multi-stakeholder governance structures that include, for example, local citizens, municipalities and NGOs, and which are sensitive to financial performance, community inclusion, and environmental preservation. Hence, based on the document analysis and on previous literature (Bauwens, 2016; Bauwens et al., 2016; Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014), we propose the following table to position Rescoops within the more recent generation of cooperatives that are more hybrid in their missions and governance when compared to traditional counterparts.

***INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE***

The increase in the numbers of Rescoops has been attributed to several factors (Bauwens et al., 2016; Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014), such as the increased willingness of consumers to control the source (and price) of energy, and rising interest in community ownership as a way to counter local resistance to RE generation facilities, typically onshore wind farms. Despite these benefits, several barriers hinder the diffusion of the Rescoop organizational form. Although returns to investors are satisfactory (especially from wind farms) reports have noted that financial institutions remain skeptical of the cooperative governance structure and community competences (Bauwens et al., 2016). Further, low levels of public sector understanding and regulatory support of the Rescoop organizational form in some countries has been disadvantageous when bidding for public contracts for RE production or supply (Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014).

In 2010 and 2011, the founders of six Rescoops met and agreed to explore ways of working together. They created Rescoop.eu, which five year later counted 1240 Rescoops involved directly as organizations or indirectly through their national network. The aims of Rescoop.eu are to: ‘represent the voice of citizens and renewable energy cooperatives to European policy-makers’; ‘support the start-up of new Rescoops’; provide ‘valuable services to members’; and ‘promote the Rescoop model throughout Europe’ ([www.rescoop.eu](http://www.rescoop.eu), viewed on 11 March 2016). In the next section, we provide evidence of the gradual institutionalization of the Rescoop form and we explore how the Rescoop.eu network, whilst under construction, contributed to such institutionalization.

**Findings**

Our data suggests that the active promotion of the Rescoop form at EU level was the main initial driver of the Rescoop.eu networking process, as expressed during an early meeting:

What we’ll now try is to form a federation, because the energy market is European. We could still work each on our side, but there are advantages in sharing our experiences, […] it’s good that we work on our model altogether. […] Europe doesn’t know who we are, what happens with cooperatives at the local level. If no one tells them, they won’t know. (MEETING1, April 2011)

Before providing a detailed analysis of how the network contributed to institutionalizing the Rescoop form, we provide some evidence of the outcomes of such institutionalization in relation to Rescoop.eu. First, the number of Rescoops has increased rapidly and several new RE cooperatives have been initiated with the guidance of Rescoop.eu. The acronym Rescoop was adopted by most RE cooperatives, and national Rescoop networks were created in several countries. Second, the Rescoop organizational form secured endorsements from a range of audiences, e.g., Greenpeace heralded Rescoops as the ideal vehicle to engage citizens in energy transition; the European Covenant of Mayors and Cooperatives Europe endorsed Rescoops as part of the cooperative renewal; and industry associations such as the European Wind Energy Association (EWEA) developed increased interest in this model. Third, in 2015 the Rescoop organizational form was presented as a model of best practice of citizen involvement in the RE industry by the EU Commissioner on Climate and Energy – despite former mistrust between this Commissioner and Rescoop adopters and advocates. Rescoop was also acknowledged as an emblematic case of hybrid social enterprise by the EC in the context of the *Social Business Initiative*. Although individual Rescoops and national networks (such as the Community Energy Coalition in the UK) were also contributory to these achievements, our study suggests that Rescoop.eu was instrumental in coordinating and accelerating the institutionalization efforts.

In parallel, the Rescoop.eu network itself became increasingly formalized. The network secured a €1.9 million grant from the EU for the ‘Rescoop 20-20-20’ project in 2012. This project aimed to promote the Rescoop organizational form and support the establishment of new Rescoops. It enabled regular interactions between Rescoops and helped formalize the structure and governance of the network (with legal incorporation and a board of directors in 2013). In 2015, after relying on volunteers, Rescoop.eu hired two full time employees (a coordinator and a president), both formerly active as Rescoop leaders. The network adopted the label ‘federation’ and received the mandate from members to represent their interests to and formally engage with EU authorities. In 2016, Rescoop.eu received further funding for seven new community RE projects. Industrial associations invited Rescoop.eu, and member Rescoops, to participate in three RE projects (*PV Financing, Nobel Grid* and *WISE Power*). Since 2012 the network has been featured in more than 120 media reports (television, web and newspaper articles) at both the national and European levels (e.g. Euronews). Finally, by 2016 the 1240 active members of Rescoop.eu represented 50% of European RE cooperatives.

