

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Meta-Organisation Facing Transition: Practices, Logics of Action, and Tensions within an Economic Cluster

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Abstract

An increasing body of research suggests that meta-organisations (MOs) can play a role in ecological transition. Yet their contribution remains ambivalent, particularly in the case of economic clusters, whose original mandate is primarily focused on competitiveness. This article explores how a cluster-type MO engages its members in transition, drawing on the case of Cluster Montagne, which brings together key stakeholders in mountain tourism development. The study is based on an inductive qualitative methodology, combining a 4-year immersion within the cluster with interviews, observations, and analysis of internal documents. The findings identify four distinct logics of action: facilitating projects, producing and disseminating knowledge, fostering networks, and constructing a collective narrative. These dynamics are marked by several tensions: between economic imperatives and ecological ambition, between member autonomy and governance control, and between institutional legitimation and genuine transformation. These insights extend current research on the ambivalence of MOs in addressing grand societal challenges. The article concludes by discussing the conditions under which such intermediary organisations can evolve from incremental adaptation to becoming genuine levers of transition.

Keywords: *Meta-organisation; Economic cluster; Sustainability transitions*

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Organisations today are confronted with grand challenges in the form of complex, global, and interdependent societal problems that demand collective and coordinated responses (George et al., 2016; Howard-Grenville, 2021). Chief among these are climate change and the ecological transition, understood as 'a fundamental transformation towards more sustainable modes of production and consumption' (Markard et al., 2012, p. 956). In the context of the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2002; Wallenhorst & Wulf, 2023), organisations face an urgent imperative to realign their activities within planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2012; Steffen et al., 2015). Their engagement in ecological transition has therefore become critical. Yet many organisations address climate challenges through a logic of continuity, leaving their business models largely unquestioned (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Against this backdrop, meta-organisations (MOs), organisations whose members are themselves organisations (Ahme & Brunsson, 2005, 2008), have emerged

as potentially strategic structures for coordinating collective action in response to grand challenges (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Bor & O'Shea, 2022; Ferraro et al., 2015). Still, their role in transitions remains ambivalent: while they may foster cooperation, resource pooling, and the diffusion of sustainable innovations (Berkowitz, 2018), their structural characteristics, voluntary membership, member heterogeneity, and consensus-based governance may simultaneously hinder radical change and reinforce the status quo (Berkowitz & Bor, 2024; Bor & O'Shea, 2022).

This paradox is particularly salient in the French cluster model (Berthoinier-Poncet, 2012): associative organisations with economic purposes, supported by public authorities. While some studies recognise their transformative potential (Berkowitz & Gadille, 2022), others underscore the difficulty clusters face in moving beyond competitiveness to embrace transition. Moreover, although the role of clusters in managing

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transition-related issues is increasingly acknowledged, 'Empirical research on the intra-cluster processes and mechanisms required to sustain this role remains limited' (Saniossian et al., 2022, p. 97).

The sustainability transition literature (Geels, 2002; Markard et al., 2012) provides a complementary systemic and temporal lens to situate cluster practices within broader trajectories of ecological transition. Transitions entail reconfiguring socio-technical regimes, mobilising institutional, cultural, and organisational dimensions, and require intermediary actors capable of articulating across temporal and spatial scales (Köhler et al., 2019; Loorbach, 2010). Yet these processes are also shaped by power relations and inertia that may constrain their transformative potential (Smith et al., 2010).

This article addresses these questions through a case study of Cluster Montagne, an Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes cluster that unites stakeholders in mountain tourism development. Initially created as an instrument of economic development, the cluster is now positioned as a stakeholder in the ecological transition of mountain territories. Our aim is to understand how a cluster-type MO engages in ecological transition while grappling with tensions inherent to its competitiveness mandate.

Methodologically, the study draws on a 4-year qualitative immersion in Cluster Montagne, combining interviews, observations, and document analysis. We identify and analyse the cluster's practices and logics of action related to transition, and examine the tensions that limit their scope. The article contributes in several ways. Empirically, it documents the concrete practices mobilised by an economic cluster to support ecological transition, including coordination, mediation, tool development, and narrative building. These practices are largely short-term in orientation, aimed at optimisation and impact reduction rather than structural change. Second, the study highlights tensions that constrain the emergence of collective transformation: between economic imperatives and ecological ambitions, between member autonomy and shared strategic orientation, and between vertical coordination and horizontal participation. By bridging the literatures on MOs, clusters, and sustainability transitions, the article sheds light on both the limitations and the conditions of effective MO engagement in transition.

Literature review: MOs, economic clusters, and sustainability transitions

Amid accelerating environmental disruptions, ecological transition has emerged as a central research focus in management studies. Within this context, collective organisational forms such as MOs are receiving growing scholarly attention. These hybrid arrangements, composed of autonomous organisations, hold strategic potential for guiding the transformation of

productive systems towards greater sustainability. To address this question, we conducted a literature review structured around three key theoretical perspectives: MOs, economic clusters, and sustainability transitions. Taken together, these perspectives offer the basis for a holistic understanding of the capacities and constraints of economic MOs when confronted with the challenges of transition.

MOs and sustainability transitions: Between coordination potential and structural tensions

MOs are organisational forms composed not of individuals but of other organisations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008). This distinctive feature positions them uniquely within the organisational landscape: neither informal networks nor traditional hierarchies, MOs are defined by voluntary, associative governance and consensus-oriented decision-making processes. Their primary function is to coordinate collective action among autonomous members while maintaining internal coherence. This capacity makes them potential candidates for structuring collective responses to today's grand challenges, notably ecological transition (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Ferraro et al., 2015). Berkowitz (2018) introduces the concept of meta-organisational capacities to describe firms' ability to organise collectively around sustainability goals. Firms often face resource constraints, information deficits, or a lack of legitimacy that render isolated initiatives ineffective in addressing transition challenges (Etzion & Ferraro, 2010; Howard-Grenville et al., 2014). In this regard, MOs provide a structuring platform to pool resources, design shared tools, and develop collective routines that foster sustainable innovation (Gadille et al., 2013; Lupova-Henry & Dotti, 2022). Through hybrid governance mechanisms balancing autonomy and coordination, they enable experimentation while ensuring minimal coherence across organisational diversity (Berkowitz, 2018).

