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HUBS: Enabling multiple value creation through collaboration

ABSTRACT

In deze paper onderzoeken de auteurs de opkomst van cooperatieve vormen van organiseren in netwerken genaamd hubs. Hubs ontstaan ten gevolge van een behoefte in de samenleving om op een coöperatieve manier maatschappelijke doelen en meervoudige waardecreatie te realiseren. Hubs ontwikkelen zich tot waardecreërende, netwerkende vormen van organiseren die bijdragen aan lokale en regionale ontwikkelingen die worden geassocieerd met een transitie naar duurzame ontwikkeling. In dit artikel onderzoeken we welke positie hubs innemen binnen het bestaande organisatorische landschap. We kunnen hubs beschouwen als verdichte netwerken die zich vormen op basis van de specifieke behoeften en condities in de regio waarin de hubs opereren. Dit heeft te gevolg dat elke hub anders is samengesteld. Om hubs te kunnen onderscheiden van andere vormen van organiseren werken wij zeven eigenschappen uit waarop we hubs kunnen herkennen: (i) lokaal of regionaal opererend; (ii) gericht op ingewikkelde problemen; (iii) leidend tot een brede configuratie van deelnemers; (iv) pakken activiteiten op het gebied van meervoudige waardecreatie op; (v) onconventionele organisatievormen; (vi) geïntegreerde aanpak van vraagstukken; (vii) gericht op een transitie op langere termijn. Deze eigenschappen gebruiken we om verschillen en overeenkomsten in bestaande hubs te duiden. We onderscheiden dat de organisatorische uitdagingen waar hubs voor staan aanleiding geven voor verder te onderzoeken, dat inzicht kan geven in de configuraties die gericht zijn op het realiseren van een duurzame toekomst.

Keywords: hubs, meervoudige waardecreatie, coöperatieve vormen van organiseren, duurzame ontwikkeling

1. Introduction

The growing complexity and interconnectedness of our society combined with a growing demand for long-term sustainable solutions seemingly requires new, collaborative ways of organising. Networking and shared value creation are increasingly being recognised as important routes towards organising a sustainable future (Earpington, 1997; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013; Jonker, 2012a).

Being able to organise effective cooperation has become an increasingly important management skill. The ability to organise effective collaboration between different stakeholders even more so. With the Internet leading to seemingly endless new ways of communication and organising between people, organisations, and machines, communication and collaboration in networks becomes ever easier to accomplish. Interactions between multiple organisations are intrinsic to shaping a society. Over time people have always worked together to realise personal and common goals. Numerous organisational forms and types have been developed, some forced upon, others embraced by people, to coordinate and direct people’s collective activities.

Scientific management literature acknowledges different forms of organising in networks, e.g., alliances, value chains, and networks (Grant & Baden-Fuller, 2004; Kogut, 2000; Lewin, Long, & Carroll, 1999; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Schilling & Steensma, 2001), collaborative networks (Agranoff, 2006; Agranoff & McGuire, 1998; Camarina-Matos & Afsarmanesh, 2005), entrepreneurial ecosystems (Andler, 2006; Stam, 2015), partnerships (Selsky & Parker, 2005), cross sector collaboration (Bysen, Crosby, Middleton Stone, & Stone, 2006), Platforms (Young, 2011), et cetera. Throughout history awareness of the interdependence of knowledge and sources outside the colloquial organisati-
on has led to structural partnerships between organisations of the same type, some more successful than others. Some obvious examples are nation states being shaped by governmental organisations, firms entering into partnerships to realise efficient and ongoing delivery of goods and services, or NGOs collaborating to ensure effective campaigns. Structural or formalised cooperation between organisations from different realms of society to accomplish shared, long-term goals is a recent development and comes with all sorts of organisational challenges.

