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Meta-organization as partial organization: An integrated framework of organizationality and decisionality

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Abstract

Meta-organizations often lack the monitoring and sanctioning power associated with the organization of individuals, and thus they can be considered to be partially organized. Little research investigates the extent to which meta-organizations, in general, and clusters in particular, *are* organized. The current meta-organization literature thus perpetuates an implicit assumption that all meta-organizations are equally incomplete. We challenge this assumption and theorize variations in meta-organizations' organizational structures. To do so, we transpose the partial organization concept and specify at the meta-organization level: 1) degrees of structural organizationality, as measured by the selective combination of membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctioning, and 2) degrees of what we call *decisionality*, that is, the extent to which each organizational component is itself the object of decisions. By combining structural organizationality and decisionality, we identify four main meta-organizing dynamic profiles: thin partial meta-organization, thin meta-organizing, thick partial meta-organizing, and thick meta-organizing. We contribute to current efforts to advance meta-organization theory and provide an analytical tool to investigate this phenomenon while providing a better understanding of clusters as social actors.

Keywords: Meta-organization; partial organization; organizationality; decisionality; decision; partial meta-organizing

INTRODUCTION

To what extent are meta-organizations, that is, organizations of organizations, themselves organizations? And on which theoretical bases can we study and compare meta-organizations? In this methodological piece, we develop an analytical framework to account for the structural variations of meta-organizations in terms of membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016). In so doing, we enable a systemic comparison of clusters as forms of more or less partially organized meta-organizations.

Clusters constitute one possible empirical form of meta-organizations, those characterized by a spatial or territorial anchorage (Gadille et al., 2013; Lupova-Henry & Dotti, 2022). However, meta-organizations cover many other social phenomena of organized collective action among organizations, from multi-partner alliances to trade associations, cooperatives, or R&D consortia (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018). While each phenomenon has been the object of extensive research in its own field of literature, little work has closely examined how these diverse forms can be compared from a meta-organization perspective, and where clusters stand in a broad spectrum of meta-organizations. Understanding this is essential to recognize the possibility of organized clusters driving sustainability transformations (Berkowitz & Gadille, 2022 this volume; Lupova-Henry et al., 2021).

Drawing on recent studies addressing the concept of partial organization (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Grothe-Hammer, 2019b; Laamanen et al., 2019; Nielsen, 2018), this paper develops a profiling methodology to study, compare, and visualize the selective combination of organizational components in meta-organizations or *structural organizational* (Grothe-Hammer et al., 2021).

We break down each component (membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions) into operationalizable dimensions that can be studied in meta-organizations, including clusters. We use structural organizationality in combination with the concept of decisionality, that is, the degree to which each element is itself organized and the object of decisions. We distinguish this dimension of organizationality from *decidability*, a dimension of social orders describing the ability of actors to reach collective decisions (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2021).

We show that membership can involve a greater or lesser degree of decisionality depending on its formality, the auto-determination of the meta-organization, the categories of membership, the ability of members to decide on their own involvement, and the variety of their contributions. The decisionality of a hierarchy depends on whether (and if so, how) authority is vested in the meta-organization, which is conceptualized as cooperation and coordination power. Decisionality on rules, monitoring, and sanction can be assessed based on affordances, processuality, and uses. On this basis, we further highlight the potential thinness or thickness of (partial) meta-organization and the dynamics of meta-organizing.

This work moves beyond the few assumptions about organizationality in meta-organizations and the emphasis on membership as their structuring feature (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). We argue that variations in meta-organizations arise because of both the number and type of components they mobilize (organizationality) and also the decisions they make about those components (decisionality). This approach has various implications for organization studies.

WHAT DOES PARTIAL ORGANIZATION MEAN AT THE META-ORGANIZATION LEVEL?

Meta-organizations are organizations that are constituted of other organizations. Organization is here understood as a decided order, that is, a system of decisions on

organizational components, membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). When organizations use only some of these components, this is referred to as partial organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl (2016) argue that partial organization can appear under different constellations of organizational components, which should be analysed. This partial organization also connects with the concept of organizationality, that is, organizational dimensions of organizations (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Grothe-Hammer, 2019b). Grothe-Hammer et al. (2021) use structural organizationality to distinguish the selective combination of organizational components from entitative organizationality, that is, actorhood and collective identity at the level of the entity. Here, we focus strictly on structural organizationality or partial organization of meta-organizations.

