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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Continuity and Change in Spin-off Meta-organizations: An Imprinting Perspective

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Abstract

Research into meta-organizations – or organizations whose members are organizations – does not explain the observation that members may decouple themselves from 'parent' organizations and form 'child' organizations that pursue more targeted objectives. Addressing this gap, we study two interlinked meta-organizations – the first created to tackle broad sustainability issues, and the second as a 'spin off' to confront the grand challenge of sustainable urban mobility. Mobilizing insights from organizational imprinting, we identify conditions under which members break away from their parent and elucidate how the child organization inherits organizational features from its predecessor while acquiring new ones during the spin-off process. We contribute to meta-organization scholarship by stretching understandings of their post-creation dynamics. We build on organizational imprinting literature by indicating how imprinting processes play out in unconventional organizational forms previously overlooked. Our findings encourage policymakers and practitioners to reflect on how to promote and manage meta-organizations more effectively to address complex social issues.

Keywords: *Meta-organizations*; *Imprinting*; *Partial organization*; *Sustainability*

Bioenergy Europe brings together business and scientific actors to promote European policy for sustainable electricity production. It is an example of the many meta-organizations – or organizations whose members are organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005) – created to support collective action of heterogeneous actors in response to grand challenges (e.g. Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022). Over time, Bioenergy Europe has spawned two meta-organizations: the European Pellet Council (EPC) and the International Biomass Torrefaction Council (IBTC). These are related to Bioenergy Europe through inherited memberships. However, their missions – to promote wood-pellet and biomass markets – are narrower than the broad goal of their parent.

Scholars show umbrella meta-organizations can create affiliates to promote their goals (e.g. Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015). None, however, investigate the phenomenon – captured in the Bioenergy Europe example – of members decoupling themselves from a 'parent' meta-organization to form a 'child' organization to achieve new objectives. No studies explain the

emergence of child organizations or provide insights into why it may be necessary to create new, autonomous meta-organizations possessing their own traits, rather than merely replicate features of their parent. Investigating characteristics of 'spin-off' meta-organizations and exploring their emergence can stretch understandings of meta-organizational dynamics (Berkowitz et al., 2022). Despite interest in studying meta-organizations as unconventional forms of organizing (ibid.), there is a gap in knowledge on how they develop over time (e.g. Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016).

Meta-organizations' idiosyncratic organizational features – including heterarchical decision-making norms – can lead to inertia (e.g. König et al., 2012) and hinder modification of founding objectives or structures (Ahrne et al., 2016b). Exploring the creation of spin-off meta-organizations may generate new insights into how meta-organizations evolve and address grand challenges. We explore the phenomenon of spin-off meta-organizations by asking: under what conditions do members of one meta-organization created to address

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grand challenges break away to form another, and how does this process unfold? These questions are intriguing as – intuitively – it may require less effort for meta-organizations to address new issues in existing organizational structures, rather than in new, standalone fora.

One approach addressing factors and processes of the spin-off phenomenon is the organizational imprinting perspective. This emphasizes how – during periods of susceptibility – economic and technological conditions, institutional arrangements, or individuals' visions are stamped onto organizations, becoming factors that leave a mark on organizations' trajectories and outcomes (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Scholars demonstrate how imprinted organizations may, in turn, imprint their descendants (e.g. Roberts et al., 2011). They elucidate mechanisms through which child organizations inherit features of their parent's imprint while simultaneously developing organizational distinctiveness from prevailing conditions during their creation (e.g. Ferriani et al., 2012).

The imprinting perspective explores the impact of imprints on industries, firms, and individuals (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) but has not been applied to meta-organizations. Organizational imprinting in general, and processes through which parent organizations imprint their offspring in particular, may play out differently in these unconventional forms. For example, individual-level agency is seemingly central to imprinting processes (e.g. Snihur & Zott, 2020). Whether this is the case in meta-organizations remains unclear, as they exhibit structural arrangements favoring consensus-based over top-down decision-making (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Garaudel, 2020).

Exploring our questions through this imprinting lens, we train attention on two meta-organizations tackling the grand challenge of sustainable urban mobility. In many cities, congestion, poor air quality, and rising emissions lead to health issues, prevent the functioning of local economies, and threaten inward investment (European Commission, 2013). Our focal organizations – AlphA and BetA – address these issues. They have specific missions but are closely connected: AlphA supports collective dialog around broad sustainability issues, while BetA implements concrete solutions to urban mobility devised in AlphA. BetA is a 'spin-off' created by a subgroup of AlphA members who still remain members of the parent association. Our empirical context explores factors behind BetA's breakaway from AlphA, how this occurred, and consequences in terms of organizational outcomes.

We find a meta-organization's founding imprint may provide certain members with a supportive space for developing – but not pursuing – a new, common purpose. Given challenges of changing the founding imprint, this conflict may push members to decouple themselves from the meta-organization and search for external solutions that support their new purpose. This opens up a sensitive period during which members

are exposed to new environmental demands, triggering a two-step process of active compliance followed by passive retention and resulting in a new imprint stamped onto a child meta-organization. This spin-off meta-organization – exhibiting new organizational features marked by environmental conditions during the sensitive period and inheriting persistent organizational elements from its parent – advances efforts aimed at tackling grand challenges initiated in its parent.

Our exploration of spin-off meta-organizations, their enabling conditions, and the process through which they emerge contribute to meta-organization literature by explaining the previously overlooked empirical observation of spin-off meta-organizations. Building on previous studies, we demonstrate how creating spin-off meta-organizations may present opportunities for circumventing organizational sclerosis that results from meta-organizations' initial organizational imprints. We advance the imprinting perspective by considering the context of meta-organizations and indicating that – in the absence of top-down decision-making in such organizations – the initial imprint of the parent may be modified not through change to the parent structure, but through the creation of an offspring meta-organization. From a practical perspective, we encourage policymakers and practitioners to reflect on how to use meta-organizations to foster multi-stakeholder cooperation to address grand challenges. The substantive – as opposed to symbolic – tackling of such challenges is a long-term endeavor, which may require successive meta-organizations, each building on the achievements of its predecessor to pursue more targeted objectives.

We begin by establishing the theoretical foundations of our research. We then describe our research context and methods. We subsequently present key findings and discuss their scholarly and practical contributions. We conclude by establishing limitations and identifying future research opportunities.

Literature review and theoretical background

Meta-organizations

Meta-organizations are increasingly ubiquitous organizational forms underpinning interorganizational activities of trade associations, standard-making bodies, and international organizations. There exists a rich corpus of scholarly work around meta-organizations (see, for example, Berkowitz et al., 2022). Studies indicate they are proven vehicles for driving collective action of heterogeneous actors in response to grand challenges, including sustainable development (Berkowitz et al., 2017), climate change (Chaudhury et al., 2016), and healthcare (Cropper & Bor, 2018).

As unconventional organizations (Brès et al., 2018), meta-organizations are described as partial organizations (Ahrne

et al., 2016b; Ahrne et al., 2019) that only selectively incorporate elements (hierarchy, membership, rules, monitoring, and sanctions) of conventional organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Members' reluctance to abandon their autonomy makes hierarchical power detrimental to meta-organization and encourages consensus-based decision-making (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Malcourant et al., 2015). Relaxing membership requirements helps meta-organizations attract a maximum number of members and ensure wide adoption of their practices (Rasche et al., 2013). Light-touch – or non-existent – rules, monitoring systems, and sanctions create low-cost structures for collective action while protecting members' autonomy (Berkowitz, 2018).

As meta-organizations possess their own missions, identities, and internal tensions, which can result in different internal dynamics compared to other organizational forms (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008), scholars have begun developing a theory to explain the particularities of meta-organizations (e.g. Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008; Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Garaudel, 2020). With this theorizing still in its infancy (e.g. Berkowitz et al., 2022), there remains much to investigate before our knowledge about meta-organizations are as developed as our understanding of traditional organizations such as individual-based firms (Berkowitz et al., 2020). Here, we focus on one area of underdeveloped research – the dynamics of meta-organizations (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016).

Dynamics of meta-organizations

Although scholars have investigated the emergence of meta-organizations (e.g. Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Saniossian et al., 2022; Valente & Oliver, 2018), understandings of their evolution remain limited. Figure 1 shows meta-organizational dynamics may stem from internal activities and decisions of the collective, including membership strategies (Ahrne et al., 2016a), the bureaucratization of their secretariats (Roux & Lecocq, 2022), or changes in governance mechanisms (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019). They may also be explained by external institutional forces, which – over time – reshape meta-organizations' structures or purposes (Cropper & Bor, 2018; Laurent et al., 2020).

