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Labour Market Social Innovation in France Gaining Legitimacy through Meta-Organisations

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Abstract

Labour Market Intermediaries (LMIs) with a social purpose, or Labour Market Social Innovation, are bubbling since the 1980s due to the fragmentation of labour standards and the growing number of "non-standard forms of work". However, they face an important lack of legitimacy especially in countries like France where labour market is highly regulated. Analysing the legitimation trajectories of two profit-limited LMIs, the Employers' Associations and the Business and the Employment Cooperatives in France, we highlight the role of meta-organisations and some key factors of success and failure. Thus, this article presents some levers that social innovations can use through meta-organizations to gain different types of legitimacy.

Keywords: Labour Market; Social Innovation; Legitimacy; Inter-company Cooperation.

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1 Introduction

In France, nonprofit and for-profit-limited organisations (NPOs) have long been associated to labour market transformation through the intervention of the State (Moore, 2001; Krlev et al., 2020) particularly in terms of their potential for innovation (Dover and Lawrence, 2012). Facing the multiplication of new organisations favouring flexible forms of work relying on individualised relations to work and creating unbalanced power relations, precariousness and loneliness (Tremblay, 2002), some NPOs are developing labour market social innovations in order to reconcile flexibility and security. However, despite their tight ties with public policies these organisations and their innovations struggle to gain legitimacy. As showned by Schlesinger et al. (2004) this lack of public legitimacy can be explained by a deficit of understanding of what are nonprofits, a negative a priori about the performance and a crisis of confidence in public institutions. This study aims at understanding how these organizations can overcome these obstacles in terms of legitimacy. It focuses on the cases of Employers' Associations (EAs) and Business and Employment Cooperatives (BECs) in France.

In a context of high and lasting rate of unemployment (unemployment rate in France is above 7% since the 1980s according to ILO criteria), EAs and BECs represent a solution to create jobs. Thanks to EAs, organisations (corporations, NPOs, public agencies) mutualise their small labour needs to create new jobs. The employees hired by EAs share their working time between different organisations members of the EA, and ideally reach a full time job. On their side, BECs gather

entrepreneurs who set up their activities autonomously but within the cooperative frame that offers them an employee contract with the attached social benefits, transforms their turnovers into salaries and provides supports (training, legal assistance, etc.).

These two types of labour market intermediaries (LMIs) with social purpose exist respectively for more than thirty and twenty years. Over the years, both BECs and EAs created meta-organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005), associations aiming at influencing their environment. However, at the opposite of other LMIs they experience a lack of legitimacy and remain marginal. Based on the comparison of the legitimacy trajectories of EAs and BECs this article aims to understand to what extent meta-organization can help labour market social innovation gain legitimacy.

The article starts with a presentation of the theoretical foundations of the analysis, then of the method followed by the results and ends with a concluding discussion.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Labour Market Evolution and Social Innovation

Pushed by their competitive environment organisations are changing their work practices to gain flexibility (Barley and Kunda, 2001). Consequently, the number of short-term contracts and outsourcing is increasing. The ILO report (2015) on the changing nature of job reveals that only a quarter of the employees worldwide have a permanent contract and that, between 2009 and 2013, part-time jobs increased faster than full-time jobs. These evolutions blur the boundary between employment and entrepreneurship and give birth to a variety of work arrangements. To classify them Cappelli and Keller (2013) rely on legal regulation regarding who assumes the administrative requirements and who is responsible for protecting workers. Following these criteria, work arrangements range from direct employment with a full control of the organisation to direct contracting between the organisation and the worker with a limited control from the organisation.

Between these extremes, work arrangements can involve third parties with whom the organisation shares the control and protection responsibilities through co-employment or sub-contracting for instance. These third parties or labour market intermediaries (LMI) play a key role for the workers with boundaryless careers, i.e. switching between different statuses and contracts (Van den Born and Van Witteloostuijn, 2012, Lorquet, 2017). Indeed, although these careers can be source of satisfaction regarding autonomy, work-life balance, income or professionalism they can be source of precariousness and loneliness as well (Kunda et al. 2002; De Stefano, 2016). Thus, labour market intermediaries (LMI) offer services such as matching, risks sharing, and administrative support.

Through their study of the Belgian labour market, Lorquet et al. (2017) draw two ideal-types of workers with boundaryless careers: the quasi-employee and the quasi-self-employed (with a range of other careers forms between the two). For the quasi-employees, LMI "*function as regular employers: they place workers onto assignments (match-making), they provide them with a full range of integrated HRM services and they close access to the information they produce. Hence, they offer stability by reconstructing an extended internal labour market through triangular relationships*." (Lorquet et al., 2017, p.10). At the other extreme of the continuum, the quasi-self-employed build a mutualisation dynamic through labour market intermediaries that "*aim to cushion non-standard job transitions on external labour markets by developing 'functional equivalents' to the traditional employment relationship (Marsden, 2004): customized insurance packages, training, financial support for the development of activities or expense accounts transformed into remuneration statements (primacy of transitional rights, likely to be activated when needed whatever the occupational status). They explicitly test the limits of the current functioning of the labour market*

through new boundary-crossing solutions."

LMIs are part of what is broadly labelled "atypical" (Fourcade, 1992), "non-standard" (ILO, 2015) work forms or "grey employment zones" (Supiot, 2000; Bureau and Dieuaide, 2018). This terminology highlights the marginality and lack of legitimacy of these forms of work in comparison with the existing norms of work. This is especially the case in countries like Belgium and France where the norm since the 1950s is the full time employment for a single organization with a permanent contract (Fourcade, 1992). However, since the 1970s these institutional contexts closely regulated by labour laws have been shaken by, on the one hand, the "successive sociopolitical compromises that express the contradictions and constraints of globalisation" and, on the other hand, the emergence of "actions and modes of organisation in work [that] cannot be easily framed within existing norms and statuses" (Bureau and Dieuaide, 2018, p.264). Moreover, within the broad family of LMIs we can count, among others, organizations supported by policy makers to fight the unemployment resulting from these changes. Some of these organizations aim at reintegrating jobless people in the labor market through adapted employee contracts for instance, while others aim at supporting jobless people to create their own job in the gig economy.

