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## Towards local sustainability: How intermediation fosters social innovation

Romain Slitine<sup>a,\*</sup>, Didier Chabaud<sup>a</sup>, Nadine Richez-Battesti<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> IAE Paris-Sorbonne, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 75 013 Paris, France

<sup>b</sup> LEST-CNRS, 35 avenue Jules Ferry, 13626 Aix-en-Provence Cedex, France

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of social innovation has received considerable interest in recent years, both in research and policy. One of the main challenges lies in understanding how to move from experimentation to spreading social innovation and bringing it to widespread use. This is how concrete objectives for sustainable development can be achieved in a given territory. Intermediation plays an essential but little-studied role in the spread of social innovation. In this study, we endeavoured to understand how the social innovation intermediation process is constructed and its effects. We interconnected the actor-network theory and *middleground* approach to separate the practices and dynamics at work in an emblematic case: the *Start-Up de Territoire* (in France). By entering the 'black box' of the social innovation factory, we observed how the role of social innovation intermediary is built gradually over time. We then identified three main social innovation intermediation processes that condition its scale-up: building the vision of the territory, expanding the network, and defining how the different levels interrelate by distinguishing between top-down and bottom-up translations.

Our analysis contributes to the literature on social innovation by providing an interpretative framework to understand how intermediation dynamics interrelate at different levels. This contribution thus makes it possible to strengthen the theoretical foundation of social innovation and explore the connection between social innovation and transformation.

### 1. Introduction

Social innovation is garnering growing interest from citizens and public authorities. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has increasingly recognised the significance of social innovation in its policy frameworks and recommendations, emphasising its role in driving economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. The European Union, aligning with this vision, initiated an ambitious 'Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI)', which has been made permanent within the European Social Fund since 2021. Numerous social innovations have emerged globally, such as the Aravind Eye Care System in India, which revolutionised eye care with high-quality, affordable surgeries; Territoire Zéro Chômeur de Longue Durée (Territory Zero for the Long-Term Unemployed) in France, aimed at creating employment opportunities for long-term unemployed individuals within specific geographic areas; and the Social Innovation Clusters supported by the European Union.<sup>1</sup> Alongside this dynamic, we are seeing specialised laboratories take

shape, such as the Centre for Research on Social Innovations (CRISES) at the University of Quebec in Montréal (UQAM) from as early as 1986 as well as a strong surge in research work since the mid-2000s. While social innovation is the subject of multiple interpretations and continues to stir controversy (Solis-Navarrete et al., 2021; Richez-Battesti and Bidet, 2024), initial research emphasises the creative nature of social innovation, a new response aimed at bringing about greater well-being for individuals and/or communities (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Since then, the conceptualisation has gained clarity, and we propose to start from the inclusive definition offered by Bouchard (2011) and often chosen by the CRISES. According to her, social innovation is '*a process initiated by social actors driven to respond to an aspiration, to fulfil a need, to offer a solution or to seize an opportunity for action in order to change social relations, transform a scenario or provide new cultural guidance*' (p. 6).

Many researchers have described social innovation as a new approach for addressing unmet social needs (Moulaert et al., 2015). However, social innovation, which promotes social cohesion, is inherently a territorialised process (Solis-Navarrete et al., 2021). There is a

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [romain@slitine.com](mailto:romain@slitine.com) (R. Slitine).

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ess-europe.eu/fr/publication/les-clusters-dinnovation-ecologique-et-sociale-dans-lunion-europeenne>.

clearly stated purpose connected to the economic and social cohesion of the territories and the development of activities that are useful to its inhabitants. Thus, social innovation is firmly rooted in the territory from which it emerges (Tricarico et al., 2022; Lacroix and Slitine, 2019). It plays a central part in contributing to sustainable development (Kamaludin, 2023) and to the emergence of a ‘solidarity-based city’ (Richez-Battesti and Vallade, 2017).

The whole challenge thus lies in understanding how to move from the experimentation stage to that of spreading social innovation and bringing it into widespread use (Richez-Battesti, 2015). Recent literature highlights the key role played by social innovation intermediaries (Klarin and Suseno, 2023). Following Ho and Yoon (2022, p. 1), we defined social innovation intermediation as ‘actors in social entrepreneurship that aim to deliver some level of social innovation in the context they work in and assist social entrepreneurs to build their capabilities and diffuse innovative ideas’. Inspired by technological innovation frameworks (Howells, 2006), social innovation intermediaries are ‘innovation facilitators’ (Klerkx and Leeuwis, 2009) acting as ‘an agent or broker in any aspect of the innovation process between two or more parties’ (Howells, 2006 p. 720). These organisations are indispensable because of the intricate nature of social problems, which require the coordinated efforts of multiple stakeholders, each contributing unique resources and expertise to devise and implement effective solutions (de Abreu and de Andrade, 2019). Social innovation intermediaries enable a process of collective action based on the broad coming together of stakeholders (organisations of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), public authorities, local companies, and residents) and their participation (Richez-Battesti et al., 2012). This perspective makes it possible to move away from the conception of social innovation as an entrepreneurial vector offering a one-off solution to social problems and considers it a process of co-construction and collective overcoming of problem situations (Magalhaes et al., 2020).

However, most studies focus on codifying the functions (Ho and Yoon, 2022) and effects (Barraket, 2020) of social innovation intermediaries in a generic and often territorial manner. The literature does not contain a general framework for analysing how social innovation intermediation becomes structured over time. Consequently, our research aimed to understand how intermediation is emerging to foster a process of territorial social innovation.

To gain a detailed analysis of these social innovation processes, we proposed dissecting the practices and dynamics at work in an emblematic case: the Start-Up de Territoire. Initiated in 2016 by the Archer Group in Romans-sur-Isère in the Drôme, this innovation sparked significant interest in local development actors, who transposed SUT into their respective territories in France (16 active territories in 2024), before being recognised by the State as part of the ‘Territoires d’innovation — grande ambition’ [Innovation Territories - Great Ambition] (TIGA) programme. Within this framework, the Banque des Territoires granted €23 million to help deploy social innovation.

We began by recalling the fundamentals of social innovation intermediation and presented our theoretical framework, which combines the actor-network and creativity theories. Second, we characterised our methodology, case study, and the Start Up de Territoire dynamic to capture the social innovation intermediation processes. Finally, the results were presented and discussed.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Intermediation in social innovation

The recent literature has highlighted the crucial role of intermediation in the implementation and dissemination of social innovation (Klarin and Suseno, 2023). Extending Howells’s (2006) approach, Maisonnasse et al. (2013) emphasised that innovation mediators develop coordination between organisations. Additionally, in Muller’s (2021) view, some SSE actors can be conceptualised as social innovation

intermediaries, combining a relational role (ability to mobilise and connect disparate actors) and a cognitive role (in the circulation of knowledge and resources). This enabled them to stimulate collective projects of general interest in their territories. According to Ho and Yoon (2022), social innovation intermediaries demonstrate their ability to facilitate the creation of new networks, mobilise appropriate resources, connect diverse actors, harmonise their interests, propose training programs, and legitimise their actions. They also play a specific role in supporting the social enterprise creation dynamics by involving a wide variety of stakeholders. The authors emphasise the capacity of intermediary organisations to help ‘create opportunities and overcome the difficulties faced by social entrepreneurs, social enterprises and broader ecosystems’ (Ho and Yoon, 2022, p. 2). Recent discussions emphasise that the intermediary can play a facilitator role in enabling other actors, in particular, entrepreneurs, to achieve their objectives (McElwee et al., 2018). This function makes it possible to ‘encourage others to act in an innovative way and sponsor, channel and promote their entrepreneurial capacity’ (McElwee et al., 2018, p. 174). According to Avelino et al. (2019), intermediaries ‘translate, spread and connect social innovations across different sectors and localities, and they co-shape narratives of change in relation to game-changing developments’. This multilevel dimension of social innovation intermediaries is particularly highlighted in the literature on transition studies, which describes how intermediaries operate to connect local experimental projects and the construction of a ‘global’ niche for transitions. A systemic intermediary operates at all levels—niche, regime, and landscape—promoting an explicit transition programme and taking the lead in change efforts across the entire system (Geels and Deuten, 2006). From this perspective, intermediaries facilitate the transition towards greater social and environmental sustainability (Snellman et al., 2023; Nilsson et al., 2020; Kivimaa et al., 2019).

