CREATING PUBLIC VALUE WITHIN THE SMART ENERGY COMMUNITIES (SECS): A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR HYBRID ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid organizations, such as Smart Energy Communities (SECs), play a pivotal role in the dynamic landscape of the energy sector by attempting to harmonize the pursuit of both public and private value. As the transition to a sustainable and smart energy future gains momentum, understanding how these organizations effectively balance these dual objectives and create public value becomes paramount. This paper investigates the intricate dynamics influencing the ability of hybrid organizations to effectively create public value. Factors such as governance structures, stakeholder relationships, and mission alignment will be explored in depth to illuminate the strategies employed by these organizations to reconcile dual goals. Furthermore, this work develops a theoretical framework that enhances our understanding of the mechanisms and strategies employed by hybrid organizations to optimize public value creation. The framework considers the diverse missions, stakeholders, and organizational structures present within hybrid organizations. It integrates concepts from organizational theory, public management, and corporate social responsibility to provide a holistic view of the factors that contribute to the creation of public value in these complex entities. By systematically analyzing these factors, the paper offers practical insights for SECs and policymakers seeking to enhance their effectiveness in driving positive social and environmental impacts.

Keywords *- Public value creation, Hybrid organizations, Smart Energy Community, Sustainability.*

INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by rapid societal and environmental shifts, the emergence and evolution of hybrid organizations have become a focal point in discussions about innovative approaches to public value creation. Hybrid organizations, which operate at the intersection of public, private, and nonprofit sectors, aim to synergize the creation of both social and economic value, addressing complex societal issues with inventive solutions (Billis, 2010; Jay, 2013; Mair, 2015; Champenois & Etzkowitz, 2018; Panagiotopoulos et al.,

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2019; Mion & Tessari, 2021; Secinaro et al., 2021; Vakkuri et al., 2021). The blend of these sectors enables these organizations to generate public value while maintaining financial sustainability, a critical aspect in today's dynamic economic landscape. In particular, the UN (2015), in alignment with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the 2030 Agenda, has emphasized the need to "ensure everyone's access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy systems", leading to the creation of Smart Energy Communities (SECs) in line with SDG 7 ("Affordable and Clean Energy") and SDG 17, within the context of energy transitions and global partnerships.

This work delves into the theoretical and practical dimensions of hybrid organizations, with a particular focus on their role in creating public value. It explores how these entities, exemplified by the Smart Energy Community (SEC), navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by their unique positioning. The SEC's endeavors in promoting sustainable energy, reducing carbon emissions, and enhancing community life quality are reflective of the broader objectives and impacts of hybrid organizations (Ceglia et al., 2020; Savelli & Morstyn, 2021; Galassi, 2021). Central to our analysis are three pivotal theoretical frameworks: Institutional Theory, Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), and Social Entrepreneurship Theory. These perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics in the functioning and success of hybrid organizations like the SEC (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Hillman et al., 2009; Doherty et al., 2014; Mair et al., 2015; Rahim & Mohtar, 2015; Ferreira et al., 2017; Ozturk, 2021).

Additionally, the concept of public value, a cornerstone in public administration and management literature, is examined through the lenses of New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG). These theories offer insights into how public value is conceptualized and operationalized within hybrid organizations, highlighting the balance between efficiency, effectiveness, and broader societal impacts (Schedler & Proeller, 2000; Kickert, 2001; Lane, 2002; Jones & Kettl, 2003; Brandsen & Karré, 2011; Doherty et al., 2014; Wiesel & Modell, 2014; Dickinson, 2016; Ziruolo, 2016; Christensen & Lægreid, 2017).

As we navigate through these theoretical landscapes, we aim to present a nuanced understanding of how hybrid organizations like the SEC contribute to the public good, and how their innovative approaches can be a blueprint for addressing contemporary societal challenges. The case study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of hybrid governance, the application of smart cities governance principles, and the effectiveness of public value creation strategies in achieving sustainable and citizen-centric outcomes.

In this sense, the Sub-Equana Valley (Abruzzo, Italy) represents an intriguing context for examining public value creation models in hybrid organizations within the domain of smart cities governance. The Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community is an innovative initiative aimed at transforming a territory into a sustainable and energy-efficient urban ecosystem. It brings together a diverse set of stakeholders, including local government entities, energy providers, technology companies, research institutions, and community organizations, to collaboratively design, implement, and manage a range of smart energy solutions (Zavratnik et al., 2018; Ceglia et al., 2020; Gjorgievski et al., 2021; Satoła & Milewska, 2022).

The essential aim of this contribution is to draw upon the main theories and concepts related to public value and hybrid organizations to build a theoretical framework based on Moore's Strategic Triangle (1995) and test it within the context of an organization at the interception of these two research strands.

By applying these theories, we aim to develop the display of the SEC's public value creation and contribute to the theoretical foundations of hybrid organizations. The research questions underlying this contribution are the following:

> RQ1. How can hybrid organizations effectively balance the pursuit of both public and private value, and what are the key factors influencing their ability to create public value within this complex context?
>
> RQ2. What theoretical framework can be developed to better understand the mechanisms and strategies that enable hybrid organizations to optimize their public value creation, considering the diverse missions, stakeholders, and organizational structures that they encompass?

The results of this case study contribute to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence of public value creation in a hybrid organization context. Additionally, the findings offer insights into the unique characteristics and strategies employed by the SEC, highlighting potential avenues for further research and improvement in similar initiatives.

This paper is structured as follows: the next section provides an overview of the relevant literature on public value and hybrid organizations, highlighting the key concepts and frameworks employed in this study to assess the theoretical background of the contribution. Subsequently, the methodology section outlines the research design, data collection methods used and the generalizability potentials. The following sections present the findings, discussing the various dimensions of public value created by the SEC and identifying the factors contributing to its success and the challenges to be faced. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings, discusses their implications, and outlines potential avenues for future research.

THEORETICAL PREMISES

A preliminary overview

Hybrid organizations represent a unique model that harmonizes social and economic value creation. Operating at the intersection of public, private, and nonprofit sectors, they focus on generating public value while maintaining financial stability. Recently, these organizations have gained recognition for addressing complex societal issues with innovative solutions (Billis, 2010; Borgonovi & Mussari, 2011; Doherty et al., 2014; Mion & Tessari, 2021; Grossi et al., 2022; Mari & Picciaia, 2022).