By analogy, meta-organizations are a decided order that may also selectively embrace membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016). As noted by Kerwer, this is to be expected: *'[Meta-organizations] making full use of these organizational elements challenge the autonomy of its member organizations. As a consequence, [meta-organizations] only draw on a reduced repertoire of organizing'* (Kerwer, 2013, p. 43). This also means that meta-organizations differ in their organizationality (Lupova-Henry et al., 2021).

We draw on the partial organization literature to unpack structural organizationality among meta-organizations and degrees of decisionality. We define decisionality as the extent to which decisions are made about organizational elements. In the cluster context, we study the possible organizational elements that structure this territorialized form of meta-organization. We also choose to set aside the temporal dimension of meta-organizing, that is, the potential dynamics between *partialness* and *completeness* that have been studied at the level of organizations (Dobusch &

Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn & Dobusch, 2019). Temporality remains to be examined at the level of meta-organizations. Developing a framework to study the partial organization of meta-organizations constitutes the first step in this endeavour.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FRAMEWORK

To develop our framework, we analyse each organizational component for meta-organizations, that is membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions, and operationalize their degree of decisionality. To illustrate this, we use two examples of meta-organizations studied in the literature. The first case is the Global Business Initiative (GBI), a global group of businesses collaborating on human rights issues (Berkowitz et al., 2017). The second case we draw on to illustrate our approach is Cluster B, an Australian machine manufacturing cooperative from the Hunter region in New South Wales (Lupova-Henry et al., 2021). These cases illustrate differences in terms of their partiality, since GBI has low organizationality and decisionality, while Cluster B has high organizationality and decisionality. We now proceed to analyse each of the organizational elements separately. For each element, we present theoretical elements we use to analyse their decisionality.

Membership

Membership refers to who belongs and contributes to the meta-organization (Grothe-Hammer, 2019b; Nielsen, 2018). Meta-organization theory considers members of the meta-organization to be those organizations that have been accepted as members. Membership is usually voluntary and rests on the initiative of member organizations, though the meta-organization itself can have the decision power over accepting members or accepting applicants for membership. Whether the meta-organization has a formalized

membership and whether it holds decision power over membership are considered two different aspects of the organizational element *membership*.

While most members have decision rights in the organization (also referred to as full members), membership can vary depending on participants' positions or roles, and particularly depending on the extent of the decision rights of the participants (see the discussion on stratification by Gulati, Puranam, et al., 2012).

The boundary of the meta-organization – that between those who belong and those who do not – can be established by defining types of members and their rights and responsibilities. Meta-organizations' websites often contain lists of members. Membership in meta-organizations may contribute to set boundaries of competition and meta-organizations may even organize competition in markets (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). However, the means of deciding who can join can differ significantly from one meta-organization to the next. Consider a small meta-organization with five members acting as a closed club, i.e. having a strict membership boundary. When an organization would like to join such meta-organization, existing members can be expected to be involved in deciding whether to admit the new member. In contrast, for a large meta-organization, such as the UN Global Compact with more than 10,000 members, the situation is likely to be different. Members may have been involved in drafting criteria under which an organization can become a member, but members are not always involved in evaluating and accepting new members. That decision might well be handled by an administrative unit rather than by the collective membership.

While some meta-organizations rule that members must be officially accepted before they can participate in the activity of the meta-organization, that is not always the case: Cropper and Bor (2018) describe the case of a healthcare partnership where non-members participate and contribute to the meta-organization, and in a way still belong to

the meta-organization. Although it is clear that accepted and paying members govern the meta-organization, other organizations may provide it with important resources and may influence the programme of work but may not be willing to join the meta-organization formally. Consequently, membership – in terms of owning or governing the meta-organization – is often more restricted, but membership in terms of participation or contribution might be less clearly defined and thus blurs its boundaries (Grothe-Hammer, 2019a).

Table 1 presents the results of decisionality for membership for both GBI and Cluster B.

