

Ecologies of intermediation and the Social and Solidarity Economy: A new form of governance for ecological transitions

Ecologias de intermediação e Economia Social e Solidária: uma nova forma de governança para as transições ecológicas

Ecologías de intermediación y economía social y solidaria: una nueva forma de gobernanza para las transiciones ecológicas

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Abstract

This article argues that ecological transitions are increasingly shaped by overlapping intermediaries, and that Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) principles can make these "ecologies of intermediation" more effective and fairer. Using an exploratory integrative literature review of core work on intermediation ecologies and 13 studies linking SSE to eco-social transitions, the authors identify coordination problems and SSE-based responses. They show how intercooperation, democratic network governance, territorial embeddedness, and mission-oriented ethical finance can transform competition for resources into complementarity, distribute sensing and decision-making across scales, and sustain long-term transition work beyond short project cycles. From this analysis, the article develops a conceptual framework and testable propositions and proposes policy guidance that recognizes SSE networks as ecology-level stewards, designs hybrid arenas where public, regime, and community intermediaries co-decide, builds capabilities for value-based cooperation, and revises evaluation systems to capture relational and value outcomes.

Keywords: Social and Solidarity Economy; ecological transitions; ecologies of intermediation; democratic governance; mission-oriented finance.

Resumen

Este artículo sostiene que las transiciones ecológicas están cada vez más moldeadas por intermediarios superpuestos y que los principios de la Economía Social y Solidaria (ESS) pueden hacer que estas "ecologías de intermediación" sean más eficaces y justas. A partir de una revisión exploratoria e integradora de la literatura sobre ecologías de intermediación y de 13 estudios que vinculan la ESS con las transiciones ecosociales, las autorías identifican problemas de coordinación y respuestas basadas en la ESS. Muestran cómo la intercooperación, la gobernanza democrática en red, el arraigo territorial y las finanzas éticas orientadas por la misión pueden transformar la competencia por recursos en complementariedad, distribuir la detección y la toma de decisiones entre escalas y sostener trabajos de transición a largo plazo más allá de los ciclos de proyectos. A partir de este análisis, el artículo desarrolla un marco conceptual y proposiciones contrastables y propone orientaciones de política que reconocen a las redes de ESS como gestoras a escala de ecología, diseñan arenas híbridas donde intermediarios públicos, de régimen y comunitarios co-deciden, fortalecen capacidades para la cooperación basada en valores y revisan los sistemas de evaluación para captar resultados relacionales y de valor.

Palabras clave: Economía Social y Solidaria; transiciones ecológicas; ecologías de intermediación; gobernanza democrática; finanzas orientadas por la misión.

Resumo

Este artigo argumenta que as transições ecológicas são cada vez mais moldadas por intermediários sobrepostos e que os princípios da Economia Social e Solidária (ESS) podem tornar essas "ecologias de intermediação" mais eficazes e justas. Com base numa revisão exploratória e integrativa da literatura sobre ecologias de intermediação e em 13 estudos que relacionam a ESS às transições ecossociais, os autores identificam problemas de coordenação e respostas ancoradas na ESS. Mostram como a intercooperação, a governança democrática em rede, o enraizamento territorial e as finanças éticas orientadas por missão podem transformar a competição por recursos em complementaridade, distribuir a percepção e a tomada de decisão entre diferentes escalas e sustentar trabalhos de transição de longo prazo para além dos ciclos de projetos. A partir dessa análise, o artigo desenvolve um quadro conceitual e proposições testáveis e propõe orientações de política que reconhecem as redes da ESS como guardiãs ao nível de ecologia, desenham arenas híbridas em que interme-

diários públicos, de regime e comunitários co-decidem, constroem capacidades para a cooperação baseada em valores e ajustam os sistemas de avaliação para captar resultados relacionais e de valor.

Palavras-chave: Economia Social e Solidária; transições ecológicas; ecologias de intermediação; governança democrática; finanças orientadas pela missão.

Descriptor

- Q01** Sustainable development
- Q58** Environmental policy; government policy and regulation
- P13** Cooperative enterprises; worker-owned; employee ownership
- O35** Social innovation; social entrepreneurship; social economy

Introduction

The urgent need to transform our socioeconomic system into a sustainable one has been identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2023) and has been the subject of numerous research studies from various perspectives. As Markard et al. (2012) rightly point out, establishing a long-term multidimensional transition process that transforms the current socio-technical system into one that guarantees sustainable production and consumption is paramount. Loorbach (2010) defines this transition as a complex association of diverse interactions among individuals, organizations, and networks, while Soberón et al. (2022) highlight the role of intermediaries in connecting governance processes within transitions to achieve sustainability objectives. Building on this body of research, this article contributes to the existing literature on intermediaries from the perspective of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), arguing that its distinctive characteristics—based on its principles and values—offer valuable mechanisms for facilitating and sustaining ecological transition processes.

Before delving into the concept of intermediaries, it is important to recognize that the literature on transitions presents a plurality of approaches, which, as Hölscher et al. (2018) note, can be considered complementary in addressing an intrinsically complex phenomenon. The present research focuses on sociotechnical transitions (STT) from an exploratory perspective. Rather than exhaustively evaluating the systemic reality of change processes, it seeks to identify the types of entities and mechanisms that can help overcome existing challenges. Within this framework, Kanda et al. (2020) identify a specific category of actors—intermediaries—defined as strategic and self-identified entities whose functions often transcend mere facilitation and instead contribute to shaping the direction and coherence of transition processes.

Intermediaries have been recognized as key facilitators of sustainable transitions (e.g., Mignon & Kanda, 2018). However, the contemporary context –marked by post-pandemic disruptions, geopolitical instability and environmental uncertainty–, poses significant challenges to their ability to fulfil that role. Transition processes generate shifting relationships among stakeholders, intermediaries and institutions, revealing diverse interests and motivations that current conditions often amplify and can hinder coordination. This article therefore argues that research on STT and intermediaries can benefit substantially from engaging with the SSE, whose organizations embody cooperative, community-based and democratically governed forms of coordination that may strengthen intermediation capacities.

Focusing more closely on the concept of intermediaries, Kanda et al. (2020) develop a conceptualization of both their definition and their roles, identifying different levels of intermediation systems. Expanding upon this work, Soberón et al. (2022) introduce a new level of analysis within the notion of ecologies of intermediation, which highlights the conditions under which relationships between intermediaries and intermediation processes emerge, evolve, persist and dissolve within specific contexts. These ecologies emerge in the context of the necessary systemic changes required in our models of production and consumption. Starting from this complex web of interrelations and dependencies, this research aims to further explore the dynamics generated within sustainable transitions by analyzing a reality that is in an incipient and evolving phase.

Specifically, this exploratory research conducts a targeted literature review, focusing on two specific areas: ecologies of intermediation and the SSE. The objective is not to provide an exhaustive empirical description, but rather to theoretically explore how the mechanism, principles, and values of the SSE can contribute to the development and strengthening of the intermediation processes and in the ecological transitions in general. Against this backdrop, the research question (RQ) that guides this study is as follows:

RQ. How do the principles and values of the Social and Solidarity Economy interact with ecologies of intermediation in sustainability transitions?