LMIs find themselves at the crossroads of two contradictory demands for flexibility and security. On the one hand, there is an increasing call for organisation flexibility and an upgrading of entrepreneurship and freelancing. While on the other hand, there is a rising concern regarding rights at work, social security and well-being as the social security systems are not adapted to new flexible careers (ILO, 2015; De Stefano, 2016).

In sum, LMIs are entangled between the choice of exploiting existing and legitimate work practices – open ended employee contract with a unique organisation – and exploration of new but not fully legitimate work practices – contract work, time shared, etc. Moreover, LMIs are very diverse. Some are providing only online services; while other are barely on the web, some are for-profit organisations and other non-profits.

What we named in this paper labour market social innovation is a sub-category of LMIs relying on nonprofit or for-profit-limited organisational forms and responding to the four criteria defining social innovation. First, they aim to improve social conditions (Mulgan et al., 2007; Edwards-Schachter et al., 2012) on the labour market: tackling unemployment, precariousness and/or responding to flexibility, security, belongingness aspirations. Secondly, they involve all stakeholders, particularly the beneficiaries, in an empowerment approach (Klein et al., 2010; Cantù and Selloni, 2013). Third, their success depends on interactions between diverse actors such as policymakers, corporations, and civil society, who cross institutional boundaries (Harrisson et al. , 2012; Terstriep et al. , 2015). Fourth, they generate institutional or system change (see publications of the Center for Research in Social Innovation of Québec – CRISES) (Westley et al., 2014; Bouchard et al., 2015). Thus, social innovation is a multi-level dynamic dependent on context (Westley et al., 2014). Scholars adopting a process lens on social innovation produced typologies and detailed descriptions of strategies for developers to diffuse and institutionalize their social innovation (Gibassier et al., 2016). For instance, Westley et al. (2014) identified different types of scaling modes: scaling out to impact the greater numbers; scaling up to impact laws and policy, and scaling deep to impact the cultural roots. Bouchard et al. (2015) identified three main institutionalization processes: negotiated institutionalization with policymakers, which recognizes unique features of the social innovation and gives innovators a degree of autonomy; flexible institutionalization, which adapts to local contexts; and refocusing on innovation. Thus, social innovation literature focus on the institutionalization process but barely scrutinize the sub-process of legitimation. However, significant challenges remain in managing social innovation development for long-term and expanding its social impacts (Pirotti et al., 2021).

As highlighted by Xhauflair et al. (2018) study of the Belgian Labour Market Social Innovation, SmartBe, the key issue is gaining legitimacy while challenged by established for-profit actors . Indeed, in addition to having to manage the tension between flexibility and security Labour Market Social Innovations have to manage the legitimacy deficit of NPOs (Schlesinger et al., 2004).

2.2 Legitimacy and Meta-organisations

To survive organisations actions need to be perceived or assumed "*desirable, proper or appropriate*" vis-a-vis the "*socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions*" (Suchman, 1995, p.574) of its audiences.

Scholars distinguish four main types of legitimacy that might complement or contradict each other: regulative legitimacy that derives from rules, laws, and standards; normative or moral legitimacy that rests on norms and values; cognitive legitimacy that comes from taken-for-granted assumptions or common beliefs; and pragmatic legitimacy relying on the self-interest of the audiences (external and internal) (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002; Scott, 2008).

The literature also suggests that there exists a "hierarchy" between the different types of legitimacy. In their study Colyvas and Powell (2006) highlight that technology transfer first gain socio-political legitimacy and then, in a second phase gain cultural-cognitive legitimacy. These results confirm Suchman (1995) proposition: "[...] *as one moves from the pragmatic to the moral to the cognitive, legitimacy becomes more elusive to obtain and more difficult to manipulate, but it also becomes more subtle, more profound, and more self-sustaining, once established*." (ibid.:585)

Moreover, following Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002), legitimacy might not be considered as binary – existing or not – but rather as variating from low to high. Indeed, in the vein of institutional approach, it represents a multi-level and collective process (Suddaby et al., 2017). Thus, it would be more correct to use the term legitimation and define it as a continuous process that can consist in gaining, maintaining or repairing legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

Legitimation represents a perilous process, as it is not universal but depends on the targeted audiences' system of norms, values and beliefs. Thus, it should continuously be negotiated (Suchman, 1995).

Moreover, the strategic management of legitimacy depends on the issue at stake - gaining, maintaining or restoring legitimacy –, on the context (Bitecktine and Haack, 2015) and on the strategic latitude of the organisation (Suchman, 1995).

During stable times and within environments presenting rules, norms and values highly institutionalised with strong taken for grantedness, macro-level judgments prevail, individuals' judgments are under isomorphic pressures, and organisations might opt more easily for conformance. Conversely, within environments more amenable to change, multiple voices make themselves heard and compete to be judged legitimate, thus organisations might opt for the selection or manipulation of its environment, or even create something new (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). These last two strategies of manipulation and creation, can be implemented at individual and/or collective levels, by influencing individuals' propriety judgments, "*the approval of the organization, its actions or practices as desirable and appropriate*" (Bitecktine and Haack, 2015, p.6) or influencing validity, the general consensus, at collective level.

There are multiple channels to do so: use rhetoric to persuade the audience through emotion, normative beliefs, or rational calculus; rely on credible and influential actors such as experts, journalists, legislators, etc.; target and influence influential actors such as celebrities; or coercion and inducement (ibid.).

