

From Context to Counterpart:
Linking Business Networks and Society for Sustainability & Circularity

Special track proposal for IMP 2026

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Sustainability heightens expectations that business networks deliver not only efficiency and innovation but **societal outcomes**. Emerging work on the circular society (e.g., Calisto Friant et al., 2024; Leipold et al., 2021; Raasens & van Leeuwen, 2024) challenges B2B networks to move beyond efficiency and adopt a more holistic, socially embedded role in shaping circular futures. While IMP research has a strong tradition in interaction, relationships, and networks, the **links between business networks and society** remain underdeveloped. In the ARA model, for instance, society is not a structural element but an implicit milieu surrounding actors, resources, and activities. Foundational texts nonetheless point to this connection: societal developments can trigger adaptations (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995); firm–environment boundaries are blurred (Håkansson & Ingemansson, 2013); and public actors may occupy positions in business networks (Halinen & Törnroos, 1998).

We therefore call for advancing IMP to treat society not merely as **context** but as a **constitutive counterpart** in network dynamics—especially under sustainability pressures. The central question is how business networks connect to broader societal, ecological, and institutional systems. This track invites studies that (re)examine these links to understand how networks enable—or impede—sustainability and circularity.

Potential topics to explore

- **Locating “society” in IMP theory:** How do existing models of business relationships and networks (incl. ARA) position society—as context, constraint, or counterpart—and how might we make these couplings explicit conceptually and empirically?
- **Network–society connections for sustainability:** Theory development grounded in empirical studies that trace how business networks connect **to** society (and **vice versa**) to enable—or impede—environmental and social outcomes.
- **Enactment and translation of societal expectations:** Mechanisms and processes by which expectations around sustainability are **enacted, translated, stabilized (and contested)** within relationships and across networks.
- **Actors–Resources–Activities with society in view:** Using ARA to model how societal **actors** (e.g., public agencies, NGOs, communities), **resources** (legitimacy, standards, public attention), and **activities** (regulation, campaigning, certification) shape network dynamics.
- **Paradoxes and unintended consequences:** When networked sustainability efforts generate trade-offs or rebound effects.
- **Methodological innovations:** Processual, longitudinal, and configurational designs; qualitative secondary analysis; trace/archival data for business–society couplings.

References

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