Yet much of the literature on MOs and transition remains focused on national or international cases (Ahrne et al., 2017; Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Spillman, 2018), often detached from territorial specificities. Moreover, MOs are not free from internal tensions, which may hinder their transformative potential. Bor and O'Shea (2022), for instance, identify four postures that MOs may adopt in the context of transition, oriented either internally towards members or externally towards their environment. These postures fall into two broad categories: those oriented towards maintaining the status quo and those facilitating change. In the former case, MOs act as harmonisers, ensuring continuity of the existing regime and the prosperity of their members, thus limiting radical transformation. They also play a protective role towards the external environment, seeking to reduce uncertainties in

their organisational field, particularly legal and financial, thereby limiting disruptions caused by transition dynamics. In contrast, other MOs embrace transition by stimulating innovation among their members. They adopt a supportive role towards experimentation, encouraging the evolution of organisational practices, while externally acting as facilitators of change and exerting positive influence to promote ecological transition. This typology, summarised in Table 1, underscores the variety of possible postures as well as the tensions that emerge between economic imperatives and transition ambitions.

Furthermore, Berkowitz and Bor (2024) identify four core tensions inherent to MOs: the divergence of members' objectives versus the need for a shared orientation, implicit hierarchies that slow the diffusion of innovation, the delicate balance between collective action and member autonomy, and the inertia in strategic adjustment created by consensus-based governance. These structural tensions can undermine the development of coherent and ambitious sustainability trajectories.

Finally, critical perspectives also caution against the risk of strategic co-optation of transition issues by MOs. Banerjee (2008) demonstrates that sustainability is often mobilised as a legitimisation tool serving the economic status quo rather than as a lever for genuine transformation. Similarly, Carmagnac et al. (2022) show how powerful actors may instrumentalise participatory mechanisms to consolidate their position while leaving existing logics intact.

Taken together, these insights suggest that while MOs hold promise, their engagement with transition remains deeply ambivalent. This ambivalence warrants closer empirical scrutiny, particularly of their concrete practices and logics of action within specific contexts. It is in this spirit that the following section turns to economic clusters, a specific form of territorially grounded MO.

Economic clusters: Between competitiveness devices and transition imperatives

French clusters (Berthinier-Poncet, 2012) emerged in the 2000s as part of territorial competitiveness policies

Table 1. Roles of MOs in sustainability transitions

	Internal	External
Maintain the status quo	Seek harmonisation and cohesion among members	Protect against uncertainty; defend collective interests
Facilitate change	Foster innovation and experimentation	Influence and engage proactively with external actors to achieve transition

Source: Adapted from Bor and O'Shea (2022).
MO, meta-organisations.

(Retour, 2009; Suire & Vicente, 2008; Vicente, 2016). Drawing on the tradition of industrial districts (Marshall, 1920) and Porter's (1998) cluster theory, they were designed to stimulate innovation, cooperation, and growth within specific industries. Bringing together firms, public institutions, and academic organisations, they are typically structured as associations with shared governance and, as such, meet the criteria of MOs (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005). Although initially conceived as tools for economic development, clusters are increasingly expected to contribute to the ecological transition. Prior work suggests that they can act as intermediaries between public and private actors and foster sustainable innovation dynamics (Berkowitz & Gadille, 2022; Lupova-Henry & Dotti, 2022). Yet their transformative potential remains constrained by their original competitiveness-oriented mandate. Internal tensions further limit clusters' engagement in transition. Empirical studies (Berkowitz & Gadille, 2022; Sanioossian et al., 2022) point to power asymmetries, the predominance of growth-oriented objectives, and member heterogeneity, all of which complicate the articulation of a shared transition strategy.

As a result, clusters emerge as hybrid actors, positioned at the intersection of economic and environmental logics. Their transformative role hinges on governance structures, internal power relations, and their ability to embed transition in a coherent strategic vision.

While clusters have been extensively studied through the lens of their impact on economic performance, there is little empirical evidence on the concrete practices they mobilise to engage with transition (Sanioossian et al., 2022). Addressing this gap, our study examines these practices in depth through the case of a specific territorial economic cluster. To this end, we mobilise insights from the sustainability transitions literature, which offers a systemic and situated lens on how organisations engage with ecological transformation.

Sustainability transitions: A systemic and temporal lens on change dynamics

The field of sustainability transitions provides a conceptual framework for analysing the transformations required to address global environmental challenges. Building on a systemic approach to change, the multi-level perspective highlights the dynamics at play within niches, understood as experimental spaces; within regimes, corresponding to stabilised socio-technical systems; and within the landscape, which refers to the broader socio-technical environment and macro-societal trends (Geels, 2002). This framework has been consolidated as a distinct research field, structured around the technological, institutional, and social dimensions of transition (Markard et al., 2012). It has subsequently been extended to more explicitly integrate governance issues and actor dynamics

(Loorbach et al., 2017), before being synthesised into a research agenda emphasising the organisational and political conditions of transitions (Köhler et al., 2019).

Yet, this framework has historically tended to underestimate the role of intermediary organisational actors such as MOs or clusters. These structures may act as interfaces, transmission belts, or compromise stabilisers between conflicting logics, thereby contributing to the evolution of existing regimes without necessarily disrupting them. To address this limitation, the transition management approach (Kemp et al., 2007; Loorbach, 2010; Rotmans et al., 2001) brings a governance-oriented perspective. It emphasises the need to articulate different temporalities of action, which Loorbach (2010) formalises into a transition management cycle comprising four dimensions: an operational dimension, corresponding to the short-term implementation of concrete projects; a tactical dimension, aimed at coordinating actors and developing medium-term programmes; a strategic dimension, centred on defining long-term visions; and a reflexive dimension, focused on continuous evaluation and learning. This framework allows for assessing the coherence and scope of actions undertaken by questioning their embedding within a broader transformation trajectory. It offers a useful analytical tool to examine the positioning of MOs across the temporalities of transition, though its application to economically oriented MOs remains largely unexplored.

The sustainability transitions literature further emphasises the importance of multilevel governance arrangements capable of coordinating diverse actors over time (Köhler et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2010). Nonetheless, several limitations have been identified: a frequent focus on socio-technical regimes at the expense of analysing the intermediary work of organisational actors linking economic, political, and societal spheres (Smith et al., 2010; Wittmayer et al., 2014); and a strong emphasis on participatory and consensus-driven approaches, which, in certain contexts, may slow down decision-making and dilute transformative capacity (Smith et al., 2010), an ambivalence also observed in multi-stakeholder MOs (Carmagnac et al., 2022). To overcome these limitations, recent studies highlight that business models can become levers of transformation when conceived as collective arrangements (Aagaard et al., 2021), while collaborative approaches appear as accelerators of transition (Derks et al., 2022). These contributions reinforce the relevance of analysing MOs as governance and coordination structures at the heart of sustainability transitions.

Despite the advances of this field, the ways in which economically oriented MOs concretely engage in transition processes and their associated temporalities remain underexplored. The articulation of the literature on MOs

and clusters, which highlights their capabilities but also their structural tensions, with that on sustainability transitions, which emphasises temporalities and governance arrangements, provides a shared analytical framework. All three theoretical streams converge on the same observation: these structures can play a pivotal role in transition dynamics, yet their effective contribution remains constrained by strong tensions and ambivalent forms of action.

