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Can collective deliberation on work make it sustainable? The case of a French collective interest cooperative company

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Abstract. *This article analyses the merits of collective deliberation as a means of achieving ecological and social sustainability of work in enterprises. To this end, I examine the case of a French collective interest cooperative company working towards green transition objectives. This type of cooperative is premised on the participation of all stakeholders (producers, consumers, etc.) in collective deliberation on work. The article analyses the contributions and limits of "holacracy" as a method of organizing work to provide multiple spaces for collective deliberation. I find that the impact of collective deliberation on the sustainability of work depends on the stakeholders involved.*

Keywords: sustainable work, cooperative, SCIC, multi-stakeholder model, holacracy, organizational work, collective deliberation, democracy at work.

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1. Introduction

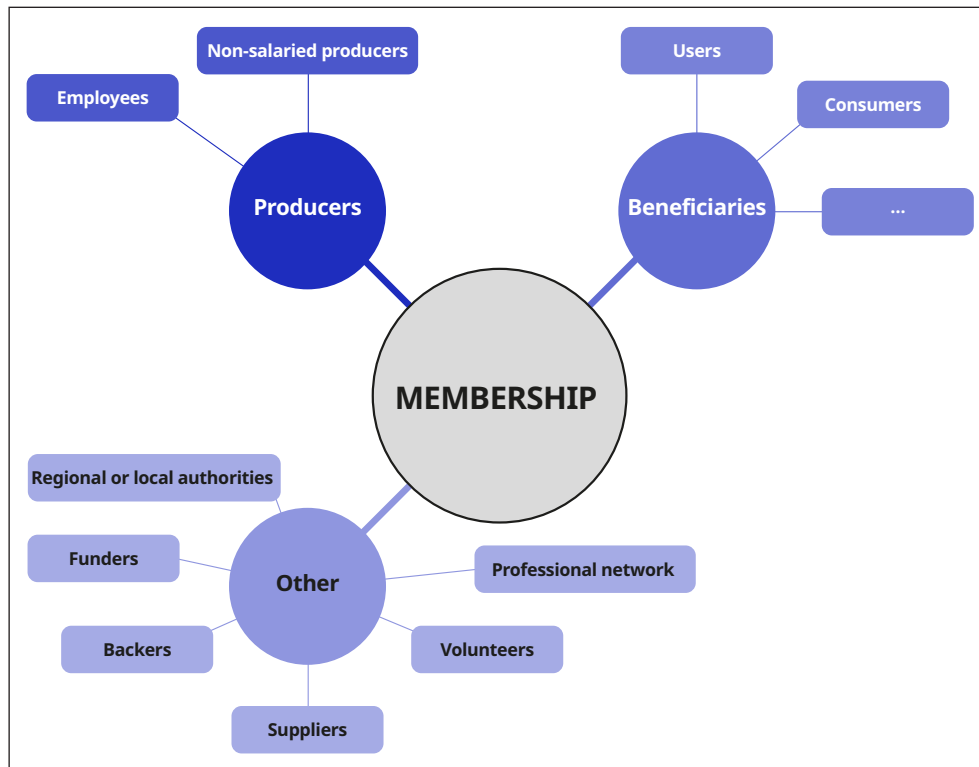
Although the concept of “sustainable work” may appear fitting for an evaluation of enterprises’ capacity to contribute to the green transition, it essentially remains unclear. Two main positions emerge from the literature on the subject. The first focuses on the *ecological dimension* of the sustainability of work, considering the consequences of work on the biophysical environment as a whole. Its proponents adopt a range of approaches, from defending work that maintains economic growth (Docherty, Kira and Shani 2009) to more radical approaches proposing to evaluate sustainability on the basis of quantitative data, in particular CO₂ emission rates (Hoffmann 2023). The second position highlights the *social dimension* of the sustainability of work. Its proponents argue that it is primarily the activity of work that must be sustainable. Accordingly, some authors put forward the idea that the ability to work should be preserved throughout workers’ lives (Kira, van Eijnatten and Balkin 2010; Barisi 2011; Eurofound 2021). Others go further, stressing the need for work that is adapted to human physiological characteristics and their development over time, which “allows for the development of efficient work strategies” and prevents work-life tensions (Gollac, Guyot and Volkoff 2008, 7–8). If these dimensions are understood as complementary (Herzog and Zimmermann 2025 – this Issue), sustainable work becomes a matter of organizing working conditions and a production process whose consequences harm neither workers nor the balance of ecosystems.

From a sociological perspective, one way of analysing the relationship between the ideal of sustainable work and the practical reality might be to consider enterprises’ organizational systems. Given that their implementation could affect the sustainability of work, their analysis sheds light on how such systems could promote this type of sustainability, but also on their potential limitations. This article considers the case of a collective interest cooperative company (SCIC – *société coopérative d'intérêt collectif*), which is a relatively recent corporate structure under French law.¹ Like traditional producer cooperatives, SCICs are collectively owned enterprises. Each of its members holds a minimum of one share in the cooperative, which is similar to holding shares in a traditional company except that, regardless of the number of shares held, each member theoretically² has the same general assembly voting rights as others under the “one person, one vote” principle. SCICs differ from other cooperatives in their “multi-stakeholder” structure.³ In other words, their membership includes various categories of stakeholders. Whereas producer cooperatives only allow employees to become members, the regulations on SCICs provide for categories of producers (employees or not), beneficiaries (users, consumers, etc.) and at least one third undefined category, which is generally made up of funders, backers or representatives of regional or local authorities (figure 1).