Organisations can decide to use these different channels by themselves or to rely on collectives. The assumption behind collective strategies is that *"[...] new ventures, perhaps organised into*

an industry association, can have more impact than one operating alone." (Zimmerman and Zeitz; 2002, p.424).

Creating meta-organisations (MOs), that is to say organisations whose members are themselves organisations, can be one collective strategy to gain legitimacy (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005; Esparza et al., 2014). MOs aim at influencing their environment (Berkowitz and Bor, 2017) through three main objectives: interaction among members, collective action among members and creation of collective identity (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008).

Collective strategies appear to be even more necessary when addressing societal issues as highlighted by Berkowitz (2018) with the diffusion of sustainable innovations. This is also the case for organisations mixing categories by pursuing both social and economic purposes (Huybrechts and Haugh, 2017). However, as highlighted by Esparza et al. (2014) there is a lack of studies on meta-organizations of NPOs.

Besides, meta-organisations present some specificities and challenges that distinguish them from individual-based organisations (Berkowitz and Dumez, 2016). First, they are more dependent on their members. Indeed, who is member and who is not is much more important for MOs than for individual-based organisations. Second, they may exist a competition between the MO and its members. Third, their production lie mainly on information. Fourth, their decision-making process is slower as it relies on consensus and not on hierarchy. Finally, weaker organisations are the ones that need the most to join or create a meta-organisation.

As expressed by Berkowitz and Dumez (2016) these specificities raised peculiar challenges deserving more scholar scrutiny. Indeed "*we lack holistic approaches to their efficiency and its dependence on factors such as organizational form, and costs and benefits structure*." (ibid., p.153).

In this article, we try to understand to what extent meta-organisations can represent a lever for labour market social innovation to gain legitimacy. To do so we compared the trajectories of two labour market social innovations which created meta-organisations.

3 Method

3.1 Two French Labour Market Social Innovation

Since the 1970s, French labour market is experiencing a high rate of unemployment (oscillating between 7 and 10% of the workforce[1]). To fight this situation policy makers rely on two strategies. On the one hand, they support NPOs to help people reintegrate job market through training and subsidised contracts. On the other hand, they encourage business flexibility and micro-entrepreneurship or freelancing.

This last phenomenon of flexible and individualised relation to work accelerates those last years with the development of digital platform and the gig economy where commercial contracts substitute to worker contracts (De Stefano, 2016).

It is in this context that emerged and developed what is called labour maker intermediaries (LMI) offering different services ranging from workers-enterprise matching, to administrative and legal services, information sharing among freelancers (Lorquet, 2017; Xhauflair et al., 2018). We studied two of these LMIs – the Employers' Associations and the Business and Employment Cooperatives – which represent what we called labour market social innovation as they pursue social goal, are NPOs and try to produce institutional changes.

1. Source : INSEE (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies)

Table 1. Presentation of the Employers' Associations

	Employers' Associations
Genesis	Created in the 1980s to meet atypical needs in terms of employment (seasonality, part-time, unattractive jobs...) in the agriculture and progressively spread to other sectors.
Main missions and functioning	EAs are NPOs: -gathering organisations with unusual or small workforce needs, -hiring employees who share their working time between different organisations. EAs intend to develop 'win-win-win' situations for: -**Organisations**: as the hiring risk is borne by the EA, which respond to both needs of flexibility and security. -**Employees:** as they access to a pool of hiring organisations and sign a unique contract with the EA so they don't face the administrative complexity of having multiple employers. -**Local communities:** as they build proper jobs from small workforce needs, EAs revitalise areas facing economic downturn. They fight local depopulation and help unemployed to re-integrate labour market.
Key figures	6 485[2] EAs in France including 5 612 agricultural EAs 41 238 employees in EAs including 25 270 in agriculture 98 % of EAs are non-profit organisations 54% EAs count less than 10 employees 2/3 of EAs employees (excluding EAs dedicated to the qualification of unskilled) hold open-ended contracts and 70% work full-time (Dessen Torres and Ejnes, 2016)
Meta-organisations	**National level**: -National Federation of EAs -National Union of EAs **Local level**: numerous local and sectoral meta-organisations essentially based on the regional administrative division and adopting various forms (ex. resource centers for EAs, regional associative networks, etc.)
Legal framework	Law of 25 July 1985 : creation of EAs, legalisation of an informal practice Law of 2 August 2005 : EAs can transform into cooperatives Law of 2 August 2016 and Law of 5 May 2014 : creation of EAs for qualification and insertion

Table 2. Presentation of the Business and Employment Cooperatives

	Business and Employment Cooperatives
Genesis	Created in 1995 by members of Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE) and supported by policy makers in a national context characterised by mass unemployment with public policies encouraging unemployed people to create their own jobs through entrepreneurship and supporting WISE.

2. Source: Lenancker P. (2018) Socio-Economic Council (CESE) Notice.

	Business and Employment Cooperatives
Main missions and functioning	BECs offer support to project holders in their entrepreneurial journey. Entrepreneurs benefit from both an entrepreneurial and employee status. They freely canvass their clients but it is the BEC that bills the clients, receives the payments and transforms the payments into salaries. Thus, the entrepreneurs benefit from an employee contract and the attached social benefits. Moreover, as BECs are cooperatives the entrepreneurs become associates and take part to the democratic governance.
Key figures	In 2021, 155 BECs gathered more than 11 000 members[3]
Meta-organisations	-Two national meta-organisations (*Coopérer pour entreprendre* and *Copéa*) created by and dedicated to BECs -National and regional meta-organisations dedicated to worker cooperatives (*CGscop* and *URScop*) -*Bigre* gathering 5 big BECs sharing the same political project -*La Manufacture Coopérative* a group of co-operators-researchers developing action-research projects about how to support collectives of entrepreneurs In 2020 the two BECs national meta-organisations (*Copéa* and *Coopérer pour entreprendre*) created the BEC federation attached to the national confederation of worker cooperatives (*CGScop*)
Legal framework	Law on the social and solidarity economy (2014) with the legal recognition of the BEC and the status of Entrepreneur-Employee-Associate.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The case of Employers' Associations

