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# Meta-organizations as devices of multinational corporations (MNCs) to tackle plastic pollution: interactions with mandatory regulation and deliberative processes

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**EGOS Conference Paper –**  
**Meta-organizations as devices of multinational corporations (MNCs) to**  
**tackle plastic pollution: interactions with mandatory regulation and**  
**deliberative processes**

**Abstract:**

This paper studies how collective action led by multinational corporations (MNCs) tackle plastic pollution in emerging countries. While literature has identified challenges met by corporations involved in the management of environmental problems, devices of collective action such as meta-organizations are increasingly used by organizations. Against this backdrop, we rely on the concept of meta-organizations, meaning organization of organizations, to understand how leading MNCs leverage collective action to support waste management infrastructure for plastic waste. Drawing on a qualitative study of five cases of meta-organizations (MOs) in West Africa and South-East Asia, we situate our findings at three different levels. At the organizational level, we describe that subsidiaries of MNCs develop meta-organizations focusing on the issue of plastic pollution, combining political and corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. At the inter-organizational level, these MOs are used by MNCs to push a specific type of mandatory regulation that we qualify as “hybrid”. To get this regulation successfully adopted and implemented by national governments, MOs are highly dependent on the national context, multi-stakeholder deliberation being highly influenced by the deliberative strategy adopted by governments. By identifying multi-level mechanisms, we highlight how and why meta-organizations led by corporations adopt political and/or CSR activities and develops different degrees of partialness.

## Introduction

For the past decade, plastic pollution has become a burning issue at a global level. While viral contents of beaches and oceans full of plastics reached citizens all over the world, an increasing number of studies have been warning both national and international organizations about how serious is this threat. The global challenge of plastic pollution has consequences on a wide range of dimensions, from human and animal health to environmental and social stability. Plastic leakage in Asian and Africa countries has been identified as the one of the most pressing problems, as It is representing an overwhelming share of the total volume of plastics currently rejected in the oceans (Jambeck et al., 2015).

Responsibility of large FMCG companies in the issue has been pointed by civil society (Castelló & Lopez-Berzosa, 2021). Most famous MNCs (multinational enterprises) such as Coca-Cola, Unilever or Nestlé could not ignore these accusations, and MNCs involved in the whole plastics value chain – petro-chemical, packaging, food & beverages and recycling industries – have been gathering in various multi-stakeholder initiatives in order to discuss and develop solution towards “a new plastics economy”<sup>1</sup>. Global commitments announced by these multinational corporations, that consist of reaching targets of plastic waste collection, recycling and reduction by 2025 or 2030, imply to develop these circular economy strategies. Even though literature on political CSR has investigated how corporations could get involved in the management of societal issues (Scherer et al., 2016; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), some contributions have identified different limits and critiques to the rise of MNCs as political actors (B. Banerjee, 2018; Wright & Nyberg, 2015). In the meantime, more balanced perspectives have studied voluntary CSR implementation at the level of individual firms (Acosta et al., 2021; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). While corporate responses to environmental grand challenges such as self-regulation and market-based solutions have proven their limits (Böhm et al., 2012; Moog et al., 2014; Wright & Nyberg, 2017), hybrid forms of governance and regulation require structures supporting collective action (Etzion et al., 2017; Ferraro et al., 2015). In this vein, the concepts of partial organization and meta-organization turned out to be useful for scholars studying collective action tackling environmental issues both in developed and emerging countries (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022; Valente & Oliver, 2018). Meta-organizations (MOs),

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<sup>1</sup> This expression came from the Global Commitment launched in 2018 by the Ellen Mc Arthur Foundation and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). To learn more: <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/global-commitment-2022/overview>

defined as “organizations of organizations” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008), also include firms’ devices of collective action such as trade associations and chambers of commerce (Dumez & Renou, 2020). This brings us to ask the following research question in this paper: how does meta-organizations led by MNCs tackle an environmental grand challenge such as plastic pollution in emerging countries?

We developed a qualitative research design studying five cases of meta-organizations specifically dedicated to plastic pollution in emerging countries. These MOs have been created and led by subsidiaries of MNCs operating in the food & beverages industry. We collected and analyzed qualitative data, mainly 68 interviews conducted in West Africa and South-East Asia during two field trips (Ghana, Ivory Coast, Thailand, Vietnam and Ivory Coast). Our findings lie at three different levels. At the organizational level, we describe the type of activities led by meta-organizations and their organizational features. At the inter-organizational level, our findings show how these meta-organizations play a key-role in the mandatory regulation of plastic packaging, by being drivers, products and vehicles of a specific type of regulation namely “Extended Producer Responsibility” (EPR). At the level of the national context, the type of deliberative processes, highly influenced by the deliberative strategy of the government, provide an understanding of why meta-organizations achieve – or not in most of the cases – to get a mandatory regulation for their market. Drawing upon these findings, we highlight the multi-level mechanisms explaining how these organizational devices are used by MNCs for managing both political and CSR activities, while being highly influenced in their degree of partialness and combination of organizational elements by national context dynamics. Lastly, we develop our contributions to literatures on partial and meta-organizations and political CSR (Ahrne et al., 2016; Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Rasche et al., 2013; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

## **Literature review**

### *The political role of multinational corporations (MNCs)*

Management research is increasingly involved in understanding and tackling grand challenges, defined as “important and unresolved problems” (Colquitt & George, 2011, p.432) requiring the collaboration of a diversity of actors (Ferraro et al., 2015). Within contexts characterized by the limited scope of nation-states, corporations are increasingly involved in the management of societal issues (Moon et al., 2005; Scherer et al., 2006). Literature on PCSR (political CSR) has

stressed how corporations, and especially the most powerful ones, have been endorsing a political role (Scherer et al., 2016; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). This new role includes being a channel for political contestations by other stakeholders (Gond et al., 2016; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016), thus requiring corporations' engagement in protecting and providing some rights traditionally ensured by states. In liberal democracies, the nature of these rights shall be political, social or civic nature (Matten & Crane, 2005). The political engagement of corporations implies providing to citizens an access to some public goods, such as roads, school and healthcare services in emerging countries (Livesey, 2002; Matten & Crane, 2005; Valente & Crane, 2010) . It also refers to the management and lead of multi-stakeholder dialogue and deliberation by MNCs (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021).

### *A critical perspective about corporate responses to environmental grand challenges*

In the meantime, It has been highlighted how leading corporations have failed in the management of major environmental issues such as climate change, by providing *business-as-usual* responses (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). These corporate responses include technological innovation, market-based tools and voluntary commitments based on self-regulation (Wright & Nyberg, 2014). Management of externalities by markets-based tools, such as carbon credits markets offering an “off-setting solution” to polluting corporations, has been highly criticized for its limited capacity and efficiency to mitigate carbon emissions (Böhm et al., 2012; Kaplan, 2024). Voluntary commitments, that consist of engaging with certifications, norms and codes of conduct (Vogel, 2008) have also produced mixed results for managing environmental issues such as climate change (Kaplan, 2024). Weaknesses of certification-based systems, that have been developed to make value chains more responsible for products such as wood and paper (Forest Stewardship Council), coffee (Organic, Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance) or palm oil (Roundtable Sustainable Palm Oil) have been identified. In the cases of wood and coffee, the multiplicity of standards and certifications generated in a competitive context has limited the environmental performance of such systems, while audits supposed to ensure compliance have been questioned (Levy et al., 2016; Mione & Leroy, 2013; Moog et al., 2014).