To date, research has mainly focused on the role and influence of social innovation intermediaries, emphasising the importance of intermediation in social welfare (Venugopal and Viswanathan, 2019; Visser et al., 2017). Despite advances in knowledge, the emergence of intermediation processes and their contribution to changes in the scale of social innovation remain poorly understood (Muller, 2021). It is now necessary to go beyond the description of the social innovation intermediary’s functions (Wegner et al., 2023) to gain a more detailed understanding of how intermediation is constructed over time. Focusing on processes allows us to enter into the ‘internal mechanics’ of intermediation and better understand how it works.

Moreover, while research has emphasised the importance of building intermediary networks for the dissemination of social innovation, it has often neglected the territorial dimension (Ho and Yoon, 2022). However, social innovations emerge in territories (Solis-Navarrete et al., 2021). A territory is a complex system that cannot be transformed by a single social initiative alone (Slitine et al., 2024). The importance of proximity-driven mobilisation dynamics for local development has already been demonstrated (Torre, 2023). Indeed, connections are established between project leaders within territories, creating various forms of territorialised networks of initiatives. These networks have the potential to affect the local transition dynamics. This approach requires considering not isolated initiatives but ‘systems of territorialized innovation’ (Glon and Pecqueur, 2020), within which different forms of relationships between stakeholders can be identified.

Therefore, the territorial dimension of social innovation as a ‘field of action’ was a crucial theoretical assumption of our paper (see also Tricarico et al., 2022). We also hypothesised that the effectiveness of social innovation intermediaries is influenced by their ability to navigate across the micro (individuals and local initiatives), meso (organizational and territorial networks), and macro (public policies and institutional frameworks) levels of social and economic action.

Consequently, we proposed a theoretical framework with a reading grid suited to these processual and territorial dimensions.

## 2.2. A framework for analysing social innovation intermediation over time and space

To study this process, we proposed a combination of two theoretical approaches. On the one hand, the actor-network theory (ANT) (Callon and Latour, 2013; Akrich et al., 1988) proposes a process-based approach to network creation, in which intermediation is placed at the heart of innovation construction (Cohendet et al., 2010). ANT offers tools for analysis and useful concepts for the study of technical innovations, which we proposed to adopt to understand how territorial social innovation is created. To complement this processual approach, we mobilised the notion of the ‘middleground’ derived from the theory of city creativity (Simon, 2009; Cohendet et al., 2010), to give a concrete form to the action of the social innovation intermediary. The middle-ground continuously connects the formal units (‘the upperground’) of the territory (firms, research centres, administrative departments, etc.) with informal active units of the vibrant ‘underground’ (diverse informal groups, communities, creative talent, etc.). These informal entities often spawn new and disruptive ideas, trends, and usage modes. This combination of ANT and the middleground approach enabled us to propose a relevant analytical framework for studying the practices and actions of social innovation intermediation.

### 2.2.1. The social innovation intermediation process: the ANT

ANT has already been used in research on social and solidarity economies and appears relevant in analysing social innovation dynamics (Bollinger Raedersdorf, 2018). Social innovation is a process that develops over time. ANT offers useful analytical tools for studying technical innovations that we propose to adopt to understand territorial social innovation. The starting point of the ANT is a reflection on the concept of network conceived of as a ‘metaorganisation’ that brings together acting parties. These are ‘human’ (individual or collective) and ‘non-human’ (technology, standard, location, etc.) actors, liable to be interconnected with others to form an innovation network (Latour, 2007). It is thus by looking at situations as ‘a set of human or non-human, individual or collective entities, defined by their roles, their identity, their programme’ (Latour, 2020 p. 65) that one can begin to understand them. According to ANT, the success or failure of an innovative project does not depend on the intrinsic characteristics of an innovation but on a network capable of linking heterogeneous ‘actors’. Another key concept is the ‘controversy’, which is a prerequisite for network formation. Whether these facts have been worked out is controversial. Controversies (and compromises) become reference points for identifying the dynamics of a network and the evolution of its network convergence to ultimately arrive at a consensual technical object (or innovation).

According to Callon and Latour, an innovation network assumes a ‘translation’ process, understood as a symbolic relationship ‘that transforms a specific problem statement into the language of another specific statement’ (Callon, 1974 p. 19). Translation thus makes it possible to establish an ‘intelligible link between heterogeneous activities’ and becomes a movement ‘that links statements and issues that are a priori incommensurable and without common measure’ (Callon and Latour, 2013, p. 32). Thus, there can be no innovation network without the intervention and mediation of a translator that facilitates and nurtures the link between the members of these heterogeneous entities. Moreover, this translator must have the legitimacy to be accepted by other members of the network.

The creation of an innovation network involves several stages, as identified by Callon (1986), according to an iterative process (back and forth) with four main stages. First, the ‘problematisation’, based on the expression of controversies, aims to bring out a common questioning to which all involved can agree. This process leads to the formulation of a question that can create convergence among the intentions of various actors. The degree of generality with respect to the singular positions of each participating party is always fairly high. Problematisation is an

exercise in which each entity moves from a context, from a singular and isolated position, to an acceptance of cooperation. The ‘incentive’ phase then occurs to mobilise stakeholders around the proposed solution. It assumes that discursive or material resources are presented to various actors as potential gains derived from their participation in a project. Thus, the solution is commonly accepted as a new concept, and a new network of interests is created. Thereafter, in the ‘enrolment’ phase, each party is offered and accepts a specific part to play in the project through which they will be able to satisfy their respective interests. This transformation phase makes members of the network essential players in an emerging system, and not passive agents of a structure that can operate without them. Lastly, with ‘mobilisation’, the new network begins its action with a view to achieving the proposed solution. The aim is to mobilise allies by coordinating with others effectively by expanding the network of actors, a condition for its lasting future. This analytical framework makes it possible to understand how a question is shared and how actors become connected within a network (Amblard et al., 2015).

