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# CONDITIONS FOR A TRUSTWORTHY COMMITMENT: UNPACKING THE CONTENT OF THE PURPOSES OF PROFIT-WITH-PURPOSE CORPORATIONS

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## ABSTRACT)

In recent years, the concept purpose has emerged as a new craze in the business world, with stakeholders demanding that companies go beyond profit to address societal and environmental issues. This surge in interest is set against a backdrop of increasing public and academic scrutiny regarding the sincerity and impact of these corporate claims. In response to this phenomenon, our study proposes to delve into the content of corporate purpose with the aim of proposing a model that build on corporate purpose and Grand challenges literature.

Our analysis utilizes a panel of profit-with-purpose corporations, especially French *Sociétés à mission* to evaluate how their legal purposes, as stated in their articles of association, resonate with scholarly expectations and broader societal objectives. The results indicate a strong focus on broad responsibility issues and a unifying future vision, while revealing a lack of attention to environmental uncertainties and stakeholder interdependencies.

The paper contributes a novel framework for understanding the formulation of corporate purposes, proposing dimensions that could be used to assess their trustworthiness and alignment with grand societal challenges. We argue for the importance of credible purpose statements in fostering stakeholder trust and discuss the implications for governance and the dynamic nature of corporate purpose commitments. This work offers a foundational step towards a more

nuanced comprehension of the corporate role in a context of Grand challenges and suggests directions for future research in the governance of purpose.

**Keywords :** Purpose ; Profit-with-purpose Corporation ; Grand challenges

## **INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary ecological and social crises have led to ambiguous questioning of the role of corporations. On one hand, there is a shared belief that corporations must take on a more assertive role in addressing significant contemporary challenges, advocating for their capacities for design and action to be directed towards solving Grand challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015)). On the other, the increasingly frequent mentions of purpose washing reveal a climate of distrust among stakeholders, and the public in general, specifically towards corporations that claim to be drivers of these transformations by committing to social and environmental objectives in a more assertive manner than most (Kaplan, 2023).

In this context, the corporate purpose, also defined as "*the reason for which a business is created and exists, its meaning and directions*" (Hollensbe et al., 2014, p. 1228), is receiving considerable attention (See Zenger, 2023), to the point of being progressively seen as a "*new imperative in business*" (Gulati & Wohlgezogen, 2023). This resurgence is particularly occurring through law, by means of new legal forms known as profit-with-purpose corporations (Segrestin & Levillain, 2023). These allow willing companies to elevate their purpose to a binding and long-term commitment by incorporating it into their articles of association. Given the fact, that the purpose is also freely expressed, this also provides companies the opportunity to clarify the content of their promises and the scope of their commitment. Furthermore, these forms impose a governance of purpose which translates into an increased duty of accountability,

similar to financial objectives (Battilana et al., 2020). These forms are growing in popularity among companies, which in France, for instance, now counts more than 1,000 of these *Sociétés à mission*<sup>1</sup>.

While these legal innovations are quite recent, the concept of purpose itself refers to a long tradition of work in the strategic field, where the determinants and consequences related to the invocation of purpose for collective action have been thoroughly explored (George et al., 2023). The use or questioning of the relevance of goals in strategic episodes crucial to companies, for example, prior to redefining a strategic plan or in anticipation of a merger and acquisition for instance has, for instance, already been assessed (Bauer and Friest, 2023). Other studies have highlighted the difficulty of coexisting, or maintaining over time, a plurality of objectives without resulting in contradictory injunctions (See for instance Battilana et al., 2022) or compromises towards one or another of the goals. The literature is increasingly recognizing that multiple and often conflicting goals coexist in most organizations. Understanding how different goals relate to one another and become prioritized is therefore key (Aguilera et al., 2024).

In both instances, the purpose—whether perceived through a goal-based or duty-based approach (George et al., 2023)—is ultimately considered as a (pre)given element of the analysis. The research then focuses less on the content of the purpose itself than on clarifying the different facets of this broad concept (Besharov & Mitzinneck, 2023), its compatibility with a broader performance framework (Aguilera, 2023), or on the risk of disappointing constituencies with expectations that this statement suggests are out of step with operational reality, sometimes referred to as drift (Grimes et al., 2020; Henisz, 2023). However, little is currently known about the development of the stated purpose and the content of such a commitment. Even less is understood about how these profit-with-purpose corporations have

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.observatoiredessocietesamission.com/barometres-osam/sixieme-portrait-des-societes-a-mission/> (in French)

taken the opportunity to draft a purpose in their articles of association. It remains finally to explore the conditions of a commitment that promotes trust, that is, credibility with respect to those to whom or towards what the promises are expressed, and consistent with the general context in which this purpose operates. Therefore, this work proposes to further explore the content of the purposes of PPCs and the conditions of a trustworthy purpose in a context where companies are also traversed by Grand challenges.