This case has been studied in the context of an action-research project conducted by a pluridisciplinary research team in partnership with two EAs (Resweber, 1995; Liu, 1997). This research project took place in the Grand East Region. This region located between the Parisian region and the German border, is facing an economic downturn due to the deindustrialisation. Its rate of unemployment raised at 8,4% of the active population in 2018 with some sub-areas experiencing around 12% of unemployment. To fight this situation, policy makers of this region are, among other, supporting research action projects. Thus, a call for research project named Innov'Action was launched in 2014 to promote social innovation. Our project, aiming to support the development of EAs through the creation of a local network, was among the projects selected in 2015. The project was led by two EAs and a multidisciplinary research team. The grant also enabled the two leading EAs to hire two interns to support the project.

The action research project was organised in two phases. The first phase (February 2015 to June 2016) consisted in reviewing the literature on EAs and collecting qualitative data. The research team conducted 63 semi-structured interviews with a sample of EAs managers, presidents, permanent salaried staff and time-shared workers. These interviews aimed at understanding the history of the EAs (Who created the EA? When was it created? Who supported the creation? etc.), their functioning (Number of members? Employees? Geographic area? Partners? Business model? Impacts on workers? etc.) and the projects of the EAs for the years to come. At the same time, the research team sought to measure the level of knowledge of EAs among students (327 questionnaires), jobseekers (29) and workers (17). The research team also realised a benchmark of EAs' meta-organisations throughout France to have an overview of EAs landscape. The second phase (September 2016 to February 2017) covered the launch of the local meta-organisation.

3. Source: National Confederation of Worker Cooperatives (CGScop), 2022.

During this period, the research team realised 21 meetings (with and without EAs representatives), wrote two reports, organised two seminars to present the results of the study and three professional seminars for EAs' managers. Following an abductive approach (Thiétart, 2007), the authors simultaneously collected and apply a thematic analysis to the data (Bardin, 2003). After the official launch of the network in December 2017, action research (Resweber, 1995; Liu, 1997) gradually turned into intervention research (Xhauflair and Pichault, 2009) as the research team is now actively supporting the deployment of this network (animation, advice to the board of directors, etc.).

The case of the Business and Employment Cooperatives

The BECs were studied through a case study that was part of one of the author's PhD dissertation. It concerned one of the leading BEC located in the Parisian area and the national BECs meta-organisations. From 2011 to 2015, the author conducted 33 semi-structured interviews. The interviews with the BEC and meta-organisations leaders were about the history of the BECs, the main issues encountered and the projects for the years to come. The interviews with the entrepreneurs were about their professional pathway before entering the BEC, within the BEC and, for the ones concerned, after their exit. 11 non-participative observations of the welcome meetings, general assemblies and annual universities, 2 focus-groups and archives (annual report, welcome booklet, meeting minute, etc.) completed the data set. All these data were analysed with an abductive approach (Suddaby, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Gioia et al., 2012) assisted by the software Nvivo. This analysis resulted in a new institutional approach of (1) the national trajectory of this social innovation, (2) the hybridity of the BEC and (3) the individual trajectories of the salaried-entrepreneurs. The author also took part to a second BEC case study that deepen the understanding of these organisations and their context.

The supra-analysis

The two authors worked together on the EAs research project and were intrigued by the difficulties EAs were facing to get out of marginality after more than 30 years of existence while the BEC were gaining visibility and legitimacy through the social and solidarity economy law after (only) 20 years. This surprising fact led to the adoption of an abductive approach in order to build hypotheses that could explain this difference in legitimation (Dumez, 2012). Thus, the authors decided to compare the two legitimation trajectories through a supra-analysis (Chabaud and Germain, 2006; Heaton, 2008). The aim was to reuse the rich data sets in order to investigate a new research question. Like the detectives (Catellin, 2004), the authors searched their data and the literature for clues that could explain the situation.

They shared their data and selected the ones providing information about the meta-organizations and the legitimacy. They organised the information on a table describing for each organisational form the genesis, the functioning, the key figures, the legal framework and the meta-organisations (Tables 1 and 2 presented previously). Then, they listed in another table all the empirical elements relying to the legitimacy typology presented in the literature review (regulative, cognitive, moral, pragmatic) (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002; Scott, 2008) and evaluated whether the legitimacy elements were increasing (+) or decreasing (-) (synthesis presented in Table 3). This analysis enabled to identify the similarities and differencies between EAs and BECs and the roles of their respective meta-organizations. The following section presents the results of this comparative meta-analysis.

Table 3. Comparison of BECs and EAs Legitimacies

	Employers' Associations	**Business and Employment Cooperatives**
Pragmatic	(+/-) Many national and local meta-organisations	(+)National meta-organisations and showcase in the capital
Regulative	(+)25th July 1985 Law : legal recognition of the EAs 2nd August 2005 Law : EAs can be either associations or cooperatives 2014 and 2015 Laws enabling the creation of EAs dedicated to training and qualification of unskilled people 2nd August 2016 Law: EAs can receive public subvention for employment and training (-)Complex labour and fiscal regulation to which EAs have to adapt	(+)31st July 2014 Law : recognition of the BECs 2015 : creation of a BEC label by the national meta-organisation *Coopérer pour entreprendre* (-)Complex labour and fiscal regulation to which BECs have to adapt
Normative or moral	(-)Non unified discourse	(+) Discourse on the fight against labour casualisation
Cognitive	Innovativeness of the work form: (+) close to the employment stardard but (-)some organisations may be reluctant to have workers working for other organisations and potentially competitors; the workers themselves may be reluctant to navigate between different organisations (+) Research projects (ex. Innov'Action)	Innovativeness of the work form: (+) awork form that is quite aligned with the entrepreneurial trend of the labour market but (-) difficulties for some BEC members to define themselves with the 3 identities of entrepreneur, employee and cooperator (+) Research projects and a meta-organisation dedicated to research-action project (*La Manufacture Cooperative*)