In this research context, our contribution is to enhance the notion of ecologies of intermediation through the lens of the SSE. Rather than providing detailed case studies, we present a conceptual framework that explores how SSE principles –such as solidarity and reciprocity, democratic and cooperative governance and community embeddedness– can be operationalized as ecological capacities that address persistent coordination challenges. Three central claims are advanced. First, the establishment

of values-based coordination and cooperation routines (e.g. shared services, federated platforms) can help to transform potential rivalry among intermediaries into a state of complementarity. Second, democratic, networked governance mechanisms enhance adaptability under volatility by distributing sensing, decision-making and learning across organizations and scales. Third, community-rootedness and patient, mission-oriented finance can address long-term intermediation gaps by sustaining trust, continuity, and stewardship of shared infrastructures. These contributions will be addressed systematically by identifying the opportunities and challenges presented by ecologies of intermediation, such as the SSE, in ecological transitions. Against this backdrop, the general research question is addressed through two specific sub-questions that enhance the contribution done:

RSQ1. In what ways can SSE mechanisms (intercooperation, shared services, solidarity finance and community anchoring) strengthen the coordination, adaptability, and continuity of intermediation ecologies?

RSQ2. How do the relational, multi-actor and power-laden dynamics of intermediation ecologies, in turn, reshape, constrain or enable the application of SSE principles?

In terms of methodology, an exploratory literature review is conducted to establish an analytical framework that maps SSE mechanisms to ecological functions, specifies boundary conditions and derives testable propositions for STT. Through this theoretical synthesis, the SSE is positioned not merely as another group of actors, but as a repertoire of practices and governance principles capable of strengthening the design, maintenance, and evolution of intermediation ecologies.

To facilitate reader orientation, the article adopts the following structure. Firstly, we develop the conceptual grounding that brings together ecologies of intermediation and the SSE. Then, we describe the exploratory review design. We then present findings on opportunities and difficulties and demonstrate how SSE mechanisms function as ecological capacities. We then discuss the implications of these findings, their limitations, and potential future research directions. Finally, we offer policy recommendations to conclude the analysis. In principle, we reconceptualize transition governance as the ecological alignment of heterogeneous intermediaries through SSE-derived, value-based capacities. In practice, we translate this lens into actionable guidance for public authorities and networks by recognising the SSE as an ecology-level actor, designing hybrid arenas, building cooperation capabilities, and adjusting evaluation systems towards relational and value outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

Transition processes and governance

As Geels (2019) points out, the transition processes shaping the current models of production and consumption have been extensively analyzed across diverse theoretical traditions. Despite their differences, they all agree on the idea that systemic, rather than isolated, change is required, implying a reconfiguration of multiple socio-economic, cultural and technological dimensions. While some advocate gradual adjustments within the current model, others propose more profound transformations that challenge the status quo. There are even approaches that emphasize rupture over reform, seeking a shift towards value-driven, post-growth models (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). Among these perspectives, the STT approach has attracted the most attention in recent research (Geels, 2019). However, as Hölscher et al. (2018) point out, all these perspectives are not mutually exclusive; rather, they offer complementary insights that, when combined, can help to address the intrinsic complexity of sustainability transformations.

STT are complex, long-term processes involving multiple actors with the aim of transforming basic production and consumption systems (Loorbach 2010; Geels, 2004; 2011). To achieve the desired transformation, systemic changes must occur involving technologies, policies, markets, consumption practices, infrastructure, cultural meanings and scientific knowledge. These are reproduced, maintained and transformed by various actors, including companies and industries, policymakers and public officials, consumers, civil society, professionals, and researchers (Geels, 2004; 2011). As transitions involve a wide range of actors within a complex ecosystem, the most frequently used analytical framework is the multi-level perspective (MLP). This methodology analyses transitions across three interrelated levels: innovation niches, sociotechnical regime and sociotechnical landscape. The MLP thus focuses on the interplay between micro-level innovations, meso-level institutions and macro-level pressures, explaining how localized experiments can gradually influence or reshape dominant sociotechnical systems (Geels, 2004; 2011).

Although the analysis of transitions from a STT perspective is predominant, it also has limitations (Ramos-Mejía et al., 2018). By prioritizing technological and systemic changes, there is a tendency to overlook the impacts on people and neglect existing social inequalities. In that context, Ramos-Mejía et al. (2018) propose incorporating an eco-social perspective that integrates viewpoints that are often overlooked in transition studies. They argue that at the heart of any transition lies not only technological innovation, but also the restructuring of social relations and economic

priorities. In other words, transitions must be evaluated not only by their capacity to decarbonize production systems, but also by their ability to reduce social vulnerability and ecological degradation.

As previously mentioned, the STT approach examines the emergence of new regimes that transform basic features of production and consumption systems, including energy, mobility, housing, among others (Geels, 2011; Rip & Kemp, 1998; Schot & Geels, 2008). Considering these ideas, we deem it pertinent to study transitions from an eco-social perspective. This approach, while drawing upon the tools and methodologies of the STT literature, also allows for the circumvention of its inherent limitations. This integration has already been adopted by authors such as Díaz et al. (2024), who combine both perspectives to better understand the role of cooperative banks in these processes.

When considering the conceptualization of eco-social transitions, the interconnection between the ecological sustainability of the future model and a necessary vision of social justice is paramount. These transitions suggest a significant change to current economic and social systems, with the economy being directed towards meeting human needs and the sustainability of societies, rather than solely on the pursuit of economic profit (Ramos-Mejía et al., 2018). This approach involves adapting the size of the economy according to the planet's limits, which requires transforming sectors of activity, prioritizing more sustainable ones and reducing certain defining elements of the current socio-economic system, such as working time. In this context, production processes must be based on circular models that abandon linear practices of extraction and disposal, promoting strategies oriented towards sufficiency and efficiency in the use of resources (Villalba-Eguiluz et al. 2023). One of the elements that makes this transition approach interesting is that, instead of relying on competition as a regulatory mechanism, it proposes cooperation between economic actors to address both social and ecological needs, placing collective well-being above economic profitability. This integrative perspective aims to transform the economic model and social relations to ensure a sustainable and just future for present and future generations.

As we have seen in the conceptual approach to eco-social transitions, one of the key aspects is the need for governance that can manage the complexity and multiple interests of the actors involved in the transformation. In this sense, the concept of governance in transitions involves the interaction of political, economic and social actors, creating spaces and mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation (Farla et al., 2012; Fischer & Newig, 2016). These governance processes must be sufficiently flexible and dynamic to accommodate the tensions inherent in transitions. They seek to balance ecological and social objectives, as well as to address the tensions between different

visions of the future and the conflicting interests of actors competing under market rules. In this governance context, the challenges that can be identified in eco-social transitions are like those in STTs, although the way of addressing them differs completely. The former focuses on establishing governance based on collaborative values, while the latter emphasizes competitiveness.

The differences in how these challenges are governed are an area that has not yet been academically explored enough. The combination of socio-technical and eco-social perspectives could lead to fairer and more sustainable transitions. Consequently, this study will address the governance of transitions from an integrated approach that combines both perspectives, following the path opened by Díaz et al. (2024).

Systemic intermediaries and ecologies of intermediation as a form of transition governance

Considering the increasing prevalence of governance processes within transitions, the topic about analyzing the intermediaries of the transitions¹ has attracted growing scholarly attention from authors –such as Kanda et al. (2020) and Soberón et al. (2022). The present study aims to adopt a more comprehensive approach by exploring the broader implications of intermediaries within ecological transitions. It is noteworthy that intermediaries exhibit significant heterogeneity in terms of their origins, structures, functions, and areas of operation. Some emerge organically in response to systemic gaps, while others are established by governments or organizations to address specific challenges (Klerkx & Leeuwis, 2009). Their functions extend beyond mere facilitation, encompassing agenda setting, knowledge dissemination and the establishment of protective spaces for experimentation (Geels & Deuten, 2006; Bulkeley et al., 2011).