To do this, this study first explores the literature in management sciences, striving to draw links between strategic and management research that address the question of trust in purpose and those concerning more specifically Grand challenges. This literature review allows us to develop a list of propositions regarding the few determinants of trust for a purpose. This work shows that a broad coverage of responsibility issues, managing interdependencies, exploring explorations, and drawing a desirable common future are all attributes that allow us to gauge the trustworthiness of a purpose expressed in the context of Grand challenges.

The study of the literature provides us with an analytical framework which we then use to dissect the content of purposes based on a panel of PPC cases, extracted from the French scope – *Société à mission*. This panel consists, on the one hand of early adopter of the *société à mission*, that is to say, those that adopted the legal form among the first after the promulgation of the law – and on the other hand, of all the *Société à mission* in a given sector of activity, and concerned in the front line by a grand challenge (namely the medico-social service sector). In this context, we analyze to what extent the purposes stated in the articles of association meet the concerns stated by the literature. This work highlights that a broad coverage of responsibility issues is a frequently encountered element in the purposes, alongside the evocation of a desirable and unifying future. On the other hand, the consideration of uncertainty in the

environment and the questions of the treatment of tensions and interdependencies is much less frequently discussed within purposes. Finally, this work allows us to start a discussion on the conditions for considering the mission as a tool for expressing credible promises with regard to the Grand challenges on the one hand, and to discuss the need for tools for the governance of such promises.

The research advances several contributions. The first concerns research efforts on the emerging forms of profit-with-purposes corporations. This work, by explaining more precisely the content of the commitment, allows us to follow more closely the deployment of these legal innovations for the responsible commitment of companies. It allows us to discuss the variety of forms of commitment (variety, contrasting cases) through the design of ad hoc observables. This work also allows us to discuss the works on trust purpose by trying to reveal the conditions of purpose-driven strategies that favor the trust among stakeholders.

This work, which is still in progress, already points to a number of possible avenues for future research. Firstly, by extending the analysis on the governance of the purpose, It might be worth exploring the link between the formulation of the mission and its control, by examining the role and expertise of the mission committee. In the same vein, given the contrasts highlighted in terms of the content of the purpose, it could be worth to the strength of a given formulation in a dynamic perspective, and how raise differentiated questions depending of the nature of the promises made.

## **Literature Review – Determinants of Trust for the Purpose**

While the concept of purpose is increasingly mobilized, both by research and practitioners, to make visible the ambition to pursue commercial strategies whose performance we refuse to reduce to the goal of profitability, it becomes, consequently, massively observed by a variety of stakeholders, internal as well as external, interested in probing the manner in which the plural objectives it designates, intersect or not with their own interests. In other words, the way in which companies intend to solve a problem that is within their field of interest. Under these conditions, the solidity of the purpose is very largely correlated with the trust granted to the content articulated in the said purpose (George et al., 2023). Moreover, the literature on purpose has already abundantly warned about the consequences and risks of mistrust that a corporate action, misaligned with the expectations raised by the image that the company tries to project (Grimes et al. 2020; Gulati & ... 2023), especially through its purpose. Sometimes qualified as drift, and defined in this context as a lasting and “perceived discontinuity between an organization’s actions and its identity—” (Grimes, Williams & Zhao, 2020:234), authors show that mistrust towards the purpose can be prejudicial, including for other dimensions of performance (Gartenberg, 2023). Thus, it remains to precisely define the conditions of trust, that is, what are the expectations in terms of content in the purpose that foster trust and what links this establishes with operational elements?

To do this, this literature review does not have the ambition to conduct a systematic and exhaustive analysis of the field, but it does intend to extract from a small number of recent works, the few determinants that seem important to consider for this purpose. These elements will be looked at in two directions. The first is how trust (trust) in the purpose is established to the extent that it is expressed within a framework of plural performance, with plural objectives, possibly sometimes in competition. The second is the way in which the context, that of the Grand challenges, invites companies to apprehend their responsible actions.