The center of Figure 1 indicates, as meta-organizations evolve, they may adapt to changing environments (Cropper & Bor, 2018). Despite consensus-based decision-making structures, they can quickly adapt in response to third-parties' outreach activities (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019) or contestations (Peixoto & Temmes, 2019). Laurent et al. (2020) report, for example, how two meta-organizations merged into one following government-initiated change in their field. Other studies argue meta-organizations respond to non-paradigmatic change with inertia (König et al., 2012). As their activities become more bureaucratized, meta-organizations find it challenging to change their focus (Vifell & Thedvall, 2012). Long-term evolutions may affect members' perceptions, putting the purposes of meta-organizations under scrutiny and resulting in decision lock-ins (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022). Meta-organizations may become inactive and morph into dormant meta-organizations (Berkowitz et al., 2020) or risk dissolving or merging into individual-based organizations (Ahrne et al., 2016b).

Despite these insights, prior literature neither recognizes nor theoretically explains the observation – captured in the Bioenergy Europe example above – that one meta-organization may over time spawn another. To be fair, scholars (e.g. Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015) have documented the related phenomenon of how umbrella meta-organizations may create affiliate meta-organizations to pursue their goals in other arenas. However, none engages with the possibility that members may decouple themselves from the structure and goals of a meta-organization to form a new child meta-organization whose characteristics and objectives deviate from their parent's. Exploring conditions under which a parent meta-organization gives birth to a child and unpacking how this process unfolds thus has potential to generate new insights into the dynamics of collective meta-organizing and the trajectories of meta-organizations.
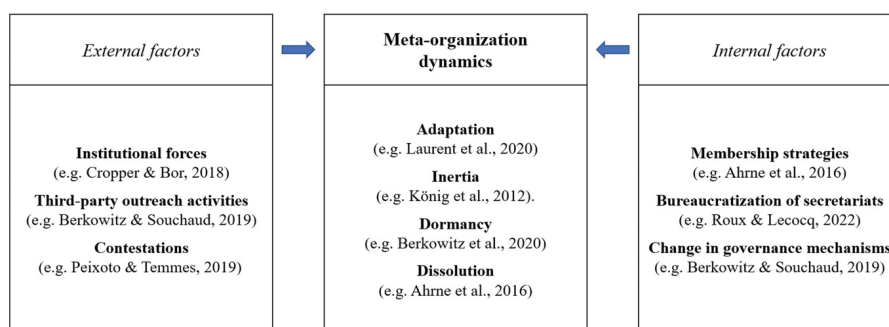

External factors	Meta-organization dynamics	Internal factors
Institutional forces (e.g. Cropper & Bor, 2018) **Third-party outreach activities** (e.g. Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019) **Contestations** (e.g. Peixoto & Temmes, 2019)	**Adaptation** (e.g. Laurent et al., 2020) **Inertia** (e.g. König et al., 2012). **Dormancy** (e.g. Berkowitz et al., 2020) **Dissolution** (e.g. Ahrne et al., 2016)	**Membership strategies** (e.g. Ahrne et al., 2016) **Bureaucratization of secretariats** (e.g. Roux & Lecocq, 2022) **Change in governance mechanisms** (e.g. Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019)

Figure 1. Prior research into the dynamics of meta-organizations.

Meta-organizational dynamics and organizational imprinting

One approach addressing factors, processes, and outcomes of the spin-off phenomenon is the organizational imprinting perspective. Grounded in the work of Stinchcombe (1965), this addresses the importance of external and internal forces in shaping organizations' features over time. Imprinting highlights how – during sensitive periods – organizations may be susceptible to economic and technological conditions, institutional arrangements, or visions of individuals. These leave a stamp on the structures, strategies, and trajectories of organizations (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Imprinting scholarship brings into focus the concepts of *imprinters* (i.e. entities providing the form of an imprint), the *imprinted* (i.e. the target of imprints), and *imprinting* (i.e. the process through which an imprint is stamped onto organizations) (Simsek et al., 2015). Scholars working across business and management research have applied notions of imprinting to explore how organizations are formed and carry a lasting imprint of their founders and founding conditions (e.g. Motley et al., 2023).

The imprinting perspective emphasizes the sensitive period of an organization at its formation, stressing the enduring influence of features imprinted on organizations during this initial window (e.g. Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; Simsek et al., 2015; Zarea Fazlelahi et al., 2022) and exposing inertia and path dependency as mechanisms explaining these persistent effects (Ellis et al., 2017). For instance, organizations' practices or capabilities may be affected by their initial technology environment (Kriauciunas & Kale, 2006). Organizational structures may be designed to fit the institutional environment that prevails at the time of founding (e.g. Marquis & Huang, 2010). Organizational missions may be shaped by preferences of individual founders (e.g. De Cuyper et al., 2020). Scholars recognize, however, that initial imprints can change, amplify, or decay over time (e.g. Muñoz et al., 2018).

Imprinting scholarship increasingly raises the possibility – beyond the founding phase – of subsequent periods of sensitivity, during which imprints evolve and organizations imprinted anew. Further windows of imprintability may open up in response to poor performance or crises (Baker & Collins, 2010), mergers (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013), or – of relevance for our study – spin-offs (Ferriani et al., 2012). Studies suggest spin-offs are imprinted primarily by their parents (e.g. Zarea Fazlelahi et al., 2022). Through the metaphor of filial imprinting or how offspring inherits characteristics and behaviors of direct ancestors (e.g. Simsek et al., 2015), scholars show organizations may imprint their descendants. Spin-offs may inherit routines, technologies, and capabilities from their parents (e.g. Roberts et al., 2011), leaving a lasting stamp on their development.

These prior studies emphasize continuity between spin-offs and their parents, focusing on parent–child resource transfers.

Less common are studies exploring whether spin-off organizations break their parental mold and develop organizational distinctiveness. Scholars overlook possible parent–progeny discontinuities and the extent to which spawns inherit – or not – structural and organizational features from their ancestors (e.g. Chatterji, 2009). Notable exceptions include Klepper and Sleeper (2005) who demonstrate spin-offs are not simply clones of their parents: even if they inherit their incumbent firms' product and market focus, child organizations may develop their own unique organizational features.

Although rare, studies exploring the imprinting process unpack activities that unfold during sensitive periods (e.g. Simsek et al., 2015). Following a triggering event, organizations may be vulnerable to the forces of imprinters, whose characteristics combine with those of the organization – together with historical and contemporaneous influences – to create new imprints (Kriauciunas & Kale, 2006). De Cuyper et al. (2020) demonstrate how – following the introduction of new senior managers – the characteristics of a social venture's organizational imprint both persisted and evolved through a process of sedimented imprinting marked by imprint reinforcement, reforming, and coupling. Through the notion of reimprinting, Ferriani et al. (2012) capture mechanisms through which a technology spin-off firm selectively maintained influences of its parent while developing features resulting from responses to feedback from the evolving business environment.

These studies – like the imprinting perspective in general (e.g. Ellis et al., 2017; Snihur & Zott, 2020) – highlight the role of individual-level agency in organizational imprinting. Evolution of an organization's imprint partially depends on top-down attempts of new leaders to modify features stamped on an organization by its founders (De Cuyper et al., 2020). Whether spin-off organizations carry over imprints of their parents can be driven by proactive, reflexive individuals who selectively defend organizational legacies while coping with demands of the changing environment (Ferriani et al., 2012). These studies – in taking social ventures or private firms as their focal entities – overlook organizational idiosyncrasies of meta-organizations, and the role these may play in determining evolution in organizational imprints. Whether insights into the imprinting processes or filial reimprinting can be generalized to meta-organizations is unclear, especially since their members are organizations rather than individuals, and because they exhibit configurations that favor consensus-based over top-down decision-making (e.g. Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008).

In summary, meta-organization literature tells us little theoretically about conditions under which a parent meta-organization may give birth to a child, and how this unfolds. Theorizing on organizational imprinting has sought to explore related issues, albeit without considering organizational idiosyncrasies of meta-organizations. We therefore aim to explore how an initial organizational imprint evolves beyond the initial founding

period within the context of meta-organizations. We investigate conditions under which meta-organization members attempt to free themselves from an organizational imprint, how this process plays out, and with what consequences. Studying how meta-organizations and their imprinted characteristics evolve over time, we hope to stretch knowledge about meta-organizational dynamics while advancing understandings of organizational imprinting in organizational contexts not previously studied. We also expect to generate practical insights into how meta-organizations can be mobilized to tackle grand challenges.

Methods

We adopted an abductive approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2014) to explore conditions under which members break away from one meta-organization to form another and identify micro-processes through which spin-off meta-organizations establish their idiosyncrasies while simultaneously inheriting parental features. Concretely, we followed the example of previous studies (e.g. Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) by considering prior theories related to issues under investigation but remaining open to observing new constructs and relationships.

