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Héloïse Berkowitz, Nils Brunsson, Michael Grothe-Hammer, Mikaela Sundberg, Bertrand Valiorgue

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Héloïse Berkowitz[1]*, Nils Brunsson[2,4], Michael Grothe-Hammer[5], Mikaela Sundberg[3,4], and Bertrand Valiorgue[6]

[1]CNRS, Lest, Aix Marseille University, Aix en Provence, France
[2]Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden
[3]Department of Sociology, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden
[4]Stockholm Centre for Organizational Research (Score), Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden
[5]Department of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway
[6]emlyon business school, Écully, France

Abstract

In this introduction, we reemphasize some key parts of meta-organization theory and their implications for understanding meta-organizations and meta-organizing processes. We clarify what meta-organizations are and what they are not and then analyze their key purposes and activities. We then present the papers of the special issue and discuss venues for future research. Although many key contributions have been made to meta-organization theory and research, there are many more things to investigate before we know as much about meta-organizations as we know about individual-based organizations.

Keywords: *Meta-organization; Meta-organizing; Partial organization; Organization theory*

Meta-organizations – organizations with other organizations as their members – are ubiquitous. Among the more than 10,000 international meta-organizations, there are not only such well-known ones as the European Union (EU), the World Trade Organization, Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), and the International Air Transport Association but also such lesser-known organizations as Birdlife International, the Global Business Initiative, and the Forest Stewardship Council. Most international nongovernmental organizations and all international government organizations are meta-organizations. In addition, there are many more national meta-organizations; many of which are, in turn, members of international or transnational ones. Meta-organizations attend to such matters as lobbying, pooling resources, negotiating prices, diffusing global standards, or tackling social and environmental problems. Much global governance is conducted by and through meta-organizations. In fact, it is impossible to understand contemporary globalization processes fully without understanding the functioning of meta-organizations.

Since Ahrne and Brunsson's (2005, 2008) pioneer work on a theory of meta-organizations, recent calls have invited organization scholars to investigate this salient phenomenon (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Spillman, 2018). Growing scholarly efforts have explored various aspects of meta-organization, from its formation and evolution (Cropper & Bor, 2018; Valente & Oliver, 2018) to its role in standardizing global value chains (Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019).

The term 'meta-organization' has been used for designating two different phenomena – a divergent terminology that can be found mainly in the management and organization literature. Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008) defined meta-organizations as formal organizations organizing other formal organizations. What has been called the 'European School' (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018) has emphasized the decided dimension of meta-organization: the existence of an umbrella collective with some degree of actorhood, featuring a distinctive level of at least some interconnected decision-making (see Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022).

In 2012, Gulati et al., apparently unaware of previous theory and research, began using the term 'meta-organization' for a different phenomenon – the formation of a system-level goal among various organizations and individuals – without implying a joint decision capability or a formal organizational structure. This move led to an unfortunate confusion, as the same term came to be used for two different concepts.

***Corresponding author:** Héloïse Berkowitz, Heloise.berkowitz@univ-amu.fr

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The Gulati et al.' (2012) term was later applied to such phenomena as entrepreneurial ecosystems, platform ecosystems, and other emergent interorganizational spaces (Kretschmer et al., 2022; Roundy & Bayer, 2019) – phenomena lacking collective actorhood at the meta level. But by broadening the definition of meta-organization to encompass informal, loosely connected, interorganizational arrangements, one precisely misses the significant characteristics and implications of meta-organization as initially defined by Ahrne and Brunsson. These characteristics and implications include the competition between meta-organizations and member organizations for autonomy, authority, and identity (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008). These tensions result from member organizations releasing decision power to the meta-organization, while simultaneously expecting to retain their own decision power and organizationality. Indeed, meta-organizations constitute systems of systems of decisions, or put differently, decided orders of other decided orders (Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022).

We believe that there is a need for a bounded and precise concept of meta-organization that excludes many other forms of cooperation among organizations that need other equally bounded and precise concepts. Using the original definition allows for the circumscribing of a distinct phenomenon, thus granting the concept its analytical power.