## **Building purpose trust within a myriad of organizational and societal outcomes**

What current academic renewal around purpose insists on is that this concept is multifaceted. This means that the content, i.e., what the promises cover, and to whom they are addressed, can radically change in nature and form from one company to another. Besharov and Mitzinneck (2023) have, moreover, well documented this situation by specifying several archetypal situations. For social enterprises, for example, the purpose is often understood as a taken for granted goal, which draws directly from a well-identified social issue and for which collective action is directed, at a local level, for example (Ebrahim et al., 2014). For others, the ambition is to make visible the objectives beyond profit in a purely commercial context (Battilana et al., 2017), others still, by evoking the purpose, aim to generate adherence to a project of massive transformation, a renewal of consumption or production modes in a given sector, sometimes qualified as systemic change (Henderson, 2021; Mair & Seelos, 2021), in a context of grand challenges. In other words, the purpose leaves the company free to choose the "causes" or problems it intends to particularly highlight. Also, given the great variety of issues that can be mentioned in the purpose, the stakeholders who are concerned by the said social, environmental, or scientific problems can legitimately give rise to expectations, hopes. It is the gap between these expectations and the concrete perception of what the company achieves that is an important source of mistrust (Grimes et al., 2018, 2020). Hopes dashed, in short. Also, the choice of a greater or lesser coverage of responsibility issues, that is, the way the content of the purpose is explicit, informs more precisely about how the company intends to apprehend specific grand challenges, and with what level of ambition, is an element that is determinant in qualifying its robustness because it gives clearer indications on how to appreciate the coherence of the efforts made for this purpose. This observation, that is, the freedom of choice of issues, and the consequences that this freedom generates, allows us to specify this first proposition.



**Proposition 1:** *The trustworthiness of a purpose can be assessed by the way it positions the organization within the variety of possible responsibility issues at stake, meaning the way it precisely explicits promises that the company intends to make, and to whom.*

The works on purpose have also particularly highlighted the difficulty of co-existing a purpose in an institutional, organizational, or even competitive environment that is characterized by a framework where performance is formed of multiple determinants. Also, many works indicate that the deviations, or behaviors perceived as not integrated, are the result of a compromise towards a competing objective to the purpose, profitability for example (Ebrahim et al., 2014). The corporate purpose would suffer from a handicap due to its status as a long-term oriented objective, that encompasses economic and non-economic (social) value extending beyond the corporation to the multiple stakeholders engaging with the corporation (Aguilera, 2023). Also, it would be necessary to recognize and distinguish the possible tensions between short-term issues, such as profitability, and those of longer term on which the purpose is appreciated (Ebrahim et al., 2014). Financial performance, while regularly highlighted and frequently taken as an example of competition between goals (Battilana et al., 2020), is nonetheless only one of the determinants among others, but the robustness of a strategy is also appreciated by many other dimensions (Aguilera et al., 2023). Other works warn that the issues of responsibility themselves, due to their great variety, can take on contradictory characteristics, and therefore be in tension if they have the ambition to be pursued simultaneously (Davies & Doherty, 2019). The purpose is then probably all the more solid and trustworthy, as it recognizes this situation of interdependencies between goals, and as it makes known the conditions of a simultaneous pursuit. This observation supports our second proposition, which is as follows:

**Proposition 2:** *A Purpose is more likely to build trust, if it makes visible and expresses promises in full awareness of the interdependencies between the different goals it pursues, and of the potential tensions this generates.*

### **Building purpose trust in a context of grand challenges**

The first part attempted to develop propositions by elaborating on the great freedom of choice of the purpose, and how this freedom could question, on the one hand, the choices made (coverage) and the tensions that the pursuit of multiple objectives raises given the interdependencies between the issues (interdependencies); this is about understanding more precisely what is expected from the content of a purpose that is expressed, vis-à-vis or in the context of grand challenges.

To describe the crises that accompany the grand challenges we are currently facing, the management literature mobilizes the perspective known as paradox (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019). According to this approach, the difficulty for companies to credibly position their actions in relation to these contemporary challenges, such as climate change or increasing social inequalities, is due to the scale, complexity and value-laden nature of these Grand contemporary challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015). The first characteristic is that a Grand challenge is a complex phenomenon. The complexity is characterised by the fact that it brings into question numerous interactions between objects, individuals, or physical phenomena, and that the latter respond to singular dynamics, sometimes non-linear and on multiple time scales. Thus, the elements constituting these challenges, their nature or root causes, as well as the paths leading to their resolution are difficult to conceive in the state of available knowledge (Veers et al., 2022), or require sophisticated forms of multi-actor cooperation (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). The second characteristic is linked to the multiple uncertainties surrounding its evolution. Within the limits of current knowledge, the very nature of the problem and its probable evolution seem difficult to anticipate. It is complicated to identify possible future states of the world on which to base decision-making. Therefore, managing in consideration of a grand challenge does not refer to a standard decision-making situation, or project management (Kuhlmann & Rip, 2014) but rather to a situation of radical uncertainty, or even of unknown. Rather, grand challenges refer

to heterogeneous factors and forces to be mobilised, managed, and considered in action (Elmqvist et al., 2019). Finally, Grand challenges are considered to be evaluative or value-laden problems. The scale of the problem and its determinants inspire multiple readings depending on the actors involved. The fact that the phenomenon transcends borders (territorial, physical, jurisdictional), implies multiple value criteria, and may bring new concerns as it is explored. Depending on the socialisation or and worldview of the actors involved who interpret them, they can be understood in multiple ways (A. Gümüşay et al., 2020). "*Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad*" (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 162).