Research design

We draw on a case study investigating two meta-organizations addressing sustainable urban mobility. Common in meta-organization scholarship (e.g. Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Valente

& Oliver, 2018), case studies provide detailed explanations of under-explored phenomena and help explore 'how' and 'why' questions (Yin, 2003) and complex processes (Langley, 1999). These considerations are relevant for our research as few studies engage with the evolution of meta-organizations beyond their foundation (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022; Cropper & Bor, 2018; Laurent et al., 2020).

Research setting and case selection

We study two meta-organizations – AlphA and BetA (pseudonyms) – based in the same French city, which suffers from traffic congestion problems around its airport, a major employment zone. Both comprise private firms and public bodies and are closely connected: BetA was established as a 'spin-off' by a subgroup of AlphA members who remain members of the parent. AlphA and BetA have specific missions. AlphA supports the development of collective solutions to broad sustainability issues. BetA implements concrete solutions to urban mobility challenges devised in AlphA. This context enables us to surface factors explaining BetA's break-away from AlphA, how this occurred, and its consequences in terms of organizational outcomes.

Data collection

Table 1 summarizes data collection, combining semi-structured interviews and archival data to increase research validity (Yin, 2003).

Table 1. Data sources

Source	Type of data	Use in analysis
Exploratory stage (May 2018–March 2019)		
Interviews	4 Institutional Affairs Managers	Understand institutional context
Intensive data collection stage (April 2019–June 2020)		
Interviews	22 interviews with AlphA and BetA members	Understand conditions surrounding emergence of meta-organizations, members' motivation to join, organizational structures, resources, actions
	5 interviews with third parties involved in creating AlphA	Support evidence from interviews with AlphA and BetA members
Archival	5 administrative guidance documents for grant applications issued by French government and COE (145 pages in total)	Support evidence from interviews with AlphA and BetA members
	5 promotional documents issued by AlphA and BetA (5 pages in total)	
	1 previous public–private collaboration agreement (13 pages in total)	Support evidence from interviews
	3 COE reports of BetA's progress (67 pages in total)	
	17 meeting minutes, projects proposals, and confidential internal documentation (97 pages in total)	
	17 press articles on AlphA and BetA (23 pages in total)	
Reflexive phase with back and forth between data and literature		
Informal exchanges	Phone call/e-mail exchanges with 9 AlphA members	Share initial findings, obtain feedback, solicit further information

Interviews

AlphA and BetA's roles in responding to urban mobility challenges emerged as an important topic as we interviewed Institutional Affairs Directors as part of another, unrelated project. We used these interviews (May 2018–June 2019) to gain initial understandings of each meta-organization. In a second round (April 2019–June 2020), we interviewed private and public members of both meta-organizations to understand how each had emerged, why members joined them, and details about their structures. Through snowballing, we interviewed other actors – representatives from COE (Cities of Europe) and ConsulT employees – involved in creating BetA. We invited interviewees to review our findings between July and November 2020. We conducted a total of 31 formal interviews resulting in a total of 41 h of recordings (see Table 2). We transcribed all interviews verbatim, following good practice (Gibbert et al., 2008).

Archival data

We reviewed AlphA and BetA websites and consulted press articles addressing each organizations' work. Interviewees also shared confidential documentation, including reports, presentations, and minutes of meetings. The websites of the French government and European Union provided background information on institutional prescriptions. We used archival data to triangulate evidence derived from interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, we referred to guidance documents provided by COE to corroborate interview data on how it expects meta-organizations to be structured to obtain European funding.

Data analysis

Inspired by Gioia et al. (2013), we analyzed data in four steps. First, we developed an in-depth understanding of our data sources. Immersing ourselves into the reality of our focal organizations and the contexts of their emergence, we created a narrative summarizing the creation of the parent organization in our study (AlphA), the activities it performed, and individual members' perceptions of its functioning. Our narrative also captured the motivations for a subgroup of members to break away from AlphA and create BetA – the 'spin-off' meta-organization in our study. Our thick narrative synthesized the spin-off process while accounting for actors' different viewpoints (Dumez, 2016). In a second step, we followed Nag and Gioia (2012) to code interview data using informants' in vivo expressions and grouped these into first-order categories. Our third analytic step involved collapsing categories into second-order themes. Our analytical strategy during these two stages combined both deductive and inductive coding techniques.

When deductively coding our data, we, for example, used the concept of partial organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011) and its five organizational elements (membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions). As partial organization is closely related to meta-organizations and their structure (Ahrne et al., 2016b; Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022), we used it as a tool to identify continuity and change across AlphA and BetA's organizational structures. For instance, informants referred to the use of consensus as a mode of decision-making, which we related to the organizational element of *Hierarchy* in Ahrne and Brunsson's terms as a first-order category. We subsequently collapsed this category – and other categories related to organizational elements – into a second-order theme labeled *Structure*.

In the absence of preexisting guidance, we used inductive coding to capture other phenomena, collapsing first-order categories into researcher-induced themes at a more abstract level. For example, interviewees spoke about being approached by AlphA's managers to share information about sustainability projects, which could be developed collaboratively. We coded this as *Soliciting members' proposals*. We grouped this first-order code with other related and subsequent actions – including *Classifying proposals into topics* and *Connecting common interests* – into a theme covering activities referring to *Subgroup creation*.

In a fourth step, we grouped second-order themes into aggregate dimensions, again adopting both a deductive and inductive stance. For instance, as we were investigating links between parent and child meta-organizations, the concept of organizational imprint (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) appeared central to our analysis. As such, we collapsed the *Structure*, *Resources*, and *Purpose* second-order themes that characterized AlphA into a single aggregate dimension labeled *Parent imprint*. In other instances, we inductively clustered second-order themes into aggregate dimensions mirroring processes of transition between AlphA and BetA. For example, the *Subgroup creation*, *Emergence of new collective purpose*, and *Inaction of members* second-order themes appeared to be closely related to a *Decoupling* phase (aggregate) between AlphA's structure and its members' evolving goals. Ultimately, this fourth step rendered five aggregate dimensions: (1) parent imprint, (2) decoupling, (3) spinning off, (4) imprint on child organization, and (5) collective impact of child organization. These laid foundations for elaborating our theoretical model.

Alongside these four steps, we also conducted member checks (e.g. Nag et al., 2007), sharing emerging codes and models with colleagues and interviewees to ensure trustworthiness of analysis. These checks provided feedback on our analysis while ensuring interpretations were consistent with interviewees' experiences. The data structure resulting from our analysis is reported in Table 3.

Table 2. Interview data

Organization	Interviewee	Date of interview	Duration (minutes)
BusinesscluB[1,2]	Lydia, *President*	May-19	101
	Frédéric, *Project Manager*	June-20	202
AirporT[1,2]	Marie-France, *Sustainability Manager*	May-19	75
		Januray-20	67
TurbocorP[1,2]	Elodie, *Head of Public Affairs*	August-19	90
		September-19	80
		October-19	72
		November-19	49
	Laura, *Public Affairs Manager*	September-19	80
		November-19	66
JetcorP[1,2]	Sonia, *Head of Public Affairs*	May-18	95
		July-18	105
		May-19	60
	Henri, *Head of Environmental Affairs*	May-18	50
		March-19	74
	Louis, *Facility Manager*	May-19	82
	Daniel, *Project Manager*	April-20	96
SyscorP[1,2]	Béatrice, *Institutional Affairs Manager*	May-19	126
CitycouN[1,2]	Pierre, *Vice-President European Affairs*	October-19	74
	Silvia, *European Project Manager*	April-19	60
		November-19	123
PubtranS[1,2]	Alain, *Planning Director*	June-19	84
		April-20	57
NormagE[2]	Véronique, *Head of Mobility*	September-19	70
	Liliane, *Mobility Project Manager*	December-19	60
SoftcorP[2]	Arthur, *Head of Innovation*	June-19	37
COE[3]	Giuliano, *Project Supervisor*	November-19	52
	Joan, *Project Expert*	June-19	60
		December-19	45
ConsulT[3]	Amélie, *Project Manager*	February-20	120
	Sophie, *Project Manager*	December-19	75
	Total duration		***41.45** h*
	Average duration		***80.2** min*
	Total Interviews		**31**

[1] Founding members of AlphA; [2] Members of BetA; [3] Organizations associated with BetA

