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Evolution and trends in social enterprise governance: a structured literature review

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to review and critique governance literature within social enterprises (SEs), offer an overview of the state of research and outline a future research agenda.

Design/methodology/approach – Seventy-eight refereed journal articles are analysed using a structured literature review methodology.

Findings – The governance of SEs is an increasingly relevant research topic. However, the literature remains fragmented and, at times, contradictory. The definitional challenges associated with the different types of SEs referenced across studies (e.g. non-profit organisations, hybrid organisations and others) further complicate comparative analyses. The findings reveal three key insights: firstly, the governance of SEs is shaped by internal attributes and the fundamental dichotomy between social mission and economic sustainability, influencing their governance models. Secondly, SEs increasingly act as strategic coordinators in cross-sector collaborations, highlighting the complexity of managing multi-stakeholder partnerships. Thirdly, there is a divergence in country frameworks, leading to inconsistent results in SE governance research, emphasising the importance of understanding local regulatory contexts.

Originality/value – This paper provides a structured literature review of peer-reviewed journal articles, offering valuable insights for future research directions.

Keywords Social enterprise, Governance, Board, Structured literature review

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction

Social enterprises (SEs) are hybrid organisations that combine social objectives with economic activities and are characterised by multi-stakeholder governance structures (Defourny and Nyssens, 2008, 2010; Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Pestoff and Hulgård, 2016). Despite extensive scholarly debate, no universally accepted definition of SE has emerged, reflecting the conceptual complexity of the phenomenon (Pestoff and Hulgård, 2016). The EMES European Research Network has identified a set of economic and social criteria that broadly characterise SEs, including continuous economic activity, autonomy, economic risk, participatory governance and limited profit distribution (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010; Pestoff and Hulgård, 2016).

This complexity is further amplified by the inherently multi-stakeholder nature of SEs, which makes them accountable to a diverse range of actors with potentially divergent

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expectations, values and institutional logics. As a result, SEs face persistent tensions in defining strategic priorities, allocating decision-making power and designing accountability mechanisms. Operating at the intersection of market and solidarity logics, these organisations must continuously balance social and financial objectives within governance structures that differ significantly from conventional models (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014). Traditional governance frameworks – primarily focused on ownership, control and economic efficiency – are therefore insufficient to capture the specificities of SEs.

Existing studies have examined a wide range of issues, including board composition and participation (Spear *et al.*, 2009; Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014), governance tensions in hybrid organisations (Mair *et al.*, 2015; Wolf and Mair, 2019), accountability and mission protection (Pestoff and Hulgård, 2016), the influence of institutional frameworks on governance structures (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010, 2017; Liptrap, 2021; Vakkuri *et al.*, 2021) and the role played by SEs within public management and public policy (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011; Quélin *et al.*, 2017; Henry *et al.*, 2022). However, these contributions remain fragmented across theoretical perspectives, analytical levels and institutional contexts and often produce conflicting findings, limiting the development of a coherent understanding of how governance operates in SEs. In addition, while existing research has provided valuable insights into specific dimensions on the basis of a single theoretical lenses or isolated levels of analysis, it has rarely examined how these elements interact.

A recent literature review on SE governance (Iswoyo and Narsa, 2023) provides a useful overview of the literature, but it mainly focuses on publication trends and thematic classifications. Thus, it does not systematically integrate findings across analytical levels, nor does it examine how different theoretical perspectives shape the interpretation of governance dynamics. As a result, important inconsistencies in the literature remain unexplained.

This study goes beyond prior reviews by developing an integrated multi-level framework that links macro (institutional), meso (inter-organisational) and micro (internal governance) dimensions (Dopfer *et al.*, 2004). In doing so, it not only synthesises existing knowledge but also explains why previous studies report divergent findings, showing how these differences stem from variations in theoretical assumptions, analytical levels and contextual settings. This shift from descriptive aggregation to explanatory integration represents a substantive advancement in the study of SE governance. Within this integrated perspective, the three analytical levels play distinct but interrelated roles in shaping SE governance. At the macro level, institutional and regulatory frameworks define the constraints and opportunities within which governance arrangements emerge, influencing legal forms, stakeholder participation requirements and accountability expectations. At the micro level, these conditions are mediated through internal governance choices, particularly board composition, decision-making structures and accountability mechanisms, which shape how tensions between social and economic objectives are managed in practice. At the meso level, cross-sector collaborations can further amplify or destabilise these arrangements, as SEs engage with external partners, navigate power asymmetries and adapt governance structures to sustain inter-organisational coordination. The contribution of this framework is therefore not only classificatory but also explanatory, as it clarifies where contradictory findings in the literature originate and how they can be reconciled across levels of analysis.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to provide a structured and comprehensive synthesis of the literature on SE governance. Specifically, it seeks to:

- investigate how the governance literature on SEs has evolved (*RQ1*);
- identify the central themes and theoretical approaches shaping the current discourse (*RQ2*); and

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- reflect on the implications for governance research by highlighting unresolved tensions, enduring ambiguities and directions for future research (*RQ3*).

By adopting a structured literature review (SLR) approach (Massaro *et al.*, 2016) and analysing a broader, more recent body of high-quality studies than previous reviews, this paper develops an integrated, multi-level framework that captures the interplay among internal governance structures, institutional contexts and cross-sector dynamics.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the research method, detailing the SLR approach adopted to identify, select and analyse the relevant academic contributions. Section 3 presents the main findings of the review, offering both descriptive insights and a critical assessment of the current state of knowledge on SE governance. Section 4 discusses the implications of these findings, highlighting theoretical contributions, practical relevance and directions for future research. Lastly, Section 5 concludes the paper by summarising the key insights and reflecting on the broader significance of the study.

2. Research method: structured literature review

To comprehensively analyse research trends in SE governance, we adopt an SLR (Massaro *et al.*, 2016). This approach is particularly suitable for examining a fragmented and evolving field, as it enables the systematic identification of trends, gaps and theoretical inconsistencies while ensuring transparency, replicability and analytical rigour.

Accordingly, the review follows the protocol proposed by Massaro *et al.* (2016), including the definition of research questions, systematic literature search and selection, development of an analytical framework, assessment of reliability and validity, data coding and subsequent analysis to derive insights and identify future research directions. This structured process provides a transparent and coherent basis for interpreting the findings and organising the analysis of SE governance.

2.1 Definition of the research questions

According to Massaro *et al.*, 2016, an SLR should focus on three specific issues, i.e. the flow of literature over time, the critical analyses of the extant studies to understand the primary research fields and the identification of new directions for future research, thereby advancing knowledge on the topic. Accordingly, we formulate the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What are the main themes, governance mechanisms and analytical levels addressed in the existing literature on SE governance?

RQ2. What is the focus of the governance literature within SEs?

RQ3. What are the implications for the governance research within SEs?

Answers to these RQs are provided in the following sections.

2.2 Type of studies and literature search

This section outlines our process for selecting relevant studies for our review.

We searched the Scopus database (www.scopus.com) provided by Elsevier. This repository was chosen as it includes documents that adhere to specific quality standards, it offers extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature (Falagas *et al.*, 2008) and is one of the most extensive searchable citation and abstract sources, regularly updated and expanded (Chadegani *et al.*, 2013).

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We focused on publications in English included in the “Business, Management and Accounting” and “Social Sciences” areas. These areas, in fact, reflect the dual nature of SEs, which combine market-oriented approaches with a strong social mission. While the former captures organisational and governance aspects, the latter provides insights into the social, institutional and multi-stakeholder dimensions central to SEs.

We defined the following search string:

"Social enterprise*” AND “Governance” OR “Board”.

These keywords were incorporated within the “titles, abstracts, and keywords”.

This search, conducted in February 2025 and considering documents published up to 2024, yielded 380 documents.

We restricted the search to the document type “article” and to articles published in academic journals (source type) as these articles typically undergo a more rigorous review process, ensuring scientific rigour and a detailed research methodology that supports the validity of the findings. The selection resulted in 248 relevant articles.

Another selection was carried out based on journal rankings. We chose to include only articles published in top-tier journals, specifically those that held an SJR classification of at least Q1 or Q2 in any field at the time of the search. Our selection was based solely on the journal’s quality, without regard to the specific research area. The decision to rely exclusively on Scopus and to include only articles published in Q1 and Q2 journals was guided by the need to ensure high levels of methodological rigour, transparency and peer-review quality in the SLR process. While this strategy strengthens the internal validity of the review, it also involves a trade-off between quality and inclusiveness. In particular, it may introduce certain biases, such as a potential geographical skew in the country analysis and the exclusion of relevant theoretical contributions published in lower-ranked journals or alternative outlets. These limitations are acknowledged and taken into account when interpreting the findings of the study. Following this process, we had 203 articles.

We carefully reviewed the title, keywords and abstract to identify relevant articles. Based on this initial screening, 115 articles were selected, downloaded and thoroughly analysed.