So, given the characteristics of these Grand challenges, how can we expect in terms of content for a purpose that is positioned in regard to and in a context of Grand challenges to be trustworthy. First, a consensus has now emerged in management literature that the urgency of current social and environmental crises requires more than an incremental adaptation of existing business practices, because these are not solutions to such “wicked problems” (See for instance Pradilla et al., 2022; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). The Grand Challenge perspective also largely recognize the imperative to take into account this highly uncertain environment in order to maintain its ability to cope with a wide variety of possible future changes (Grimes & Vogus, 2021). In the face of the unknown, research highlights the imperative to be able to give ample space to learning, experimentation and the design of original responses to explore new desirable alternatives (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022) and to explore forms of vigilance against the unknown (Buhmann & Fieseler, 2021). Research on purpose also recognizes the need to go further incremental innovation, and argues that building a richer understanding of architectural or systemic innovation will also be crucial (Henderson, 2021). Finally, this high uncertainty regarding the future, coupled with the value-laden character of Grand challenges led authors to recommend some kind of flexibility in the manner we address strategy that aims to go beyond profit. A project to transform companies in search of greater sustainability involves multiple

forms of uncertainty regarding both the means to be used and the results - or impacts - that can be expected, both in nature and in scale. For companies that are proposing to explore highly original approaches and innovative products and services to meet these social and environmental challenges, the research shows that they are in an extremely precarious situation with regard to the future and that it is difficult to make the case for such innovations (see for example Veers et al., 2022). The principles of robust action integrate and insist, on the contrary, on the turbulent and the very strong evolutionary nature of the issues that give rise to responsibility, such as the grand challenges. The responsible action then must take another form, i.e., integrate both the constraints of today but also a capacity for reactivity, adaptation that is important in order not to mar its capacity for future action. Acting “for good” therefore takes the form of the exploratory requirement imposed by the grand challenge, but proposes a reflexive posture, and increased vigilance regarding the future consequences of the company's actions. For the purpose, this praises for maintaining a capacity for « flexibility », also meaning a capacity to maintain adherence and encourage deliberation (Dryzeck 2017, Ferraro 2018) by the evocation of desirable and unifying horizons. This observation leads to this third and fourth proposition:

**Proposition 3:** *In the context of grand challenges, a purpose may include elements that aim to foster trust in how it addresses uncertainty, by the means of learning or exploration for instance.*

**Proposition 4 :** *A purpose that is based on the designation of desirable futures based on systemic changes could be more likely to gain the adherence , as it maintains a direction in a context marked by significant instability.*

## **RESEARCH SETTING**

### **Method and choice of the data**

We built upon the literature on purpose in the context of grand challenges to propose some expectations of what a purpose formulation should encompass to align with both internal and

external expectations. This work provides, in a way, an analytical framework that we aim to test on a sample of profit-with-purpose corporations.

In this paper, we specifically focus on the scope of French profit-with-purpose corporations, known as "sociétés à mission." Since 2019, French corporate law has recognized the possibility for a company to define its mission within its statutes freely, provided that it includes specific governance and accountability mechanisms (Segrestin & Levillain, 2020). French law allows for the free formulation of a company's raison d'être, coupled with one or several specific social or environmental objectives. This legal framework offers us the opportunity to explore the extent to which the purposes articulated by these mission-driven companies intersect with one or more dimensions deemed determinative for assessing the quality of a purpose, as per the preceding studies presented (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Overview of the proposed purpose model

Here, we propose to compare the model of purpose drawn from the literature and its four distinct propositions with the lexical content of the legal purposes of these profit-with purpose corporations. This lexical analysis, which is still underway, is currently based on a purely manual coding conducted by the authors.

## Overview of the data

To carry out this lexical coding, we propose to rely on a dataset composed in the following manner. The cases are exclusively chosen from among the French *Sociétés à mission*. The selection of the sample from this population was conducted according to two distinct logics.

**SAMPLE A:** A sample from among those who adopted the scheme early on: about 50 *Sociétés à mission* (SàM). The so-called pioneers, or those already operating for at least 2 years as profit-with-purpose corporations. This approach stems from the idea of having companies that have a certain distance in relation to the scheme, and that have already tested the governance model in a "sustainable" way, that is to say, who have already, through their mission governance (mission committee), produced several reports. This arises from the idea, in particular, to avoid picking companies using the PPC scheme with an opportunistic behaviors of that would have adopted a legal purpose in a superficial manner. These companies were then chosen according to a logic of diversification, to have a variety of sectors of activity, company sizes, and contrasting legal and shareholder forms (See table 1).