Table 1: Comparison of decisionality degree for membership

	Cluster B	GBI
Is there a membership (a list of members)?	1	1
Does the meta-organization determine who can become a member?	1	1
Do members decide on candidates' entry or other members' exit?	1	0
Are there different, predetermined categories of membership?	1	0
Are contributions to the meta-organization and participation in its activity restricted to members only?	1	0
Membership decisionality degree	5	2

Cluster B grew from an initial 14 members to currently approximately 150 members. Cluster B has a list of members, and the meta-organization determines its membership boundary, the organization, for example, shifted from an emphasis on the quantity of members to one of quality by excluding several members. In addition, the meta-organization has different types of member categories and provides a different form of value to each (ibid). As illustrated in Table 1, Cluster B has an overall membership decisionality score of five. The GBI is an association that seeks to train its members on human rights issues. It counts 18 major companies across multiple sectors, including Total and Coca-Cola, as members. Members meet at workshops where they learn from the experience of other sectors in dealing with human rights issues at different levels of

the firm, for example, in the context of procurement or the safety of exploitation sites. Publicly available information shows that the GBI has a list of members, and its administration decides who can join. There is a single category of member. However, the workshops mentioned above can involve guest contributors and are thus not exclusively for the members of the meta-organization. In addition, members do not hold a decision power over candidate members' entry or incumbent members' exit from the meta-organization. The GBI therefore has an overall score of two for membership decisionality.

Hierarchy

In the context of a meta-organization, hierarchy describes how authority is vested. 'Extensive delegation of significant decisions' is difficult in meta-organizations, as it threatens their autonomy, and thereby the future of member organizations, as Ahrne, Brunsson and Kerwer note (2016, p. 9). Nevertheless, authority to make decisions, however restricted, is vested in the meta-organization to ensure that it can make at least some decisions.

We conceptually distinguish authority in meta-organizations as cooperation or coordination authority (Bor, 2014; Gulati, Wohlgezogen, et al., 2012). A cooperation orientation involves governance questions about the 'joint pursuit of agreed-on goal(s) in a manner corresponding to a shared understanding about contributions and payoffs' (Gulati, Wohlgezogen, et al., 2012 p. 533). A meta-organization can vest cooperation authority in the collective of full members, a governance board, or a general assembly meeting where representatives of all full members can make collective decisions (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). However, when the meta-organization demands frequent oversight or representation, the members may choose to vest their cooperation authority in a smaller group of representatives of member organizations for a particular period (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979).

Coordination is concerned with ‘the deliberate and orderly alignment or adjustment of partners’ actions to achieve jointly determined goals’ (Gulati, Wohlgezogen, et al., 2012, p. 537). A meta-organization can vest coordination authority in one single group or different groups (for various coordination purposes) and split further into sub-groups that form a hierarchy of coordination decisions (Albers et al., 2016). Having these different groups may collect representatives of member organizations but can also centralise authority to a selection of representatives of members, or to personnel hired by the meta-organization, so forming what Provan and Kenis (2008) describe as a network administrative organization. Table 2 illustrates the variations in hierarchical decisionality in Cluster B and GBI.

Table 2: Comparison of the degree of hierarchical decisionality

	Cluster B	GBI
Is there a decision from members to vest authority in the meta-organization?	1	1
Is cooperation authority vested in a collective of members?	1	1
Is cooperation authority further vested in a (or various) smaller internal group(s)?	1	0
Is coordination authority vested in committees/ workgroups (and possible sub-groups)?	0	1
Is coordination authority vested in offices (in an administrative organization)?	1	1
Hierarchy decisionality degree	4	4

In Cluster B, members decide to delegate authority to the meta-organization, and specifically to a secretariate reporting to the board of the cluster. Cooperation authority is thus vested in a smaller group, and other members do not partake; the power has thus become centralized. There is no mention of any working groups or committees, but the secretariate does the coordination work. In GBI, the members are expected to work together to determine the meta-organization’s strategic priorities, learning focus areas, and opportunities for engagement with external stakeholders. The cooperation decisions are thus made by the collective of members. Members also invest in coordination through

participation in bi-annual peer learning meetings. Alongside the involvement of the members, a small steering group undertakes the administrative organization of GBI and has the authority to make some coordination decisions.

Both examples represent meta-organizations with a relatively high degree of hierarchical decisionality. Indeed, in both cases, authority in the meta-organization is vested in several devices to pursue collective action, although the forms of collective action vary considerably across the case examples.