¹ Collective interest cooperative companies were introduced by Law No. 2001-624 of 17 July 2001, on various social, educational and cultural measures, and supplementing Law No. 47-1775 of 10 September 194, on statutes of cooperation.

² In practice, some cooperatives assign different weights to different categories of votes, which may or may not correspond to categories of members. This may mean giving greater weight to the votes of certain types of members, such as employees, when there are more members in one category than in others.

³ This “multi-stakeholder” configuration is not specific to French law. Structures with statutes similar to those of SCICs can be found in Belgium (*sociétés à finalité sociale*), in Quebec, Canada (*coopératives de solidarité*), in Italy (*cooperative sociali*), in Portugal (*cooperativa de solidariedade social*) and in the United Kingdom (community interest companies).

Figure 1. Member categories generally found in multi-stakeholder SCICs

Source: <https://www.les-scic.coop/presentation> (accessed 4 July 2024).

As cooperatives, SCICs are part of the “cooperative identity” promoted by the international cooperative movement. This cooperative identity comprises a number of principles,⁴ including two ideas that can be related to sustainable work. The first is that cooperatives should provide education and training for their members so that they can contribute to the management of the enterprise. The second is that members must favour forms of production that are consistent with sustainable development objectives. Through these principles, the cooperative identity appears to provide a structure that promotes both the social and the ecological sustainability of work.⁵ This also seems to be confirmed by various studies that find that cooperatives offer better quality of employment and work than traditional enterprises (Richez-Battesti, Petrella and Melnik 2011; Chorum 2020) and that they contribute to the implementation of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (Lafont, Saura and Ribeiro-Soriano 2023).

This article is based on the hypothesis that the multi-stakeholder structure of SCICs offers a favourable context for the social and ecological sustainability of work in that, by introducing a mode of governance⁶ that is designed to take the interests of all stakeholders into consideration, it should then be possible to meet needs, identify problems and define solutions not only throughout the production chain but also up- and downstream. I

⁴ For more information about these principles, see the website of the International Cooperative Alliance. <https://ica.coop/fr/coop%C3%A9ratives/identite-cooperative> (accessed 5 December 2024).

⁵ Moreover, every five years, SCICs are required to submit to an audit of their compliance with the principles of the cooperative movement, known as the “cooperative review” (Conseil Supérieur de la Coopération 2021).

⁶ “Governance” should be understood as all actions that seek to regulate an organization.

test this hypothesis using a case study to analyse the mechanisms through which this multi-stakeholder structure operates and to determine whether and how they can be used to identify and address unsustainable work practices.

Given that cooperatives give each of their members a voice and see decision-making as a collective exercise, the analysis in this article focuses on the corporate decision-making process. In order to study the mechanisms of collective decision-making, two theoretical frameworks are combined: Gilbert de Terssac's theory of organizational work and Philippe Urfalino's theory of collective deliberation.

In line with Jean-Daniel Reynaud's theory of social control, which focuses on the production and reproduction of generic rules in organizations (Reynaud 1989), Gilbert de Terssac explains that all forms of organized work require "organizational work". The latter identifies ways in which generic rules of work are unfit for purpose and "devises effective solutions for problems caused by disruptions that undermine the regular course of production" (de Terssac 2011, 103). This organizational work is understood as comprising two phases in which generic rules are first adjusted to a specific situation, after which the workers are asked to validate the adjustment, producing new socialized rules through a process of collective deliberation.

According to Philippe Urfalino, collective deliberation involves organizing debates that enable the members of a group to exchange arguments based on practical reasoning, seeking to persuade one another about the form that rules should take. For such debates to be successful, the group needs to have reached a prior understanding on a metarule setting the boundaries for collective deliberation. This metarule makes a collective decision binding for the group (Urfalino 2021).

It is clear from these two theories that collective decisions are not spontaneous, but rather the outcome of a process that begins with the detection of a problem and leads to collective deliberation in order to decide upon the best way of resolving it. Taking the example of the multi-stakeholder cooperative SCIC model, I consider whether and how the different categories of members can take part in collective deliberation. To this end, I analyse a work organization model, known as the holacratic method, that is used to enable all stakeholders to participate in collective deliberation, promoting the distribution of authority and responsibility and levelling hierarchies. I will show how this method is applied in Enercoop Region, an SCIC that promotes ecological excellence in the production and sale of "green" energy.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. I begin, in the second section, by analysing how the members of this SCIC structured the governance of their enterprise by creating spaces for collective deliberation at each level of the organization and including all categories of members, whether or not they were paid employees of the SCIC. I then show how the choice of a holacratic method tends to mitigate the workplace stress that is created, in other contexts, by the absence of resources for organizational work. These results will then be contrasted with the demands of the holacratic organization of collective deliberation, especially in terms of time. Whether this is the time needed to adopt the method or for organizational work, I show that the method can generate social unsustainability through interpersonal tensions and excessive workloads.

In the third section, I examine the impact of the collective deliberation instrumentalized by the holacratic method on the ecological sustainability of the SCIC. First, I find that measures to mitigate the ecologically unsustainable effects of the enterprises' production process are determined through deliberation among employees. I then present the limits of a multi-stakeholder structure in terms of its impact on the ecological sustainability of work by showing how the collective deliberation of other member categories, through the SCIC's Board of Directors, has only a marginal effect in compensating for the ecologically unsustainable effects of work.