Table 1 Overview of the data - sample A

<b>Sector</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Listed</b>	<b>Social Economy</b>
<i>Strategy &amp; Transformation Consulting</i>	7	<i>Large corp</i>	7	Yes 45
<i>Real Estate / Construction</i>	6	<i>Mid-caps</i>	10	No 5
<i>Finance / Insurance</i>	6	<i>SMEs</i>	25	
<i>Education / Training</i>	4	<i>Micro</i>	8	
<i>Energy / Environment</i>	3			
<i>CSR Consulting</i>	3			
<i>Food &amp; Beverage / Food Trade</i>	3			
<i>Textile</i>	2			
<i>Technology / Computer Science</i>	2			
<i>Health / Medico-social</i>	2			
<i>Furnishing</i>	2			
<i>Transport / Logistics</i>	1			

<i>Business services</i>	2			
<i>Culture / Leasures</i>	1			
<i>Cosmetics</i>	1			
<i>Consulting (Others)</i>	1			
<i>Communication</i>	1			
<i>Retail / textile</i>	1			
<i>Retail / Furnishing</i>	1			
<i>Others services</i>	1			
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>		<b>50</b>	

To this initial sample, a second one is added (Sample B), formed by extracting all the Sociétés à mission belonging to the same sector of activity – namely the health and medico-social sector. This logic stems from the desire to estimate how "similar" companies, or at least those that share some of the same responsibility challenges, have taken up the opportunity to draft a legal purpose. The choice of the health and medico-social sector itself was motivated by the desire to focus on activities that are particularly exposed to a grand challenge, here health – and all that it entails in terms of contemporary crises and difficulties (access to care, population aging, etc.).

This second sample ultimately comprises 39 companies that cover the four main categories of the sector: Medico-social service providers, Home help or similar, Nursing homes or similar, Clinics. (See table 2)

*Table 2 Overview of sample B - Health and medico social service sector*

<b>Sub-sector</b>	<b>Company name</b>
Medico-social service provider (17)	<i>Adlin Science, Agir à Dom Assistance, Carians, Conscious Eyewear, Doctolib, Excellence imagerie, Hublo, Intermed exportation, Letstalk, Nausica, Primary medical, Prism, Santé Cie, Sonio, Stane ingénierie</i>
Home care or similar (11)	<i>Alenvi, Apicil, Arkea assistance, Cosima , Destia, Emilie Care, Groupe Avec, Hantone, Oneclinic, Talents vie, Ulisse, Vitadom</i>
Nursing home for elderly individuals or similar (6)	<i>Clariane, Claripharm, Colisee, La maison de Blandine, Vivalto Holding group</i>
Clinics (5)	<i>Hospitalisation privée d'addictologie, Ramsay générale de Santé, Sante Cité, Sedna Santé, Vivalto Santé</i>

### *Datasources mobilized*

We have thus conducted an analysis of the missions undertaken by the *Sociétés à mission* in these two samples, relying on data from multiple sources. First, the legal content – Articles of Association, minutes of General Assemblies meetings and proceedings (if available), and Mission Committee reports – to access the exact wording of the purpose, as well as some contextual elements that preside over the choices of statutory commitments. This legal information is published in the Commercial Court Registries. Additionally, for these cases, we drew on the communicative content – manifestos, websites, corporate communications, etc. – produced by the company, with the aim of cross checking the previous informations and enhancing our understanding of the choice of words and their intentions at the time of coding.

### **Data analysis**

Here we choose to present the method of coding data not in the form of a synthetic table summarizing all the results, but through an illustrative approach by selecting a number of cases from among the coded ones.

### ***Chosen illustrative case (sample A) : Camif***

Camif is a retail company primarily focused on the sale of home furniture, online. The organization has approximately 80 employees and generates around 50 million euros in turnover. The company adopted the status of *Société à mission* in November 2020. Camif's statutes mention elements as part of the legal purpose – a *Raison d'être* is expressed as:



*« To offer products and services for the home for the benefit of people and the planet. Mobilize our ecosystem (consumers, employees, suppliers, shareholders, local stakeholders). Collaborate and act to invent new models of consumption, production and organization. ».*<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the following five objectives are listed:

*« (i) Informing, raising awareness and providing the means for more responsible consumption; (ii) Boosting employment in our territories and promoting integration, (iii) Making the circular economy our standard, (iv) Offering the best possible products for health and (v) Transforming the view on the Firm and contributing to the reinvention of our industry sectors »*

The coding of this text according to the dimensions of the previously presented purpose model results in the following outcome (Figures 2 & 3). The purpose is appreciated according to three of the four preceding propositions. Namely, several specific promises related to Camif's activity are identified which, from its point of view, merit specific commitments (e.g., circular economy as a standard, responsible consumption, or employment). These elements address distinct stakeholders or issues (Consumers, employees, territories, planet, etc.), which denote promises that differ in nature and ambition depending on the stakeholder. To these specific elements is added the designation of a unifying future, which profoundly revises the place and role of the company within its value chain and society as a whole. Finally, a specific element is articulated with respect to a commitment to learn and to invent (new models of consumption and production) to support these projects and to lend credibility to the future realization of the previously mentioned promises.