After a reading the full texts, 78 articles were included in the final review; 37 papers were excluded because they referenced the keywords “social enterprise” or “governance” only marginally and did not address the research topic substantively. Consequently, the SLR was conducted on a final sample of 78 rigorously selected articles, as outlined above.

MS-Excel was used to index and analyse the articles retrieved from the database.

Figure 1 summarises the paper selection process.

2.3 Article impact

The fourth step involves assessing the impact of the articles based on the number of citations on the Scopus database. To this end, we collected citation data as of 17 February 2025. Table 1 presents the ten most cited articles, while Table 2 lists the ten with the highest number of citations per year (CPY). As shown in Tables 1 and 2, six articles appear in both rankings (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010; Mair *et al.*, 2015; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011; Quélin *et al.*, 2017; Vakkuri *et al.*, 2021; Davies and Doherty, 2019). However, when considering CPY, more recent articles emerge in Table 2, suggesting strong scholarly interest in citing the latest research on SE governance. This phenomenon underscores the growing academic interest in the topic and its relevance in the scientific debate.

As shown in Figure 2, the number of articles published annually in the field has been steadily increasing. The analysis excludes 2025 to avoid distorting the trends, although one publication from that year has still been included in the count.

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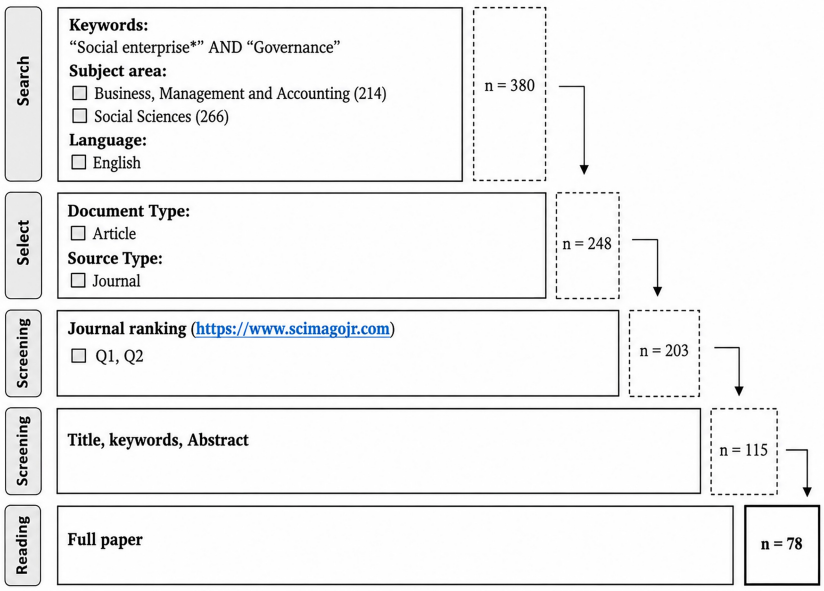

Figure 1. Paper selection process

Lastly, Table 3 lists the most influential journals in the field, the total number of articles published on the topic and their relative frequency.

2.4 Analytical framework

Coding codes were determined initially based on previous SLR studies (Massaro *et al.*, 2016; Dumay *et al.*, 2016). These examine the country of research, the methods, frameworks and models used and the research's contribution. Additionally, nodes specific to SE governance were added for this study. The coding framework is partially based on units of analysis from previous SLRs and partially explicitly developed for this study to enhance our understanding of SE governance.

The "units of analysis" categories were developed to code the articles. Table A1 summarises these categories and their attributes.

In short, five categories have been identified, namely, "Country of Research", "Type of Contribution", "Definition of SEs", "SEs Type Focus", "Focus of the Paper" and "Theoretical Framework". The definitions of each category is reported in Appendix.

2.5 Literature review reliability

According to Massaro *et al.* (2016), we used Krippendorff's alpha (K-alpha) as an inter-coder reliability test. This test allowed the authors to use a statistical measure to test coding reliability (Massaro *et al.*, 2016). Reliability measures can help researchers assess the coding quality and reduce mistakes and personal bias (Dumay *et al.*, 2016). According to the K-alpha test, authors can "rely on variables with a reliability above a = 0.800; consider variables with reliabilities between 0.667 and a = 0.800 only for drawing tentative conclusions" (Krippendorff, 2018). Two authors independently coded the 119 publications in separate

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Table 1. Top ten articles by Scopus citations

Authors	Title	Year	Journal	Scopus citations
Defourny, Jacques Nyssens, Marthe	Conceptions of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship in Europe and the United States: Convergences and divergences	2010	*Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*	803
Brinkerhoff, Derick W. Brinkerhoff, Jennifer M.	Public-private partnerships: Perspectives on purposes, publicness, and good governance	2011	*Public Administration and Development*	390
Mair, Johanna Mayer, Judith Lutz, Eva	Navigating Institutional Plurality: Organisational Governance in Hybrid Organisations	2015	*Organisation Studies*	367
Defourny, Jacques Nyssens, Marthe	Fundamentals for an International Typology of Social Enterprise Models	2017	*Voluntas*	261
Spear, Roger Cornforth, Chris Aiken, Mike	The governance challenges of social enterprises: Evidence from a UK empirical study	2009	*Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*	178
Mason, Chris Mason Kirkbride, James Bryde, David	From stakeholders to institutions: The changing face of social enterprise governance theory	2007	*Management Decision*	165
Roy, Michael J. Donaldson, Cam Baker, Rachel Kerr, Susan	The potential of social enterprise to enhance health and well-being: A model and systematic review	2014	*Social Science and Medicine*	164
Quélin, Bertrand V. Kivleniece, Ilze Lazzarini, Sergio	Public-Private Collaboration, Hybridity and Social Value: Towards New Theoretical Perspectives	2017	*Journal of Management Studies*	162
Low, Chris	A framework for the governance of social enterprise	2006	*International Journal of Social Economics*	124
Davies, Iain A. Doherty, Bob	Balancing a Hybrid Business Model: The Search for Equilibrium at Cafédirect	2019	*Journal of Business Ethics*	106

Note(s): As of 17 February 2025

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Table 2. Top ten articles by citation per year (CPY)

Authors	Title	Year	Source title	CPY
Defourny, Jacques Nyssens, Marthe	Conceptions of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship in Europe and the United States: Convergences and divergences	2010	*Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*	54
Mair, Johanna Mayer, Judith Lutz, Eva	Navigating Institutional Plurality: Organisational Governance in Hybrid Organisations	2015	*Organisation Studies*	37
Defourny, Jacques Nyssens, Marthe	Fundamentals for an International Typology of Social Enterprise Models	2017	*Voluntas*	33
Brinkerhoff, Derick W. Brinkerhoff, Jennifer M.	Public-private partnerships: Perspectives on purposes, publicness, and good governance	2011	*Public Administration and Development*	28
Quélin, Bertrand V. Kivleniece, Ilze Lazzarini, Sergio	Public-Private Collaboration, Hybridity and Social Value: Towards New Theoretical Perspectives	2017	*Journal of Management Studies*	20
Vakkuri, Jarmo Johanson, Jan-Erik Feng, Nancy Chun Giordano, Filippo	Governance and accountability in hybrid organisations – past, present and future	2021	*Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting and Financial Management*	18
Davies, Iain A. Doherty, Bob	Balancing a Hybrid Business Model: The Search for Equilibrium at Cafédirect	2019	*Journal of Business Ethics*	18
Pache, Anne-Claire Battilana, Julie Spencer, Channing	An integrative model of hybrid governance: the role of boards in helping sustain organisational hybridity	2024	*Academy of Management Journal*	17
Olmedo, Lucas van Twuijver, Mara O'Shaughnessy, Mary	Rurality as context for innovative responses to social challenges – The role of rural social enterprises	2023	*Journal of Rural Studies*	17
Sparviero, Sergio	The Case for a Socially Oriented Business Model Canvas: The Social Enterprise Model Canvas	2019	*Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*	16

Note(s): As of 17 February 2025

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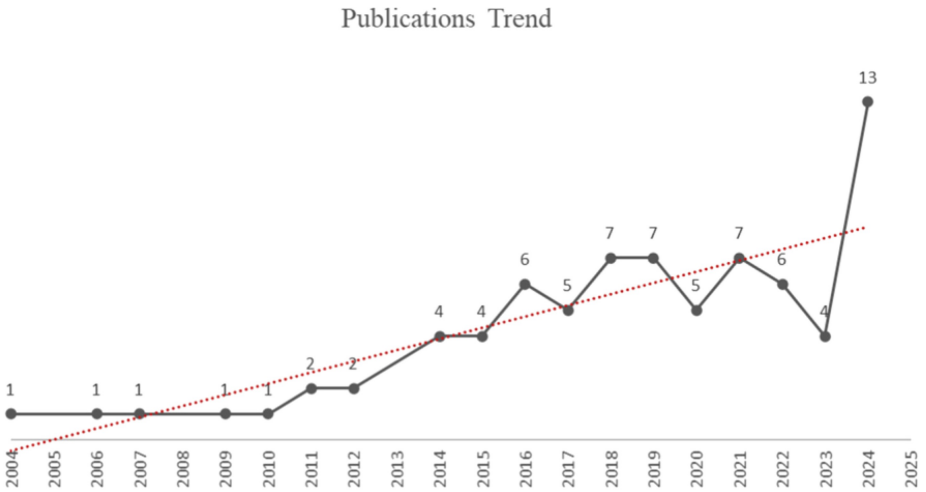

Figure 2. Number of publications per year

Excel spreadsheets. We used the software "R" and the library "irr" to test the reliability of our coding. As reported in Table A1, the results show a Krippendorff's alpha over 0.8 in all instances. Therefore, the authors argue that the results presented are reliable.