Also, the dark side of political activities by corporations should not be overlooked. As suggested by (Nyberg, 2021), corporations are likely to weaken regulatory initiatives by governments and inter-governmental bodies regarding climate issues. Different types of strategies have been deployed by corporations, the most conventional ones being public campaigns, lobbying and

funding of political parties and candidates to influence policy-making (Lawton et al., 2013; Lock & Seele, 2016). By endorsing activities traditionally ensured by government, the rise of corporations as political actors would include a neoliberal dimension characterized by deregulation and a loss in the democratic processes (Rhodes & Fleming, 2020). Even worse, some petrochemical MNCs adopted practices generating doubt regarding climate change while being aware of early scientific evidence (Bonneuil et al., 2021; Oreskes & Conway, 2011). More broadly, the essential role of governments in the management of societal issues has been emphasized: instead of being relegated to the roles of enabler or facilitator as they could be between the 1980's and the 2000's, they would be perceived as regulators for the past and coming decade (Kourula et al., 2019). In the context of emerging countries, same types of critics have been issued, MNCs from Western countries being accused of pursuing forms of colonial domination through their CSR and political activities (Banerjee, 2014; Banerjee, 2000; Khan & Lund-Thomsen, 2011).

#### *Meta-organizations as devices to articulate corporate and multistakeholder collective actions*

The limitations in corporate responses and the current fragmentation in the governance of a diversity of issues require new forms of multistakeholder collaboration to tackle grand challenges, such as climate change and plastic pollution (Etzion et al., 2017; Ferraro et al., 2015). Even though mandatory regulation has been identified as a key-element to reduce the environmental impact of corporations (Aragón-Correa et al., 2020), the literature has also underlined its limited impact on the environmental performance of environmental alliances developed by corporations. Because they tend to focus on compliance in order to avoid sanctions and penalties of mandatory regulation, corporations introduce only incremental changes through reactive strategies (Ortiz-de-Mandojana et al., 2016). Reactive strategies have limited impact on corporations' activities while transformative and "radical strategies" deeply affect them, by reducing pollution at source and developing sustainable business models for example (Stadtler & Lin, 2017). Beyond mandatory regulation, literature on environmental alliances highlights the importance of other factors engaging corporations with more transformative strategies, such as the diversity of the partners within the alliance (Lin, 2012), the centrality of the corporation within a network (Ashraf et al., 2014), and the greater size of environmental networks of corporations (Stadtler & Lin, 2017).

Thus, solving environmental grand challenges implies a hybrid approach involving collective action both between corporations and between corporations and other stakeholders, such as states, NGOs and international organizations. Many studies have been studying inter-organizational collaboration related to ocean preservation or adaptation to climate change (Chaudhury et al., 2017; Etzion et al., 2017; Porter et al., 2020), some of them adopting the lenses of partial organization and meta-organizations (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022). For this paper, we are mainly relying on these concepts of partial organization and meta-organizations. Partial organization designates forms of organizations that have only some of the five elements characterizing “formal” organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011): membership, rules, monitoring, sanctions and hierarchy. While complete organizations, such as corporations or NGOs, have access to the five elements identified by Ahrne et al. (2016), partial organization encompasses less formal forms of organization such as networks, markets and meta-organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2019).

Meta-organizations (MOs) are defined as organizations composed of other organizations, assuming that organizations are usually composed of individuals (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Gulati et al., 2012). It has been observed that more and more actors have been creating MOs to address complex social and environmental issues as they have the ability to bring organizations from various industries or fields while offering flexibility to each member (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018). Different types of MOs have been described and characterized (Berkowitz et al., 2017), most of them being studied in developed countries and international context (Berkowitz et al., 2020; König et al., 2012). Members of meta-organizations may be very diverse (multistakeholder MOs) or more homogenous, such MOs with members operating in the same industry (sectoral or sub-sectoral MO). To designate meta-organizations with exclusively corporate members, (Dumez & Renou, 2020) have used the term of “firms’ collective action device (FCDA)” that is defined as “organizational devices that make collective action possible and efficient” (p.3). (Rasche et al., 2013) emphasized the conceptual power of partialness to study CSR strategies developed by corporations.

In France, the study of a multi-stakeholder meta-organization has highlighted how platforms of the sharing economy have been using it as a device to develop a hybrid form of regulation, associating both regulation from the government and self-regulation (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019). To our knowledge, few empirical works have been studying meta-organizations in emerging countries and how they contribute, as organizational devices of collective action, to

hybrid forms of governance. While Valente & Oliver (2018) identified conditions and mechanisms bringing to the emergence of MOs to tackle societal issues in Sub-Saharan Africa, very little is actually known about the role ensured by MOs in emerging countries, that are characterized by the limited capacity of public governments (Alo & Arslan, 2023; Chaudhury et al., 2016).

In this paper, we aim at responding to the following research question: how an environmental grand challenge, such as plastic pollution in emerging countries, is tackled by MNCs through meta-organizations?

## **Methodology**

### *Empirical setting*

Plastics is among the most produced and consumed material in the world, with steel and cement<sup>2</sup>, and forecasts expect its global production to double between 2020 and 2040<sup>3</sup>. As mentioned above, multinational corporations operating in the food and beverages industries have been facing intense pressures from external stakeholders regarding its responsibility in the current issue of plastic pollution. The Ellen Mc Arthur Foundation (EMF), a major stakeholder that has been pushing for circular economy (Aggeri, 2023), has been tracking both commitments and performance of these MNCs. The 2023 progress report published by the EMF identifies four main types of commitments taken by MNCs with figures to be reached by 2025<sup>4</sup>: decrease the absolute amount of virgin plastic use (plastic directly produced from oil); increase the share of recycled plastics within the packaging sold; ensure 100% of plastic packaging is reusable, recyclable or compostable; increase the share of reuse models. Among these four targets, the most ambitious and challenging commitments – reducing the absolute volume of plastic used and switching to reuse alternatives – are far from being reached by MNCs, or even not communicated for some of them. Most of the efforts provided by these MNCs focus on reaching 100% of reusable, recyclable or compostable plastic packaging (for all of them) and increasing the share of recycled plastics used for new products. This latter commitment requires

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<sup>2</sup> Report published by the International Energy Agency “The Future of Petrochemicals”  
<https://www.iea.org/reports/the-future-of-petrochemicals>

<sup>3</sup> Report published by The Pew Charitable Trust and Systemiq “Breaking the Plastic Wave”:  
[https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2020/07/breakingtheplasticwave\\_report.pdf](https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2020/07/breakingtheplasticwave_report.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Report from the Ellen Mc Arthur Foundation “The Global Commitment 2023 Progress Report”:  
<https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/global-commitment-2023/overview>



to develop waste management infrastructure to collect and recycle plastic packaging that has been sold to consumers. It could turn out to be highly challenging to reach in emerging countries, suffering from a lack of waste management infrastructure and limited capabilities of national governments. This is the issue we investigate in this paper, by highlighting how subsidiaries of MNCs in emerging countries develop collective action to improve their performance to reach their global commitments for plastic waste management.