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<sup>2</sup> Initially in French, traduction by the authors.

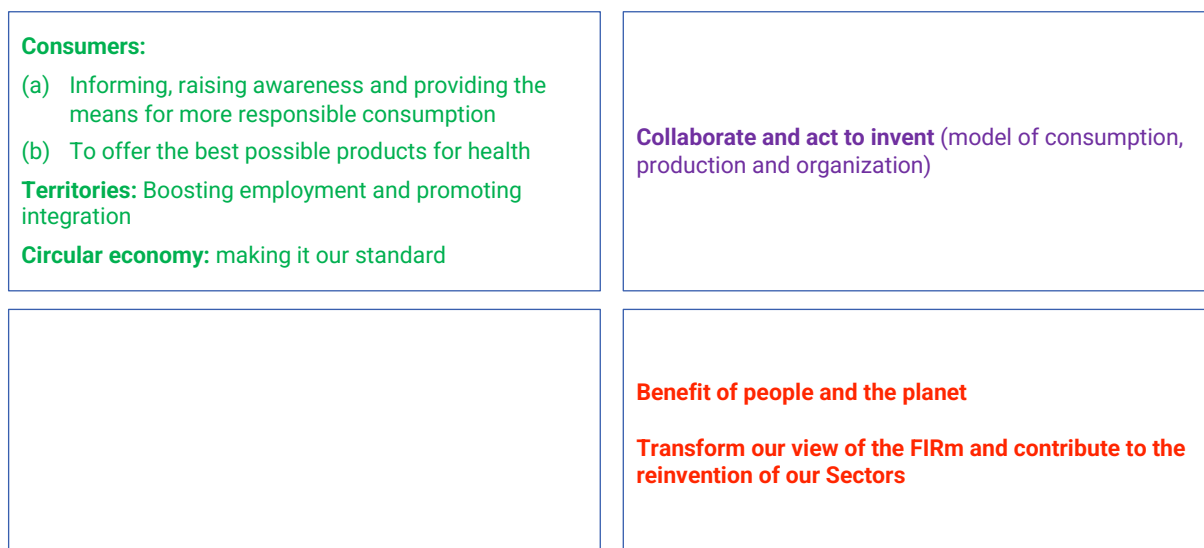


Figure 2 Results of the coding (Camif case)



Figure 3 Results of the coding in terms of valid propositions according to the purpose model

### **Chosen illustrative case (sample B) : Colisée**

Colisée is a company with 19,000 employees. It belongs to the medico-social sector and manages about 372 facilities (for 32,000 places) across Europe. The company has been a mission-driven company (société à mission) since June 2021. Colisée's statutes articulate a purpose consisting of the *Raison d'être* and the following five objectives:

*“We aim to be a player in a world that thinks long-term and takes into account the major societal and environmental challenges of our planet for the next generations. We contribute to this by practicing finance that serves the regions and their actors, which is sustainable and helps everyone to achieve their potential. To this end, we have chosen to be a cooperative and collaborative bank that promotes a balanced sharing of value with our members, clients, employees, partners, and regions. A company that is solidary, ethical, and inclusive, which is attentive to the respect of its environment. Daily, we develop, in collaboration with our stakeholders, innovative solutions to support our members and clients in their life projects and respond to their aspirations.*”

*Commitment 1: Make our decisions aiming for a balanced approach between financial performance and positive societal and environmental impact, through the exercise of cooperative governance rooted in our territories.*

*Commitment 2: Support each of our stakeholders in their environmental transition.*

*Commitment 3: Develop territorial cooperations and commit in favor of local vitality.*

*Commitment 4: Commit to inclusion and cultivate a lasting trust relationship with all our members and clients, from pioneers to the most vulnerable.*

*Commitment 5: Encourage our collective commitment to the common interest, in particular by living our mutualist values”.*

The coding of this mission reveals several determinants of the purpose as previously stated. The first is the statement of specific promises to given stakeholders. The second is the long-term commitment to managing "better ageing" in that it will contribute to a better collective future. This coding underscores that the purpose presents explicit references to two of the previously discussed frameworks of propositions, but, conversely, nothing evokes the questions of tensions between issues, nor the learnings deemed or necessary for the resolution of these challenges.

**Customers** : Federating a community of exchanges, improving the quality of life of seniors

**Employees** : Improving the quality of life of our **teams**, enhancing the value of professions for the elderly

**Environment** : Reducing the impact of our activities, protecting our quality of life on the planet

**Committing to better ageing means making our Society grow sustainably.**



Figure 4 Results of the coding (Colisée case)

**Chosen illustrative case (sample A) : Danone**

Danone is a Food & Beverage company. The company has about 100,000 employees worldwide and generates a turnover of 25 billion euros. It adopted the french profit-with-purpose corporation framework in June 2019. The study of Danone’s legal purpose highlights elements across all four dimensions of the purpose model. Namely, in addition to specific promises and in view of a unifying and desirable future as seen previously, the purpose includes elements that on one hand, acknowledge situations of interdependencies and therefore potential tensions between several issues related to its activity – here, human health and the planet. On the other hand, the legal purpose carries the ambition to innovate at the level of a statutory promise (Figure 5). This case demonstrates the configuration of a purpose that resonates with the four attributes of the model.





