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Special Issue title:

**Governance of Inter-organizational Networks for
Sustainability in the Digital Era**

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1. Introduction to the Special Issue

In an era marked by escalating global challenges such as climate change and resource depletion, organizations are increasingly required to collaborate beyond their traditional boundaries (Hanelt et al., 2021; Yaqub et al., 2024). The global imperative for sustainability, including environmental protection, social equity, and responsible resource use (George et al., 2016), is rarely achievable by single organizations acting alone (Westerlund & Rajala, 2010). Instead, sustainability depends on complex inter-organizational relationships, encompassing both dyadic and networked forms of collaboration across public, private, and civil society sectors. Where appropriate, we distinguish inter-organizational networks (IONs) as more structured, multi-actor configurations that entail distinct governance mechanisms and coordination challenges (Grandori & Soda, 1995; Kivimaa & Rogge, 2022; Provan & Kenis, 2008; Provan et al., 2007). Such networks demand robust, adaptive, and multi-level collaborative arrangements that can navigate uncertainty, align divergent interests, and foster shared value creation (Matinheikki et al., 2016; Sydow et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2005). This Special Issue seeks to explore the dynamic interplay between ION governance and sustainability, offering an opportunity for novel insights into how collaborative governance arrangements enable or constrain progress in these interconnected domains (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Gray & Purdy, 2018).

Social, ecological, and economic sustainability, as a grand societal goal, necessitates cross-sectoral coordination among diverse actors, including firms, NGOs, governments, and local communities (Bansal & Song, 2017). The IONs in which firms and other organizations participate form the relational fabric through which sustainability strategies can be designed, implemented, and scaled (Albino et al., 2012; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011; Helfen et al., 2018; Sydow et al., 2022). These relationships are governed through combinations of formal structures (contracts, rules, standards) and informal mechanisms (trust, shared norms, and relational learning), both of which are essential for enabling collaboration on sustainability challenges that are often long-term, uncertain, and systemic (Dacin et al., 2007; Schaltegger et al., 2016; Windsperger, 2013).

Emerging research underscores the pivotal role of ION governance in advancing sustainability objectives, particularly where complex, cross-boundary coordination of more often than not multiple types of organizations is required (Blomberg et al., 2023; Schöggel et al., 2024). Different governance forms—such as participant-governed, lead-organization, or network administrative models—vary in suitability based on levels of trust, consensus, and the need for centralized coordination (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Van Den Oord et al., 2023). These structures influence decision-making authority, accountability systems, and the distribution of sustainability-related risks and benefits. Effective governance in these networks involves developing capabilities such as mutual adjustment, shared information systems, and cross-organizational routines, which together enhance collective environmental action (Wegner & Verschoore, 2022).

Firms can co-create sustainability value through inter-organizational trust, joint sense-making, and knowledge sharing (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Suchek & Franco, 2024). High-trust networks enable deeper collaboration, as seen in circular economy initiatives and regenerative practices, while weak ties often facilitate eco-innovation by exposing firms to diverse sustainability logics (Uzzi, 2018; Vurro et al., 2009). Governance is especially critical in global supply networks (Dimitropoulos et al., 2023), where formal controls like certification must be complemented by relational mechanisms to manage institutional and cultural diversity (Jell-Ojobor & Raha, 2022; Kano, 2018).

As IONs increasingly pursue complex sustainability goals, digital technologies can shape how collaboration unfolds (Zhou et al., 2024). The rise of digital ecosystems, platform-based coordination, and data-driven decision-making requires IONs to adapt their structures, processes, and roles to remain resilient and effective. Accordingly, the interplay between digitalization and ION governance is becoming a critical factor in enabling sustainability transitions.

Amid this shift from the productivity-focused Industry 4.0 paradigm to the more sustainability-oriented Industry 5.0 (Luo & Zahra, 2023), digital transformation can serve as both an enabler and a disruptor of sustainability efforts. Technologies such as AI, big data analytics, IoT, and blockchain offer powerful tools for reducing emissions, increasing supply chain transparency, and advancing circular economy models (Jell-Ojober et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2024).