### 2.2.2. Situating social innovation intermediation: the middleground

The territorial dimension can be regarded as a field of action for social innovation processes, serving as both a central feature and a distinctive element of a specific or sectoral approach (Moulaert et al., 2013). If ANT enables us to propose analytical tools for thinking about the intermediation process as it unfolds, mobilising the theoretical framework of a creative city, particularly the notion of the ‘middle-ground’, offers us the possibility of understanding how intermediation is a phenomenon situated in a given territory. The creative territory model (Florida and Goodnight, 2005; Cohendet et al., 2010; Bootz et al., 2019) places the collective dynamics of diverse stakeholders at its core. The idea is that creative processes, which are precursors to innovation, occur within an ecosystem (e.g. territory, industry) and are not limited to innovation activities carried out within firms. This approach also provides an interpretative framework for understanding how intermediation dynamics are interrelated at different levels. Thus, innovations depend on the ability of the actors involved to develop and interact with the economic levels of the *underground* (bringing together the creative actors who originate the new ideas) and the *upperground* (the institutional actors; this is the preferred level for the economic promotion of innovations) thanks to the *middleground*. Consequently, the *middleground* is a set of spaces and activities that act as fertile grounds for innovation to flourish. Sarazin et al. (2017) identify four dimensions that form the *middleground*. *Places* are locations where members can meet informally (third places, fab labs, cafés, etc.); *spaces* are designed as cognitive spaces that foster the construction of ideas; and *events* (festivals, conferences, forums, hackathons, etc.) and *projects* (joint projects) offer a shared experience that makes it possible to align the visions of organisation members. The *middleground* will be richer, more dynamic, and more creative as these four components are simultaneously activated (Fig. 1).

## 3. Method

To answer our research question and test our theoretical model, we proposed a single case study that adopted a process approach based on longitudinal data collection.

### 3.1. Methodological approach

We used case studies to allow an ‘explanatory’ analysis (Yin, 2009) to explore situations in which the intervention being evaluated had no single, clear set of outcomes. As Hlady-Rispal (2015) reminds us, the ambition of a case study is to generate theories from observations and descriptions. The case study approach makes it possible to analyse new and complex subjects in detail and in depth ‘in their specific context for the purposing of confronting theory with the empirical world’ (Piekkari et al., 2009). The single case study makes it possible to mobilise a great



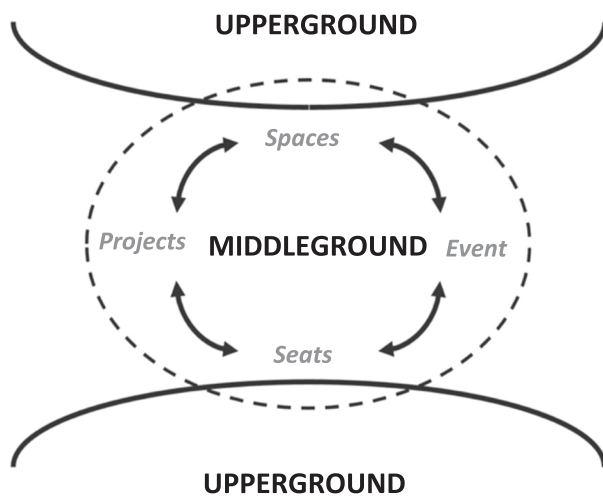


Fig. 1. The four key mechanisms of middleground spaces, projects, events, and places.

(Source: Sarazin et al., 2017.)

wealth of data to reveal a phenomenon—that of intermediation—little studied until now by the scientific community (Royer and Zarlowski, 2014). Moreover, as Yin (2009) points out, a single case is relevant if it is longitudinal, and the aim is to study how certain conditions or phenomena evolve over time.

The case we sampled followed the guidelines suggested by Pettigrew (1990), in particular because the case studies were ‘highly visible cases’ in which the process was ‘transparently observable’ and contained a ‘high level of experience’ (p. 275).

We chose this case because we had negotiated privileged access to internal data and the possibility of meeting a wide range of players in various territories before starting this research.

From this perspective, the SUT can be considered an instrumental case (Stake, 1995). The Archer Group created this dynamic in 2016 to launch citizen initiatives to serve the territory. A social innovation geographically located within the territory of Valence Romans enjoys broader recognition, both throughout the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region as a whole and at the national level (in large federations such as Coorace or the ESS Lab). Specifically, the dynamic builds in several phases: the territory is mobilised by going out to meet the territory’s inhabitants and economic and social networks, ideation evenings (mobilising several hundred participants) to collectively come up with responses to the territory’s challenges, and support for and launch of projects (taking into account their collective and general interest dimension). To date, the SUT has created or supported fifty projects.

Although SUT is a recent initiative, it is part of a broader innovation dynamic launched by the Archer Group, which was founded in 1987 in Romans-Sur-Isère. Archer, a company that operates as a part of an SSE, aims to contribute to sustainable local development. With more than 1000 employees and a budget of USD 22 million, it is one of the region’s leading economic actors. Furthermore, in 2020, the Archer Group and the Valence Romans Conurbation created a dedicated organisation, Fab T, to manage SUT dynamics and financing and support the emergence and consolidation of new local companies. Through the various actions set in motion to serve local development, the Archer Group and its Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Christophe Chevalier, play key roles as intermediaries of social innovation, which we proposed to capture over the longer term.

### 3.2. Data collection

Our research question required certain types of data. Specifically, it called for largely observation-based longitudinal data and in-depth

interviews collected at least partially in real time (Balogun et al., 2003). Collecting comprehensive and high-quality data through deep and prolonged immersion in the field is essential for such endeavours. Therefore, our case study was based on several complementary data sources from different stages (see Table 1).

From 2010 to 2019, the first author engaged in regular annual exchanges with the CEO of the Archer Group and conducted informal conversations with various stakeholders in the territory, enabling a detailed understanding of the organisation’s evolution.

Between 2020 and 2023, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with the main stakeholders involved in social innovation (founders, supported entrepreneurs, and elected representatives). Although the first author conducted most of the interviews, the three authors who worked on the interview guides adapted them to the specifics of each interviewee. Nevertheless, for each, three inlets were addressed in all cases: the key stages of the person’s journey, the person’s vision of the territory, and the person’s vision of the SUT or Archer Group. During this phase, the first author produced a life story of the Founder of SUT and the current CEO of the Archer Group, Christophe Chevalier, to reflect the entrepreneur’s words in detail and complexity. A total of 14 h of conversation in the interviews were fully transcribed, which were extended by informal conversations. According to Bertaux (2016), the term life story can be used whenever a person tells a researcher about an episode in their life experience in the form of a narrative. A strong relationship of trust between the researcher and the narrator is essential for a life story. The 50 h and 30 min of interviews carried out between October 2017 and March 2022 were fully transcribed and constituted a corpus of 525 pages of verbatim.

In addition, three authors made participant observations each year between 2021 and 2023 in connection with the structuring of the SUT. They attended the annual general meetings of the Archer Group and other public events as participants or speakers. One of the authors was also more actively involved in participation observation in 2019 as he was involved in drafting a call for SUT proposals. Furthermore, we collected many documents, both internal (often confidential) and external (press articles, websites, etc.), from the Archer Group and Fab T. Finally, we reused qualitative data (Chabaud and Germain, 2006) that had been collected by one of the authors during the preparation of a book on the Archer Group published in 2013 (a series of interviews). Secondary data analysis involves investigations in which data collected for a previous study are analysed, either by the same or a different researcher, to explore new questions or use different analysis strategies that were not a part of the primary analysis (Ruggiano and Perry, 2019).

### 3.3. Data analysis

To understand this case, we proposed an abductive approach, which enables us to go back and forth between theory and the phenomenon observed on the ground (Peirce, 1974). We applied a dual-analysis framework to our case study.