Figure 5 Result of the coding (Danone case)

## RESULTS

The work, still in the process of finalization at this stage, already allows us to advance results of two types. Regarding the model of purpose itself, and the different configurations it suggests, this work highlights a typology of the various forms of purpose (result 1). As for the cases of the sample studied themselves, this systematic coding work allows us to establish a classification and highlight the elements that are the subject of particular commitment (result 2).

### Result 1 : proposition of typology

The deployment of the analytical model of purpose – through its four characteristics (1) Coverage of specific responsibility issues, (2) Interdependencies, tensions or paradoxes, (3) Learning and exploration, and (4) Unifying and desirable future, firstly allows for establishing several possible configurations concerning the content of the purpose.

#### *(a) Purpose as a list of commitments close to a CSR approach*

This configuration corresponds to situations where only attributes (1) and (4) are activated. The case of Colisée within the studied sample is an illustration of this. The content of the commitment here is summarized as an inventory, more or less extensive, of promises that fall under the inventory of good practices in terms of responsible business conduct. The syntax used suggests reference to a stabilized situation, or in reference to known responsibility criteria. They

finally express themselves towards identified stakeholders, to whom promises of improvement or preservation are made independently of each other.

<b>1/ Covering of specific responsibility issues</b>	N/A	<b>1/ Covering of specific responsibility issues</b>	N/A
N/A	N/A	N/A	<b>4/ Unifying and desirable future</b>

Figure 6 1 Purpose as a list of commitments close to a CSR approach

*(b) Purpose identifying partial levers of action for Grand Challenges*

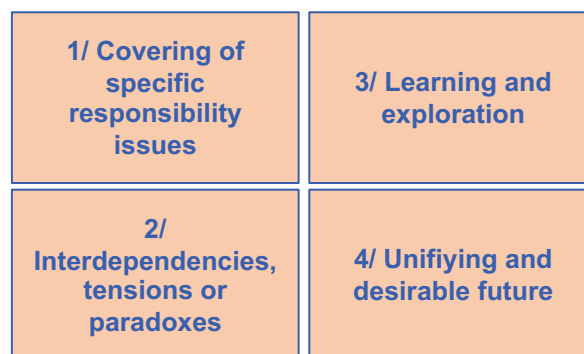
The second configuration that can be extracted from this model includes purposes that integrate certain partial action levers related to grand challenges within their formulation. This configuration is found in the case of Camif presented above, for example. It incorporates the attributes expressed in the previous configuration (1) and (4), to which is added specific attention, either towards a tension inherent to the expressed responsibility issues, without specifying the ways in which it intends to be resolved. Or by specifying a commitment to innovate (new models of consumption or production at CAMIF) without details on the difficulties to be overcome to achieve these ends (Figure 7).

<b>1/ Covering of specific responsibility issues</b>	<b>3/ Learning and exploration</b>	<b>1/ Covering of specific responsibility issues</b>	N/A
N/A	<b>4/ Unifying and desirable future</b>	<b>2/ Interdependencies, tensions or paradoxes</b>	<b>4/ Unifying and desirable future</b>

Figure 7 - Purpose identifying partial levers of action for Grand Challenges

*(c) Robust Formulation in the Expression of a Purpose in a Context of Grand Challenges*

Finally, we present here a third and last configuration, that of a formulation that could be qualified as robust in a context of Grand Challenges. Robust, because it is expressed across all the determinants identified by the literature. Namely, the identification of responsibilities specific to its activity, the challenges to work in the unknown and innovation levers, notably arising from the identification of tensions or situations of interdependencies and finally the expression of a unifying future. Among the cases used to illustrate our data, it is Danone that comes closest to this configuration.



*Figure 8 Formulation robuste à l'expression d'un purpose dans un contexte de Grand Challenges*

**Result 2 - Classification of the cases studied**

We can now take a somewhat more global look at the results of applying the purpose model to the entire sample. This is to estimate, on the one hand, to what extent we can identify purposes whose content falls within the different configurations previously presented (sample A), and on the other hand, to determine whether, within a given sector of activity, there are common purpose configurations (sample B – health and medico-social sector).

If we perform this classification, we reveal a contrasting reality in terms of the content of commitment (Figure 9). In other words, we find companies across all three configurations on one hand, and on the other hand, we confirm the mobilization of purpose as a tool for commitment towards Grand challenges with configurations (b) and (c). This work also highlights that attributes (3) Learning and Explorations and (4) Interdependencies are massively less represented than the other two, which are almost systematically found in the formulations.