2.6 Validity tests

In this study, both external and internal validity were addressed to ensure the robustness of the review process.

External validity was supported through a rigorous screening procedure, involving the systematic analysis of titles, keywords, abstracts and full texts to ensure the relevance and representativeness of the selected articles.

Internal validity was strengthened through a pattern-matching approach (Yin, 2014), whereby initial coding and interpretation were tested on a subset of articles before being extended to the full data set, reducing the risk of systematic bias. In addition, a time-series analysis was conducted to examine publication trends and citation dynamics over time, providing further support for the consistency and interpretability of the findings.

Table 3. Top journals per number of publications

Journal	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency (%)
Voluntas	10	13
Journal of Social Entrepreneurship	7	9
Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics	4	5
Corporate Governance (Bingley)	4	5
Journal of Management Studies	4	5
Social Enterprise Journal	4	5
Sustainability (Switzerland)	4	5

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2.7 Code data using the developed framework

The coding was performed according to Stanley (2001, p. 135) and Massaro *et al.* (2016). In detail, the two authors manually coded the articles, resolving discrepancies through direct discussion. The manual codes were validated through text searches to improve the validity of the results. After coding, the data were analysed to derive insights and critiques. The coding scheme combined deductive and inductive components to ensure methodological rigour and flexibility. Deductive codes were adapted from established studies on SE governance and hybrid organisations (e.g. Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Mair *et al.*, 2015; Wolf and Mair, 2019) and served as initial sensitising concepts. To avoid bias or the risk of overlooking emergent issues, the coders were explicitly instructed to add new inductive codes whenever the data did not fit the pre-defined categories. As a result, several new governance themes emerged inductively (e.g. collaborative accountability, context-specific hybrid tensions, sectoral particularities), demonstrating that pre-existing categories did not constrain the analysis.

The coding results are reported and discussed in the following sections. A detailed description of these codes is provided in Table A1 (Appendix 1).

3. Findings

This section examines the coding process and presents the results addressing *RQ1* and *RQ2*.

Specifically, it examines key aspects, including the country of research, the main topics covered in the articles, definitions of SEs, the theoretical frameworks adopted and the implications of the findings.

3.1 Country of the research

Country representation was analysed to identify geographical patterns in SE governance research and to assess whether knowledge production is concentrated in specific institutional contexts. This analysis aligns with calls in the SE literature to examine how national frameworks and welfare regimes shape governance arrangements (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010, 2017; Vakkuri *et al.*, 2021; Liptrap, 2021). The articles are grouped by continent and examined at the country level. The results of the analysis are shown in Figure 3. The regions with the highest representation are Europe, with 36 articles (46%), followed by Asia, with eight articles (10%) and Africa, with five articles (6%). Among the 12 European countries,

Figure 3. Country analysis

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the UK and Belgium appear to be the most studied, with 16 and 4 articles, respectively. In Asia, China and South Korea are the most analysed countries, with two articles each.

Of the 78 articles examined, the USA stands out as underrepresented, with only three articles, despite its significant economy. Additionally, several emerging countries, mainly those in Central and South America, are often overlooked or poorly analysed.

Further analysis revealed that ten studies compared different locations. It is important to interpret this country's analysis of SE publications with an awareness that SEs are defined differently across countries and, in some cases, even within articles from the same country.

This geographical pattern is analytically relevant because institutional regimes and legal frameworks strongly shape governance structures in SEs. The predominance of studies from Europe and the UK reflects the maturity of organisational forms such as social cooperatives and CICs, which have explicitly codified governance models. Conversely, limited coverage of regions such as Latin America, Africa and Asia suggests that governance insights from diverse regulatory and welfare contexts remain underexplored. The purpose of this analysis is therefore not to offer a census of global SE activity but to highlight the geographical concentration of scholarly knowledge and its implications for theory-building.

Taken together, these findings suggest that SE governance is strongly shaped by institutional contexts in which legal forms and governance models are more formalised. This can explain the predominance of European and UK-based studies and suggest the need to investigate and compare different regulatory environments, with a specific focus on the underrepresented regions.

3.2 Type of contribution

Figure 4 illustrates the temporal distribution of SE governance articles categorised by contribution type (conceptual vs empirical). The data reveal a growing trend in publications, particularly in studies using empirical approaches, which have increased significantly in recent years. While early contributions (2004–2015) were predominantly theoretical, the prevalence of empirical studies has risen steadily, as indicated by the red trendline. The 2024

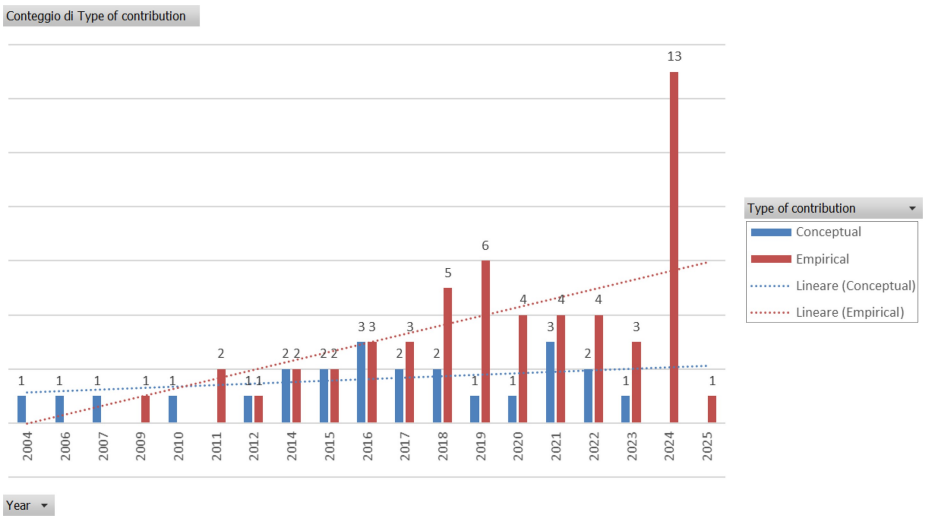

Figure 4. Type of contribution

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peak suggests unprecedented interest in SE governance research. This trend highlights an evolution in the research focus from conceptual foundations towards more data-driven analyses. However, conceptual studies remain relatively stable, suggesting an ongoing effort to refine conceptual frameworks in tandem with empirical advancements. The limited number of contributions before 2010 suggests that SE governance has only recently gained traction as a distinct research field. These findings underscore the growing maturity of the SE governance literature, with increasing attention to empirical validation and real-world applicability.

More specifically, the analysis shows that qualitative approaches clearly dominate empirical research on SE governance. Of the 54 empirical articles, 40 adopt qualitative designs, including case studies, fieldwork, interviews and document analysis. This strong predominance suggests the need to explore organisational dynamics, stakeholder interactions and governance tensions in depth, particularly given the hybrid, context-dependent nature of SEs.

By contrast, quantitative studies remain limited in the field, with only nine articles using statistical techniques such as surveys, regression models or ANOVA to investigate governance determinants or performance relationships. Mixed-methods designs are even rarer, with only five studies integrating qualitative and quantitative data to capture multiple dimensions of governance.

This methodological distribution also has implications for knowledge development in the field. The predominance of qualitative approaches reflects the need to explore complex governance dynamics in context, but it also limits the ability to establish causal relationships and generalisable findings. The relatively limited use of quantitative and mixed-methods designs, therefore, highlights a gap in the literature, particularly in relation to testing governance–performance relationships and developing more generalisable insights.

3.3 Theoretical frameworks

The review of 78 articles on SE governance highlights a diverse and fragmented theoretical landscape. Institutional and stakeholder theories are among the most frequently used (both cited seven times), while governance network and collaborative governance (four), social innovation theory (three) and resource dependency theory (two) appear less frequently. Many studies (30) fall under the "Others" category, reflecting the wide range of perspectives applied. Notably, 17 articles propose new frameworks, suggesting an ongoing effort to refine existing theories and develop conceptual approaches to better capture the complexities of SE governance.