### *Emergence of the research design*

For this research, we developed a “flexible” research design (Blumer, 1986; Dumez & Toussaint, 2022), which includes an exploratory phase (data collection) and an investigation phase (the analysis). This research project started by observing many different types of IORs (inter-organizational relationships) tackling plastic pollution in emerging countries, empirically entitled partnerships, alliances or joint ventures at global, regional, national and local levels. We conducted many interviews with middle and top managers from MNCs and different non-profit organizations (NGOs, social enterprises) evolving at global and/or national levels.

We identified Ghana as a promising context of study because of its wide range of stakeholders engaging with the issue of plastic pollution (MNCs, recycling companies, NGOs) and some intriguing features, such as multi-stakeholder platform developed by the World Economic Forum (WEF) through a partnership with the national government. This Ghanaian context looked very contrasted as compared to the situation in Ivory Coast, the neighboring country. From the information we were able to collect, Ivory Coast had much less stakeholders involved in the issue and no official policy or strategy specifically dedicated to plastic pollution. These major differences motivated the choice of investigating the context of Ivory Coast, as these two countries shared in the meantime many similarities from the economic and social standpoint (GDP per inhabitant, similar scores at the Human Development Index, size of population). Many international and private organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Standard & Poor’s, categorize both Ghana and Ivory Coast as “frontier markets”. According to the Basic Criteria Framework of the rating agency Standard & Poor’s, countries categorized as frontiers markets are described as less developed than emerging ones. Main differences of frontier markets with emerging ones are economic: their national economy of frontier markets

is less stable, while markets are less open to foreign investment and trade<sup>5</sup>. According to this classification, Vietnam is also a frontier market but is closer to the status of emerging country according to the FTSE Classification<sup>6</sup>. According to S&P's classification, one of the main features of countries classified as "emerging" is their GDP per inhabitant, which is less than 15,000 USD. Indonesia and Thailand are classified as emerging countries by most the lists, the latter one being closer to the status of "Developed country" according to the FTSE classification. As the next sub-section shows It, these shades between "developing countries" were taken into the decision to select or not some cases within a given national context.

### *Data collection (exploration)*

During the data collection process, the phenomena that became our unit of analysis, meta-organizations initiated and led by MNCs, emerged from our first field trip in West Africa. Because no single MNC could tackle plastic pollution on its own, collective action was described as the best lever by interviewees. In both Ghana and Ivory Coast, we identified "associations", initially created and led by subsidiaries of major brands (Coca-Cola, Unilever, Danone), that developed different activities specifically dedicated to the issue of plastic waste. Speeches of interviewees regarding mandatory regulation were made explicit: these associations and their members were lobbying the government for a specific type of regulation named "Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)". We also learnt from the interviewees that this type of organizations had also been developed in other countries, such as Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Indonesia. We use the concept of meta-organization (MO) to designate our cases, which are these associations.

After this first field trip in West Africa and, we could either chose to focus on these two first cases (Ghana and Ivory Coast), or explore "new" ones. We observed challenges met during this first field trip, main one being the direct access to the interviewees working within MNCs linked to these two cases (refusals or absence of replies from most of them). Applying the *economy of*

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<sup>5</sup> Methodology of the S&P Dow Jones Indices Country Classification:  
<https://www.spglobal.com/spdji/en/documents/index-policies/methodology-country-classification.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> FTSE classification of emerging countries:  
[https://www.lseg.com/content/dam/ftse-russell/en\\_us/documents/country-classification/ftse-country-classification-update-latest.pdf](https://www.lseg.com/content/dam/ftse-russell/en_us/documents/country-classification/ftse-country-classification-update-latest.pdf)

*research* principle (Peirce, 1974; Rescher, 1976), we took the second option – exploring new cases – that led us to build a multiple case study. After setting our unit of analysis following this field trip in West Africa, we planned a second one: following a similar process of exploratory interviews and public documents’ analysis, we selected three more cases located in South-East Asia. Being aware of the geographic, cultural and institutional differences, we shifted from West Africa to South-East Asia because It offered national contexts facing a similar issue but on a larger scale. With stronger industries and higher consumption of plastics per inhabitant<sup>7</sup>, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia are usually ranked in the top 10 countries rejecting the biggest volumes of plastic waste in the ocean (Jambeck et al., 2015). Sixty-eight interviews were conducted between November 2021 and September 2023, during two field trips, most of them being recorded. These interviews lasted between 30 and 100 minutes. At the very end of the document, a table gathers empirical elements from the different meta-organizations about their missions, values and identity.

#### *Data analysis (investigation)*

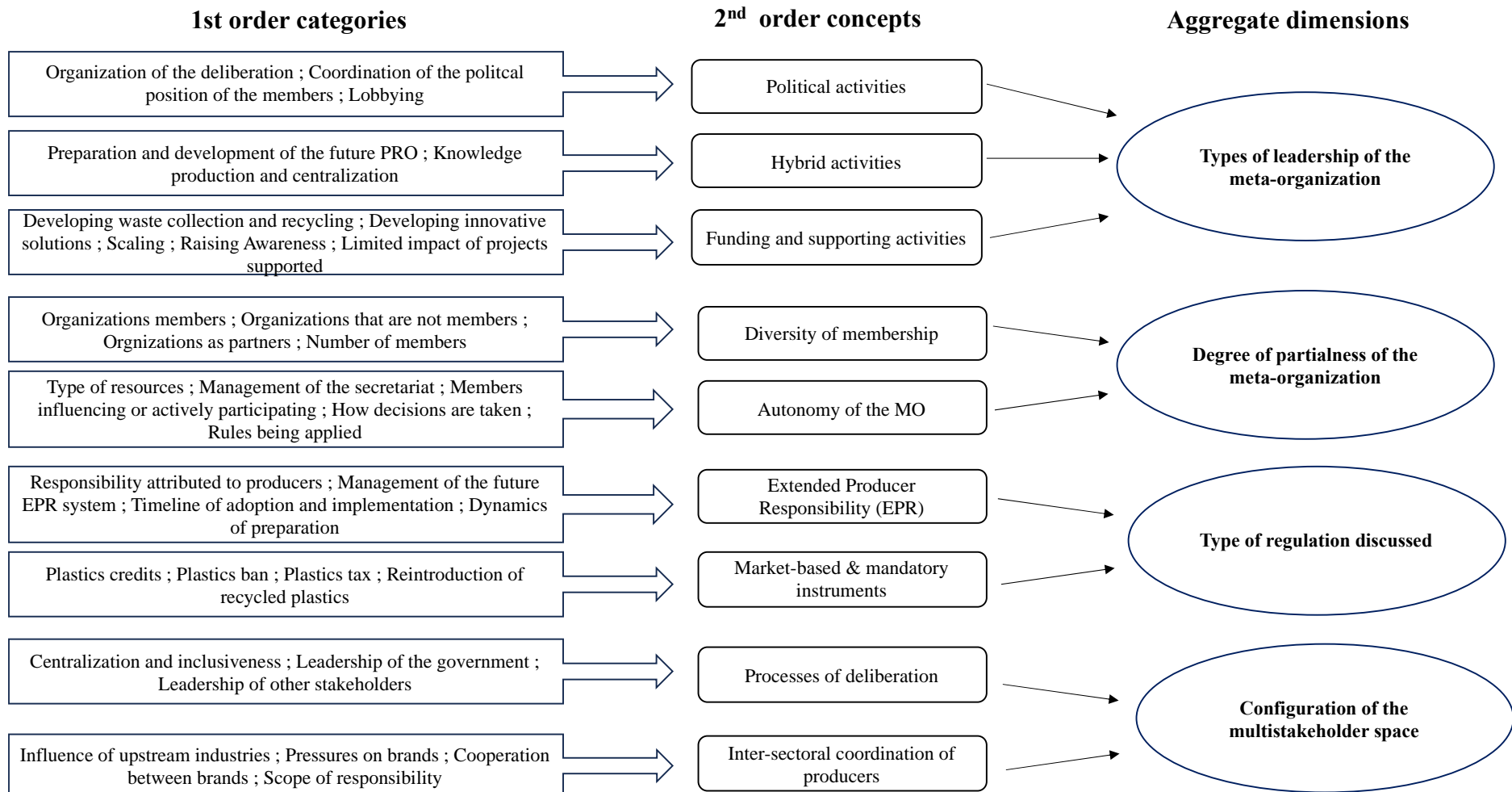
First, data was organized according to how close It was to the cases studied. Interviews conducted at the national and local levels are considered as primary data, while most of the data collected with interviewees evolving at the global and/or regional levels are considered as secondary data. To generate our findings, we followed an iterative process constituted of three steps by focusing on primary data. The first one involved reading primary data - interviews and documents collected before and during the field trips - by using free-floating attention (Dumez, 2016; Freud, 2013). As we were able to identify similarities and differences between MOs, we were stroke by the speech of the interviewees about the role of the national government, and especially the role of a particular kind of regulation that was either described as a “*game-changer*” or “*something that has never stopped to emerge*”. As floating attention helped us to generate a major hunch (Kistruck & Slade Shantz, 2021), we went forward by describing each case of meta-organization. Meta-organizations seemed to have different types of activities and relationships with their members, and our deepened hunch consisted of linking these variables with regulation.

