

Public value creation experiences in hybrid organizations: a preliminary case study

Prof. ANDREA ZIRUOLO - Dott. SIMONE CIFOLELLI - Dott. MARCO BERARDI

ABSTRACT: (PUBLIC VALUE CREATION EXPERIENCES IN HYBRID ORGANIZATIONS: A PRELIMINARY CASE STUDY)

This paper presents a preliminary case study investigating the public value creation experiences within the context of the "Sub-Equana Valley" Smart Energy Community (SEC). The objective of this work is to explore the multifaceted nature of public value and assess its creation in hybrid organizations operating in the SEC. A hybrid organization refers to a unique entity that combines elements of both public and private sectors, seeking to achieve societal and economic goals simultaneously. To achieve this objective, a mixed-methods research approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The study encompassed interviews with key stakeholders, including community members, government officials, and representatives from the SEC's hybrid organizations. Additionally, surveys and document analysis were conducted to gather comprehensive data on the SEC's public value creation processes. The results of this study reveal the diverse public value creation experiences within the Sub-Equana Valley SEC. Three key public value mechanisms emerged from the analysis: collaboration and partnerships, innovative technologies and community engagement and empowerment. Furthermore, the findings highlight the interplay between public and private actors in the creation of public value, emphasizing the significance of hybrid organizations as vehicles for achieving sustainable development goals. The originality of this contribution lies in its exploration of public value creation experiences within hybrid organizations operating in the context of a Smart Energy Community. While prior research has investigated public value and hybrid organizations separately, this study synthesizes these concepts, providing a holistic understanding of how hybrid organizations contribute to public value in the SEC. By focusing on the Sub-Equana Valley case study, this research adds empirical evidence to the growing body of literature on hybrid organizations and expands our understanding of their role in driving societal progress. Overall, this preliminary case study sheds light on the complexity of public value creation within hybrid organizations in the specific context of a Smart Energy Community. The findings have practical implications for policymakers, community leaders, and practitioners involved in designing and managing hybrid organizations, providing insights into the factors that contribute to successful public value creation. Further research is needed to explore additional case studies and refine our understanding of the dynamics of public value creation within hybrid organizations in various contexts.

KEYWORDS: *Public value creation, Hybrid organizations, Smart Energy Community.*

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1. Introduction

The double crisis, energy and climate, exploded in recent months, has led both academics and policymakers to questioning on the solutions to be adopted to face the ecological transition, finding as a common denominator the reduction of the use of fossil fuels and the acceleration towards renewable energy sources that do not pollute. A shared consensus emerges—one that underscores the imperative of diminishing reliance on fossil fuels and hastening the shift towards unpolluted renewable energy sources. Notably, the UN, 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) (UNITED NATIONS, 2015; PIZZI et al., 2020). The phenomenon is booming in Europe and, by 2050, it is estimated that 264 million European citizens will join the energy market as prosumers, generating around 45% of the total renewable electricity of the communities (PNRR, 2021).

In particular, at the end of 2022 there were only a few dozen operational Energy Communities in Italy, however it is expected that by 2026 they can number in the order of tens of thousands. The SECs diffusion can represent an effective and efficient response to one of the primary needs within the Mission 2 of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR, “Green Revolution and Ecological Transition”). The deployment of the SECs is supported by the PNRR with 2.2 billion, representing one of the cornerstones of the European Commission Plan to support the Italian recovery with a view to sustainable development and low environmental impact.

On the academic side, in recent years there has been a growing interest in exploring the concept of public value and its creation within hybrid organizations. Nevertheless, international literature presents lack of contributions in the field of public value creation experiences within hybrid organizations operating in the context of a Smart Energy Community.

A hybrid organization is defined as a dynamic and flexible entity that combines elements of both traditional hierarchical structures and innovative, networked approaches. It seeks to integrate the strengths of both models to enhance adaptability, collaboration, and responsiveness to the ever-evolving demands of the modern business environment (DOHERTY et al., 2014; MION & TESSARI, 2021; GROSSI et al., 2022). Understanding how public value is created in such organizations is essential for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners seeking to enhance their effectiveness and impact. In the broader sense, the public value encompasses the impact generated by the institution's policies on the level of overall well-being (from an economic, social, and environmental multidimensional viewpoint) for citizens and stakeholders, obtained by governing performance (DEIDDA GAGLIARDO, 2015; ZIRUOLO, 2016; PAPI et al., 2020; GODENHJELM, & SJÖBLOM, 2020).

This paper presents a preliminary case study focusing on the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community (SEC), a notable hybrid organization that has demonstrated remarkable achievements in public value creation. The case study was selected as it was considered of significant scientific interest due to the embryonic state of the project, that included it in the short list of the first eight SECs launched on the Italian territory. The experience of the Smart Energy Community which arose in the first months of 2022 in the “Sub-Equana Valley”, a highly depopulated Italian internal area, could be considered a hybrid organization because it involves members of the community in the generation, distribution, and consumption of clean energy (CEGLIA et al., 2022). The hybridity of this organization becomes evident through its continuous collaboration with stakeholders from the third, public, and private sectors. From its nascent stages, the Smart Energy Community envisions and collectively constructs innovative consumption models, fostering active participation (GALASSI, 2021; MION & TESSARI, 2021).

The SEC represents a unique model of collaboration between public and private stakeholders, aiming to develop and implement sustainable energy solutions while delivering significant benefits to the community. By examining the SEC's experiences and practices, this study seeks to shed light on the mechanisms and processes that contribute to public value creation within hybrid organizations.

To explore the public value generated by the SEC, a comprehensive approach was embraced, incorporating a mix of primary and secondary data using a qualitative methodology and involving interviews with key stakeholders and an analysis of relevant documents and reports (TELLIS, 1997; MERRIAM, 1998; GIOIA et al., 2013; SECINARO et al., 2021; HRISTOV & MECHELLI, 2021).

The essential aim of this contribution is to draw upon the main theories and concepts related to public value and hybrid organizations to support, through the single case study analysis, Moore's "Strategic Triangle" (1995) as a public value creation model for an organization representing the interception of these two research strands.

Public value theory (MOORE, 1995, MEINHARDT, 2009; DEIDDA GAGLIARDO, 2015; ZIRUOLO, 2016; GODENHJELM, & SJÖBLOM, 2020) emphasizes the importance of delivering services and benefits that align with the preferences and needs of the public, while hybrid organizations theory explores the distinctive characteristics and dynamics of organizations operating in the intersection of public and private sectors. The research questions underlying this contribution are the following:

- RQ1: How does the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community (SEC) contribute to public value creation?
- RQ2: How does the selected hybrid organization maximize public value creation within the framework of Moore's "Strategic Triangle"?