This fragmentation is not merely descriptive but has important analytical implications. Different theoretical lenses illuminate distinct dimensions of SE governance, yet they also generate partial and sometimes contradictory interpretations. Stakeholder and participatory perspectives tend to emphasise inclusiveness, legitimacy and voice, whereas agency and efficiency-oriented approaches highlight control problems, coordination costs and governance effectiveness. Similarly, institutional perspectives explain how regulatory environments and legitimacy pressures shape governance arrangements but often provide limited insight into how governance tensions are managed within organisations. As a result, inconsistencies in the literature stem not only from empirical heterogeneity but also from the selective explanatory power of the theories adopted.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the main theoretical lenses offer complementary but incomplete explanations of SE governance. Each perspective captures specific aspects of governance dynamics while overlooking others, leading to a fragmented understanding of the field. More importantly, the review reveals that many of the

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contradictions identified in prior studies can be traced back to differences in theoretical assumptions and levels of analysis rather than to fundamentally incompatible empirical results. This insight shifts the interpretation of fragmentation from a weakness of the field to a consequence of unintegrated theoretical perspectives, underscoring the need for more integrative approaches capable of bridging these lenses and providing a more coherent understanding of SE governance.

3.4 Definition of social enterprises and social enterprises typology

The analysis of SE definitions across the 78 reviewed articles reveals significant conceptual diversity, reflecting the ongoing debate regarding the nature and boundaries of SEs. The most prevalent classification aligns SEs with hybrid organisations (33), emphasising their dual focus on creating social and economic value. A few studies adopt the widely recognised Emes definition (3) or categorise SEs within the third sector (2). Notably, ten articles suggest that SEs are inherently difficult to define, while 24 do not specify a definition, further highlighting the field's conceptual ambiguity. Additionally, two studies propose their definitions, and two fall into the "Others" category. Regarding the specific focus of SEs, the literature encompasses a wide range of models and sectors. Work integration SEs (WISE) emerge as the most frequently studied type (ten), followed by social cooperatives (six), community-based SEs and community cooperatives (five), fairtrade SEs (three) and SEs engaged in cross-sector partnerships (five). For-profit SEs, while less common in the sample (two), reflect the growing interest in market-driven SEs. However, many studies (24) classify SEs under "Others", and 14 do not specify a particular type, suggesting a broad, heterogeneous research landscape. Furthermore, nine articles explore multiple SE types, reinforcing that SEs operate across diverse organisational forms and sectors.

Table 4 presents a detailed overview of the diverse definitions of SEs used across different countries and continents.

The data highlights a substantial prevalence of "Hybrid organisations" as the dominant definition, particularly in European countries such as Belgium, the UK and Spain. This suggests a broad consensus around hybridity, in which SEs combine social and economic objectives. The concept of "hybrid organisation" is used in the literature in multiple and sometimes overlapping ways. In some studies, hybridity is treated as a defining characteristic of SEs, reflecting the combination of social and economic objectives. In others, it is used as an analytical category to group organisations operating across institutional logics. In yet other cases, hybridity serves as a theoretical lens for interpreting governance tensions, particularly those arising from competing stakeholder expectations and accountability demands. This conceptual overlap contributes to ambiguity in the literature and affects how governance phenomena are interpreted.

However, significant variation in terminology is observed, with a considerable proportion of studies from countries such as Germany, Greece, Hungary and Italy categorising the definition as "Not specified". Thus, there is a lack of a clear definition or an adaptation of the SE concept to fit local contexts.

Additionally, definitions such as "Third sector organisations" and "Non-profit organisation" appear, reflecting different conceptualisations of SEs across regions. The frequency of the "Impossible to define" category, particularly in countries like Malaysia and South Korea, underscores the challenges and complexities of defining SEs universally, as local contexts often shape these definitions in unique ways. This variability emphasises the importance of considering regional and national specificities when researching SEs, as their conceptualisations are diverse and heavily influenced by local socio-economic and legal environments.

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Table 4. SEs definition and country of research

Continent	Country	Definition(s) of SEs	Frequency
Europe	Belgium	Hybrid organisations	4
	France	Hybrid organisations	1
		Not specified	1
	Germany	Not specified	1
	Greece	Not specified	1
		Hybrid organisations	1
	Hungary	Not specified	1
	Ireland	Hybrid organisations	1
	Italy	Not specified	1
		Third sector organisations	1
	The Netherlands	Hybrid organisations	1
		Impossible to define	1
		Not specified	1
	Portugal	Not specified	1
	Spain	EU definition	1
		Hybrid organisations	1
	Sweden	Non-profit organisation	1
	UK	Hybrid organisations	8
		Impossible to define	5
		Not specified	5
		Provide its definition	1
		UK government definition	1
North America	USA	Hybrid organisations	1
		Not specified	2
South America	Chile	Not specified	1
Africa	Africa	Hybrid organisations	2
		Impossible to define	1
		Several	1
Asia	China	Hybrid organisations	2
	South Korea	Hybrid organisations	1
		Impossible to define	1
		Not specified	1
	Malaysia	Impossible to define	1
	Bangladesh	Not specified	1
	Cambodia	Not specified	1
Australia		Hybrid organisations	1

In a nutshell, from the analysis, it emerges that the concept of hybridity is used in the literature in multiple and sometimes overlapping ways, which contributes to conceptual ambiguity in SE governance research. Firstly, SEs can be understood as hybrid organisational forms, when the combination of social and economic objectives is embedded in the organisation's core identity and mission. Secondly, hybridity can be used as an analytical category, when studies group together organisations that operate across multiple institutional logics to compare governance structures and outcomes across different contexts. Thirdly, hybridity can be interpreted as a governance challenge, when tensions arise in relation to accountability mechanisms, board composition and the risk of mission drift resulting from competing stakeholder demands and institutional pressures. Distinguishing among these uses helps clarify how hybridity is mobilised in the literature and provides a more consistent basis for interpreting governance dynamics across studies.

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3.5 Social enterprise's definition and focus of the paper

Table 5 analyses the relationship between different definitions of SEs and the corresponding governance focuses in the literature. Governance structure refers to the formal framework of an organisation's governance, including the composition of boards, roles and decision-making processes. By contrast, governance attributes describe the qualitative features of how governance is practised, such as transparency, accountability and inclusivity. While structure defines the "who" and "how" of decision-making, attributes focus on the principles and behaviours that influence governance effectiveness. Governance structure is the most frequently mentioned governance focus, appearing 25 times across several definitions of SEs, particularly in the "Hybrid organisations" (ten occurrences) and "Not specified" (ten occurrences) categories. This suggests that governance structure is a critical concern in discussions of SEs. Another notable governance focus is cross-sector governance coordination, prevalent in SEs and defined as "Hybrid organisations" (seven occurrences). It also appears three times in the "Not specified" category. This focus highlights the importance of managing relationships and coordinating efforts across sectors, including the public, private and non-profit sectors. Governance attributes appear 22 times across multiple definitions. This broad frequency indicates that governance attributes are crucial in ensuring SEs meet their social missions while maintaining organisational efficiency and financial sustainability. Good governance, mentioned seven times, appears primarily in the context of "Hybrid organisations" (five occurrences) and "Not specified" (two occurrences). This focus emphasises the need for ethical leadership and transparent, accountable governance practices, which are essential for SEs that often pursue social and financial objectives. The "Impossible to define" category has ten governance focuses, with "Governance attributes" and "Governance structure" appearing five times each. These occurrences suggest that governance remains a key area of focus even in contexts where the definition of SEs is unclear or elusive. The "Not specified" category includes a variety of governance focuses, notably cross-sector governance coordination (three occurrences), good governance (two occurrences) and governance attributes (six occurrences). This variability reflects the diversity of governance practices and considerations in SEs that do not explicitly define

Table 5. Focus of the paper

Definition of SEs	Governance focus	Frequency
Emes definition	Governance attributes	3
Hybrid organisations	Governance structure	10
	Cross-sector governance coordination	7
	Good governance	5
	Governance attributes	5
	Governance structure	5
Impossible to define	Governance attributes	5
	Governance structure	5
Not specified	Cross-sector governance coordination	3
	Good governance	2
	Governance attributes	6
	Governance structure	10
	Not specified	4
Other	Governance attributes	3
Provide its own definition	Governance structure	2
Third-sector organisations	Cross-sector governance coordination	2
	Governance attributes	1

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themselves or are subject to different interpretations. Others provide their definition categories, highlighting that some researchers propose frameworks with "Governance attributes" and "Governance structure" as recurring themes.

Taken together, these findings show that the diversity of definitions and theoretical lenses used in SE governance research is not merely descriptive but has significant analytical consequences. Studies adopting broader or more flexible definitions of SEs (e.g. social businesses, hybrids, informal community initiatives) tend to emphasise entrepreneurial autonomy, innovation and performance, whereas research grounded in stricter institutional definitions (e.g. social cooperatives, CICs, WISEs) places more substantial weight on accountability, democratic participation and mission safeguarding.

These distinctions have direct implications for governance outcomes. Studies adopting broader or more flexible definitions of SEs (e.g. hybrid or social business models) tend to emphasise entrepreneurial autonomy, innovation and performance. By contrast, research grounded in more institutionalised forms (e.g. social cooperatives or WISEs) places greater emphasis on accountability, democratic governance and mission protection. As a result, differences in how SEs are defined help explain variations in board composition, governance structures and the nature of organisational tensions reported in the literature.