To study how an economic cluster engages in transition, we adopt a practice-based approach. We distinguish between organisational practices (Schatzki et al., 2001), understood as concrete and observable actions implemented by the MO, and logics of action (Thornton et al., 2012), defined as bundles of practices oriented towards a common organisational purpose. This distinction enables a finer-grained analysis of how an economic cluster engages in ecological transition and of the tensions associated with this engagement. Our research question is therefore as follows: how does a MO in the form of an economic cluster engage in ecological transition through its practices and logics of action, and what tensions arise from this engagement?

Research methodology: A case study of Cluster Montagne's transition

Case study presentation: Cluster Montagne, a MO at the heart of the mountain tourism socio-economic ecosystem

Cluster Montagne (literally mountain cluster) is a key institutional player in French mountain tourism. Established in 2012, it operates as a MO (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008) with a national scope but strong territorial roots in the Northern Alps (Savoie, Haute-Savoie, Isère). Funded equally by public resources primarily from the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Region and private contributions (membership fees and partnerships), the association's mission is to 'support, promote, and represent French actors in the mountain leisure and development industry, both domestically and internationally'.

Governed as a non-profit, the cluster is overseen by a board of directors, an executive board, and a permanent team of nine staff members. These employees implement an annual action plan structured around four strategic pillars: networking, innovation, growth, and sustainable development. Networking initiatives connect stakeholders, particularly firms, through dedicated events; innovation activities include a joint incubator to support new projects in mountain tourism development; growth efforts focus on international expansion opportunities such as trade fairs; and, since

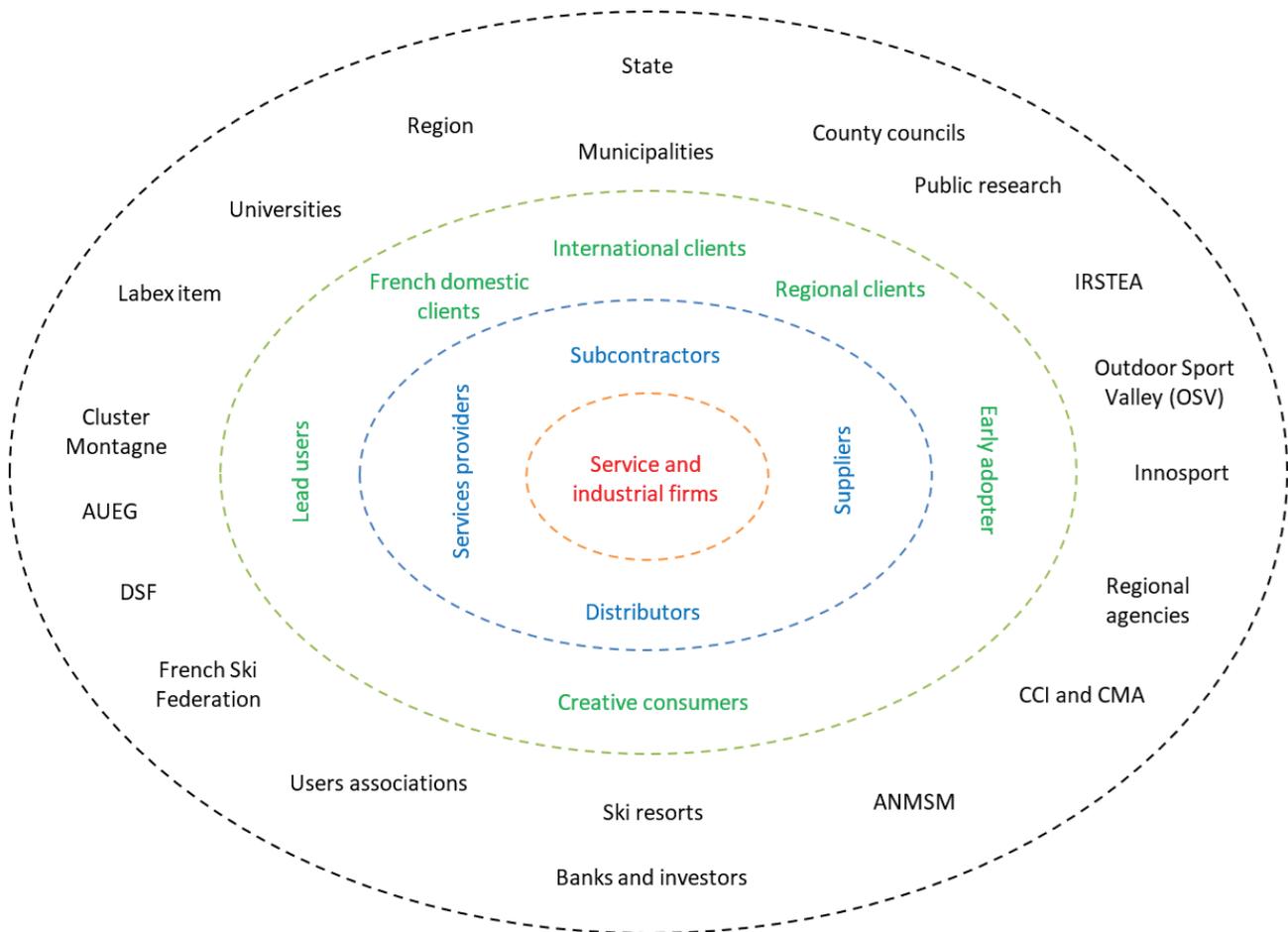
2020, the sustainable development pillar has encouraged members to integrate ecological transition into their strategies.

As of 2024, the cluster counts 248 members across three groups: institutions, companies, and higher education/research organisations, all represented on the board of directors. Companies, however, remain the backbone of the cluster, making up two-thirds of its membership and exclusively holding seats on the executive board that steers daily operations. Membership spans the entire value chain, from ski lift manufacturers (e.g., French cable transportation company (POMA) and Montagne & Neige Développement (mountain equipment group) [MND]) to digital service providers (e.g., Team Axess) and engineering consultancies (e.g., ABEST). The institutional group includes umbrella organisations such as Domaines skiables de France (DSF) and the Association nationale des maires de stations de montagne (ANMSM), while the cluster also maintains strong links with local authorities and

universities (Université Grenoble Alpes, Université Savoie Mont Blanc, Inrae, Grenoble Ecole de Management (GEM), etc.). Since 2021, a ‘territories of innovation’ scheme has further extended membership to ski lift operators, tourist offices, and municipalities.

By bringing together this diversity of actors, Cluster Montagne functions as a representative MO of the mountain tourism socio-economic ecosystem (MTSE) (Bouhaouala, 2017). Figure 1 illustrates the composition of this ecosystem.