First, the process approach (Langley and Tsoukas, 2017) enables a longitudinal understanding of player positioning evolution. One of the major challenges in analysing empirical research using this approach is managing and presenting data to illustrate processes in a state of continuous evolution (Mendez, 2010). To implement this approach, we carried out a ‘narrative strategy’, which made it possible to build a detailed history of the intermediation process based on the data collected. Narratives play a crucial role in process organisation research by describing sequences of events and linking consequences to antecedents over time, making them essential for understanding the nature of organising and complex organizational changes (Ricoeur, 1984; Buchanan and Dawson, 2007). This preliminary stage enabled us to construct a chronology of the intermediation phenomenon that was useful for subsequent analyses. As a supplement, we mobilised the ‘time breakdown strategy’ (Langley, 1999), identifying the main phases in the evolution of the social innovation intermediary’s structure over time.

**Table 1**  
Data collection techniques.

Interviews and life story	<i>Life story</i> Christophe Chevalier, CEO of Archer Group and founder of SUT Regular additional interviews (8 interviews) <i>Archer executive interviews</i> Raphaële Bénilan d'Hérouville, Deputy Director of the Archer Group François Vercouten, Deputy Director of Archer Group Gilles Moncoudiol, Chairman of the Management Board Emmanuelle Benoît, Head of Communications Emeline Macard, Training Manager <i>Interviews with Fab T actors/SUT</i> Michel Nicolas, Director of Fab T (2 interviews) François Monterrat, Fab T Project Manager Carinne Fleury, Fab T Support Manager René Buttin, Head of Fab T Partnerships Elected representatives from the territory Nicolas Daragon, Mayor of Valence, and President of Agglo Valence-Romans Laurent Monnet, Vice-President of Agglo Valence-Romans Marie-Hélène Thoraval, Mayor of Romans-Sur-Isère <i>Interviews with Agglo Valence-Romans civil servants</i> Mourad HADER, Director of Economy Department Marie José Georges, Communications Director <i>Interviews with SUT project owners</i> Pierre Pezziardi (La Ceinture Verte) Ivan Collombet (The Green Belt) Ma Bouteille s'appelle Reviens Éric Marchand (Jardin'Envie) Laura Blaskovic (L'Artisanoscope) François Lignier (Les coulisses de l'image animée) Maryline Chasles (FabLab Romans) Cecilia Garayt (Potagers de Ouf) François Xavier Chambost (Bed in shop) Noémie Volle and Céline Duffy (Recyclerie — Refabrik) Solen Bourgeat (Cocagne/Courte Echelle) <i>Other interviews</i> Eric Beasse, Delegate General of Coorace Federation Pierre Langlade, Director of the GDID Association Group (Bouches du Rhône), Armand Rosenberg, Director of the ValHorizon Group (Ain) Laurent Pinet, Managing Director of the ISACTYS Group (Isère)	19 h - 225 pages of verbatim reports	
	6.5 h 89 pages of verbatim		
	4:40 h—57 pages of verbatim		
	3:35 h - 42 pages of verbatim		
	02:15 h - 26 pages of verbatim		
	8 h — 86 pages of verbatim		
	06:35 h - 78 pages of verbatim		
	Observing participations	Presentations and facilitation of conferences organised by the Archer Group and FabT since 2014 Participation of one of the authors in the drafting of the call for proposals of Banque des Territoires (Territoire d'Innovation Grande Ambition — TIGA) in 2019	
	Non-participating observations	Several immersion trips within the Archer Group for 10 years. Participation in SUT events since 2016	
	Documents	Access to numerous internal and external documents, including confidential (see response to the call for proposals from the Banque des Territoires)	

**Table 1 (continued)**

Reuse of secondary data	Books written by the main actors on SUT, Archer, etc. <i>Livre Économie qu'on aime, Editions Rue de l'Echiquier, 2014 reissue 2017</i> Series of interviews 2013 and 2017
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This enabled us to determine the time intervals that mark the development of the process (Table 3).

In addition, thematic analysis, in accordance with the logic of [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), offered the opportunity to identify, scrutinise, and report on models (themes) working from the data. We coded all interviews and documents using the qualitative analysis software *Atlas.ti*. After an initial coding phase ([Saldaña, 2016](#)), which enabled us to identify a certain number of emerging themes, we conducted theoretical coding derived from our conceptual framework and research question. In particular, we sought to understand how the dynamics of local social innovation were constructed, and where and when they were expressed (places, spaces, events, and projects). [Table 2](#) presents the primary open and theoretical codes used in this study. From these different codes, we carried out a second round of analysis to identify broader themes (e.g. 'top-down translation' and 'bottom-up translation') and wrote analytical memos on each of the identified processes following the recommendations of [Miles et al. \(2018\)](#).

#### 4. Findings

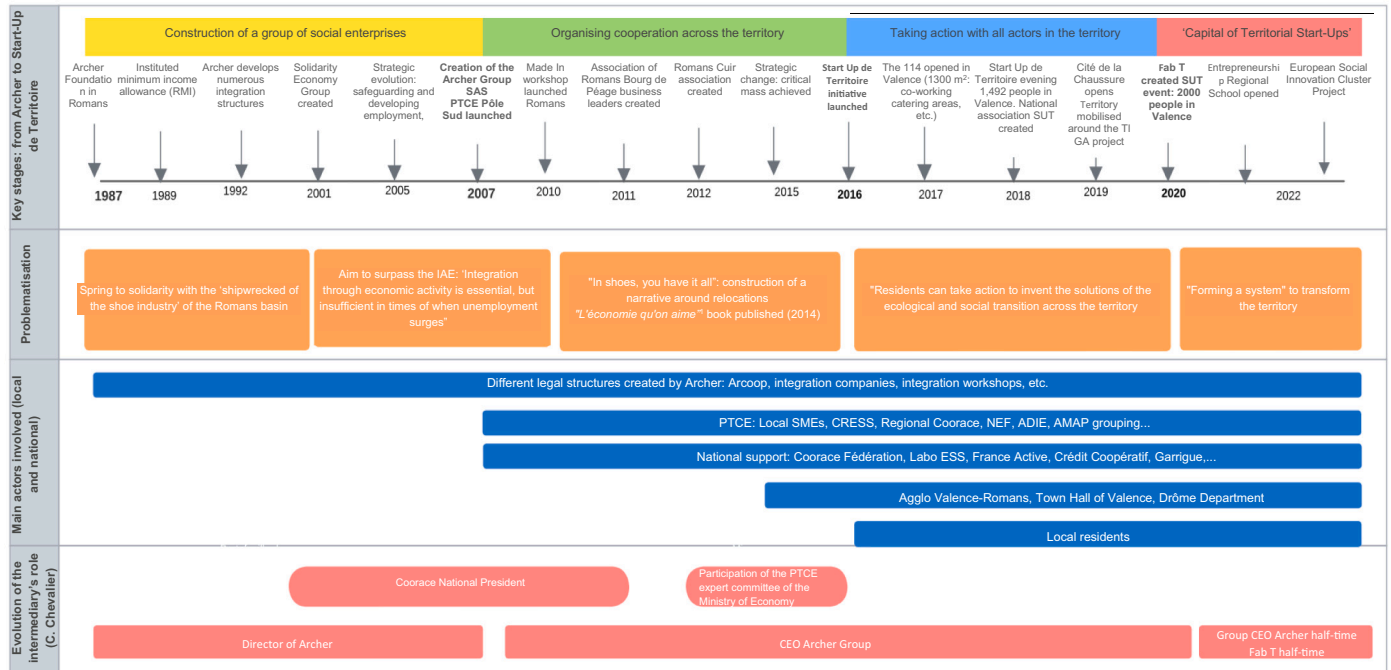
Social innovation intermediation encompasses *function* and *processes*. By entering the 'black box' of the social innovation factory, we could observe how the role of social innovation intermediaries is built gradually over time. We then identified four main social innovation intermediation processes.