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 and data collection methods used. 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. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings, discusses their implications, and outlines potential avenues for future research.

Through this preliminary case study, our goal is to delve into the field of public value creation within hybrid organizations. By supporting Moore's "Strategic Triangle" model (1995), we examine the preliminary experiences of the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community, deriving valuable insights to the design and implement similar initiatives, thereby fostering the creation of public value and the advancement of hybrid organizational models.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 A preliminary overview

Hybrid organizations have emerged as a distinct and dynamic form of organizational arrangement that seeks to blend social and economic value creation. These organizations operate at the intersection of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, and their primary objective is to create public value while sustaining financial viability. In recent years, hybrid organizations have gained significant attention due to their potential to address complex societal challenges and deliver innovative solutions (BILLIS, 2010; BORGONOVİ & MUSSARI, 2011; DOHERTY et al., 2014; MION & TESSARI, 2021; GROSSI et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, public value refers to the positive impact created by public organizations

and hybrid organizations in the pursuit of societal well-being. It encompasses the benefits, outcomes, and impacts that organizations create for the public and society as a whole, it goes beyond traditional notions of economic value and takes into account social, environmental, and cultural dimensions. The concept emphasizes the importance of collective welfare and the fulfilment of public needs and aspirations. In the context of hybrid organizations like SEC, public value represents the positive changes brought about by their activities, such as increased access to sustainable energy, reduced carbon emissions, and improved quality of life for the community (MEINHARDT, 2009; DEIDDA GAGLIARDO, 2015; ZIRUOLO, 2016; GODENHJELM, & SJÖBLOM, 2020).

Recent literature has explored various theoretical perspectives on hybrid organizations and their role in public value creation. This text reviews three key theories - Institutional Theory, Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), and the Social Entrepreneurship perspective - to offer a comprehensive framework for understanding SEC experiences.

Institutional Theory focuses on formal and informal rules shaping organizational behavior, emphasizing how organizations seek legitimacy by conforming to broader institutional expectations. In the context of hybrid organizations like SECs, it explains how they navigate conflicting pressures from public, private, and nonprofit sectors (KONDRA & HINININGS, 1998; DOHERTY et al., 2014; MAIR et al., 2015). Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) highlights the interdependence between organizations and their external environment (HILLMAN et al., 2009). For SECs, reliance on financial capital, technological expertise, and social networks is crucial. Analyzing these dependencies sheds light on the SEC's ability to create public value through sustainable energy initiatives. The Social Entrepreneurship perspective recognizes hybrid organizations' unique blend of entrepreneurial approaches and social missions. It emphasizes innovative strategies to address societal challenges effectively (DOHERTY et al., 2014; RAHIM & MOHTAR, 2015; FERREIRA et al., 2017). Understanding how social entrepreneurship principles guide SEC operations provides insights into their public value creation, showcasing resource mobilization, partnerships, and innovative solutions to energy and sustainability challenges.

Simultaneously, the concept of public value has gained prominence in the literature on public administration and management. Public value refers to the positive outcomes and benefits that public organizations generate for society as a whole. It transcends narrow financial considerations and encompasses broader societal impacts. This debate is placed within two prominent theoretical perspectives in the field of public administration and management: New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG). These theories offer valuable insights into the dynamics and mechanisms of public value creation within hybrid organizations.

New Public Management is a management philosophy that emerged in the 1980s as a response to the perceived inefficiencies and shortcomings of traditional bureaucratic approaches to public administration (CHRISTENSEN & LÆGREID, 2017). NPM advocates for the adoption of private-sector management techniques and practices in the public sector, with the aim of enhancing efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. Central to NPM is the notion of public value, which emphasizes the creation of value for citizens and society as a whole (ZIRUOLO, 2016). NPM approaches public organizations as quasi-business entities, emphasizing performance measurement, goal setting, and the use of market-like mechanisms (SCHEDLER & PROELLER, 2000). The primary focus is on achieving tangible outputs and outcomes, often through the use of performance indicators and targets.

NPM emphasizes a results-oriented approach, with a strong emphasis on cost-effectiveness, customer satisfaction, and continuous improvement (LANE, 2002). In the context of hybrid organizations like the SEC, NPM provides insights into how public value can be created through the application of market-oriented principles. It highlights the importance of performance measurement and accountability mechanisms in driving value creation. However, critics could argue that NPM's narrow focus on efficiency and outputs may overlook the broader societal impacts and intangible aspects of public value.

On the other hand, New Public Governance represents a shift away from the market-oriented principles of NPM towards a more collaborative and networked approach to public administration (DICKINSON, 2016). NPG recognizes the complexity and interconnectedness of societal challenges and advocates for the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including government, non-profit organizations, businesses, and citizens, in decision-making processes. NPG emphasizes the importance of collaboration, participation, and deliberation in generating public value. It acknowledges the role of hybrid organizations as intermediaries that bring together diverse actors and resources to address complex public problems (WIESEL & MODELL, 2014). NPG approaches public value as a co-created and context-dependent concept, shaped through interactive and inclusive processes (ZIRUOLO, 2016). In the case of the SEC, NPG provides a lens to understand how public value is created through collaborative governance arrangements and the engagement of various stakeholders. It highlights the importance of participatory decision-making, trust-building, and the alignment of interests among different actors. However, critics could argue that NPG's reliance on collaborative processes can be time-consuming and prone to power imbalances among stakeholders.

Nevertheless, while NPM and NPG offer distinct approaches to understanding public value creation, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, many hybrid organizations like the SEC operate within a dynamic interplay between market-oriented and collaborative approaches. By combining elements from both NPM and NPG, these organizations can leverage the strengths of each perspective to create public value effectively (KICKERT, 2019).

Or, as an alternative, in the last decades, it was noted the diffusion of a “third way”. Social Entrepreneurship theory, in fact, highlights the role of entrepreneurial activities in creating social value (BRANDSEN & KARRÉ, 2011; DOHERTY et al., 2014). It emphasizes the pursuit of social and environmental objectives alongside economic goals. Hybrid organizations, like SEC, often exhibit characteristics of social entrepreneurship by blending market mechanisms with a social mission. Social entrepreneurship theory recognizes the potential for innovative solutions to societal problems and the importance of collaboration and community engagement.