This ecosystem faces diverse challenges. The business model of mountain territories, traditionally based on ski area operations, is increasingly challenged. Climate change (Bourdeau, 2021; George-Marcelpoil et al., 2019; Reynard, 2020; Richard et al., 2010), evolving societal attitudes such as the Swedish *flygskam* (‘flight shame’), and the COVID-19 crisis have all highlighted structural and cyclical vulnerabilities that threaten the long-term viability of the social and economic ecosystem of mountain tourism (ESETM). At the same time, public authorities have



Source: Bouhaouala (2017).

DSF, Domaines skiables de France; ANMSM, Association nationale des maires de stations de montagne.

Figure 1. Mountain tourism socio-economic ecosystem.

emphasised sustainability and ecological transition, through initiatives such as the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Region's Plan Avenir Montagnes, the Espace Valléen programme, and the national Plan montagne 2. The États généraux de la transition des territoires de montagne further illustrate this shift, bringing together stakeholders across the French mountain tourism sector to collectively address transition challenges.

Against this backdrop, examining the practices of the MO representing this ecosystem is particularly relevant to understanding how it seeks to address transition, which is an essential condition for its medium- and long-term survival.

Data collection

The findings presented in this article are derived from a 4-year research project conducted as part of a Industrial Agreement for Training through Research (CIFRE) doctoral thesis, co-funded by Cluster Montagne. In this capacity, we were employed within the organisation, fully integrated into its organisational structure as a project officer, and had an office at the cluster's headquarters. The study adopts a qualitative approach (Dumez, 2016) based on a single case study design (Yin, 2017) and relies on three main sources of data collection: semi-structured interviews, participant and non-participant observation, and the analysis of secondary data.

We conducted 26 semi-structured interviews over a 2-year period (2020–2022), each lasting approximately 1 h, with actors representative of the three categories of Cluster Montagne members: firms, institutions, and higher education and research organisations. Members of the executive team, the association's board, and cluster employees were also interviewed. All interviewees had participated in at least one cluster project related to transition. The interview guide was structured around the following themes: (1) the socio-economic profile of the organisation, (2) presentation of the project in which the organisation was involved (motivations, expectations, objectives, level of engagement, etc.), (3) practices and role of the cluster in the project, (4) relationships developed through the project, (5) costs and benefits associated with the project, and (6) additional questions and follow-ups. Table 2 summarises the interviews conducted.

This analysis was further enriched through extensive in situ observation, which combined both participant and non-participant observation, in order to capture the organisational dynamics and informal practices of Cluster Montagne. Participant observation took place during a number of events organised by the cluster, such as workshops dedicated to water management, natural hazards, or long-term foresight, where we alternated between the roles of project coordinator and contributor. This active immersion provided direct access to the interactions among stakeholders and allowed for a

deeper understanding of the processes of coordination, decision-making, and tension management within the organisation.

Non-participant observation was conducted systematically over a period extending from 2019 to 2022, with an average presence of 3 days per week at the cluster's headquarters. This regular immersion within the everyday life of the organisation made it possible to capture daily interactions, informal conversations, and the internal dynamics shaping the cluster's functioning. The data collected through these observations were recorded in detailed field notebooks, which contained both factual descriptions of events and interactions (e.g., statements made, exchanges between members), and analytical as well as reflexive notes concerning actors' positions, emerging tensions, and issues directly or indirectly related to ecological transition.

In addition to interview and observational material, we also collected a wide range of secondary data produced by Cluster Montagne. These included internal documents (such as annual reports, membership guides, and meeting minutes) as well as external communication materials and publications. The triangulation of these sources enabled us to identify and map the set of actions carried out by the cluster in relation to ecological transition during the period 2018–2024. A detailed account of these actions is presented in Table A1 in the Appendix.

Data analysis

The analytical process was grounded in an inductive posture (Dumez, 2016), designed to allow the emergence of categories directly from the empirical material rather than imposing a pre-existing framework. The analysis unfolded along two complementary axes.

The first axis consisted of identifying the practices effectively implemented by the cluster in connection with the ecological transition. An open coding procedure was conducted using NVivo software, through which the various sources of empirical material – interviews, observational notes, and documentary data – were systematically coded without reference to any predetermined analytical grid, in order to remain as close as possible to the lived realities of the field. Coding decisions took into account several dimensions: the nature of the occurrence, the actors involved, the context of action, its temporality, and the declared or implicit intention. These codes were then progressively aggregated into broader categories, enabling the identification of different logics of action mobilised by the cluster. In this inductive process, a distinction was made between *practices*, defined as concrete and observable actions undertaken by Cluster Montagne in the field of transition (such as organising a workshop, producing a guide, or facilitating connections among stakeholders), and *logic of action*, understood as clusters of practices that are oriented towards a common organisational purpose. Several logics of action emerged from

Table 2. Summary of interviews and participants

Organisation	Category	Duration	Transcribed pages
Cluster Montagne	/	1:46:58	26
Cluster Montagne	/	2:05:03	28
Cluster Montagne	/	1:04:36	20
Cluster Montagne	/	0:37:50	10
Cluster Montagne	/	2:07:45	25
Cluster Montagne	/	1:19:45	23
Cluster Montagne	/	1:36:35	24
Cluster Montagne	/	2:13:18	32
France Mountain	Institutions	0:32:24	10
DSF	Institution	1:20:16	22
SNMSF	Institution	0:58:24	14
Atout France	Partner	1:18:20	17
ANMSM	Institution	1:12:33	14
France Mountain	Institution	1:44:17	24
Air-Coop	Enterprise	0:59:09	16
Mandarine CODI	/ (Non-member)	0:52:02	14
LHM Conseil	Enterprise	1:28:21	19
Lumiplan Montagne	Enterprise	1:15:51	18
Graph & Plume	Enterprise	1:24:31	9
CIMEO	Enterprise	1:12:46	15
Ice Driving Val Thorens	Enterprise	1:15:32	20
B2D Conseil	Enterprise	0:40:42	12
ENSAM	Recherche	0:40:41	12
G2A Consulting	Enterprise	0:41:08	12
GMM	Enterprise	0:45:47	14
Techfun	Enterprise	1:11:23	17
Total	/	32:00:42	447

Source: Own elaboration.

DSF, Domaines skiables de France; ANMSM, Association nationale des maires de stations de montagne; SNMSF, national union of french ski instructors; CIMEO, CIMEO Ingénierie (engineering hydrology consultancy); G2A, G2A Consulting (tourism data and performance consultancy); .

recurrent patterns of practices exhibiting similar objectives. For example, an initiative launched by the cluster to set up a foresight project group was initially coded under 'project management', before being subsumed under the broader logic of 'project facilitation'.