The collaborative landscape was broadened by studies directed at deliberate partnerships and networks between different types of organisations such as public-private partnerships (Osborne, 2005), social enterprises (Dies & Anderson, 2003), Innovation Eco Systems (Ander, 2006), Communities of Practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), and multi-stakeholder platforms (Faysse, 2006). We acknowledge the value of these and other studies in getting an overview of the form and scope of collaborative initiatives and projects. Many studies are dedicated to how and why organisations and/or individuals collaborate, how collaboration can be beneficial to realise shared and individual goals, and how participating in networks can realise added value for the involved partners and stakeholders. From a more practical point of view, in professional literature there is a rise in management tools, blogs, websites, and courses on organising in networks and cooperatives (see for instance Kaats & Opheij, 2012; Lamberigts & Schipper, 2015).

Organisations engage in collaboration in networks to realise goals they have in common with partners, originating from challenges relating to sustainability. Programmes like COP 21 (UNFCCC, 2015) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) emphasise the interconnectedness of these challenges and the importance of cooperation to address complex issues. This has resulted in a growing number of initiatives in which different organisations and individuals collaborate to address complex issues: energy, waste, food, care, etc. To do so they are investing time, energy, money, and other resources that contribute to collaborative solutions for multi-faceted, 'wicked' problems (Faber & Jonker, 2015; Weber & Khademian, 2008). Constituents in these multi-party networks are willing to invest various means and will eventually share the common results of their effort. Faber and Jonker (2015) label this as multiple, collective, and shared value creation.

Sustainability is par excellence a simultaneous interplay of multiple values: social, economic and ecological. Integrating multiple sustainable values is challenging for traditional organisations. Giving equal attention to multiple values contradicts with the nature and existing business model of many organisations, which are basically organised around single, often economical, value.

In the past decades, governments, companies, institutions, social movements, and other forms of organising started to cooperate in diverse attempts to address sustainability. Traditionally these efforts resolve to give an extra amount of attention to social and ecological values while maintaining 'business as usual'. Partnerships and new alliances are considered crucial in a transition towards a more sustainable society (Elkington, 1997). However, it seems that in order to address sustainability issues in a successful manner, we need long-term forms of collaboration that are able to integrate multiple values. In multiple value-creating networking forms of organising, different backgrounds, visions and aims are represented. Although differences in views on how to organise things, on how to govern collaboration, and on responsibilities and accountability of the collaborative activities might be present, constituents initiate and join these forms of organising because they recognise the added value(s) of addressing complex issues together.

We observe the emergence of three forms of organising enriching the existing landscape of organisations that differ from partnerships, alliances, and networks. They can be distinguished by a growing amount of both the participating constituents and the complexity of the issues they address, we distinguish (i) Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000), (ii) Living Labs, and (iii) hubs. In communities of practice (CoPs), multiple constituents from the same domain or background exchange expertise and enter a joint learning process shaped around a central, single issue e.g., energy, mobility, and waste. In Living Labs, multiple constituents from different backgrounds in a confined area (neighbourhood, town, region) co-create, explore and experiment in a cooperative setting to achieve progress around a single, more complex, issue, e.g. a safe neighbourhood, autonomous energy production or local food production. In a hub, multiple parties, both organisations and individuals, collaborate to address multiple, interconnected, complex issues, aiming at the long-term transition of an area.

The aim of this paper is to position hubs within the existing landscape of forms of organising. Whereas CoPs and Living Labs have taken their place within the organisational landscape, we argue that Hubs have not yet established a position. Hubs may be different in terminus a quo but eventually they operate in the same playing field as other forms of organising. A playing field where rules and regulations are already set and where known forms of organising already have found their modus operandi.

The main research question is to what extent Hubs show similarities and differences with other forms of organising, particularly networking forms of organising? Hubs manifest themselves over and in between the boundaries of more traditional
forms of inter-organisational networking (Faber & Jonker, 2015). In this article we approach hubs as a configuration of organisations that start to collaborate around shared issues and common values.

Section 2 presents the organisational landscape as we know it. The third section provides a detailed overview of hubs. In section four, we illustrate the hub phenomenon using three examples we have observed in the Netherlands and France. We finalise this paper with a discussion and present some conclusions.

2. The organisational landscape

Organisations are considered to be actors in the socio-economic domain. Organisations enable their constituents to engage in coordinated actions and to work together to realise common goals. There are different ways to establish an organisation, depending on, amongst other things, the goals, the configuration of constituents and the circumstances under which the organisation is formed. Aside from this there are different dimensions along which we can distinguish forms of organising: (1) societal position, (2) formal (legal) form, (3) organisational goals, and (4) governance model.