Public value refers to the positive societal impact created by public and hybrid organizations. It encompasses a broad spectrum of social, environmental, and cultural contributions that go beyond conventional economic value, emphasizing collective welfare and public needs. For hybrid organizations like SEC, public value includes increased access to sustainable energy, reduced carbon emissions, and improved community quality of life

(Meynhardt, 2009; Deidda Gagliardo, 2015; Ziruolo, 2016; Cordella & Paletti, 2019; Godenhjelm & Sjöblom, 2020; Grossi et al., 2022; Ziruolo et al. 2023).

Recent literature has explored theoretical perspectives on the emergence and operation of hybrid organizations, highlighting public value creation as central. To understand SEC's experiences, three key theories are reviewed: Institutional Theory, Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), and Social Entrepreneurship (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Hillman et al., 2009; Doherty et al., 2014; Mair et al., 2015; Rahim & Mohtar, 2015; Ferreira et al., 2017; Ozturk, 2021).

Institutional Theory explains how formal and informal rules, norms, and values shape organizational behavior, guiding hybrid organizations in balancing environmental sustainability, economic viability, and social equity. Resource Dependence Theory focuses on the importance of external resources, such as financial capital, technology, and social networks, in enabling hybrid organizations like SEC to create public value, especially in sustainable energy initiatives. The Social Entrepreneurship perspective highlights how these organizations combine entrepreneurial strategies with social missions, driving resource mobilization and innovative solutions in energy and sustainability.

Additionally, New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG) offer contrasting approaches to public value creation. NPM emphasizes efficiency and accountability, while NPG advocates for collaborative and participatory approaches. Hybrid organizations like SEC often integrate elements of both to effectively generate public value. Social Entrepreneurship Theory further emphasizes the balance of social, environmental, and economic goals, illustrating how hybrid organizations like SEC leverage market mechanisms to advance their social missions and foster community engagement.

Theoretical foundations

This section provides the conceptual basis for understanding the research problem and forming the theoretical framework. It relies on two domain theories and a specific method theory, clarified here to define the theoretical foundations.

Firstly, regarding domain theories, Hybrid Governance is an organizational form combining characteristics of both public and private sectors (Vakkuri et al., 2022). Situated at the intersection of government, market, and civil society, hybrid organizations address complex societal challenges that traditional governance models cannot (Mair et al., 2015). These organizations leverage the strengths and resources of multiple stakeholders for collaborative decision making, enhanced service delivery, and public value creation (Jay, 2013; Grossi et al., 2022). By integrating diverse perspectives, hybrid governance models aim for innovative, sustainable solutions benefiting communities and society. Operationally, three main theories illuminate hybrid governance mechanisms: Co-Production Theory emphasizes public value created through collaboration among citizens, government agencies, and other actors, with citizens as active participants (Scupola & Mergel, 2022). Network Governance highlights the need for collaborative networks to address complex societal challenges through horizontal coordination and joint decision-making (Stoker, 2006). Social Innovation focuses on novel ideas, strategies, and practices that address

social needs and drive positive societal change, emphasizing bottom-up initiatives (Doherty et al., 2014).

Secondly, Smart Cities Governance applies advanced technologies and data-driven approaches to enhance urban efficiency, sustainability, and livability (Caragliu et al., 2013; Yigitcanlar, 2015; Meijer & Bolívar, 2016). It integrates digital infrastructure and ICT to optimize resource allocation, improve service delivery, and enable citizen participation (Finger & Razaghi, 2017; Vial, 2019). Smart cities governance underscores collaboration among governments, businesses, academia, and citizens to harness technology and innovation for public value creation (Pereira et al., 2017). These elements are exemplified in the Sub-Equana Valley SEC case study, a Smart (rural) Villages model that blends innovative technologies with sustainable practices in a rural setting, enhancing quality of life, economic opportunities, and environmental sustainability (Zavratnik et al., 2018). This concept balances rural traditions with modern needs, fostering a resilient community that thrives in the digital age while preserving rural living (Satoła & Milewska, 2022).

Regarding the applied method theory, public value creation refers to generating societal benefits valued by citizens and stakeholders (Deidda Gagliardo et al., 2015; Ziruolo, 2016; Cordella & Paletti, 2019; Magliacani, 2020; Papi et al., 2020). It encompasses social, environmental, and cultural dimensions beyond economic measures (Esposito & Ricci, 2015; Papi et al., 2018). Public value creation models prioritize citizen-centric approaches, participatory decision-making, and the co-creation of public value through engagement and collaboration (Grossi, 2022; Marsilio, 2022). These frameworks offer a holistic view of the impact and effectiveness of public policies. The analysis will use the Strategic Triangle (Moore, 1995; Ziruolo, 2016), a conceptual model identifying three key elements for public organizations' success:

- Public value: production of valid results for public bodies, citizens, users, and stakeholders, reflecting the positive impact of an organization on the community.
- Organizational capacity: sustainability and adequacy of organizational actions to achieve institutional objectives, ensuring adaptability to change and long-term effectiveness.
- Legitimacy and support: the organization's legitimacy and ability to garner and maintain public support for effective operation.

Theories selection

This section explains the theoretical foundations we selected to build a framework for understanding and enhancing the functioning of hybrid organizations and their public value-creation mechanisms.

Firstly, Institutional Theory, as highlighted in recent international literature, provides valuable insights into how organizations are influenced by the norms, values, and rules of their broader institutional environment (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Mair et al., 2015). For SECs, operating at the intersection of public, private, and nonprofit sectors, navigating

these institutional pressures is crucial. Institutional Theory helps explain how SECs conform to these pressures to gain legitimacy and maintain their social license to operate, balancing the dual goals of economic viability and social equity. Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), another significant theoretical lens used in this work, emphasizes the importance of external resources for the organizational survival and success of SECs, which rely on various external resources such as financial capital, technological expertise, and social networks (Hillman et al., 2009; Ozturk, 2021). Additionally, the Social Entrepreneurship theory, which focuses on innovative solutions to social problems by combining entrepreneurial principles with social goals, is ideal for studying SECs, addressing energy sustainability and community engagement through entrepreneurial approaches (Doherty et al., 2014; Rahim & Mohtar, 2015; Ferreira et al., 2017).