We now turn to documenting the roles performed by the network to help institutionalize Rescoops as a hybrid organizational form. Three overarching network roles emerged from the longitudinal analysis, each corresponding to one period: building field-level receptivity to institutional pluralism, collectively codifying the new hybrid organizational form, and consolidating legitimation towards plural audiences. The data structure is presented in Figure 1 and illustrative empirical data in Table 2.

***INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE***

***INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE***

**1. Building field-level receptivity to institutional pluralism (2011-2012)**

Between 2011 and 2012, the founding members of the informal, not legally registered, network pooled their knowledge and resources and stimulated collective reflexivity about the added-value of Rescoops to complement the perceived narrowness of the RE institutional landscape. Together they created a new narrative for RE by first, explicating the contradictions inherent in the exclusive market focus of energy corporations and EU policies, and then advancing alternative narratives that would address the narrowness outlined above.

*Highlighting contradictions in extant field arrangements*

The founding members of the network came together during the initial, informal meetings to discuss how to position their specific organizational form within the RE field. Rather than undermining the relevance of market principles or the presence of corporations as legitimate actors in the RE field, as some members advocated individually, the discussions led to identifying problematic contradictions between the discourses and actions of dominant field actors, i.e., corporations and policy-makers. First, the network members decided to focus their critiques on the private appropriation by RE corporations of RE sources, which were considered by Rescoops to be ‘common goods’ and thus better suited to community appropriation:

Renewable energy is by nature a common good, […] which must benefit the whole community and not only particular individuals. (REP12)

A second critique concerned the perceived contradiction between the EC’s discourse of a free market and fair competition, and the reality of an oligopolistic RE market, lack of competition and barriers to entry for smaller energy producers:

We’re not against the free market, on the contrary, we precisely want the EU authorities to clear the market from all these contradictions and obstacles to a fair competition. (Interviewee 1, Rescoop.eu)

The perceived contradictions were employed by Rescoop.eu to delegitimize the narrowness of the extant RE taxonomy by asserting that the exclusive market focus of corporations and policy-makers had not responded to community and environmental interests.

*Advancing alternative narratives*

Based on discussions between the more radical and ‘reformist’ founding members, a narrative emerged that did not seek to replace the current structure of the RE industry but rather sought to increase field-level receptivity to accommodating community interests and environmental concerns. In addition to emphasizing the importance of ambitious environmental goals, the informal network members agreed to ask public authorities to ‘take citizens seriously’, i.e., to not only invite them to participate in consultations, but also acknowledge their role in investing in local RE generation and supply.

This is what we ask to the EU: ‘Keep the production in the hands of citizens, stop using the money to buy foreign oil and gas and give foreign companies all the profits, but rather keep the money for the local communities.’ (RESCOOPDOC23)

The data suggest that these concerns were, over time, gradually endorsed by the EC and by industry associations seeking to reduce community resistance to RE projects. This work enabled Rescoop.eu, reinforced by environmental and community development movements, to create receptivity, i.e., openness to the new concerns. The receipt of invitations from large industry associations to Rescoop.eu to join projects that aim to reach out to local communities are indicative of corporate receptivity to institutional pluralism. Receptivity to community engagement in RE production and supply has also become increasingly visible in EU texts, for example the ‘2050 Energy Roadmap’ or the ‘Clean Energy for All Europeans’ 2016 Directive:

[Rescoops] are an efficient way of managing energy at community level […]. To ensure that such initiatives can freely develop, the new market design requires Member States to put in place appropriate legal frameworks to enable their activities. (EUDOC15, p. 8)

Rescoop.eu members reacted cautiously to this explicit recognition, highlighting that the same texts from the EC also remained favorable to corporate nuclear power. Moreover, despite the EU-level intentions, Rescoops have suffered from unfavorable legislation shifts in specific countries, e.g., in Spain and the UK, which indicate that field-level receptivity differs from active support. Hence ‘receptivity’ results from the cautious approach of the informal Rescoop.eu network to make their collective voice heard, and the organizational form understood, by public authorities and industry associations, considered here as ‘field gatekeepers’ (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005).

