



Mission-Based Ecosystem Lab

CSI-HSG, University of St.Gallen



University of St.Gallen

Competence Center for Social Innovation

WHITE PAPER

COLLABORATING FOR SUSTAINABILITY: SOLVING COMPLEX CHALLENGES THROUGH MISSION-BASED ECOSYSTEMS

Featuring a lifecycle model for building and orchestrating mission-based ecosystems

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WHY MISSION-BASED ECOSYSTEMS

MATTER

As the world faces increasingly complex challenges, particularly in sustainability, the need for innovative solutions has never been more pressing. These challenges, often referred to as “wicked problems,” are characterized by their complexity, uncertainty and controversial nature (Cash et al., 2006; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Grand challenges like climate change and social inequality are too extensive for any single organization or sector to tackle on their own (Mazzucato, 2018a). Consequently, they require a collaborative approach to innovation, uniting diverse stakeholders from both the private and public sectors under a shared mission (George et al., 2016).

A core belief behind the concepts of innovation and entrepreneurship is the idea that organizations rarely operate in perfectly competitive markets, but rather in structures where they take on complementary roles to create value together (De Bernardi & Azucar, 2020). Innovation arises and spreads as a result of interaction between a large number of actors spread across many different institutions and locations (Doloreux, 2002) and is the result of a complex network of relationships between players in a system, which includes companies, universities and state research institutes. In this context, the term “ecosystem” has become an attractive metaphor to describe the spectrum of interactions and interdependencies that occur between different institutions and stakeholders (De Bernardi & Azucar, 2020).

The term ecosystem (ecological system) has its origin in ecology, in which the interaction of living beings with their physical environment is central (O'Connor et al., 2018). The originally natural science-based biological concept of the “ecosystem” has been adapted by the social sciences to mean “social or societal ecosystem”.

According to this adaptation, characteristic features and crucial aspects of an ecosystem (e.g., actors, institutions, structures and processes) and its patterns of interaction are embedded into society as a whole and have linkages to societal subsystems (Carayannis & Campbell, 2019).

Mission-based ecosystems¹ (MBEs) are an emerging approach to specifically address sustainability challenges (Jütting, 2020). These ecosystems align actors around particular missions and represent a framework for achieving systemic change (Mazzucato & Dibb, 2019). Given the complexity of these challenges, collaboration among various actors from science, industry, politics and society within ecosystems is important (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009). MBEs are distinguished by their focus on mission-driven objectives. As defined by Mazzucato and Dibb (2019, p. 2), missions are “concrete targets within a challenge that act as frames and stimuli for innovation.” These missions often address current local or global challenges, including for example public health or environmental sustainability.

This white paper represents an initial step toward conceptualizing and formalizing the concept of MBEs. In the upcoming chapters, we introduce the concept of MBEs, share insights from our research and provide actionable frameworks for building and sustaining such ecosystems.

It begins with a definition of what MBEs are, laying the groundwork for understanding their unique role in tackling grand challenges. Next, we present two case studies – SAP and Terragr’eu – that exemplify how MBEs function in practice, offering tangible examples of their transformative potential.

Building on these insights, we introduce a process model for creating and nurturing MBEs, offering a structured approach for practitioners. Finally, the paper concludes with reflections on the opportunities and challenges associated with MBEs,

¹ In the literature, the term ‘mission-oriented innovation ecosystems’ is often used (e.g., Jütting, 2020 or Mazzucato & Dibb, 2019). While there may be subtle differences in emphasis, the concept aligns closely with what we refer to here as ‘mission-based ecosystems.’ For the purposes of this white paper, we use the term ‘mission-based ecosystems’ to encompass the core principles and implications discussed in the referenced works.

emphasizing their relevance and potential to drive systemic change.

Through this white paper, we aim to bring the concept of MBEs into broader conversations, sharing the knowledge we have created and inspiring others to explore their potential as a framework for collaboration and innovation.

THE CONCEPT OF MISSION-BASED ECOSYSTEMS

MBEs bring together a diverse range of actors – businesses, NGOs, governments and academic institutions – around a shared mission in sustainability (Mazzucato & Dibb, 2019). Unlike traditional partnerships that focus on short-term objectives or economic gains, MBEs are purpose-driven, with the aim of addressing long-term challenges that span economic, social and environmental dimensions (Mazzucato, 2018a).

MBEs are especially relevant in the context of grand challenges such as climate change, social inequality and resource depletion. These complex, global problems require innovative solutions that go beyond traditional approaches, and the inclusion of diverse stakeholders is essential (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009). By uniting stakeholders with different expertise, perspectives and resources, MBEs create the collaboration needed to generate impactful, systemic change (Autio & Thomas, 2020; Jacobides et al., 2018; Kapoor, 2018).

Aligned with the ecosystem literature, one core principle of MBEs lies in creating value that no single organization could achieve on its own (Suominen et al., 2019). These ecosystems are built on collaboration and collective expertise, where stakeholders co-create solutions that address systemic societal changes. By working together, these stakeholders foster innovation and sustainable impact, generating transformative solutions that benefit society as a whole.