Rules

Rules refer to formalized parameters that frame collective actions and members' behaviour (Grothe-Hammer, 2019b; Nielsen, 2018). Rules are determined by generalized expectations of behaviour and duties, input (contributions), output (results), procedure, or process. An organization may have no defined rules (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015), a very limited number of set rules (Laamanen et al., 2019), or several sets of rules, as is common in formal organizations. The more areas are covered by rules, the more organized (and thus the more predictable) the organization will be.

Although rules can remain verbal, they are often written down. Written rules have organizing strength because they can be checked, recalled, more easily communicated, and therefore have greater decisionality. The agreed rules can thus find their way into meeting memos and various other communications. To ensure rules are easily accessible, however, they are often collected into bodies of rules or collated into rulebooks (which may be incorporated into contracts and other agreements, for example). The more accessible the ruleset is, the greater the chance the rules agreed upon have an organizing effect, and therefore the greater the decisionality of that ruleset. Research addressing self-regulation and soft law suggests that in the context of meta-organizations, self-regulation has a stronger effect than regulation from outside (Ostrom, 1990) because the member

organizations themselves define the rules and are therefore more likely to follow them (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Brunsson et al., 2012; King & Lenox, 2000). Accordingly, the more rules used to regulate member behaviour are self-imposed, or voluntarily agreed, the more impactful they should be.

Table 3: Comparison of decisionality degree for rules

	Cluster B	GBI
Are there decisions made about action and behavioural parameters?	1	1
Are the decided rules written down?	1	0
Are the decided rules collected in ‘rule books’ or charters?	1	0
Are there different sets of rules for different substantial areas?	0	0
Do members voluntarily comply with decided rules?	0	1
Rules decisionality degree	3	2

While in the two cases, at least some decisions are made about rules within the meta-organization, Cluster B and GBI differ notably in the specification and implementation of those rules (see Table 3). Examples of GBI setting a minimum level of rule adherence include the statements, ‘*Companies commit to the vision and spirit of GBI*’ and ‘*We work to shape practice, inspire commitment and build capability to implement respect for human rights, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. We are the only business organisation to focus entirely on human rights*’ (GBI website). However, the specifics of those rules are not detailed and written down. In contrast with GBI, the practice of Cluster B is such that it has clear rules and criteria, specified in its constitution or its charter. There do not seem to be different sets of rules for different areas. The voluntary nature of adherence to decisions may be questioned owing to the rather centralized power, monitoring, and sanction regime, which forces the members to follow the rules under threat of exclusion.

Monitoring

Monitoring revolves around observing and collecting, organizing and sharing information about behaviour, efforts, or results. The organizing effect of monitoring depends on several dimensions. One issue of importance is the perceived trustworthiness of the information. Information trustworthiness relates to how the information is gathered, what is known about it, and who collates it. Data gathered systematically, possibly through an automated process and in a transparent process, can be considered more trustworthy than data gathered less systematically and transparently. Another important element is who collects and analyses the information, that is, whether the organization that is conducting the monitoring is a trusted actor or not.

Another issue of importance is the channel for information sharing. Information accumulated through monitoring information may be shared via a variety of channels, such as reports, ratings, or rankings. The more actionable, accessible, understandable, clear, and trustworthy is the information available, the more helpful it is for decision-makers (within or outside the organization). Rankings and labels can simplify information and thus serve as structuring tools in situations where those who need to make decisions lack the time or the capability to understand the complexity of their choices (Osterloh & Frey, 2015; Sauder & Espeland, 2009).

The steering effect of monitoring is stronger when monitoring information is available to a wide range of individuals, groups, or organizations, making them capable of making decisions based on such information (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Kerwer, 2013). As member organizations are affected by the results of monitoring decisions, Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl (2016, p. 97) expect that there are 'limitations to the amount of monitoring members are willing to accept'. However, external pressures may convince meta-organization members to monitor their

behaviour, efforts, or results and make monitoring information more openly available. Meta-organizations may also aim to influence their wider environment, which can mean that members and non-members are monitored.

Table 4: Comparison of decisionality degree for monitoring

	Cluster B	GBI
Is there a decision by the meta-organization to monitor behaviour, efforts, or results?	1	0
Are non-members (also) monitored?	0	0
Is the process of gathering observations considered trustworthy by decision-makers?	1	0
Is the reporting of the findings accessible, easily understandable?	0	0
Is the reporting made available outside the meta-organization?	0	0
Monitoring decisionality degree	2	0

As Table 4 synthesizes, in Cluster B the board monitors member behaviour and may also act based on the reported behaviour of members, but monitoring is restricted to members. The process is not very clear and seems to be somewhat random. Similarly, reporting does not seem systemic nor public outside the meta-organization. The GBI, in contrast has made no decision at all about monitoring.