2.2 Theoretical foundations

Thus, a primal clarification between the theoretical premises underlying the present contribution could be very useful to define the theoretical foundations: this work relies on two domain theories and on a very specific method theory.

Firstly, as regards the domain theories, Hybrid Governance refers to the blending of public, private, and civil society actors in the pursuit of collective goals and public value creation (JAY, 2013; GROSSI et al., 2022). It represents a departure from traditional modes of governance, such as hierarchical government control or market-driven approaches. Hybrid governance recognizes the complexity and interdependencies of societal challeng-

es, and the need for collaborative efforts that leverage the strengths of different actors (MAIR et al., 2015; VAKKURI et al., 2021). The Sub-Equana Valley SEC exemplifies a hybrid governance model by involving multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, researchers and academics, community organizations, and residents.

The following Table 1 provides an overview of the main theories concerning hybrid governance and their relevance to the case study of the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community (SEC) in terms of public value creation (STOKER, 2006; DOHERTY et al., 2014; SCUPOLA & MERGEL, 2022).

Table 1 - Hybrid Governance for creating public value - adaptation by the authors

Hybrid Governance theories	SEC's experience
Co-Production Theory	The public value is created through the involvement of community members in decision-making processes, the co-design of smart energy solutions, and the co-delivery of services (SCUPOLA & MERGEL, 2022).
Network Governance	The Sub-Equana Valley SEC can be seen as a network governance arrangement, where different organizations and individuals collaborate to develop and implement smart energy solutions and collectively generate public value (STOKER, 2006).
Social Innovation	It highlights the potential for transformative change in the energy sector through the adoption of smart technologies, the empowerment of local communities, and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles (DOHERTY et al., 2014).

Secondly, Smart City Governance refers to the use of innovative technologies, data analytics, and collaborative decision-making processes to enhance urban sustainability, efficiency, and liveability (CARAGLIU et al., 2013; YIGITCANLAR, 2015; MEIJER & BOLÍVAR, 2016). It encompasses the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) into urban infrastructure, enabling data-driven decision-making and service delivery (FINGER & RAZAGHI, 2017; PEREIRA et al., 2017; VIAL, 2019). While Smart City Governance has traditionally focused on urban areas, the concept of Smart Villages has emerged to address the specific challenges faced by rural and peri-urban communities. Smart Villages leverage digital technologies and innovative solutions to enhance the quality of life, economic opportunities, and social cohesion in rural areas (SOMWANSHI et al., 2016, ZAVRATNIK et al., 2018; SATOLA & MILEWSKA, 2022).

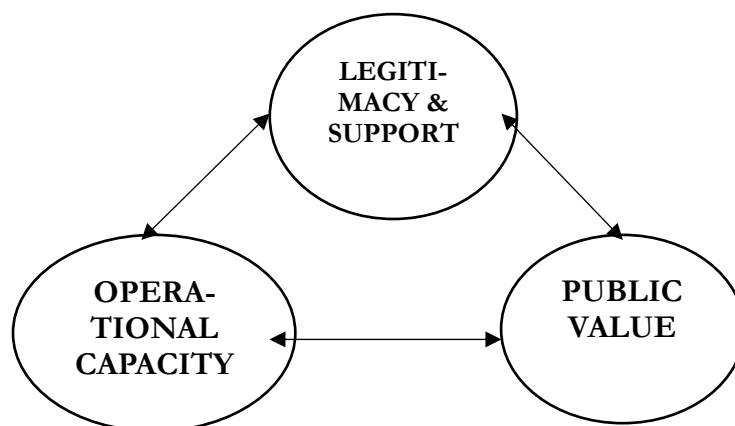
Lastly, concerning the applied method theory, Public Value creation is a crucial concept in the field of public administration and management, as it seeks to understand and evaluate the outcomes and impacts generated by public organizations and initiatives (MEYNHARDT, 2009; DEIDDA GAGLIARDO, 2015). The analysis of public value creation experiences will be carried out by exploiting the theoretical lens (reported in Figure 1) of the Strategic Triangle (MOORE, 1995; ZIRUOLO, 2016), a conceptual model that identifies three key elements for the success of public organizations:

- Public value: production of objectively valid results for public bodies, citizens, users,

and stakeholders. Public value refers to the positive impact an organization can have on the community, such as the provision of efficient and effective public services.

- Organizational (operational) capacity: the importance of the sustainability and adequacy of the actions undertaken by the organization to achieve the institutional objectives. The organization must be able to adapt to changes and face organizational challenges to remain effective over time.
- Legitimacy and support: Moore defines this point as the legitimacy of the organization to enjoy external support from the relevant actors. The organization must gain and maintain public support to operate effectively.

Figure 1 - Strategic Triangle (MOORE, 1995; ZIRUOLO, 2016)



3. Research methods

The present research is based on a qualitative approach that combines document analysis with structured and semi-structured interviews with key SEC members and stakeholders involved in the project. The data collected was processed by applying a case-oriented thematic analysis to study the case in-depth, identifying the key factors and mechanisms of public value creation in the SEC to support Moore's "Strategic Triangle" (1995) as a public value creation model for hybrid organizations (TELLIS, 1997; MERRIAM, 1998; GIOIA et al., 2013; SECINARO et al., 2021; HRISTOV & MECHELLI, 2021).

The rigor and scientific reliability of this contribution derive from a research protocol composed of four standardized steps which begins with a first and crucial step of systematic review of the international literature, taking into consideration the contributions published in the time range from 1997 to 2022 and excluding duplicates and conference proceedings in the initial process of identifying the eligibility criteria (GREEN et al., 2001; XIAO & WATSON, 2019), as it represents the starting point of the debate about "Creating public value" (MOORE, 1995).

The choice of the database to use as a search engine in this systematic literature review fell on Scopus because it is representative of over 20,000 peer-reviewed journals and includes 97% of the articles indexed in the Web of Science (WoS) (THEWALL, 2018; SECUNDO et al., 2020). A series of keywords related to the topics of "Hybrid Govern-

ance”, “Smart City Governance”, “Smart Village”, “Public Value” and “Public Value Creation” were included in the search string, producing an initial sample of over 1000 contributions. Through a long process of screening and exclusion of works deemed irrelevant and following the reading of Titles-Abstract-Keywords establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the research question(s) (KITCHENHAM & CHARTERS, 2007), we have reached a final sample of about seventy contributions, which represent the theoretical foundations of the present work (WOHLIN, 2014; PAUL & CRIADO, 2020).