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<sup>7</sup> See the white paper by Roland Berger for the Alliance to End Plastic Waste “The Plastic Waste Management Framework”:  
<https://endplasticwaste.org/en/our-stories/plastic-waste-management-framework>

To build robust findings and get a systematic analysis across cases, we decided to analyze interviews by using the method of multi-thematic coding (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Dumez, 2016). These different themes were identified by drawing upon the literature on meta-organizations and our first hunch. Many themes were linked to meta-organizations: we defined a first theme for the activities and main goals of the MOs, and a second theme for all the aspects related to the organizational processes of the MO. By adding more cases and going deeper into the analysis, a much more precise level of coding inductively emerged with descriptive labels. For example, within the theme “Organizational processes of the MO”, we created labels entitled “Stakeholders that influence the decisions taken by MO” or “Activities of the member that are out of control of the MO”.

Because of the important flow of data after three cases, we started structuring by pooling some labels into an intermediary level of coding. An example of this intermediary level is “Governance of the MO” (**2<sup>nd</sup> order concepts**) that covers the labels “Stakeholders that influence the decisions taken by MO” or “Activities of the member that are out of control of the MO” (**1<sup>st</sup> order categories**) while belonging to a larger code related to the organization and level of autonomy of the MO (**aggregate dimension**). We then used two different techniques to complete our systematic comparison. First, we wrote memos to describe each case (Glaser, 2014). Then, we drafted a visual template to compare the differences between them regarding their activities and organizational elements (size of the secretariat, type of resources, diversity of the membership). These techniques helped us to refine our 2<sup>nd</sup> order concepts, merging them with related labels if needed. Combined with insights from literature on meta-organizations and political CSR, these techniques ultimately led us to highlight the different links between 2<sup>nd</sup> order concepts and aggregate dimensions, renaming these latter ones. For all the steps previously described (data management and coding), we used the NVivo software. On the **figure 1**, we illustrate the final stage of our data structure. Even if we did not follow the inductive process of analysis developed by Gioia et al. (2013), we chose to present our data structure to use their template of data structure.



**Figure 1 Data structure inspired from Gioia et al. (2013)**

*Table 1 Details of interviews for each context*

Type of stakeholders	Ghana	Ivory Coast	Thailand	Vietnam	Indonesia	Regional & global-level stakeholders	Total number
Meta-organizations (coordinators)	2	2	2	3	1	1	<b>11</b>
MNCs	2	1	2	2	2	6	<b>15</b>
Local companies	3	4	0	1	4	N/A	<b>12</b>
NGOs	5	1	1	2	1	0	<b>10</b>
Governments	1	0	1	1	0	N/A	<b>3</b>
International and development aid organizations	1	1	1	2	1	3	<b>9</b>
Universities, think tanks & consulting	0	0	2	1	3	2	<b>8</b>
<b>Total number of interviews</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>68</b>

*Table 2 Meta-organizations case studies*

Country and code of each case of MO	Year of creation	Approximate number of members	Share of MNCs within members	Type of industries and sectors of the members	Type of MO
MO Ghana (A)	2017	15	80-90%	Petro-chemicals ; food & beverages	Sectoral MO
MO Ivory Coast (B)	2018	20	50%	Packaging ; food & beverages ; waste management & recycling ; mining ; environmental NGO	Multi-stakeholder MO
MO Thailand (C)	2019	7	90%	Packaging ; food & beverages	Sectoral MO
MO Vietnam (D)	2019	21	80-90%	Petro-chemicals ; packaging ; food & beverages	Sectoral MO
MO Indonesia (E)	2020	15	85%	Packaging ; food & beverages ; waste management & recycling	Supra-sectoral MO

## Findings

### 1. Organizational level: the emergence of meta-organizations dedicated to plastic waste management

Across the different geographies investigated, we observed that MNCs develop different strategies to manage “post-consumer” waste, which designates plastic packaging generated by consumers. Besides meta-organizations specifically dedicated to plastic pollution, three types of strategies are developed by MNCs at the local level. The first type is a kind of “CSR-as-usual” strategy consisting of providing support by global entities, such as the Coca-Cola Foundation or the Danone Ecosystem Fund. These entities bring resources of different nature, but mainly financial ones. These resources are dedicated to projects developed by local stakeholders such as NGOs or waste management companies developing solutions for plastic waste collection and recycling. Interviewees depict these projects as “*cross-sector partnerships*” or “*philanthropic*” projects contributing to the waste management infrastructure. If some interviewees recognize the positive aspects of these approaches – bringing resources and building capabilities to tackle waste mis-management – some of them are also highly criticized for their limited impact and the tendency of MNCs to overcommunicate with the underlying intention to improve their image.

The second type of strategy developed by MNCs often designated as “purchase of plastics credits”. This very recent tool is based on the same concept than carbon markets: a “polluter” ask for a broker to get some projects that collect plastic waste polluting the environment, such as the oceans or under-served areas. These NGOs and companies get paid for each ton of plastics collected while the “polluter” get a certification as evidence of its efforts to “off-set” its “plastics footprint”. These plastics credits markets, that have been starting for a few years, are still very small. However, they are growing and many of the stakeholder operating confirmed for having collaborated with MNCs in different places in South-East Asia. In the same vein than carbon markets, this market-based tool has brought controversies: many NGOs have been pointing the risk of “double-counting” meaning collecting plastic waste that was already managed. NGOs have also been underlining the risk of displacing the problem by “not turning off the plastics tap”. Also, because of the poor quality of the dusty and muddy material, recovery solutions are limited, leading the operators to bring plastic waste to cement factories that burn them in their incinerators. To sum up, plastics credits are easy-to-use solutions for

MNCs but they represent major risks for their reputation. In 2023, two of them, Coca-Cola and Unilever, officially stated they were “*not convinced by plastics credits*”. While plastics credits promoters have been accusing these MNCs for trying to avoid a solution that would entail an immediate financial cost, their purchase of credits remain at an experimental stage.