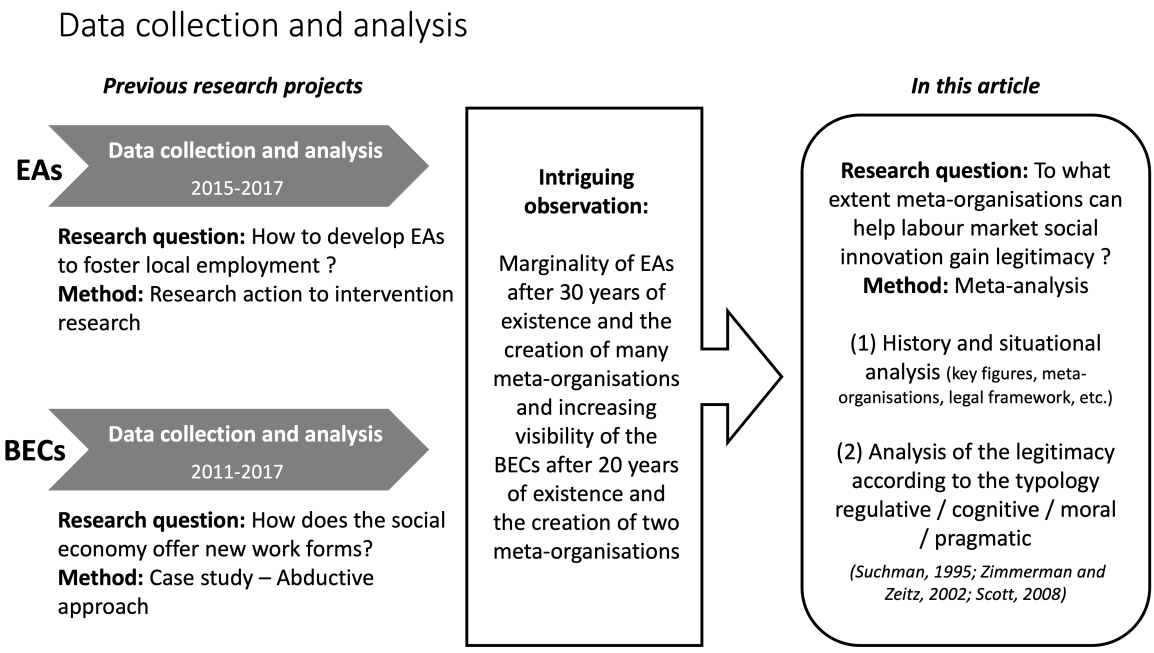

Figure 1. Data collection and analysis

4 Findings

4.1 Trajectory of the Employers' Associations

Gaining pragmatic legitimacy: meta-organising at local level

EAs trajectory started in the 1980s in the agriculture where farmers created associations to meet their atypical human resources needs (replacement, seasonal hiring, etc.).

Gradually, other sectors such as sport and culture adopted similar practices by creating EAs. It appeared that EAs diffused in very diverse economic sectors and in the entire country without national coordination. Early 2000s EAs created meta-organisations on a local basis to mutualise their knowledge (Resources Center for Employers'Associations – CRGE) but it is only in 2014, with the inforcement of a law about the representativity of employers' unions, that EAs started to federate at national level. Two different meta-organisations were created: the National Federation of Employers'Associations (FNGE) in September 2014 and the National Union of Employers'Associations (SNGE) in March 2015. Here we have to notice the specificity of the EAs dedicated to training and insertion (GEIQ) as they created a national federation in 2013, enforced a label and built close partnerships with policy makers and corporations.

Thus, the main motivation of EAs to build meta-organisations was the pressing issues of developing their services and sustain their organisations.

This was at the heart of the creation of the studied EAs meta-organisation, PROGREST, officially launched in December 2017 in the Grand-East region of France. With PROGREST, EAs main objective was to improve their practices (HRM, governance, marketing, etc.) by pooling competences as one EA director explained: "*It would certainly be of interest to share some functions between all the associations because we are facing the same difficulties on a daily basis on the legal recourse dimension for example, on these aspects of staff administrative management, in particular the payroll (. . .)*"[4].

However, building a collective dynamic appeared harder than expected. Although one of the underlying expectation was to reduce the isolation of EAs managers, cooperation was not easy for several reasons. First, the scope of the meta-organisation was very broad, as the Grand-East region is as large as Belgium, what complicated the meetings. Second, the elected president of the meta-organisation had multiple elective reponsibilities at the same time and her time was scattered. With a low leadership and important physical distance between its members the meta-organisation barely meet its objectives during the first years.

Gaining regulative and moral legitimacy: using the academic lever

Another important objective of EAs through meta-organisation is to improve the dialogue with policy makers so that labour regulations take into account the specificities of EAs and time shared work. Here, an important challenge for EAs is to speak with a common voice to policy makers: "[. . .] *we worked with our colleagues [. . .] getting back to the regional council saying: "you helped us for setting up, you supported us politically but. . . you need to recognize our specificities* [. . .]" (Director of an EA dedicated to nonprofits).

By answering to the regional council research-action call for project on social innovation, the two EAs at the origin of PROGREST were expecting to gain moral legitimacy. Indeed, through this project EAs could define themselves as a social innovation aiming at improving local socio-economic conditions and benefit from the academia legitimacy.

4. All verbatims have been translated from French by the authors.

Gaining cognitive legitimacy: the challenge of diversity

Last but not least, EAs had to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their potential members - the firms - and their potential employees – the job seekers.