However, the efficacy of intermediaries is not without its challenges. These challenges may include issues such as resource dependency, power imbalances and conflicting stakeholder interests, all of which may limit their transformative capacity

1 At the heart of these transition processes are intermediaries, who act as facilitators, connectors, and mediators of change. Intermediaries can be defined as actors or entities that operate across different levels and domains, linking diverse stakeholders, resources, and knowledge systems to catalyse transformative processes (Kivimaa et al., 2019). Their multifaceted roles include promoting innovation, fostering collaboration, disseminating knowledge and advocating for policy change (Mignon & Kanda, 2018; Kanda et al., 2020). They are particularly useful in enabling experimentation within niche environments, where novel ideas and practices can be tested and refined (Geels, 2004).

(Kivimaa et al., 2019; Soberón et al., 2022). These constraints underscore the need to examine how contextual and organizational conditions –including participants, governance settings, cultural norms and power relations– influence intermediation practices and outcomes.

It has been demonstrated that intermediaries do not act in isolation, but rather enter relationships with other actors, intermediaries and institutions, within a specific context. These relationships generate ecologies of intermediation that represent the dynamic and interconnected networks of intermediaries that emerge during transitions towards sustainability. This concept underscores the relational and evolutionary nature of intermediaries, emphasizing how their roles and activities are shaped by contextual factors, including governance structures, cultural norms and technological landscapes (Soberón et al., 2022; Hyysalo et al., 2018). In contrast to the traditional view of intermediation as isolated actions, the ecologies of intermediation recognize the importance of synergies and complementarities between diverse actors (Kivimaa et al., 2019; Hernberg & Hyysalo, 2024).

These intermediaries are recognized as systemic actors, distinguished by their ability to operate across multiple levels and domains, facilitating interaction between niches, regimes, and landscapes in the STT framework (Kivimaa et al., 2019). They assume particular significance in contexts that require the coordination of multi-stakeholder collaboration to address entrenched systemic challenges (Soberón et al., 2022; Klerkx & Leeuwis, 2009). In the context of eco-social transitions, systemic intermediaries could assume a pivotal role in the integration of ecological and social dimensions since their function includes facilitating knowledge co-creation, bridging the gaps between scientific and local perspectives, and mediating conflicts between stakeholders with divergent priorities (Mignon & Kanda, 2018; Soberón et al., 2022). For instance, intermediaries can support community initiatives by providing access to resources, technical expertise and political advocacy, while aligning these efforts with broader sustainability goals (Fischer & Newig, 2016).

The reality that can be seen in the literature about ecologies of intermediation is complex, and it is worth focusing on the opportunities and challenges generated by these dynamics. As previously referenced, the efficacy of intermediation ecologies is contingent on numerous factors, including the diversity of intermediaries, their capacity to adapt to evolving circumstances, and the mechanisms in place to encourage collaboration and accountability (Kanda et al., 2020). However, the present situation does not greatly facilitate the generation of ecologies that pursue common goals. In the context of our research, additional challenges arise from the eco-social approach, specifically on the need to balance power dynamics, debates on evolving north-south

issues, ensuring equitable societal participation in transition decisions, or addressing structural inequalities that may hinder the transition process (Loorbach, 2010). These factors underscore the necessity for a systemic perspective that acknowledges the intricacies and interdependencies inherent in transitions towards sustainability. Concentrating on the opportunities and challenges anticipated in these ecologies of intermediation are imperative, as Soberón et al. (2022) have demonstrated, so that actions can be taken with elements of check and balance.

The interplay between opportunities and challenges within ecologies of intermediation constitutes a pivotal feature of their dynamics, meriting detailed and continuous study. These ecologies possess the capacity to stimulate innovation, accelerate learning processes, and amplify the impact of successful initiatives. By leveraging the strengths of diverse intermediaries, ecologies can create synergies that amplify their collective impact (Kivimaa et al., 2019; Kanda et al., 2020). For instance, systemic intermediaries can function as connectors, thereby facilitating knowledge and resource sharing across sectors and levels of governance (Soberón et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, the dynamic, multi-actor, and evolving nature of these ecologies also gives rise to tensions and conflicts. Competition among intermediaries often constitutes one of the first tensions that surface within these ecologies. Despite the possibility of collaborative efforts towards shared objectives, the limited nature of resources frequently generates competitive dynamics (Soberón et al., 2022). Overlaps in mandates and ambiguity in roles can lead to inefficiencies and duplication of efforts (Soberón et al., 2022; Hyysalo et al., 2018). Moreover, the lack of stable, long-term funding and institutional support may undermine both the continuity and the effectiveness of intermediaries, particularly in contexts where systemic transitions necessitate sustained engagement (Kanda et al., 2020; Fischer & Newig, 2016). This issue is further compounded when discussing actors within the eco-social transition, as the inherent tensions within the approach result in a direct conflict between individual interests and the greater good. Consequently, from an eco-social transition perspective, intermediation ecologies tend to operate in a fragile and unstable equilibrium.

In this complex context, the integration of social justice and equity considerations demands a deeper and more sustained commitment to tackling structural inequalities. This necessitates the navigation of sensitive issues by intermediaries, including power imbalances, cultural differences and historical injustices, while maintaining their role as neutral facilitators (Mignon & Kanda, 2018; Kivimaa et al., 2019). To address these challenges, it is essential to cultivate more effective ecologies of intermediation through deliberate strategies, such as building capacity, fostering trust and collaboration, and developing mechanisms for conflict resolution (Kivimaa et al.,

2019). By adopting a systemic and reflexive orientation, intermediation ecologies can enhance their resilience and adaptive capacity, thereby improving their contribution to sustainability transitions in the face of emerging social and environmental challenges.

SSE and the role in transition processes

The field of the SSE emerged primarily from an open plural debate rather than from a stable consensus. As a hybrid label, it aims to unify within a single framework the potential for innovation and change of the Social Economy (Soccer) and the Solidarity Economy (SolE), and its use has gradually expanded in international academic and institutional circles. However, the literature itself emphasizes that this hybridization raises questions about its coherence and its real capacity to bring together different normative and organizational universes: is it an operational umbrella or a label that blurs boundaries? (Pérez de Mendiguren et al., 2009; Pérez de Mendiguren & Etxezarreta, 2015).

On a conceptual level, the SolE reintroduces Polanyi's substantive view of the economy and a plurality of organizing principles (exchange, redistribution, reciprocity), questioning the formalism that identifies the economy with self-regulating markets and maximizing agents. From there, it proposes to re-root the economy in institutions and norms, and understands economic relations as institutionalized and socially constructed, not reducible to pure individual rationality (Pérez de Mendiguren & Etxezarreta, 2015). This shift is not only methodological since it also re-politicises economic activity, positioning the SSE as both an economic and political project, open and influenced by other transformative movements (feminism, environmentalism, alter-globalisation), though still marked by internal tensions and incomplete coherences.