The third type of strategy could have a much higher impact. MNCs, such as Danone, Coca-Cola and Unilever, have been looking for introducing recycled plastics within their own packaging. This “close-the-loop” model requires to secure supplying material from recycling industries. Because of food safety constraints, only a few leaders of the worldwide recycling industries are able to comply with the high-quality standards. For food & beverages MNCs, these issues imply the development of industrial partnerships with the recycling industries to guarantee steady quality and quantities of recycled plastics. However, many of these partnerships fail or turn out to be pain points for recycling companies:

*“The biggest driver is regulation. Maybe I will ask you not to quote me on this. Brand owners, their voluntary commitments, this is bullshit, definitely, all of them, each one is worse than the other. [...] Only bull shit. Actually, our basic mistake is to build up assets, recycling plants, by relying on voluntary commitments of brand owners. These voluntary commitments that they take is really a mean to bring regulators for slowing the pace by telling them “don’t worry, we are managing this problem”, more or less. However, without any regulatory framework, this [commitments] will be post-poned. They will find any excuse to say “we could not do it””.*

General manager of a recycling business unit

This analysis of a well-informed interviewee is confirmed by many other stakeholders interacting with MNCs. Through these three strategies, one can observe that MNCs are facing tensions between their commitments that require sustainable solutions to manage plastic waste, and competitive constraints. Regulation becomes then the main issue to be managed: this is where meta-organizations intervene.

For each national context, associations have been created by corporations to deal with the specific issue of plastic waste. Led by MNCs operating in the food and beverages companies, they have similar missions consisting of reducing the environmental impact of plastic waste and developing recycling systems and circular economy. Diversity of the membership is in



itself diverse: the meta-organization in Thailand gathers only Western MNCs operating the same industry. Conversely, in Ivory Coast the meta-organization has very different members, from foreign MNCs to local SMEs start-ups of the recycling and packaging industries. Through cases, meta-organizations develop different types of activities. The most visible activities are related waste management infrastructure, meta-organizations and their members using funds to support local stakeholders operating in the waste management industry. Depending on the case, the meta-organization is more or less autonomous in the choice of these projects. In most of the cases, we observed challenges met by the secretariat of the meta-organization to support its own projects: compared to the size of their individual CSR budgets, MNCs dedicate few resources to the projects directly managed by the meta-organization. In the “worst” case (Ghana), the meta-organization is only an intermediary between local stakeholders and the “real” funders, which are usually subsidiaries of the MNCs. In the case of the Vietnamese meta-organization, MNCs dedicate high amounts of financial resources to scale the projects supported.

However, this very visible side of meta-organizations should not “hide” another one: political activities conducted by the meta-organization. Depending on the case, these activities can consist of coordinating the position of the members regarding future regulation, lobbying the government on behalf of the members, and in some cases participating in the organization of the multi-stakeholder deliberation at the national level. For example, members of the meta-organization only use for having meetings in order to discuss regulation issues, and coordinate their position before negotiations that will happen with the government and other stakeholders. In Vietnam, the meta-organization is going farer by giving a mandate to the secretariat for managing the relationship.

*“Before the relationship with the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment was managed by our former vice-president who was also general manager of Nestlé brands in Vietnam. But he left and it is rather me, with the help of the members, for sometimes, to contact the Ministry for some issues. I don’t know if you are aware but now there is a debate about the Fs, which is the amount each producer should per kilo of plastics or aluminum to be recycled.”*

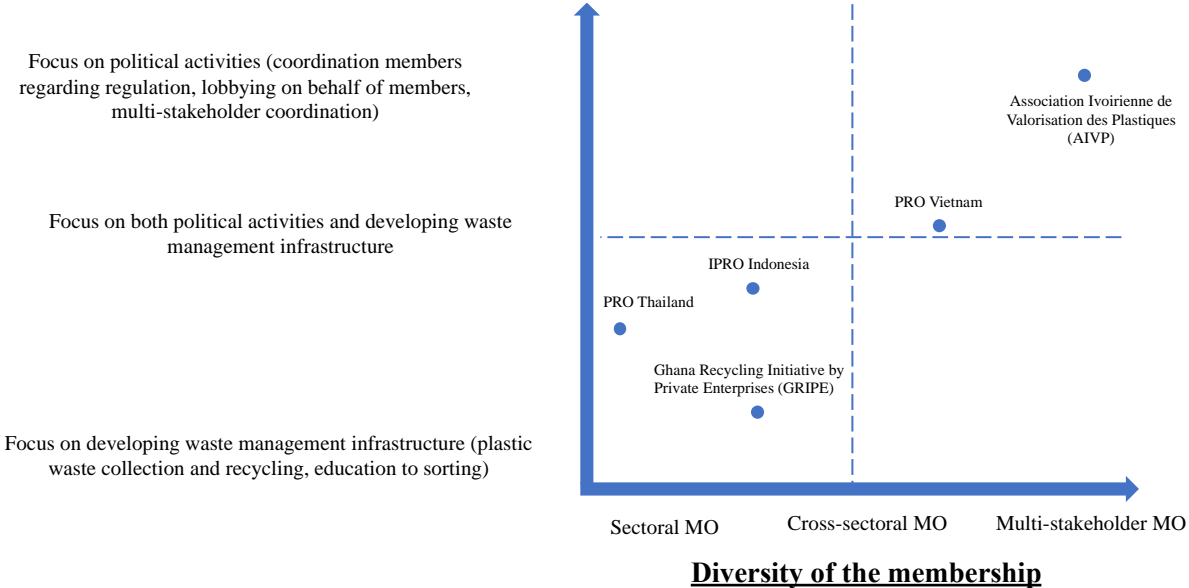
General manager of the meta-organization in Vietnam

Thus, the political role of the meta-organization in Vietnam is much more important than in Ghana. In another case (Ivory Coast), the meta-organization has an even much more important role: It is pro-active in the organization of the discussions that shall happen between a wider array of stakeholders.

*“In a very first time, we consulted each stakeholder independently. And now we agreed that It was time to set up a working group, start to lead an in-depth reflection. So if there is one thing that we have been doing well for the past year, this is it. We have been able that, all stakeholders involved, should they be members of the association or public authorities, we all agree that we must sit at the table to discuss. Now It is the role of the association to organize these different meetings”*

General Manager of the meta-organization in Ivory Coast

To sum up, meta-organizations are different in terms of organizational attributes (diversity of the membership, autonomy of its secretariat) and of activities. The figure below show how polarized are meta-organizations between their diversity and the type of activities their members decide to delegate. The two following sections of findings aim to explain these differences.