This was also an important motivation for EAs to join the meta-organisation as illustrated by the following words of an agricultural EA director : « *We are too unknown... by the public, in fact, regardless of our sector of activity. Uh, if you ask a person in the street what is a temporary work agency, she will know how to answer, what is an Employer Association ... nobody knows what is an Employer Association. For myself, I am quite favorable to this network dynamic (...)*".

However, EAs heterogeneity complicated the construction of a shared identity to be displayed to external audiences. As explained earlier, EAs are very diversified, their location, their scope, their sector, etc. are specificities highly influencing their approach (practices, discourses, etc.).

Tensions due to heterogeneity exacerbated during the drafting of PROGREST charter when the common values were discussed. Indeed, two EAs left the project after attending three meetings because they did not recognise themselves as belonging to social and solidarity economy (officially gathering in France non-profits, cooperatives, mutuals and social enterprises).

« *Networking with other Employer Associations for non-profits, we try to do it, we do it ... with more or less difficulties, because we have divergences... because we are people, we are different. Yes anyway networking is never bad. This is not the question, the issue is who mobilises this network and for what? [. . .] So I know, it's never that easy, there are different strategies, political strata, issues, and so on.*". (Director of an EA dedicated to nonprofits). These words confirm Kumar and Das (2007) results on the importance of inter-partners legitimacy.

Finally, the interviews revealed that these identity tensions were also present within some EAs between the president and the director. Nonetheless, the understanding and complementarity of this tandem is crucial for EAs development - not to say survival – but the quality of their relationship will ricocher to the meta-organisation.

To summarise, although EAs diffused throughout the country and within most economic sectors for 30 years, they still struggle to gain legitimacy in the eyes of policy makers, firms and workers. While they aim to become the preferred choice of both companies and employees when they need flexibility, they fail to replace temporary work agencies. Thus, the EAs case reveals the difficulty of labour market social innovation to gain legitimacy. In particular, EAs fail to create a national unity with a single interlocutor to negotiate. This difficulty is explained, in large part, by political issues and governance conflicts.

4.2 Trajectory of the Business and Employment Cooperatives

Gaining cognitive legitimacy: Problematising the social issue and distinguishing the new organisational form

In her book recounting the creation of the BECs, their founder explains her motivation with these words: "*The reasons for my involvement with BECs are numerous. [. . .] The first was the fight for employment. [. . .]Unemployment causes society to decay*." After having worked several years for work integration social enterprises (WISEs), she was aware that WISEs failed to secure workers on the long-run. When she encountered policy-makers willing to create something new to enable jobless people to launch their own activities within a secure frame the project of BEC progressively emerged. The inception of the BEC followed a trial-and-error process regarding among others its legal status (from non-profit to cooperative) and its accounting. To create the BEC, stakeholders had to build a consensus. The founder of the BEC related an interesting event: one of her partners advised her to set up two distinct organisations. One for promising projects that would most probably make a profit, and the other for less promising projects. But this was not an option for

her. She wanted to co-create something new with the project holders. She considers that solidarity and interesting learning processes will emerge from the wide variety of members. Consensus also concerned the regulatory authorities. For instance, the founder of the BEC had to convince them that joining a BEC is a form of job seeking, and should entitle people to unemployment benefit. By building consensus with the public agencies, BEC founder provide the new organisational form with regulative and normative legitimacy (Scott, 2008). It also appeared crucial for the founder to differentiate BECs from the work integration social enterprises. She did not consider any of her members as marginalised, or as lacking the necessary skills to enter the job market or set up their own business. This distinction provides cognitive demarcation for the BECs to gain legitimacy as it appears to address labour market issues with an original approach.

Gaining pragmatic legitimacy: Creating meta-organisations and showcase to theorise and build strategic partnership

Although, the first BEC was still at the beginning of its experimentation stage, policy makers decided, after a study on the scalability of BECs, to quickly spread the experimentation in other territories. During the 2000s around 60 BECs[5] were created all around France. This rapid growth of the number of BECs can be explained by the pressing issue of unemployment and the failure of the extant measures to fight it. As the organisational form was not stabilised, BECs developed alongside a continuum ranging from transit organisations supporting the first phase of micro-entrepreneurship to organisations rooted in cooperative culture and encouraging people to maintain their business within the BEC. This diversity was enhanced by two factors: the sectoral rules which necessitated the creation of specialised BECs in building or social services for instance, and the territorial anchoring of BECs which took different forms according to territorial and local population characteristics (rural, urban, dominated by industries or services, poorly or highly educated, etc.). This diversity created tensions between the actors who created two distinct BEC meta-organisations: *Coopérer pour entreprendre* and *Copéa*. Organising the BECs into meta-organisations was a way to develop at national level, to gain visibility in the labour regulation landscape, to improve BEC practices through sharing experience, and to promote the organisational form. Thus, it facilitated the dialogue with national policymakers. The creation of a BEC in the French capital, Coopaname, provided the BECs with a showcase close to policymakers and national media. Its members publish numerous press articles and have set up a research committee, whose members present and publish academic papers, establishing the building blocks for BEC theorisation. Another way to structure and diffuse the BECs model was to establish partnerships with key players of labour regulation: the national authority responsible for unemployment benefits, trade unions, health insurance companies, etc. Through partnerships, the BECs aligned with national standards and gained pragmatic legitimacy, for instance by negotiating individual agreements or insurance contracts.