Traditionally, organisations are distinguished according to their position in society: (i) private organisations serving the economic domain, (ii) governmental and public organisations serving the public domain, regulation and legislation. Next to organisations in the private and in the public domain we distinguish (iii) Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that can range from informal, community-based organisations to large Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). According to the International Monetary Fund, CSOs include business forums, faith-based associations, labour unions, local community groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), philanthropic foundations, and think tanks (IMF, 2016).

A second way to distinguish organisations is their formal position. Within all three above-mentioned organisational domains we distinguish different forms of organising, most of which have, to some or to greater extent, a constitutional status. This enables us to distinguish organisations according to their legal form, their ownership, and their accountability. Cooperation between organisations may very well challenge the existing formal structures. For instance: as common as Senseo and Nespresso are today, when they were developed, the cooperation between different multinational companies provided an interesting business case full of legal and organisational challenges. In addressing environmental and societal issues, companies and NGOs have been considered ‘natural enemies’ for many years. However, in the past decades they have started to recognise the added value of collaboration, thus giving rise to alliances and platforms which enable different parties to exchange information and expertise. Multinationals, NGOs and governments even teamed up during COP 21 in Paris to halt climate change. Sometimes alliances between partners from different societal domains evolve into new formal organisations. For instance, cooperation between NGOs and impoverished coffee farmers in the 1980s eventually led to the World Fair Trade Organisation (van den Hoff & Rozen, 2003; WFTO, 2016) which in turn sparked similar initiatives in which multinational enterprises participate. Incidental or structural cooperative initiatives like these evolve to serve common goals of the constituents such as product innovation, halting climate change, or providing a basic income.

This brings us to a third way of distinguishing organisations: by looking at their goals. Many organisations have a single principle goal, e.g. continuity of the firm or working at a societal cause. Organisations start to cooperate within the same domain when they recognise the added value of cooperation. The drive for this can be protection of the individual organisation's domains, giving rise to e.g. private cartels. However, cooperation may also be inspired by the aim to realise societal goals, e.g. in campaigns in which companies, NGOs and governments participate. In order to make the cooperation into an efficient process, these planned collaborations operate through a clear governance structure.

Which brings us to a fourth way in which we can distinguish organisations: by their governance structure. Different organisation structures provide different levels of freedom to choose a governance structure e.g. according board structure, membership rules, etc. For some organisations, their legal structure dictates the way they are governed. There are for instance differences in the formal governance structure of listed companies, cooperatives, and foundations.

Looking at the four previously mentioned ways of distinguishing organisations we observe both differences and similarities between hubs and other networking forms of organising:
(1) We can position hubs in between existing public, private and civil society organisations and networks, bridging the gap between societal and economic issues, and organising multiple value creation.
(2) Hubs are open, horizontal forms of organising to which collaboration and co-creation are key. Hubs provide a non-hierarchical structure in which public, private and civil society organisations all can participate as equals. Hubs are a constellation of both organisations and individual citizens that organise them-
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selves in order to collaborate around multiple wicked problems. Although for practical reasons hubs often resolve to existing formal and legal structures, their form of collective organising is relatively new to our western society. Consequently, hubs experiment with forms of organising.

(3) In addressing wicked problems, hubs are bound to address multiple short-term and long-term goals simultaneously. Constituents cooperate to realise both collaborative and individual goals.

(4) The fourth way in which hubs clearly distinguish themselves from existing forms follows out of the first three, namely experimental forms of governance. Positioned between organisations, being horizontal networking forms of organising, and addressing multiple goals of organising, all of which while still emerging as an organisational form, is already an indication that - currently - there is no prescribed governance model for hubs. Hubs experiment with forms of organising and consequently they experiment with forms of governance. Somewhere during this process hubs become intrinsic addressable entities, representing the joint constituents and their collaborative projects, aims and goals.