The second axis of analysis focused on the tensions that permeated the cluster's engagement with ecological transition. Coding in this case was conducted in parallel, drawing on interview excerpts and field notes that referred to contradictions, conflicts of objectives, resistance to change, or discrepancies between discourse and practice. For instance, a statement made by a cluster member that 'companies must first ensure their survival before thinking about these issues' was initially

coded under 'priority to economic profitability' and subsequently integrated into the broader category of 'tensions between economic imperatives and transition'.

These two axes of analysis were then brought into dialogue through an iterative process, characterised by continuous back-and-forth movement between the empirical material, the intermediate categories, the observations recorded in the field, and the reflexive notes elaborated throughout the research. This triangulated approach, deeply rooted in prolonged field immersion, was intended to capture and reconstitute the complexity of organisational dynamics within a MO confronted with the challenges of ecological transition.

Results

The analysis of the empirical material led us to organise the presentation of the results into two complementary parts. The first part focuses on the main logics of action mobilised by Cluster Montagne to accompany its members in processes of ecological transition. Instead of producing an exhaustive inventory of all the initiatives identified during the period under study, we propose a synthetic typology of logics of action, derived from the inductive grouping of similar practices. Each category identified in this typology is illustrated with one or two emblematic examples, chosen to exemplify the dynamics at play.

The second part of the results is devoted to the analysis of structural tensions that permeate the implementation of these practices. The purpose here is to examine how specific organisational characteristics of Cluster Montagne, particularly those linked to its governance model, its membership structure, and its dual mission of economic competitiveness and ecological responsibility, tend to limit the transformative scope of the actions undertaken.

Transition practices and logics of action

The practices deployed by Cluster Montagne in relation to ecological transition can be understood as forming a set of multiple and interconnected logics of action. The inductive analysis of the empirical material collected throughout the study highlights four such logics: the facilitation of projects, the production and dissemination of knowledge and tools, the development of networking activities, and the construction of a collective narrative. Each of these logics reflects a distinct but complementary way in which the cluster engages with the ecological transition of its members.

The first logic of action corresponds to the cluster's role as a facilitator of projects, which it assumes through two complementary modalities. On the one hand, the cluster acts as project leader by directly initiating and managing initiatives carried out by its own staff. In such cases, the cluster takes responsibility for coordinating projects aimed at fostering the integration of transition-related issues within its membership. These projects vary considerably in scope, and sometimes directly involve member organisations. One illustrative example is the call for expressions of interest launched by the cluster to establish a foresight project group. Coordinated by the cluster's head of innovation and foresight, this initiative culminated in the production of an annual 'trend book', a forward-looking publication compiling contributions from researchers and experts on transition-related themes. Another emblematic case is the 'transition action plan' launched in collaboration with a specialised consultancy, designed to provide business leaders with

methodological and operational guidance for developing action plans to decarbonise their activities.

On the other hand, the cluster also positions itself as a partner in larger-scale initiatives led by other organisations or MOs, such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Savoie. In such instances, the cluster contributes by seconding staff to project management tasks on behalf of its members. The European Carb 0 project, which aims to achieve simultaneous decarbonisation across several industrial sectors at the European level, provides a representative illustration. Here, the cluster acted as a logistical and coordination interface, enabling the participation of its members in an initiative they would not have been able to lead independently. These activities consolidate the cluster's role as an intermediary between its members and external support mechanisms for ecological transition. To summarise, the cluster facilitates projects in two distinct ways: by assuming direct responsibility as project leader and by serving as a reference partner in broader initiatives. In both cases, however, the temporal horizon of these activities is predominantly short- to medium-term, oriented towards operational outcomes and immediate effects such as project participation or funding acquisition, without necessarily generating long-term strategic transformation.

The second logic of action relates to the cluster's efforts to produce and disseminate knowledge with the aim of strengthening the capacity of its members to act in the field of transition. The cluster organises awareness-raising activities, including workshops, webinars, and events involving external partners such as Solucir; develops training modules through initiatives such as the Cluster Montagne Academy, and highlights exemplary practices within and beyond its network via the dedicated Cluster Montagne Solutions platform, which showcases member companies' expertise. In addition, the cluster produces and disseminates operational tools and resources, such as the Cluster Montagne Data platform, which centralises technical, economic, and environmental information pertaining to the sector. These activities are designed to enhance members' capacity to act, while deliberately avoiding the prescription of a single trajectory or strategic pathway. Their temporal orientation is primarily short-term: they provide readily available resources that members can mobilise in response to specific information needs or short-term upgrading requirements, rather than serving as components of a broader, long-term strategic plan.

The third logic of action is centred on networking activities. This logic manifests itself, first, through the organisation of events among members, specifically designed to address issues related to ecological transition. Such initiatives often involve collaboration with academic institutions, as illustrated by partnerships with the Sustainable Tourism Chair at Université Savoie Mont Blanc and the Territories in Transition Chair at Grenoble École de management. These collaborations take the form of presentations of academic work and joint workshops

bringing together researchers, territorial stakeholders, and tourism infrastructure companies.

In addition to internal networking, the cluster acts as a relay for transition-related events organised by external actors. One example is its promotion of a webinar introducing the Convention des entreprises pour le climat, intended to encourage member companies to engage with this national initiative. In such cases, the cluster operates as a transmission belt, facilitating connections that may lead to ad hoc collaborations between its members and external academic or institutional actors. For members, these networking activities are perceived as enhancing both legitimacy and effectiveness, insofar as they diversify interlocutors, broaden access to external resources, and foster a deeper understanding of transition-related issues. The temporal horizon of such activities is short- to medium-term: they are typically renewed on an annual basis, progressively consolidating a recurrent interaction space. However, their influence on members' strategic trajectories remains indirect and contingent, depending both on their integration with other mechanisms and on the voluntary engagement of members themselves.

The fourth logic of action relates to the construction of a collective narrative linking the cluster and its members to the ecological transition. Since 2020, the cluster has formally recognised sustainable development as one of its four strategic pillars. This orientation has resulted in an intensification of transition-related initiatives, including the publication of a collective manifesto in favour of a 'living, sustainable, and shared mountain', as well as regular communication activities highlighting the environmental commitments of its network. Through these narrative practices, the cluster contributes to forging a shared identity around ecological transition. Nevertheless, this narrative construction does not rest on the foundation of a binding roadmap, and its appropriation by members varies considerably. It functions primarily as a flexible framing device, capable of encouraging engagement with transition-related issues without imposing uniform norms. This narrative logic is embedded in a longer-term temporality, oriented towards the gradual reshaping of collective representations of sustainability within the sector through the accumulation of repeated, low-intensity signals. Yet, the absence of translation into binding commitments or structured monitoring mechanisms currently limits its structuring potential and raises concerns about the possibility of decoupling between discourse and practice.

Table 3 provides a synthetic overview of these four logics of action, situating them in relation to illustrative practices, their dominant temporality, and their primary function. This overview also sets the stage for the subsequent section of the analysis, which examines the tensions that restrict their transformative capacity.