Field and method

This article draws on field research carried out in France from 2019 to 2022 in a member cooperative of the national Enercoop network. In addition to a so-called “national” SCIC based in the Paris region, this network is comprised of ten regional SCICs. The latter’s mission is to sell the services provided by the national cooperative, namely green energy, while promoting the development of local sites for renewable energy production.

The Enercoop network describes itself as representing “a unique model”,¹ supplying “100 per cent renewable” energy, that is, from solar, wind or hydraulic energy production sites.

The cooperative in this study, referred to as Enercoop Region, was created in 2013. Its Board of Directors is made up of some 15 people representing six categories of members: employees, shareholders, producers, consumers, partners and local or regional authorities. At the end of 2022, the cooperative had some 3,600 members spread across these six categories. The activity of the ten employees² of the SCIC was shared between providing assistance for civic green energy projects and marketing energy supply.

The analysis presented in this article is based on the data collected from the open observation of various types of meetings (see table 1). Nineteen in-depth interviews were recorded with members (see table 2) for an average of 1 hour and 30 minutes. The names of the people and places cited in the article have been modified to preserve their anonymity.

¹ See <https://www.enercoop.fr/> (accessed 4 July 2024).

² In addition to this team of employees on open-ended contracts and SCIC members, there were various employees on work-study programmes, interns and people on civil service contracts. They were not included in the analysis on account of their shorter working hours, their limited time in the enterprise and their distance with the cooperative’s members.

Table 1. Meetings observed between 19 November 2019 and 7 November 2022

Type of meeting observed	Number of meetings	Total observation time (hours)	Number of participants
Production	4	4	3–4
Supply	3	4.5	3–4
Administration	2	2	2
Coordination	5	8	4–5
Employee Team	4	14	9–10
Board of Directors	5	13	8–14

Table 2. Gender and role of Enercoop Region members interviewed

Gender	Women	9
	Men	10
Role in the enterprise	Directors	10
	Permanent employees	11
	Work-study employees	1

2. The contrasting effects of collective deliberation on the social sustainability of work

Most of the 3,600 members of Enercoop Region, 84 per cent of whom were clients and consumer group members, did not usually engage in collective deliberation on the work of the SCIC. The main opportunity for such engagement among members who were neither employees nor directors was the annual general assembly. However, in 2022, for example, only 28 per cent of members across all categories participated in voting.⁷ When compared with general assembly participation rates in cooperative banks – between 1.5 and 7 per cent (Caire and Nivoix 2012) –⁸ this is not insignificant. It nevertheless shows that only a small share of Enercoop Region members actively participated in the formal validation of the general rules governing the SCIC, setting the value of shares or allocating a budget to “compensatory allowances” for directors, for example. Moreover, most collective deliberation took place outside the general assembly, in bodies closed to members who were neither employees nor directors. It was mainly in the Board of Directors and in the employee working groups that decisions were taken and rules amended. The difference between these spaces and the general assembly was that they were primarily *working* spaces. The work carried out in them by employee and director members was not only more regular, but also received greater recognition, by means of fixed remuneration for employees and, in some cases, directors. It was also associated with greater responsibilities, such as the chairperson’s personal liability, the responsibilities of the members elected to the Board of Directors and employee responsibilities. It is therefore on these spaces of collective deliberation that I focus my analysis.

2.1. Avoiding workplace stress by allowing time for organizational work

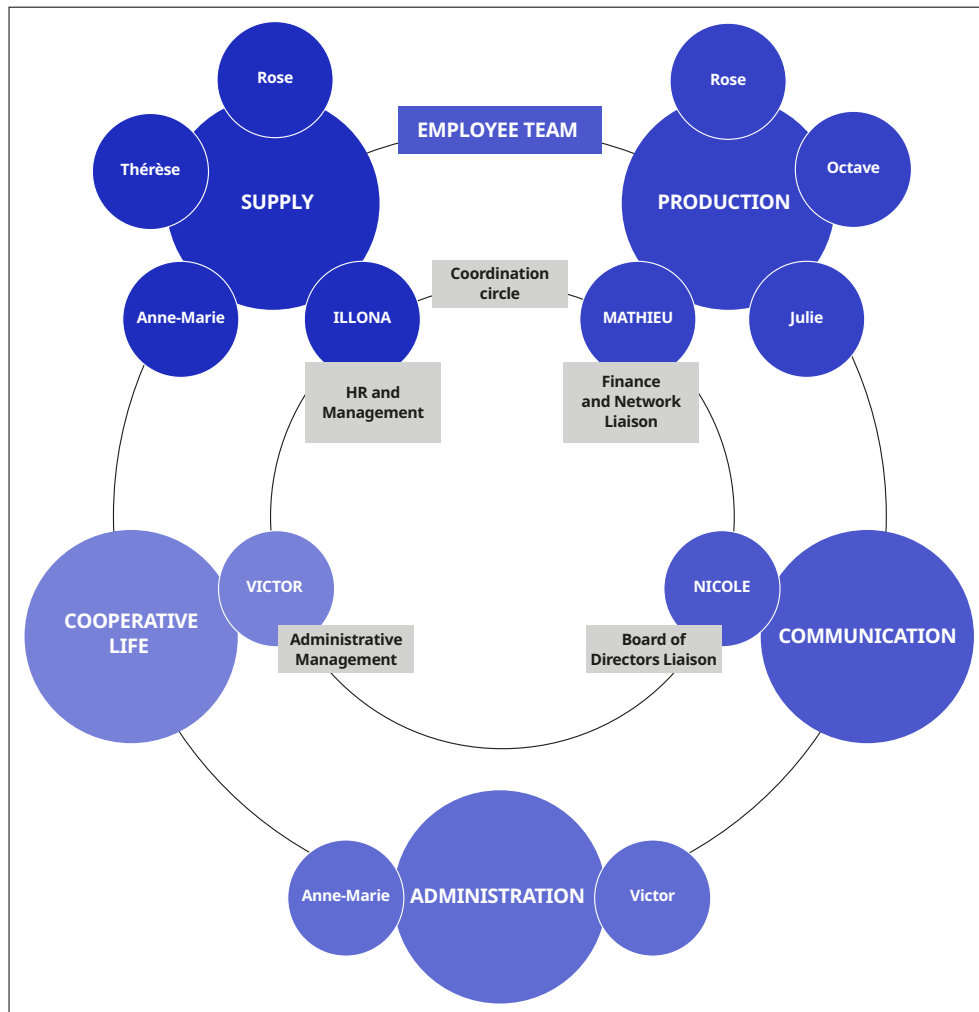
When Enercoop Region was created in 2013, the first employees sought to distance the organization of work from the traditional top-down hierarchical model, in line with Enercoop National’s practices. However, it was not until a few years later, as the number of employees increased, that it became clearly necessary to establish formal tools to consolidate this organizational structure. Starting in September 2019, the employees and the Board of Directors decided to request the assistance of a group of employees from the SCIC Enercoop National specialized in “shared governance”, and “holacratic” management in particular. The notion of holacracy,⁹ which is taken from the management studies literature (Robertson 2015), relates to a method for sharing responsibility and decision-making. This redistribution of authority seeks to promote self-organization, based on a model of management composed of “circles” with “double linking” between them through the participation of some members in more than one circle, thereby facilitating the circulation of information within the enterprise (Romme 1995).