Concurrently, the SocE has followed a more consolidated legal, institutional, and statistical path (CIRIEC/EMES), historically grounded in cooperatives, mutuals, and associations. However, the literature indicates a shift in its institutional agenda towards legal and fiscal recognition, which occasionally overlaps with the more explicitly political claims of the SolE (Pérez de Mendiguren & Etxezarreta, 2015). This highlights a key tension: how to balance institutionalization, which brings visibility, access to public policies and regulatory stability, with the transformative ambition of democratizing the economy beyond market-centred logics. The question is therefore not only whether legal stabilization is desirable, but to what extent such stabilization enables or, conversely, narrows the transformative horizon of the SolE (Pérez de Mendiguren & Etxezarreta, 2015). While much of the literature highlights the tendency for institutional pressures to homogenize SocE organizations (Bager, 1994), there is also evidence

that these pressures can be negotiated or bypassed. As Arando and Herce (2023) demonstrate in the MONDRAGON cooperatives case, even within a complex regulatory environment, organizations with strong cooperative traditions, internal governance capacity, and inter-cooperation mechanisms can use institutionalization as a resource rather than an obstacle, transforming it into a means to sustain, not dilute, their transformative project.

An important node in the debate is the notion of social enterprise, formulated by the EMES network as an ideal type with two sets of criteria: economic (continuous activity, autonomy, risk, paid work) and social (community benefit, participatory governance, limits on the distribution of surpluses). The intention was to bridge between the cooperative and associative traditions, but definitional ambiguity persists, affecting the measurement, mapping, and evaluation of the sector (Pérez de Mendiguren et al., 2009). The discussion is not only of an academic nature. Defining what does and does not fall within the scope of a social enterprise has practical consequences (transparency, accountability, eligibility for policies). The question of where the line should be drawn between commercial companies with social responsibility and the outsourcing of public services is a complex one (Pérez de Mendiguren et al., 2009).

At the same time, growing evidence points to the risk of isomorphism. The emphasis on efficient management and competitive pressure can displace social goals, especially in contexts of austerity where low-cost service provision is assumed. This reconfigures internal priorities and erodes legitimacy if there are no mission safeguards (Pérez de Mendiguren et al., 2009). The issue of how models with substantive values can scale up without converging towards dominant commercial logics remains unresolved. The literature acknowledges the tension yet does not provide clear or generalizable conditions for resolving it (Pérez de Mendiguren & Etxezarreta, 2015).

In this regard, one of the arguments that supports the relevance of SSE as an integrative category is not so much organizational homogeneity –as has been demonstrated– as the existence of a shared normative core. When we shift the focus from legal status or institutional maturity to the principles that guide action, a clear convergence emerges between the SocE tradition (reflected in the European charters of cooperatives, mutual societies and associations) and the more heterogeneous SolE tradition (reflected in Latin American declarations, labor economy proposals and the charters of networks such as REAS). This convergence suggests that initiatives under the SSE umbrella embody values fundamentally at odds with market-centered logics.

Firstly, both approaches share the principle of prioritizing people and social goals over capital. In essence, this means placing the focus on achieving a mission rather than the pursuit of profit (Monzón and Chaves, 2011; Coraggio, 2011). This

priority enables us to identify shared experiences within the market, such as the utilization of public and private resources or the incorporation of volunteer contributions. Notably, these experiences usually involve the reinvestment of most surpluses into the collective project and the community.

A second shared value is economic democracy. SocE formulated this early on through one-member-one-vote systems. SolE, in turn, radicalizes it by placing self-management, the expanded participation of the subjects involved (producers, users, territory) and transparency as a condition of legitimacy. In both cases, the question is not only how decisions are made, but who is entitled to decide on resources that are considered common or socially produced. Therefore, the SSE can be considered an endeavour to broaden reciprocity and co-decision beyond the organizational boundaries, aligning them with networks, movements and local governments (Laville, 2010). The point of friction –the extent of openness and the target audience– remains, but a shared reference standard has emerged –that the economy must ultimately be democratized.

A third and increasingly influential principle concerns the sustainability of life and socio-ecological justice. The SolE incorporated these dimensions earlier, through alliances with feminism, agroecology or fair trade. In the case of the SocE, the commitment to sustainability is more recent and still evolving. These principles have been integrated in accordance with the agendas on sustainable development and the necessity to demonstrate differential contributions in public policies. In both cases, the fundamental principle is that economic activity must be compatible with ecological limits, recognize and redistribute care work and be anchored territorially with responsibility. This makes the SSE a particularly appropriate space for transition processes (Olaizola-Alberdi et al., 2025) because it operates with a logic of resource hybridization and social co-responsibility that the conventional capitalist market and specialized administrations find more difficult to sustain (Pérez de Mendiguren & Etxezarreta, 2015).

Another element of convergence lies in solidarity as an organizing and operating principle. In the SocE, this is expressed through inter-cooperation, mutual funds or community services, while in the SolE it takes the form of mutual aid, non-monetary exchange networks, ethical finance or short and socially orientated value-chains. The mechanisms differ, yet the function remains constant, as the social costs that are externalized within the market are internalized within the organization, thereby facilitating community reproduction capacity. This allows us to consider the SSE not only as a ‘third sector’ between the state and the market, but as a transitional social infrastructure capable of sustaining long-term practices that de-commodify key areas without completely removing them from economic circulation.

Finally, most of these charters and declarations share a political commitment to environmental protection and to transforming the rules that produce exclusion. In this instance, the SolE tends to be more explicit in its links to movements for food sovereignty, feminist economics and the right to the city, while the SocE expresses it in the language of advocacy, social responsibility and institutional dialogue. However, there is a common underlying theme in both cases since the SSE is not merely an aggregation of “good” entities, but rather a project to reorient the economic system towards more democratic, equitable and sustainable forms. The hybrid label is thus particularly appropriate, as it provides a shared framework for mutual recognition and collaboration in policy, measurement and representation, while respecting the historical specificities of each tradition.

In summary, SSE initiatives tend to emerge where market and state mechanisms prove insufficient, prompting collective place-based responses (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005). In contrast to the concept of a closed sector, a relational network is proposed as a more accurate representation of the phenomenon under investigation. This network comprises different initiatives and is characterized by the exchange of skills, trust, and resources. The resulting hybrid field is both recognizable and distinct (Pérez de Mendiguren et al., 2009). In this context, networking becomes the key to facilitating mutual learning, generating mutual guarantees and achieving scalability without compromising community roots. The relational character of this phenomenon, as opposed to a pure market logic based on competition for resources, facilitates engagement in a productive dialogue with transition-oriented approaches. From this standpoint, the SSE can be regarded as a genuine family capable of connecting needs and resources in specific contexts (Klerkx & Leeuwis, 2009). This relational dimension has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention and offers valuable insights for enriching the literature on transitions.

Methodology

The methodological option for a literature review responds to the exploratory and connective purpose of the study. Rather than aiming to measure the effects of a specific policy or to compare closed cases, the objective is to establish a dialogue between two partially distinct bodies of literature –the one on ecologies of intermediation (mainly within STT) and the one on SSE in eco-social transitions– to see where one can, compensate for the limitations of the other. In emerging and conceptually heterogeneous fields, narrative and integrative reviews are considered more adequate than strictly systematic designs because they allow the incorporation of different vocabularies,

geographies, and levels of analysis, and make it possible to reconstruct notions that are still in formation (Paré et al., 2015).

To enhance the robustness of the results, the review was organised in two search blocks in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). First, we searched for “*ecologies of intermediation*” in title, abstract, and keywords. The term is very specific and yielded 5 academic contributions. To avoid an excessively narrow corpus, we applied an added method, named as snowballing on their references and citations, selecting 15 additional works that are treated there as precursors of the ecological view. Specifically, studies on systemic and multi-level intermediaries, urban experimentation, niche–regime connectors and orchestration of multi-actor initiatives. This first block provided the list of opportunities and difficulties that current ecologies of intermediation face.