Hence, we argue that within existing forms of organising, hubs take position as new networking forms of organising. The emergence of hubs seems to follow out of developments that require a diversity of cooperating parties. This makes us question whether hubs could be the ‘glue’ that enables the realisation on a local or regional level of, e.g., sustainable energy facilities, food cooperatives, healthcare networks, or circular waste organisation. In other words: to realise multiple value creation by cooperation. In order to more precisely position hubs in the organisational landscape, we seek to understand what hubs are, how they are organised and governed, and what they do in the next section.

3. HUBS

We characterise hubs as thick networks driven by practitioners, shaped around multiple, wicked and interlinked problems, shared interests, and shared principles. Constituents in hubs realise new, cooperative, experimental, and innovative approaches to accumulate human, social, natural, physical, and financial capital, aiming to accomplish common goals and to co-create shared values. Co-creation of shared values necessitates new ways of horizontal, multi-party collaboration, leading to novel approaches towards issues like energy, care, mobility, waste, food, and wellbeing. A necessity that hubs apparently are more suitable to fulfill than traditional forms of organising. Consequently, hubs become drivers of local and regional transitions within the mentioned domains.

Hubs represent a new development in a networking economy in which new opinions regarding organisations and entrepreneurship emerge (Jonker, 2012). At first glance the appearance of hubs seems similar to existing collective forms of organising and many hubs adopt an existing legal status, such as a cooperative or an assembly. Reasons for this are mainly practical. In many cases, an organisational or legal form is required to structure, direct and coordinate certain projects and processes, and to acquire resources e.g., through loans or subsidies. However, the adoption of certain legal form does not level hubs with existing forms of organising such as cooperatives of associations.

The apparent need for hubs to formally organise themselves using traditional structures that are bound by the legislation of the country in which they come into existence raises two questions. First, do hubs differ from existing forms of organising, and if so, how? Second, what similarities with existing forms of organising are distinguishable?

Constituents in hubs recognise a common need for change and respond to this with an issue-related approach. Any individual or organisation is able to initiate a hub. The initiators of a hub aim at developing solutions to shared problems and in some cases even to gain collective control over local and regional resources. Depending on the local or regional setting and the scope of the issues addressed, a variety of local and regional organisations and individuals participate in a hub.

Based on the recognition of mutual shared ideas and values, constituents in hubs perceive collaboration as a logical solution amidst many other forms of organising, Jonker (2012) indicates that hubs thrive within a networking economy in which new opinions regarding organisations and entrepreneurship emerge. Gradually, they become recognised as possible drivers of transition by governments (European Commission, 2010, 2014). Local, regional and national governments are initiating, facilitating and even participating in hubs (Kennisprogramma Duurzaam Door, 2013; Provincie Limburg, 2015).

3.1. Seven properties for hubs

Taking the abovementioned characteristics into account, we propose seven properties that are helpful in distinguishing hubs from other networking forms of organising. These properties are an elaboration of the seven properties that have been developed by Faber and Jonker (2015).

(i) Operating in a local or regional setting;
(ii) addressing wicked problems;
(iii) leading to a broad configuration of constituents;
(iv) engaging in multiple value creating activities;
(v) shaped organisationally in an unconventional way;
(vi) issue-related approach;
(vii) leading to a transition over time.

Below we elaborate briefly on all these properties.

(i) Operating in a local or regional level. It appears that most hubs are created on a local or regional level at which constituents know each other and physical meetings are relatively easy to organise. Given the growth and use of digital communication platforms, communities can be driven by social digital networks that materialise in local initiatives.

(ii) Wicked problems. Hubs address complex interlinked problems for which no clearly defined answer is suitable. Problems with a wicked nature seem to be characteristic of our time, for we live in an interconnected world. In operations under specific institutional constraint that have created the current wicked problems, it will be easier for people to develop a form of collaboration.

(iii) Multiple constituents. A distinct difference between hubs and other networking forms of organising is the broad array of constituents. Public institutions, private enterprises, NGOs and citizens’ initiatives can all participate in, and for that matter initiate, a hub. Together they create a network between already existing local or regional networks, enabling them to cooperate to address common needs and aims.