THE ROLE OF ACTORS AND ORCHESTRATORS IN MISSION-BASED ECOSYSTEMS

The composition of MBEs consists of a diverse range of actors, such as businesses, government agencies, academia, NGOs and civil society organizations. Not every MBE requires the full spectrum of these stakeholders; the specific configuration depends on the nature of the mission and the challenge being addressed. Each actor contributes unique capabilities that are essential for the ecosystem's value creation (Bogers et al., 2019) and in the end reaching the overarching mission.

The actors in MBEs are not entirely controlled through hierarchical structures (Jacobides et al., 2018). They retain a high degree of autonomy but remain connected through a shared value proposition (Bogers et al., 2019) through the common mission (Jütting, 2020). However, while these stakeholders are united by a common goal, they often have their own individual objectives and priorities (Adner, 2017; Jacobides et al., 2018). This is where the role of the orchestrator becomes crucial.

Ecosystems typically do not emerge spontaneously. They are often shaped and driven by a central orchestrator who aligns ecosystem actors toward the shared value proposition or the mission (Jacobides et al., 2018). The role of this orchestrator is essential, as ecosystem actors, while aligned towards a common mission, require coordination to function effectively (Adner, 2017; Jacobides et al., 2018). The orchestrator does not hold full control but acts as a facilitator, managing coordination, setting standards and aligning the diverse actors' contributions to enable value creation (Lingens et al., 2023). The orchestrator leads and aligns ecosystem actors, depends on them, but is lacking the authority to lead through strict contracts and hierarchical structures (Jacobides et al., 2018). The role of the

ecosystem orchestrator can evolve depending on the ecosystem's stage in its lifecycle. During the early phases of ecosystem development, the orchestrator's role is particularly critical. Active leadership and dynamic agency are necessary in these initial stages, as the orchestrator must actively shape the ecosystem's mission to attract participants and secure early commitments (Dattée et al., 2018). As the ecosystem develops, the role of the orchestrator may shift or even be taken over by a different actor better suited to guide the ecosystem at that stage. As the ecosystem evolves, generally the roles of all actors may shift and adapt. This adaptability is key to maintaining alignment and progress over time (Bogers et al., 2019).

CASE STUDIES

To illustrate this concept more concretely, we have selected two case studies of MBEs to present in this chapter: (1) SAP and (2) Terragr'eau. Both cases exemplify this approach in action.

The Case of SAP:

A MBE with a Focus on Human Rights

Mission Statement

Ensuring human rights for all workers by promoting ethical policies and shared responsibility across the value chain, while driving global impact through effective human rights due diligence².

Background and Purpose

Addressing the complexity of human rights violations in global supply chains requires bold leadership and collective action. As a leading enterprise software provider, SAP identified the need to empower organizations in ensuring ethical practices throughout their value chains. The journey was sparked by growing external expectations as well as evolving regulations and frameworks such as the Corporate

Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the OECD Guidelines on Due Diligence for Responsible Business Conduct.

"We identified the need for systemic collaboration; individual companies fulfilling regulations won't create the systemic change required."

Johanna Latt (Product Marketing Manager for SAP Sustainability Solutions)

To tackle these challenges, SAP embraced a MBE approach, uniting diverse stakeholders to collectively address the issue of human rights in supply chains. In this initiative SAP took on the role as a provider of innovative solutions and as an orchestrator of collaborative ecosystems designed to drive systemic change and foster responsible business practices.

Project Implementation

The MBE initiative followed a structured and collaborative process to address human rights challenges in supply chains. This process was guided by two interconnected streams: the internal stream and the external stream, which together informed the overarching mission and direction of the initiative.

The internal stream focused on evaluating SAP's existing solutions against the established OECD Guidelines on Due Diligence for Responsible Business Conduct framework. This analysis involved a detailed gap assessment to identify areas where SAP's solutions could better address human rights risks, particularly in complex, multi-tier supply chains. The external stream emphasized understanding the challenges and needs of organizations and the broader ecosystem. Through industry events, interviews and a comprehensive needs assessment, SAP gathered insights into the specific requirements of companies across various sectors. This external stream also examined the influence of stakeholders, such as NGOs and government organizations, on the HRDD landscape. These findings were instrumental in identifying collaboration opportunities and

² Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) is a process that businesses undertake to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for their impacts on human rights. It is guided by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which outline global standards for ethical business practices (United Nations, 2011).

ensuring that the initiative addressed real-world challenges faced by businesses and their stakeholders. By integrating insights from both streams, the HRDD initiative developed a mission, creating the foundation for engagement with stakeholders in an ecosystem.

A stakeholder mapping exercise enabled SAP to identify and categorize potential ecosystem actors. Building on this foundation, a MBE was established, bringing together diverse stakeholders from different industries like consumer goods, pharmaceuticals or renewable energy. Since the ecosystem was in its early stages, it was primarily centered around companies, which were envisioned as the primary users of the developed solution.

Through iterative workshops, the ecosystem actors refined the shared mission and co-developed core problem statements. These sessions fostered alignment and ensured that the initiative remained relevant to the diverse needs of the ecosystem.

Once the ecosystem was established, it served as a platform for aligning diverse ecosystem actors around problem statements and a defined mission, fostering collaboration and shared accountability for advancing human rights in supply chains. The ecosystem

facilitated the exchange of insights and experiences which shaped SAP's HRDD product development. While further refinement and processing of these insights occurred within SAP, the ecosystem is a space for dialogue and advancing collective understanding of human rights due diligence.