Although these logics of action indicate an increasing engagement of Cluster Montagne with ecological transition, they unfold within an organisational context that is itself marked by structural tensions, which significantly restrict their transformative potential. The analysis highlights the existence of contradictions, obstacles, and implicit trade-offs, all of which are presented in greater detail in the following sub-section.

Tensions in the implementation of the transition at Cluster Montagne

The analysis of the empirical material highlights several organisational tensions that hinder the implementation of transition practices within Cluster Montagne. These tensions result from the difficult balance between economic imperatives, the interplay of actors, and the structuring of transition mechanisms.

The first major obstacle lies in the challenge of reconciling economic and environmental logics. Cluster Montagne brings together companies that must ensure their profitability while progressively integrating the requirements of ecological transition. Although awareness of environmental issues is increasing, decisions remain largely influenced by short-term imperatives, which limits the capacity of members to invest in innovative practices. This tension is well summarised by one interviewee who explained that 'companies must first ensure their survival before thinking about these issues'. Moreover, from its creation, Cluster Montagne was conceived as an economically oriented cluster, and it largely remains so despite transition imperatives: 'We remain an association that helps businesses develop. We remain an accelerator of performance and innovation for an economic ecosystem. So, we must not lose our DNA'. Consequently, although some transition-oriented initiatives have been implemented, they remain occasional and rarely embedded in a long-term strategic approach.

Beyond strict economic constraints, the governance structure of Cluster Montagne constitutes a second limiting factor. On the one hand, the structure depends heavily on external funding and on the strategic orientations defined by its main institutional partners sitting on the board of directors. On the other hand, the executive committee of the association, which pilots the cluster's day-to-day activities, is composed of pivotal firms from the sector that pay close attention to safeguarding the interests of the cluster's strategic partners. This dependency can slow down or even prevent ambitious orientations in relation to transition, as illustrated by a participant in the Prospective Club: 'If the Prospective Club wants to go in a direction that is contrary to the politico-economic will of the major funders, the bureau can decide in favour of the institution that provides the

Table 3. Cluster Montagne's logics of action for the ecological transition

Logic of action	Example implementations	Temporal domain	Purpose
Project facilitation	Trends report, Carb 0 initiative	Short/medium term	Providing operational support for collective projects
Knowledge dissemination	Cluster Montagne Data platform, webinars	Short term	Promoting acculturation and disseminating information
Networking	Collaborative workshops, promotion of external events	Short/medium term	Fostering inter-organisational connections within and beyond the cluster
Collective narrative	Manifesto, sustainability pillar	Long term	Building a shared identity that frames transition as a strategic priority

Source: Own elaboration.

subsidy'. This situation raises questions about the cluster's real ability to drive a transformative dynamic without jeopardising its strategic relationships. Furthermore, cluster governance tends to intervene in the decisions of project groups, thereby limiting their autonomy and capacity to structure initiatives, as stated by another participant of the prospective club, 'This is what really breaks it for me. [...] This is my cluster, I am a member of this association, I contribute, and then you take back the file and tell me that you will discuss it among yourselves. Who are you?' This observation is also confirmed by the opinion of a member of the governance who declared: 'A project group does not decide. It suggests, it proposes, and in the end, it is governance that decides [...] geopolitics is dealt with at the level of governance. So, there is absolutely no question that a small project group makes decisions'. These two statements clearly illustrate the symptoms of a centralised governance structure, marked by strong hierarchical control that can stifle innovation and experimentation in transition-oriented initiatives.

Another key tension lies in the absence of a shared vision among the various actors engaged in the cluster. The heterogeneity of companies, public institutions, and other members leads to the fragmentation of expectations and priorities, which complicates the formulation of a coherent roadmap for transition. One interviewee emphasised this difficulty:

Once again, as with monitoring, doing foresight for this entire ecosystem is impossible. Each actor, within their business logic, economic model, worldview, and constraints, must do foresight for themselves. Because you cannot simultaneously do foresight for someone who makes plastic tarpaulins for reservoirs, for someone who develops navigation systems for snow groomers, and for someone involved in tourism services like accommodations. There is no foresight that can be common to all these people.

Here, the diversity of cluster members clearly appears as an obstacle to establishing a shared framework across all actors.

Without such a shared framework, the efforts deployed risk remaining fragmented and insufficiently coordinated to generate a systemic transition.

Transition also seems to be hindered by cultural and cognitive resistance to change. The mountain tourism sector has historically relied on a development model based on the expansion of infrastructure (accommodation and ski lifts) and tourist attractiveness, which makes the adoption of new practices more difficult. One business leader illustrated this inertia by stating: 'Looking to the future and anticipating threats is something that never existed. We always operated with the idea that all you needed was snow, a ski lift, and a hotel, and things would run by themselves'. Yet the integration of transition-related challenges requires a profound transformation of collective representations, a process that still needs to be consolidated within the studied ecosystem.

It also appears that practices promoting transition carried out by Cluster Montagne serve to legitimise its action among members and institutional partners. By showcasing initiatives such as the environmental transition action plan or the support of sustainable innovation projects, the cluster strengthens its role as a mediator between the expectations of economic actors and the imperatives of transition. This positioning allows it to affirm its utility within the ecosystem while avoiding too radical a questioning of dominant business models. One respondent highlighted this strategic function by explaining that the cluster's practices promoting transition primarily serve to enhance its image:

I think it establishes us as a professional structure. I am referring to image, respectability, and quality. When we are capable of producing this kind of work and communicating it effectively [...] it is the expression of a structure that is professional. So, it is an image benefit and therefore work that must be continued. And yes, it also strengthens credibility.

This tension between the necessity to act and the preservation of its institutional positioning shapes the actual impact of transition practices and raises questions about their real capacity to transform existing models.

Finally, a last set of tensions relates to the absence of formal mechanisms for collective reflection, monitoring, or evaluation of the actions undertaken. This lack of reflexivity is all the more problematic as it is combined with a strong orientation towards the rapid production of visible actions. As one interviewee expressed when discussing the *Trends Book* produced by the Prospective Club:

It is a beautiful document, it is valuable, it is well done. The readership rate must be terribly low. But that doesn't matter, we produced a beautiful trend report! But earlier, we were talking about the budget, and this reflects everything: zero reflection, everything in communication. And when you look at the cluster, it is all about communication. Talking before acting and talking about things that we are going to do, but never actually do. For me, the trend report belongs to this logic, where you take space, you generate visibility, you say you are doing things. But in reality, who actually appropriates the lessons from this report? Do we set ourselves the mission of creating a project group to work on the three most pressing trends? In your companies, what does it mean if we take such a trend? Does it mean we are addressing the initial need of companies, which is: how does this affect my strategy? That, we don't care. We don't do it.