4. A multi-level framework for social enterprise governance and future research directions

The contradictions observed in the Results section – particularly regarding the effects of multi-stakeholder boards, the sources of mission drift and the influence of national institutional frameworks – suggest that governance outcomes cannot be understood in isolation. Rather than representing isolated inconsistencies, these divergent findings stem from differences in institutional environments, organisational configurations and theoretical assumptions across studies.

The micro–meso–macro framework proposed by Dopfer *et al.* (2004) explains socio-economic evolution through the dynamics of "generic rules", i.e. routines, institutional arrangements, operational norms and organisational models that guide the behaviour of economic agents. This model explains how generic rules emerge at the micro level, diffuse at the meso level and shape systemic structures at the macro level (Dopfer *et al.*, 2004; Dopfer, 2005). At the micro level, individual actors create, adopt and adapt rules as they solve problems and refine routines or strategies. The meso level focuses on populations of agents who carry these rules, showing how they spread, compete, stabilise and form organisational or institutional patterns. Evolutionary mechanisms such as variation, selection and replication are most visible at this intermediate stage. The macro level represents the aggregation of meso structures into broader systems – industries, regimes or socio-economic orders. Here, rules interact within "surface" and "deep" structures to determine systemic coherence and long-term trajectories. Overall, this framework offers a systemic, evolutionary lens that links individual organisations to institutional transformation, explaining how single innovations can scale up to reshape complex socio-economic systems over time.

Building on these considerations, this section develops an integrative multi-level framework for understanding SE governance. The literature is organised across three interrelated levels: micro (internal governance structures and mission-related tensions), meso (cross-sector collaborations and inter-organisational relationships) and macro (institutional and regulatory contexts).

By linking these levels, the framework explains how governance dynamics emerge from the interaction between institutional contexts, internal arrangements and external

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partnerships. In other words, it can be argued that governance outcomes vary because macro constraints shape micro choices, which are amplified or moderated through meso-level interactions.

Accordingly, the discussion is structured along these three dimensions, providing a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of SE governance.

4.1 Micro-dimension: distinctive attributes and internal dichotomy

Governance in SEs has been defined as board-level leadership that enables stakeholders to create and maximise social value (Mason, 2012). It includes the systems and processes that ensure organisational direction, oversight and accountability, encompassing board composition, roles and responsibilities, performance, board–staff relationships, accountability mechanisms, stakeholder engagement and governance structures (Cornforth, 2004; Lee *et al.*, 2024). Internal governance also involves key elements such as stakeholder participation, autonomy and independence from state and market pressures (Savall Morera *et al.*, 2024).

From a critical perspective, governance challenges in SEs stem from their hybrid nature and from broader governance reforms across sectors (Spear *et al.*, 2014). In Europe, SEs are characterised by collective governance, stakeholder involvement and limited profit distribution, reflecting traditions of economic democracy (Spear *et al.*, 2014). Tensions arise both externally and internally. External pressures include market competition, regulation and diverse stakeholder expectations. Internally, SEs must balance social missions with economic sustainability. Multi-stakeholder governance can mitigate these tensions by promoting inclusiveness and transparency (Borzaga and Galera, 2023). Still, it may also increase coordination costs and slow decision-making processes (Doherty and Kittipanya-Ngam, 2021).

These dynamics can be better understood by combining different theoretical perspectives, each of which captures specific dimensions of SE governance. Stakeholder approaches emphasise the role of inclusive governance in enhancing legitimacy and aligning organisational goals with broader social interests, highlighting the importance of diverse board composition (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014). At the same time, institutional perspectives show how governance structures are shaped by external expectations and legitimacy pressures, often taking on a symbolic function that reflects societal values (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011). However, insights from research on hybrid organisations point to persistent tensions between financial sustainability and mission preservation, which are not fully resolved by these perspectives (Mason, 2012). In this context, agency theory adds a complementary view by focusing on the board's role in monitoring management and safeguarding organisational objectives (Wolf and Mair, 2019).

In all, these perspectives suggest that governance structures are central to managing the balance between social and economic objectives, yet existing research still offers a partial and insufficiently integrated understanding of how these tensions are addressed in practice.

Future research should investigate hybrid governance models, participatory practices and the alignment between board objectives and organisational missions.

4.2 Meso-dimension: strategic coordinators in cross-sector collaboration

At the meso level, SEs act as coordinators within cross-sector collaborations, where governance dynamics are shaped by interactions among heterogeneous actors with different institutional logics. These arrangements are typically characterised by interdependence, shared decision-making and the need to align diverse objectives, requiring governance mechanisms that support coordination, negotiation and conflict resolution (Grudinschi *et al.*, 2013; Keast and Mandell, 2014).

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Resource dependence perspectives explain the emergence of such collaborations, as organisations engage with partners to access critical resources and reduce uncertainty (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). However, differences in goals, power and organisational logics often generate tensions, particularly around accountability, value distribution and control (Di Domenico and Meneguzzo, 2009; Henry *et al.*, 2022). In response, the literature highlights the role of inclusive and negotiated governance arrangements in facilitating alignment and sustaining collaboration over time (Gillett *et al.*, 2019).

These findings suggest that meso-level governance does not merely coordinate inter-organisational relationships but actively shapes how macro-level constraints and micro-level governance choices are translated into collaborative outcomes. At the same time, existing research remains primarily focused on inter-organisational dynamics, offering more limited insight into the internal governance capacities required for SEs to effectively sustain such partnerships.

4.3 Macro-dimension: regulatory frameworks against inconsistent results

Understanding SEs requires careful consideration of the local and national specificities that shape these initiatives (Lindsay and Hems, 2004). Governance is deeply influenced by country-specific regulatory frameworks, making it essential to understand these contexts before conducting cross-country analyses. One example is provided by social cooperatives, which have become widespread in Europe. Different forms have been legally recognised in countries such as Italy, Spain, France, Portugal and Greece, including the "social cooperative" in Italy and the "cooperative social with limited liability" in Greece. Unlike traditional cooperatives, which primarily benefit their members, social cooperatives are designed to serve the broader community. Legal frameworks in several European countries impose strict limitations on profit distribution, reflecting a shift from mutual interests to a broader public interest (Spear *et al.*, 2009).

In other contexts, new legal forms have emerged to recognise SEs, such as the "enterprise à finalité sociale" in Belgium (1995), the "limited dividend company" in Sweden (2006) and the "community interest company" in the UK (2001) (Doherty and Kittipanya-Ngam, 2021).

Many SEs adopt multi-stakeholder governance structures involving beneficiaries, employees, volunteers, public authorities and donors. In countries such as Italy, Portugal, Greece and France, this structure is recognised or mandated by law. For example, the SCIC law in France requires the inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups in governance. Similarly, in South Korea, SEs (WISEs) must involve various stakeholders, including workers, beneficiaries and external actors, in governance (SEPA, Article 8). While this model enhances participation and legitimacy, it also introduces coordination challenges and potential conflicts among stakeholders.

However, these regulatory trends are not consistent across countries. A comparison between European and US frameworks highlights important differences. In the USA, legal forms such as the "low-profit limited liability company" (L3C), the "benefit corporation" (B-Corp) and the "flexible purpose corporation" (FPC) allow for social objectives while not imposing strict profit distribution constraints. This contrast shows how legal systems shape the structure, sustainability and operational capacity of SEs, influencing their ability to attract investment and balance social and economic objectives.

The results also show significant variation in how SEs are defined and classified across studies. This heterogeneity is closely linked to the institutional and regulatory contexts in which SEs operate. For example, the prominence of hybrid organisations reflects environments that allow or encourage dual missions. Similarly, the focus on WISEs, social

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cooperatives and community-based models often corresponds to contexts where these forms are legally recognised and supported.

Overall, this conceptual dispersion highlights both definitional ambiguity and the importance of contextualising SE governance within its institutional environment. Future research should therefore examine how regulatory frameworks shape hybridisation processes, stakeholder tensions and governance configurations. Expanding empirical studies beyond Western contexts and analysing the evolution of legal frameworks over time may also provide deeper insights into governance dynamics and mission drift. While institutional and comparative approaches effectively explain how regulatory environments shape SE governance models, they offer only limited insight into how governance tensions are managed in practice within organisations.

4.4 Integrative insights

Rather than operating as independent analytical domains, the macro, meso and micro levels interact dynamically in shaping SE governance, generating both complementarities and tensions that help explain the heterogeneity of findings in the literature.

At the macro level, institutional and regulatory frameworks define the conditions under which SEs operate, shaping legal forms, accountability requirements and stakeholder expectations (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010, 2017; Vakkuri *et al.*, 2021). However, these external constraints do not translate mechanically into governance outcomes. Their effects are mediated at the micro level, where internal governance arrangements – such as board composition, decision-making structures and accountability mechanisms – determine how organisations interpret and respond to competing social and economic demands (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Mair *et al.*, 2015). As a result, similar institutional environments may lead to different governance configurations depending on how these tensions are managed internally.