“The systemic approach of the MBE is flexible and iterative, requiring ongoing input and adjustment as we navigate relationships with diverse actors.”

Laurent Tessier (Former Facilitator of the MBE & Member of the Life Centred Design at SAP; now Founder & President of Le lieu Life Centred Design)

Roles and Contributions of Key Actors

SAP as an Orchestrator: SAP played a central role as the orchestrator of the MBE, driving its establishment through internal and external assessments, interviews and exploratory research to identify mission areas and challenges in human rights due diligence. Leveraging these insights, SAP onboarded companies to create the ecosystem. Once established, SAP facilitated discussions and collaboration within the ecosystem, ensuring alignment on problem statements and a shared mission. By coordinating the ecosystem and

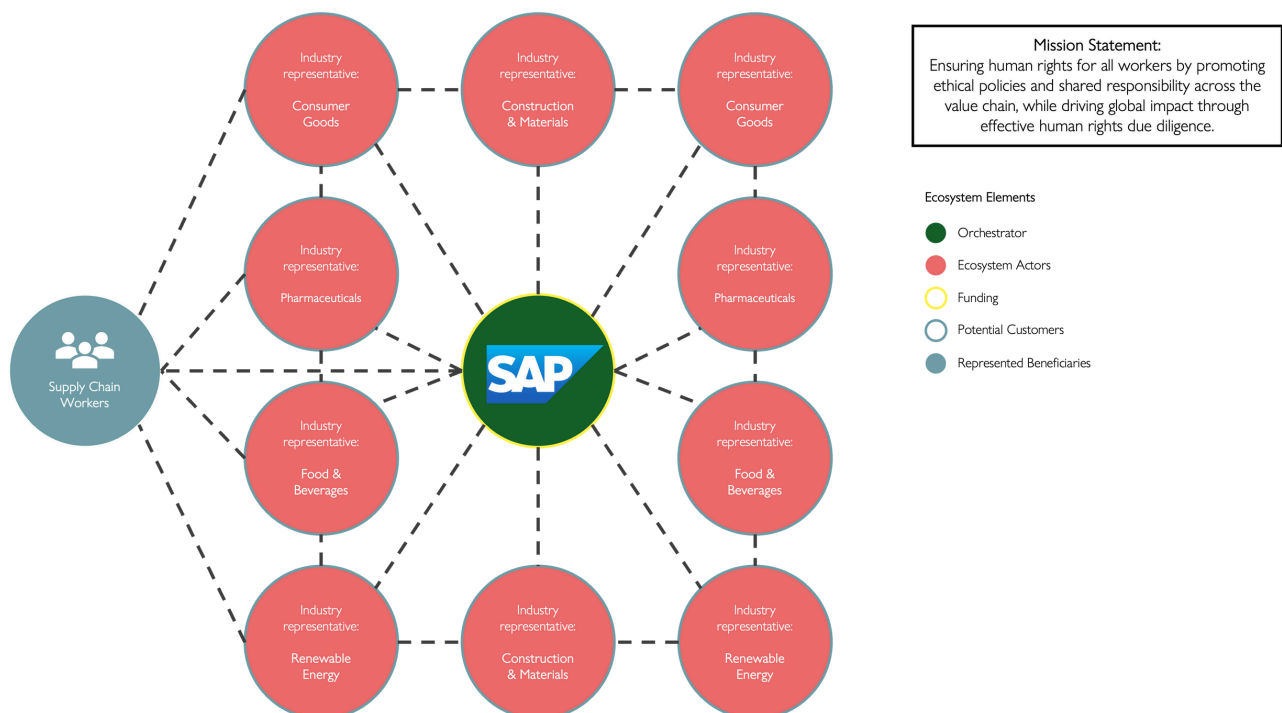


Fig 1: SAP's HRDD MBE

processing insights internally, SAP shaped its HRDD product development while advancing innovative solutions for human rights in supply chains.

Ecosystem Actors: Organizations³ from industries such as consumer goods, pharmaceuticals, food & beverages, renewable energy and construction & materials provided real-world insights and co-creatively worked on the defined mission. The ecosystem typically comprised representatives from 8-10 different companies, although the composition of actors in the exchange sessions shifted over time and was not always consistent.

Sustainability Impact

The HRDD MBE is an initiative in advancing sustainable practices in human rights due diligence by fostering collaboration, promoting regulatory alignment and driving systemic change across industries.

- Regulatory alignment and risk management: Solutions developed through the ecosystem align with major regulatory and guiding frameworks, including OECD guidelines. These advancements enhance visibility into human rights risks across complex, multi-tier supplier networks, enabling organizations to improve compliance while fostering ethical accountability.
- Operational and social outcomes: The initiative has driven progress toward shared ownership of human rights processes, reducing the burden on individual organizations while enabling collective impact. Through its collaborative nature, the ecosystem provided a foundation for companies to enhance their practices, align with sustainability goals and contribute to ethical value chains.
- Ecosystem-wide learning and innovation: The ecosystem encouraged cross-industry learning by uniting participants from diverse sectors. This exchange of knowledge stimulated innovation, contributing to the development of solutions for human rights due diligence challenges.