**Table 2**

Summary of the main emerging codes and theoretical codes (treatment with *Atlas.ti*).

Emerging codes	Theoretical codes
'Counter culture'	Creativity
'Bringing everyone on board'	Innovation community
'Making worlds talk'	Network construction
'Faire système' (achieve systemhood)	Enrolment - change in attitude
Transformation ambition	Incentive
Facilitation/Helping others engage in entrepreneurship	Legitimacy of intermediary
Public-private partnership	Middleground - +TOOLS
Change of scale	Middleground - event
Building a message	Middleground - place
Creating opportunities	Middleground - project
Difficulties	Middleground - space
Spreading social innovation	Mobilising allies
Personal engagement	Position of the intermediary - Animatorship
Intermediation governance	Problematisation
Common grammar	Underground
Hybridity of private/public actors	Upperground
GES/PTCE preliminary innovations...	
Collective interest/disincentives	
Opening up possibilities/alternatives	
Driving a vision of the territory	
Positioning—Evolution	
Role of the intermediary	
Public support	
Intermediary strategy - evolution	
SUT Definition	
Awareness-raised territory	
Work over the long term	
Values expressed	

**Table 3**  
Major stages of social innovation intermediation (Archer Group).



4.1. The intermediary function: a progressive structuration

We distinguished the different main stages in the evolution of the Archer Group and its CEO Christophe Chevalier towards the role as a social innovation intermediary. During this period, two markers, legitimisation and professionalisation, structured the construction of the social innovation intermediation function in the territory.

When founded in 1987, the Archer association was built around a strong social project to provide emergency employment for hundreds of locals who had lost their jobs following the closure of luxury shoe factories. From the incipient stage (1987) until 2006, the association focused on developing a social economy group made up of different activity clusters, autonomous in their day-to-day operations while connected to the organisation for general resources and strategy. The challenge was to move from a 'classic' work integration social enterprise (WISE) to a group of companies offering sustainable jobs to the long-term unemployed.

Beginning in 2007, parallel to the consolidation of its operations, the Archer Group sought to develop cooperative agreements with various players in the region. Thus, Pôle Sud came into being, the first Territorial Economic Cooperation Hub (PTCE) in France, which brings together players from the Social and Solidarity Economy (the Regional Chamber of the SSE, the Coorace, the Nouvelle Economie Fraternelle (NEF) bank, the Association pour le développement par l'activité économique (ADIE) microfinance institution, and a grouping of Association for the preservation of peasant agriculture), local SMEs (with which the association of business leaders and, later, the Romans Cuir association were created), and a number of public actors (the national employment agency France Travail, in particular). The aim was to develop pooling and joint actions (e.g. industrial relocation, business or company takeovers following adverse events, revival of the shoe manufacturing industry). During this period, we observed an assertion of the legitimacy of the intermediary of social innovation in the territory. Since 1987, the many initiatives of the Archer organisation and its CEO Christophe Chevalier have enabled them to be recognised as indisputable intermediaries of social innovation. According to François Vercouten, Deputy Director of the Archer

Group, it really makes it a whole lot more credible when a person can come tell you about what they have done, rather than what they think should be done. In addition, Archer's purpose of public interest (a nonprofit group with 140 shareholders in the territory) nurtures trust in the organisation. Consequently, as the Group's CEO reminds us, 'when Archer secures support to launch projects (such as the Cité de la Chaussure), it is not support to help Christophe Chevalier, or the Archer Group, it is to help a territory, because amongst themselves, they validated that we were a territory enterprise'.

Lastly, from 2016, with the launch of the SUT dynamic, the aim for the Archer Group was to move from an entrepreneur role to that of a facilitator to bring out sustainable development projects that are useful to the territory and championed by its inhabitants. At this point, an alliance formed with Agglo Valence Romans actively contributed to the implementation of the SUT. Specifically, the Archer Group and Agglo joined forces to respond to the Banque des Territoires ('Territoire d'Innovation Grande Ambition') call for projects and win €23 million to implement SUT. This alliance was embodied by a new organisation, Fab T—which was designed in the original form of an *Établissement Public Local Autonome* (Autonomous Local Public Establishment, EPLA)—co-directed by the Agglo Valence-Romans and the Archer Group to finance and support entrepreneurial initiatives serving sustainable development. During this last period, we identified a professionalisation process for social innovation intermediaries. Specifically, Christophe Chevalier reorganised Archer Group management (forming an expanded steering committee) to be able to dedicate part of his time to facilitating cooperation in the territory. More recently, following the 'Territoire d'Innovation Grande Ambition' (TIGA) project, Chevalier adjusted his work organisation. He remained part-time CEO of the Archer Group and decided to devote the other half of his time to Fab T to develop the SUT dynamics. Michel Nicolas left his position as director of the economy at Agglo Valence Romans in 2019 to take over as the head of Fab T full-time.

#### 4.2. Unveiling the processes of social innovation intermediation

In connection with the two theoretical frameworks, we identified three social innovation intermediation processes in the territory. These processes are linked and interdependent but are presented separately for greater clarity.

##### 4.2.1. Building and developing a vision of the territory (problematization)

The social innovation intermediary is extensively involved in co-constructing a narrative that will help onboard and involve different stakeholders in the territory. They play a central role in problematisation. Far from stabilisation, this problematisation has continually shifted over the last 35 years.

Originally, in 1987, the message focused on the need to find emergency solutions for the ‘shipwrecked shoe industry’ (Gilles Moncoudiol, president of the Archer Group) and, more broadly, socially underprivileged populations. Starting in the 2010s, the message shifted towards the need to find sustainable employment solutions beyond integration through economic activity. The Archer Group was looking to build a positive narrative around its business-relocation actions. As Christophe Chevalier explained, ‘In shoes, you have it all: people began to understand our role when we revived this business in Romans: it was a very symbolic undertaking that made it possible to make our role in the territory understood’. Inspired by the action of the Archer Group, the book *L’Économie qu’on aime*<sup>2</sup> [The Economy We Like] (more than 15,000 copies sold) also played an important part in raising awareness about the Archer Group’s unique positioning in its territory.

Starting in 2016, the main message began to expand and became aimed at involving various actors across the territory, particularly the inhabitants. The message was based on the idea that everyone has influence and can take action to transform their territory. For example, Christophe Chevalier, at a meeting with members of the federation Coorace, recalled: ‘I think we have a responsibility today to collectively bring our actions up to the level of the ambitions and ideas we have [...] I think we are not aware of the strength and power of our ability to change the world, we do not believe enough, we do not do enough. And it is a mistake, because together, collectively, we are able to change things’. Michel Nicolas, director of Fab T, described a similar outlook when he recalled that the social innovation intermediary has an ‘affirmed territorial transformation ambition’. The aim is to ‘achieve systemhood’ (an expression used by many of those with whom we discussed, including Christophe Chevalier and Pierre Pezziardi (co-founder of the Green Belt project)). To do so, the key lies in ‘bringing mass to our action in the territory’ (Mourad Ader, current director of Economic Services at Agglo). The aim is thus to move beyond the mere success of ecological and social initiatives across the territory to ‘an additional ambition for this social and solidarity economy [...] and find ways to scale it up’ (Ivan Collombet, co-founder of La Ceinture Verte).

