

Extended abstract

Voluntary organizations of the civil society, such as those belonging to the so called Third sector or the more radical Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), rely mostly on voluntary and democratic cooperation. Again, they employ different values and modes of organizations in order to pursue common scopes different from the sole production and distribution of monetary surplus (Kawano, 2016). Simply, these organizations target social purposes alternatively to market/public logic; however, no proper epistemology represents and assists their sustainable development. This epistemological limit is recognized as a fundamental obstacle in order to sustain these actors of societal transformation (Dash, 2014). Due to its systemic outline and immaterial target, the Bio-economic theoretical proposition, firstly developed by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, seems suited to represent SSE initiatives and investigate about the sustainability of their activities. However, no study ever represented an organization of SSE employing such alternative epistemology. Therefore, the principal research questions became the following: is a Bio-economic informed conceptual framework a consistent epistemology to investigate SSE organizations and their sustainability? Consequently, which benefits are derived from the application of a Bio-economic-inspired framework representing a SSE organization as a hypothetic Bio-economic System? To answer the mentioned questions, a qualitative study is proposed in order to employ a Bio-economic epistemology analyzing a case-study representing a SSE organization: the *Association Sahel Vert*, a French grass-root SSE organization promoting social inclusion for vulnerable people based nearby Mulhouse. Therefore, a literature review firstly defines the main characters for which a proper epistemology should account. The review highlights both the alternative characters as well as the essential purpose-driven nature of these organizations. Consequently, in the theoretical framework are presented the main features of a Bio-economic epistemology. Basically, it allows to consider the economic process as an evolutive open-system that employs available resources within its organization to jointly strive towards the reproduction of particular (fundamentally immaterial) goals through the proper development of its constitutive systems (Bonaiuti, 2003). An according epistemology entails logically ordered description of reality's mode of functioning of an organization thought as a complex system reproducing immaterial values, achieved respecting sustainability, defined by the minimal complementary degradation of the resources for which depends the reproduction of the immaterial purpose. To apply the mentioned epistemology to a case-study research, a Bio-economic informed framework is proposed. This outline, so

called Agent-Activity-Value, organizes data gathered from diverse data sources in order to represent the association as a Bio-economic System. The Agent – Activity – Value framework is an original conceptualization proposed in order to outline the qualitative data of a socioeconomic organization according to a Bio-economic understanding. Data were collected to generally respond to ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions regarding the association about to organize and sustain its activity. In order to gain the richer information, the case study is composed of a mix of data sources. Gathered data were mainly of three types: visual data/observations, encoded/documents and verbal data/semi-structured interviews. Each of the presented data collection methods show different comparative advantages to gain specific types of information. Findings describe the case-study *Association Sahel Vert* as Bio-economic System. The sustainability of the organization would then be analyzed employing a Bio-economic Process. Results evidence the crucial role of the immaterial purposes of the association to reproduce the values within the structure and the initiatives of the organization. Again, findings highlight how initiatives follow a particular logic that can be investigated in Bio-economic manner.

In summary, the highlights of the present research can be summarized as follows. In the case-study, the explored epistemology succeeds to evidence the basic characters for which the different kinds of voluntary organization are identified in the literature, demonstrating in particular the consistency of a Bio-economic epistemology to study SSE organizations. On the other side, the investigation of sustainability consistently offers valuable insights about the quality of the initiatives of the organization; however, a qualitative research is considered insufficient to properly relate with the Bio-economic theoretical contribution. Therefore, a development of this epistemology is endorsed combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to give more accuracy in the statements accounting also for the environmental impact of SSE initiatives. In conclusion, the explored Bio-economic approach can be judged appropriate in order to guarantee the sustainability within the organization itself, while a more complete approach, both qualitative and quantitative, must be considered to properly recall the Bio-economic theoretical framework achieving full sustainability.