*Raising collective reflexivity*

The new narrative constructed by the informal Rescoop.eu network integrated the views of members who were very critical about corporate practices and public policies, and members keen to gain these audiences’ support. In particular, Rescoops facing a hostile national context with unfavorable policies and oligopolistic energy markets (e.g., Spain and France) held more radical views than Rescoops in countries with a more favorable context (e.g., Denmark and Germany). The informal Rescoop.eu network sought to balance these divergent views into a constructive critique that avoided undermining market principles. For example, when preparing a common response to a draft EU energy directive, a Rescoop leader commented to his colleagues:

Even if I personally share the indignation, we must be able to use a more refined language if we want to get our point across. (CALL5, 2011)

Through raising awareness of the problems described above and advocating for greater organizational diversity in RE production and supply that took into account community and environmental concerns, the informal Rescoop.eu network went beyond organization-level field analyses and built a common narrative to create field-level receptivity to institutional pluralism in order to accommodate the new hybrid organizational form. Our informants talked about how Rescoop.eu enabled them to analyze field-level challenges and opportunities, feel empowered that the network represented EU citizens, and produce a shared EU-level narrative in ways that would have been impossible for individual organizations to achieve:

In the first meetings of Rescoop.eu we’ve had discussions with members spread throughout Europe and together we’ve developed and shared an in-depth firsthand knowledge of the issues involved. Armed with that crucial knowledge Rescoop.eu can transform our little voices into a big voice that can really be heard in the European energy debate. (Interviewee 18, CitGR1)

In contrast to what could be achieved by organizations acting alone, the network drew on the diverse views and collective skills of network members to carve out symbolic space, both cognitively and morally, in which the new hybrid organizational form could flourish.

**2. Collectively codifying the new hybrid organizational form (2012-2014)**

As it started the Rescoop20-20-20 project (2012) and got legally registered (2013), the network activities shifted to collectively codifying the meaning and characteristics of the new hybrid organizational form. With the knowledge (cognitive legitimacy) and experience (pragmatic legitimacy) of the founding members from different countries, Rescoop.eu created a forum for experimentation to bring the values and practices from different organizational forms into a unified new hybrid that was anchored into the cooperative organizational form.

*Grafting to assemble a new hybrid organizational form*

Taking stock of the organizational forms and business models developed by pioneer members, Rescoop.eu network framed Rescoops as a new hybrid organizational form in which commercial, community and environmental goals could be integrated. To achieve this combination of goals, the network helped members to anchor the Rescoop organizational form in the cooperative principles, onto which additional characteristics were grafted from other extant organizational forms. Although not all community RE groups were formally registered as cooperatives, especially the smaller community groups, the pioneer members emphasized the cooperative form would as the common and distinctive identity that all community-based RE groups should endorse:

[Rescoops] bring new business models to the energy market. Rescoops want to consume less energy and produce renewable energy. That’s a completely different business model than the traditional one. (REPORT16)

Fifteen years ago we didn't know the cooperative principles. We applied them, not by chance but neither consciously or systematically. Today they form the basis of our federation. (MEETING6, 2013)

Regarding the RE dimension, by 2013 the ‘RES’ (RE sources) abbreviation was well established in national and EU policy energy debates. When formalizing, the network associated ‘RES’ with the ‘coop’ abbreviation to form Rescoop as a powerful symbolic step to both acknowledge the anchoring cooperative principles and endorse the trans-European language specific to the RE field. A logo that included the different RE sources, and several documents on technical and environmental issues, were made available to Rescoop.eu members to facilitate compliance with RE field requirements and audience expectations.