This ambitious vision for the territory is given a narration of its own in the Great Ambition Innovation Territory (TIGA) project led by the Archer Group and Agglo Valence-Romans: ‘The PIA Territoires d’innovation will enable us to pass a tipping point, to bring mass to this promising dynamic and thus to move from the edges to the centre of the territory with the aim of creating a full-fledged productive recovery programme for the territory resulting in 1500 jobs within 5 years’. The aim is thus to offer an approach that ‘breaks with our reflexes’ (Christophe Chevalier) to champion different values, ‘different from the sole reference to GDP, and to economic viability to take an interest in better living together and respecting the environment’ (Michel Nicolas). The ‘Valence Romans, Capitale des Start Up de Territoire’ is a ‘project’ that was co-constructed with a number of local business networks and SMEs, making it possible to align the vision of the various associated

organisations. According to François Monterrat, project manager at the FabT, the response to this call for projects ‘was a real turning point for the territory: there was a before and after, in particular in the way in which the different public and private actors decided to work together’. This was confirmed by Michel Nicolas, for whom ‘the resources that we have managed to mobilise thanks to this State funding have enabled us to interest a large number of actors in these territorial transition issues, such as local SME managers who, in some cases, were initially quite far-removed from these concerns’.

This ultimately consensual message on the social transformation action of local actors should not overshadow discussions—controversies in the language of ANT—on how to designate this economic innovation in the making. In this spirit, Michel Nicolas, director of Fab T and Former Deputy General manager of Agglo, has been able to formalise different concepts in recent years to designate this dynamic: the ‘positive economy’, the ‘donut economy’<sup>3</sup>, or the ‘impact economy’. The exchanges between the different actors in the network have made it possible to converge towards the notion of ‘territory entrepreneurship’. For Christophe Chevalier, it is a matter of ‘moving away from a vision of a social entrepreneur that builds ad hoc solutions to problems to build an ecosystem which in itself can be transformative’. This discourse is embodied in emblematic meeting places (*‘places’*) that have been created locally. After the PTCE, which started in 2006 in Romans-sur-Isère at the Archer Group as a sustainable open space for collaboration, ‘104’ in Valence emerged as a social innovation accelerator with co-working areas, office rentals, seminar spaces, and a catering area. Its aim is to ‘facilitate changes in attitude in economic actors, towards better cooperation between them’<sup>4</sup>. Complementing this is the Cité de la Chaussure in Romans-sur-Isère (2019), imagined as a ‘hybrid space, a true productive third place, and a marker of the revival of footwear in the territory’ (TIGA presentation file). It brings together five production workshops open to visitors, the Agglo tourist office, and a shared outlet store at the heart of the city, all of which promote professional cooperation. In addition, the Fab T premises themselves are designed to be a ‘Totem Place’ to offer a large part of its support services.

##### 4.2.2. Expanding the network across the territory

The second key process of social innovation intermediation proceeds from the gradual construction of a network of social innovation actors. This capacity is recognised by many partners on the territory, for instance, Laurent Monnet, the Vice-President of the Agglo Valence-Romans, according to whom ‘Christophe can be here three days, in Paris for two days, in all the ministries, the other clusters... and because of this, we are able to be one step ahead’. The framework of ANT makes it possible to understand how this expansion occurs in stages.

In the ‘incentive’ phase, the first actors mobilised by the Archer Group around its desire to innovate in the region were the social economy structures as well as certain public services connected with the world of integration through economic activity (e.g. the Pôle Emploi). With the Pôle Territorial de Coopération Économique (PTCE) Pôle Sud, this network was extended to private entrepreneurs from the territory brought together by the Roman Bourg de Péage business federation. This dynamic enabled us to overcome certain divides: according to François Monterrat (project manager at Fab T), ‘we have found that there is not the Social and Solidarity Economy on the one hand and the traditional economy on the other: in our territory, there is a whole fabric of often quite young business leaders who aspire to get involved in the economic development of the territory’.

Gradually, some local authorities—first and foremost, Agglo Valence-Romans and, to a lesser extent, the Drôme department—were

<sup>2</sup> Amandine Barthélémy, Sophie Keller and Romain Slitine, Editions Rue de l’Echiquier (2014, reed. 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Referring to the work of Kate Raworth, *The Donut Theory*, Plon, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> *D’une mobilisation locale à une Start Up de Territoire* [From local mobilisation to a Start-Up de Territoire], Sophie Keller, Christophe Chevalier, Pierre-François Bernard, 2019, Editions Groupe Archer.



among the key actors in the territory's social innovation process. Nicolas Daragon, for example, says that 'my job as President of Agglo is to ensure that everything that is duplicable and profitable for the regional economy, like SUT, gets done'. This phase, which we can term 'enrolment', makes it possible to structure a public-private alliance that is both strategic and operational between the two organisations. Christophe Chevalier finds a form of 'alter ego' in Michel Nicolas, at the time Deputy Director General in charge of the economy of the Agglo Valence Romans.

Lastly, from 2016 onwards, SUT, 'a kind of PTCE (Pole Territorial de Coopération Economique) 2.0 that involves citizens in the process', (Christophe Chevalier) initiated a new dynamic of broadening the network and allowed us to enter a phase of 'mobilisation' of the entire territory. The number of participants (1492 participants in the SUT edition in 2018; more than 2000 in 2020 in Valence) and the diversity of their origins (economic environments, associations, academics, public organisations, etc.) all help illustrate this mobilisation. The future challenge, as François Monterrat of Fab T points out, is to succeed in mobilising even more widely, particularly by addressing 'residents of priority neighbourhoods who are not used to coming to this type of event'. First, SUT's creative evenings are *cognitive 'spaces'* that foster structures. These are meeting spaces to act collectively on the territory, as François Monterrat indicate: 'What we do with SUT is to give people a new lease on life and say what do we want to do together, how do we want to live together? Good shared living is something that affects us all'. According to Chevalier, the idea is for everyone to identify the economic and social needs of the territory collectively and initiate entrepreneurial responses. These different evenings can bring together a few dozen people around specific topics or attract more than 2000 people around issues such as unemployment, energy transition, school leavers, and access to quality local food.

In addition, since 2016, a large number of 'events' have been created in the territory. Alongside the SUT ideation evenings, the Archer Group and the Fab T organised different smaller-scale event formats to enable the territory inhabitants to monitor the progress of the projects and give everyone the chance to contribute to them. These events made it possible to 'encourage creativity around projects, to restore horizontality to recreate ties when they have become loosened between the project owners and its stakeholders in the region' (Armand Rosenberg, Director of Valhorizon).

However, this network expansion did not proceed without hitches. Christophe Chevalier emphasised this himself: 'In fact, when you do this on a territory, there are a huge number of obstacles. They never come head-on, but some elected officials, for example, are against this type of economy. They won't tell you straight to your face but will find a way to get the message across to their counterparts... then, beyond a conflict of values or points of view, there are certain actors who are just plain afraid that we will succeed'.

#### 4.2.3. Connecting the upperground, middleground, and underground levels (translation)

The social innovation intermediary is positioned as a 'passer in the territory' (Christophe Chevalier). It plays an essential part as a translator, which Michel Nicolas sums up as follows: 'What happened is, we decided that we needed a common language, but at different levels'. Consequently, we identify two translational dynamics at these levels.