In this introduction, we reemphasize some key parts of the original meta-organization theory and their implications for understanding decision-making and meta-organizing processes. We start by highlighting what meta-organizations are and what they are not and then analyze their key purposes and activities. We then present the findings from the papers of the special issue before discussing a few research venues.

What are meta-organizations?

The central idea of meta-organization theory is that organized collectives of organizations require specific conceptualization because they intrinsically differ from other forms or devices of collective action – those comprising individuals (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008) and those that are non-decided (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016). Three key features characterize meta-organization and distinguish it from such other forms of organizations as firms and public administration and from other forms of social order, such as networks and institutions. Meta-organization are (1) decided social orders; (2) organizing organizations rather than individuals; and (3) associative, in that they constitute a voluntary association of members.

Meta-organizations constitute a *decided social order* rather than an emergent one, as in the case of networks and institutions. Meta-organizations result from fundamental decisions (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022); they have decided on a name and an address, which organizations shall be members and how decisions shall be made. As formal organizations, they are expected to make further fundamental decisions on rules, monitoring, and sanctions (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016).

Not only do meta-organizations constitute a decided social order, but also *every member is a decided social order*. Each member possesses its own identity, resources, strategic agenda, and norms. It decides on its own membership, mechanisms of hierarchy or central power, sets of rules, and systems of monitoring and sanctions. This reality may create autonomy and identity tensions between members and their meta-organization, and they may even end up competing with one another (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018).

Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) have further argued that most meta-organizations have the form of associations. Each member can choose to join or leave the meta-organization. And unlike the merging of organizations, the creation of a meta-organization implies the addition of a new organization without the elimination of any others. This construction results in an embedding of systems of decisions and a layering of organization (Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022). Decidability – the ability of members to make collective decisions about changing an existing social order that falls under the mandate of the meta-organization – is also rendered particularly complex.

As these three characteristics attest to, the concept of meta-organization describes a broad diversity of organizations, and other concepts have often been used to analyze them. Meta-organizations with firms as members have been called business associations (Marques, 2017) or trade associations (Spillman, 2018), and interorganizational networks (Fortwengel & Jackson, 2016) or network administrative organizations (Braun, 2018; Saz-Carranza et al., 2016).

But there is an increasing number of studies that are using meta-organization theory for understanding these organizations – Roux and Lecocq (2022) for business cooperatives, for instance, or Megali (2022) and Laviolette et al. (2022) (this issue), Berkowitz et al. (2017), Spillman (2018), or Dumez and Renou (2020) for industry associations. Some studies of social movements have used the meta-organization concept (Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015; Laurent et al., 2020). Higher-education meta-organizations and science meta-organizations with universities, business schools, or research centers as their members (Bor, 2014; Brankovic, 2018; Kerwer, 2013; Zapp et al., 2020) constitute other fields of study. A further field of application is international relations or international governance (Ahrne, Brunsson & Kerwer, 2016; Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022; Garaudel, 2020; Kerwer, 2013). Governmental meta-organizations organize states, but they can also organize other public administrations, like municipalities and cities (Berkowitz, 2018; Zyzak & Jacobsen, 2019). Those interested in the organization of sports cannot ignore such meta-organizations as FIFA, UEFA, or the World Anti-Doping Agency (Malcourant

et al., 2015). Studies of so-called multi-stakeholder initiatives include research into the relatively low but increasing number of meta-organizations that are based on heterogenous members with different interests, rather than members with common interests (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; de Bakker et al., 2019; Tamm Hallström & Boström, 2010; Valente & Oliver, 2018). Most heterogeneous meta-organizations group civil-society organizations, scientific organizations, business actors, and public organizations (Berkowitz et al., 2020).

… And what are they not?

As we have demonstrated, meta-organization can apply to many different forms of collective action among organizations that fulfill different purposes. When does it not apply?