Table 3. Data structure

Illustrative quotes	First-order codes	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
'AlphA is about collaboration and consensus. Each member plays its part in decision-making, we see what we can do together' (Daniel, April 2020)	Hierarchy	Structure	**Parent imprint**
'The idea behind AlphA is quite simple: anyone who wants to come along is welcome' (Elodie, September 2019)	Membership		
'We designed AlphA so that members would face as few obligations and directives as possible' (Daniel, April 2020)	Rules		
'Alpha is mostly based on goodwill. There's little pressure to contribute, and virtually no way to assess progress or commitment' (Laura, November 2019)	Monitoring		
'In AlphA, we sign presence sheets to show we've participated in meetings, but face few consequences if we don't attend' (Lydia, June 2019)	Sanctions		
'AlphA has generated some interesting projects, but we need funding to launch them and free up members' time. Firms won't stump up the financing themselves' (Béatrice, May 2019)	Financial	Resources	
'I was literally the only coordinator in AlphA. I couldn't keep an eye on 25 projects at the same time, it was impossible to participate in each working group' (Daniel, April 2020)	Human		
'In AlphA, we coordinate a technical working group where we share our knowledge of sustainable mobility technologies for local public transport' (Alain, April 2020)	Expertise		
'There are loads of firms with environmental impacts, and public actors who have little ability to address them. AlphA sought to sit both actors round the same table' (Henri, March 2019)	Connecting numerous and diverse members	Purpose	
'AlphA meetings aim to explore collaboration around sustainability with other firms and public authorities. Our first meeting addressed loads of topics, including saving bees, and using electric cars' (Elodie, October 2019)	Imagining sustainability solutions		
'Henri and Daniel asked for notes of intent. I personally proposed seven notes on bio-diversity, the circular economy, mobility, and so on'. (Marie-France, May 2019)	Soliciting members' proposals	Subgroup creation	**Decoupling**
'We received 25 notes of intent, and used them to establish four working groups on mobility, the circular economy, green growth and pollution' (Henri, March 2019)	Classifying proposals into topics		
'The idea behind creating the working groups was to see how actors interested in similar topics could possibly do something together' (Daniel, April 2020)	Connecting common interests		
'Consistent with its intentions, AlphA is really just a talking shop – it doesn't do much in concrete terms' (Pierre, October 2019)	Criticizing initial purpose	Emergence of new collective purpose	
'The mobility group was a real pool of ideas. We'd devised concrete proposals, and realized we were all eager to implement them' (Béatrice, May 2019)	Recognizing collaborative potential		
'We couldn't escape the fact there wasn't a single penny in AlphA's coffers, and didn't have relevant human resources. We didn't know how to solve the puzzle' (Marie-France, May 2019)	Members' frustration	Inaction of members	
'Without specific financing, no single idea could be implemented. Why should I devote time to AlphA topics in such conditions? They're secondary interests and not central to my job' (Laura, November 2019)	Members' demotivation		
'We turned to Henri and Pierre for help, knowing they had experience in exploring spaces where it's possible to find public financing to support projects' (Marie-France, January 2020)	Scanning the external environment	Search for new external resources	**Spinning off**
'We presented national and European funding opportunities A call for projects issued by the COE appeared to fit what the mobility group was trying to do' (Daniel, April 2020)	Identifying external resources providers		
'We considered the COE requirements, and realized they stressed replicability, measurement, and innovativeness. They also implied we should organize in work packages' (Silvia, November 2019)	Confronting new external demands	Active compliance with new external demands	

Table 3. (Continued) Data structure

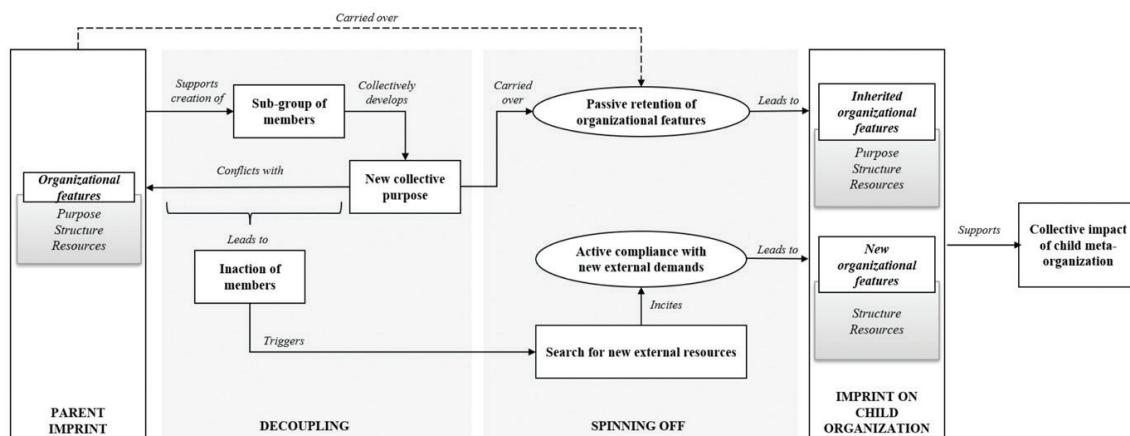| Illustrative quotes	First-order codes	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
'We realized we needed additional technical and standardization expertise to increase our chances of winning the COE call' (Silvia, November 2019)	Interpreting external demands		
'We invited two other organizations to fit with European demands: NormagE for replicability issues and SoftcorP for measuring results' (Henri, March 2019)	Translating external demands		
'COE is unclear about how applicants should agree to make decisions, or what to do when partners don't comply with rules. So, I told members of the mobility group it's not necessary to reinvent the wheel'. (Amélie, February 2020).	Recognizing absence of external demands	Passive retention of organizational features	
'One thing that worked well in AlphA was the equality thing. It helped members of the mobility group to come up with good points. It was obvious we should work the same way in BetA, we did not even discuss it' (Daniel, April 2020)	Importing parent's features		
'All members of BetA are equal when it comes to making decisions. There's no hierarchy. There really is equal treatment. Each member is important, each has its place' (Silvia, November 2019)	Inherited hierarchy	Structure	**Imprint on child organization**
'Like AlphA, BetA isn't based on sanctions. The idea is to encourage cities to take risks, with no obligation for results' (Giuliano, November 2019)	Inherited sanctions		
'BetA wouldn't exist without both public and private members. We need the city council as some initiatives require political decisions, and they need firms because our employees create demand for mobility' (Béatrice, May 2019)	Inherited membership		
'SoftcorP responded positively to Henri's invitation to join BetA because we wanted to showcase how our expertise could be deployed beyond its original field of application' (Arthur, June 2019)	New membership		
'In BetA, work-package leaders are in charge of financing and coordinating work. They have to be driving forces, working together, and attending special meetings' (Amélie, February 2020)	New rules		
'Beta members identify risks using a dashboard. Green for good progress, yellow for problems, and red for critical issues. We devise action plans for yellow and red issues' (Sophie, December 2019)	New monitoring		
'We all had different capabilities regarding traffic congestion issues in AlphA. We continue to deepen our combined know-how in BetA' (Laura, September 2019)	Inherited expertise	Resources	
'BetA uses our software to track progress along different dimensions: the use of cars, the potential to use bicycles, emissions' (Arthur, June 2019)	New expertise		
'We submitted the proposal to COE, and a few months later were notified that we'd received €5 million to kick start our action' (Louis, May 2019)	New financial resources		
'Without European funding, my firm wouldn't have allowed me to work half a day per week for three years on the issue of urban mobility' (Marie-France, January 2020)	New human resources		
'Ideas hatched under AlphA to collaboratively address car sharing and teleworking have been put into operation under BetA' (Silvia, November 2019)	Inherited ambition to implement solutions	Purpose	
'We're still interested in furthering collaboration. Our joint plans to address cycling habits emerged only after the creation of BetA' (Béatrice, May 2019)	Inherited ambition to deepen collaboration		
'Look at what we've done in BetA regarding car sharing. Large firms managed to agree on a service provider and unify their actions for the benefit of the entire airport zone. In under a year, the car sharing app has been used over 53,000 times. It's amazing!' (Laura, November 2019)	Effects on mobility habits	Field effects	**Collective impact of child organization**
'Use of cars has decreased by 9 points, cycling increased by 10 points […] and collectively, 17 tons GHG are avoided daily' (COE final report, 2021)	Environmental effects		
'Since BetA's launch, several firms have been interested in what we can achieve with AlphA. It has become a flagship example, and within a few months we went from 30 to 40 members, and probably more by now' (Daniel April 2020)	Increased legitimacy	Effects on parent meta-organization	
'Even though it is not yet working at full steam, BetA is already a success because everybody – including other firms and political actors at both the departmental and regional level – want to be part of it and join AlphA' (Pierre, October 2019)	Increased attractiveness		

Figure 2. Theoretical model.