Subsequently, the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community was selected as the case study due to its significance as a hybrid organization focused on sustainable energy solutions and to trace the case study back to the theoretical premises mentioned in the previous section, as reported in Table 2.

Table 2 - Sub-Equana Valley SEC as a hybrid organization - adaptation by the authors

Hybrid Organization theories	Hybrid focuses	SEC's <i>in fieri</i> challenges
Institutional Theory	Decision making processes	The SEC was influenced by the institutional environment in which it operated, seeking legitimacy by conforming to institutional expectations. Its main challenge was to face pressures to prioritize the economic viability of the project, by harmonizing the conflicting institutional pressures from the municipalities, members, private firms, and non-profit associations involved.
Resource Dependence Theory	Reliance on critical resources	The SEC most valuable element was the access to financial capital and it shed light on its ability to create public value. The organization firstly promoted the project through cost savings obtained by the leading municipality and then will benefit from the Mission 2 of the Italian National Recovery Plan (PNRR) to implement sustainable energy initiatives and create positive social and environmental impacts.
Social Entrepreneurship Perspective	Mix of entrepreneurial approaches with social missions	The SEC expressed its desire to create positive social change while applying business strategies to achieve the goal of commonly decide (when all the solar panels will be fully operational) to lower the bills of the participants to the SEC or to invest in social projects and public interventions in the territory involved. This perspective emphasizes the importance of innovative, participative and hybrid solutions to address societal challenges effectively.

It was considered of significant scientific interest due to the embryonic state of the project, that included it in the short list of the first eight SECs launched on the Italian

territory. Moreover, 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).

Thus, in the period between January and May, two rounds of interviews, structured and semi-structured, were conducted with about thirty of the key members of the SEC involved in various ways and with different points of view in the SEC project (TELLIS, 1997; SECINARO et al., 2021). The interviews were designed to gather insights into their perceptions, experiences, and understanding of the public value generated by the SEC. A set of open-ended questions was used to encourage participants to provide detailed responses. To complete the data collection process, a thorough analysis of relevant documents was conducted. These documents provided valuable background information about the SEC, its objectives, governance structure, and public value creation strategies. They also facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the SEC's operations and initiatives. The primary and secondary data sources are reported in the following Table 3.a.

Table 3.a - Data sources - adaptation by the authors

Data type	Sources
Primary	Structured and semi-structured interviews administered to: mayors, public officials, entrepreneurs, citizens, researchers, Third Sector representatives.
Secondary	Documentary analysis carried out through the study of: Internal Areas National Strategy (SNAI) Report, local authority planning documents, Renewable Energy Community Guidelines (CER), Regional Economics and Finance Document (DEFER) - Abruzzo Region, Rural Energy Community Advisory Hub (REACH), Clean Energy Package (CEP).

Table 3.b - Interviewees, roles and themes - adaptation by the authors

Interviewees	SEC's involvement	Question's drivers
Mayors	Project design, coordination, financial management, decision making processes	Public value, organisational capacity, legitimacy and support
Public officials	Coordination, monitoring	Public value, organisational capacity
Entrepreneurs	Financial support, membership	Public value, organisational capacity, legitimacy and support
Citizen (members)	Project design, membership, decision making processes	Public value, legitimacy and support
Researchers	Project design, follow up, result's dissemination	Public value, organisational capacity
Third Sector representatives	Project design, membership, decision making processes	Public value, legitimacy and support

Ultimately, the data obtained from semi-structured interviews (see Table 3.b for the detailed report of interviewee's roles and themes) and document analysis were subjected to thematic analysis (GIOIA et al., 2013). The analysis involved the following steps:

- a. Transcription and data cleaning: the interviews were transcribed verbatim, ensuring accuracy and clarity. The collected data were organized and cleaned for analysis.
- b. Clustering and theme development: the data were analysed using open coding techniques to identify initial codes and patterns. These first order concepts were clustered into themes, which represented the key factors, practices, and challenges associated with public value creation models in hybrid organizations.
- c. Thematic analysis: the coding and theme development process were iterative, ensuring that emerging themes adequately represented the data. Validation techniques, such as member checking and triangulation, were employed to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings. This analysis led to an investigation of the aggregate dimension by merging the two research strands.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, the research focused on a single case, the Sub-Equana Valley SEC, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study relied on qualitative data from interviews and document analysis, which may be subject to bias and interpretation. Furthermore, the main limitation of a deductive approach is its dependence on the pre-existing theories to guide the research process and to make specific recommendations.

In conclusion, this research methodology provided a model for conducting a preliminary case study on public value creation experiences in the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community (SEC).

The qualitative case study design, incorporating semi-structured interviews and document analysis, facilitated an in-depth exploration of the SEC's public value creation efforts. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data, enabling the researchers to identify patterns, themes, and diverse perspectives related to public value creation. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process to ensure the protection of participants' rights and privacy. The overall research design is illustrated in the following Figure 2 (pag.)

4. Results

The thematic analysis was carried out by applying the Gioia Methodology (GIOIA et al., 2013) and the findings are reported in the following Table 4. The first-order concepts represent the initial level of analysis and are derived directly from the data. These concepts are specific ideas or statements found within the data that are relevant to the research question. The second-order themes involved the clustering of the first-order concepts into broader categories or themes. These themes provide a higher level of abstraction and allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the data, coinciding with the two main domain theories, Smart City governance (with a specific focus on Smart Village issues) and Hybrid governance (JAY, 2013; CARAGLIU et al., 2013; YIGITCANLAR, 2015; MEIJER & BOLÍVAR, 2016; SATOŁA & MILEWSKA, 2022; GROSSI et al., 2022). Thus, the aggregate dimension represents the overarching concept that integrates and synthesizes the second-order themes. It provides a comprehensive view of the main focus of the re-

search and captures the essence of the public value creation experiences in hybrid organizations through the three key elements identified by Moore (1995): public value, organizational capacity, legitimacy and support.