These dynamics are further complicated at the meso level, where SEs engage in cross-sector collaborations with actors embedded in different institutional logics (Grudinschi *et al.*, 2013; Keast and Mandell, 2014). Here, governance challenges intensify, as organisations must reconcile not only internal tensions but also externally induced conflicts related to power asymmetries, resource dependencies and divergent objectives (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Di Domenico and Meneguzzo, 2009; Henry *et al.*, 2022). Meso-level interactions thus act as both amplifiers and moderators of macro–micro dynamics, reshaping governance arrangements through ongoing processes of negotiation, coordination and adaptation (Gillett *et al.*, 2019).

Importantly, the interplay across these levels helps explain many of the contradictions identified in prior studies. Findings that appear inconsistent – such as the effectiveness of participatory governance or the impact of stakeholder involvement – often reflect differences in how governance mechanisms operate across levels rather than fundamentally conflicting empirical evidence. For example, practices that enhance legitimacy at the macro level may increase coordination costs at the micro level (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014), or become difficult to sustain in meso-level collaborations characterised by unequal power relations (Henry *et al.*, 2022).

Concluding, these insights suggest that SE governance cannot be fully understood within single-level frameworks. Instead, it emerges from the continuous interaction between institutional constraints, organisational choices and inter-organisational dynamics. An integrated, multi-level perspective is therefore essential not only to capture the complexity of SE governance but also to reconcile fragmented findings and provide a more coherent explanation of governance outcomes.

Table 6 summarises key insights from the SE governance literature across the three levels outlined above.

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Table 6. A multi-level framework for SE governance

Level	Main Findings	Scientific Contribution	Practical Implications	Policy Implications	Key theoretical lenses and illustrative studies
Macro-dimension	- Variation in SE governance models across national regulatory frameworks	- Influence of institutional frameworks on hybridisation dynamics	- Consideration of legal diversity in SE governance planning	- Regulatory balance between investment openness and mission protection	Institutional and comparative perspectives on SE models (e.g., Defourny and Nyssens, 2010, 2017; Lindsay and Hems, 2004; Liptrap, 2021; Vakkuri *et al.*, 2021)
	- EU emphasis on multi-stakeholder governance and asset locks	- Tensions from regulation-driven multi-stakeholder governance	- Strategic legal form selection based on flexibility and mission safeguarding	- Policy design informed by diversity in SE organisational forms	
	- US preference for flexible legal forms (e.g. B-Corps, L3Cs) with limited redistributive constraints - High heterogeneity in SE classification across empirical studies	- Underrepresentation of Global South and Eastern Europe in empirical studies - Legal framework evolution and implications for mission drift			
Micro-dimension	- Tensions between social mission and economic sustainability	- Impact of governance structure on social–economic goal balance	- Board composition with social and economic expertise	- Capacity-building initiatives for hybrid governance and board effectiveness	Stakeholder, agency and hybrid governance perspectives (e.g., Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Mair *et al.*, 2015; Wolf and Mair, 2019; Mason, 2012; Spear *et al.*, 2014; Pestoff and Hulgård, 2016; Savall Morera *et al.*, 2024; Lee *et al.*, 2024)
	- Enhanced legitimacy through multi-stakeholder governance, with increased decision-making complexity	- Comparative assessments of hybrid governance effectiveness	- Participatory structures for strategic alignment and transparency	- Support for inclusive and mission-aligned governance models	
	- Limited research on board–mission alignment	- Stakeholder participation and organisational performance - Board–management alignment in mission fulfilment	- Skill development in hybrid governance		
Meso-dimension	- Role of SEs as strategic coordinators in inter-sectoral partnerships	- Governance design in cross-sector partnerships	- Development of collaborative governance skills	- Institutional support for co-governance in multi-actor contexts	Resource dependence, collaborative governance and hybridity/institutional logics perspectives (e.g., Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011; Quélin *et al.*, 2017; Doherty and Kittipanya-Ngam, 2021; Longoni *et al.*, 2019; Gillett *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2022; Hatak *et al.*, 2016)
	- Value-based tensions and divergent logics in SE–for-profit collaborations	- Effects of power asymmetries on partnership sustainability	- Conflict management mechanisms in partnership settings	- Incentives for transparent and durable collaborative models	
	- Trust-building through inclusive governance practices	- Governance configurations for long-term collaboration			

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Table A2 (see Appendix 2) classifies the 78 reviewed studies according to the level of analysis (micro, meso, macro), supporting the development of the proposed multi-level framework.

4.5 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the literature in four main ways.

Firstly, it clarifies the conceptual fragmentation that characterises SE governance research by identifying dominant and emerging theoretical lenses and showing how different perspectives generate partial and sometimes conflicting interpretations of governance phenomena (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Mair *et al.*, 2015; Wolf and Mair, 2019). In doing so, the study highlights the need for more integrative approaches to understanding SE governance.

Secondly, the study advances existing knowledge by developing an integrated multi-level framework that links macro (institutional), meso (inter-organisational) and micro (internal governance) dimensions (Dopfer *et al.*, 2004; Defourny and Nyssens, 2010, 2017). This framework moves beyond single-level analyses by explaining how governance dynamics emerge from the interaction among institutional contexts, organisational structures and cross-sector relationships (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011; Quélin *et al.*, 2017).

Thirdly, the analysis provides a more coherent analytical lens for interpreting inconsistencies in prior studies, showing that contradictory findings often stem from differences in definitional choices, theoretical assumptions and levels of analysis (Pestoff and Hulgård, 2016; Liptrap, 2021). By making these sources of variation explicit, the study contributes to a more cumulative and systematic understanding of SE governance.

Fourthly, the review consolidates and extends existing knowledge by identifying key governance mechanisms and patterns across the literature – such as the role of multi-stakeholder governance, the balance between social and economic objectives and the importance of governance design in cross-sector collaborations (Spear *et al.*, 2009; Gillett *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2022) – and by deriving theory-informed propositions that support the development of future research in the field.

4.6 Practical and societal implications

The findings highlight the broader societal relevance of SE governance, showing how governance choices directly shape social value creation, particularly in vulnerable communities and service domains where SEs play a critical welfare role. Effective governance arrangements – especially those capable of balancing social and economic objectives and managing multi-stakeholder dynamics – emerge as key enablers of social inclusion, accountability and long-term impact (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Mair *et al.*, 2015).

The analysis also identifies context-specific governance configurations that enhance effectiveness across different SE models. For instance, in WISEs, governance structures that combine participatory decision-making with professional managerial competences support labour market reintegration (Lee *et al.*, 2024; Savall Morera *et al.*, 2024). In social cooperatives, multi-stakeholder governance strengthens democratic accountability and community embeddedness (Spear *et al.*, 2009; Pestoff and Hulgård, 2016). In cross-sector collaborations, explicitly designed governance mechanisms – such as shared decision-making structures and conflict-resolution processes – are critical to managing tensions and sustaining long-term partnerships (Longoni *et al.*, 2019; Gillett *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2022).

At the same time, the findings underscore the central role of institutional and regulatory environments in shaping SE governance. Variations in legal frameworks influence how hybrid tensions are managed, how stakeholder participation is structured and how

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organisations access resources. Governance outcomes are therefore closely tied to the degree to which regulatory systems support mission-aligned organisational forms, reduce administrative constraints and enable access to financial and institutional resources (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010, 2017; Liptrap, 2021; Vakkuri *et al.*, 2021).

4.7 Future research suggestions

Building on this multi-level framework, the review also proposes several propositions to guide future empirical research on SE governance:

- *Proposition 1* (*macro–micro link).* In institutional contexts where SE-specific legal forms emphasise multi-stakeholder participation and asset locks (e.g. social cooperatives, CICs), SEs are more likely to adopt governance structures that prioritise social mission protection over investor control (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010, 2017; Spear *et al.*, 2009; Liptrap, 2021). Future studies could test how different legal regimes shape board composition, accountability mechanisms and resilience to mission drift.
- *Proposition 2 (micro-level governance).* SEs whose boards combine social- and business-oriented expertise and adopt participatory governance practices are better able to manage tensions between social mission and economic sustainability, compared to SEs with more traditional, manager- or investor-dominated boards (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Mair *et al.*, 2015; Wolf and Mair, 2019; Pestoff and Hulgård, 2016; Savall Morera *et al.*, 2024; Lee *et al.*, 2024). This proposition invites comparative, longitudinal and mixed-methods research on board–mission alignment and its impact on organisational performance.
- *Proposition 3 (meso-level collaborations).* In cross-sector partnerships, SEs that can establish shared governance mechanisms (e.g. joint decision-making bodies, negotiated rules, explicit conflict-resolution procedures) are more likely to sustain long-term collaborations and generate social value, despite power asymmetries and divergent logics among partners (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011; Quélin *et al.*, 2017; Doherty and Kittipanya-Ngam, 2021; Gillett *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2022; Hatak *et al.*, 2016). Future research could examine which governance configurations are most effective in different sectoral and national contexts.