While digital transformation has received significant attention in the literature, less is known about how digital tools are integrated—or resisted—within multi-actor governance structures aimed at delivering environmental, social, and economic value. Digitalization presents governance challenges for IONs, including decentralized coordination due to a high level of standardization and blurred accountability (Jell-Ojober & Kramer, 2022; Lumineau et al., 2021). At the same time, it opens up new forms of inter-organizational collaboration, including cooperation among competitors pursuing shared sustainability goals (He et al., 2020; Windsperger et al., 2025).

Effective ION governance is therefore essential to navigate competing logics, manage power asymmetries, and respond to evolving institutional demands (Pitelis & Runde, 2017; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Yet, despite growing interest, research on how digital transformation influences ION governance and sustainability outcomes remains limited.

This Special Issue invites scholarly contributions that explore how IONs are governed in pursuit of sustainability and how these governance mechanisms adapt under the pressures of digital transformation. We welcome both theoretical and empirical papers that can make a strong contribution and address, but are not limited to, the following research questions:

- What existing or emerging theoretical perspectives can best explain IONs whose governance structures are shaped by sustainability imperatives?
- How do existing inter-organizational relations influence the governance and effectiveness of sustainability-oriented networks?
- What governance designs effectively mitigate power asymmetries and promote equitable value distribution in cross-sector sustainability partnerships?
- What role does meta-governance (e.g., orchestration by third parties or institutional intermediaries) play in aligning fragmented sustainability efforts across diverse IONs?
- Which combinations of formal and informal governance mechanisms are most effective in fostering learning, innovation, and sustainability outcomes across IONs?
- In what ways do trust, reciprocity, and shared values contribute to the resilience and performance of sustainability-focused collaborations?
- How do varying sustainability logics and orientations among network partners influence governance choices and network-level outcomes?
- How do tensions between economic competitiveness and collective sustainability goals manifest and get managed within digitally enabled IONs?
- How do dynamic capabilities support firms in reconfiguring inter-organizational relations in general and IONs in particular in response to evolving sustainability goals and environmental complexity?
- How do inter-organizational governance mechanisms evolve in response to shifting or drifting sustainability agendas, regulatory landscapes, or socio-political pressures?
- In what ways can digital technologies (e.g., blockchain, AI, IoT) enhance transparency, coordination, and sustainability performance within inter-organizational governance frameworks?
- How does digital transformation reshape governance mechanisms—such as control, monitoring, and more trust-based relationship management—across vertical, horizontal, or concentric dimensions of sustainability-oriented networks? Who benefits, and who may be disadvantaged in digitally transformed IONs?

- What governance risks and unintended consequences does digital transformation pose for sustainability-focused IONs?
- How can inter-organizational governance structures enable or accelerate circular economy transitions within supply chains and broader ecosystems?
- How do cultural and institutional differences across countries shape the governance of transnational sustainability-oriented IONs?
- What roles do external institutions (e.g., governments, NGOs, consumers) play in shaping the governance and legitimacy of IONs pursuing sustainability objectives?
- What metrics or evaluative frameworks are most effective for assessing governance quality and sustainability performance in complex inter-organizational ecosystems?

2. Submission Process

Submission of papers should take place from 15 August 2026 to 30 September 2026. Manuscripts should be prepared following EMR’s author guidelines and submitted via the online system. To ensure that all manuscripts are correctly identified for consideration for this SI, authors must select SI: “Governance of Inter-organizational Networks for Sustainability in the Digital Era” when they reach the “Article Type” step in the submission process. All submitted manuscripts will be subject to EMR’s double blind review process. Submitting for the SI does not preclude submitting a paper for any other conference.

Questions about the Special Issue may be directed to the guest editors Dr. Maria Jell-Ojobor (maria.jellojobor@johncabot.edu) and Dr. Aved Raha (aved.raha@univie.ac.at).

3. Guest Editors

The guest editorial team brings substantial research expertise in the thematic areas addressed by the Special Issue. They possess valuable experience as reviewers and have previously served as editors for special issues in leading journals such as the European Journal of International Management, Industrial Marketing Management, Managerial and Decision Economics, Organization Studies, Project Management Journal, and Regional Studies. In addition, they have published several books on network economics and management. The team also plays a key role in the academic community as founding members and organizers of prominent international conferences, including ISOF and EMNet.

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