Operationally, however, three main theories were selected to clarify the hybrid governance mechanisms. Co-Production Theory, posing that public value is created through the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders, is crucial to understanding how SECs engage community members in the decision-making processes, ensuring that public value is co-created through inclusive practices (Scupola & Mergel, 2022). Network Governance Theory, recognizing the necessity of collaborative networks for addressing complex societal challenges, helps in analyzing how SECs coordinate and manage stakeholder relationships to implement smart energy solutions and achieve sustainable outcomes (Stoker, 2006). Furthermore, the Social Innovation perspective, developing novel ideas to address social needs, allows us to explore how SECs implement innovative strategies and practices to enhance their public value creation efforts (Doherty et al., 2014).

Finally, Moore's Strategic Triangle (1995) has been considered central to shaping a holistic theoretical framework because it provides a comprehensive model for public value creation, focusing on public value, operational capacity, and legitimacy and support. This model is well-suited for analyzing the dynamics of hybrid organizations like SECs and for understanding and optimizing public value creation in SECs by combining insights from the selected theories.

Reshaping a theoretical framework

Using existing previous theory as a guide, this theoretical section proposes a comprehensive framework for creating public value in hybrid organizations such as SECs by merging insights from Hybrid Organizations and Hybrid Governance theories within the context of Moore's Strategic Triangle (1995).

Firstly, concerning "legitimacy and support" dimension, SECs as hybrid organizations, operate within a complex institutional environment that includes government regulations, market forces, and community expectations. They must conform to these institutional pressures to gain legitimacy and maintain their social license to operate. Drawing from Institutional Theory, we argue that the creation of public value in SECs is intimately connected to their capacity to meet external expectations and adhere to the institutional logics of their operating environment (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Doherty et al., 2014; Mair et al., 2015). Public value creation in SECs can be optimized when stakeholders, including community members, actively participate in decision-making processes, contribute local knowledge, and co-create solutions. Co-production Theory, thus, informs the dimension

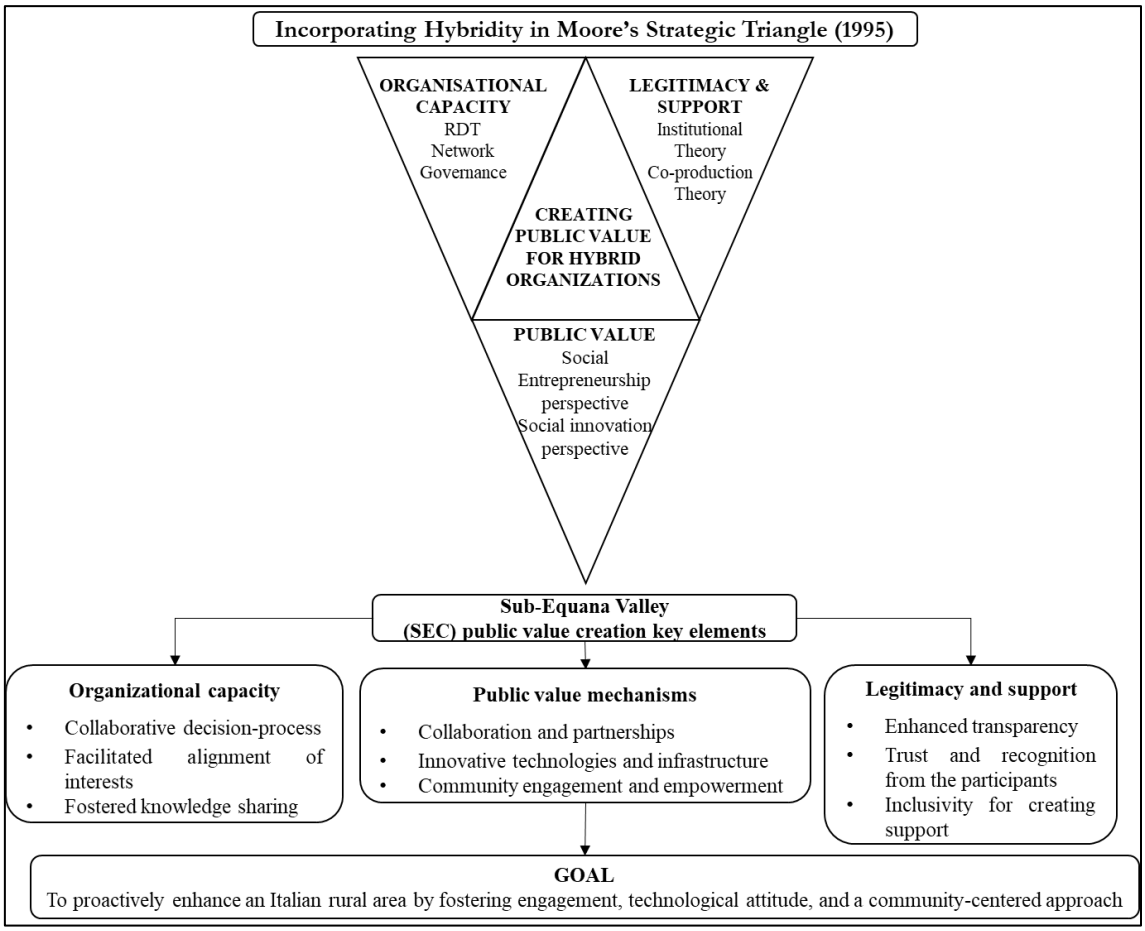
of support within our framework, emphasizing the role of stakeholders in contributing to the success of SEC initiatives (Scupola & Mergel, 2022).

Then, regarding "organisational capacity" dimension, in the context of SECs, RDT helps us analyze the interdependence between the organization and external entities, such as government agencies, energy suppliers, and community stakeholders. SECs are resource-dependent entities that require a continuous inflow of financial, technical, and social resources to fulfil their mission of sustainable energy provision. By integrating RDT into our framework, we examine how SECs navigate their resource dependencies and use them strategically to create public value (Hillmann et al., 2009; Ozturk, 2021). Moreover, in SECs Network Governance Theory provides insights into how these stakeholders collaborate, communicate, and coordinate their efforts within the network, facilitating the development of smart energy infrastructure and services (Stoker, 2006). By incorporating this theory into our framework, we understand the role of net-work governance in fostering organizational capacity and public value creation within SECs.