This lack of reflexivity also reflects an organisational culture of 'doing fast', with a strong emphasis on materialising projects in the short term. As summarised by a member of the executive committee: 'I have a bit of a flaw, which is that I like efficiency. Today, the motto is "deliver useful." The cluster must feed short-term strategies. [...] Doing pitches, innovating, detecting start-ups, supporting SMEs in innovating'. This orientation towards immediate operational delivery prevents debate about the actions undertaken and the development of a reflexive logic that could enrich the transition trajectory. The absence of feedback or evaluation mechanisms thus limits the possibility of progressive or strategic adjustments in practices.

These tensions reveal that the transition within Cluster Montagne is confronted with multiple challenges. The opposition between economic profitability and environmental engagement, governance constraints, heterogeneous strategic visions, cultural resistance to change, short-term orientation, and the lack of structured reflexive mechanisms all hinder the emergence of a strong collective dynamic. These findings question the very role of economic clusters in transition and underscore the necessity of rethinking their modes of governance and action if they are to genuinely become facilitators of change.

Discussion

Theoretical contributions

The case of Cluster Montagne illustrates how an economic cluster-type MO can support ecological transition through a

variety of practices structured into distinct logics of action. These logics, including project facilitation, resource production and dissemination, networking, and the construction of a collective narrative, signal a growing willingness to integrate transition issues into the cluster's activities. Yet these dynamics are largely framed in terms of helping members adapt, rather than questioning dominant economic models, which raises several theoretical insights.

First, our study confirms that MO can play an important role in enabling transition by providing methodological support, pooling resources, and creating spaces for interorganisational exchange (Berkowitz, 2018; Lupova-Henry & Dotti, 2022). The logics of action identified reflect flexible coordination functions: facilitation, intermediation, and the provision of tools that contribute to members' gradual acculturation to sustainability issues. However, they entail neither a shared orientation nor structural change. This aligns with the tensions identified by Berkowitz and Bor (2024): in contexts of consensus-based governance and strong member autonomy, MOs' ability to act collectively is constrained by the need to maintain interorganisational balance. Cluster Montagne thus exemplifies a non-prescriptive facilitation logic: stimulating without constraining, accompanying without directing.

Second, these dynamics are embedded in short- to medium-term time horizons, consistent with the operational and tactical phases described in the transition management cycle (Loorbach, 2010). The cluster's activities aim at immediate outcomes: organising workshops, disseminating guides, and participating in projects, without linking them to a longer-term collective transformation strategy or reflexive mechanisms for continuous evaluation. This is illustrated by the annual *Trends Report*, which is rarely mobilised as a shared strategic tool. These findings echo critiques of regional clusters' difficulties in establishing mechanisms for collective learning and embedding their actions within an evolving trajectory (Lupova-Henry & Dotti, 2022). The absence of reflexive mechanisms in this case fragments the cluster's action and limits its ability to adjust or reinforce its commitment over time.

Third, our findings underscore the ambivalence of clusters' role in transition. Cluster Montagne oscillates between supporting innovation and acculturation and preserving the existing economic regime. This ambivalence resonates with Bor and O'Shea's (2022) typology of MO postures towards transition: facilitator of change, but also protector of sectoral interests, harmoniser, or defender of the status quo. In practice, the cluster adopts a hybrid posture, acting as a relay for certain sustainability initiatives, while avoiding any structural redefinition of its economic mandate. This contributes to regime stabilisation (Geels, 2002), where transition is absorbed into practices compatible with dominant models, rather than driving deeper transformation. Such hybridity also manifests in the strategic use of transition practices as levers of transformation and as a

tool of legitimization and visibility in the absence of mechanisms for collective appropriation or evaluation.

Fourth, the study highlights the structuring role of governance in shaping MOs' transformative capacity. Cluster Montagne operates through centralised governance dominated by the most powerful economic actors, reinforcing established interests and limiting the scope for experimentation. This echoes Ahme and Brunsson's (2005, 2008) work on the limits of partially organised organisations, where decision-making mechanisms do not enforce binding norms. Without formalised mechanisms for broad participation and co-construction, project groups remain consultative bodies, lacking the ability to shape the cluster's strategic orientation. Governance is therefore not neutral: it defines both the conditions for engagement and the potential for transformation.

Finally, the case shows that MOs' engagement in transition may be driven more by institutional legitimization than by a genuine intent to transform the regime. Cluster Montagne's initiatives enhance its image with members and public partners by signalling alignment with current societal priorities. As noted by Carmagnac et al. (2022) in the context of other multi-stakeholder MOs, such image-oriented logics risk decoupling discourse and action, where sustainability becomes a rhetorical register rather than a strategic reorientation. In this case, the tension between the need to act and the desire to preserve institutional positioning results in a top-down form of transition, where sustainability practices are valorised but not embedded in binding commitments or systemic transformation.

In sum, this study sheds light on the mechanisms through which an economic cluster-type MO supports transition, while also revealing the structural constraints that limit its transformative potential. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the ambivalent role of MOs in collective transformations and calls for greater attention to the political, organisational, and cultural conditions required for a truly strategic and transversal transition.

Managerial contributions

This study identifies several levers of action for economic clusters seeking to engage in ecological transition.

First, the results indicate that most practices are limited to ad hoc, operational initiatives. To overcome this logic of incremental adaptation, steering committees should develop a collective roadmap anchored in long-term strategic objectives for transformation. This requires shifting from reactive responses to more coherent and durable logics of action. Second, governance appears as a critical leverage point. Decision-making concentrated in the hands of a few powerful economic actors restricts project groups' autonomy and stifles innovation. More participatory and diverse governance arrangements would foster the co-construction of shared

trajectories that are both more inclusive and more ambitious with regard to transition. Third, the lack of reflexive mechanisms is a major limitation. Introducing evaluation tools, feedback loops, and systems for monitoring environmental impact would strengthen organisational learning and enable continuous adjustment. Such mechanisms should focus on collective improvement rather than the *ex post* justification of actions already undertaken. Finally, the findings have implications for public authorities. Their role is essential in guiding clusters towards shared governance, clear objectives, and structured reflexive capacity. Making certain funding conditional on these requirements could serve as an effective lever to foster more ambitious transitions.

Overall, if clusters are to play a structuring role in transition, they must move beyond flexible support and embrace a more strategic, participatory, and learning-oriented dynamic.