As many Rescoop founders we’ve developed technical skills concerning wind turbines and one aspect of Rescoop.eu’s mission is to advance technological innovations and their implementation among renewable energy projects of any type. (Interviewee 17, RescoopUK2)

The network also emphasized the consistency between the cooperative principles and the environmental and community concerns grafted onto the cooperative form:

It’s difficult to convince people to invest in RE and other environmentally meaningful projects. But this is what cooperatives can best do. And the cooperative is the most suited form to have the people involved. (Interviewee 23, CoopnetUK)

*Conciliating and formalizing rules and practices*

To advance the understanding of the Rescoop organizational form, Rescoop.eu codified the rules and practices described above into membership standards (Rescoop.eu Charter of Principles, RESCOOPDOC4) and best practices (RESCOOPDOC5). In doing so Rescoop.eu both laid out the barriers to becoming a Rescoop and shared success stories:

We are gathering all the examples, we are providing inputs to make it more general, to make it more theoretical, to organize seminars and provide brochures to explain the Rescoop model. (Interviewee 1, Rescoop.eu)

The network founders, all pioneers within the RE industry, helped new members from different countries to integrate the economic, community and environmental building blocks of the Rescoop organizational form. The cooperative principles provided ex-post cognitive rationalization of community groups’ grassroots practices and helped to build a shared identity between Rescoop.eu members which transcended country-level differences.

The formal Rescoop.eu network was also active in helping members to adopt appropriate RE technology and adapted the language and symbols displayed by members to meet audience expectations, especially at the EU level. Finally, collective action enabled members to legitimize their business activity as pragmatically meaningful and innovative:

We’ve also had to work with all the members on the economic aspects to make room for our new business model, and through the cooperative form we can say that we’ve managed this relatively well. (Interviewee 2, former RescoopB1 representative, currently Rescoop.eu manager)

By collectively codifying a new hybrid organizational form that enabled the simultaneous pursuit of economic, community and environmental goals, and by helping community groups to endorse and achieve this novel combination of goals, Rescoop.eu worked far beyond the capabilities of individual organizations to reinforce the cognitive and pragmatic legitimation of the Rescoop form by both potential adopters and field gatekeepers. This enabled the network to take advantage of the field-level receptivity to institutional pluralism that it had contributed to building.

**3. Consolidating legitimation towards plural audiences (2015-2016)**

The third role theorized from our data corresponds to a phase in which Rescoop.eu gained federative capacity and mandate to act on behalf of its members. Until then, the directors of the network represented the interests of individual members and had joined forces to promote their model. As a federative network, Rescoop.eu sought to actively engage with different audiences to advance the recognition of the Rescoop form. These audiences went beyond field gatekeepers and potential new form adopters already targeted in the previous phases, and included new form supporters (environmental and community groups) and even competitors (businesses) that could be turned into allies. To do so, the network amalgamated the contacts of members and used them to further gain moral and pragmatic legitimacy beyond what could be achieved by individual organizations.

*Moral advocacy*

To gain more active endorsement from public authorities and allies such as the cooperative and environmental movements, and to motivate adoption of the Rescoop organizational form by community groups, the network based its communications on the appropriateness of the cooperative form for protecting common goods. This was advanced as a morally superior course of action when compared with the private appropriation of common goods denunciated earlier. And Rescoops were framed as the most appropriate organizational form to enhance such community appropriation and empowerment.

Rescoops bring the common goods back to the community by explicitly choosing for direct co-ownership, shared decision-making power, shared profit distribution and -where possible- access to the produced energy for members. (REPORT12).

Moral advocacy was also built by connecting the Rescoop form with supporters of the broader sustainability transition agenda. Extending the vision of individual organizations who were often focused on a solo energy project, the network managers highlighted the Rescoop form as a major actor in the sustainability transition that was better able than commercial companies to involve communities in this transition:

We need a global transition from a production-driven system owned by international power giants using […] fossil or nuclear power, to a human economy with local actors that do not seek to maximize profits and engage consumers as responsible citizens. (CONF4, 2015)