Second, we launched the query “*Social and Solidarity Economy*” AND “*transitions*”, deliberately using the full label to capture not only northern social economy literature but also Latin-American and solidarity-oriented academic contributions. This search returned 52 papers. We applied two inclusion criteria. The article had to address sustainability or eco-social transitions, not merely local development or social inclusion, and it had to make explicit reference to SSE principles or value frameworks (solidarity, reciprocity, democratic/cooperative governance, territorial embeddedness, sufficiency). Applying these criteria, we retained 13 papers. This second block supplied the repertoire of mechanisms potentially mobilizable as “ecological capacities”.

The research team conducted the analysis in two consecutive stages. Firstly, both corpora were coded to identify opportunities and difficulties in each. Secondly, these two maps were cross-matched to identify, on the one hand, where a SSE mechanism responded directly to a challenge of the intermediation ecologies and, on the other, how the ecological perspective made visible functions of the SSE that usually remain implicit. This step is necessarily interpretive, but it is what enabled us to formulate the two sub-questions (RSQ1 and RSQ2) and to argue that the SSE should be understood not as an additional actor, but as a repertoire of governance capacities for transitions. On this basis, and adopting a transfer-oriented perspective, we have derived a set of public policy recommendations. These recommendations are aimed at addressing the gaps, tensions, and needs to be detected in the theoretical and empirical literature.

Results

Ecologies of Intermediation: Opportunities and difficulties

Building on the two bodies of literature reviewed, the following section presents the main findings from our integrative analysis. As our results stand out, the more recent strand of work on transition intermediaries proposes moving from the study of single, emblematic organizations to the analysis of ecologies of intermediation, that is, constellations of formal and informal intermediaries, operating at different system levels and evolving with the transition itself (Kivimaa et al., 2019; Kanda et al., 2020). This move is not merely descriptive. It recognises that contemporary transition arenas – energy communities, urban experimentation, circular and bio-based systems – are too complex to be supported by one “super-intermediary”. What exists is a distributed support infrastructure in which public agencies, consultancy firms, user platforms, advocacy networks, research centers and even peer-to-peer forums all mediate, each with a different mandate, degree of neutrality and temporal horizon (Bastås & Mignon, 2025). Seen from this angle, intermediation becomes a relational condition of ecological transitions rather than a task of one actor, and its governance must therefore focus on how these relations are created, aligned and, when necessary, re-composed.

A first opportunity of this ecological view is that it allows the combination of heterogeneous intermediation functions. Kivimaa et al. (2019) already argued that niche, regime, systemic, user, and process intermediaries are all needed, but for different things since some protect experimentation, others translate to incumbents, others destabilize unsustainable configurations. Only taken together do they form the “full ecology” that a transition requires. Kanda et al. (2020) give this intuition a clearer architecture by showing that intermediaries operate simultaneously in-between entities, in-between networks and in-between actors/networks/institutions, and that effectiveness comes from connecting these three levels. In other words, ecologies facilitate division of labour and complementarity, enabling one actor to focus on providing bilateral advice to adopters, another to build cross-sector coalitions and a third to change the institutional rules that enable those coalitions. Bastås and Mignon’s (2025) survey on solar sector in Sweden makes this very specific since public and private intermediaries end up serving different target groups, at different moments of the adoption journey, and with different kinds of knowledge, so that adopters experience a more continuous support track than any single actor could have provided alone.

A second opportunity lies in handling temporality. Both Soberón et al. (2022) and Bastås and Mignon (2025) show that ecologies are not born coordinated. Early

on there are overlaps, gaps and even contradictory messages with time, roles become sharper, some actors withdraw, others emerge, and a degree of sequencing appears (for instance, public advisors first, installers later). Looking at the whole ecology, rather than at one organization, is what lets researchers see this transition from fragmented to more ordered patterns of intermediation. This is important for policy because it suggests that temporary redundancy or overlap is not necessarily a failure, but occasionally the price to pay to build a resilient support infrastructure.

A third opportunity concerns bridging across sociotechnical levels and worlds. Ehnert's (2023) analysis of urban experimentation in Dresden shows clearly that when niche intermediaries (citizen labs, transition experiments) and regime intermediaries (municipal offices) work in tandem, the city gets both visionary capacity and procedural capacity – one side mobilizes people and new frames, the other side secures institutional anchors and navigates administrative complexity. This reinforces the argument that ecologies help to pluralize the sources of intermediation and to keep open a space “in-between” niches and regimes where translation, conflict mediation and joint framing can happen. Without that in-between space, experiments either remain local curiosities or get absorbed by incumbents under their terms.

A fourth opportunity, which is more novel, is that ecologies themselves can be deliberately cultivated. Based on the Spanish initiative *El Día Después*, Soberón et al. (2022) argue that the ecology of intermediation role is not to support a project or a sector, but to make the relations among existing intermediaries more productive, less conflictive and more responsive to the transition context. This is an important contribution because the earlier literature treated ecologies as something that “emerges” as transitions unfold. However, here the ecology is made governable. Ecology intermediation promises optimization of resources, shared opportunities, knowledge exchange and the possibility of linking parallel transition arenas that usually do not talk to each other (energy–mobility–food, national–local, public–civic).

Precisely because ecologies multiply actors and relations, the literature is equally insistent on the difficulties they bring. The first and most cited one is competition for visibility, funding, and strategic influence inside the ecology. Intermediaries are very good at making others collaborate, but not always at collaborating among themselves. Since many of them depend on the same public programs or philanthropic funds, a perverse competition appears that undermines the partnerships the transition needs (Soberón et al., 2022). This becomes sharper in acceleration phases, when some roles are no longer needed and others become central, creating turf wars and defensive behaviors.

A second difficulty is the highly dynamic and uncertain context in which these ecologies operate. Transitions open brief “windows” –regulatory changes, new EU calls, sudden price shifts– and intermediaries must read them, realign their activities and help others to do so. Soberón et al. (2022) show that this continual adaptation is difficult to coordinate collectively since each intermediary interprets the window through its own sectoral lens, geography or clientele, so alignment cannot be taken for granted; it must be worked for. Moreover, strategic adaptation can threaten the very legitimacy of intermediaries (“are we still neutral?”, “are we still public-interest oriented?”), pushing some of them into diversification or into combining intermediation with commercial activities to survive, which again increases heterogeneity and complexity (Kanda et al., 2020).

A third, very persistent difficulty is achieving the right composition. It is about having the right mix of intermediaries at the right moment. Case studies repeatedly report “empty spots” in ecologies –for instance, no actor taking care of cross-regional scaling, or no one doing political advocacy for a community innovation– and these gaps slow down or even stall the transition phase that depends on them. As transitions advance, new forms of intermediation become necessary (e.g. decommissioning, finance aggregation, conflict mediation with incumbents), but they do not appear automatically. That is why Soberón et al. (2022) propose ecology-level orchestration, and why Bastås and Mignon (2025) insist that the apparent public–private complementarity they found is probably more fragile than it looks once we bring in the informal, often invisible, intermediaries (peers, platforms, associations) that are very difficult to map.

A fourth difficulty concerns power and (dis)empowerment inside the ecology. Ehnert (2023) shows that regime-embedded intermediaries are indispensable to make experiments travel through bureaucratic procedures, but they are also socially and institutionally constrained since they cannot always act as impartial translators, and occasionally, they even reproduce the very hierarchies that experiments were trying to unsettle. In those situations, an external or more community-rooted intermediary is needed to rebalance the negotiation – but this multiplies actors again and, with them, transaction costs.