Lastly, in line with the "public value dimension", in the SECs Social entrepreneurship emphasizes the creation of public value through innovative energy solutions, community engagement, and the pursuit of environmental and social goals. Social entrepreneurs seek to align their goals, resources, and culture with the production of public value, emphasizing community empowerment and environmental sustainability (Kickert, 2001; Brandsen & Karrè, 2011). In addition, Social Innovation Perspective focuses on the development and implementation of new ideas or processes that address social challenges (Doherty et al., 2014). In SECs, social innovation plays a crucial role in introducing novel solutions to energy-related problems, promoting inclusive participation, and enhancing the overall well-being of the community. This perspective highlights the importance of aligning goals, resources, and culture to foster innovation and generate public value.

The theories are organized into a visual representation of framework model to make it easier to see how relationships and concepts fit together. The resulting theoretical framework is illustrated in the following Figure 1.

Figure 1: The tested theoretical framework - adaptation by the authors



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METHODS

Implementing a theoretical framework

As already stated, the essential aim of this contribution is to draw upon the main theories related to public value and hybrid organizations to build a theoretical framework based on Moore's Strategic Triangle (1995) and test it within the context of an organization at the interception of these two research strands. In doing so, we applied a nine-step research protocol reported in the following Table 1, starting by clearly defining the research questions we wanted to address to better understand the mechanisms and strategies that enable hybrid organizations to optimize their public value creation (Jabareen, 2009; Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Torfing et al., 2021).

Table 1: The main steps to build a theoretical framework

Step	Where to find it in this work
1. Research question identification	1. Introduction
2. Systematic Literature Review (SLR)	2.1 A preliminary overview
3. Theories selection	2.2 Theoretical foundations
4. Key concepts definition	2.2 Theoretical foundations

5. Establishing relationships	2.3 Reshaping a theoretical framework
6. Creating a visual representation	2.3 Reshaping a theoretical framework
7. Justifying the choices	3. Methods
8. Refining	4. Discussion – 5. Results
9. Test and validation	4. Discussion – 5. Results

Source: own illustration

Thus, we conducted a thorough review of existing literature drawing upon the main relevant theories related to the hybridity dimension, such as Institutional Theory, Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), and the Social Entrepreneurship perspective, or from an operational viewpoint analyzing Co-Production Theory, Network Governance Theory, and Social Innovation perspective. At the same time, we recalled the main concepts related to public value, such as New Public Management (NPM), New Public Governance (NPG), and Social Entrepreneurship Theory to enhance the robustness of the theoretical framework. The present review has been made to provide a conceptual basis for understanding the research problem, to ensure an operational definition for each element, and to establish relationships and hypotheses between the key concepts. A comprehensive visual representation is provided in the previous section.

The selection of these specific theories, concepts, and relationships is based on how they relate to the research questions. This work focused on the key factors influencing hybrid organizations like the SECs to create public value. The Sub-Equana Valley SEC, operating within a complex institutional framework, endeavored to gain legitimacy by adhering to the expectations of this environment. It navigated the delicate balance of economic feasibility against the varied and sometimes conflicting demands of municipalities, member entities, private companies, and non-profit organizations. Central to its strategy was leveraging financial capital to create public value. Initially, the SEC focused on reducing costs for the leading municipality, a strategy that aligned with Italy's National Recovery Plan, Mission 2, which aims to foster sustainable energy and generate social and environmental benefits. The SEC's ambition extended beyond economic objectives, aspiring to effect positive social change. It planned to use business tactics to decide whether to reduce costs for its participants or invest in social and public projects once the solar panels became fully operational. This approach underscores the need for innovative, participatory, and hybrid solutions to effectively tackle societal challenges.

The case study analysis

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, combining both exploratory and descriptive research methods (Tellis, 1997; Merriam, 1998; Gioia et al., 2013; Secinaro et al., 2021; Hristov & Mechelli, 2021). The primary data collection techniques include interviews, surveys, and observations. Key stakeholders, such as community members, government officials, industry representatives, and organizational leaders, has been interviewed to gather rich insights into public value creation models. The methodological protocol encompasses four main phases:

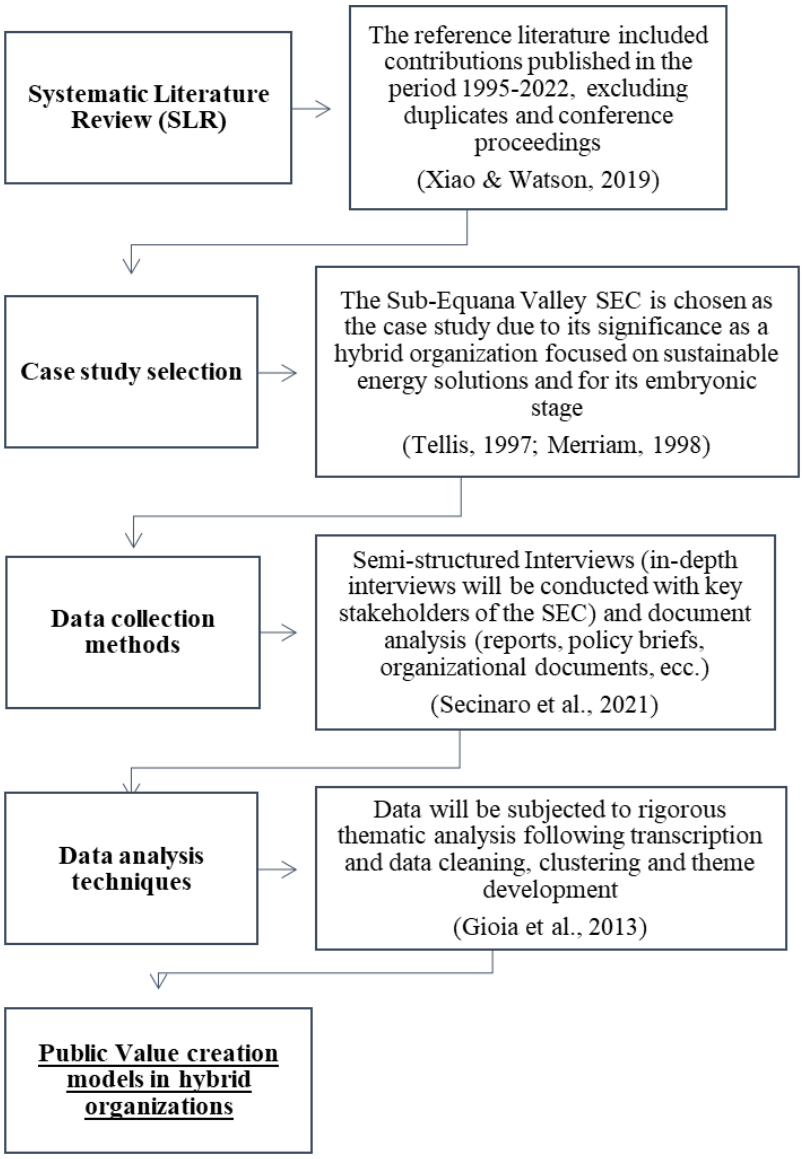
1. Research design: the study utilizes a qualitative research design to explore and understand the complex phenomenon of public value creation models