Sanctioning

Applying sanction is defined as a decision to try to influence the behaviour of an individual or group. It is controversially defined by Ahrne and Brunsson as capable of encompassing both punishment and reward (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011).. Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) note that decisions by meta-organizations to sanction are complicated, and decisions on negative sanctions are likely to be particularly difficult. Decisions on sanctions, however, may accumulate over time lending the application of sanction cumulative organizing strength.

The difficulty arises first because members need to agree on sanctions, which would necessarily affect those members too. Second, if we accept the proposition by

Ahrne and Brunsson that sanctions encompass incentives, meta-organizations often do not have sufficient financial resources to provide significant rewards to members. Sanctions can also take the form of identity enhancing benefits, such as being allowed to utilize a symbol of certification. Third, meta-organizations depend on their members for their existence, which makes it more difficult to punish members without punishing the collective, including the meta-organization.

Ahrne, Brunsson and Seidl (2016) do however note that sanctions may emerge slowly over a longer period. Sanctioning decisionality may depend on how systematic (and thus predictable) the sanction is, and how much it affects the member organization's functioning.

First, awards distributed to individual member organizations or their representatives can positively affect the member organization concerned. The individual nature of these sanctions, however, means they have only a limited organizing effect. Second, punishments doled out to individual member organizations have a potentially stronger organizing effect. As Ostrom (1990) pointed out in the context of self-steering systems, the circumstances and history of the issue will often be considered in the decision, and these sanctioning decisions are often graduated, with the stakes or consequences increasing each time. Such negative sanctions mainly affect those who do not follow agreed rules or regulations and are not always systematic. Consequently, some organizations that are important to the meta-organization may never be punished for disobeying the rules. Third, with more systematic positive sanctions, for instance, being rewarded for meeting a clear set of criteria, the organizing power becomes far stronger.

There are two difficulties with this type of sanctioning. First, these negative sanctions are only more strongly organizing when the consequence is severe enough for those who break them to be concerned. Second, if the sanction is too severe, the

organization may consider terminating its membership of the meta-organization. The most strongly organizing situation is that in which sanctioning decisions are made on a wide range of themes, combining positive and negative sanctions. To make these decisions easier, we expect that the more systematic and frequent sanctioning decisions are, the more those decisions become routine and rule-based, whereupon administration bodies assume a more central role than governance bodies in the decision-making.

Table 5: Comparison of decisionality degree for sanction

	Cluster B	GBI
Are there decisions made about sanctions (positive or negative)?	1	0
Are non-members (also) sanctioned?	0	0
Is there a defined set of criteria and a process for sanctioning?	1	0
Have negative sanctions actually been enforced?	1	0
Are sanctions used consistently?	0	0
Sanction decisionality degree	3	0

As synthesized in Table 5, as with the question of monitoring, GBI has made no decision about sanctioning its members. This is in line with the lack of written rules or collective goals that would drive collective action. In contrast, Cluster B sanctions members, including excluding members from the meta-organization, based on the criteria and process set in the charter. Whether these sanctions are used consistently remains unclear from the data presented.

AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK: STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATIONALITY AND DECISIONALITY

This paper provides an integrated framework assessing various criteria of decisionality developed to analyse structural organizational in meta-organizations. Membership can present a higher or lesser degree of decisionality depending on whether there is a formal membership, on the ability of the meta-organization to decide about membership (or its auto-determination), on the categories of membership, on the ability of members to decide

on their own involvement, and the variety of contributions. Similarly, decisionality can be placed higher or lower in the hierarchy depending on whether and how authority is vested in the meta-organization and how cooperation and coordination authority is organized. Decisionality on rules, monitoring, and sanctions can be assessed based on their affordances, processuality, and uses. The more criteria are met, the greater the degree of decisionality each component achieves. These criteria are not exhaustive and more could be added.