Being an organization means that there is some level of decision-making regarding the organizational elements of membership, rules, hierarchy, monitoring, and sanctions (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Therefore, the meta-organization concept cannot be applied to forms of interorganizational relations that are not organized to some extent. For example, so-called clusters cannot qualify as meta-organizations if there is no organization at the meta level (Lupova-Henry et al., 2021). Similarly, business ecosystems can be studied as meta-organizations only if and when there is a system of decisions encompassing members of the ecosystem. This does not mean, however, that there cannot be an ongoing meta-organizing process that is an attempt to create an organized actor at a meta-level (see Saniossian et al., 2022, in this issue).

Although it is true that organizations and a fortiori meta-organizations are always represented by individuals, organizational membership is a sine qua non of meta-organizations. The fact that there are organizations having a mixed membership of both individuals and organizations raises specific issues that need to be conceptualized as such.

The study of meta-organizations presents a challenge to organizational scholars. Overwhelmingly, theories of organization have been based on studies of organizations with individuals as their members. Such theories may well explain some aspects of meta-organizations, but used alone, they would miss other salient aspects. There has been a tendency for traditional theories to influence empirical studies and theoretical analyses, to the extent that the particular aspects of meta-organizations are overlooked. Meta-organizations have sometimes been analyzed as if they were individual-based organizations, and scholars have viewed the secretariat as the individual-based organization and the meta-organization members as some form of environment (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Bencherki & Snack, 2016; Marcussen, 2005; Saz-Carranza et al., 2016). We believe that such approaches run the risk of missing key aspects of the settings studied.

Varieties of meta-organizations

Until now, much research in the area has been devoted to understanding the differences between meta-organizations and individual-based organizations. These differences can be derived from the differences between individuals and formal organizations. Admittedly, these two categories share some characteristics. They can both own property and be parties in legal affairs. They are both perceived as social actors and as entities possessing sovereignty, with their own identity and goals and with clear boundaries. In many other ways, they are different, however (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008).

Organizations are highly differentiated entities with different legal forms, purposes, and memberships, and they come in a wide variety of sizes. This differentiation makes it easy to identify which organizations are potential members of a given meta-organization. And the meta-organizations may initiate the creation of some of its own members. For instance, international meta-organizations sometimes initiate the founding of national ones, designed to become fitting members of their meta-organization.

Most organizations have economic resources far beyond the cost of founding and participating in a meta-organization. This situation makes it relatively easy to create a meta-organization and recruit members (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016). On the other hand, because the members usually have much greater resources than their meta-organization, the meta-organization becomes highly dependent on its members, especially its rich or powerful members.

Meta-organizations have difficulty in solving internal conflicts for at least three reasons. (1) One cannot persuade organizations; only their representatives can be persuaded, but the persuaded representatives may have difficulty persuading people in their own organization. (2) Voting is not necessarily legitimate because the idea in individual-based associations of 'one member, one vote' is far from obvious among highly differentiated organizations. (3) Expelling cumbersome members runs the risk of threatening the relevance of the meta-organization.

In contrast to individual-based organizations, there is a fundamental similarity between the organization and the member, as both are organizations. In order to be seen as relevant, all organizations need some degree of autonomy, some ability to make their own decisions. This need creates keen competition for autonomy and raises tensions between the member and its meta-organization. This competition, combined with the problems of conflict resolution, can render meta-organizations weak or slow and can threaten their stability.

Differences between individual-based organizations and meta-organizations are but one key area for research, however. There is need for more research on the differences among meta-organizations and the causes and effects of those differences.

Meta-organizations vary in membership. They organize states, firms, or associations. A special case of the latter is those meta-organizations, often international ones, that organize other meta-organizations: 'meta-meta-organizations'. Although most meta-organizations have relatively few members (typically tens or hundreds), they do vary greatly in size of membership. And although most meta-organizations recruit members that share salient similarities and are expected to represent similar interests, multi-stakeholder meta-organizations recruit members with different and even antagonistic interests (Berkowitz et al., 2017). One should expect differences in the workings of meta-organizations with different memberships.