In practice, this requires a move away from a vertical organizational management structure. Each circle is responsible for steering, performing and evaluating a specific task. The members of a circle enjoy relative autonomy and are responsible for their internal organization. Any management roles serve not only to manage circle members but also to provide a “double-link” between them and higher-level circles, enabling information to pass between the two.

⁷ The minutes of the Enercoop Region 2022 general assembly indicate that only 1,020 of the cooperatives’ 3,627 members at that time had voted. Participation had been even lower in the previous two years owing to the COVID-19 health crisis.

⁸ The average rate of participation in SCIC general assemblies would be a more informative reference, but this statistic is not currently available.

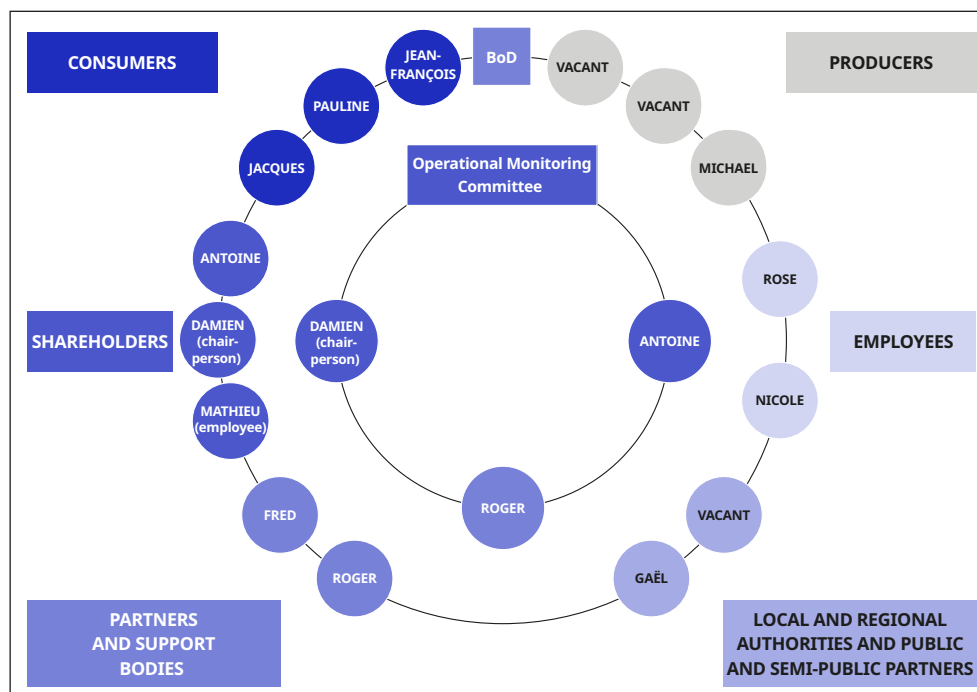
⁹ The people in the study did not use the term “holacracy” since they did not identify with all the aspects of this highly codified method.

Figure 2. The holacratic organization of Enercoop Region employees in 2022

Source: Adaptation of an organizational chart provided by the head of the Supply circle.

Enercoop Region had seven circles for employee members only: the Employee Team, Coordination, Administration, Supply, Production, Cooperative Life and Communication circles (see figure 2). The Production circle, for instance, was responsible for developing projects for renewable energy production sites, while the Supply circle was made up of the sales employees responsible for negotiating power purchase agreements and running a telephone helpline. The Cooperative Life and Communication circles, each of which had only one person assigned to them at the time of the study,¹⁰ were responsible for support activities such as organizing the general assembly, raising annual funds and communicating with members and the public. These four circles were directly connected, through their managers, with the Coordination circle, where responsibilities were shared out among those same managers. In this distribution, the manager of the Cooperative Life circle, which had been tasked with administrative management, ended up becoming a member of a sixth "Administration" circle. Lastly, all employees were part of the Employee Team circle.