Future research could also benefit from stronger integration with public management scholarship, which offers valuable insights on collaborative governance, co-production and hybrid accountability arrangements. While our review focused primarily on SE governance as addressed in management and organisation journals, public administration research provides important complementary perspectives that could enrich multi-level analyses of SE governance, especially in contexts where SEs act as welfare intermediaries or partners in public–social service ecosystems.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to provide a structured, integrative understanding of SE governance through a systematic literature review. The findings show that the literature is characterised by significant fragmentation across definitions, theoretical perspectives and levels of analysis. In particular, governance dynamics are interpreted differently depending on whether studies adopt institutional, stakeholder, agency or collaborative perspectives, often leading to partial and sometimes contradictory conclusions.

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By developing a multi-level framework, this review suggests that SE governance cannot be understood in isolation, but emerges from the interaction between institutional contexts (macro), internal governance arrangements (micro), and cross-sector relationships (meso). This perspective allows us to move beyond descriptive classifications and to explain why similar governance mechanisms may produce different outcomes across studies.

The findings highlight the need for more integrative approaches that account for interactions across analytical levels and clarify how definitional choices, institutional contexts and governance structures jointly shape organisational outcomes. They also underscore the importance of governance arrangements that balance social and economic objectives, strengthen accountability and effectively manage multi-stakeholder dynamics through diverse expertise and participatory mechanisms. More broadly, the results emphasise the central role of governance in shaping how SEs operate within complex institutional environments and address societal challenges while pointing to the importance of regulatory conditions that support hybrid organisational forms and resource access.

This study therefore shifts the understanding of SE governance from a fragmented set of perspectives to a multi-level, theoretically integrated explanation of governance dynamics.

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Appendix 1

- "Country of Research" identifies the nation where the study was conducted. By examining this category, we can determine which countries have seen the most development in the literature on SE governance.
- "Type of Contribution" identifies whether each paper's contribution is purely theoretical or empirical and is ultimately linked to a theoretical framework.
- "Definition of SEs" refers to the definition provided by each paper. This allows us to identify the most commonly cited definitions. We have highlighted this variable to shed light on the varying approaches to defining SEs and to understand better the nuances of how these definitions shape the discourse on SE governance. Of course, some articles either do not provide a definition or claim that it is "impossible to define". This helps us identify commonalities and discrepancies across the literature.
- "SEs Type Focus" helps to enhance our understanding of how the focus on specific SEs may influence the governance structures and approaches discussed in the literature. This category allows us to explore whether specific characteristics of SEs – such as their legal form – affect how governance is framed and practised.
- "Focus of the Paper" was identified to highlight the primary emphasis of each study, whether it is centred on governance structures, governance attributes, cross-sector governance structures, good governance or other related themes. This category helps us better understand the specific angles and themes that researchers prioritise in the context of social enterprise governance, providing a clearer picture of the most frequently addressed topics in the literature.
- "Theoretical Framework" focuses on the underlying theoretical frameworks that guide the studies. This category presents the main theories used to analyse governance structures in SE, providing insights into the research's intellectual foundation.

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Table A1. Nodes used for coding, Krippendorff's alpha and a summary of results

Category	Variables	Results	Krippendorff's alpha
Country of research	Europe	36	
	Belgium	4	
	France	2	
	Germany	1	
	Greece	2	
	Hungary	1	
	Ireland	1	
	Italy	2	
	The Netherlands	3	
	Portugal	1	
	Spain	2	
	Sweden	1	
	UK	16	
	The Americans	*4*	
	USA	3	
	Chile	1	
	Asia	*8*	
	Bangladesh	1	
	Cambodia	1	
	China	2	
	Malaysia	1	
	South Korea	2	
	Thailand	1	
	Australia	*1*	
	Africa	*5*	
	Comparative analysis	*10*	
	Not applicable	*14*	
	Total	78	1.000
Type of contribution	Conceptual contribution	24	
	Empirical contribution	54	
	Total	78	1.000
Definition of SEs	Emes definition	3	
	Hybrid organisation	32	
	Third sector organisation	3	
	Impossible to define	10	
	Provide its definition	2	
	Not specified	25	
	Others	3	
	Total	78	0.823
SEs focus type	WISE	10	
	Social cooperatives	6	
	Fairtrade SEs	3	
	Community-based SEs, community cooperatives	5	
	SEs in cross-sector partnership	5	
	For-profit SEs	2	
	Others	24	
	Several	9	
	Not specified	14	
	Total	78	0.861

(*continued*)

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Table A1. Continued

Category	Variables	Results	Krippendorff's alpha
Focus of the paper	Governance structures	25	
	Governance attributes	22	
	Cross-sector governance coordination	13	
	Good governance	7	
	Business model	3	
	Others	1	
	Not specified	7	
	Total	78	0.928
Theoretical framework	Institutional theory	7	
	Stakeholder theory	7	
	Resource dependency theory	2	
	Social innovation theory	3	
	Governance network, collaborative governance	4	
	Several	8	
	Propose a new framework	17	
	Others	30	
	Total	78	0.880

Note(s): The data in column "Results" provides the number of papers for each variable, and Krippendorff's alpha column reports the Krippendorff's alpha of the codification; a definition of the Krippendorff's alpha is provided in Section 2.6

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Appendix 2

Table A2. Classification of reviewed studies by level of analysis

Level	Authors	Title	Year
Macro	Defourny, Jacques Nyssens, Marthe	Conceptions of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship in Europe and the United States: Convergences and divergences	2010
	Defourny, Jacques Nyssens, Marthe	Fundamentals for an International Typology of Social Enterprise Models	2017
	Mason, Chris Mason Kirkbride, James Bryde, David	From stakeholders to institutions: The changing face of social enterprise governance theory	2007
	Roy, Michael J. Donaldson, Cam Baker, Rachel Kerr, Susan	The potential of social enterprise to enhance health and well-being: A model and systematic review	2014
	Low, Chris	A framework for the governance of social enterprise	2006
	Davies, Iain A. Doherty, Bob	Balancing a Hybrid Business Model: The Search for Equilibrium at Cafédirect	2019
	Mason, Chris Doherty, Bob	A Fair Trade-off? Paradoxes in the Governance of Fair-trade Social Enterprises	2016
	Vakkuri, Jarmo Johanson, Jan-Erik Feng, Nancy Chun Giordano, Filippo	Governance and accountability in hybrid organizations – past, present and future	2021
	Pestoff, Victor Hulgård, Lars	Participatory Governance in Social Enterprise	2016
	Bruneel, Johan Moray, Nathalie Stevens, Robin Fassin, Yves	Balancing Competing Logics in For-Profit Social Enterprises: A Need for Hybrid Governance	2016
	Sinclair, Stephen Mazzei, Micaela Baglioni, Simone Roy, Michael J.	Social innovation, social enterprise, and local public services: Undertaking transformation?	2018
	Kannampuzha, Merie Hockerts, Kai	Organizational social entrepreneurship: scale development and validation	2019
	Wolf, Miriam Mair, Johanna	Purpose, Commitment and Coordination Around Small Wins: A Proactive Approach to Governance in Integrated Hybrid Organizations	2019
	Tortia, Ermanno C. Degavre, Florence Poledrini, Simone	Why are social enterprises good candidates for social innovation? Looking for personal and institutional drivers of innovation	2020
	Mason, Chris	Isomorphism, Social Enterprise and the Pressure to Maximise Social Benefit	2012
	Sacchetti, Silvia	Inclusive and Exclusive Social Preferences: A Deweyan Framework to Explain Governance Heterogeneity	2015
	Fazzi, Luca	Social enterprises, models of governance and the production of welfare services	2012