*Pragmatic advocacy*

Rescoop.eu also advocated that the Rescoop organizational form was better suited to improving community acceptance of local RE production facilities and increasing community access to green and affordable energy. The first argument was particularly targeted towards energy corporations who were struggling to have RE facilities (typically windfarms) accepted by local communities, and public authorities facing protests by citizens. The network emphasized the excellent Rescoop acceptance by local communities to encourage energy corporations to work with them and public authorities to support the inclusion of Rescoops in RE support schemes:

With their projects, REScoop members secure economic benefits in their local community. The notion of ownership strengthens the ties and the responsibility of the local community towards the project’s success. (RESCOOPDOC23)

The second argument on access to green and affordable energy was directed towards Rescoop supporters in the environmental movement, public authorities, and communities themselves so as to encourage them to create a Rescoop.

If you have community-based renewable energy, it means that you know it's safe and it's clean. (Interviewee 22, expert, Netherlands)

In collecting evidence of, and advocating for, these practical benefits, the network went beyond the promotion of any individual ‘success story’ to institutionalize the Rescoop organizational form as commercially, socially and environmentally robust.

*Amalgamating members’ connections with audiences*

To communicate the moral and pragmatic superiority of Rescoops towards plural audiences, the network representatives used the connections already established by country-level members and amalgamated them into a set of broader, EU-level connections. The amalgamated members’ connections with audiences were employed to lobby the EC, create alliances with befriended networks such as Cooperatives Europe and environmental NGOs, and collaborate with corporate networks. The EU-level connections were especially visible in invitations to Rescoop.eu to collaborate on projects, e.g., the *WISE Power* project developed by the EWEA and the *PV Financing* project of the German Solar Industry Association (BSW Solar). In both these projects, Rescoop.eu was invited to participate because the Rescoop form was understood by partners to be particularly well suited to ‘have an impact on empowering the local communities and enhancing social engagement’ (WISE Power project description). In another funded project, *Community Power*, relationships were built with Friends of the Earth Europe (a European NGO). Finally, during the annual ‘European Sustainable Energy Week’ (EUSEW), the best practice contest organized by the EU, the network selected and successfully showcased exemplary Rescoop practices (e.g. citizen funding), thereby attracting field-level recognition.

The network thus consolidated the national-level advocacy efforts to legitimize Rescoops as an institutionalized transnational organizational form. There is much evidence that this work was highly valued by members:

Making our model accepted requires a lot of time and attention - and I fear that most of our organizations are not willing or cannot afford to pay or free someone to fight this battle. But together through the federation we are stronger and we are more visible to find allies. Basically, this is the reason why we wanted a federation. (Interviewee 14, RescoopS1).

**Discussion and contributions**

In this section we situate the findings and explain the contributions to the extant literatures on organizational hybridity and collective institutional work through inter-organizational networks. First, we explain the work to help institutionalize the Rescoop form by documenting how the legitimacy challenges inherent in organizational hybridity can be overcome through specific institutionalization roles. Second, we theorize the mediating functions that enable inter-organizational networks to perform these roles. Third, in doing so, we highlight the symbiotic process through which the institutionalization of a new hybrid organizational form and the formalization of the network progress hand-in-hand.

*Organizational hybridity*

While previous research on hybrid organizations has investigated their emergence (Dufays & Huybrechts, 2016) and organization-level strategies to internally manage hybridity (Battilana et al., 2015; Jay, 2013), our study shifts the focus towards examining how new hybrid organizational forms are institutionalized. In the theory section, we highlighted three legitimacy challenges related to organizational hybridity: categorical confusion, perceived paradoxes, and legitimation across multiple audiences. Our findings suggest that these challenges can be overcome and even transformed into opportunities for institutionalization. First, building field-level receptivity to institutional pluralism may enable the new hybrid form proponent (in this case the network) to discourage audience categorical confusion. We suggest that institutionalizing the new hybrid form as a complement to enrich the extant institutional landscape towards higher pluralism (Kraatz & Block, 2008) yields less opposition than radical institutional change. Indeed, building field-level receptivity seeks to complement, not undermine, the dominant logic, with the help of alternative narratives (environmental and community concerns). Hence, the networks’ efforts advance a more pluralistic institutional landscape that supports rather than threatens organizational hybridity.