¹⁰ As in all Enercoop Region's circles, the number of people in the Cooperative Life and Communication circles varied. New people were regularly recruited to them, under either short-term (internships, work-study contracts or civil service) or long-term contracts.

Figure 3. Holacratic organization of Enercoop Region directors in 2022

Note: BoD = Board of Directors.

Source: Own observations and interviews.

Each of these circles could organize itself with a certain level of autonomy. Their members regularly took collective decisions on both operational and organizational issues. The members of the Production circle, for example, took decisions about their respective workloads, the frequency of their meetings, the choice of which solar power plant sites to prospect and how to manage relations with local officials and opponents to their projects. Deliberation in the Coordination circle covered everything from the choice of events at which Enercoop Region should be represented to the management of human resources.

There were fewer circles for directors (see figure 3), if Enercoop Region is considered on its own.¹¹ Aside from the Board of Directors, which comprised the representatives of each SCIC member category and took strategic decisions concerning the enterprise's development, there was one other circle, the Operational Monitoring Committee, made up of only three members of the Board of Directors and tasked with helping the employee team prepare the agenda for the meetings of the Board of Directors.

Advocates of the holacratic work organization method highlight its potential for involving all stakeholders (Richard et al. 2020) in resolving problems within an enterprise (Autissier, Johnson and Moutot 2016). Some even see it as the means of promoting the goals of social sustainability (Archer, Forrester-Wilson and Muirhead 2016). Indeed, the most active members of SCICs (employees and directors) seem to be able, through their distribution across the circles, to contribute to different aspects of organizational work. As well as creating coherence in the implementation of the multi-stakeholder model in SCICs, holacracy avoids a well-documented source of social unsustainability in work: the creation of organizational work without providing adequate resources for it (Dujarier 2012, 173–177). By allowing dedicated time – at the various circle meetings – for organizational work, SCIC members create the conditions for its implementation. This would therefore allow them to

¹¹ The analysis could be extended to show that various directors participated in “network circles”. This was the case of Damien, a member of the “CODIR” committee, which comprised all the directors of the regional Enercoop network member SCICs.

avoid the health issues associated with organizational work (Clot 2013; de Terssac 2013) and promote a certain social sustainability in their work.

2.2. The unsustainable effects of collective deliberation on employees' work: Tensions and excessive workloads

There are, however, a number of factors that can make the holacratic method of collective deliberation detrimental to the social sustainability of work. First and foremost is its time-consuming nature. As noted by the sociologists Carine Ollivier and Sandrine Rospabé (2022), the implementation of the holacratic method and its adoption by the members of a cooperative can take a considerable amount of time. This was the case for Enercoop Region, where implementing the new organization of work required many adjustments, in particular among its employee members. From its introduction in 2019 and until 2022, the employees and the Board of Directors organized internal meetings and seminars and participated in various training sessions, provided by external suppliers, in order to allocate responsibilities and establish the remit of each circle. Although the method's advocates explicitly recognize the amount of time it requires, estimating that it takes approximately ten years for it to be fully accepted and operational (Ollivier and Rospabé 2022), the impact of this gradual integration on social sustainability has yet to be investigated. The impact takes two forms, increasing tensions between members and creating excessive workloads for certain employee members.

At the heart of the holacratic method is the notion of highlighting and resolving "tensions", understood as gaps between existing practice and the required standard. Within the theory of organizational work, "tensions" refer to stumbling blocks in the production process. Discussing these in the circles' collective deliberations should allow members to take existing "tensions" into account in their organizational work. However, the concept of "tension" may have initially been ambiguous for certain members in this case study:

I was pretty taken aback at first [...] to see that people were not at all nice to each other or respectful in their exchanges. There was a lot of aggression [due to] poorly implemented collective assessment methods. We were focused on "tensions", except that no one knew what a tension was. People were bringing huge grievances and accusations to the table. And it wasn't ... done in a non-aggressive way. (Illona, 35, manager of the Supply circle, interview on 20 May 2022)

The interpersonal difficulties created by the implementation of the holacratic method were not limited to ambiguity over the concept of "tension". The creation of new spaces and opportunities for expression also made it clear that the members needed training on non-violent forms of communication to put a stop to recurring conflicts. This came to a head in 2020 when Victor, who managed the Cooperative Life circle, expressed discontent and frustration – in a manner that his colleagues considered violent – at the gradual reduction in the activities related to his portfolio. After the outburst, he went on sick leave for several months. Over time, the members were able to overcome difficulties relating to communication about "tensions". After an experimental phase of approximately three years, they began to appreciate the value of the method. For Julie, for example, participating in the circles was one of the most meaningful aspects of her work, because it allowed her "to take a step back from her work, discuss practices with others – it's very enriching to be able to get to know others".¹² It is however reasonable to suppose that every new recruit required a certain adaptation period.

In addition to this adaptation period, time was needed for the organizational work required by the holacratic method. Indeed, as table 3 shows, given the busy schedule of meetings in the different circles, the employee members spent a considerable amount of their time managing tensions and deliberating over their resolution.

¹² Interview with Julie, 39, Enercoop Region employee, 25 October 2022.