Results

Our theoretical model (Figure 2) explains how a parent meta-organization gives rise to a child. The left-hand side of the model indicates this process begins with a decoupling phase, during which the organizational imprint of the parent supports the creation of a subgroup of meta-organization members. Through collaborative efforts, these members may collectively develop a new purpose, which cannot be pursued under the organizational and resource constraints imposed by the parent imprint. Inaction stemming from this conflict between the new collective purpose and parental imprint consequently triggers a search by subgroup members for new external resources. This search opens up a window of imprintability – captured in the spinning-off phase in the model – during which members are confronted with new demands from external resource providers. To comply actively with these new demands, they modify the organizational features of the parent meta-organization. In the absence of explicit demands from the external environment, they may also retain organizational elements from the parental imprint without significant modification. New organizational features introduced in response to external environmental demands, and existing ones carried over from the parent organization, are combined and stamped onto a new, child meta-organization – in the right-hand side of the model – whose imprint supports the pursuit of new goals developed in the parent-organization. Following a brief description of the parent organization in our case study, we unpack the individual components of our model, identifying conditions under which members of one meta-organization break away to form another and explaining the process through which this occurs.

Contextual background – the imprint of the parent meta-organization

In 2015, the French government passed the Law on Energy Transition encouraging local stakeholders to combine efforts to address environmental issues. The law guided efforts by Henri – Environmental Affairs Officer at JetcorP – to tackle such issues around his firm's premises, situated close to the city airport. For Henri and his assistant Daniel, environmental questions could be resolved only through collective action by multiple, heterogeneous actors. The pervasive nature of such issues meant 'individual firms can't solve them alone – to have real impact, they have to join forces with other actors' (Daniel, April 2020). They thus decided to create a meta-organization – AlphA – composed of local public and private actors to initiate long-term, interorganizational dialog on environmental challenges.

Henri based AlphA on his interpretation of the 2015 French Law and previous experiences of working in meta-organizations. AlphA, he contended, should attract a large number of diverse organizations, thus implying minimal membership conditions. To avoid constraining members' autonomy, it should have consensus-based decision-making processes. Instead of imposing coercive rules, Henri wanted members to commit to nonbinding principles that were subject neither to formal monitoring nor sanctions. For example, by joining AlphA, they should pledge to work with local actors to improve their environment footprint and identify funding opportunities for any initiatives they devised (minutes of AlphA kick-off meeting, 2017). With its open membership, flat hierarchy, and informal system of engagement, AlphA succeeded in attracting 30 private firms and public bodies with common interests in collaborating on projects to meet targets of the Law on Energy Transition.

Conditions for child meta-organizations – the decoupling of meta-organization members

Under what conditions, we asked, may a parent meta-organization like AlphA give birth to a child? Our model indicates the parent must be imprinted with a purpose and structure that encourage the emergence of a subgroup of like-minded

member representatives who reorientate the purpose of their collective action, but stamped by resource conditions that prevent them from fulfilling their new collective objectives.

Henri created in AlphA different working groups on issues such as the circular economy or green growth. A group addressing mobility attracted individuals representing private firms, the City Council, and the local public transport authority. These had already attempted – with limited success – to address individually a congestion problem affecting the city's industrial zone. Members saw in AlphA working groups' nonbinding rules, light-touch monitoring mechanisms, and the absence of formal sanctions an appealing setting for collectively discussing the congestion problem. One interviewee indicated her manager supported her participation in the mobility group precisely because Henri had pitched AlphA as a discussion forum requiring minimum resource commitments (Béatrice, May 2019).

Working together, mobility-group members acknowledged they collectively had potential to achieve more than simply discussing the congestion problem. One member likened the group to a 'high mass' enabling heterogenous organizations to combine complementary technical and political expertise and establish concrete actions for urban-mobility challenges (Marie-France, May 2019). Both public and private organizations recognized opportunities for deeper collaboration presented by the diverse membership of AlphA and its mobility group:

> The mobility group helped us reach a common diagnosis about the congestion problem and devise ideas – like an inter-firm mobility plan – that complemented conventional public-transport solutions (Alain, June 2019).

> We appreciated working with representatives from the transportation authority. They made useful, technical contributions to our evaluations and took decisions that helped progress when discussions stalled. They were a cornerstone to our work (Laura, September 2019)

Consensus-based decision-making inherent to AlphA helped individuals in the mobility group realize – despite their heterogeneity – they could agree upon concrete solutions to the congestion problem. Avoiding an 'I am right, you are wrong' posture, they explored what they could undertake together to solve the common problem. As one interviewee explained, 'confrontations were useful for reaching best possible compromises' (Louis, May 2019).

Cooperation between the group's heterogenous members advanced positively, with commentators praising its maturity of collaborative spirit and ability to develop 'killer solutions' to mobility problems (e.g. Pierre, October 2019). Their experiences in the mobility group incited member representatives to rethink the scope of their collaboration. Through their interaction, they realized they shared a common interest in not only devising solutions to the congestion problem but also concretely implementing them:

> We could have continued discussing internal indicators, comparing what we do, and benchmarking. Instead of remaining at that level, we developed an ambition to go further and implement actions (Marie-France, January 2020)

However, our model indicates a meta-organization's initial imprint may simultaneously prevent subgroup of like-minded member representatives from fulfilling new collective objectives. While AlphA's structure served members' purpose of discussing sustainability issues, its imprinted resource endowments prevented members of the mobility group from pursuing their new ambitions. Henri's decision not to equip AlphA with formal monitoring processes, rules, or sanctions adversely affected members organizations' long-term resource commitments. Individuals alluded to challenges of convincing their organizations to channel resources into AlphA when there were no checks to ensure others would do likewise. When meetings finished, 'individuals headed off in their own direction, doing their own things, with AlphA an afterthought' (Daniel, April 2020). Nonbinding rules prevented members sharing resources to implement solutions (Laura, November 2019). When asked to commit unforeseen financial resources to projects, individuals representing private firms in the mobility group would speak out: 'We didn't sign up for this! We don't have a mandate!' (Béatrice, May 2019). The mobility working-group – and AlphA by extension – risked remaining 'a mere talking shop' (Pierre, October 2019).

In sum, our model indicates that structural elements and intended purposes imprinted on a meta-organization at its creation may provide a favorable social context which – by permitting certain members to meet others with similar interests, combine their expertise, and agree upon collective solutions to common problems – encourages the development of a new, collective purpose extending beyond the meta-organization's original goals. However, resource conditions stamped on a meta-organization at its founding may prevent members from pursuing this new purpose. This requires additional resources that no single member may be willing to commit under the prevailing organizational structure. As one member of the mobility group summarized:

> In AlphA, we've got a public-private partnership, a network, technical expertise, and a willingness to do things. What's missing are the financial means (Alain, April 2020)

Overall, our model suggests evolution of a subgroup's collective purpose may conflict with the meta-organization's original features. Such decoupling can result in a situation of inaction among members that may be an important condition for a parent meta-organization to give birth to a child.

Window of imprintability – the spinning-off of meta-organization members

In our case, conflict between the initial imprint of a meta-organization and evolving objectives of some members was a necessary but insufficient condition for explaining the emergence of a child meta-organization. Our model exposes a process that may be necessary to move from a situation where subgroup members' changing objectives confront the imprinted limitations of the parent meta-organization, to the creation of a new, child meta-organization.

This transition was – in our study – driven by individuals who sought to help members of the mobility working-group collectively reorganize to secure external resources for pursuing the ambitious objectives developed in AlphA. As mentioned earlier, members of the group had difficulties persuading their organizations to commit resources to AlphA under its organizational configuration. Neither Henri nor his assistant Daniel considered it judicious to change AlphA's imprinted structure or purpose. Doing so, they feared, would dissuade new organizations from joining and hamper progress being made in other working groups. Indeed:

> AlphA shouldn't interfere with individual members' decisions. We designed it so organizations could contribute as they personally saw fit, and then see what they could do together. This step was necessary to reach a point where concrete projects like those in the mobility working-group could emerge. We wanted AlphA to bring similar developments in other groups (Daniel, April 2020).

Given this situation, members of the mobility group looked beyond the meta-organization for additional financing. This search would be facilitated, they reasoned, by AlphA's heterogenous membership: private and public members had access to distinct sources of financing that could benefit the collective (Daniel, April 2020)

The search resulted in the City Council – a member of the mobility working-group – identifying a call for proposals issued by Cities of Europe (COE) – a European agency providing municipalities with resources to test innovative solutions to urban challenges. Collectively motivated to advance work achieved in AlphA, private members of the mobility working-group most adversely affected by the traffic congestion problem agreed to respond to the call with the city council and local transportation authority (Alain, April 2020; Daniel, April 2020; Henri, May 2018; Pierre, October 2019; Silvia, November 2019).

The search for new external resources to support the subgroup's new objectives opens up a window of imprintability (Marquis & Tilsik, 2013), during which members are susceptible to external demands. These combine with the historical structure of the parent meta-organization to shape the formation of a new imprint. We expose two steps through which this new imprint may form.