Finally, there is a structural difficulty that all authors stress in different words: ecologies add complexity and costs. They increase the number of actors, meetings, interfaces and reporting lines in a transition field. These costs only make sense if the benefits –faster diffusion, better alignment, higher quality of support, more inclusive governance– actually materialize. Otherwise, ecologies risk becoming self-referential arenas that compete for resources without delivering commensurate transition value.

Social and solidarity Economy: An odd view of transitions

The body of work that connects the SSE with transitions does not begin with sectors, technologies or efficiency, but with values that are already organizing economic life – solidarity, reciprocity, economic democracy, care and territorial embeddedness– and asks how far those values can be stretched to reorient development paths. In contrast with the dominant, Northern and often techno-managerial narrative on “green” transitions, the literature about SSE and transitions argue that many territories –especially in Latin America and also in parts of Southern Europe– are already advancing ecological transitions by thickening plural, community-rooted economic relations, even if they do not name them through the standard STT vocabulary (Arcos-Alonso et al., 2024; Carranza-Barona et al., 2025). From this angle, the SSE offers an odd view because it makes principles –not technologies– the unit of analysis, and because it places social reproduction, food sovereignty and care work in the center of transition priorities, not at the margins.

A first opportunity identified by this literature is that SSE principles re-embed economic coordination in solidarity and thereby generate transition capacities that the market and the state on their own do does not create. Soto-Gorrotxategi et al. (2025) show, for the Basque SSE networks, that intercooperation routines –joint services, mutual learning, shared political advocacy– are explicitly built on reciprocity, mutual aid and justice, and that these routines strengthen organizations and make them more transformative. In practice, solidarity becomes an intra-field infrastructure that reduces rivalry for scarce resources, allows knowledge and funding to circulate and enables the field to speak with one voice in territorial transition arenas. The contribution here is clear, since values (solidarity/reciprocity) are turned into meso-level coordination mechanisms that accelerate and protect eco-social transitions.

A second opportunity is that SSE principles inject sufficiency and limited-profit logics into transition agendas that are otherwise captured by competitiveness and green growth. As demonstrated by Villalba-Eguiluz et al. (2023), cases in the Basque Country and Western Switzerland illustrate that the SSE’ normative core –mission primacy, profit limitation, and stakeholder cooperation– produces a circularity that begins with refusal, rethinking, and reduction, and subsequently progresses to recycling or industrial optimization. This “social circularity” is made possible by the strategic decision of organizations to prioritize social and ecological goals over economic profit maximization. As Villalba (2024) confirms at policy level, when circular economy policies are designed with sufficiency and horizontal governance in mind –as they are with SSE networks such as REAS– they can be categorised as transformative economies.

However, when they are designed around efficiency and competitiveness –as in the Basque institutional circular economy– they cannot. The contribution here is to offer a value-based criterion to judge what counts as a transformative transition.

A third opportunity concerns territorial, pluriversal transitions. The Andean systematization led by Arcos-Alonso et al. (2024) and the Ecuadorian cases analyzed by Carranza-Barona et al. (2025) demonstrate that, when SSE principles are combined with agroecology or feminist/care perspectives, transitions are redefined around three dimensions: building alternative economic relations, guaranteeing basic need sovereignty and recognizing care as a productive activity. These are not add-ons, since they are territorial priorities that emerge from community and SSE actors themselves, and they expand the transition agenda beyond energy or mobility. The contribution here is twofold: firstly, to demonstrate the compatibility of SSE values with decolonial and ecofeminist frameworks for transition and secondly, to emphasize that transitions can be achieved by strengthening plural economies rather than solely by promoting the adoption of environmentally sustainable practices by incumbent entities.

A fourth opportunity is the SSE's capacity to hybridise public, social, and market rationalities to deliver transition outcomes in specific sectors. Sanz-Abad (2025) uses the case of Traperos de Emaús Navarra to show how one SSE organization can integrate, in the same practice, an institutional logic (public contracts for waste), a social logic (inclusion of vulnerable groups) and a mercantile logic (sale of recovered materials) without abandoning its core principles. This plural rationality is what allows it to orient waste management simultaneously towards environmental goals and social justice –something ordinary firms or bureaucracies rarely achieve. The contribution here is to demonstrate that SSE values can be institutionalized in public-social partnerships and, in doing so, they turn “service provision” into a concrete piece of a just transition. A parallel argument is made by Itçaina and Kieffer (2025) for Mexican community-based tourism since moving from community to cooperative, or back, is itself a transition when reciprocity, collective ownership and territorial identity must be renegotiated; SSE values provide the grammar to do so without losing social control.

A fifth opportunity, more recent, is that SSE principles enable financial and digital infrastructures for transitions. Díaz et al. (2024) show that ethical-solidarity finance such as Fiare Banca Ética makes mission, solidarity, and democracy the criteria for credit allocation, so finance becomes a transition device that sustains SSE innovations over time and keeps them inside a safe space. Barba del Horno (2025) does something similar for the digital sphere since he argues that only by combining public policy, digital commons and platform cooperativism under an SSE logic of co-production can the digital dimension stop reinforcing extractive capitalism and start contributing

to a just, low-carbon transition. Here the contribution is to show that SSE values are scalable to enabling infrastructures, not just to small local projects.

Precisely because the SSE view of transitions is value-driven and territorially grounded, the literature is equally clear about the difficulties it encounters. The first, visible in the EU text-mining study by Santos and Moreira (2025), is a recognition gap: European strategic documents do mention the SSE, but mostly as an implementer of social inclusion, care or local development, not as a driver of ecological or industrial transitions. This institutional framing flattens the transformative content of SSE principles and risks locking them into compensatory roles. The difficulty, therefore, is political, since values that in practice orient transitions are under-recognized in policy discourse.

A second difficulty is pressure stemming from interaction with public institutions and market environments. Villalba (2024) notes that, when SSE actors enter green-deal arenas, they are pushed to adopt competitiveness and scaling logics that can dilute sufficiency, horizontality, and mission primacy. The same tension appears in Sanz-Abad's (2025) analysis, since maintaining three economic rationalities at once is what makes the initiative transformative, but it also creates permanent negotiation over prices, labor conditions and contractual requirements.

A third, very persistent difficulty is bridging North–South and pluriversal understandings of transition. The Andean and Ecuadorian works insist that, if Northern transition frames are imported without acknowledging communities, feminisms or indigenous economies, then SSE becomes just another delivery mechanism for a transition designed elsewhere. In other words, values such as autonomy, reciprocity and territorial self-determination must be recognized as transition criteria, not as cultural ornaments. Otherwise, the risk is a recolonization of transitions through green policies.

A fourth difficulty lies in organizational forms. The Mexican community–cooperative analysis shows that translating community solidarity into cooperative governance is not linear. Issues of representation, leadership, gender, and benefit distribution can create ruptures and even exclusion within projects that are, in principle, guided by equality and reciprocity. The value base is common, but the institutional translation is contested, especially when market exposure grows or when public programs demand specific legal forms.

Finally, there is a structural difficulty in terms of the value-based transitions, which add layers of deliberation, participation and co-production. In that sense, the SSE transition mindset is intended to increase meetings, assemblies, accountability processes and spaces for care. It is only logical that these costs should be incurred if the literature is to be produced in a manner that is effective in delivering the promised

outcomes, namely more just, more territorially embedded and more sufficiency-oriented transition pathways. If not, the SSE risks being reduced once again to a set of “good practices” that relieve social pressure without altering the course of the sociotechnical system.