Limitations and research perspectives

This study also presents several limitations that suggest promising directions for future research. A longitudinal perspective would provide deeper insight into how Cluster Montagne's strategies evolve in response to transformations in its environment. Expanding the scope to include other MO engaged in transition would help identify what is specific to economic clusters compared with other types of intermediary organisations and highlight the factors that enable or constrain their ability to structure effective collective dynamics. A comparative approach could further shed light on the governance models adopted by different clusters and assess how institutional, sectoral, or territorial configurations shape their role in transition. Such research could, for instance, explore differences between clusters operating under strong regulatory oversight and those in more autonomous environments, as well as the effects of public authorities' or other stakeholders' involvement in their structuring. A second line of inquiry could examine how MOs, and economic clusters in particular, design reflexive mechanisms to adjust their trajectory in response to environmental challenges. Investigating how clusters develop monitoring systems and feedback loops to progressively adapt their strategies would deepen our understanding of how they can move beyond fragmented approaches to adopt more coherent and adaptive ones. Finally, further research should focus on assessing the concrete impact of economic clusters' initiatives on the transformation of members' practices, in order to better evaluate their actual contribution to transition.

Together, these research avenues would refine our understanding of the role of MOs in ecological transition and help identify levers to enhance their effectiveness as structuring intermediary actors.

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Appendix

Table A1. Actions related to the transition implemented by the cluster over the period 2018–2024

Project name	Purpose	Role of the Cluster	Project leader/partner	Date/period
Conference on Sustainable Mountain and Tourism Development	Raise awareness of the impacts of climate change in mountain areas	Relay	Nations Unies	2018
Act for the Outdoors	Fundraising for projects aimed at tackling climate change	Relay	Outdoor Sports Valley	Annually, since 2018
Innovation Morning (water, etc.)	Raise awareness and inform on specific issues related to mountain development	Project leader	/	Occasional, since 2018
Webinar/Workshop 'Cluster Montagne, Sustainable Development and You'	Define a collective message on sustainable development and identify outstanding initiatives	Project leader	/	Several sessions, 2020
Prospective Club	Working group on climate, economic, social, and other issues affecting the mountains in the medium and long term	Project leader	/	Annually, since 2018
<i>Trends Book</i>	Compilation of expert articles on various issues related to the transition	Project leader	/	Annually, since 2020
Trends Book Conference	Conference giving the floor to experts featured in the <i>Trends Book</i>	Project leader	/	Annually, since 2021
Workshops – Chair Territories in Transition	Workshops organised by Grenoble Ecole de Management to reflect on issues related to transition in mountain areas (circular economy, business models, etc.)	Partner; relay	Grenoble École de Management	Occasional, since 2021
Collective Action 'Greenhouse Gas Inventory'	Support in conducting greenhouse gas emissions inventories	Co-lead	ADEME, DSF	2020
SmartSports4GoodLife	European project promoting sustainable development across several sport-related sectors	Partner	INDESCAT, Cluster Sport @ Technology, Sport et Lifestyle, epsi	2021
General Assembly on the Transition of Mountain Tourism	Collective mobilisation of all French mountain stakeholders to build new pathways for the transition of mountain tourism	Partner	Mountain Wilderness · 2TM · Région AURA · Région Sud – PACA · Région BFC · ANCT National · SUERA · DSF,...	2021
Sustainable Tourism Fund	Fund led by ADEME to support projects fostering tourism sustainability	Relay	ADEME	2021
'Energy for Industry' Day	Conferences, workshops, and B2B meetings to initiate or advance the energy transition of businesses	Relay	AURA Entreprises	Annually, since 2023
Sharing for the Future	Conference day on issues related to sustainable development	Co-lead	Université Grenoble Alpes	Annually, Since 2020
Plan Avenir Montagne	Provide engineering support to mountain territories in developing tourism strategies adapted to ecological transitions	Relay	ANCT	(2021–...)
Sustainable Development Project Group	Define the 2022 Sustainable Development action plan	Project leader	/	Annually, since 2022
Sectoral Guide for the Sport, Mountain and Tourism	Sectoral guide to help companies design a comprehensive strategy to reduce GHG emissions	Co-lead	UTOPIES, AirCoop, Région AURA, DSF, OSV, ADEME	
Collective Action 'Environmental Transition Action Plan'	Support companies in defining their environmental strategies and developing specific indicators to measure progress	Project leader	Damoe, Banque de la transition énergétique	2022

(Continued)

Table A1 (Continued). Actions related to the transition implemented by the cluster over the period 2018–2024

Project name	Purpose	Role of the Cluster	Project leader/partner	Date/period
Sustainable Development Study Tour	Three-day immersion trip enabling participants to become familiar with and collectively embark on sustainable development practices	Project leader	/	2022
Circular Economy Workshop	Raise awareness among companies on circular economy issues	Project leader	/	2022
Collective Training: First Steps towards CSR	Three workshops to share good practices and draft a CSR roadmap	Co-lead	Quintessens	2023
Signing of the Zero Wild Waste in the Mountains Charter	Collective commitment to achieving zero wild waste in the mountains by 2030	Signatory	Mountain Riders	2023
Zero Waste Mountain Training	Train stakeholders to achieve a zero wild waste mountain by 2030	Relay	Mountain Riders	2023
Webinar – Business Convention for Climate	Presentation of the Business Convention for Climate	Relay	CEC Alpes	2023
Circular Economy Day for the Regional Mechanical Sector	Foster information-sharing among stakeholders and identify key short-term challenges for the sector	Relay	CIRIDD, CIMES, CARA	2024
Inter-company Workshop – Renewable Energies	Discover technical solutions for green energy production and learn about advantageous financing schemes	Relay	SDES73, ASDER et Région AURA	2024
Circular Economy Workshop	Raise awareness among companies on circular economy issues	Relay	Fibr'ethik, PECSS	2024
SoluCir Fair	Fair dedicated to the circular economy, aimed at accelerating transition and circularity	Relay/partner	Solu'Cir	(2021–...)
Workshop on Acceleration and Facilitation of Sustainable Development Projects	Feedback workshop on the work of the Sustainable Tourism Chair regarding transition pathways in mountain areas	Partner	Fondation USMB	2024
Mission Carb'0	ALCOTRA programme to support the decarbonisation of businesses	Co-lead	CCI Nice Côte d'Azur; CCI Savoie, Camera di Commercio Cuneo, ENSAM, Camera di commercio industria Artigianato e Agricoltura Di Torino,...	2024
Webinar – Financing the Transition	Advice and support on transition financing	Co-lead	Crédit Agricole des Savoie	2024

Source: Own elaboration.

DSF, Domaines skiabiles de France; OSV, Outdoor Sports Valley; AURA, Auvergne rhône alpes region; PACA, Provence alpes côte d'azur region; BFC, Bourgogne franche comté region; SUERA, European union strategy for the alpine region; UTOPIES, UTOPIES (sustainability strategy consultancy); CEC, Convention of companies for the climate; SDES73, Savoie departmental energy syndicate; ASDER, Savoy association for renewable energy development; PECSS, Circular economy hub of coeur de savoie; CCI, Chamber of commerce and industry.