in hybrid organizations. Qualitative research enables a detailed investigation of the context-specific fac-tors, stakeholders' perspectives, and organizational practices that contribute to public value creation (Meynhardt, 2009; Arena et al., 2021). This approach allows for in-depth exploration and analysis of the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community case study.

2. Case study selection: the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community is chosen as the case study due to its significance as a hybrid organization focused on sustainable energy solutions. The community presents an exemplary context for understanding the public value creation models employed by hybrid organizations operating in the renewable energy sector (Tellis, 1997; Merriam, 1998; Ceglia et al., 2020).
3. Data collection methods: according to Secinaro et al. (2021) the primary data collection methods employed in this research include:
   - Semi-structured interviews: in-depth interviews will be conducted with key stakeholders, including representatives from the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community, government agencies, community members, and industry experts. The interviews will explore their perspectives on public value creation models, organizational strategies, and challenges faced by hybrid organizations.
   - Document analysis: relevant documents, such as reports, policy briefs, organizational documents, and public discourse related to the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community, will be analyzed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the organization's public value creation practices.
4. Data analysis techniques: the qualitative data collected through interviews and document analysis will be subjected to rigorous thematic analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). The analysis process will involve the following steps:
   - Transcription and data cleaning: the interviews will be transcribed verbatim, ensuring accuracy and clarity. The collected data will be organized and cleaned for analysis.
   - Clustering and theme development: the data will be analyzed using open coding techniques to identify initial codes and patterns. These first order concepts will be clustered into themes, which will represent the key factors, practices, and challenges associated with public value creation models in hybrid organizations.
   - Thematic analysis: the coding and theme development process will be iterative, ensuring that emerging themes adequately represent the data. Validation techniques, such as member checking and triangulation, will be employed to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings.

The applied research design is reported in the following Figure 2.

Figure 2: Research design



Source: own illustration

The case study generalizability

Creating public value in Smart Energy Communities (SECs) requires addressing di-verse challenges unique to different regions and countries. Tailored strategies are essential for effectively harmonizing public and private values (Borgonovi & Mussari, 2011). Regional and cultural differences significantly impact stakeholder expectations, governance structures, and community engagement. For example, European SECs often focus on regulatory compliance and sustainability initiatives, reflecting strong environmental policies and civic participation (Lowitzsch et al., 2020). In contrast, SECs in developing countries prioritize energy access and affordability to address energy poverty and infrastructural deficits.

Governance structures and policy frameworks also vary widely. In decentralized systems like Germany, local governments have significant autonomy to manage SEC initiatives, allowing tailored solutions. In centralized systems like China, SECs benefit from strong state support but may struggle with local customization and community involvement. Governance models must adapt to these different political and administrative contexts (Wang et al., 2022; Koltunov et al., 2023). Furthermore, economic context and resource availability shape SEC strategies. Wealthier regions with advanced technology and capital can invest in sophisticated systems, driving innovation and efficiency. In less affluent areas, SECs may rely on cost-effective, scalable solutions like community-based microgrids that can expand as resources become available. This economic diversity necessitates flexible financial and technological planning (Reis et al., 2021).

In addition, stakeholder engagement varies based on local social dynamics and cultural norms. Some regions have high public trust and cooperation with government and private entities, facilitating collaborative public value creation (Criado & Gil-Garcia, 2019). In other areas, historical mistrust can hinder engagement, requiring intensive outreach to build trust and foster collaboration. SECs must develop culturally appropriate engagement strategies.

Finally, environmental and geographical factors, such as climate and resource availability, also affect SEC strategies. SECs in sunny regions can capitalize on solar energy, while those in windy areas may focus on wind power (Koirala et al., 2016). Urban SECs might prioritize smart grid infrastructure for dense populations, whereas rural SECs might focus on decentralized solutions for dispersed communities. Tailoring energy solutions to environmental conditions ensures sustainability and efficiency.

The Sub-Equana Valley in Abruzzo, Italy, exemplifies regional adaptation of SEC principles. This initiative unites local government, energy providers, research institutions, and community organizations to collaboratively design and manage smart energy solutions. The focus is on transforming the area into a sustainable, energy-efficient ecosystem, reflecting unique socio-economic and environmental characteristics (Zavratnik et al., 2018; Ceglia et al., 2020; Gjorgievski et al., 2021; Satoła & Milewska, 2022). To address regional and contextual differences, SECs must adopt flexible, context-specific strategies. Thus, adaptive governance, community-centric approaches, scalable and sustainable technologies, and strong partnerships with diverse stakeholders are essential.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This investigation applied Moore's Strategic Triangle (1995), augmented with contemporary notions of hybridity, to the context of Smart Energy Communities (SECs). This approach enabled to explore the unique organizational capacity, public value mechanisms, and the legitimacy and support required to facilitate public value creation in these hybrid organizations (Pereira et al., 2017; Papi et al., 2018).