Meta-organizations vary in how rich they are and how many employees they have. Many of them are completely dependent on membership fees, whereas others, such as most international sports organizations, have incomes of their own – sometimes extremely large incomes. Some meta-organizations have no employees; rather they let their members take turns handling the administration. Others have secretariats that may reach thousands of employees. These differences are likely to affect the balance between the meta-organization and its members. One can also ask what factors are important for creating these differences among meta-organizations.

Meta-organizations have different – or different combinations of – purposes and may serve at least four main purposes (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). (1) They are established in order to facilitate interactions among members – interactions that may consist of collaboration among the members, as in the Universal Post Union or competition among them, as in sports organizations. (2) They may aim at facilitating joint action toward their environment, as defense alliances do; or they may issue statements in the public debate, as many civil society organizations or business associations do. (See also Rajwani et al., 2015; Spillman, 2018) (3) Meta-organizations deal with the identity and status of their members by enabling members to create a collective identity – preferably a high-status identity – as some meta-organizations for universities do (Hedmo, 2012), or by creating a status order among its members, as sports associations do. (4) Yet another possible purpose of meta-organizations is the handling of common tasks that the members have outsourced to the meta-organization, not because they have to be done collectively, but because they can be more effectively handled by the meta-organization. These four purposes translate into four common and crucial activities in meta-organizations: (1) governance or comanagement activities, (2) advocacy activities, (3) boundary and category work, and (4) service provision – each of which we examine next.

Four activities of meta-organizations

The purpose of facilitating interaction among members generally leads to *governance or comanagement activities*. Meta-organizations contribute to regulating, controlling, and managing behaviors. They may, indeed, act as what has been called regulatory intermediaries – organizations that contribute to defining, diffusing, translating, and adapting national or international rules (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Jordana, 2017), thereby shaping laws and markets (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Peixoto & Temmes, 2019). Multi-stakeholder meta-organizations are increasingly conducting this task of regulation, especially in a perspective of socio-ecological transition (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019). But as relatively weak organizations, meta-organizations are often primarily producers of standards or soft law for their own members (Lupova-Henry et al., 2021; Rasche et al., 2013; Vifell & Thedvall, 2012). In the extreme case of the EU (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Kerwer, 2013), however, meta-organizations can even organize and regulate states by producing large-scale international or transnational regulatory frameworks, which may have repercussions beyond their own organizational boundaries. Non-members can even be forced to adopt similar rules to those of the member states if they want to undertake transactions with the EU (Kerwer, 2013).

Voluntary membership and legitimacy of self-regulation may make comanagement through meta-organizations quite effective (Vifell & Thedvall, 2012). This is probably why several scholars have recently investigated the role of meta-organizations in tackling grand challenges (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022; Chaudhury et al., 2016; Fernandes & Lopes, 2022). Meta-organizations facilitate comanagement activities, such as the joint control of the use of collective resources. This governance dimension of meta-organizations connects with the literature on the governance of commons – natural or intellectual resources that are held in common by society, such as the air, a forest, or heritage sites (Corazza et al., 2021; Ostrom, 1990). Indeed, several characteristics of meta-organization – joint decision-making, horizontal participation, and self-regulation, for example – render them particularly suited for managing common resources (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Corazza et al., 2021). Some of Ostrom's (1990) principles for individuals managing common resources largely echo the definitions and features of meta-organizations as governance devices, even though the actors in our case are organizations. Specifically, the reality of meta-organizations is often reflected in what Ostrom identified as defining clear group boundaries, matching the governance model to local needs and conditions, ensuring participation of stakeholders in rule making, ensuring that community members' rights are respected by external authorities, self-monitoring members' behavior, having a system of graduated sanctions for rule violation by members, creating a conflict-resolution system, and ensuring multi-level responsibility for governing the common resource.

The purpose of joint action often leads meta-organizations to involve themselves in *advocacy – acting as representatives for their*

members and defending their interests (Lawton et al., 2018; Marques, 2017; Rajwani et al., 2015). Meta-organizations can negotiate on prices, contracts, and regulations, for example (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018). In their advocacy role, meta-organizations often rely on outreach – on gently raising awareness or nudging actors on certain issues (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Valente & Oliver, 2018). Outreach can also be the main or only strategy for attracting new members to meta-organizations.