Active compliance with new external demands

In a first step, subgroup members actively modify their organization to ensure compliance with demands of the external environment. New environmental demands are in effect interpreted and translated into new structural features that support their new objectives. In our study, new external demands encountered during the window of imprintability took the form of application guidelines issued by COE (see e.g. Figure 3).

Guidelines first included membership-related demands, requiring applicants to explain how individual participants would bring expertise to projects. In response to COE's requirements, Henri successfully persuaded two new members to join the subgroup. He reasoned NormagE – a French standardization body – would be useful for replicability purposes, making the collective's managerial processes a reference point for similar urban mobility initiatives in Europe. He assumed SoftcorP – an outsourcing technology company – had competence in designing tracking systems for transportation systems that would benefit the collective in terms of output measurability.

Second, applicants needed to define realistic activities. Recognizing the subgroup lacked expertise in applying for EU funding, Henri enlisted ConsulT, an external consultancy with experience in responding to COE calls, to sensitize members to nuances of COE's requirements. One consultant (Amélie, February 2020) explained how her role involved ensuring subgroup objectives observed the COE's mission of funding solutions to sustainable mobility. She had to ensure their objectives remained consistent, injecting realism into members' ambitions, where necessary. For example, based on her previous experiences, she had to convince members it was inappropriate to use the call to finance a new freeway exit or provide free travel passes.

Finally, in terms of rules and monitoring, organizations seeking COE support had to demonstrate effective management. ConsulT employees – again mobilizing experiences accumulated in similar situations – explained COE expected applicants' activities to be organized in work packages (Sophie, December 2019). They facilitated brainstorming meetings and helped members cluster ideas germinated in AlphA into packages around a new urban-mobility collaborative-management system, car sharing, and autonomous shuttles. COE imposed on applicants a governance work package, compelling them to explain decision-making and monitoring processes. To conform with these demands, ConsulT proposed members arrange regular steering, technical, and catch-up meetings. Based on previous experiences, ConsulT-colleagues-suggested members introduce a traffic-light system to help identify progress risks (Sophie, December 2019).

Passively retaining organizational features of the parent

Active compliance with external demands may be followed by a second step involving passive retention of the parent's
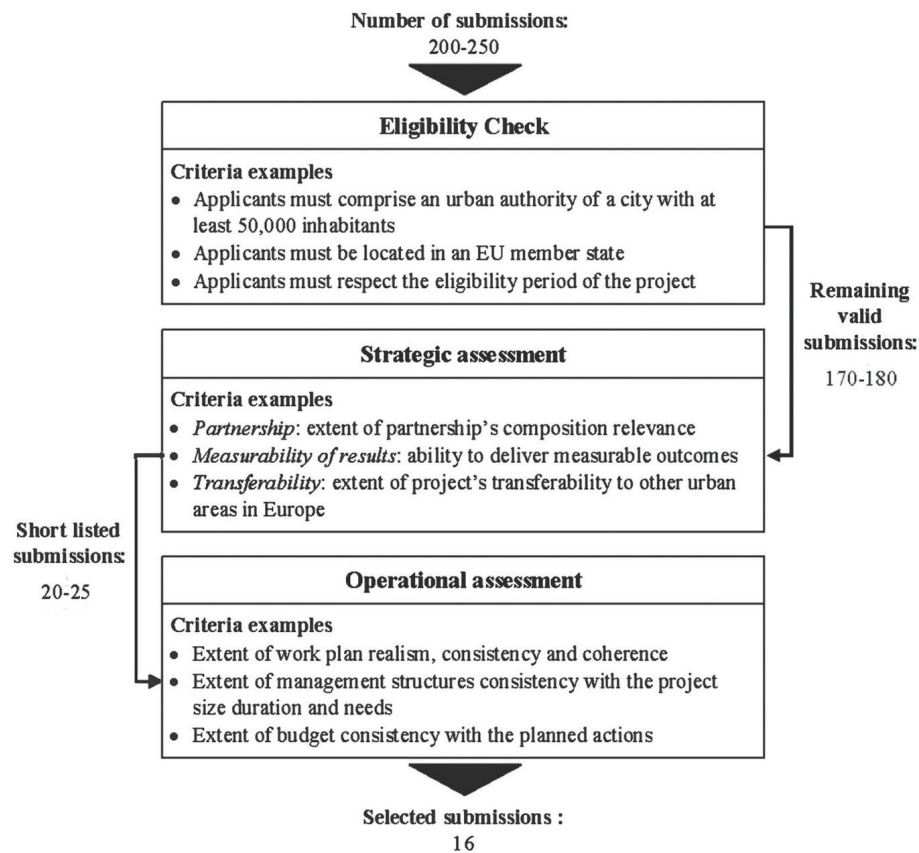
Number of submissions:
200-250

Eligibility Check

Criteria examples
- Applicants must comprise an urban authority of a city with at least 50,000 inhabitants
- Applicants must be located in an EU member state
- Applicants must respect the eligibility period of the project

Remaining valid submissions:
170-180

Strategic assessment

Criteria examples
- *Partnership*: extent of partnership's composition relevance
- *Measurability of results*: ability to deliver measurable outcomes
- *Transferability*: extent of project's transferability to other urban areas in Europe

Short listed submissions:
20-25

Operational assessment

Criteria examples
- Extent of work plan realism, consistency and coherence
- Extent of management structures consistency with the project size duration and needs
- Extent of budget consistency with the planned actions

Selected submissions :
16

Figure 3. COE demands on applicants seeking project financing.

organizational imprint. In the absence of explicit demands from the external environment, subgroup members may carry over blueprints of the parent meta-organization without substantive modification. In our case, COE demands regarding questions of hierarchy were ambiguous. Guidelines stated applicants should show evidence of decision-making processes, without explicitly specifying what form these should take (COE Guidance document, 2017). COE avoided issuing recommendations regarding formal sanctions, as doing so contradicted its mission of encouraging municipalities to take risks (Giuliano, November 2019). In the words of one Consult employee:

> COE is unclear about how applicants should make decisions, or what to do when partners do not comply with rules. So, I told members of the mobility group that it's not necessary to reinvent the wheel. I advised them to continue doing what they were already doing in AlphA (Amélie, February 2020).

Members of the subgroup thus agreed their decisions should continue to be taken on the tried-and-tested principle of consensus used in AlphA. Similarly, group members retained the informal systems of sanctions based on peer pressure (Elodie, October 2019). These principles had been successful in the past. They were expected to remain so moving forward.

Imprinting the child meta-organization

Our model shows the two-step process of active compliance and passive retention results in a new imprint, which – combining external environmental demands and features of the parent meta-organization – is stamped onto the child meta-organization. Table 4 reports the characteristic features of BetA – the child meta-organization emerging from AlphA. It indicates how BetA exhibits a new layer of organizational features marked by environmental conditions during the sensitive imprintability period while simultaneously inheriting persistent organizational elements from AlphA.

New features stamped by the external environment – coupled with characteristics retained from the parent meta-organization – can create a new meta-organization whose social context enables members to put into action collective objectives previously developed – but not enacted – in the parent organization.

Subgroup members' decision to present themselves in line with COE demands as a small, diverse group of private firms and public-sector actors formally organized around a system of work-package-based rules and monitoring systems contributed toward BetA receiving a bursary of €4.16 million for 3 years (Giuliano, November 2019). The decision to include SoftcorP

Table 4. New and persistent imprinted characteristics of BetA

	New layer of imprinted characteristics	Characteristics inherited from parent (AlphA)
Purpose		To test concrete solutions for sustainable urban mobility
Hierarchy		Consensus-based decision-making
Membership	Inclusion of new members for replicability/measurability	Heterogeneity: private and public sector organizations
Rules	Work-package-based agreements	
Monitoring	Regular progress meetings and traffic light system to track problems	
Sanctions		Absence of formal sanctions
Resources	€4.16 million funding from COE, plus additional €1.04 million from member organizations	

and NormagE paid dividends (Elodie, September 2019). It enabled members, in BetA, to engage in more technical conversations and share more specialist expertise than they had done in AlphA (Béatrice, May 2019). Work-package-based rules meant fewer political interests came into play, encouraging greater project participation (Daniel, April 2020). Unlike in AlphA, member organizations were obliged in BetA to meet deadlines (Alain, April 2020). Monitoring processes also encouraged greater resource sharing in BetA compared to AlphA. The traffic-light-based system helped members flag up a critical 'red' issue when, in the face of public opposition, plans to test an autonomous shuttle were shelved. This triggered unplanned technical and steering-group meetings, during which member organizations voluntarily invested unforeseen technical and human resources to find a solution (Amélie, February 2020; Silvia, November 2019; Sophie, December 2019).