Figure 2 - Research design - adaptation by the authors

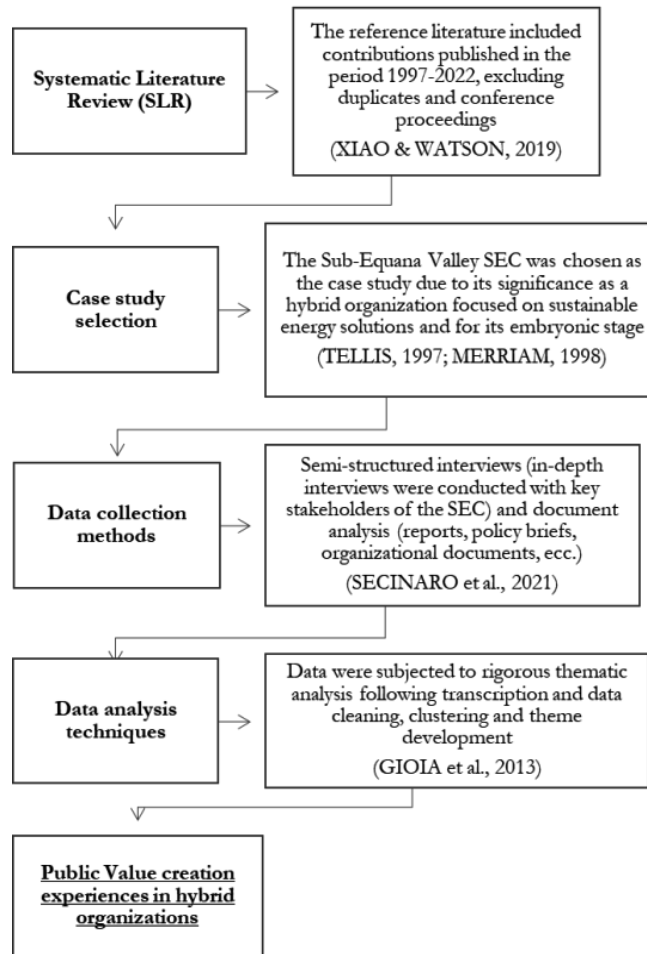


Table 4 - Summary of the thematic analysis (adapted from GIOIA et al., 2013)

1 ST order concepts	2 ND order themes	Aggregate dimension
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Depopulation and the consequent destruction of the socioeconomic fabric of the internal areas 2. The need to increase the human capital and skills available to a small local authority 3. The importance of a process of active participation and involvement of citizens 4. Fatalism rooted in citizens and stakeholders 5. The urgency of environmental awareness activities and reflections on energy consumption needs and habits 6. The evident misalignment between central-regional and local government 7. The need for new participatory, collaborative, and horizontal governance approaches and models 8. Collaborative experiences as catalysts of regeneration processes of the attractiveness of a territory and the predisposition to planning 	<p>Smart City (Smart Village) governance</p> <p>Hybrid governance</p>	<p>Public value creation experiences in hybrid organizations through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public value creation mechanisms - Organizational capacity - Legitimacy and support

The preliminary case study of the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community (SEC) revealed several key dimensions of public value creation. These dimensions encompassed both economic and social aspects, demonstrating the hybrid nature of the SEC. The results were aggregated within three main dimensions: public value creation mechanisms, organizational capacities for public value creation and legitimacy and support habits (MOORE, 1995; ZIRUOLO, 2016).

Firstly, the findings showed that the SEC has successfully created public value through its initiatives and operations (Rq1) (ESPOSITO & RICCI, 2015; DEIDDA GAGLIARDO et al., 2015; GOBBO et al., 2016; CRIADO & GIL-GARCIA, 2019). The community has positively impacted various stakeholders, including residents, businesses, and the wider society. The key public value creation experiences observed in the case study are mainly related to the improved energy efficiency, resulting in reduced energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. This has led to cost savings for residents and businesses, improved environmental sustainability, and a more resilient energy system (GALASSI, 2021). At the same time, the SEC has focused on enhancing the well-being of community members. Through its smart energy infrastructure and services, the SEC has provided reliable and affordable energy access, reducing the so called “energy poverty”. Additionally, the community engagement initiatives have fostered social cohesion and a sense of belonging among residents (LOWITZSCH et al., 2019; GJORGIEVSKI et al., 2021). Moreover, it must be highlighted the SEC is gradually contributing to local economic development through job creation and business opportunities. The establishment of renewable energy projects and the development of energy-efficient technologies are attracting in-

vestments, generating employment, and stimulating entrepreneurship in the territory.

These public value experiences have been triggered thanks to three main mechanisms, reported in the following Table 5.

Table 5 - SEC's public value creation mechanisms – adaptation by the authors

Public value mechanisms	SEC's outcomes
Collaboration and partnerships	The SEC actively collaborates with local governments, industry stakeholders, and research institutions. These partnerships enable knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and collective decision-making. Collaboration also facilitates the co-creation of solutions that address local energy challenges and maximize public value.
Innovative technologies	The SEC leverages innovative technologies, such as smart grids, energy storage systems, and advanced metering infrastructure, to optimize energy generation, distribution, and consumption. These technologies enable real-time monitoring, data analytics, and demand-response mechanisms, leading to increased efficiency, reliability, and sustainability.
Community engagement and empowerment	The SEC actively involves community members in decision-making processes and empowers them to participate in energy-related initiatives. Through public consultations, education programs, and awareness campaigns, the SEC fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among residents.

Thus, the findings shed light on the various dimensions of organizational capacity and their implications for public value creation. The SEC demonstrated a strong capacity for collaborative governance and stakeholder engagement, which played a pivotal role in public value creation (MAGLIACANI, 2020; MARSILIO, 2022). The community actively involved various stakeholders, including local government agencies, energy providers, residents, and businesses, in decision-making processes and implementation strategies. This collaborative approach facilitated the alignment of diverse interests, enhanced transparency, and fostered a sense of ownership among stakeholders. At the same time, the SEC fostered a culture of collaborative learning and knowledge sharing among its stakeholders. Regular workshops, training programs, and knowledge exchange moments were established to facilitate the dissemination of best practices, lessons learned, and innovative ideas (BACON et al., 2019). This collaborative learning environment empowered stakeholders to contribute their expertise, identify new opportunities, and collectively address challenges.

Nevertheless, the SEC did not benefit from a supportive policy and regulatory framework at the national and regional levels. Government agencies not always recognized the potential of the SEC model and implemented policies that encouraged its development. Favourable regulations, incentives, and funding mechanisms could have facilitated the implementation of innovative projects and enabled the SEC to overcome financial and administrative barriers (CAPODAGLIO et al., 2019). This not accommodating policy and regulatory support significantly slowed down the SEC's capacity to achieve its objectives.