Table 3. Frequency and duration of the meetings of the various Enercoop Region circles in 2022

Holacratic body (circles)	Frequency of meetings (monthly)	Duration of meetings (hrs)
Production and Administration	4	1:00
Supply	2	1:30
Coordination	1	1:30
Employee Team	1	3:00

Notes: The number of hours is based on the case study analysis and the reglementary frequency and duration of meetings, as indicated by Loïc (Director between 2018 and 2022) and by Illona (in charge of management from 2022 onwards). Observations of meetings confirmed that these frequencies and durations tended to be respected.

This table is, however, incomplete. It should include a number of irregular meetings, such as bilateral meetings between employee team members, meetings of ad hoc working groups and “network” meetings bringing employees into collaboration with their counterparts in other Enercoop network cooperatives. In addition, other meetings involved other members as well as employees. This was the case of the meetings of the Board of Directors and the Strategic Policy Committee (an offshoot of the Board of Directors), in which some employees participated. Lastly, the table does not capture the time spent preparing all these meetings and managing communications, especially online, between the members of the various circles. It nevertheless shows, for example, that Mathieu, who was in charge of the Production circle and was a member of the Coordination circle, the Board of Directors and the employee team, as well as managing relations with the network through CODIR (comprising the directors of all cooperatives in the Enercoop network) and the national production committee, spent 15 to 20 hours (12–15 per cent of his monthly working time) on organizational work. In the case of Julie, an employee involved in fewer circles (Production and Employee Team), organizational work took up over 5 per cent of her time every month. Within a holacratic system, therefore, a considerable amount of time is spent on the regulatory activity of organizational work.

The employee members considered that the time required for this organizational work was detrimental to their productivity. The members of the Coordination circle, in particular Mathieu and Victor, regularly complained at meetings that they did not have enough time for their job-specific tasks. Their attitudes to the problem differed, though. After the tense episode described above, Victor resigned himself, with a certain amount of resentment, to reducing his work on Enercoop Region’s cooperative life. For example, he stopped recruiting “ambassadors” – members that he trained to become local representatives of Enercoop’s business advocacy. It was harder for Mathieu to reduce his job-specific tasks within the Production circle. His work prospecting for new solar power plant sites, developing plant projects and negotiating with local stakeholders were all core activities for the SCIC. He therefore came “under pressure”¹³ and his organizational work regularly left him without enough time for his job-specific tasks. From their post-mortem evaluations of meetings, it was clear that the other employees were aware that low productivity was a risk. For many of them, an efficient meeting was one that covered a lot of ground without requiring follow-up meetings that would put further strain on their job-specific work.

Organizing work based on collective deliberation among the SCIC’s most active members, through the holacratic method, thus appears to have had contradictory effects in terms of the social sustainability of work. Whereas the method helped avoid certain problems at work by closely involving members in organizational work to address the tensions created by the production process, the time that it required could create interpersonal tensions and excessive workload, potentially leading to burnout.

¹³ Field journal extract. Observation made during a meeting of the Coordination circle, 25 October 2022.

3. Offsetting the ecological unsustainability of work

3.1. The central role of employees' collective deliberation in the ecological sustainability of their work

If the holacratic organization of collective deliberation can have contradictory effects on the social sustainability of work, what impact does it have on the ecological sustainability of SCICs? In order to test the hypothesis that members' contributions to collective decision-making from the upstream to the downstream of the production process can significantly affect the sustainability of the enterprise's work, I observe the different types of collective decisions taken by employee and director members concerning the construction of solar power plants in natural areas – a recurrent work situation.

Although the Enercoop network used various different sources of energy, the Enercoop Region SCIC concentrated its efforts on building ground-mounted solar panel plants. When working on large-scale projects, competition with other major operators forced the SCIC to limit its site research criteria, which had an impact on its ecological sustainability. Indeed, although the prospecting team tried to limit the impact on biodiversity by prioritizing previously anthropized areas for the construction of new solar power plants, they generally had to use natural spaces owing to the difficulty of winning bids with anthropized areas. Given that Enercoop network's economic and political mission had an ecological dimension, it might be expected that the final decision on construction sites would fall to the circle responsible for strategy – the Board of Directors. However, this was not the case. Once the Production circle had selected a site and was preparing to prospect and contact local stakeholders, it did inform the Board of Directors but they were not directly involved in the selection. It was not until later, when the project's evaluation process was sufficiently advanced and funding needed to be secured, that the Production circle presented a detailed proposal to the Board of Directors, which would deliberate before issuing an opinion or recommendations. The members of the Board of Directors were therefore not able to decide collectively on the choice of site, only the Production circle employees. And even though the Board of Directors could in theory oppose the choice of site at the end of the process, in practice this never happened as the project was at such an advanced stage that most criticisms had already been dealt with by the Production circle. The latter moreover regularly informed the Board of Directors of its progress.

One of the main reasons why the choice of site could not be put to multi-stakeholder collective deliberation was that, at the Production circle employees' own admission, these sites were "hard to find"¹⁴ and, once selected, many remaining obstacles meant that there was nothing to guarantee that the project would go ahead. The cooperative still had to convince the local authorities or the site's private owners of the benefits of a partnership, conduct studies prior to applying for planning permission, and persuade inhabitants that the project would have no adverse effects on the landscape, their health or local biodiversity. Because of all these hurdles, these projects generally only saw the light of day after three to five years of development. It was during this development stage that the consequences – generally negative in terms of ecological sustainability – of the choice of site could be offset based on a series of collective deliberations.