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Table A2. Continued

Level	Authors	Title	Year
	Lindsay, Graeme Hems, Les	Sociétés Coopératives d'Intérêt Collectif: The arrival of social enterprise within the French social economy	2004
	Lindsay, Graeme Hems, Les	Sociétés Coopératives d'Intérêt Collectif: The arrival of social enterprise within the French social economy	2004
	Larner, Justin Mason, Chris	Beyond box-ticking: A study of stakeholder involvement in social enterprise governance	2014
	Sacchetti, Silvia Tortia, Ermanno	Social responsibility in non-investor-owned organisations	2020
	Kuan, Yu-Yuan Chan, Kam-Tong Wang, Shu-Twu	The governance of social enterprise in Taiwan and Hong Kong: a comparison	2011
	Liptrap, J.S.	British social enterprise law	2021
	Joy, Simy Poonamallee, Latha Scillitoe, Joanne	What to Be (or Not to Be): Understanding Legal Structure Choices of Social Enterprises from a Resource Dependence Perspective	2024
	Zhu, Edwina Y.	Can social enterprises achieve resilience and at what price?	2024
	Tortia, Ermanno C.	Stakeholders self-organization and adaptive governance in social enterprises: Membership representation, worker control and client orientation	2024
	Olmedo, Lucas O'Shaughnessy, Mary	A Substantive View of Social Enterprises as Neo-endogenous Rural Development Actors	2023
Meso	Brinkerhoff, Derick W. Brinkerhoff, Jennifer M.	Public-private partnerships: Perspectives on purposes, publicness, and good governance	2011
	Quélin, Bertrand V. Kivleniece, Ilze Lazzarini, Sergio	Public-Private Collaboration, Hybridity and Social Value: Towards New Theoretical Perspectives	2017
	Barraket, J. Loosemore, M.	Co-creating social value through cross-sector collaboration between social enterprises and the construction industry	2018
	Longoni, Annachiara Luzzini, Davide Pullman, Madeleine Habiague, Martin	Business for Society is Society's Business: Tension Management in a Migrant Integration Supply Chain	2019
	Smeets, Dominique Jozef Alfons	Collaborative Learning Processes in Social Impact Bonds: A Case Study from the Netherlands	2017
	Park, Chisung Wilding, Mark	An exploratory study on the potential of social enterprise to act as the institutional glue of network governance	2014
	Norbäck, Maria Zapata Campos, María José	The market made us do it: Public procurement and collaborative labour market inclusion governance from below	2022
	Park, Jaehong Hwang, Kumju Kim, Sang-Joon	Forming a social partnership between a small social enterprise and a large corporation: A case of the joint platform, H-JUMP	2018
	Barraket, Jo McNeill, Joanne Campbell, Perri Carey, Gemma	Navigating network governance: the role of social enterprise in local employment services	2023
	Mair, Johanna Mayer, Judith Lutz, Eva	Navigating Institutional Plurality: Organizational Governance in Hybrid Organizations	2015

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Table A2. Continued

Level	Authors	Title	Year
	Ma, Ming Kang, Yi Feng, Yuyan	Can Cross-Sector Support Help Social Enterprises in Legitimacy Building? The Mixed Effects in Hong Kong	2022
	Muftugil-Yalcin, Seda Mooijman, Anouk	Making sense of each other: Relations between social enterprises and the municipality	2024
	Bruder, Ignas M. Sydow, Jörg	Governing Inter-Organizational Collaboration through Purpose Work and Purpose Borrowing: How Social Enterprises' Normative Aspirations Influence Business Partners' Practices	2024
Micro	Spear, Roger Cornforth, Chris Aiken, Mike	The governance challenges of social enterprises: Evidence from a UK empirical study	2009
	Sparviero, Sergio	The Case for a Socially Oriented Business Model Canvas: The Social Enterprise Model Canvas	2019
	Crucke, Saskia Knockaert, Mirjam	When Stakeholder Representation Leads to Faultlines: A Study of Board Service Performance in Social Enterprises	2016
	Apostolopoulos, Nikolaos Newbery, Robert Gkartzios, Menelaos	Social enterprise and community resilience: Examining a Greek response to turbulent times	2019
	Costanzo, Laura A. Vurro, Clodia Foster, Doug Servato, Flavio Perrini, Francesco	Dual-mission management in social entrepreneurship: Qualitative evidence from social firms in the United Kingdom	2014
	Thorgren, Sara Omorede, Adesuwa	Passionate Leaders in Social Entrepreneurship: Exploring an African Context	2018
	Crucke, Saskia Decramer, Adelien	The development of a measurement instrument for the organizational performance of social enterprises	2016
	Hatak, Isabella Lang, Richard Roessl, Dietmar	Trust, social capital, and the coordination of relationships between the members of cooperatives: A comparison between member-focused cooperatives and third-party-focused cooperatives	2016
	Seyedsayamdost, Elham Vanderwal, Peter	From Good Governance to Governance for Good: Blockchain for Social Impact	2020
	Leung, Sidney Mo, Phyllis Ling, Howard Chandra, Yanto Ho, So Sum	Enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of social enterprises in Hong Kong: A three-dimensional analysis	2019
	Jackson, Brad Nicoll, Matthew Roy, Michael J.	The distinctive challenges and opportunities for creating leadership within social enterprises	2018
	Martens, Katrin Wolff, Anke Hanisch, Markus	Understanding social innovation processes in rural areas: empirical evidence from social enterprises in Germany	2020
	Doherty, Bob Kittipanya-Ngam, Pichawadee	The role of social enterprise hybrid business models in inclusive value chain development	2021
	Olmedo, Lucas O'Shaughnessy, Mary	Community-Based Social Enterprises as Actors for Neo-Endogenous Rural Development: A Multi-Stakeholder Approach☆	2022

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Table A2. Continued

Level	Authors	Title	Year
	Mswaka, Walter Aluko, Olu	Corporate governance practices and outcomes in social enterprises in the UK: A case study of South Yorkshire	2015
	Pache, Anne-Claire Battilana, Julie Spencer, Channing	An integrative model of hybrid governance: the role of boards in helping sustain organizational hybridity	2024
	Colenbrander, Aalt Argyrou, Aikaterini Lambooy, Tineke Blomme, Robert J.	Inclusive governance in social enterprises in the Netherlands – a case study	2017
	Berry, Daphne Bell, Myrtle P.	Worker cooperatives: alternative governance for caring and precarious work	2018
	Bull, Mike	Reconceptualising social enterprise in the UK through an appreciation of legal identities	2018
	Kamaruddin, Muhammad Iqmal Hisham Auzair, Sofiah Md Rahmat, Mohd Mohid Muhamed, Nurul Aini	The mediating role of financial governance on the relationship between financial management, Islamic work ethic and accountability in Islamic social enterprise (ISE)	2021
	Sepulveda, Leandro Lyon, Fergus Vickers, Ian	Implementing Democratic Governance and Ownership: The Interplay of Structure and Culture in Public Service Social Enterprises	2020
	Crucke, Saskia Moray, Nathalie Vallet, Nathalie	Internal representation and factional faultlines as antecedents for board performance in social enterprises	2015
	Piabuo, Serge Mandiefe Hoogstra-Klein, Marjanke Ingram, Verina Foundjem-Tita, Divine	Community forest enterprises (CFEs) as Social Enterprises: Empirical evidence from Cameroon	2022
	Takács, Sándor	Managing the Flow Experience - The Dilemmas of Participatory Governance in Hungarian Social Enterprises	2023
	Argyrou, Aikaterini Blomme, Robert J. Lambooy, Tineke Kievit, Henk	Unravelling the participation of stakeholders in the governance models of social enterprises in Greece	2017
	Muñoz, Cristian A. Dávila, Ana María Mosey, Simon Radrigán, Mario	Exploring Participatory Management in Social Enterprise Practice: Evidence from Chile	2021
	Kolodinsky, Robert W. Ritchie, William J. Çapar, Nejat	Social Enterprise Legitimacy: Application of Accountability Mechanisms as a Multi-Institutional Context Strategy	2022
	Crucke, Saskia Knockaert, Mirjam	Stakeholder Knowledge and Behavioral Integration in Boards of Social Enterprises: A Team Production Approach	2021
	Mair, Johanna Rathert, Nikolas	The Political Side of Social Enterprises: A Phenomenon-Based Study of Sociocultural and Policy Advocacy	2024
	Olmedo, Lucas Rinne-Koski, Katja Marika O'Shaughnessy, Mary Matilainen, Anne Lähdesmäki, Merja	Support structures for a plural economy in rural areas? Analysing the role of community-based social enterprises	2024
	López-Arceiz, Francisco J. Bellostas, Ana J. Rivera, Pilar	Are Mediterranean Nonprofits Adopting the Social Enterprise Model?	2024

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Level	Authors	Title	Year
	Nkabinde, Sizakele Mamabolo, Anastacia	The South African social enterprises' strategies to guard against mission drift when faced with tensions from the funders	2022
	Parkes, Michael Graham O'Rourke, Rebekah Domingos, Tiago Teixeira, Ricardo F. M.	An Experimental Portuguese Social-Enterprise Project in Urban Agriculture: A Case Study on the Influence of the Interaction of Stakeholder Roles on Sustainable Governance	2023
	Hossain, Shahadat Galbreath, Jeremy Hasan, Mostafa Monzur Randøy, Trond	All in the family? The impact of founder directors and family governance on microfinance institutions' social performance	2024
	Savall Morera, Teresa Solórzano-García, Marta Guzmán, Carmen	Responding to the imprecisions of social enterprise identity: considering the role of participatory governance	2024
	Lee, Misun Brower, Ralph S. Fay, Daniel L.	Social enterprise governance and labor equity: the emerging role of work-integrated social enterprises in a niche labor market	2024
	Koehne, Florian Birrell Ivory, Sarah	Polycratic governance in hybrid organisations: The re-enchantment of collegiality	2024
	Vickers, Ian Lyon, Fergus Sepulveda, Leandro	Collective Capabilities for Organizational Democracy: The Case of Mutual Social Enterprises	2025

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