The purpose of creating identity and status orders often leads to what can be called *boundary and category work*. Meta-organizations set organizational boundaries for and around their members regarding identity, categories, and resources. As Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) have argued, meta-organizations establish a collective identity or family name, although they may face obstacles in developing these 'meta-level' identities (Laviolette et al., 2022; Patvardhan et al., 2015). Many meta-organizations seek to construct, adapt, and reinforce their collective identity. This activity has been specifically documented in business associations (see Spillman, 2012), but it also occurs in sports organizations, like FIFA, or standards organizations, like ISO (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Maintaining the status of the meta-organization and its members sometimes requires that measures be taken against a black sheep – a member whose poor behavior is negatively affecting the whole group. By managing a collective reputation, meta-organizations also protect collective interests and identities (Berkowitz et al., 2017; King et al., 2002; see also Laviolette et al., 2022, in this issue).

In relation to the creation of a collective identity, meta-organizations conduct some form of category work. 'Categories represent a meaningful consensus about the features of some entities as shared by actors grouped together as an audience' (Durand & Paolella, 2013, p. 1100). Meta-organizations in the form of trade associations, cooperatives, and multi-stakeholder groups are all involved to a greater or lesser extent in defining categories for their members – categories of products, for instance. They may even be involved in organizing whole new markets before their legalization by governments, as Berkowitz and Souchaud (2019) showed in relation to the so-called sharing economy.

Meta-organizations also provide *service production* for their members (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018), particularly the production of information (Bradley, 1965). This information takes various forms, ranging from statistics on specific industries to collective research. Sometimes the information is sold to members, in order to generate revenues for the meta-organization – through training, for instance. But services to members may also include more concrete benefits, like producing specific joint resources or making them available – infrastructures, for example, or auction houses in the case of business cooperatives, producer organizations, and other agricultural meta-organizations (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Lerman & Parliament, 1990; Trebbin, 2014). Meta-organizations may also facilitate knowledge sharing and capacity building among members through workshops, events, and the identification and diffusion of best practices (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Vifell & Thedvall, 2012). Meta-organizations that focus on providing services tend to be more homogeneous and highly dependent on their members, who will act as clients (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018). This dependency may also be affected by the place and role of a secretariat and by the dynamics of hierarchy and prerogatives. (see Roux & Lecocq, 2022, in this issue.)

In what follows, we provide a short description of the remaining papers in this special issue. They analyze meta-organizations that differ in membership, purpose, and primary activities.

Dynamics of meta-organizing: Articles in the special issue

The four articles in this special issue have a common denominator: dealing with the dynamics of meta-organizing, creating a meta-organization of coordinating members or joint activities, and making joint decisions at the meta-organizational level, all of which have implications for efficiency, legitimacy, or market organization. These papers have in common their examination of meta-organizations as moving entities conducting sets of activities that may affect the collective over time.

We first present the paper that examines the role of a meta-organization in market organization and the effects of the delegation of power to one member organization. The second paper deals with the process of creating multi-stakeholder meta-organizations, and the third with collective identity formation and evolution at the meta-organization level. The fourth and last paper addresses the growing power of a secretariat, which contributes to the efficiency of the meta-organization.

Delegation of meta-organizational power to a few members

In this first article, Théophile Megali (2022) analyzes digital platforms as members of meta-organizations. He discusses how a meta-organization of digital platforms in the field of online advertising was created with the use of a digital tool, in order to deal with a global problem for the industry: ad-blocking preventing advertisements from appearing on a web page. The meta-organization established and implemented industrial standards. What is original, however, is the meta-organization's delegation of internal self-regulatory functions to some of its members, thereby contributing to the partial organization of the industry. Rather than the meta-organization conducting monitoring and sanctioning itself (see, for instance, Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019), some of its members act as regulatory intermediaries. The practice was facilitated by the presence of one of the main organizations, Google, ensuring rule

enforcement, which allowed Google to strengthen itself in the market. Because the standard became dominant, this noteworthy development had implications for nonmembers as well. The author explains this phenomenon by referring to the collective construction of the standard through the meta-organization, which not only created legitimacy but also raised antitrust concerns. In addition, the meta-organization protected its members from conflicts with external stakeholders, thereby ensuring the meta-organization's long-term durability.