Conclusion

The case of SAP's MBE demonstrates the potential of collaborative approaches in addressing complex global challenges like human rights violations in supply chains. By orchestrating the ecosystem, SAP successfully aligned diverse stakeholders across industries, fostering shared accountability contributed to regulatory compliance. Moving forward, continued collaboration and innovation will be key to scaling the impact of the ecosystem and further embedding human rights due diligence into global business practices. This case exemplifies the value of collective action in driving systemic change and advancing sustainability goals across industries.

Sources:⁴ European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2018; United Nations, 2011

The Case of Terragr'eu: A MBE with a Focus on Sustainable Water Preservation

Mission Statement

To preserve the purity of Evian's water sources by reducing nitrate pollution, while supporting local farmers in adopting sustainable practices through innovative waste management and renewable energy solutions.

Background and Purpose

The industrialization of agriculture has increased nitrate pollution risks, particularly in areas with heavy farming activity. In Evian-les-Bains (FR), where 60% of the watershed land is used for agriculture, nitrate pollution posed a serious threat to the quality of water resources. As Evian's (the company) mineral water must meet high standards of purity and stability, addressing this pollution was critical. However, the required sustainable farming practices came with significant costs, which many family farmers in the

³ The authors are aware of the companies that participated in the MBE. However, due to confidentiality reasons, the names of these companies cannot be disclosed and are instead represented by their respective industry clusters.

⁴ The information for this case is based on the sources mentioned, as well as interviews with individuals involved in this MBE project at SAP and document analysis.

region could not afford, putting their livelihoods at risk. To address these challenges, the Terragr'eau project was launched as a collaborative initiative involving multiple actors, such as Danone Ecosystem Fund, Evian Mineral Water Company, the Communauté de Communes du Pays d'Evian (a grouping of 22 municipalities), SICA Terragr'Eau Methanisation (a cooperative of local farmers) and various local and regional stakeholders. These actors gathered around the shared mission to develop a sustainable solution that would both protect water quality while also promoting economically viable and environmentally friendly agricultural practices.

Project Implementation

The cornerstone of the Terragr'eau project was the co-creation of a novel approach to methanization and the construction of a biodigester facility in 2017. This biodigester converts cattle manure and organic waste from surrounding municipalities into biogas and organic compost. The biogas provides a renewable source for Evian, powering up to 1'300 households or 40 GNV (gas-powered) buses, while the compost serves as a sustainable fertilizer substitute for local farmland.

- **Agricultural benefits:** Local farmers benefit from reduced fertilizer costs, as the biodigester-produced compost replaces expensive chemical fertilizers, reducing their fertilization expenses by 70%. The biodigester supports approximately 77 farmers, improving their working conditions and enabling sustainable practices that protect their land and water sources.
- **Environmental and social impact:** By reducing the reliance on chemical fertilizers, the project helps minimize nitrate leaching into the watershed, thereby protecting Evian's natural water sources and avoiding costly water purification treatments for the community. The project also fosters local development, having created 11 permanent jobs and strengthened the local economy.

Roles and Contributions of Key Actors

Each stakeholder in the Terragr'eau mission-based ecosystem brought specific expertise and resources to ensure the success and sustainability of the project.

Danone Ecosystem Fund: As a primary funder, Danone Ecosystem Fund contributed €3.73 million to support the project's development. They also provided leadership in ecosystem management, leveraging its experience in sustainable water stewardship to guide the project's goals. Danone Ecosystem Fund is a corporate foundation established by Danone, supporting projects that align with Danone's sustainability goals.

Evian Mineral Water Company: Evian Mineral Water operates as a subsidiary of Danone. Evian, motivated to protect the purity of its mineral water, collaborated closely with local farmers and municipalities. Evian helped raise awareness around sustainable nitrate management practices, aligning farmers and communities toward a common goal of water quality preservation.

Communauté de Communes du Pays d'Evian: This local government body played a coordinating role, bringing various stakeholders together and contributing €1.73 million to the project. They continue to oversee the project's integration into the community's infrastructure and economy. Beginning as the "partner on the ground," the Communauté's role gradually evolved throughout the process, eventually assuming the responsibilities of an orchestrator.

SICA Terragr'Eau Methanisation: This cooperative of local farmers took charge of the biodigester's operations, managing the collection of organic waste and the distribution of compost. They also ensure compliance with sustainable spreading practices to protect soil and water quality.

GRDF (Gas Network): GRDF facilitates the distribution of the biogas produced by the biodigester, allowing it to be used as a renewable energy source for the surrounding community.