Alongside these newly imprinted features, BetA also benefited from elements inherited from AlphA. The combination of expertise from public and private members – enabling them to imagine innovative ideas – was exported to BetA. By coupling the transport authority's technical knowledge with private firms' understanding of business operations, members were able to mature their ideas even further (Marie-France, January 2020). Consensus-based decision-making carried over from AlphA encouraged members to continue committing themselves to solving the congestion problem. The on-going absence of hierarchy ensured long-term adhesion by avoiding a situation where members found themselves obliged to participate in projects not serving their interests. As one informant explained 'we only conclude meetings in BetA when everyone agrees' (Alain, April 2020). The informal system of peer pressure inherited from AlphA appeared sufficient to encourage and increase members' commitment. One informant recalled a conversation with another company representative who persuaded her to invest more time in communication efforts:

> She said, 'who wants to deal with the communication issue?' 'Not me!' I said. 'But everybody else is dealing with a particular issue!' she replied. Under pressure, I finally accepted to do it. (Elodie, October 2019)

Impact of the child organization

Informants suggest senior managers within member organizations took BetA more seriously than AlphA. Funding provided by COE triggered a multiplying effect in terms of resource commitments. Indeed:

> Member organizations are more committed to BetA than AlphA, even financially, because we've signed a formal agreement based on work packages, developed a governance system, and secured a budget. All this helps me sell BetA more easily to internal colleagues. It motivates member organizations to invest more resources, especially human resources, in BetA. If Europe hadn't agreed to co-fund BetA, I doubt other members – even JetcorP, the largest member – would have launched it on their own (Laura, November 2019).

In breaking away from AlphA and creating BetA, organizations moved from a situation where they could only engage in dialog around urban mobility, to one where they now implement concrete, interorganizational solutions to the issue. Observers (Giuliano, November 2019; Joan, December 2020) qualify BetA a success, bringing significant reductions in CO_2 emissions through the increase of carpooling, cycling, and teleworking and reduction in private car usage.

BetA has triggered no changes to the purpose or structure of AlphA. Its members remain members of AlphA, where they continue to participate in discussions surrounding broader sustainability issues. BetA's creation as a 'spin-off' meta-organization has raised no questions about AlphA's purpose. Rather, BetA highlights AlphA's potential to nurture multi-stakeholder dialog and attract external funding. BetA has become a 'flagship example' of what AlphA can achieve (Daniel, April 2020). Other AlphA members consider the mobility working-group a model for attracting external resources. It has also served as a recruitment magnet, enabling AlphA's membership to increase to over 40 members.

Discussion

Meta-organizations may create members who are themselves meta-organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Umbrella

meta-organizations, operating at a supranational level, may create affiliate meta-organizations to promote their goals across national or regional levels (Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015). However, no studies have investigated the possibility – exposed by our research – that members may decouple themselves from a 'parent' meta-organization and form a new 'child' organization to pursue new objectives.

Scholarly contributions

We contribute to meta-organization literature by emphasizing the overlooked empirical observation of 'spin-off' meta-organizations. We uncover organizational continuities and discontinuities across parent meta-organizations and their offspring. For example, consensus-based decision-making underpinning AlphA was carried over as a blueprint to BetA, leading to persistence of organizational features developed in the parent organization. Despite sharing structural characteristics with its parent, a child meta-organization may break from its parental mold and develop organizational distinctiveness. In our study, this discontinuity manifests itself in rules and monitoring processes introduced to guide the work of BetA's members. Viewed through the organizational-imprinting prism, our research exposes a layering (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) of imprints across a parent meta-organization and its spin-off. Previous meta-organization imprints do not necessarily fade away but may live on in their progeny, creating foundations for additional imprinted organizational features.

Insights from organizational imprinting help explain this continuity and discontinuity across parent and child meta-organizations, first by exposing conditions under which organizations break away from one meta-organization to form another, and second by unpacking micro-processes through which spin-off meta-organizations establish idiosyncrasies while inheriting features from their parent.

An important condition inciting members to decouple from a parent and create a child meta-organization is conflict between the organizational imprint of the parent and members' changing objectives. On the one hand, the purpose and structure imprinted on a parent can encourage subgroups of organizational members to develop new objectives. On the other hand, resource conditions stamped on the parent may prevent members from pursuing these new objectives. We contribute to theorizing on meta-organizational dynamics by providing new insights into how meta-organizations evolve beyond their founding phase.

For example, prior research suggests – as meta-organizations develop – their structural elements such as consensus-based decision-making may hinder changes to their objectives, structures, and resources (Ahrne et al., 2016a; Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022). These decision-making norms may not lead to inertia, as previous research suggests

(König et al., 2012). They may push some members to consider alternative means of pursuing objectives that deviate from those of its parent. In our study, AlphA served its intended purpose by providing members of its mobility working-group with a favorable context for discussing solutions to their common congestion problem. Interestingly, though, AlphA equally incited them to explore what they could achieve as a collective in the longer term. Rather than leading to stagnation, AlphA's organizational configuration provided working-group members with a supportive space for further scoping out their common purpose. Realizing their potential purpose conflicted with AlphA's founding imprint pushed them to break away from the meta-organization and pursue their new, more ambitious objectives in an alternative forum.

We also build on studies indicating it is potential members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Saniossian et al., 2022), external actors (Malcourant et al., 2015), or meta-organizations themselves (Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015) that provide impetus for creating meta-organizations. The genesis for establishing a new 'spin-off' meta-organization may originate among member organizations. Having benefited from a parent meta-organization to foster cooperation, these may decide to create a new meta-organization dedicated to specific topics discussed in the parent. Of the different working groups created within AlphA, only members of the mobility group have decided to form a new meta-organization. Why some – but not all – member organizations choose to break away lies beyond the scope of our research. We tentatively suggest, however, that certain meta-organization subgroups seemingly gain maturity faster than others when developing implementable solutions. Reasons behind this maturity merit further investigation.

Alongside exposing conditions under which organizations break away from one meta-organization to form another, we unpack micro-processes through which a spin-off meta-organization establishes its distinctiveness while preserving features of its parent. Conflict between the organizational imprint of a meta-organization and changing objectives of some of its members incite them to search for external solutions, opening up a window of imprintability (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) where they confront new environmental demands. Exposure to new demands triggers a two-step process composed of active compliance with new external demands followed by passive retention of existing organizational features.

These findings stretch understandings of meta-organization dynamics by exposing how third-party demands – emanating from governmental bodies – present opportunities for circumventing organizational sclerosis affecting meta-organizations. In suggesting inertial forces can be offset by enablers of change embedded in organizational constitutions or routines (e.g. König et al., 2012), existing research foregrounds internal mechanisms through which meta-organizations can resolve episodes of stagnation. This internal gaze distracts attention

from the effects external factors may impose on meta-organization (e.g. Cropper & Bor, 2018) and, we suggest, on the way members can overcome meta-organizational inertia. In our study, members of AlphA's mobility group could not fully exploit their cooperation without modifying AlphA's immutable imprint. They nonetheless found a solution for escaping this frustrating situation by looking beyond the confines of the collective. In COE's call for proposals, they saw a chance to create a new meta-organization within which they could strengthen cooperation on urban mobility without changing AlphA's organization.

We reveal the role individuals play in creating new, spin-off meta-organizations. Meta-organization scholars distinguish their object of study – organizations whose members are organizations – from individual-based organizations (e.g. Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Although recognizing individuals may initiate the creation of meta-organizations (Kaplan, 2021), they assume organizational members collectively define a meta-organization's degree of organizationality (Ahrne et al., 2016a). We find that – even if meta-organizations exhibit configurations that favor consensus-based as opposed to top-down decision-making (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008) – influential individuals drive activities undertaken during the sensitive period as a child meta-organization emerges from its parent.

BetA would unlikely have emerged from AlphA without Henri's leadership. He marshaled personal experiences of European projects to advise mobility-group members how to reorganize themselves collectively – through the inclusion of new members – to ensure compliance with external environmental demands about measurability and replicability. Henri also had personal interest in pushing BetA's development as it demonstrated to critics that – far from being a 'talking shop' – AlphA could be a catalyst for concrete change. We thus draw attention to insights that can be gleaned from embracing a microlevel perspective (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018) and investigating how individuals' characteristics affect meta-organizing.

Although speaking primarily to the meta-organization literature, our findings also contribute to the organizational imprinting research, specifically by advancing understandings of the imprinting process (e.g. Marquis & Tilsik, 2013) and illuminating how this may unfold in the context of unconventional meta-organizational forms.