The SEC exhibit a strong organizational capacity characterized by collaborative decision-making processes and a facilitated alignment of interests. This was particularly evident in

the way these communities foster knowledge sharing among diverse stakeholders, including residents, technology providers, and local authorities. The SECs demonstrated an ability to integrate multiple forms of knowledge, ranging from technical expertise in renewable energy systems to local know-how about community needs and preferences (Lowitzsch et al., 2020).

The results indicate that the SEC effectively employ public value mechanisms that include collaboration and partnerships. Innovative technologies and infrastructure, such as smart grids and renewable energy sources, were utilized not only for economic benefits but also for enhancing community engagement and empowerment. These mechanisms served as a conduit for SEC to translate their hybrid organizational structure into tangible outcomes for the community, aligning with the strategic goals of enhancing an Italian rural area through engagement, a technological attitude, and a community-centered approach (Okazaki, 2008; Vial, 2009; Vakkuri et al., 2021). The framework also directed our attention to the crucial role of legitimacy and support in the functioning of SECs. Enhanced transparency, along with trust and recognition from the participating actors, emerged as key factors in securing the stability and growth of SECs. Activities aimed at inclusivity and creating support for sustainability initiatives were shown to reinforce the legitimacy of SECs.

The integration of these dimensions - organizational capacity, public value mechanisms, and legitimacy and support - under the umbrella of Moore's Strategic Triangle with hybridity considerations has provided a nuanced understanding of how SECs create public value. SECs in the Sub-Equana Valley, as a case study, have demonstrated the potential to proactively enhance an Italian rural area by fostering engagement and a community-centered approach. The theoretical framework has proven effective in highlighting the key elements of SECs that contribute to public value creation. The results suggest that SECs, as hybrid organizations, are well-positioned to lead the transition towards more sustainable and participatory forms of energy consumption and production (Ceglia et al., 2020; Savelli & Morstyn, 2021).

Empirical evidence supporting the theoretical framework

The interviews were carried out in two rounds in the period between January and May 2023, by interviewing twenty pivotal members of the SEC. Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in the smart energy community (Secinaro et al., 2021). The interviews focused on understanding their experiences, perceptions, and practices related within the organization. Afterwards, participant observation was employed to gain insights into the daily operations and interactions within the SEC. In doing so, a considerable time was spent within the community, attending meetings, workshops, and other events, while taking field notes and recording observations. Then, several documents, such as reports, project plans, and internal communication materials, were analyzed to complement the interview and observation data. These documents provided additional context and background information related to the SEC processes and strategies.

Regarding the organizational capacity dimension, the mayor of a participating municipality said that in their community, the decision-making process for the SEC initiative is

deeply collaborative. They regularly convene with local businesses, civic leaders, and residents to ensure that the strategies reflect the collective interest. Public officials, moreover, assert that the success in implementing smart energy solutions is largely due to the ability to bring together various stakeholders and leverage their expertise. This has been a cornerstone of their organizational capacity.

Furthermore, a member of the SEC provided a clear representation of the public value perceived highlighting that: “there’s a sense of pride in our community for being part of the SEC. Our engagement in energy decisions has empowered us, and we can see the direct benefits through improvements in our local environment.” In this sense, the legitimacy and support dimension played a pivotal role. “Transparency and trust are non-negotiable in these communities. The SECs have done a remarkable job at maintaining transparency in their operations, which has built a solid foundation of trust", pointed out a researcher involved in the SEC start-up phases. And again, from the viewpoint of a third sector representative: "we've noticed a significant increase in support for the SEC once the community began to see the tangible benefits. Inclusivity in creating support strategies has been a game-changer, ensuring that the initiatives have wide-spread backing."

These excerpts provide a cross-sectional view of the sentiments and experiences of various stakeholders involved with the SEC. The mayors and public officials highlight the collaborative nature of the decision-making processes that underpin the organizational capacity of the SECs. Entrepreneurs and citizens emphasize the public value mechanisms through their personal and business experiences with the SEC's technologies and community initiatives. Researchers and third sector representatives reflect on the importance of legitimacy and support in nurturing the community's trust and engagement with the SEC. Together, these perspectives corroborate the theoretical framework proposed by illustrating the practical implementation of the framework's concepts and the creation of public value within the context of Smart Energy Communities.

Testing the theoretical framework

To test the theoretical framework, we carried out a thematic analysis processing the data emerged by the interview and the internal documents to provide an empirical backbone to the theoretical framework (Jabareen, 2009; Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Torfing et al., 2021). This process aims to affirm that the key elements proposed are not only conceptually robust but also practically relevant. It would offer a qualitative validation of the framework through real-world evidence, suggesting that the framework is applicable and useful in understanding and guiding the development of Smart Energy Communities. The results are collected in the following Table 2.

Table 2: A thematic analysis

Themes emerged	Analysis	Validation
Collaborative governance and organizational capacity	Interviews across the board highlighted a strong emphasis on collaborative governance to enhance organizational capacity. This was evident in the recurring mention of multi-stakeholder decision-making processes and knowledge-sharing practices. Stakeholders from various sectors emphasized the importance of leveraging diverse expertise to drive the SEC's initiatives.	The frequency and consistency of these points across interviews suggest that SECs are cultivating an environment where collaborative governance is not only encouraged but practiced. This aligns with the theoretical framework's assertion that hybrid organizations require collaborative decision-making to effectively harness organizational capacity.
Innovation and public value mechanisms	A common narrative among entrepreneurs and community members was the integration of innovative technologies and infrastructure, which form a crucial part of the public value mechanisms. The success stories related to community engagement and the tangible benefits of innovation support the framework's emphasis on the role of technology in public value creation.	The testimonies provide evidence that SECs are effectively translating their hybrid nature into public value through technological innovation. This supports the framework's perspective that innovation is key to operationalizing public value mechanisms in hybrid organizations.
Transparency, trust, and legitimacy	Transparency and trust were cited by researchers and third-sector representatives as foundational for the legitimacy of SECs. The data points to a clear link between the transparent operations of SECs and the trust they garner from their stakeholders, which in turn bolsters their legitimacy.	The thematic analysis underscores the theoretical framework's claim that legitimacy in hybrid organizations like SECs is contingent upon trust and transparency. The data confirms that SECs' focus on these elements is effective in maintaining their legitimacy.
Community engagement and support	Statements from citizens and third-sector representatives also highlighted the importance of community engagement and the proactive creation of support. This theme ties closely with the SECs' goals of enhancing rural areas and fostering a community-centred approach.	The evidence from interviews supports the framework's notion that active community engagement and the creation of support are critical for the success of hybrid organizations. The SECs' strategies for inclusivity and creating support validate the framework's propositions.