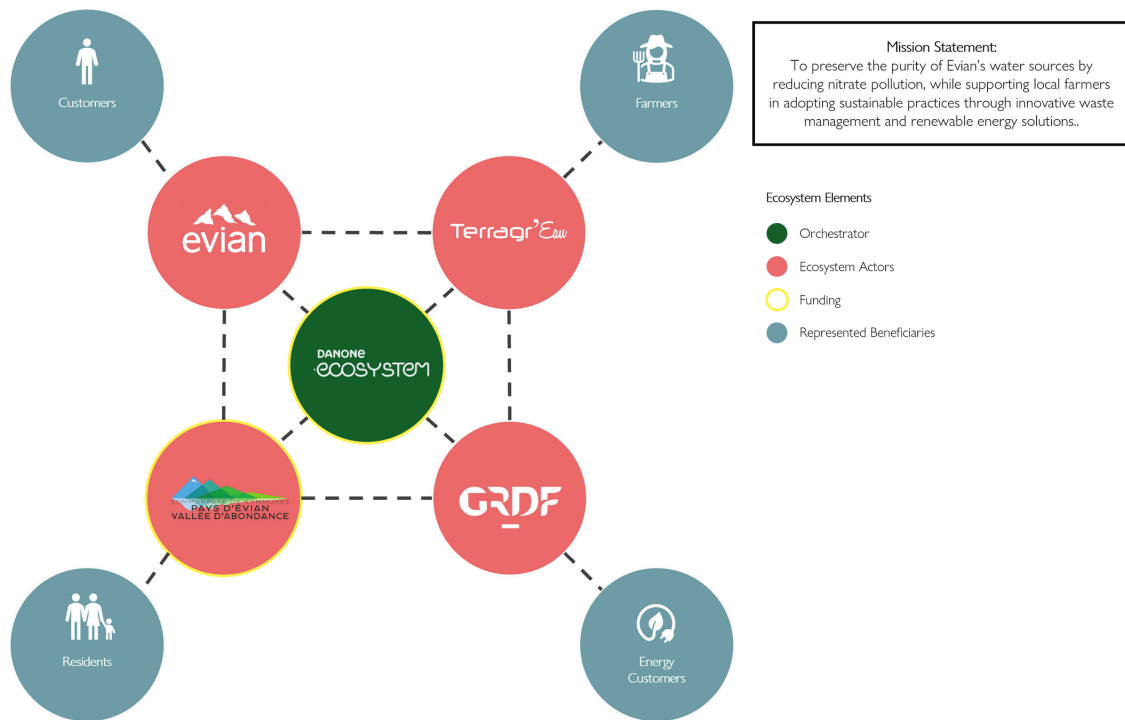


Fig 2: Terragr'eau MBE

Sustainability Impact

The Terragr'eau project has delivered significant environmental, social and economic benefits, serving as a good example for a MBE in agriculture and water management.

- **Water quality protection:** By reducing nitrate pollution, the project protects the natural impluvium area, preserving the long-term quality of Evian's water sources. This helps avoiding the need for costly water purification for nearby rural communities.
- **Renewable energy production:** The biodigester produces approximately 1.25 million cubic meters of biogas annually, which is purified and injected into the local gas network, reducing reliance on fossil fuels and contributing to the region's renewable energy goals.
- **Economic and social benefits:** The project has created 11 jobs, provided economic stability for 77 local farmers, and reduced fertilizer costs by 70%. By fostering a sustainable agricultural model, the project supports local farming livelihoods and reduces environmental impact, making family farming in the region more resilient.

Conclusion

The Terragr'eau project exemplifies the power of MBEs to address complex sustainability challenges through cross-sector collaboration. By aligning the interests of local government, farmers, the private sector and community stakeholders, this project has safeguarded Evian's water quality, promoted sustainable farming and advanced local development. It serves as a replicable model for other regions facing similar agricultural and environmental pressures, demonstrating that economic and environmental objectives can be achieved together through mission-driven collaboration.

Sources: Auvergne Rhône-Alpes; Danone Ecosystem Fund; Eclaira; GRDF

BUILDING A MISSION-BASED

ECOSYSTEM: FROM MISSION

DEFINITION TO MISSION

SUSTAINING AND SCALING

Following the case studies that exemplify the potential of MBEs in addressing complex societal challenges, this chapter shifts focus to the process of building and sustaining such ecosystems – specifically, their lifecycle (Moore, 1993). While the case studies highlight what MBEs might look like and the outputs they produce in practice, it is also critical to understand the development journey that enables these outcomes.

Ecosystems must be intentionally designed and constructed to achieve their intended impact (Dattée et al., 2018; Jacobides et al., 2018). Understanding the lifecycle of ecosystems is essential, as they evolve through distinct and interconnected phases. Each phase reflects the dynamic nature of ecosystems, with roles, interdependencies, activities and resources continuously adapting as they grow and mature (Moore, 1993).

In the following pages, we present a process model we developed for creating and sustaining MBEs, structured around five interconnected phases: Mission Launchpad, MBE Activation, Launch the Mission, Fueling the Mission and Mission Sustaining & Scaling. This model, grounded in our research, offers a practical framework for understanding how MBEs can be purposefully designed and guided through their lifecycle to achieve systemic and long-term impact.

1. Mission Launchpad

At the heart of any MBE is a well-defined mission. The mission serves as the North Star, guiding all actors toward a shared goal. Launching such an ecosystem is suitable when the challenge is a complex social issue that exceeds the capabilities of any single actor to solve alone (Mazzucato & Dibb, 2019).

The orchestrator begins by identifying whether the challenge they face is also experienced by others. By conducting need assessments and engaging in dialogue with potential collaborators, the orchestrator ensures the challenge resonates widely. To deepen this understanding, the orchestrator facilitates exchanges to explore priorities, opportunities and potential areas of focus that may emerge when addressing the mission. These dialogues help identifying what might be most important as the mission takes shape and provide a foundation for collective problem-solving. Following this exploration, a preliminary mission statement is drafted to inspire collective action. The mission must be clear, actionable and adaptable, offering enough relevance to attract stakeholders while remaining broad enough to accommodate diverse perspectives (Mazzucato, 2018b). This approach ensures the mission serves as a unifying vision that each actor can interpret in a way that aligns with their goals and expertise (Ferraro et al., 2015; Pinch & Bijker, 1984). By the end of this phase, key outputs such as a preliminary stakeholder map, defined mission objectives and an initial mission statement - which serves as a unifying vision for potential ecosystem actors - are developed. These outputs provide a foundation for the ecosystem's future development.