Studies identify individuals, organizations, and environmental conditions as key imprinting sources (Simsek et al., 2015). However, they commonly focus on only one of these levels of analysis, at a given point in time. We indicate an organization can inherit features from its parent while acquiring organizational features marked by external environmental demands. Decisions regarding compliance with external demands are negotiated by individuals, drawing on their previous experiences. We thus build on extant research by exposing imprinting as a multilevel phenomenon, illuminating interplay between

environmental-, organizational-, and individual-level imprinting entities and demonstrating how each may have an influence on organizations (e.g. Simsek et al., 2015). By showing spin-off organizations may be imprinted by new, environmental conditions, we challenge the deterministic posture – widely adopted by imprinting theorists – that parental influences exert powerful, enduring effects on their offsprings' development courses (e.g. Roberts et al., 2011).

Previous studies highlight that – in firms – individual, hierarchical agency plays an important role in imprinting (e.g. Snihur & Zott, 2020) such that managers – through top-down efforts – can drive modifications to organizational imprints (e.g. De Cuyper et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2017). We find this may not be the case in meta-organizations. The pervasiveness of consensus-based decision-making in such organizations means no single individual or member may have authority to change organizational imprints. Meta-organizations require adhesion of all members to change collective purposes. No single member or subset of members may impose organizational change without the agreement of all other members (Ahrne et al., 2016b). We find that, in such situations, a subgroup of members may collectively mobilize to create a new meta-organization, rather than reform the parent. The initial imprint of the parent is thus modified not through change to its structure but through the creation of an offspring meta-organization.

While downplaying individuals' ability to impose new imprints on meta-organizations, we nonetheless highlight that the significance interpersonal dynamics may play in this process. Active compliance, for instance, requires individuals to build consensus among heterogeneous members in a meta-organization so these understand and respond appropriately – as a collective – to external environmental demands. While the ability of individuals to change organizational imprints in hierarchical organizations may stem from their formal status, it may depend in heterarchical organizations on other sets of individual-level characteristics. In meta-organizations, individual actors may – in the absence of formal, hierarchical power – need to mobilize other individual-level traits – such as expertise, experience, or charisma – to build relationships needed to change organizational imprints. This finding draws much-needed attention to the background characteristics of imprinting agents, and how they shape the imprinting process (e.g. Simsek et al., 2015).

Practical implications

Our study echoes previous research (e.g. Berkowitz et al., 2020; Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022; Chaudhury et al., 2016) in suggesting heterogenous meta-organizations composed of public- and private-sector actors can be more effective than homogenous organizations – comprising only government entities, for example – at addressing grand challenges. Building on these studies, we suggest one, single

multi-stakeholder meta-organization may not be a 'silver bullet' for tackling grand challenges. Responding to such challenges substantively rather than symbolically may be a long-term endeavor, requiring successive heterogenous meta-organizations, each building on the achievements of its predecessors in pursuit of more focused objectives. These insights have implications for the members and managers of meta-organizations, and for policymakers.

Members experiencing inertia in meta-organizations can take inspiration from our study by considering how a spin-off organization may present a solution for keeping momentum in achieving collective sustainability-related goals. Members choosing to create a spin-off meta-organization should reflect on how they may leverage the accomplishments of their parent – especially as an arena for fostering collaboration – as they seek to strike out on their own in a child organization. Meta-organizations managers should anticipate their organizations may give rise to others that pursue more specific goals. We show how such spin-off meta-organizations may increase the attractiveness and legitimacy of their parent. Managers should thus view such developments positively and support the intensification of members' collaboration, such as by helping them identify and attract external funding.

For policymakers, our research implies meta-organizations may be more effective – compared to public consultations – for soliciting stakeholder opinions and promoting public–private cooperation around societal problems (Adam-Ledunois & Mansuy, 2019). Public consultations are not neutral, in that they involve public bodies listening to – but not necessarily implementing – external actors' suggestions. By contrast, meta-organizations like AlphA – and, *a fortiori*, BetA – integrate each actor's voice in collective decision-making. As per other studies (Radnejad et al., 2017), we indicate this consensual way of addressing grand challenges may strengthen actors' commitment and encourage collaboration. Rather than organizing potentially internally biased consultations, policy actors might consider supporting more independently managed meta-organizations to initiate greater collaboration.

We provide policymakers with insights on promoting such organizational forms and fostering collaboration between actors unaccustomed to working together. Policymakers have considerable sway over the structure and outcomes of meta-organizations. Some initiatives – such as the French Law on Energy Transition – may encourage loosely structured meta-organizations – like AlphA – that provide a low-commitment forum for multiple, heterogeneous members to meet, discover common interests, and scope out potential cooperation. Others – such as calls for projects issued by the COE agency – may promote more formally structured meta-organizations – like BetA – allowing organizations to pursue more ambitious goals emerging from cooperation in previous forums.

Policymakers must carefully consider how best to mobilize scarce public resources to subsidize meta-organizations. We highlight limitations of promoting only low-commitment meta-organizations like AlphA. These enable heterogeneous organizations to get to know each other but may lead to situations where members talk but perform few concrete actions. Similarly, we illuminate risks of subsidizing only BetA-like meta-organizations: these may have difficulties gaining traction unless members have explored collaboration capabilities in a previous arena. Establishing AlphA-like meta-organizations may be a necessary 'stepping-stone' for creating effective BetA-like meta-organizations capable of implementing tangible solutions to grand challenges. Overall, we recommend public subsidies be used to balance the need for both types of meta-organization. As low-commitment meta-organizations like AlphA appear comparatively inexpensive to maintain, policymaker support for their creation could be limited to issuing policy messages that encourage their emergence. This would allow subsidies to be targeted more effectively at higher-commitment meta-organizations like BetA that require significant resources.

Conclusion, limitations, and future research

Research does not theoretically explain why or how members of a meta-organization may decouple themselves from their parent to form a child meta-organization that pursues new objectives. We make an important contribution to meta-organization literature by foregrounding 'spin-off' meta-organizations. Using insights from the imprinting perspective, we explain organizational continuities and discontinuities across parent meta-organizations and their offspring, first by exposing conditions under which organizations break away from a meta-organization, and second by unpacking micro-processes through which spin-off meta-organizations establish idiosyncrasies while inheriting features from their parent.

We also contribute to organizational imprinting literature by advancing understandings of the imprinting process (e.g. Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013), and how this unfolds in meta-organizations where individual, hierarchical agency typically associated with organizational imprinting does not prevail. From a practical perspective, we encourage policymakers and practitioners to reflect on how best to promote the use of meta-organizations to foster multi-stakeholder cooperation and tackle grand challenges. Addressing such challenges in a substantive way may require successive meta-organizations, each building on the achievements of its predecessor to pursue increasingly targeted objectives.

Our study has its limitations. It focuses on two meta-organizations created in the same city to find solutions to broad sustainability issues, especially sustainable urban mobility. While recognizing difficulties in generalizing from case-study-based research (Eisenhardt, 1989), we contend our results may apply to other sustainability-related issues, whose solutions require

collaboration between public and private entities. Scholars and practitioners interested in organizing collective responses to issues like the circular economy or job creation programs should be able to draw theoretical and practical insights from our work.

We focus on a relatively short time frame, spanning the period 2016–2020. This prevents exploring longer-term effects of observations. Our spin-off meta-organization – BetA – appears to have been successful: its organizational features have supported experiments that promote carpooling, cycling, and teleworking. It would be interesting to return to BetA and explore whether it was able to sustain these solutions to urban mobility once its external, European financing expired. Future studies could also investigate whether the withdrawal of this financing opened up a new sensitive period, during which members were again susceptible to conditions that left a new stamp on BetA's purpose and structure.

A more protracted time horizon could cast light onto the longer-term effects of spin-off meta-organizations on their parents. The creation of BetA appeared to have no immediate, adverse impact on AlphA: BetA was perceived as a role model for other AlphA members, for example. It would be intriguing to explore whether the longer-term evolution of BetA – either building on its initial momentum or stalling as European funding disappears – impacts this situation. A spin-off meta-organization – or indeed series of successive spin-offs – may possibly weaken the parent meta-organization over time. Future research could thus explore whether child meta-organizations result in the longer-term resource-scattering issues or lead to members disengaging with the work of the parent.

Our data prevent us from exploring intriguing findings that emerge from our research. For example, some – but not all – subgroups may choose to decouple themselves from the parent and create a spin-off meta-organization. Future research should explore which characteristics make such groups likely to dissociate themselves from their parent. We suggest different levels of cooperation maturity may have an impact. Comparing different subgroups dynamics within a single meta-organization could generate insights into mechanisms, processes, and factors affecting this maturity. Our research also suggests – in the absence of formal, hierarchical power – individuals may need to mobilize other resources – such as expertise or experience – to build relationships to affect change in meta-organizations. Surfacing these individual-level resources would be helpful in developing further microlevel understandings of imprinting agents and how they shape imprinting processes (e.g. Simsek et al., 2015).

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