Ultimately, the analysis revealed, all things considered, a high level of legitimacy for the SEC's public value creation activities among the stakeholders. The SEC's commit-

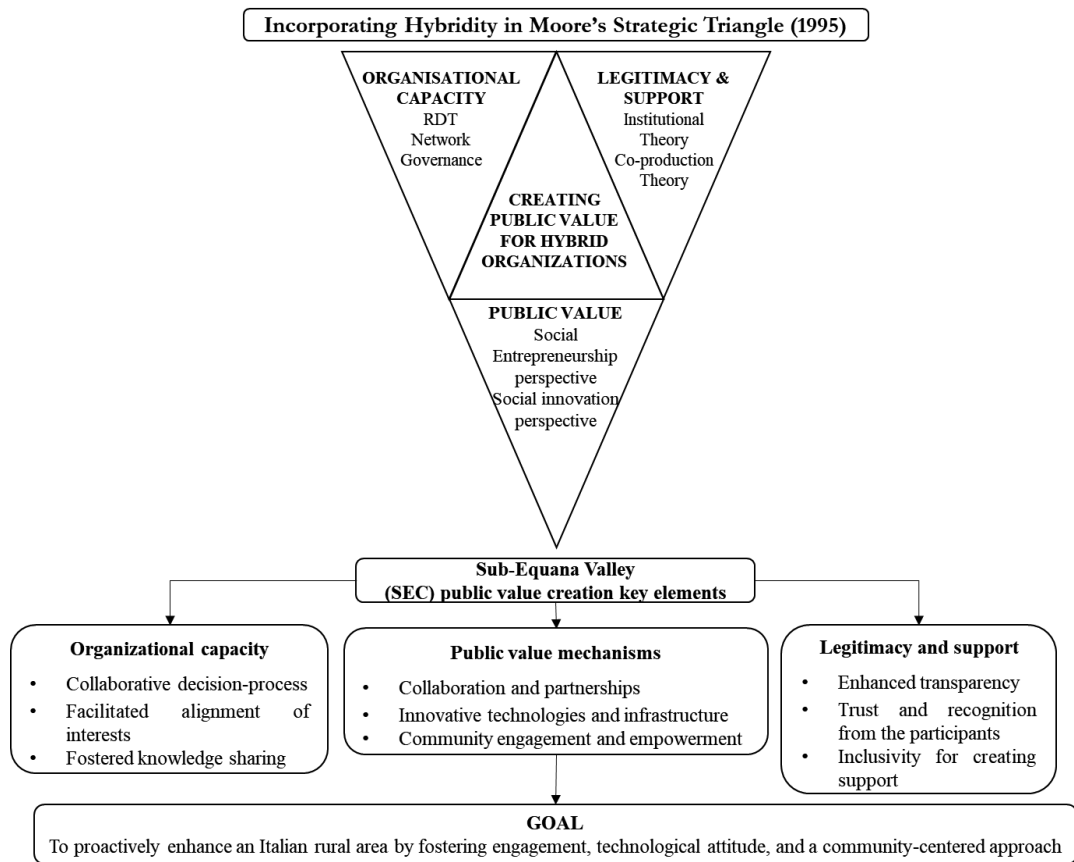
ment to addressing the energy needs of the local community and its transparent decision-making processes were widely recognized and appreciated, especially among the participants (PAPI et al., 2018; REIS et al., 2021). Stakeholders, including residents, local businesses and public sector representatives, expressed trust in the SEC's intentions and actions, considering them aligned with the community's best interests. This legitimacy played a crucial role in fostering collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders, enhancing the SEC's capacity to create public value effectively (FINGER & RAZAGHI, 2017; PAPI et al., 2018; VIAL, 2019). The SEC's emphasis on inclusivity and the involvement of various stakeholders in decision-making processes were key factors in garnering support (VANOLO, 2014).

Despite the overall positive perception and support for the SEC's public value creation, the interviews identified several challenges and opportunities. One significant challenge was the need for continuous communication and engagement with stakeholders to maintain their trust and involvement. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of ongoing dialogue, transparent information sharing, and active participation in decision-making processes to ensure the SEC's legitimacy and effectiveness. Additionally, the thematic analysis highlighted the importance of addressing potential equity concerns to ensure that the benefits of the SEC's initiatives were accessible to all members of the community.

Simultaneously, various opportunities to enhance public value creation within the SEC were pointed out. Stakeholders highlighted the potential for scaling up the SEC's initiatives and expanding its impact beyond the Sub-Equana Valley. Collaboration with other similar initiatives, knowledge sharing, and leveraging technological advancements were identified as avenues for growth and increased effectiveness. Furthermore, the study emphasized the importance of monitoring and evaluating the outcomes and impacts of the SEC's initiatives to ensure accountability and inform future decision-making (PAPI et al., 2018; MARSILIO, 2022).

The resulting model, illustrated in Figure 3 below, aims to support, through the SEC single case study analysis, Moore's "Strategic Triangle" (1995) as a public value creation model for future experiences located at interception of these two research strands (Rq2).

Figure 3 - The SEC experience to support Moore’s “Strategic Triangle” (1995) public value creation model - adaptation by the authors



5. Discussion

5.1 Success factors for public value outcomes

In this paper, we have explored the concept of public value creation within the context of hybrid organizations, specifically focusing on the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community (SEC) preliminary case study.

The findings of our study indicate that the SEC has successfully created public value through its innovative approach to sustainable energy management and community engagement. The SEC has established itself as a hybrid organization. Through various engagement initiatives the SEC has effectively involved local residents in the decision-making processes and implementation of sustainable energy projects. This approach has not only empowered the community members but has also ensured that their needs and perspectives are considered, leading to a higher level of acceptance and support for the SEC’s initiatives.

Furthermore, the SEC has adopted an integrated and holistic approach to energy management, combining smart grid technologies, renewable energy sources, and energy

efficiency measures (CEGLIA et al., 2020). This comprehensive strategy has not only resulted in a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions but has also enhanced the resilience and reliability of the energy infrastructure in the Sub-Equana Valley. These outcomes contribute to the public value created by the SEC by addressing environmental concerns, improving energy affordability, and promoting economic development in the region (GODENHJELM & SJÖBLOM, 2020).

The collaborative nature of the SEC as a hybrid organization has also facilitated knowledge sharing and learning among the stakeholders involved. The exchange of expertise, experiences, and best practices has enabled the SEC to leverage the strengths of each stakeholder group, leading to innovative solutions and more effective outcomes. This collective learning process has not only enhanced the public value generated by the SEC but has also created a culture of continuous improvement and adaptability (BACON et al., 2019).