Source: own illustration

Aligning the findings with the theoretical framework

Lastly, to ensure the alignment of the findings and thematic analysis with the relationships and concepts outlined in the theoretical framework designed for the study on Smart Energy Communities (SECs), this work systematically matched the themes with the specific elements of the theoretical framework, to cross-reference the findings from the interviews and thematic analysis with the key components of the framework. The results are collected in the following Table 3.

Table 3: Findings cross-reference

Strategic Triangle dimensions (Moore, 1995)	Theoretical framework components	Alignment with findings
Organizational capacity	• Collaborative Decision-Processes • Facilitated Alignment of Interests • Fostered Knowledge Sharing	• The interviews revealed a strong emphasis on collaborative governance, which speaks to the 'collaborative decision-processes' in the framework. • The alignment of interests among stakeholders, a recurring point in discussions with public officials and entrepreneurs, is directly related to the 'facilitated alignment of interests. • The sharing of expertise and knowledge, especially highlighted by the mayors and public officials, aligns with 'fostered knowledge sharing.
Public value mechanisms	• Collaboration and Partnerships • Innovative Technologies and Infrastructure • Community Engagement and Empowerment	• Entrepreneurial narratives on partnerships validate the 'collaboration and partnerships' aspect of the framework. • The use of smart grids and renewable energy solutions by SECs supports the 'innovative technologies and infrastructure' element. • Citizens' feelings of pride and empowerment due to their engagement in energy decisions reflect the 'community engagement and empowerment' aspect.
Legitimacy and support	• Enhanced Transparency • Trust and Recognition from the Participating Actors • Inclusivity for Creating Support	• The importance of transparency and trust, as highlighted by researchers and third-sector representatives, is a testament to the 'enhanced transparency' and 'trust and recognition from participating actors. • The SECs' inclusivity in creating support strategies, as stated by the community members, aligns with 'inclusivity for creating support.

Source: own illustration

Through this alignment, we see that the themes extracted from the empirical data not only resonate with the theoretical framework but also vividly illustrate its practical manifestations. The findings from the interviews serve as a testament to the conceptual relationships outlined in the framework, showing a clear linkage between the proposed elements and the real-world operation of SECs. This alignment confirms that the theoretical framework is not only conceptually sound but also pragmatically applicable in understanding and evaluating the public value creation in hybrid organizations like Smart Energy Communities.

Refining the theoretical framework

Given the empirical evidence and thematic analysis, refining the theoretical framework for Smart Energy Communities (SECs) could involve several enhancements to better capture the observed complexities and dynamics.

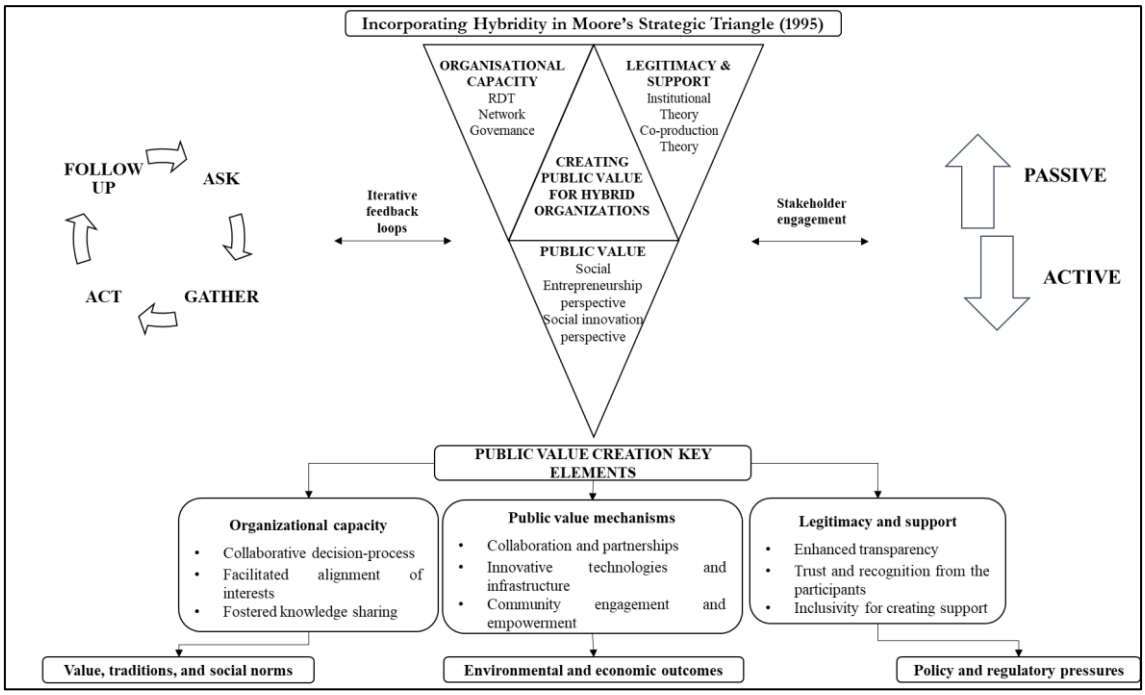
Firstly, integrating feedback loops into the framework could illustrate the iterative nature of interactions between organizational capacity, public value mechanisms, and legitimacy. This reflects how changes in one area influence others, such as increased legitimacy enhancing organizational capacity by attracting resources and stakeholder engagement. Embedding the Deming Cycle within a Total Quality Management (TQM) perspective could make the SEC framework inherently adaptive, allowing continuous refinement based on real-world feedback and evolving circumstances (Morgan & Murgatroyd, 1994). This integration would offer researchers and practitioners a dynamic tool for creating public value within hybrid organizations, ensuring the framework's relevance across various contexts.