The first of these deliberations had to identify measures and policies to *compensate* for the unsustainable effects of choosing a site in a natural area. This collective deliberation stage was, again, conducted in the Production circle. It can be illustrated by one of the "flagship projects" conducted by Enercoop Region at the beginning of the 2020s in the municipality of Pondrolles. The project came up against considerable resistance when various groups of residents filed a joint appeal against the planning permission. In such cases, the Production circle employees had to take a number of collective decisions. In this case, they first decided to refer back to a consultation conducted prior to the project's

¹⁴ Extract of a message published by Mathieu on *Village*, the social network for Enercoop members, on 18 October 2022.

launch, which had involved experts, elected officials and also residents. The assessments by the State's public investigator and experts had led to changes in the initial project, particularly concerning its effects on the landscape. The employees used these processes to strengthen their arguments in favour of the project in discussions with local officials and in a public meeting that they organized at the site, expecting the project's opponents to attend. Their case was based on the degree of the projects' ecological sustainability in terms of its impact on biodiversity. Mathieu, who headed the Production circle, thought that, although the site was on natural (non-anthropized) land, "[the Enercoop employees] were in a good position"¹⁵ as it did not have a thriving biodiversity. The soil, he said, was too "poor to grow anything apart from Scots pine".¹⁶ His colleague Julie explained that the species "colonized any unused space", pushing out endemic species like larch and beech to cover some 80 per cent of the municipality. Developing the project on the site would have an impact on the local vegetation in that the pine forest would have to be cut down, but it would not have a significant impact on biodiversity since the forest offered little plant diversity. Another argument was that the project included a package of "offsetting" measures, committing the builders to planting endemic species on other plots of land in order to "recover [...] endangered" forests.¹⁷ Mathieu was therefore confident, stating that "we are still carbon negative, even when we factor in cutting down the forest". Since the Production circle employees were satisfied that they had offset the negative consequences of the site's location by taking compensatory measures, they just needed to wait for the appeals filed by the project's opponents to be processed. Mathieu explained to the Board of Directors that the opponents' arguments did not "hold water" and that the team members had simply decided to wait for the courts to rule in their favour.

The employees were therefore well aware of the direct environmental impact of their work to build solar power plants, but they justified it by presenting countermeasures which they thought ensured that the positive effects of their actions would outweigh any direct negative impact. But what about the indirect impact of their production on the environment?

This brings us to the second type of collective deliberation involved in the efforts to offset the ecologically unsustainable effects of this type of work. It was again in the Production circle that collective deliberation took place regarding the carbon footprint of the SCIC's supply chain. The employees considered that the supply chain was based on a division of labour that, in practice, blinded them to the production process of the solar panels. These were assembled by other companies, using materials extracted and refined by other third parties and, even though they were placed on the market in France, their production might imply transporting parts internationally. Calculating the carbon footprint of these operations was not easy, but this did not mean that the employees ignored it. Julie explained that the decision on the origin of the panels had been taken in a circle meeting:

A proposal was adopted to opt systematically for panels assembled in France, up to a certain profitability threshold, of ... 4 per cent. Using Chinese panels became an option when the project fell below that. (Julie, 39, Production circle member, interview on 25 October 2022)

On this basis, priority was given to panels assembled in France to avoid transporting them from China – despite this being cheaper – thereby limiting the carbon footprint of production. Choosing to limit the environmental impact of production to the detriment of the purchase price reflects a commitment to coherence with the SCIC's values and objectives. But this commitment had its limits: the enterprise would have run into trouble if it had insisted on buying the panels in France below a certain profitability threshold. The circle thus collectively decided that Chinese prices could be considered in those cases. The objective of sustainable work has to contend with the economic difficulties specific to SCICs, which are obliged to reconcile their activist agendas with the financial viability of their products (Smith, Gonin and Besharov 2013; Demazière, Horn and Zune

¹⁵ Field journal extract. Observation of a meeting of the Coordination circle, 24 May 2022.

¹⁶ Field journal extract. Observation of a meeting of the Board of Directors, 24 May 2022.

¹⁷ Field journal extract. Observation of a meeting of the Board of Directors, 24 May 2022.

2013; Deville and Mourey 2018; Wagner 2022), sometimes requiring them to compromise on their ecological values.

3.2. The limited role of the multi-stakeholder model in offsetting the effects of ecological unsustainability

The previous example seems to indicate that, when there was a choice to make between the values and objectives of the enterprise and its economic survival, the decision fell only to the members of the employee circles. In some situations, however, the collective decision did fall to all the members of the SCIC.

This was the case at the beginning of 2022 when the question of resorting to the Regulated Access to Incumbent Nuclear Electricity (ARENH in its French acronym) was raised. This mechanism requires the incumbent energy operator in France, EDF, to sell operators a fixed volume of its production (mainly generated by nuclear power plants) at a fixed rate of €42 per megawatt hour (MWh). Since its creation, the Enercoop network had refused the ARENH. Although it would have allowed it to reduce its costs, it was not in line with the network's values or its position on the market as the only company offering 100 per cent renewable energy. By selling the MWh at €50–60, Enercoop could break even without having to use nuclear energy. However, the rise in prices at the end of 2021 brought the rate up to €300 per MWh. There was a risk that, if presented to all the members too abruptly and without contextualization, the networks' proposal to request the ARENH would be rejected outright, seen as a form of betrayal of the initial project. In reality, though, Enercoop had been buying energy from other producers for a long time. This energy was not necessarily renewable, but it was not meant for use. It provided "market hedging" to smooth supply costs over a period of three years, acting as an insurance against market volatility. In the context of rising markets, recourse to the ARENH could be proposed on a one-off basis and as part of this market hedging policy: by buying low-cost energy from EDF, Enercoop would create a buffer against the energy crisis. According to Damien, the (non-salaried) Chairperson of Enercoop Region, the stakes were high: "Without the ARENH, we would have to increase our prices considerably and we would lose our investment capacity. The ARENH would allow us to stabilize our rates and continue investing".¹⁸