Figure 9 Results expressed through the three configurations (overview - sample A)

These results are partially verified at a sectoral and sub-sectoral level, in the case of the medico-social sector (Table 3). Indeed, there is a contrast in the constitutive elements of the purpose. A contrast that is more pronounced at a sub-sectoral level. For instance, service providers in the sample have more significantly highlighted the exploratory challenges necessary for the health sector than companies in other sub-sectors. Here too, the expression of tensions between objectives is not necessarily an attribute that is regularly found in the content of the purpose. It is even completely absent from the sub-sector of clinics.



Table 3 Overview of the results (Sample B)

	<b>(1) coverage</b>	<b>(2) interdependencies</b>	<b>(3) Learning &amp; exploration</b>	<b>(4) Unifying future</b>
<i>Medico-social service provider</i>	17/17 (100%)	4/17 (24%)	13/17 (76%)	6/17 (35%)
<i>Home care or similar</i>	11/11 (100%)	5/11 (45%)	6/11 (55%)	3/11 (27%)
<i>Nursing home for elderly individuals or similar</i>	6/6 (100%)	3/6 (50%)	2/6 (33%)	4/6 (67%)
<i>Clinics</i>	5/5 (100%)	0/5 (0%)	3/5 (60%)	2/5 (40%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>39/39 (100%)</b>	<b>12/39 (30%)</b>	<b>24/39 (61%)</b>	<b>15/39 (38%)</b>

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study proposed an analytical model of purpose, build on a literature at the intersection of strategic works on purpose and developments related to grand challenges. Through systematic coding of the legal purpose of a sample of profit-with-purpose corporations, it proposes a typology of forms of legal commitments. While the analysis warrants further reinforcement, the work already allows us to envision contributions of several orders.

### Contributions to the purpose literature in Grand challenges

The literature strongly emphasizes the protean nature of the concept of purpose, and consequently the ambiguity of the notion that calls for a need for clarification (e.g., George et al., 2021). Today, this effort has been more focused on the different conceptualizations of the term and subsequently on the difficulties of working on the conditions for the perpetuation of a purpose, and its coexistence with profit, for example (e.g., Besharov and Mitzinneck, 2023). There has also been discussion of examining purpose within a broader performance framework and its possible cohabitation with the pursuit of profit, for instance (Battilana et al., 2022; Gartenberg, 2023). The path chosen here is different, and this work makes a complementary advance in this desire for clarification by unveiling the actual content of the stated purposes. It specifies the different facets a purpose is likely to express and to what extent this raises

expectations of different natures for the stakeholders, internal or external, who consider the company accountable for the actions taken in the name of the purpose. Only by mastering the content of the commitment can we judge the credibility of the company's actions regarding it. In this logic, this work could allow us to discuss the variety and credibility of the wide range of claims grouped behind the concept of purpose : from a « *mobilizing claim* » : (Grimes et al., 2019; Joly, 2021; Westphal, 2023) to a « *binding legal commitment* » such as profit-with-purpose corporate forms: Benefit corporations, French « *Société à Mission* », *Società Benefit etc.*, (Liao et al., 2019; Segrestin et al., 2021; Segrestin & Levillain, 2023).

### **Contributions to PPC literature and corporate responsibility in a context of grand challenges**

The second contribution of this work refers to the literature more specifically interested in how these new legal frameworks, the profit-with-purpose corporations, are deployed in practice (Ventura, 2023). The model of purpose elucidated here ultimately presents itself as a potential observable to monitor the adoption of these forms for corporate responsible engagement. It provides the material for the design of ad hoc observables, which will allow for a comparative and longitudinal tracking of how companies are embracing these new governance frameworks to lend credibility to their responsible strategies on the one hand (citation needed), but also to engage in dialogue with interested parties. It has been shown that commitment can be carried out, both in a context of great uncertainties that are grand challenges, and with a relatively unknown aim, for example by aligning the purpose with an ambition for systemic change (Henderson, 2021). It will be particularly interesting to explore how these projective dimensions that focus on the future will be subject to specific accountability (Ebrahim et al., 2014).

### **Perspectives : toward control of the legal purpose**

This work opens up dual perspectives. First, it proposes a model of the content of purpose whose interest and robustness need to be tested at different levels of analysis (by sector of activity, type of ownership, company size, etc.), in order to understand to what extent the specificities pertaining to these categories correspond to formulations of purpose of a certain form, or if, on the contrary, one can state a number of invariants. The second perspective refers to the question of mission governance and its control. In addition to freedom of formulation, the governance frameworks that accompany the formulation raise questions about how each of the configurations of purpose expressed here calls for a type of control consistent with the purpose content on the one hand, but also to what extent the mission governance could not be prescriptive of all or part of this very content.

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