Secondly, developing a more granular view of stakeholder engagement, with a spectrum ranging from passive to active (Magliacani, 2020; Marsilio, 2022), could help identify different levels of engagement and their impact on SECs' goals and operations. Additionally, incorporating socio-cultural factors like local values, traditions, and social norms could enhance the effectiveness of SECs by aligning public value mechanisms with the specific context.

These enhancements address the scalability and adaptability of the framework, helping to understand how SECs can grow and how the framework can be applied to different community sizes and types. Including specific metrics for evaluating success within the strategic triangle would help define successful organizational capacity and public value creation, while also assessing legitimacy and support.

Finally, adding a sustainability dimension that addresses environmental and economic outcomes would emphasize the long-term viability of SECs beyond immediate com-munity benefits. This also considers the impact of policy and regulatory environments on SECs, which can significantly affect organizational capacity and public value mechanisms. These enhancements aim to provide a more comprehensive guide for future research and practical applications in creating public value within hybrid organizations (Moore, 1995; McBain & Smith, 2010; Criado & Gil-Garcia, 2019; Capodaglio et al., 2019). The resulting visual representation is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The refined theoretical framework



Source: own illustration

Difficulties, challenges, and undesirable developments

Creating public value within Smart Energy Communities (SECs) presents numerous challenges, despite their innovative potential for sustainable energy solutions. Hybrid organizations like SECs face significant hurdles that can hinder their progress and effectiveness, shaping future research trajectories in this field.

A primary challenge is the complex governance structures within hybrid organizations (Kickert, 2001; Lowitzsch et al., 2020). SECs must balance the interests of diverse stakeholders, including private firms and community groups. Coordinating across these entities can lead to slow decision making, delaying project implementation. Varying levels of interest, understanding, and commitment among stakeholders require continuous effort in ensuring active participation, transparent communication, and inclusive decision-making (Savelli & Morstyn, 2021; Reis et al., 2021). Resistance to change and scepticism further complicate these efforts, creating friction and slowing progress.

Technological and infrastructure barriers add to the complexity. Implementing smart energy solutions involves significant technical and logistical challenges, with high costs often prohibitive for smaller communities like the Sub-Equana Valley (Gjorgievski et al., 2021). These barriers can delay the adoption of innovative solutions and limit the overall impact of SECs.

Regulatory challenges also shape SEC effectiveness. These organizations operate within a dynamic, often fragmented regulatory environment (Billis, 2010; Torfing et al., 2021). Slow adaptation of energy regulatory frameworks to new technologies and unfavorable policies can create uncertainties, impeding the implementation and scaling of

SEC initiatives. Achieving sustainability and long-term viability is another ongoing challenge, requiring strategic planning and resilience to balance short-term achievements with long-term goals in evolving conditions (Ceglia et al., 2020; Galassi, 2021).

Lastly, measuring and demonstrating the impact of SECs on public value creation is complex (Moore, 1995; Meynhardt, 2009). Developing appropriate metrics to assess social, environmental, and economic benefits, and effectively communicating these outcomes to stakeholders, is crucial for securing ongoing support and funding. This necessitates a robust evaluation framework and a commitment to transparency and accountability.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined the unique organizational model of hybrid organizations, particularly focusing on the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community (SEC), to under-stand their role in public value creation. Utilizing a comprehensive theoretical frame-work, the research explored various theories: Institutional Theory, Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), Social Entrepreneurship, Co-Production Theory, Network Governance Theory, and Social Innovation perspective. These theories provided a multi-dimensional view of how hybrid organizations like SECs operate, navigate challenges, and contribute to societal well-being.

Explaining public value creation using these theories offers a clear understanding of Smart Energy Communities (SECs) as hybrid organizations. It integrates multiple theoretical perspectives, providing a comprehensive view of how these entities balance public and private interests, which is crucial for sustainable energy development. This approach also offers practical insights for SECs, aiding in strategy and operations improvement, and has significant policy implications for enhancing social and environ-mental impacts in the energy sector. The Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community is chosen as the case study due to its significance as a hybrid organization focused on sustainable energy solutions. The community presents an exemplary context for understanding the public value creation models employed by hybrid organizations operating in the renewable energy sector (Tellis, 1997; Merriam, 1998; Ceglia et al., 2020).

The attempt to refine the framework is intended to provide an overall guide for future research and practical application in creating public value within hybrid organizations (Moore, 1995; McBain & Smith, 2010; Criado & Gil-Garcia, 2019; Capodaglio et al., 2019). This framework aims to provide a comprehensive view of the dynamics in hybrid organizations and offers insights into effective public value creation, paying attention to the challenges to be faced from a governmental, technological and regulatory point of view. It emphasizes the importance of collaborative governance, stakeholder engagement,

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and innovative solutions in addressing societal challenges. This framework is not only theoretically robust but also has practical relevance, demonstrated through a case study of the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community (Jabareen, 2009; Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Torfing et al., 2021). The study's findings contribute to the literature on public value creation in hybrid organizations and offer practical insights for similar initiatives.

The study employed a qualitative research approach, incorporating interviews, surveys, and observations to gather insights into public value creation models in SECs. The empirical findings revealed that SECs exhibit strong organizational capacity, characterized by collaborative decision-making and knowledge sharing. The SECs effectively employed public value mechanisms, utilizing innovative technologies and infrastructure for community engagement and empowerment. Legitimacy and support were found to be crucial, with transparency and trust emerging as key factors for the stability and growth of SECs. The integration of these dimensions under Moore's Strategic Triangle, with considerations of hybridity, provided a nuanced understanding of how SECs create public value. The SEC in the Sub-Equana Valley demonstrated potential in enhancing rural areas through engagement, technological innovation, and a community-centered approach.

A key limitation of this study is its reliance on qualitative data, which may not fully capture the quantitative impacts of SECs on public value creation. Additionally, the focus on a single case study limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or types of hybrid organizations.

Future research should aim to investigate multiple case studies across different con-texts to enhance the generalizability of the findings and to employ quantitative methods to measure the impact of SECs on public value creation more precisely. Moreover, the study of a variety of hybrid organizational models could be useful to understand their diverse approaches to public value creation, considering the policy-making implications, particularly in the context of sustainable development and community empowerment.

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ISSN 1662-1387