**Figure 2 Descriptive typology of MNCs-lead meta-organizations tackling plastic pollution**

## **2. Inter-organizational level: meta-organizations as drivers, products and vehicles of regulation**

Our study reveals an unexpected finding: MOs led by powerful MNCs are requesting for mandatory regulation. Even if in most cases this position is not officially stated, the different interviewees interacting with the meta-organizations relate how much importance and attention is given to this issue. The type of regulation pushed by the MNCs through meta-organizations has to be specified: drawing upon the “polluter-pays” principle, the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is a regulation tool that makes polluters responsible for each product sold on the market. Modalities of management of these fees are diverse but usually depend on a third-party organization entitled “Producer Responsibility Organization (PRO)”. In most of the countries within which it has already been implemented (mainly Europe, North America and industrialized countries in Asia), this organization is controlled by producers themselves, resulting in a hybrid. However, the implementation of this type of scheme is not guaranteed in most of the cases studied here and meta-organizations lie at the core of this regulation issue, between its members and the government to lobby.

**Meta-organizations led by MNCs are one of the main drivers for this type of mandatory regulation**, but not the only ones. International organizations, such as IUCN, World Bank and development aid stakeholders assist governments towards this type of regulation. Before gaining momentum among national governments of emerging countries, EPR regulation was already existing and dormant in many of them. In Thailand and Vietnam, governments had enacted laws for voluntary EPR since 2000’s, meaning government limited its scope to a simple recommendation to be followed by producers. EPR came back after other regulation tools failed to solve the issue of plastic pollution between 2013 and 2017. In Ivory Coast and Thailand, plastic bans on some single-use plastics (such as plastic bags and straws) had no effects and even produced backlashes from petrochemical and packaging industries having their businesses threatened. This is how EPR regulation was able to come back at the core of the discussions but with one major difference: MNCs, through their meta-organizations, agreed to make it compulsory.

**Meta-organizations are also potential products of the EPR regulation.** Because most of them remain at an experimental stage, supporting projects managing only a few hundreds tons of waste, their effect on the issue of plastic pollution is highly limited. The only-case we

describe as starting to scale its funding projects is the Vietnamese one. When we collected for this case, the EPR regulation was imminent and was planned to be mandatory and implemented only six months later. The secretariat was made of eight full-time employees dedicated to the development of waste management projects. This team is described by its manager as too small to manage all the projects but have funded recycling systems at a much higher scale than any of the other MOs studied. At the opposite, we observe that the absence of regulatory threat does not enhance collective action by MNCs. In Ghana, discussions regarding the future regulation are both slow and at an early-stage: the MNC-led MO has a very small a secretariat getting few resources from the members, and its activities are focusing on symbolic CSR. In Indonesia, a similar situation explains why members of the MO develop their own waste management projects and the MO focuses on communication.

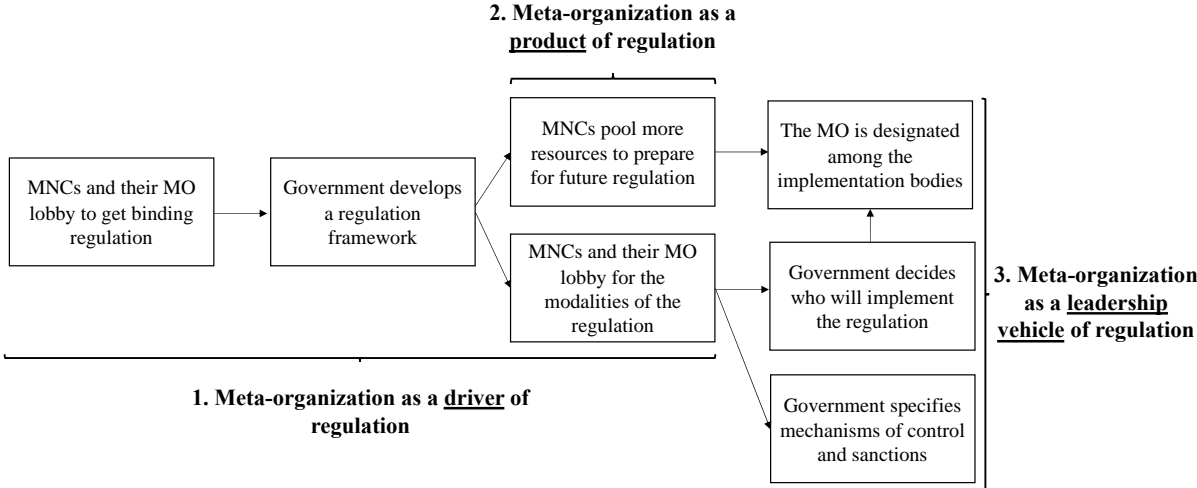
Lastly, MNCs project meta-organizations are future vehicles of the EPR regulation once implemented. As previously mentioned, the EPR for waste management consists of delegating the collection of fees due by the producers to a producer responsibility organization (PRO) which is not supposed to be state-owned. In all the cases studied, meta-organizations are pushing for this modality of management, some of them having an interesting name revealing their ambition: Packaging Recovering Organization, the acronym being... PRO (PRO Vietnam, PRO Thailand, IPRO for Indonesia...). In Ivory Coast, this ambition is made explicit:

*“Obviously, our targets are very clear, it is that the association becomes as soon as possible a Producer Responsibility Organization [...] And as I already said, a PRO, at the end of the day, is a company. The only difference is that It does not pay dividends to shareholders, so It is a non-profit organization acting as a public service. [...] Our strategy, since the beginning, is about taking the leadership on this question, so that no one should impose us anything”*

General Manager of the meta-organization in Ivory Coast

To sum up, preparing the meta-organization for acting as a PRO has two objectives. First, this provides the opportunity for preventing any form of control from the government on the collection and management of the funds. Then, once deliberation has produced this output, the meta-organization will be the most prepared entity to be in charge of this mission. By getting this position, MNCs expect the meta-organization to gain momentum by scaling operations supporting waste management industries. Above all, the meta-organization will have

accumulated different kinds of resources - experience, networks within the waste management industry and the most important: optimizing the financial cost of each ton of waste subsidized – that will put its members in an advantageous position compared to their competitors. Indeed, without any regulation MNCs need to manage a tension between the efforts and resources invested into the management of plastic waste while local competitors are operating “business-as-usual”, with no resources dedicated to this issue. By getting a mandatory EPR regulation, MNCs expect to reduce the number of free riders.