(iv) Multiple value creation. In the development of a hub, multiple constituents provide a diverse set of resources like time, energy, money, knowledge, network and other forms of ‘investment’. Cooperation takes shape around a common perception of social, ecological and economic values. The constituents invest but they also share all these means and the results of their common endeavour. This leads to multiple, collective, and shared value creation, using and sharing resources and results in a reciprocal and complementary manner. People and organisations recognise the added value of cooperation, not only for themselves but also for collaborative goals.

(v) New and unconventional ways of organising. Hubs are non-hierarchical, horizontal forms of organising that do not operate on the basis of a clear postulated structure. While forming a hub, constituents discover in practice what is needed in order to organise and govern their activities in practice. KAMM, FABER and JONKER (2015) notice that a multitude of constituents forming a horizontal form of organising bring a multitude of views on how to realise an organisational form that encapsulates shared values and common goals.

The three regional networking forms of organising we discuss below are considered to be hubs. All three have been established within the past five years. All three fit the characteristics of a hub we mentioned above: they are thick networks, initiated by practitioners cooperating to realise multiple value-creating projects. All three fit our proposed seven properties, yet differ in scope and organisational structure. Each of these hubs comes with an own set of targets, organisational and governmental challenges which we elaborate on below.

4. Three HUBS in practice

We can observe hubs emerging and developing in different regions, formed by different constituents around different issues. In this section we illustrate the application of the seven properties that define hubs with three empirical examples. These are examples of forms of organising that seem to operate on a different premise than any known form of organising. KAMM, FABER and JONKER (2015) notice that a multitude of constituents forming a horizontal form of organising bring a multitude of views on how to realise an organisational form that encapsulates shared values and common goals.

4.1. Hubs in practice

We give a brief description of each hub, based on information that is accessible through its website. Table 1 provides an overview of the three examples related to all seven properties. We elaborate on this by explaining how the hubs relate to the properties.
4.1. Gloei Peel en Maas

Gloei Peel en Maas (Gloei Peel en Maas, 2016) is a networking organisation that operates in the southern provinces of the Netherlands. Gloei was initiated in 2011 when the local government was actively seeking partners to develop collaborative projects that address the transformation of waste treatment and renewable energy. A broad multi-party movement developed, facilitated by the local government, in which a diversity of constituents participates. Constituents are actively involved in selecting issues and goals that are subsequently addressed by different working groups, varying from pilots with reuse and recycling of waste to making existing buildings sustainable, regional food production and a discussion on the benefits of basic income. Although the local government of Peel en Maas takes the role as facilitator, Gloei ownership lies with its constituents.

4.1.2. Organic Vallée

Organic Vallée (Organic Vallée, 2016) is a French cooperative situated in the Lauragais area, southeast of Toulouse. Organic Vallée was initiated in 2014 by a local entrepreneur. He is the owner of a recycling plant that was established in 2003. Organic Vallée aims at (re)organising agricultural activities in the region according to the principles of the circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation & McKinsey Center for Business and Environment, 2015). To realise this regional circular economy, a cooperative project has been initiated unifying a broad constituency of different regional actors. Organic Vallée has the ambition to eventually establish a connection with the nearby metropolitan area of Toulouse, both by manufacturing organic waste from Toulouse and delivering organic products to the city.

4.1.3. Noorden Duurzaam

Noorden Duurzaam (Vereniging Noorden Duurzaam, 2016) was established in 2013 as a platform for initiatives in the North of the Netherlands that contribute to sustainable development. Noorden Duurzaam provides a context and a structure for organisations and individuals who want to organise cooperation around issues related to sustainable development. Members can participate in ‘transition tables’ that are formed around themes, industries, value chains, or regions. Transition tables are intended to initiate various sustainability projects. Noorden Duurzaam also initiates platforms and is developing a services centre for different sustainability networks in the region. Noorden Duurzaam positions itself as a facilitator for organisations and individuals that are willing to invest in a sustainable, regional economy and society, to support all members, to stimulate cooperation, and to be a platform for cooperative activities.