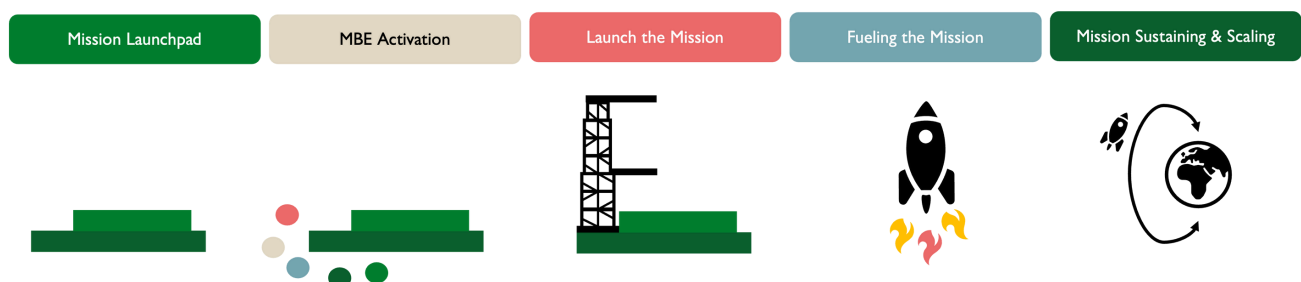


Fig 3: Mission-based ecosystem process

2. Mission-Based Ecosystem Activation

Once a preliminary mission is defined, the orchestrator identifies and engages a diverse group of stakeholders to build the ecosystem. A defining feature of a MBE is its commitment to actor diversity and its systemic approach. This means involving stakeholders from various sectors – businesses, public institutions, academia, NGOs, or civil society – each contributing capabilities and perspectives to tackle the challenge. Bringing together the relevant actors is essential to gain a holistic understanding of the challenge and to incorporate diverse viewpoints into the mission's approach. Solutions developed within this framework should balance the needs and insights of all stakeholders involved. While not all stakeholders need to be engaged in the ecosystem from the start, identifying and securing core partners early on is crucial to ensure the ecosystem has the expertise, resources and commitment necessary to drive the mission forward. However, this process requires careful navigation: Including more stakeholders provides a broader perspective but also adds complexity, making it important to find the right balance between inclusivity and manageability.

This phase sets the foundation for collaboration by defining roles, clarifying expectations and building trust among actors. Stakeholders must align around shared goals and values, fostering a culture of co-ownership and accountability. The mission is further refined in collaboration with stakeholders, incorporating their feedback to ensure it resonates across the ecosystem. This participatory approach not only strengthens the relevance of the mission but also deepens the commitment of all actors involved, creating a shared sense of purpose and collective responsibility (Etzion et al. 2017). Phase 2 concludes with a clear understanding of roles, responsibilities and expectations among all actors, creating a strong foundation for the next phases of collaboration.

Once ecosystem actors begin actively participating in the ecosystem, some may need to justify their involvement to their respective leadership teams. They must demonstrate how their contributions align with and benefit their organization, as well as how the ecosystem's outcomes support their strategic goals.

Ensuring that their participation in the MBE is well-justified is crucial, as this need for justification will continue through phases 3, 4 and 5. Continuously articulating and reinforcing the value of their engagement helps maintaining commitment and ensures alignment between the ecosystem's mission and the objectives of participating organizations. If the orchestrator recognizes that stakeholders are not willing to join the ecosystem at this stage, it may signal a need to revisit Phase 1. This could involve reassessing the common challenge, identifying barriers to participation or even re-evaluating whether the chosen approach effectively addresses the issue. Iteration is an inherent part of this process, ensuring the ecosystem evolves to meet the needs of its actors.

3. Launch the Mission

With the mission in place and the relevant ecosystem actors engaged, the next step is ideation and co-creation. This phase emphasizes collaboration, where diverse ecosystem actors pool their expertise, insights and creativity to generate innovative ideas which help to approach the mission of the ecosystem. The process thrives on the diversity of the ecosystem, as actors contribute from different perspectives, embodying participatory structures (Etzion et al., 2017). Throughout this phase, the orchestrator fosters a culture of experimentation and iteration, encouraging stakeholders to test ideas and adapt them as needed. Embracing multiple approaches is essential. When addressing missions, relying on a single development path or technology should be avoided. Instead, they should be approached with openness, utilizing a variety of solutions and strategies (Mazzucato & Dibb, 2019). Importantly, this phase includes developing a roadmap that clearly outlines milestones, priorities and responsibilities for implementing solutions. This collaborative groundwork ensures alignment and clarity for moving forward effectively. If it becomes evident during phase 3 that the ecosystem is missing key actors needed for effective co-creation, the orchestrator might need to revisit phase 2. Additional relevant stakeholders can be identified and onboarded at any point in the

ecosystem's development. The ecosystem is designed to remain open and flexible, allowing new actors to join as needs and challenges evolve, ensuring it remains dynamic and inclusive rather than a closed system.