Connections, limitations and future paths encountered

Taken together, the two strands reviewed above are answering the same underlying problem: how to govern long, multi-actor transitions that are structurally fragmented and normatively contested. The literature on ecologies of intermediation gives us the structural picture – who is there, how roles overlap, why competition appears, why sequencing matters, where the gaps are. The SSE literature gives us the normative-operational picture with which principles actors are coordinating, how solidarity is institutionalized, how democratic and territorial logics can be made economically viable. Put differently, ecologies of intermediation show that we need distributed governance, while SSE shows how that distribution can be made collaborative, value-based and durable.

The connections are most evident when aligning opportunities with challenges. The primary challenge of ecologies –competition among intermediaries for visibility and resources– is precisely the area in which SSE can make the most significant contribution. Intercooperation, mutualization of services and shared political voice are routine instruments in SSE networks, explicitly grounded in solidarity and reciprocity, and designed to turn potential competition into complementarity (Soto-Gorrotategi et al., 2025). While the transition literature asserts the necessity of “ecology-level orchestration”, the SSE literature points to the existence of value-based devices capable of achieving this. The second challenge, which is operating in volatile, window-driven contexts, can be mitigated by democratic, networked governance of the kind practiced by SSE federations (such as REAS). By distributing sensing, decision-making and learning across organizations and territories, they create adaptive capacities that do not depend on a single, central intermediary. The third challenge, which is to maintain intermediation over time when projects and grants come to an end, can be addressed by focusing on community embeddedness and mission-oriented, solidarity finance. These mechanisms are key in sustaining infrastructures, trust and collective assets as market and state cycles change. This is not merely a theoretical or utopian proposition. The MONDRAGON cooperatives or Fiare Banca Ética experience demonstrate that cooperation and coordination based on solidarity can be made durable within highly

regulated environments, provided there is organizational density, shared purpose and supportive governance arrangements (Arando & Herce, 2023; Díaz et al., 2024).

It is also important to note that the traffic moves in both directions. The application of intermediation lenses in the context of SSE can effectively illuminate the “hidden work” involved. A significant proportion of the activities undertaken by SSE actors in various territories can be categorized as intermediation. These activities include the alignment of municipal programs with citizen groups, the translation of feminist/care demands into innovative services, the facilitation of dialogue between agroecology and public procurement or the animation of digital commons. By naming it as such, we can recognize informal and community-based actors as systemic intermediaries, not just as beneficiaries. This helps us to see that SSE fields also suffer from composition problems (e.g. missing advocacy actors, finance aggregators and connectors between local and national levels). It also helps us to understand certain organizational drifts not only as weaknesses, but as misalignments at the ecology level that require collective, not individual, correction. In this regard, the ecological perspective provides SSE with a medium to discuss its internal coordination challenges without compromising its fundamental principles.

Despite these complementarities, both corpora have some limitations. In principle, most contributions remain descriptive and actor-centered. In that sense, the literature outlines the roles and responsibilities of the involved parties, but it rarely provides detailed explanations of the underlying causal mechanisms or the conditions that lead to failure. These conditions include instances where cooperation is captured, solidarity becomes a form of club goods, and public-social partnerships are reduced to mere outsourcing. Methodologically, there is a strong bias towards European and Latin American urban or regional cases, where there is already a dense organizational fabric; we know much less about how value-based ecologies work in rural, dispersed or conflict-affected territories, or where the state is weak. Analytically, power and coloniality are present in the SSE papers, but often as background. We still lack systematic accounts of how power asymmetries inside ecologies (public–civic, North–South, gendered) reshape the very principles that are supposed to guide them. A review of EU documents reveals a discrepancy between the perception of the SSE by institutions and their understanding of the SSE’s role in driving transformation. This misalignment leads to limitations in funding, mandates, and visibility.

These gaps are indicative of future opportunities. Firstly, there is scope for a design-oriented agenda that explicitly combines the three SSE-derived capacities (value-based coordination, democratic network governance, territorial/patient finance) with the four ecological challenges (rivalry, volatility, composition, power). The output

would be frameworks for “ecology-building” that are not only functional, but also politically and socially legitimate. Secondly, comparative and longitudinal research is required to ascertain whether the SSE’s coordinating effect on ecologies is consistent across various transition arenas (energy, care, food, digital) and different geopolitical contexts (European welfare states, Latin American plurinational states, Mediterranean peripheral regions). Thirdly, there is a clear opening for policy co-design. If public actors are to play the role of ecology-level intermediaries – as in *El Día Después* – they will need tools to finance shared infrastructures, to evaluate value-based cooperation (not just outputs) and to recognize informal/community intermediaries as legitimate partners. Finally, both literatures would benefit from following more closely emerging enabling infrastructures (ethical finance, platform cooperativism, digital commons) because it is there where SSE principles are being scaled up and where the ecological view can most clearly show their systemic impact.

In summary, bringing these two bodies of literature into dialogue suggests that managing ecological transitions is as much about building and maintaining value-infused relationships as it is about implementing new technologies or policies. Ecologies of intermediation illustrate the necessity of distributed, relational governance, and the SSE demonstrates that, in many territories, the normative and organizational repertoire exists to implement it, provided it is protected, named correctly and allocated resources over time.

Discussion

The analysis conducted in this article was based on a simple but insufficiently explored intuition. If intermediation has become a structural condition of ecological transitions, and if those transitions increasingly require value-based, democratic and territorially embedded forms of coordination, then the SSE is not just another stakeholder in the field, but a potential governance resource. The literature on ecologies of intermediation has confirmed the diagnostic dimension of this intuition. Ecological transitions today are sustained by dense, multi-actor, evolving constellations in which public, private, civic and hybrid intermediaries interact, sometimes in synergy and sometimes in tension (Kanda et al., 2020; Soberón et al., 2022). Concurrently, the SSE literature has demonstrated the existence of organizational families and normative repertoires that have developed effective coping mechanisms for precisely these tensions, including rivalry for resources, volatility of funding, the necessity to integrate public and market logics without compromising mission, and the imperative to maintain accountability

to communities (Pérez de Mendiguren & Etxezarreta, 2015; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, this suggests that transition governance can be reconceptualized as the ecological alignment of heterogeneous intermediaries through SSE-inspired capacities (see Figure 1).