4.2. Three hubs in seven properties

Table 1: seven properties of three hubs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local / regional</th>
<th>Gloei</th>
<th>Organic Vallée</th>
<th>Noorden Duurzaam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipality of Peel en Maas and surrounding regions (Netherlands)</td>
<td>Région Lauragais (France)</td>
<td>Provinces of Frysian, Drenthe, Groningen (Netherlands)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicked problems</td>
<td>Local economy, social cohesion, quality of life, sustainability, active involvement of civilians in governance</td>
<td>Regional circular economy, closing agricultural production loops, employment, education</td>
<td>Accelerating sustainable development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituents</td>
<td>Individuals, civil society, entrepreneurs, educational institutes, government</td>
<td>Local and regional entrepreneurs, associations, communities, civilians</td>
<td>Individuals, organisations (profit and non-profit) organisations, governmental bodies, institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Value Focus</td>
<td>Constituents participate in revolving projects: they all share the economical, ecological and/or social benefits</td>
<td>Complementary projects that have a clear economical, ecological and social impact</td>
<td>Impact of projects is enhanced by connecting them, thus addressing different and multiple values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconventional organisation</td>
<td>Social cooperative, revolving projects</td>
<td>Société Coopérative d'Intérêt Collectif (SCIC)**</td>
<td>Association organised around transition tables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues</td>
<td>Waste, energy, agriculture, housing, employment</td>
<td>Establishing regional circular economy</td>
<td>Sustainable development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition over time</td>
<td>Timeline stretches to 2020</td>
<td>Development and implementation of major projects has just started</td>
<td>Ongoing development of icon projects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** The Société Coopérative d'Intérêt Collectif (SCIC) is a specific legal form in France. It is much like a cooperation with the distinction that the SCIC allows the participation of citizens, local authorities, NGOs, etc. simultaneously.
Below we elaborate on how the three hubs relate to the seven properties.

(i) Operating in a local or regional setting:
Gloei operates from the municipality Peel en Maas. Work groups and projects stretch out to neighbouring municipalities, the province of Limburg, and even reach across the (Euregion) border. Organic Vallée is aiming for a transition of the Laar- gais region. Noorden Duurzaam has members in the Dutch provinces of Fryslan, Groningen and Drenthe, aiming to initiate a transformation towards sustainable development within these provinces.

(ii) Addressing wicked problems:
Gloei positions itself as a networking structure that initiates, facilitates and supports projects. Current projects certainly tackle ‘wicked’, multi-layered themes, including innovative recycling of organic and non-organic waste, sustainable housing projects, realisation of a sustainable municipality house and discussions on social innovation.

In aiming to become the first ‘circular region’ in France, Organic Vallée also clearly addresses wicked and interrelated problems: providing regional and clean energy sources, a change from regular to organic farming, new jobs. Noorden Duurzaam aims at facilitating and connecting organisations and individuals that invest in realising a sustainable regional economy. This involves multiple parties addressing major, interconnected projects that differ in levels of complexity.

(iii) Leading to a broad configuration of constituents:
Within Gloei entrepreneurs, institutions, civil society, companies, governmental bodies and individual citizens participate equally, in diverse configurations, in working groups. Organic Vallée is a ‘territorial cluster for economic cooperation’ (Pôle Territorial de Coopération Économique; PTCE) in which communities, associations, local (agricultural) entrepreneurs, companies interested in corporate social responsibility, and civilians participate. Members of Noorden Duurzaam are companies, governments, NGOs, professionals, citizens, and students.

(iv) Engaging in multiple value creating activities:
Gloei positions itself clearly as a mediator and connector between concrete and innovative sustainability projects, aiming for social cohesion. Projects are explicitly directed at connecting social, ecological and economical value. Organic Vallée aims at creating a synergy between agriculture, waste management, sustainable energy, regional economy and education. Noorden Duurzaam refers to the definition of sustainable development in Our Common Future (Brundtland, 1987). Depending on the topic and the level of complexity different constellations can congregate, exchange and initiate activities, and projects around identified issues. Participants prioritise issues through a voting system, resulting in various multiple value-creating activities and projects.