The creation of multi-stakeholder meta-organizations

In the second paper, Saniossian et al. (2022) report on a study of meta-organization formation, or what the authors call meta-organizations 'in the making'. They discuss the specifics of creating multi-stakeholder meta-organizations, or those with a heterogeneous membership. Through the study of four cases, the authors propose a feedback loop: a three-stage creation process based on members' logics of action, evolving organizational boundaries and organizing practices. They describe in fine detail the emergence of shared goals among member organizations. One stage is 'individual emergence', in which some leading organizations seek to enroll member organizations in establishing a meta-organization. In the next stage, 'divided groups' (depending on the legal forms of members) develop group activities needed to clarify collective action goals and processes of organization. In the last stage, all members are integrated in a collective group with a specific strategy and governance model at the meta level, finally creating the multi-stakeholder meta-organization as an actor. It is noteworthy that the research shows a key motivation for establishing a multi-stakeholder meta-organization: creating sustainable social activities, per se – not merely for the benefit of member organizations – thus connecting with phenomena discussed in the social and solidarity economy literature.

Collective identity formation

In the third paper, Laviolette et al. (2022) analyze collective identity formation. Using an in-depth case study of a meta-organization of cider producers in Quebec, the authors reveal the complex processes at the heart of a meta-organization's collective identity. They show that a meta-organization must continuously strike a balance between aligning and differentiating members, which it can do through membership definition and product categorization activities. These inward processes are complemented by outward processes. The meta-organization also needs to demonstrate the legitimacy of its collective identity toward state or public authorities, which it can do by assembling the legitimacy of its leading members and by positioning itself to address expectations. This study contributes to recent research on the collective identity of meta-organizations viewed as cycles of identity work and play (Webb, 2017).

Secretariats and issues of efficiency and control over members

In the fourth and last paper, Roux and Lecocq (2022) analyze how a secretariat may become a 'necessary evil': a powerful force that controls the members rather than the other way round but, at the same time, contributes to the meta-organization's effectiveness. The authors demonstrate the value of analyzing three levels of action in business cooperatives: the level of member organizations, the level of the meta-organization, and the level of the secretariat. Although the literature has hinted at the structural weakness of meta-organizations (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Kerwer, 2013), this case study reveals that meta-organizational effectiveness may depend on the ability of the meta-organization to grant prerogatives to its secretariat. The more prerogatives the secretariat gained, the more effective the meta-organization became in achieving its members' collective purpose, and the more the members regretted losing control to the meta-organization. In empowering its secretariat, the meta-organization became stronger, more able to sustain itself in the long term, and more likely to achieve its purpose, while protecting its members.

Future research on the dynamics of meta-organizations

The papers in this special issue contribute to a more processual understanding of meta-organizations. They also illustrate the diversity of meta-organizations: industry associations, multi-stakeholder associations, and business cooperatives with strong secretariats. The papers actualize at least three salient issues for further research.

Do the differences among meta-organizations affect other factors?

It would be valuable to analyze systematically whether differences, varieties of, and variations in meta-organization affect creation processes, collective identity activities, the strengthening of certain members or of a secretariat, and effects of the meta-organization outside of its boundaries on such external factors as markets. From that perspective, moving beyond single case studies would be necessary in order to build a more general understanding of meta-organizations. More multiple case studies and cross-country or cross-sector comparisons may offer rich insights into the diversity of meta-organizations, and the ways in which this diversity affects meta-organizing dynamics and processes.

Are there other viable options to the meta-organization?