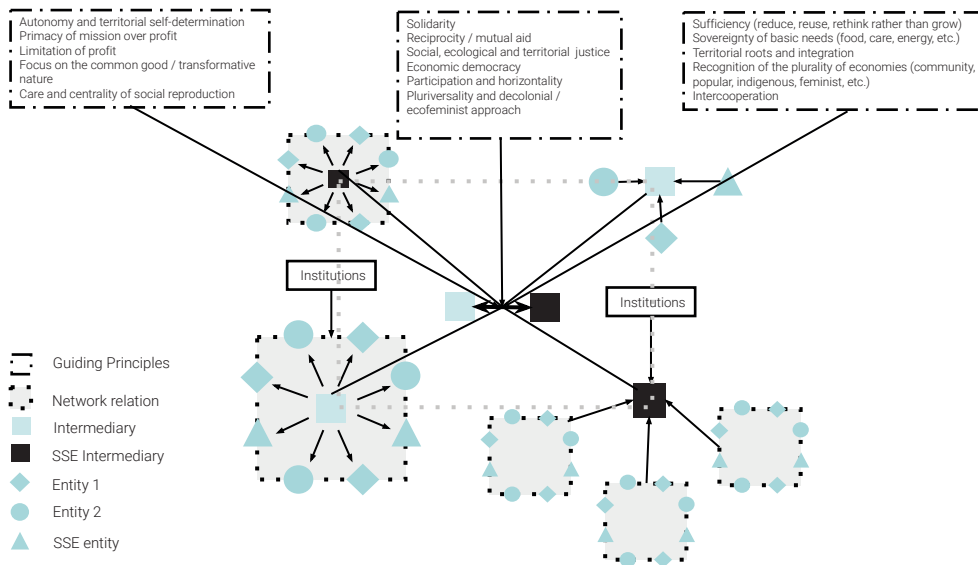


FIGURE 1

In our results, we specified three such capacities. First, values-based coordination and intercooperation routines can turn potential rivalry inside an ecology into complementarity because they introduce reciprocity, shared services and collective advocacy as rules of the game. Second, democratic, networked governance distributed across organizations and scales increase the ability of the ecology to read and react to volatile contexts without depending on a single central actor. Third, community-rootedness, together with patient and mission-oriented finance, provides the temporal depth that transition processes require but that project-based funding rarely offers. Seen in combination, these capacities do not replace the functions identified in the intermediation literature –experimentation support, translation, brokerage, regime engagement– but make them more governable under eco-social conditions.

At the same time, the dialogue between the two bodies of literature reveals an important asymmetry. Ecology studies tend to treat coordination problems as essentially technical or organizational (overlaps, sequencing, composition), whereas SSE studies treat them as essentially political and normative (whose voice counts, which

values are protected, how care and territory are recognized). Our findings indicate that, in real transition arenas, both dimensions appear together. Competition for visibility is not only a funding issue, but also a question of whose transition narrative becomes dominant. Difficulties in attaining the “right mix” of intermediaries are not only a mapping problem, but they are also a question of why some forms of knowledge (indigenous, feminist, community-based) are less likely to be recognized as intermediation. And sustaining shared infrastructures over time is not only a budgetary challenge, but also a question of whether local communities are willing to invest trust and time in them. For this reason, we argue that future work on ecologies of intermediation should make values and power explicit variables of analysis, not just contextual features to be noted in passing.

To summarise, the SSE can make a significant contribution to intermediation ecologies, and the relationship is mutually beneficial. The ecological approach can provide the SSE with the visibility and strategic status that it often lacks. However, this articulation is not without its challenges. In contrast to eco-social transition ecologies, sociotechnical transition ecosystems tend not to challenge prevailing narratives, as our research has demonstrated. Integrating the SSE into these arrangements has the potential to reorient the transition towards values of justice, care and territorial embeddedness. However, in a worst-case scenario, the very processes, actors, and intermediaries of the transition could exert pressures on the SSE, generating insights that are favorable to the regime. These insights could result in these initiatives sidelining their transformative mission and starting to resemble capital-driven enterprises.

This risk, which is also evident in the results, reinforces the need for a public policy proposal that promotes the positive aspects of this relationship (coordination, mutualization, visibility of situated knowledges), while also establishing safeguards against any potential drift that could diminish the SSE’s emancipatory content. From a policy perspective, the findings therefore point to four main areas of action for public authorities, intermediary organizations and SSE networks that want to turn this conceptual complementarity into an effective form of governance for ecological transitions.

1. Recognize and mandate the SSE as an ecology-level actor. Many of the difficulties identified in ecologies of intermediation – rivalry, lack of composition, weak accountability – arise because no actor has the explicit mandate to cultivate cooperation among intermediaries. The review of EU strategic documents shows that, for the time being, the SSE is mostly framed as an implementer of social policy and inclusion, not as an orchestrator of ecological transitions. Reframing SSE organizations and networks

as “intermediation stewards” would allow them to receive resources to do exactly what they are good at convening, mutualizing, translating across sectors and levels, and keeping the normative content of transitions visible. This recognition should appear in national and regional transition plans, not only in social or employment strategies.

2. Design hybrid governance arenas where public, regime-embedded and community-rooted intermediaries co-decide. Our results indicated that ecologies work best when niche and regime intermediaries operate in tandem (Ehnert, 2023), but they rarely have institutionalized spaces to do so. Public policy can create mixed intermediation roundtables or “transition labs” where municipal/regional offices, SSE networks, sectoral agencies and technical intermediaries jointly set priorities, decide sequencing and agree on common indicators. These arenas should be explicitly plural in terms of knowledge systems (technical, community, feminist, indigenous, etc.) to avoid recolonizing transitions through dominant Northern frames, something that the SSE literature on Latin America and Southern Europe warns about.
3. Build capabilities for value-based cooperation. The literature on SSE shows that intercooperation, transparency and democratic decision-making do not appear automatically, they are learned and maintained. If policymakers want ecologies of intermediation to adopt these modes, they need to invest in capacity-building programs for intermediaries on facilitation, conflict mediation, horizontal accountability, gender- and care-sensitive governance, and management of hybrid public–social partnerships. This is particularly important for regime-embedded intermediaries, which often reproduce hierarchical logics without intending to. Equally, SSE organizations that step into ecology-level roles will need training on policy processes, impact evaluation and cross-sector translation.
4. Adjust evaluation systems to capture relational and value outcomes. Current monitoring frameworks for transition policies are heavily output-oriented (number of projects, investments mobilized, GHG reductions). They do not measure whether an ecology has become more cohesive, whether trust among intermediaries has increased, or whether excluded territorial or social groups have gained voice in transition decisions. Introducing relational indicators (density of cooperation, stability of alliances, participation diversity, mutualised resources created) and value indicators (degree of mission alignment, sufficiency orientation, care integration) would make visible the

specific contribution of SSE -inspired governance and would legitimize funding for “invisible” intermediation work. This will serve as protection against institutional pressures that generate organizational pressures in SSE initiatives.

Conclusions, limitations, and future research lines

The emerging dialogue between ecologies of intermediation and the SSE offers a promising pathway for governing ecological transitions as relational and value-driven transformations rather than merely technological or institutional shifts. When public institutions acknowledge the SSE as an intermediary actor within a value-based-ecology, they can facilitate distributed governance while maintaining justice, care, and reciprocity at the core of transition agendas. SSE initiatives have long embedded these principles in everyday practice; their practical know-how for governing day-to-day situations provides concrete lessons for governing broader transitions. In this regard, the most significant contributions may arise within ecologies of intermediation when cultivated intentionally and with explicit normative commitments, they can catalyze more equitable ecological transitions.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our academic contribution, as these limitations will establish future research paths. Our claims are supported by a literature review that traces conceptual evolution rather than testing propositions empirically, and the evidence base is shaped by two broad, global databases in which Northern scholarship is over-represented, limiting attention to the Global South. While our synthesis makes connections between the SSE and ecologies of intermediation accessible to wider audiences, these constraints temper generalizability. The report also provides clear guidance on future actions, including the empirical examination of how value-based coordination mechanisms operate across various territorial and sectoral ecologies, and the institutional conditions that facilitate or hinder their success. It also involves undertaking comparative studies between Northern and Southern contexts to clarify how solidarity-based governance scales and adapts to diverse political economies. Finally, it recommends informing policy design that prioritizes enabling infrastructures –organizational, financial, and legal– that can sustain eco-social transitions over time and ensure they are democratically governed.

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