On the one hand, the social innovation intermediary produces a translation that we call 'top-down' between the *middleground* and various creative actors in *the underground*. In our case, *the underground* includes the project owners of local social and ecological initiatives, such as La Ceinture Verte (technical and economic support for market gardeners who want to establish themselves in organic farming on the territory), Ma Bouteille s'appelle Réviens (relaunch of the glass consignment), or Voisiwatt, a socially responsible company that produces renewable energies. Thus, as Emeline Macard (Head of Training for the Archer Group) explains, 'one of Archer's characteristics is to make the link between the structures, in supporting projects'. This involves

the creation of shared tools such as the formalisation of the 'Compass', a reference document for supporting projects through which it is possible to 'build a tool with a common grammar' (François Monterrat). Having identified four areas (economic, social, environmental, and territorial), La Boussole encourages engagement in discussions with project owners and agreement on their strengths and areas for progress, thus supporting them in these different dimensions. Thus, for Michel Nicolas, 'this is a key tool for better understanding each other and building a shared culture of action with project owners'. Another example of this top-down translation initiative is the Territorial Entrepreneurship School, which began in 2022. Co-founded by Fab T and the Archer Group, this training programme aims to reveal the vocations of 'local entrepreneurs' and mobilise future project owners around the SUT dynamic.

On the other hand, the social innovation intermediary proposes a 'bottom-up' translation action between the *middleground* and local as well as national institutions. Coorace, a federation of 'social and territorial utility companies' that brings together 600 companies in France, has been one of the important vectors for disseminating the region's social innovations. As President of the Federation, then as spokesperson, Christophe Chevalier relied on this organisation to promote solidarity economy groups (GES) first, then the PTCE, and finally the SUT approach. Today, for example, Éric Béasse, delegate general of the federation, recognises the importance of 'formalising the engagement between our network and the SUT approach, in particular by sharing a common strategy and means of action'. Furthermore, the creation of an innovation community makes it possible to spread social innovation in other territories by bringing together 'fellow travellers' interested in implementing the same SUT dynamic. This innovation community mainly consists of directors of Coorace member structures who share values and methods similar to those of the Archer Group. Pierre Langlade, Director of the GDID association group (Bouches-du-Rhône); Armand Rosenberg, group director ValHorizon (Ain); and Laurent Pinet, managing director of the ISACTYS group (Isère), regularly interact with the CEO of the Archer Group on their key issues and ambitions for transformation. To build this community of innovation, Christophe Chevalier states that he 'put in quite a bit of energy' with meetings in each of the territories three times a year to exchange, share experiences, and 'take a step back together to better act on our territories afterwards' (Pierre Langlade). Finally, the translation strategy involves the creation of a national SUT association to support territories that wish to embark on a dynamic. This organisation has a modest budget (€50,000) and no employees but makes it possible to organise meetings between the territories and formalise a certain number of methods for coordinating and supporting projects. Since 2022, this outreach action has been carried out at the European level with the participation of the Archer Group in a project involving five different countries around the dynamics of the 'social innovation cluster'.

Fig. 2 presents a theoretical model of social innovation intermediation processes, making it possible to understand their interactions at different levels.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Theoretical contributions on social innovation intermediation

Our findings on social innovation intermediation complement and clarify emerging literature on this topic. Our analysis confirms the importance of the intermediary's key role in the dissemination and generalisation of social innovation (Wegner et al., 2023). Intermediaries are more necessary than ever and will continue to play the role of 'gardener' of social innovations, using the aptly-chosen expression of Sarazin et al. (2017, p. 247). We are also in line with the approach of Ho and Yoon (2022), who indicate that social innovation intermediaries play a more complex and 'ambiguous' role than their technological innovation counterparts. They must consider not only the economic but also the social and/or environmental dimensions of the social initiatives

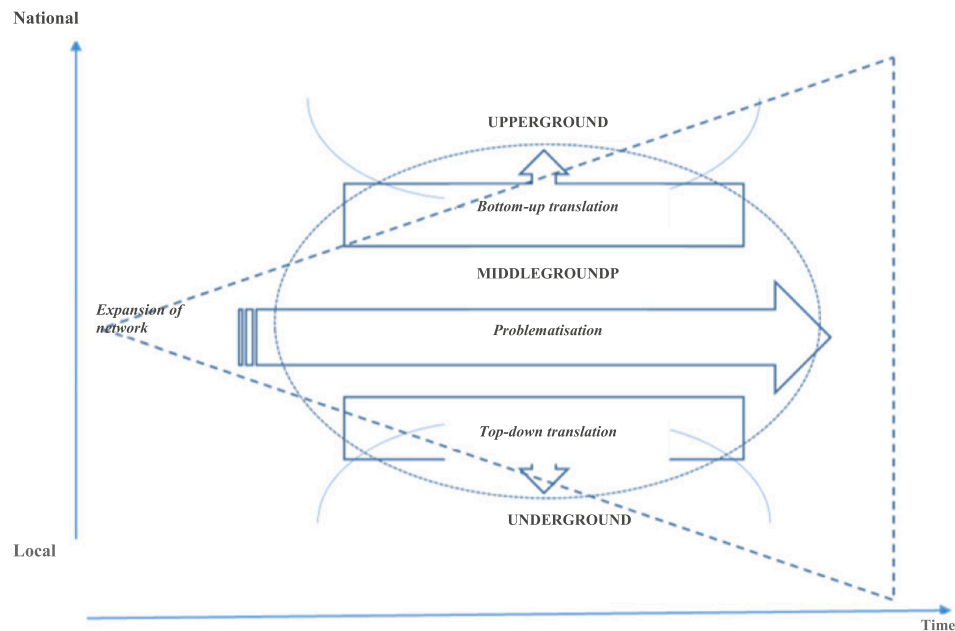


Fig. 2. Social innovation intermediation processes.

they support. Social innovation intermediaries are at the crossroads of various potentially important stakeholders, including public players, private companies, citizens, and social economy organisations.

Second, in contrast to recent research on the intermediary, which often considers it a ‘neutral’ actor, or actor not specifically driven by any objective (Backhaus, 2010), we show, extending from Hyysalo et al. (2013), that social innovation intermediaries can support the common good and have their own social transformation agenda. We highlight the importance of ambition championed through social innovation (Kivimaa et al., 2019). From this perspective, our analysis highlights the importance of creating a common narrative through an intermediary within a territory. This narrative contributes to creating a culture of collective innovation based on the belief that ‘another reality is possible’ (Younes et al., 2019, p. 87). Thus, the social innovation intermediary can drive changes in the area driven by its vision and discourse. The intention is to recognise social innovation as having a social transformation ambition (Avelino et al., 2019), which assumes a process to ensure that it is spread and scaled up.

Moreover, unlike Ho and Yoon (2022) and Wegner et al. (2023), who identified and segmented the functions of social innovation intermediaries, our analysis focused on the processes by which these functions are constructed over time. This makes it possible to consider the intermediary not as having a static role but to understand its emergence and gradual structuring. Klerkx and Leeuwis (2009) argued that technological innovation intermediaries evolve from bilateral relations into a system of multiple relations. As an extension, we showed that the social innovation intermediation function is built and asserted over time, making it possible to gradually gain legitimacy through action. Thus, our analysis contributes to the literature on social innovation by examining intermediation processes in detail.

Moreover, proposing a theoretical framework is necessary because the literature on social innovation intermediation is often theoretical (Wegner et al., 2023; Ho and Yoon, 2022). The proposed framework, which combines ANT with the *middleground* approach, offers a relevant interpretive scheme for understanding social innovation dissemination processes and has a strong heuristic dimension. The different constituent dimensions of the *middleground* (places, spaces, events, projects) specify and complete the analytical framework of ANT. Surely, these dimensions can be considered actors in the sense of ANT, in which it is necessary to focus more on better characterising the functions of

mediation. We have shown that they play an essential role in network-building dynamics and help grasp the extension of actor networks.