Gaining normative and regulative legitimacy: Setting national standards

From the start, the BECs were an experiment, but had no official status. Therefore, the new Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) law of 2014 was important, as it included a section dedicated to the BEC. Section IV defines the goal of the BEC, the status of salaried-entrepreneur-cooperator, and the contract between the members and the cooperative. The BEC meta-organisation, *Coopérer pour entreprendre*, and the national network of worker cooperatives, *Confédération générale des sociétés cooperatives et participatives* (CGScop), took an active part in writing and implementing the law. Both meta-organisations consider the law as providing legitimacy and as a step forward

5. Evaluation of the national worker cooperatives network with the consultancy Opus 3 (2016).

in the development of the BECs. To support the new legal framework for the BEC, *CGScop* wrote a report explaining to Parliament what a BEC is and a report assessing the impact of BECs. This kind of evaluation builds a shared language between BECs and policymakers. It reduces ambiguity and facilitates access to much-needed public funds. However, some ambiguity remains, as the law is amenable to opportunistic interpretations. The meta-organisations fear the arrival of new players who could attempt to use the BEC form to bypass labor laws. In order to avoid these threats, the meta-organisations have complemented the legal frame by creating norms. Thus, in 2015, *Coopérer pour entreprendre* created a label recognising high quality BEC services. The strategy of the meta-organisation consists in settling the BEC structure and practices to create a model. This strategy relies on a set of instruments – the law, the label, impact reports – facilitating the dialogue between the BECs and stakeholders and providing the BECs with normative-regulative legitimacy (Scott, 2008). Parallel to this strategy, the BECs parisian showcase, the BEC Coopaname, and its partners re-problematised the social issue of labour transformation. Indeed, since the BEC's inception in 1995 the French context had changed. Whereas the main issue in the mid-1990s was unemployment, 20 years later a broad range of insecure forms of work, called grey employment zones (Bureau and Dieuaide, 2018), had emerged. This added insecurity to the persistent issue of unemployment. Thanks to its high-status (Wright and Zammuto, 2013), Coopaname was able not to conform to the meta-organisations strategy and develop, with its partners, another strategy consisting in pursuing the experimentation to address the new social issue. With 4 other worker cooperatives it created the meta-organisation *Bigre!* to promote socially ambitious alternatives to both "*subordinated employment*" and "*precarious entrepreneurship*". The cooperative is also at the origin of *La Manufacture Coopérative*, a group of BECs members and researchers who explore new way to support small collectives of entrepreneurs. These new meta-organisations aimed at providing the BECs with a new cognitive frame more aligned with labour market evolutions.

To summarise, the BECs activated all the legitimacy levers: the cognitive with the problematisation and re-problematisation of the social issue; the pragmatic by answering to the needs of its two main audiences the entrepreneurs and the policy makers, the normative and regulative thanks to the meta-organisations that generated among others a label and a law. This was possible because BECs created both representative meta-organisations at national level and a showcase in the capital that, beyond some tensions, gather their efforts to see the BECs legitimated by the national authorities.

4.3 Legitimation Trajectories: Similarities and Differences

While EAs and BECs present some commonalities and faced the same national context, their legitimacy trajectories diverge. We will see how this could be explained.

The socio-economic context characterised by a high level of unemployment is favorable to change and following Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) we can expect organisations to manipulate their environment or create something new. However, in France labour market is highly regulated and employees benefit from a high level of social protection (health insurance, unemployment benefits, etc.). Thus, EAs and BECs are entangled between on the one hand their intend to preserve this social protection of worker while adapting it to the new forms of work (self-entrepreneurship, multi-employers, etc.). In doing so they face a complex regulation built around legal forms, economic sectors and professions. While EAs opted for what Lorquet (2017) call *quasi-employment*, BECs are closer to *quasi-self-employment*. In other word, if we use the definition of social innovation EAs focused more on meeting immediate needs whereas BECs intend to provoke institutional change.

If we look at their organisational form, both EAs and BECs are profit-limited organisations

(associations or cooperatives), thus their business model is more adapted to slow development than rapid growth. They cannot leverage venture capital and their marketing power is very low.

Moreover, as social purpose organisations, EAs and BECs are crossed by different, and sometimes conflicting, approaches as some actors emphasise the social/political dimension while other focus more on the economic dimension. This reflects in their meta-organisation strategy as both EAs and BECs created multiple meta-organisations. However, while EAs organised into very dispersed meta-organisations - mainly at local level - and failed to have one voice heard - what cost them to be called "Mexican Army"-, BECs created a reasonnable number of representative meta-organisations and a showcase in Paris to be seen and heard by national policy makers.

Finally, the trajectories of the BECs and the EAs confirm that the legitimacy of NPOs is tightly linked to the State legitimation strategy (Moore, 2001). Indeed, EAs benefited from a legal recognition and support in 2015 by french government and 18 actions integred into Finance law (2016). In the same vein, BECs gain a legal recognition in 2014 after 20 years of experimentation. This is the result of EAs and BECs' meta-organisations effort to lobby policy makers. Indeed, following the work of Hall and Deardorff (2006), we can consider that the meta-organisations were providing policy intelligence to selected legislators, notably through research projects.

The aim of these comparative cases was to understand to what extent meta-organizations could help labor market social innovation gain legitimacy.

By looking at the histories of EAs and BECs and analyzing them through the different types of legitimacy, we can say yes, meta-organization can help LMIs gain legitimacy. To do so, meta-organizations should start by gaining cognitive legitimacy notably through storytelling around the issues at stake and how the LMI can provide an up to date answer to it. We saw that the cognitive legitimacy represents a basis on which the other legitimacies can be build. Indeed, without this cognitive legitimacy, EAs and BECs could not have lobbied and convinced policy makers to enforce dedicated laws and gain regulative legitimacy. Moreover, mutualizing these framing efforts (Fisher et al., 2017) at meta-organization level is particularly interesting as it enables to overcome the diversity, to generate meaning, to gain comprehensibility (Suchman, 1995) in the eyes of the audiences and to provide a sense of coherence.