**Figure 3 Different types of interactions of MNCs-led meta-organizations**

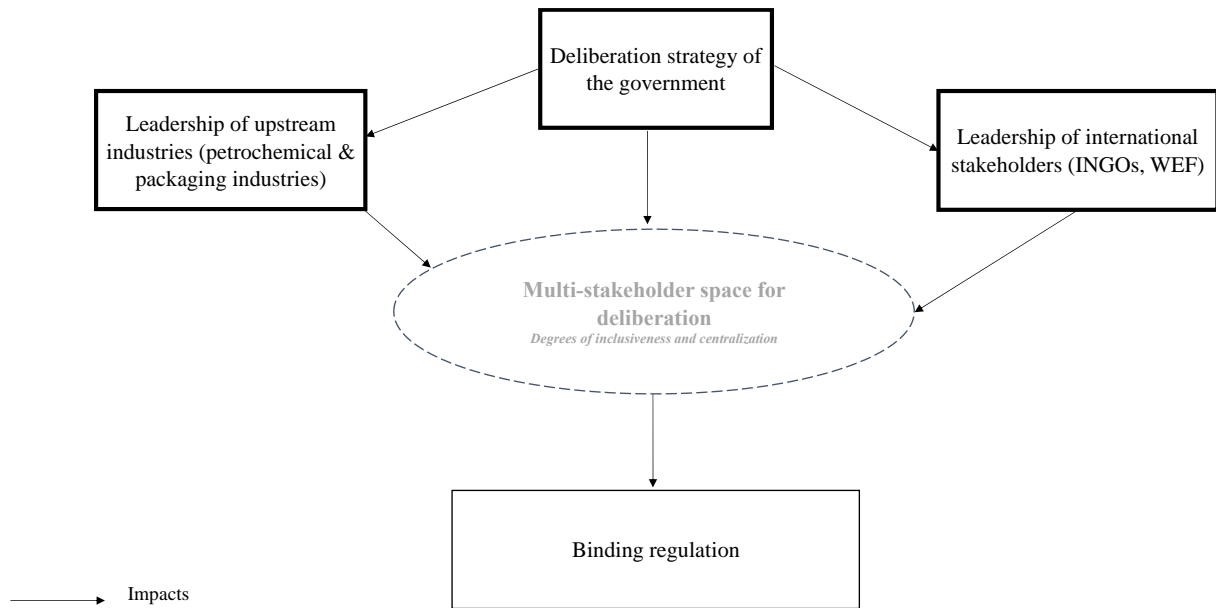
**3. National context: the dependency of MNCs and their meta-organizations on multi-stakeholder deliberation**

To understand how and why meta-organizations are successful – or not - in getting a mandatory EPR regulation, elements of the national context are crucial. Deliberative strategy of the government affects the configuration of the multi-stakeholder space, thus the deliberative processes supposed to produce the regulation. Deliberative processes with high inclusivity of stakeholders are held and organized by international stakeholders such as WWF, IUCN, World Economic Forum (WEF) or UNEP. Because of their capacity of creating open and transparent platforms, these organizations give the opportunity to the government to focus on the outputs of the deliberation process. These outputs are supposed to be more balanced than without the participation of stakeholders from civil society and other industries. In the national contexts where government did not get any help from these international organizations, it has been observed a pro-activity of the upstream industries (petrochemistry and packaging) that even got

central within the configuration. However, organizing an inclusive deliberation with the help of international stakeholders does provide the full explanation of the Vietnamese and Ghanaian contexts. In Ghana, a multi-stakeholder platform developed through a partnership between the government and the WEF has been ensuring highly inclusive discussions, although with very poor outcomes regarding regulation. When data was collected, stakeholders expected to get a very first framework of the future EPR system by end of 2024, while It would not be implemented before 2030. As mentioned in the first section of result, the MNCs-led meta-organization in Ghana is characterized by the very limited impact on waste management infrastructure. In Vietnam, the government adopted a different strategy by having many platforms organized by international stakeholders, creating then some parallel but coordinated processes of deliberation:

*“Then we also supported in the development of this decree and this circular as well. In the beginning it was IUCN but then after that we had many others including WWF fund. WWF has also supported the EPR a lot and Rethinking Plastic and other projects like the PRO. PRO supports the EPR a lot through IUCN. Because we have a strategic partnership with them. Actually, we need to share information and not everyone stepping on each other. So we share our efforts. For example, for this workshop our project will support, for the other workshop WWF will support or another or Rethinking Plastics project support. So there are many activities and projects at the same time supporting and pushing for the EPR to be in the law to be in the decree and to be in the circular for implementation.”*

Program manager at IUCN Vietnam



**Figure 3 Mechanisms shaping the configuration of multi-stakeholder space**

### **Multilevel mechanisms of collective action led by MNCs to tackle grand challenges**

In the previous section, we described the five cases of meta-organizations and how they were developed by MNCs to provide responses to plastic pollution in emerging countries. In this section, we show how these findings are articulated to provide a multi-level model theorizing how collective action is leveraged by MNCs in order to respond to grand challenges (see diagram below). In this model, the level of the **national context** has a decisive influence on how the collective action of MNCs gets successful in getting a specific type of mandatory regulation. *Leadership in the multi-stakeholder deliberation* relies on the strategic choices made by national governments to agree on solutions to tackle plastic pollution. By receiving support from international organizations, governments reduce risks of getting their leadership contested by powerful industries whose social license to operate is threatened. But support from international organizations is not enough, as more inclusiveness may create inertia and impede any *mandatory regulation* to occur rapidly.

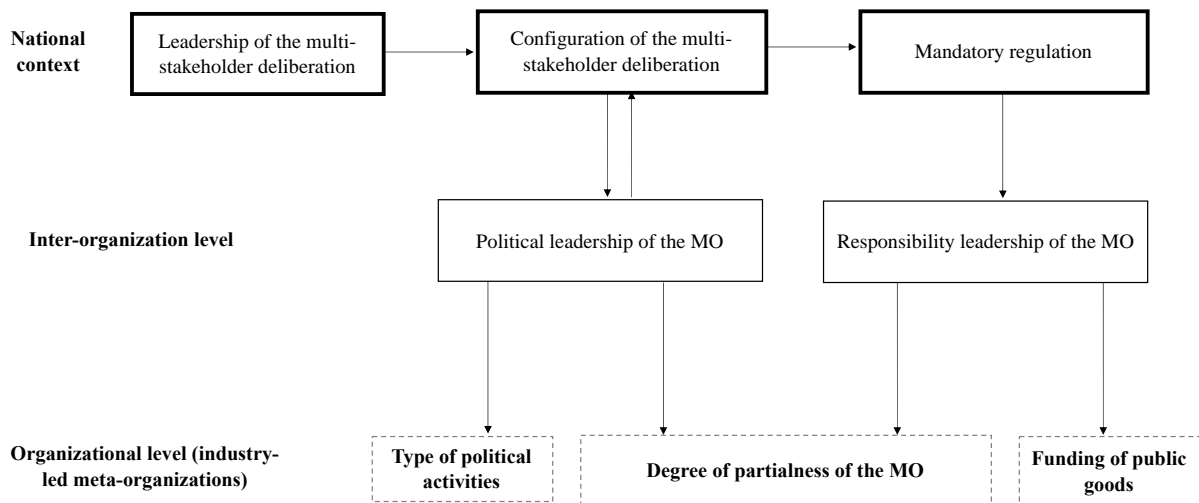
This deliberation leadership shapes the configuration of the multi-stakeholder space which in its turn affects the *political leadership* of the MO led by MNCs at the **inter-organizational level**. By political leadership, we mean the capacity of this MO to push for a specific form of mandatory regulation already implemented in European countries. The configuration of the multistakeholder space affects the degree of political leadership attributed to the MO by its

members. When the multi-stakeholder space is actively shaped by the government supported by international organizations, efficiency of the deliberation process is at risk. By supporting the efforts international organizations and developing close relationship with them and the government, the Vietnamese MO and its members contributed to the efficiency of the deliberation process expected

This specific type of regulation may attribute a *responsibility leadership* to the MO within the industry (by being recognized as a Producer Responsibility Organization by the government). This responsibility leadership is expected to produce many outcomes at the **organizational level of the MO**. First, MNCs plan to get an optimization advantage for the MO *for funding public goods*. This funding of public goods is made to manage externalities generated by the consumption of products provided by MNCs. Above all this status of responsibility leader shall provide a legitimacy to attract more producing companies, while mandatory regulation is expected to bring rules that will prevent the risk of free-riding coming from local competitors of MNCs. Another consequence of the implementation of the mandatory regulation is on the *degree of partialness* of the MO, especially its greater autonomy. This autonomy will occur through a new governance with a stronger secretariat, “authorized” by the regulation to secure resources according to the effective responsibility of each of its members, including MNCs. If no case had already been at this stage when data was collected, this greater autonomy will make the MO closer to a “complete organization” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011) than to a meta-organization. Stakeholders expect the MO to get most of the organizational elements described by the literature: strengthened membership with strict rules to be part of the MO, resulting in a hierarchy implying that members respect a governance empowering the secretariat with more resources and a wider scope to make decisions.