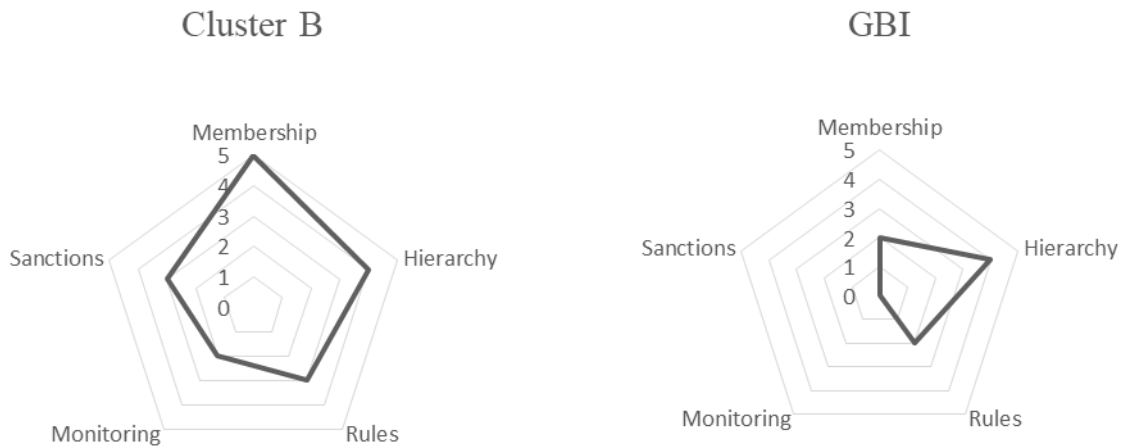
By combining degrees of decisionality for each organizational element, we propose an integrative framework to assess and compare forms of meta-organizations. Doing so makes it possible to compute an average decisionality that accounts for decisionality across all components. Table 6 illustrates this framework and the average decisionality for Cluster B and GBI.

Table 6: Decisionality by organizational element and on average

	Cluster B	GBI
Membership decisionality	5	2
Hierarchy decisionality	4	4
Rules decisionality	3	2
Monitoring decisionality	2	0
Sanctions decisionality	3	0
Average decisionality	3,4	1.6

Radar charts can illustrate the variations of structural organizationality. This visualization helps us outline varying meta-organizational profiles, see Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Radar charts of meta-organization structural organizational and decisionality profiles

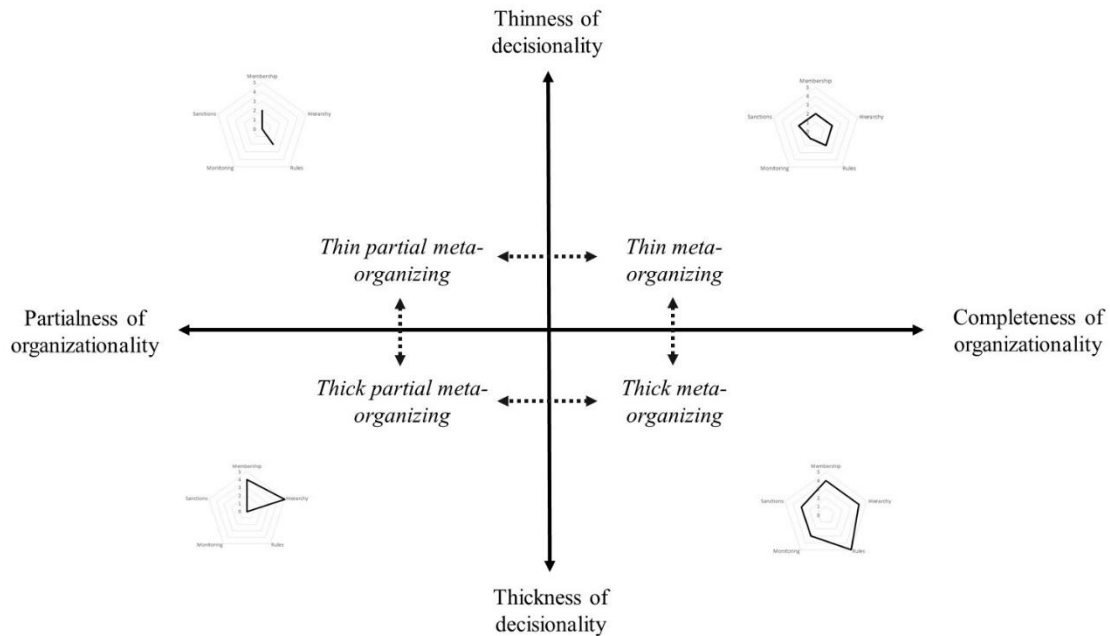


Mapping decisionality thus precisely achieves what Ahrne, Brunsson and Seidl (2016) called for, an understanding of the constellations of organizational elements, as well as what Ahrne and Brunsson (2005) called for, an understanding of the variety of meta-organization.