This combination of theories also makes it possible to introduce a multi-level vision that is still lacking in ANT. We see that translation and problematisation occur concurrently at different levels. Furthermore, in contrast to Callon who presents innovation dissemination as a sequence of distinct stages, we stress that problematisation is a permanent activity occurring throughout the stages of dissemination. Similarly, translation is a permanent process that accompanies the expansion of the network and is accompanied by different translation dynamics, both top-down and bottom-up. At the same time, the creative city theory seems to be sustained alongside ANT by enabling greater insight into its dynamics or diachronics: the evolution of each level—*upperground*, *middleground*, *underground*—takes place over time, thanks to translation and enrolment processes that enable actors to evolve. Consequently, we emphasise the importance of becoming part of multilevel processes to spread social innovation; thinking and building the transition to scale assumes overcoming narrow localism (innovating only on one’s territory), structuring a *middleground*, and articulating different levels (national or even international).

Our framework aids in understanding the interactions of multiple change processes and challenges the linear perspective of innovation. This makes it possible to organise the ‘whirlwind process’ of innovation, as described by Callon and Latour (2013). This framework resonates with the recent work of Chatterjee et al. (2023) regarding social innovation’s response to grand challenges. According to these authors, one of the keys to a successful implementation of social innovation lies in the process of ‘double weaving’ between ‘grassroots’ actors and ‘higher scale’ actors. It is a recursive process for diagnosing and addressing problems by connecting actors and resources across various locations and scales. On the other hand, we are in dialogue with Avelino et al. (2019), who have mobilised the Multi-level Perspective (MLP) (Geels, 2002) to analyse social innovations. Derived from transition studies, the MLP explains transition dynamics through interactions between three levels: 1) niches (sites of innovative practices), 2) sociotechnical regimes (dominant institutions and practices), and 3) landscapes (external macro-trends). Transitions emerge when innovations (niches) manage to put pressure on sociotechnical regimes, assisted by an evolution in major trends (landscapes). Therefore, they enjoy a ‘window of opportunity’ to influence sustainable change.

## 5.2. Practical implications

Policymakers are increasingly being encouraged to focus on social innovation as a means of solving some of society's most intractable problems (Bruton et al., 2021). This study opens up avenues of action for public authorities that go beyond the conventional literature on local development. The latter has commonly maintained that what lifts regions out of poverty are transformational entrepreneurs who 'build rapidly growing companies with global ambitions' (Schoar, 2010, p. 78), where these high-growth ventures exploit systemic opportunities, whose spatial scope goes beyond their initial geographic confines. The focus on high-impact start-ups, with an emphasis on job and new market creation (Shane, 2009) has long limited our understanding of the contributions of enterprises to their environment regarding these dimensions. This research highlights the importance of public policies, especially local policies, to support social innovation intermediaries in all their diversity (Villani et al., 2017).

A key takeaway from recent studies is the central role of third-party intermediaries in fostering connections within networks (Caloffi et al., 2023). Intermediaries occupy a strategic position in the relational landscape by contacting all network members. Wegner et al. (2023) investigated how members orchestrate collaborative networks for social innovation, highlighting the crucial roles that leaders play in achieving collective goals. Our findings add a territorial dimension to this understanding, while acknowledging the significance of intermediaries in network dynamics. Adopting a 'place-based' lens (Hambleton and Howard, 2013) provides a more concrete, anchored, and material understanding of social innovation intermediation. From this perspective, social innovation does not occur within specific spatial contexts or territorial units. Instead, it involves the transformation of social relations, which are spatially negotiated and embedded (Moulaert et al., 2013). This approach helps to clarify the daily actions of social innovation intermediaries and their ability to facilitate collaboration within networks aimed at fostering social innovation. For practitioners and policymakers, these insights emphasise the importance of considering the spatial and territorial aspects of social innovation. Recognising the strategic role of intermediaries in specific contexts can enhance the effectiveness of initiatives designed to promote social innovation. This place-based perspective not only enriches our theoretical understanding but also provides practical guidance for improving the support and development of social innovation ecosystems.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of public authorities and players in the social economy by providing greater support for intermediation in social innovation. Even when social innovations are greatly promoted, the intermediation function often remains low in visibility and is regularly ignored or underestimated by public authorities that have trouble financing them (Deschamps and Slitine, 2024).

## 6. Conclusion, limitations, and future lines of research

In conclusion, unlike some authors who associate the generalisation of social initiatives with a form of trivialisation (Juan and Laville, 2020), we suggest that social innovation can succeed in its change of scale by strengthening its specificity and equipping itself with management tools or systems that allow it to guide implementation by other actors in other territories.

This case study is a deliberate research strategy, albeit with acknowledged methodological limitations. As noted by Yin (2009) and Ozcan et al. (2017), our study encountered typical constraints associated with case study research. While the case study method allows for an in-depth exploration of specific units within a particular context, it raises questions regarding the generalisability of the findings. While there can be no question of statistical generalisation, according to Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2009), the results derived from this method can lay claim to a theoretical or analytical generalisation of results towards a broader theory, that of social innovation intermediation, in our case.

Our investigation focuses primarily on the concept of social innovation intermediation within the French cultural context, specifically examining the Archer Group and SUT initiatives. While our research offers valuable insights into social innovation intermediation, it highlights the need for further studies across different cultural and economic contexts.

Finally, our work opens up future research prospects for those who include the 'meso' dimension in their thinking about social innovation and social entrepreneurship. Interest in mesoeconomic approaches has revived over the past 20 years and has been shared by various communities of researchers. Meso-analysis aims to investigate the complex economic spaces in which specific dynamics are established. The aim is to treat these objects as analytical entities, that is, social spaces with relative autonomy that are jointly structured by their relations with other entities (Lamarque et al., 2021). In particular, work on social innovation ecosystems (SIEs) is often 'naturalised', whereas, in our view, it presupposes work on structuring and sustaining that can be carried out by social innovation intermediaries. We believe that an in-depth study of social innovation intermediation will enrich these studies in the future.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Romain Slitine:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Didier Chabaud:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Nadine Richez-Battesti:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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**Romain Slitine** is a researcher within the Entrepreneurship, Territory and Innovation Chair at IAE Paris - Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. He is also a lecturer at Sciences Po Paris. His research focuses on social innovation, the social economy and the relationship between entrepreneurship and territory. He has published several articles and books on these subjects.

**Didier Chabaud**, a specialist in entrepreneurship and strategy, is full professor at the IAE Paris – Université de Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne. He has published numerous articles on the subject in academic journals, as well as books and book chapters. He is particularly interested in the dynamics of business start-ups (process of creation, role of teams and social networks, support) and in the development strategies of organisations, particularly families, and territories. He is Director of the Entrepreneuriat - Territoire - Innovation (ETI) Chair, former President of the Académie de l'entrepreneuriat et de l'innovation (AEI) and co-editor-in-chief of the Revue de l'entrepreneuriat (2013–2019).

**Nadine Richez-Battesti** is professor at the Aix-Marseille University and researcher in economics at LEST-CNRS since 2006. She has developed research on social economy organisations, their evolutions and interactions with public policies; social innovation, and new forms of governance of social welfare services; quality of work in social economy. In particular, she studied Cooperative banks and cluster.