The results of this study demonstrate that the Sub-Equana Valley SEC has been successful in creating significant public value in multiple dimensions. Firstly, the community has effectively addressed environmental concerns by promoting renewable energy sources and reducing carbon emissions. Through the implementation of various renewable energy technologies, the SEC has contributed to mitigating climate change and fostering sustainable development in the region. This achievement aligns with the broader societal goals of transitioning towards a low-carbon economy. Secondly, the SEC has created economic value by stimulating local entrepreneurship and fostering job creation. The SEC has attracted investments in clean energy infrastructure, leading to the establishment of new businesses and the generation of employment opportunities. This economic value creation has contributed to the overall growth and prosperity of the Sub-Equana Valley region (MEINHARDT, 2009; DEIDDA GAGLIARDO, 2015; ZIRUOLO, 2016; GODENHJELM & SJÖBLOM, 2020).

Moreover, the Sub-Equana Valley SEC has demonstrated the ability to create social value by empowering local communities and promoting social inclusion. The community has actively engaged with residents through educational programs, awareness campaigns, and participatory decision-making processes. This inclusive approach has not only enhanced public awareness of energy-related issues but has also encouraged the active participation of community members in shaping the energy transition. By involving diverse stakeholders, including residents, businesses, and public organizations, the SEC has fostered a sense of ownership and collective responsibility, leading to increased social cohesion and community resilience (FINGER & RAZAGHI, 2017; PAPI et al., 2018).

Thus, we would like to highlight the key factors that led to all of these outcomes. One of the key success factors identified in this study was the strong collaboration and partnerships between various stakeholders in the SEC. The involvement of government agencies, private companies, non-profit organizations, and community members played a crucial role in driving the public value creation efforts. The collaboration helped in pooling resources, expertise, and knowledge, leading to the development of innovative solutions and services that benefited the community as a whole (VIAL, 2019; GROSSI et al., 2022). This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of collaborative approaches in achieving public value in hybrid organizations.

Another success factor was the emphasis on citizen engagement and participation in decision-making processes. The SEC actively involved community members in shaping the direction of the smart energy initiatives, soliciting their feedback, and incorporating their ideas into the planning and implementation stages. By empowering the community

and making them active participants, the SEC fostered a sense of ownership and commitment among the residents, which in turn enhanced the public value created by the organization (MAGLIACANI, 2020; MARSILIO, 2022).

Furthermore, the SEC demonstrated effective leadership and governance structures that supported the public value creation efforts. The presence of visionary leaders who championed the cause of sustainable and smart energy solutions, along with clear roles and responsibilities assigned to different stakeholders, ensured smooth coordination and execution of projects. The governance mechanisms established by the SEC helped in maintaining transparency, accountability, and trust among the stakeholders, which are vital elements for successful public value creation.

5.2 Challenges, recommendations and potentials for public value creation

Despite these success factors, the study also uncovered several challenges faced by the SEC in their public value creation endeavours. One significant challenge was the complexity of integrating diverse technological systems and infrastructure within the smart energy community. The SEC had to overcome technical barriers and interoperability issues to ensure seamless functioning of the smart grid, renewable energy sources, energy storage, and demand response systems. The integration process required significant investments in terms of time, resources, and expertise.

Another challenge was the need for long-term financial sustainability. The SEC relied on a mix of funding sources, including government grants, public body's cost savings, and community contributions. However, ensuring the availability of continuous funding for ongoing operations, maintenance, and future expansion remained a persistent challenge. Sustaining public value creation initiatives in hybrid organizations like the SEC necessitates innovative financial models and revenue streams to overcome this challenge (MARI & PICCIAIA, 2022).

Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of regulatory frameworks and policies that support and incentivize public value creation in smart energy communities. Ambiguous or restrictive regulations are hindering the progress of hybrid organizations like the SEC, impeding their ability to create public value effectively. The SEC had to navigate through regulatory complexities and advocate for favourable policies to unlock the full potential of their initiatives.

Thus, the findings shed light on the various dimensions of public value and provide recommendations for enhancing public value creation in similar hybrid organizations. Firstly, the integration of multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, private companies, and local communities, played a crucial role in creating public value. The collaborative efforts among these stakeholders resulted in the development of innovative energy solutions, increased energy efficiency, and improved sustainability practices. This emphasizes the significance of stakeholder engagement and partnership in hybrid organizations for effective public value creation. Secondly, the Sub-Equana Valley SEC's focus on addressing local energy challenges and meeting community needs demonstrated the importance of context-specific public value creation. By tailoring their initiatives to the unique requirements of the local community, the SEC was able to create tangible benefits and generate a positive impact (DOHERTY et al., 2014; MION & TESSARI, 2021). This suggests that hybrid organizations should invest time and effort in understanding the specific needs, aspirations, and priorities of the communities they serve to effectively create public value (BILLIS, 2010; BORGONOVİ & MUSSARI, 2011; GROSSI et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the study revealed the significance of data-driven decision-making and the use of advanced technologies in enhancing public value creation. The SEC leveraged smart energy systems modelling to optimize energy consumption, reduce costs, and improve service delivery. This highlights the potential of technological innovations in driving public value creation and the need for hybrid organizations to embrace data-driven approaches.

According to the hybridity premises, the SEC, in its operations, was influenced by the surrounding institutional context, aiming to gain acceptance by adhering to institutional norms (KONDRA & HINNINGS, 1998; MAIR et al., 2015). Its primary challenge was to navigate conflicting pressures from municipalities, members, private firms, and non-profit associations, all while balancing the financial viability of the project. The organization's most valuable asset was its access to financial resources (HILLMAN et al., 2009), which demonstrated its ability to generate public value. Initially, it promoted the project by achieving cost savings for the leading municipality. In the future, it plans to leverage Mission 2 of the Italian National Recovery Plan (PNRR) to implement sustainable energy initiatives and create positive social and environmental impacts. The SEC expressed its commitment to driving positive social change, while also employing business strategies to achieve a common decision, which will be made once all the solar panels are fully operational. This decision will involve either reducing the bills for SEC participants or investing in social projects and public initiatives within the affected region. This perspective underscores the significance of innovative, participatory, and hybrid solutions to effectively address societal challenges (FERREIRA et al., 2017).

Based on these findings, three main recommendations for public value creation in hybrid organizations emerged and we report them in the following Table 6.