We can further conceptualize these constellations depending on structural organizational and decisionality (see Figure 2). We propose to conceptualize structures with lesser organizational, that is, those combining two or fewer organizational elements, as *partial meta-organizing structures*, while those with greater organizational, that is, many organizational elements (three or more), can be conceptualized simply as *meta-organizing structures*. We further conceptualize those with greater decisionality as *thick* and those with lesser decisionality as *thin* (with similar thresholds as above). By combining organizational with decisionality, we obtain four categories: 1) thin partial meta-organizing with lesser decisionality and lesser organizational; 2) thin meta-organizing with lesser decisionality but greater organizational; 3) thick partial meta-organizing with lesser organizational and greater decisionality; and 4) thick meta-organizing, with greater decisionality and greater

organizationality. It can be argued that clusters, and other collectives of organizations in general, will align more closely with one of these four profiles.

Figure 2: Meta-organizing: potential transformations in thinness/thickness and partialness/completeness



The thin partial meta-organizing profile encompasses weak meta-organizational structures, where only one or two elements are the object of decisions and that feature less decisionality. Membership plays a specific role in meta-organization since it is the basis of both its definition and nature. Therefore, we can assume that thin partial meta-organizing encompasses associations that at least decide upon membership but impose very few restrictions. An example might be open clubs, a meta-organization where organizations can join if they wish to, without other members deciding upon this. As a meta-organization, GBI would fall into this category as it decides only on membership, hierarchy, and rules, and has an overall weak average decisionality (of 1.6, see Table 7). Another example of an open club type may be Fab City, an association of municipalities that undertakes little decision-making. Fab City provides a forum to cities that have a shared interest in sustainability transition and the use of *fab labs* (see, Capdevila & Zarlenga, 2015).

The thin meta-organizing category includes meta-organizational structures where many organizational elements are decided upon, but with little decisionality. In other words, a thin meta-organizing organization embraces many organizational elements, from membership to hierarchy, but little collective decisions are made on those elements, whether because members are reluctant to increase decisionality or because the meta-organization is too new to have implemented decision-making processes.

The thick partial meta-organizing category would encompass a meta-organization where a few organizational elements are decided upon (e.g., membership and hierarchy alone) but where those elements are highly structured, that is, they have a higher degree of decisionality. This could be the case in meta-organizations that serve the collective strategies of their members but do not seek to shape their members' behaviour or actions. Some trade associations could serve as examples in that such meta-organizations may have an organizing effect on their members, but that effect is strictly limited to certain dimensions.

The final category, thick meta-organizing, in contrast, describes meta-organizations which combine many organizational elements, with greater decisionality, as is the case with Cluster B. Here the meta-organization moves towards a state of completeness of organization, having many decisions made on all elements of organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Schoeneborn & Dobusch, 2019) (see Figure 2). We can assume that such meta-organizations have strong organizing effects on both their members and their environments, such as markets and regulators.

While this study has not addressed evolution per se, we can provide a basis for understanding the transformation, stabilization, and destabilization processes of meta-organizing clusters and collective action among organizations in general. Figure 2 shows how meta-organizing can vary across two axes: from partial to complete in terms of

structural organizational; and from thinness to thickness in terms of decisionality. Meta-organizations are not fixed in one profile. Indeed, Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) argue that organizations and meta-organizations alike are constituted by decisions; yet decisions always remain provisional, they are attempts at agreement but they can always be questioned. Decisions therefore produce an irreducible uncertainty, that is, organization is always unstable and can destabilize further by new decisions (Brunsson & Jutterström, 2018). Figure 2 illustrates how destabilization can occur in meta-organizing, where a meta-organization moves from thick to thin, or the other way around. With this perspective, the stabilization and destabilization processes of meta-organizing occur when structural changes affect decisions. In other words, change in a meta-organizing profile results from change to the degree of structural organizational, that is, the presence or absence of decisions on membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, sanction, and changes in decisionality, that is, the extent to which those elements are the object of decisions.