Second, our work extends previous research showing how paradoxes related to hybridity can be managed at the organizational level (Battilana et al., 2015; Jay, 2013) by documenting how they can also be overcome collectively in the institutionalization process (York et al., 2016). To do so, we demonstrate the relevance of using an anchor organizational form (Perkmann & Spicer, 2014; Xu et al., 2014), in this case the cooperative, onto which elements from other forms are grafted. Using an extant experienced organizational form that has proven its capacity to overcome internal conflict (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014) responds to the new form’s initial pragmatic legitimacy deficit. It also makes it easier to build a common identity among members (Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014) and to communicate it to plural audiences (Nelson et al., 2016)

Finally, our findings show how the challenge of legitimizing a new hybrid organizational form across multiple audiences may be overcome by collectively consolidating a broad array of alliances, and attendant (pragmatic and moral) arguments that resonate with each audience’s own expectations. In doing so, our research extends the ‘selective coupling’ strategy identified at the organizational level by Pache and Santos (2013) towards collective institutionalization work. More broadly, our research shifts the focus away from hybrid organizations responding to institutional pluralism as an exogenous field-level situation (Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014; Pache & Santos, 2013), towards pro-actively fostering such pluralism with the view of advancing their own organizational form (York et al., 2016).

*Inter-organizational networks*

A second contribution arises from isolating the specific roles of emerging networks in helping to institutionalize new hybrid organizational forms, in contrast with previous studies focusing on individual organizations (Tracey et al., 2011) or central field-level actors (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006). Regarding individual organizations, the analysis documents ‘the difficulty of doing [institutional work] while at the same time tending to technical issues’, which ‘might explain why the institutionalization of new kinds of organizations […] is a rare occurrence’ (David et al., 2013, p.373). This challenge is even more pressing given the initial legitimacy deficits inherent in organizational hybridity (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Tracey et al., 2011).

Our study finds that inter-organizational networks accomplish more than pooling financial resources from members (Baraldi et al., 2012) and collectively constructing member identity (Greenwood et al., 2002). First, they foster reflexivity among their members, which has been noted to be an important stimulus for institutional change processes (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Tost, 2011). Our study shows how reflexivity is collectively created and subsequently used to build an institutional pluralism narrative that cognitively and morally appeals to field gatekeepers (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005). As a result of their mediation and reflexivity-raising work, we suggest that networks are well equipped to engender a more subtle approach to problematization and contestation (Greenwood et al., 2002) in which more radical institutional change views (Rao et al., 2000) are softened in favor of pragmatic realism to carve out space for the new organizational form in a broadened, and receptive, institutional field.

When collectively codifying the new hybrid organizational form, the network facilitates the compilation of a repertoire of rules and practices derived from the experiences of early adopters (Schneiberg, 2013) and mediate the conciliation between them. The network is thus well placed to create a blueprint for organizational hybridity (Doherty et al., 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014) that can signal the new form’s integrity to field gatekeepers and ease its adoption by entrepreneurs (in this case local communities).

Finally, to position the new hybrid organizational form as a remedy to perceived logic narrowness at the field-level, we propose that a network is well equipped to develop moral and pragmatic arguments and selectively use them when allying with an increasingly broad array of audiences. Central here is to show how the achievement of multiple goals within a single organizational form is both sustainable (Battilana & Dorado, 2010) and relevant with regard to these audiences’ own goals.

*New hybrid form institutionalization and network formalization*

Third, our analysis of institutionalization by an emerging network portrays a different picture than the accounts of established networks taking advantage of their central position to institutionalize a new organizational form (Esparza et al., 2014; Greenwood et al., 2002; Toubiana et al., forthcoming). When the new organizational form originates from practice and a network is subsequently created to institutionalize this new organizational form, the network has to build its own legitimacy (Human & Provan, 2000) in order to gradually pool resources and speak and act on behalf of its members. The formalization of an inter-organizational network symbiotically progresses as it performs the required roles to assemble and communicate ‘a credible collective account or rationale explaining what the organization is doing and why’ (Suchman, 1995, p. 575). As the network formalizes and mobilizes its members, our findings also show how its institutionalization efforts target a growing array of audiences, from field gatekeepers in the early phase to potential adopters in the second phase and ultimately also new form supporters and competitors in the last phase. Based on our findings, we propose a process model (see Figure 2) highlighting, for each role, the formalization phase of the network, the types of legitimacy involved and the main targeted audiences.

***INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE***

We suggest that collective reflexivity to advance field-level institutional pluralism involves securing moral and cognitive legitimacy from field gatekeepers and can be successfully built by informal networks, when committed members are few (Brass et al., 2004). Even as an informal and relatively marginal institutional actor (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), the network uses collective reflexivity to sensitize field gatekeepers about the shortcomings of dominant arrangements and the relevance of a more pluralistic organizational landscape.

When formalized, the network complements cognitive with pragmatic legitimacy work by teaching new form adopters, as well as field gatekeepers, about the characteristics and advantages of the new hybrid organizational form. This type of institutional work is necessary when membership boundaries need to be established for both internal and external audiences, and higher formalization is required (Montgomery & Oliver, 2007).

Finally, amalgamating members’ connections with field-level actors to secure moral and pragmatic legitimacy from increasingly diversified field-level audiences, including also new form supporters and competitors (in this case energy corporations), can only be achieved by mandating a federated network to act on members’ behalf (Toubiana et al., forthcoming). Armed with arguments on moral appropriateness and practical benefits selectively targeted towards different audiences, the hybrid organizational form can be framed as structurally legitimate, i.e., the ‘right organization for the job’ (Suchman, 1995, p. 575).

**Conclusion**

The research explored how emerging networks contribute to institutionalizing new hybrid organizational forms. The framework we advance theorizes hybrid organizational form institutionalization as a process that successively involves building field-level receptivity to institutional pluralism, collectively codifying the new hybrid organizational form and consolidating legitimation towards plural audiences. Our study suggests that the initial legitimacy deficits inherent in organizational hybridity can be overcome, and even transformed into an institutionalization opportunity, through the actions of an inter-organizational network. To do so, we described how the collective resources, skills and influence developed over time by an emerging network were employed to institutionalize a new hybrid organizational form. Our contributions elaborate both the complexities and opportunities of institutionalizing hybrid organizational forms, the roles and specific added-value of networks, and the symbiosis between organizational form institutionalization and network formalization.

Several suggestions for future research arise from the research. First, the research focused on the discursive roles of networks to support the institutionalization of a hybrid organizational form. Future research to broaden our understanding of the collective institutional work performed by networks might explore, for example, field-configuring events (Lampel & Meyer, 2008) or technology mediated work (Perkmann & Spicer, 2014) around the new organizational form. Second, the study analyses the institutionalization processes from the perspective of the collective institutional actor. Further research could explore the cognitive processes by which different types of audiences make sense of organizational hybridity and arrive at legitimacy judgments (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Tost, 2011). This would advance our understanding of how, along with the network’s actions, the legitimacy deficits inherent in organizational hybridity evolve (or not) in the eyes of audiences, how stable this process is, and hence how, in the long run, new hybrid organizational forms effectively take root (or not) in a given field.

The empirical data was collected for the institutionalization of a new hybrid form anchored in an extant organizational vehicle (the cooperative) onto which elements from other extant organizational forms are grafted. This process involves opportunities and challenges (e.g. being tied to perceptions of the anchor form) that may influence the institutionalization process. Future research could examine how different anchor forms influence institutionalization. Moreover, as hybridity is not an ‘either-or’ state, different hybridity levels could be contrasted in terms of institutionalization (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Lee & Pennings, 2002), which would highlight different trajectories and supporting actors.

Finally, the trans-European network provided a novel setting to conduct research across national borders. However, the research did not examine specific regional differences in terms of the extent of receptivity to institutional pluralism. Further research to examine institutionalization processes and trajectories in more and less favorable national contexts would advance knowledge about how networks exploit contextual drivers and overcome institutional resistance. Finally, it would be relevant to examine and compare the capacity of different types of networks, including both more informal and more established ones, to contribute to hybrid organizational form institutionalization.

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