The papers in this issue, along with much of the other meta-organization research, seem to take meta-organization for granted. Meta-organization studies are often based upon the implicit assumption that there would be no alternative available to member organizations but to collaborate in the form of a meta-organization. Yet, the question remains: why does a meta-organization exist in this situation? We still understand relatively little about the reasons for establishing meta-organizations or why organizations decide to participate in an existing meta-organization rather than collaborating in other forms. To our knowledge, no study has systematically examined the comparative advantage of meta-organizations, particularly multi-stakeholder meta-organizations over other arrangements. We lack an in-depth understanding of the various options and the benefits of and motivations for establishing one or the other arrangement, depending on the context and objectives of the collective. From that perspective, it may also prove valuable to analyze whether the contexts of action – geopolitical setting, sectors and industries, and geographical territories in which actors are embedded – affect the form of the collective and the conditions under which it becomes a meta-organization.

How do meta-organizations gain power relative to their members and their environment?

Many meta-organizations are effective in creating and sustaining global order (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2013), and multi-stakeholder meta-organizations may even be a powerful instrument in tackling contemporary grand challenges (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Chaudhury et al., 2016). Other meta-organizations started with great ambitions but remain relatively insignificant. Comparisons between strong and weak meta-organizations could provide insights into the factors and processes that lead to strength or weakness.

To these three questions for future research, we would like to add a few more possible areas of inquiry: (1) the meta-organization as a social order, (2) layering and hypocrisy in meta-organizations, and (3) responsibility and actorhood in meta-organizations.

The conceptualization of meta-organization as a decided social order has critical implications

It invites organizational scholars to attend to the emergent or decided ordering of collective action (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011); to the evolution from emergent to decided (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Megali, 2022); and to the definition, conditions, and drivers of the institutionalization of meta-organization – a largely neglected question. This dimension of the definition also calls attention not only to the intertwining of social orders in meta-organizations (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022; Laamanen et al., 2020) and to its consequences for meta-organizational processes and activities, but also to decidability, actorhood, and other aspects of organizationality (Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022).

The specific membership of meta-organizations invites examination of the existing or potential consequences of layering of organizations. Some of the tensions between members and their meta-organizations around identity, autonomy, resources, and goals have been addressed in this special issue and in other studies (Laviolette et al., 2022; Roux & Lecocq, 2022), but more needs to be understood, particularly in relation to layering (Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022). The talk, decisions, and actions of organizations may be systematically inconsistent as a result of the inconsistent demands of their specific environments, implying organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson, 2007, Ch.7). Recent literature has focused on a particular form of hypocrisy, namely greenwashing, resulting from the pressure on firms to take environmental action and yet be profitable (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). We still understand relatively little about these inconsistencies specific to meta-organizations. The complexity of layering in meta-organizations may create multi-level inconsistencies, whereby the meta-organization makes decisions that are inconsistent with member actions. Do meta-organizations facilitate hypocrisy?

The nature of meta-organization also raises specific issues of responsibility and actorhood

This important issue has been somewhat overlooked in this special issue. It remains unclear whether and how a meta-organization can exist without achieving actorhood (Grothe-Hammer, 2019). A meta-organization actorhood means that the meta-organization is able to make collective decisions, is recognized and addressable as a collective actor, and ultimately takes responsibility for decisions for them (Berkowitz et al., 2020). Responsibility and actorhood in meta-organizations can be conceived as deeply interconnected. More organization sometimes leads to the concentration of responsibility, sometimes to its dilution (Brunsson et al., 2022). What happens in meta-organization and the layering of organization? How do meta-organizations compare with other forms of interactions among organizations in terms of responsibility concentration or dilution? In certain settings and under certain conditions, the creation of a meta-organization may dilute or confuse responsibility (Carmagnac et al., 2022). Indeed, the establishing of a meta-organization may create what we could call smokescreen effects – mechanisms to hide from negative actions – which would explain why member organizations, especially firms, so easily create or join meta-organizations. Few works have examined this darker side of meta-organizations (Carmagnac et al., 2022).

In conclusion, although many key contributions have been made to the theory of meta-organization, the research is still in its infancy. There are many more things to investigate before we know as much about meta-organizations as we know about individual-based organizations. Meta-organizations offer a promising field of research for innovative scholars who are interested in new discoveries and new theoretical development.

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