(v) Shaped organisationally in an unconventional way:
Gloei started out as an informal network and became a social cooperation in 2013. Members of the cooperation contribute by facilitating activities and/or investing time, knowledge or network on behalf of the working groups and projects. Gloei advocates a project approach with revolving revenue of both financial and societal investments and experiments with impact reporting. During monthly meetings called ‘Gloeihubs’ anyone can present or suggest new topics or ideas and look for inspiration, support and network to take these to a next level.

Organic Vallée is a ‘Société Coopérative d’Intérêt Collectif (SCIC), a legal organisational form unique to France that allows a collective, entrepreneurial approach in which different constituents, including civilian members, can be involved. The SCIC is a recently (2001) established legal form that uniquely exists in France.

Noorden Duurzaam is an association that provides a unique, well-elaborated, organisational structure to its members. By providing an organisational context it enables cooperation, exchange and upscaling of projects. This is facilitated in a structure of ‘transition tables’, organised in different levels. 1) Theme tables discuss a theme or topic. Anyone who can contribute to a theme related to a sustainability issue can participate 2) ‘Sector tables’ unite constituents that operate in a single industry (e.g. automotive, building); companies, organisations and consumers. Sector tables address issues that are central to an industry. 3) ‘Chain tables’ address issues in a geographical area related to a specific value chain. They are formed by parties that are part of a value chain and connect ‘theme tables’ and ‘sector tables’. 4) ‘Regional tables’ address region-related sustainability issues. They connect ‘theme tables’, ‘sector tables’, ‘chain tables’, government and regional organisations.

(vi) Issue-related approach:
Gloei’s activities are organised in multi-disciplinary working groups that form around, and aim to connect, major issues like energy transition, waste management and social innovation. Projects are directed at different scopes and some appear to be complementary. Some examples: a work group on ecological vegetable patches evolved into a foundation that provides information on healthy and ecological food, which in turn initiated community vegetable gardens. Currently a project is being worked out for an alternative, regional ‘energy coin’. Organic Vallée addresses major issues by realising and upscaling projects that are interconnected. For example, organic waste collected in the region is turned into compost that subsequently is used for organic farming. Regional organic products are used in amongst other things an organic bakery in which students

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are taught the trade. The ovens of the bakery are heated by energy resources produced from regional waste (wood pellets, bio gas). Establishing organic farming in the region means that resident farmers need training. A training facility already has been set up.

The transition table approach of Noorden Duurzaam is related to issues by design. Tables have an advocacy function; they make an inventory of issues in their field and put these on the agenda of government, politics, media and involved sectors. Aside from this, transition tables form a platform that initiates issue-related projects. An example of this is a recent industry agreement on sustainable concrete production in the province of Fryslan. A third function of the tables is measuring impact of transition projects.

(vii) Leading to a transition:

Gloe's current timeline reaches out to 2020. In this they aim for the establishment of a self-managing community that operates in cooperation with the municipality. So far, Gloe has realised projects on waste management and employment. Some of these projects are currently active. The municipality of Peel en Maas is a member of CENSE, a network of European municipalities and non-profit organisations working together to capitalise on the successful experiences in the field of environment and of circular economy. Gloe actively participates in this program.

OrganicVallee has only recently been established and aims at a transition to a circular regional economy in the years to come. Some major projects have been established already, amongst which (i) a co-working office for entrepreneurs in the region with an interest in Circular Economy, (ii) a solar powered plant for processing waste wood to fuel pellets and insect fare, (iii) a compost plant, and (iv) an organic farm. Currently a bio gas installation is being established. With these projects OrganicVallee aims at providing sustainable energy sources to the Laura-gais region.

Noorden Duurzaam clearly positions itself as a platform that initiates and supports the up-scaling of multiple short-term and long-range transition projects. By measuring the impact of transition projects, the organisation can monitor progress.

In summary, Gloe, OrganicVallee and Noorden Duurzaam are three examples of hubs that match our proposed seven properties. All three address major issues that can be linked to regional transition to sustainability by cooperation and multiple value creation. However, there are differences in organisational form, legal form and governance of the hubs. To us hubs prove to be interesting breeding grounds for new forms of organising. A more profound understanding of hubs is required in order to understand both differences and similarities in hubs. This will, eventually, help us to understand how hubs enable value creation through collaboration.