4. Fueling the Mission

The fourth step is where the ecosystem begins implementing its roadmap, translating concepts and ideas into actions. Prototypes and pilot solutions are developed and tested across the ecosystem, with feedback loops fostering continuous learning and improvement. Regular evaluations are critical to maintaining alignment with the mission, enabling the ecosystem to identify gaps, adapt to emerging challenges and include additional stakeholders if necessary. The orchestrator maintains the ecosystem's momentum by coordinating efforts and addressing challenges as they arise. This dynamic, iterative process ensures that the ecosystem evolves in response to real-world conditions while staying true to its mission. Collaboration during this phase is dynamic and iterative, guided by regular progress checks and accountability measures. Again, actors should keep their leadership team informed, ensuring transparency about the value of their

contributions within the MBE to secure continued support and legitimacy for their involvement. At this stage, the ecosystem will have developed and tested effective prototypes, achieved key mission milestones and established a strong basis for sustained progress.

5. Mission Sustaining & Scaling

The final phase focuses on amplifying the ecosystem's impact and building resilience for the future. Sustaining the ecosystem requires developing structures that enable adaptability and long-term relevance, ensuring the actors remain committed to the mission. As the ecosystem matures, it may identify new challenges and opportunities for collaboration, creating a foundation for future missions. Scaling includes refining and extending the collaborative approach, creating a blueprint for future ecosystems, and expanding both the process and the impact of the mission. The output of this phase is a resilient and well-integrated approach, where actors recognize the value of ecosystem-based collaboration and commit to it as a transformative method for addressing complex sustainability challenges.

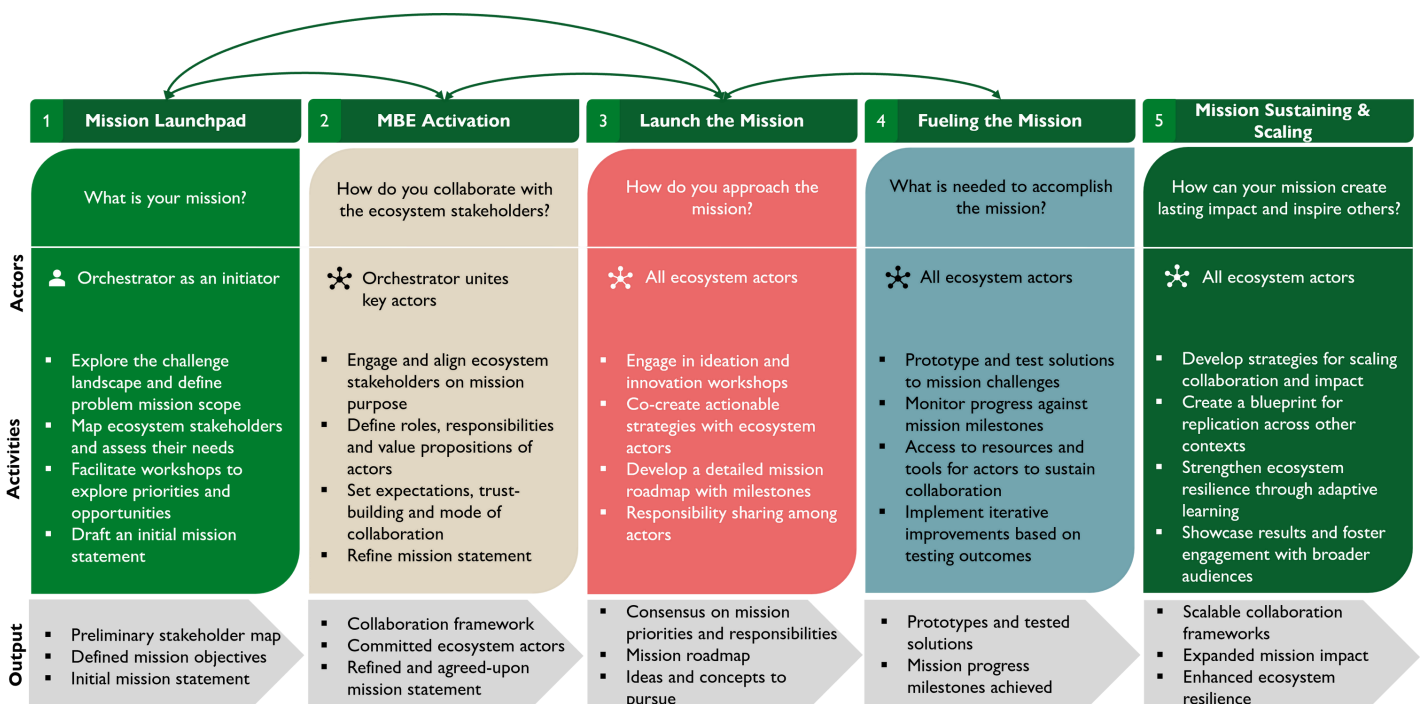


Fig 4: Mission-based ecosystem lifecycle model

CHALLENGES IN BUILDING

MISSION-BASED ECOSYSTEMS

Building a MBE is not a walk in the park. While the potential for transformative impact is immense, the process of creating and sustaining such an ecosystem is fraught with challenges. Acknowledging these difficulties is essential – not to deter engagement, but to emphasize the importance of careful planning and resilience. Below, we explore some of the common challenges faced during the lifecycle of a MBE and propose ways to navigate them effectively.