DISCUSSION, THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The objective of the current research was to understand to what extent meta-organizations are themselves organized, and thus to respond to a repeated call to investigate variations in the organizational structure of such meta-organizations (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Spillman, 2018). Further, we sought to analyse if and how the multiplicity and interrelatedness of systems of decisions in meta-organizations affect the meta-organizing process. We contribute to the literature on meta-organizations and to the study of clusters by providing an integrated framework connecting organizational and decisionality. Based on the unpacking of structural organizational and decisionality, we propose four profiles: thin partial meta-organizing, thin meta-organizing, thick partial meta-organizing, and thick meta-organizing. This research

moves beyond the few predictions provided in the literature about the organization of meta-organizations. In particular, the current study challenges the implicit assumption that meta-organizations are all similarly organized with little hierarchy, monitoring, or sanction capability. Ahrne, Brunsson and Seidl (2016) pointed out that meta-organizations are generally reluctant to be fully organized. That reluctance manifests itself as the selective use of structural organizationality. But that reluctance may vary across arrangements; for instance, certain clusters use standards rather than binding rules, and they usually cannot monitor their members because those members want to retain their autonomy. However, some meta-organizations have more authority and sanctioning power than others. We also show that there can be significant variations not only in the uses of membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions but also in their decisionality, that is the extent to which these elements are the object of collective decisions.

We contribute to organization studies by operationalizing the concept of partial organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011, 2019), or structural organizationality (Grothe-Hammer et al 2021) at the meta-organization level. We provide the first integrative analytical framework allowing the study and systemic comparison of meta-organizations. By emphasizing the role of decisions in meta-organizations through the concept of decisionality, we extend recent efforts to restore decisions to the centre of organization studies (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2021; Grothe-Hammer et al., 2021). This has implications for the study of collective action in general, as it might finally permit accounting for and understanding the differences between (meta/partial)organizations, networks, and institutions (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). It is to be expected that networks and institutions will exhibit lesser decisionality, with varying

degrees of organizationality. Exploring these variations would be crucial to understand processes of institutionalization of meta-organizations.

To further develop this theorizing, future research might use our framework to compare meta-organizations and then build on, strengthen, challenge, or refine the framework. It would be useful to study which drivers are more or less likely to trigger organizationality-decisionality dynamics. The fluidity in meta-organizing profiles could be affected by different variables, such as place, time, composition of membership, tension between autonomy and hierarchy (Kerwer, 2013), consistency of goals between the meta-organization and its members (Garaudel, 2020), or entitative organizationality such as collective identity, or (responsible) actorhood (Berkowitz & Gadille, 2022 this volume). Further, a fruitful avenue of investigation might be to connect organizationality and decisionality to the design of meta-organizations as actors contributing positively or negatively to the transition of our societies to sustainability (Bor & O'Shea, 2022 this volume). Lastly, temporality necessarily affects (partial) organizing and meta-organizing. Future research could focus on changes over time in organizationality and decisionality and highlight the resulting evolutionary trajectories of the stabilization, destabilization, and institutionalization of meta-organizations.

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Appendix A

Key criteria of the partial organization framework applied to a meta-organization (MO)

Membership	Hierarchy	Rules	Monitoring	Sanction
Is there a membership (a list of members)?	Is there a decision from members to vest authority in the MO?	Are there decisions made about action and/or behavioural parameters?	Is there a decision by the MO to monitor behaviour, efforts or results?	Are there decisions on sanctions (positive or negative)?
Does the MO decide who can become a member?	Is cooperation authority vested in a collective of members?	Are the decided rules written down?	Are non-members (also) monitored?	Are non-members (also) sanctioned?
Are there different, pre-determined categories of membership?	Is cooperation authority further vested in a or various smaller internal groups?	Are the decided rules collected in rule books or charters?	Is the process of gathering observations considered trustworthy by decision-makers?	Is there a defined set of criteria and a process for sanctioning?
Do members determine other members' access or exit?	Is coordination authority vested in committees/workgroups (and possible sub-groups)?	Are there different rulesets for different areas?	Is reporting of findings accessible and easily understandable?	Have negative sanctions been applied?
Are contributions to the MO and participation in activities restricted to members only?	Is coordination authority vested in offices (in an administrative organization)?	Do members voluntarily agree to follow decided rules?	Is the reporting made available outside the MO?	Are sanctions consistently applied?