5. Conclusion and discussion

There is a demand for multiple value-creating forms of organising that are able to address wicked problems related to sustainability issues. Existing, known forms of organising do not fit this demand and are not suitably equipped to accommodate interaction between heterogeneous groups of constituents.

Hubs provide a manner of collective organising that enables simultaneously addressing some, if not many, of the societal, organisational, and economic issues of our time. Our proposed seven properties present hubs as forms of organising that are exceptionally suitable to deal with complex, wicked problems related to sustainability. However, we are only beginning to recognise hubs and the phenomenon requires further investigation.

In relating the seven properties of hubs to three existing hubs we can observe some additional, interesting characteristics.

All three hubs facilitate cooperation between the social and the economic domain while simultaneously actively encouraging multiple value creation. Furthermore, all three hubs have an open, dynamic structure, based, to some extent, on horizontally organised decision making processes. Constituents are actively encouraged to participate on the basis of equality. All constituents can introduce new issues, topics, and ideas and are addressed according to their competencies. Based on their knowledge, expertise, and network, constituents can participate in diverse projects. As all hubs engage in projects and programmes of various lengths and levels of complexity, constituents are bound to make plans that guide their collective actions. Therefore, we perceive hubs to be strategising forms of organising. We are eager to find out how constituents in hubs develop a collective strategy in action in future research.

Of course there are drawbacks. For one: hubs are still emerging and there simply are no good practices from which they can draw experience. Hubs address interrelated issues that have not been addressed successfully previously. They are learning by doing. When a hub engages in major projects, major commitments have to be secured. Not only in time, knowledge and network but also in facilitating an environment in which projects can root and develop. This requires not only a certain amount and variety of resources, but also a visionary approach of organisational structure, rules and regulations. Hubs evolve in an organisational, societal and legal environment that may, currently, act contradictory to this.
However novel the organisational form and however willing constituents in a hub invest time, knowledge, network, etc., hubs face financial challenges. Running an organisation, facilitating and maintaining a network, hosting a website and eventually realising some projects requires financial investment at some point. The organisational structure of Gloei is partly facilitated by the local government. Some projects are funded through the CEN-SE project by the Europe for Citizens Program (European Union, 2016). In Gloei, working groups initiate both small-scale and big projects aimed at different target groups (e.g., civilians, entrepreneurs, schools). Depending on the nature of the project, there will be additional funding available (e.g., entrepreneurs investing in a sustainable housing project) or funding has to be acquired through subsidies. While the transition tables of Noorden Duurzaam may initiate projects that are dependent on available private and/or government funding, the unique organisational structure of Organic Vallée makes it possible for both companies and individuals to invest financially in the hub, providing resources that can be invested immediately in extensive projects.

5.1. Researching hubs

All hubs we have identified have emerged in the past five years, aiming for long term transitions. It is too early to conclude whether their approaches will be successful. To us hubs are a promising new phenomenon, developing interesting approaches of local and regional transitions towards sustainability. We think a much more profound understanding of how hubs evolve and how they become organised is required. This is why we engage in developing a database of hubs in Europe. This database will serve as an empirical base for investigating a number of questions.

For one, we want to find out what stimulates the emergence of hubs, and how this can be recognised at an early stage. Aside from this we are interested in the strategising process that evolves in hubs in order to understand how hubs engage in purposeful actions.

Furthermore, we want to understand how constituents in hubs shape, realise and govern multiple value creation. Hubs’ approach of value creation partially relinquishes to hybrid asset management. While approaches such as time banking or community currencies are relatively well-known, governing multiple values from an asset management perspective is unfamiliar. It is even conceivable that a different paradigm is required for multi-value governance, i.e., a paradigm that is able to simultaneously address a wide variety of incomparable, irreducible, and incompatible values and resources (Faber & Jonker, 2015).

In order for us to be able to fundamentally reorganise and govern our society in a more sustainable matter, new forms of organising seem needed in which co-creation and multiple value creation are key. We aim to discover whether hubs lead the way.

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