One of the most pressing challenges is navigating conflicting priorities among diverse stakeholders. MBEs bring together actors from various sectors, each with their own goals, values and expectations. Misalignment can lead to delays or disengagement if not carefully managed. Early-stage dialogue is critical to align expectations, define shared goals, and foster trust. Governance structures and decision-making processes must be transparent and inclusive, providing a solid foundation for collaboration. When conflicts arise, the mission should act as a guiding compass, reminding stakeholders of their shared purpose and helping to resolve disagreements.

Another significant challenge is managing expectations around short-term results. MBEs are inherently long-term endeavors and their ultimate impact often takes years to materialize. However, many stakeholders may seek immediate outcomes, leading to frustration and waning engagement. Setting realistic milestones and celebrating small wins along the way can help to maintain momentum. Incorporating feedback loops demonstrates continuous improvement and reassures stakeholders that progress is being made, even when the end goal remains distant.

Securing long-term funding and commitment presents yet another hurdle. Ecosystems require sustained resources and without a clear funding strategy, they risk losing momentum. A diversified funding model, combining private, public and philanthropic support, can provide the necessary stability.

Demonstrating the value created by the ecosystem is fundamental to securing buy-in from stakeholders over the long term. Establishing dedicated roles ensures continuity and consistent resource allocation, further bolstering the ecosystem's resilience.

For many actors, gaining internal support from their leadership teams is a pivotal challenge. Leaders may hesitate to commit resources without a clear understanding of the benefits. Articulating the ecosystem's value proposition in terms that align with organizational priorities is key. Evidence of how the ecosystem supports strategic goals or provides competitive advantages can help leaders to see the mission as an opportunity for innovation and impact, rather than a cost. Encouraging leadership to view the mission as an investment in the future can be vital in securing their support.

Finally, maintaining long-term engagement within the ecosystem can be difficult as the interests of actors evolve over time. Regularly revisiting and refining the mission ensures it remains relevant and resonant. Involving all actors in decision-making fosters a sense of co-ownership, while celebrating collective achievements reinforces commitment. Adaptive governance models that allow for flexibility while maintaining accountability can help to keep the ecosystem dynamic and inclusive, ensuring it evolves alongside the needs of its stakeholders.

Despite these challenges, the strength of the mission ultimately determines the success of the ecosystem. A well-defined and compelling mission serves as the ecosystem's anchor, providing clarity and direction. When the mission is clear, actionable and adaptable, it inspires commitment and collaboration, becoming the ecosystem's most powerful tool for overcoming obstacles. While the road may be complex, these challenges are not reasons to avoid engaging in MBEs; rather, they are opportunities to build stronger, more resilient ecosystems. By staying true to the mission and fostering a culture of trust and shared purpose, MBEs can navigate obstacles and unlock their full potential to address complex societal challenges.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

As demonstrated throughout this white paper, MBEs represent a transformative approach to addressing the complex societal and environmental challenges of our time. By aligning diverse stakeholders around a shared mission, MBEs harness collective expertise and resources to create systemic, sustainable change that transcends traditional organizational boundaries.

Through our exploration of case studies, lifecycle phases and challenges, we have shown that while the journey to building and sustaining a MBE is not without obstacles, the potential for lasting impact far outweighs these hurdles. The strength of the mission remains the cornerstone of success, serving as the anchor that aligns actors, fosters collaboration, and drives innovation. At the Competence Center for Social Innovation of the University of St. Gallen, we are deeply convinced of the value of mission-based ecosystems as a method for creating impactful and scalable solutions. This conviction fuels our ongoing research into this promising approach, as we continue to refine our understanding and explore new applications. By further investigating MBEs, we aim to empower organizations across sectors to tackle grand challenges and contribute to a more sustainable and equitable future.

IMPRINT & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This white paper was produced by the Competence Center for Social Innovation (CSI-HSG) at the University of St. Gallen, as part of the Mission-Based Ecosystem Lab initiative.

As sustainability challenges grow in complexity and urgency, we believe that lasting solutions can only be achieved through collaboration among diverse stakeholders. The Mission-Based Ecosystem Lab demonstrates how mission-based ecosystems can drive systemic change, uniting sectors in the pursuit of long-term social, economic, and environmental value. In line with SDG 17, our vision is to catalyze partnerships that go beyond innovation, tackling the world's most pressing challenges and generating systemic, measurable impact.

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to Laurent Tessier, Jonas Dennler, Johanna Latt and all other interview partners and collaborators who contributed to this report. Your insights and support were invaluable in shaping this work.

Competence Center for Social Innovation, University of St. Gallen

The [Competence Center for Social Innovation \(CSI-HSG\)](#) focuses on cross-sector collaboration to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We bridge academia and practice, preparing changemakers to tackle grand challenges while driving systemic social and environmental impact. Our work fosters co-creation and innovation with an emphasis on solutions that bring about sustainable systems change.

Mission-Based Ecosystem Lab

The [Mission-Based Ecosystem Lab](#) is a joint initiative of the CSI-HSG and SAP and was founded to research these ecosystems, uncovering key success factors for driving systemic sustainability innovation. By studying real-world projects, the lab provides practical insights that bridge research and industry practice.

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