In order to put the question to a collective decision, a major consultation process was conducted throughout the network. Before taking a decision on the use of the ARENH, the national Board of Directors, which had the final say on the matter, received the individual decisions of each of the regional Board of Directors. The Board of Directors of Enercoop Region could not conceive of taking such a decision without involving all the SCIC members. For this reason, a working group was created and led by Victor, as the person responsible for cooperative life matters. Two online meetings were held with 16 volunteer members. The issues were explained by four members of the Board of Directors, including one employee. After their meetings, the working group members produced a reasoned memorandum in favour of using the ARENH, but on certain conditions: among others, that Enercoop conduct advocacy on the green transition and make efforts to achieve independence from the market. On the basis of this memorandum, the Board of Directors held a collective deliberation that resulted in support for the working group's proposals – and thus for the ARENH – adding further conditions. This decision was sent to the Enercoop National Board of Directors, which a few weeks later decided to apply for the ARENH.

This example shows that just because all the members, including director and non-director members, could contribute to the SCIC's collective decision-making, did not mean that their contribution had any real impact on the ecological sustainability of the enterprise's work. Indeed, whatever the decision had been regarding the ARENH, it would not have affected the SCIC's ecological sustainability since the practice of market hedging predated the energy crisis. Ultimately, this was not about taking a decision that would impact the enterprise's ecological sustainability. By garnering the support

¹⁸ Field journal extract. Meeting of the Board of Directors of Enercoop Region, 24 May 2022.

of as many of the members as possible, the network was mainly concerned with its public image. This explains the intense cross-network communication campaign on the subject, and the considerable amount of time spent by SCIC employees and directors to explain the complexities of market hedging to the working group members, to the participants in the general assembly and to the users of the Enercoop members' social network. By consulting all the regional SCICs and harnessing their efforts to explain the issues involved in using the ARENH to all their members, the Enercoop National Board of Directors legitimized a decision that it intended to take anyway.

In sum, collective deliberation was indeed used by the members of the SCIC in their efforts to achieve, if not the ecological sustainability of their work, at least forms of compensation or mitigation of the unsustainable effects of their activities. There was no real benefit to the multi-stakeholder dimension of the cooperative since, aside from being able to express their opinions and provide recommendations (e.g. regarding an exploitation site or recourse to the ARENH), the director circle did not seem to share the employee circles' capacity to make collective decisions on the enterprise's sustainability thresholds – that is, the margins within which the enterprise's economic survival could be reconciled with its overall ecological objectives.

4. Conclusion

This article has analysed the effects of using collective deliberation in an SCIC on the social and ecological sustainability of its work. By adopting the holacratic method of collective deliberation among the most active members – both employee and non-salaried members – all the stakeholders in the enterprise were involved in discussing collective rules. However, I find that the impact of these methods on the sustainability of work in the enterprise varied and was limited, not all SCIC stakeholders having the same role.

The case study shows that the impacts of collective deliberation on the social dimension of the sustainability of work vary. While avoiding certain forms of workplace stress, in particular relating to reduced involvement in organizational work, running an enterprise according to holacratic principles can result in two forms of unsustainability at work: interpersonal tensions and excessive workloads that risk causing burnout. The fact that these impacts also differ across member categories – employees were those most concerned by the negative effects of the time-consuming nature of the implementation of the holacratic method – adds a further layer of complexity to the varying effects of collective deliberation on the social sustainability of work.

The case study also shows that the effects of collective deliberation on the ecological sustainability of work cannot be summed up in simple terms. The members interviewed were aware of the negative ecological impact of their work and their deliberations mainly sought to compensate for those negative effects by trying to balance the enterprise's economic difficulties with its ecological objectives. The analysis indicates that deliberations on the sustainability thresholds beyond which compensation was no longer viable were mainly conducted among employee members, and that the other member categories were only marginally involved.

The initial hypothesis is therefore only partially proven. Extending collective deliberation to all stakeholders in the enterprise seems to have been generally positive for the social sustainability of the work of non-salaried members. However, the latter did not seem to have a significant role in identifying, discussing and resolving problems linked to the enterprise's ecological sustainability. The employees' perspectives on collective deliberation showed that the ecological dimension of work in this enterprise was not understood as an achievable objective, but rather as a process of constant juggling between maximum thresholds of ecological and economic unsustainability. Collective deliberation was the means of setting those thresholds.

Not all SCICs conduct their multi-stakeholder collective deliberation in this way. In some SCICs the employee team takes precedence over all other categories of members, who do not contribute as much, or at all, to collective deliberation. Other SCICs do not follow the holacratic method and their employees are not engaged in constant deliberations. In the absence of any standardized practice in SCICs, the observations in this article cannot be generalized to this business model as a whole.¹⁹ My analysis nevertheless highlights the potential benefits and risks linked to the use of collective deliberation mechanisms involving all stakeholders in the production process.

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¹⁹ The small number of employees in the SCIC in this case study, though representative of the average in this type of enterprise, did not allow me to observe certain other limits to the introduction of holacracy, different employee reactions to this type of method (Bonnemaizon and Béji-Bécheur 2018) and its potential negative effects on social dialogue (Ollivier and Rospabé 2022).

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