Secondly, both LMIs leveraged what Fisher et al. (2017) called the associative mechanism by connecting with research laboratories. Indeed, EAs and BECs were involved in research projects that enabled them to gain normative and regulative legitimacy. Thus, our results empirically confirm that ties with research institutions can help new ventures to gain legitimacy notably in the eyes of governmental agencies (Fisher et al., 2017) which is especially important for LMIs that aim to initiate institutional change.

Table 4. Levers of meta-organizations to gain legitimacy

	Levers of meta-organizations
Cognitive legitimacy	Framing a discourse highlighting the issue addressed by the LMI
↳ **Regulative and Normative legitimacy**	Lobbying policy makers Associating with research institutions
Cognitive legitimacy pre-requisite	A clear governance

Finally, our cases highlight the importance of the governance of the meta-organizations. As for any non-profit organization, the duo president-director has to be carefully chosen. Indeed, as highlighted with the case of one of the EAs' meta-organization, when this duo has not clearly shared the tasks and power, and/or when the president do not have enough time to dedicate to the meta-organization, this one is in danger.

5 Discussion

Even if there are limitations of this research and our comparison has several biases, this research has the advantage of highlighting innovative forms of employment studied in depth. We can underline two biases. At first, we have chosen to compare two innovative forms of employment that do not have the same economic weight. In fact, there are 6485 EA in France (41238 employees) and 143 BEC in France with 11,000 members. The second bias concerns the data collection periods. We chose to cross-reference data from two longitudinal studies that could not be conducted in parallel. The EAs' data are collected between 2015 to 2017. The BECs have been studied from 2011 to 2017. This comparative study highlights how labour market social innovations can gain legitimacy. It shows the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy consisting in creating meta-organisations to gain legitimacy.

5.1 Meta-organizations: the first step towards territorial recognition

The analysis of BECs and EAs confirms Berkowitz and Dumez (2016) analysis regarding the specificities of meta-organisations, especially the higher dependence on their members compared to individual-based organisations. The case of EAs is revelatory as they present a very high heterogeneity that creates tension within the meta-organisation. Moreover, our results invite meta-organisation researchers to investigate the relationships between meta-organisations focusing on the same set of organisations. Indeed, EAs created multiple meta-organisations at national and local levels that cost them not to be heard by their audiences. Future researches could investigate whether some network strategies (Ozman, 2017) can help meta-organisations to meet their objectives and gain legitimacy more efficiently. Another important dimension that emerged from the case studies is the territorial dimension. The meta-organization approach adopted by EAs may be similar to necessity entrepreneurship in the sense of Cowling and Bygrave (2003) but it is above all a voluntary and thoughtful approach, as shown by the intermediate stage of the creation of the regional association. For PROGREST, the EAs meta-organisation, trying to gather the actors of the administrative region Great East appeared to be a handicap. Indeed acting on a so vast territory imply to deal with a high level of diversity among the actors. These results demonstrate the difficulties in networking on a given territory. The construction of an EAs network questions the role of public policies in terms of supporting employment in the territories. More specifically, it is a question of strengthening the role of the NPOs in the construction of territorial public policies in terms of employment (cf. Ciriec international research). For example, EAs are part of the territorial actors who have a very good knowledge of the needs of VSEs-SMEs in terms of employment such as integration companies. Moreover, as highlighted by Nunes and Lopes (2015) the territory can also be a lever for meta-organisations. Indeed, the BECs "strategically played" the territory by creating a showcase in the capital and this enabled them to be seen and heard by policy makers. Thus, trying to adapt to policy makers geographical delimitation can be double-edged and future researches could focus on the territorial agency of meta-organisations. These two case studies once again revive the debate on cooperation between NPOs and territorial public actors even though NPOs are increasingly essential actors for professional integration.

5.2 Progressive social innovation to respond to new labour market tensions

EAs and BECs cases also highlight the tension crossing labour market social innovations. While freelancing and entrepreneurship are gaining legitimacy (increasing visibility in media and positive image), employment is entangled in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, employment is the form of work providing the highest level of security and access to essential goods and services (i.e., loan, accommodation, etc.), on the other hand its image is eroded by hierarchical relations,

subservience, lack of flexibility and even sometimes meaning loss. Both firms and workers face the tension between these two dimensions. Workers would like to free themselves from subservience but fear insecurity. Firms wants flexibility but also to ensure the loyalty of their employees. In between labour market social innovation have to find the right balance. Following the typology of Lorquet et al. (2017) EAs provide *quasi-employment*. Thus, we can argue that EAs adopted an isomorphic strategy to gain legitimacy as they mainly rely on employment practices and consequently do not dramatically challenge work norms. In a context where workers are expecting less subservience (Kunda et al., 2002) EAs seem misaligned. On their side, BECs provide quasi-self-employment and try to change the institutions surrounding labour. They deploy important efforts especially to gain cognitive legitimacy. This highlights how high are their expectations as cognitive legitimacy is the more profound and self-sustaining (Suchman, 1995). To respond to the constant changes in the labour market, social innovations are forced to evolve and adapt continuously. By being as close as possible to companies (support for their HR policy), the EAs respond precisely to the adjustment and "flexicurity" needs of companies. At the level of the BECs, the adjustment is carried out by the entrepreneurs themselves.

6 Conclusion

This research has several contributions. On the theoretical level, it confirms the work on meta-organizations and complements Suchman's work on legitimacy. On the managerial level, these two case studies highlight the entrepreneurial strategic trajectories of NPOs to varying degrees by underlining the importance of territorial logic. These initial results open up several avenues of research. First, future research could go futher in this vein and investigate labour market social innovation under the lens of institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2013) to understand the intentional efforts of NPOs aiming at maintaining or disrupting existing labour institutions or creating new labour institutions. Second, these results invite us to develop work both on the relationship between public employment policies and NPOs as a lever for employment in territories in economic difficulty. This second result is more generally in line with work on cooperation between public authorities and NPOs.

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