Table 6 - Hybrid organizations recommendations – adaptation by the authors

Hybrid organizations dimension	Recommendations
Engagement promotion	Fostering strong partnerships with diverse stakeholders is essential. Hybrid organizations should actively engage with government agencies, private sector entities, community groups, and academic institutions to leverage their expertise, resources, and networks. This collaboration enables the exchange of knowledge, promotes innovation, and facilitates collective decision-making, leading to enhanced public value creation.
Technological attitude	This experience emphasizes the importance of leveraging technology and data for public value creation. Hybrid organizations should invest in smart technologies, data analytics capabilities, and predictive modelling tools to optimize resource allocation, improve service delivery, and enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of their initiatives.
Community-centered approach	Hybrid organizations should adopt a community-centered approach to public value creation. By involving local communities in the design and implementation of initiatives, hybrid organizations can ensure that their efforts align with the needs and aspirations of the community. This participatory approach empowers the community, enhances their ownership of the initiatives, and increases the likelihood of sustained impact.

Last but not the least, according to the latter pillar, the case study revealed several significant insights regarding the public value created by SEC in the context of community-based tourism (BLACKSTOCK, 2005; OKAZAKI, 2008). Firstly, the implementation of sustainable energy initiatives by SEC has resulted in positive environmental impacts, attracting environmentally conscious tourists. This aligns with the global trend of sustainability and presents an opportunity for the community to position itself as an eco-tourism destination. The integration of renewable energy systems, such as solar panels and wind turbines, not only provides clean energy but also serves as a distinctive attraction for tourists interested in sustainable practices (LOWITZSCH et al., 2019; GJORGIVISKI et al., 2021).

In addition, SEC's emphasis on community engagement and empowerment has fostered social value creation. The involvement of local residents in the planning and decision-making processes has empowered them, making them active participants in shaping the community's future. This inclusive approach has also facilitated the development of community-based tourism initiatives, wherein local residents offer authentic cultural experiences and share their knowledge with visitors. Such interactions contribute to a sense of place, creating memorable experiences for tourists and fostering positive perceptions of the community (OKAZAKI, 2008).

Lastly, SEC's initiatives have had economic benefits for the community. The development of community-based tourism activities can generate additional income opportunities for local residents, thereby promoting economic resilience and reducing dependence on traditional industries. The increased tourist footfall could also stimulate local businesses, including accommodation providers, restaurants, and souvenir shops. However, careful attention must be paid to ensure that the benefits are equitably distributed and that the tourism development is sustainable and aligned with the community's values and resources.

6. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this paper examined the public value creation experiences within the context of the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community (SEC), a hybrid organization that integrates both public and private sector elements (BILLIS, 2010; BORGONOVÌ & MUSSARI, 2011; DOHERTY et al., 2014; MION & TESSARI, 2021; GROSSI et al., 2022). Through a preliminary case study, we sought to understand the mechanisms through which the SEC generates public value and the factors that contribute to its success.

Our findings demonstrate that the SEC has been successful in creating public value through its innovative approach to energy management and community development. By leveraging the synergies between public and private stakeholders, the SEC has fostered sustainable energy practices, improved the quality of life for residents, and contributed to the overall well-being of the community (Rq1) (MEINHARDT, 2009; DEIDDA GAGLIARDO, 2015; ZIRUOLO, 2016; GODNHJELM & SJÖBLÖM, 2020).

One key aspect of the SEC's public value creation lies in its ability to engage and involve diverse stakeholders, including residents, local businesses, government agencies, and academic institutions. Through collaborative decision-making processes and active participation, these stakeholders have contributed their unique perspectives and resources, resulting in a more comprehensive and impactful approach to public value creation (ARENA et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the SEC's emphasis on technology integration and participative decision making has played a vital role in optimizing energy consumption, reducing costs, and enhancing overall efficiency. By leveraging smart grid technologies and renewable energy sources, the SEC has not only achieved environmental sustainability but could also stimulate economic growth, attracting businesses, tourists and investment to the region (CEGLIA et al., 2020).

The case study also highlights the importance of adaptive governance structures and flexible regulatory frameworks in facilitating public value creation in hybrid organizations like the SEC. By providing a conducive environment for experimentation, collaboration, and learning, these frameworks have enabled the SEC to adapt to changing circumstances, seize emerging opportunities, and address complex energy challenges effectively.

While this preliminary case study provides valuable insights into the public value creation experiences of the SEC, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of hybrid organizations and their potential for generating public value. Future studies could explore the long-term impacts of the SEC, examine the scalability of its model to other contexts, and evaluate the sustainability of public-private collaborations in the energy sector. Future research opportunities include:

- a) Longitudinal studies: conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of the SEC on public value creation, economic development, and community resilience. This would allow for a comprehensive evaluation of the SEC's effectiveness and the sustainability of its outcomes.
- b) Comparative analysis: conducting comparative analyses with other hybrid organizations to identify common challenges, success factors, and lessons learned. Comparative studies would provide a broader perspective on the dynamics of public value creation in different contexts.
- c) Policy implications: investigating the policy implications of the SEC's public value creation experiences. Analysing the regulatory frameworks, incentives, and governance models that supported the SEC's development would contribute to the design of effective policies for fostering similar hybrid organizations.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, the research focused on a single case, the Sub-Equana Valley SEC, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study relied on qualitative data from interviews and document analysis, which may be subject to bias and interpretation. Furthermore, the main limitation of a deductive approach is its dependence on the pre-existing theories to guide the research process and to make specific recommendations.

Ultimately, recapping Moore's premises (1995), "creating public value" in the SEC case (Rq2) referred to delivering benefits and solutions that enhance the well-being and quality of life for the community. In this hybrid organization, creating public value involved not only the community's needs fulfillment but also the alignment with broader social and environmental objectives. The SEC leveraging the strengths public, private and third sectors provided regulatory support, technical expertise, innovation, and resources. The hybrid nature of the organization allowed it to navigate and balance the diverse interests and demands of members and stakeholders effectively.

Overall, the Sub-Equana Valley Smart Energy Community represents an innovative and successful example of a hybrid organization that effectively generates public value. Its

integrated approach, inclusive stakeholder engagement, technological advancements, and adaptive governance structures offer valuable lessons for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers seeking to foster sustainable and impactful initiatives at the intersection of public and private sectors.

ANDREA ZIRUOLO
Ordinario di Economia Aziendale

Università degli Studi G. d'Annunzio
Dipartimento di Scienze Filosofiche, Pedagogiche ed Economico-Quantitative

SIMONE CIFONELLI
Dottorando in Economia Aziendale

Università degli Studi G. d'Annunzio
Dipartimento di Economia Aziendale

MARCO BERARDI
Ricercatore di Economia Aziendale

Università degli Studi G. d'Annunzio
Dipartimento di Scienze Filosofiche, Pedagogiche ed Economico-Quantitative

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