## Multi-level mechanisms of MNCs-led meta-organizations tackling environmental grand challenges



## Discussion

In this paper, we described how MNCs leveraged meta-organizations to tackle plastic pollution, the type of interactions they developed to promote mandatory regulation of their industry and how their leadership was influenced by the national context. Furthermore, we highlighted how they were used as organizational devices to drive firms' collective action, and participate in the multistakeholder collective action. In this section, we contrast our findings by discussing our contributions to both literature on political CSR (PCSR) and theory of meta-organizations (TMO): first, we discuss the contribution

In this paper, we have shown that meta-organizations are essential “devices” (Dumez & Renou, 2020) used by MNCs to assume a political role and tackle plastic pollution. First, we described that MNCs have developed a specific type of collective action: meta-organizations focused on plastic pollution, rather than using more conventional and well-known devices, such as chambers of commerce and trade associations. Then, we suggested that, for MNCs, these MOs are “convenient” devices to combine political and CSR activities: political activities are expected to radically transform the meta-organization and its activities through mandatory regulation. These findings are both in line and in contrast with other works studying meta-organizations. If some contributions underlined the growing number of business meta-organizations tackling environmental grand challenges (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Dumez & Renou, 2020), most of them studied MOs either focusing on voluntary CSR and self-regulation,

such as standard-setting (Seidl & Rasche, 2019), or traditional corporate activities such as lobbying in the case of chambers of commerce and trade association (Dumez & Renou, 2020).

We highlighted the mechanisms bringing MOs to focus more or less on each type of activities: national context influences the activities and organizational elements of the MOs. Funding of waste management (CSR activities) start being scaled when implementation of mandatory regulation is close and its implementation depend highly on the multistakeholder deliberation process occurring at the national level. These mechanisms at the national level influence the political leadership of the MOs, their members leaving more or less autonomy on this basis. Lastly, mandatory regulation is expected to provide a responsibility leadership to the MO that will gain autonomy. Referring to the five types of organizational elements defined by (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011), we highlight that MNCs as members, expect this regulation to redefine their decided social order: mandatory rules will increase the authority and degree of partialness the MO. Monitoring and sanctions under the scope of national governments and their agencies, even if limited, are supposed to constrain all producers within the industry. The implementation of such a regulation will also result into a more balanced hierarchy. To sum up, MNCs as members expect mandatory regulation to transform their MOs into a more “complete” organization (Ahrne et al., 2017; Rasche et al., 2013), self-regulation and voluntary CSR being perceived as complementary and temporary solutions. We discuss more deeply this finding through the lens of political CSR (PCSR) in the next paragraph.

Regarding the political role of MNCs, we contribute to the literature on pCSR (political CSR) by highlighting how MNCs responded at the national level when being challenged as global brands contributing to a pressing environmental problem. Even if MNCs have experimented market-based solutions and voluntary CSR programs, core of their response consists of a hybrid form of regulation across our five cases. But to get this hybrid regulation, subsidiaries of MNCs depend on national governments, both in terms of deliberation and implementation. While Reinecke & Donaghey (2021) have highlighted how MNCs could act as guarantors and enablers of multistakeholder arenas in the case of the garment industry in Bangladesh, our findings suggest that MNCs of the food & beverage industries are not the most central players to lead deliberation regarding plastic pollution. In line with previous works (Banerjee, 2018; Nyberg, 2021), we even found that MNCs from the petrochemical industries hinder both an inclusive deliberation (Marks et al., 2023) and efforts provided by more “virtuous” MNCs (operating in the food & beverages industry) to push their favored regulation.

Then, MNCs are dependent on the legal prerogatives of governments to implement: rules, monitoring and sanctions are perceived as essential to guarantee that as many corporations as possible fund waste management solutions. This reveals that MNCs, even if leading mass markets in various emerging countries, need support and resources from national governments to contribute to public goods on a large scale basis (Valente & Crane, 2010). However, the context of Vietnam brings empirical evidence that MNCs, by engaging with international NGOs, may be in position to bring a positive contribution to both deliberation and implementation. To sum up, our findings show that MNCs are highly dependent on national governments, far from the political role of corporations guaranteeing deliberation and providing public goods instead of national governments (Scherer et al., 2016; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

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*Official information for each case of meta-organization*

<b>Case/MO</b>	<b>Who are we?</b>	<b>Vision</b>	<b>Mission</b>	<b>Target/Ambition</b>
Ghana Recycling Initiative by Private Enterprises (GRIPE)	An industry-led coalition formed under the Association of Ghana Industries (AGI) with a stake in the plastics sector to integrate sustainable waste management solutions, particularly around plastics	Integrating sustainable plastic waste management solutions in Ghana.	To implement recycling and second-life solutions that reduce the impacts of post-consumer plastic waste on the environment.	N/A
Association Ivoirienne de Valorisation des Plastiques (AIVP)	An associative platform of stakeholders from both private and public sectors committed to reduce the environmental impact of plastic waste	Develop sustainable solutions to the environmental impact of plastic waste	Pooling efforts of stakeholders to create a coordinated system for plastic waste Promoting circular economy among corporate sector and public authorities	Reach zero plastic waste in the environment by 2030
Packaging Recovery Organization (PRO) Thailand	A network of organizations that cooperate in sustainable packaging management.	Driving the recovery and recycling of used packaging	The PRO Thailand Network is committed to driving sustainable packaging management through the principles of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), emphasizing the participation of all sectors including the government, private sector, and civil society	N/A
Packaging Recovery Organization (PRO) Vietnam	A coalition of leading FDI and Vietnamese companies having high prestige from consumer goods, packaging, retail, and import industries	To be one of the key contributors to make Vietnam green, clean and beautiful.	While doing business in Vietnam, we will drive the circular packaging economy and make recycling more accessible and sustainable.	Our ambition is that, by 2030, all packaging material that members put into the market is collected for recycling.
Indonesia Packaging Recovery Organization (IPRO)	<p>A voluntary, non-profit, independent, and professionally managed organization, focused on increasing the collection and recycling of used packaging</p> <p>An initiative of companies that are members of the Packaging and Recycling Association for Sustainable Environment (PRAISE)</p>	To be Indonesia leading organization that holistically provide the solution for post-consumer waste by employing Circular Economy through multi-stakeholders collaborations and fostering responsible practices by industry	Establishing a professionally run organization and maintaining Packaging Recovery Organization as leading packaging waste management system to build circular economy in Indonesia. Partner with relevant stakeholders including government, academia, civil society and others in order to increase the awareness and engagement in waste management. Promote relevant industry participation in Packaging Recovery Organization, both downstream and upstream to ensure optimum impact on sustainable collection and recycling efforts.	Our goal is to increase the collection of used packaging and recycled claims by verifying financial flows, adhering to social and environmental standards following international best practices towards a circular economy in Indonesia.