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Inter-organisational Partnerships and New Forms of Governance:

The Conditions for Balanced and Sustainable Compromises

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Summary

Based on a participative and experimental methodology, this paper proposes a set of variables able to qualify the level of sustainability of emerging inter-organizational governance practices. These variables are also action levers allowing new balanced and durable social compromises to be achieved inside inter-organizational partnerships.

Introduction

In order to confront the increased demands for flexibility and adaptability linked to the globalisation of economic exchanges, contemporary businesses are constantly testing new forms of work organisation and of workforce mobilisation (Marchington *et al.*, 2004; Cooke *et al.*, 2004). Numerous managerial measures are emerging to respond in innovative ways to the need for flexibility and security expressed as much by employers as by workers. One of the striking features of these emerging practices is that they are frequently established at an inter-organisational level, within business partnerships or mixed partnerships (public/private; profit/non-profit, etc.), within regions, within labour market areas, etc. We note moreover that

the inter-organisational partnership is more and more often presented as the appropriate perimeter for putting into new forms of governance, which is consistent with the present movement towards decentralisation and the increased value given to local forms of regulation (Supiot, 1999; Commissariat Général du Plan, 2000).

In this context, we are witnessing a genuine institutional bricolage, over the course of which social actors mobilize and use ‘whatever means are at hand’ (Levi-Strauss, 1960) and the resources available to them, rerouting them away from their primary purpose to construct new institutions (Koenig, 1996). These emerging compromises constitute a particularly interesting source of institutional innovation. Let us nevertheless stress that for the most part these new arrangements appear in a clandestine manner, growing on the margins or on the cracks of the existing legal framework. This is the case notably for *umbrella company services*, which allow a professional to act as a freelance person whilst benefiting from the status of a salaried employee and the rights which go with it. An unofficial and forbidden practice in Belgium, it is on the way to being framed by French law. We also observe practices such as *skill pooling* and *co-sourcing* which, profiting from loopholes in the law, enable a company to make its workers available to another business, either part time or for the duration of a project. To be noted is also the development of employers’ pools, a system for pooling a workforce which, thanks to a Belgian legal framework which is quite restrictive, are often conceived and managed in a very ‘home spun’ way.

In certain cases, new compromises are put into place to the satisfaction of all the stakeholders, despite their taking place beyond existing regulations. In others, notably when the power relationships between the actors are too asymmetrical, they end up in unbalanced situations which are untenable in the long term because they are too precarious for the actors concerned. One of the major issues of these new forms of governance is in effect that they frequently involve a triangulation of the employment relationship (employer, worker, user) with a corollary dissociation of economic and social responsibilities (Sobczak, 2003) which risks placing the worker in precarity. Traditional social regulation constructed on the basis of bilateral employment relations proves to be powerless as far as framing these practices is concerned (Supiot, 1999; Regalia, 2006; Berns *et al.*, 2007).

It is thus important to identify new signposts so that the emergent practices, the self regulation of the actors within the labour market, are not synonymous with a legal black hole, and allow labour market regulation to evolve whilst preserving the public interest. Up until now little research work has centred on this particular dimension – micro, inter-organisational and emergent – of social regulation. In the face of these gaps, this article offers some elements of a response to the following question: what are the conditions allowing balanced and durable social compromises to be achieved inside inter-organizational partnerships?

After a preliminary section devoted to the presentation of our methodological options, the second part of our article will describe a case of a compromise emerging at an inter-organisational level: that of the multi-active workers of the Trilogi business company. In the third part we will offer different variables enabling the construction of an analysis grid of these new forms of governance, which we will by way of an example apply, in the fourth section, to the practice put in place by the Trilogi company. This will lead us to offer in the fifth part a normative stance which promotes balanced and sustainable compromises at the inter-organisational scale.

1. An original methodological stance, based on the commitment of the stakeholders

In order to identify the conditions for a balanced and durable social regulation in inter-organisational ensembles, we put forward a methodology of an abductive nature, based on stimulating and providing back-up support for emerging compromises, and the working together with the labour market's stakeholders. A uniquely deductive approach seems to us premature given the low number of research work carried out on the subject. It is equally a question of abandoning the blinkers which result from a deductive dynamic too preoccupied with wanting to test the dimensions identified up until now by the theorists of negotiation (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Friedberg, 1993; Kutty, 1998, 2009; Neuville, 1998) or of social regulation (Reynaud, 1989).

There in effect exist at the micro-economic and micro-social levels numerous arrangements which claim to reconcile the respective interest of their stakeholders but which do not necessarily wear the 'institutional social regulation mechanism' label. As stated in the introduction, the actors of the labour market reveal themselves to be particularly inventive when it is a question of coming up with new practices aiming at reconciling needs which find no pre-existing institutional response. Yet these practices constitute potentially rich ground from which we could draw a certain number of lessons as do the governance of inter-organisational partnerships.

Thus, rather than inscribing ourselves within an a priori established framework which would probably lead us to reproduce the prevailing normativity, we have chosen to pay attention to that which, in local arrangements, contributes to pushing the more general governance of the labour market in the direction of maintaining the public interest. We postulate that the expected changes at this level cannot be brought about only by putting into practice macro-economic strategic policies: the actors' effective practices, which can be observed appearing in a proactive and emergent way at the micro-economic level, aimed at different sections of the population, including 'strategic' workers, themselves also contribute to developing forms of compromise.

We had the opportunity to gain access to these practices within the framework of a research-action project financed by Article 6 of the European Social Fund (a budget line dedicated to anticipating and managing restructurations), of which we were the co-ordinators and which ran from 2006 to 2008¹. This particular research-action context both permitted and obliged us to go beyond a simple case study to galvanise and provide support for the compromises we were aiming for. In this particular case it was a project focusing on making the notion of 'flexicurity' operational (Wilthagen and Rogowski, 2002; Wilthagen and Tros, 2004) at the micro-economic level, looking to test its relevance in order to renew the very normative and ideologically connotated discourse approach to flexicurity. The emergent compromises from which we draw the lessons presented later in this article thus correspond to a particular dimension of inter-organisational governance, in other words reconciling the stakeholders' respective flexibility and security needs.

¹ Projet « Flexicurity », co-ordinated by LENTIC at the ULg's HEC-Management school, with its partners IAE at Lille (F), OSA at the University of Tilburg (NL), the Fondation Emergences (F) and the Fondation André Renard (B); see www.flexicurity.org

More precisely it concerns diverse pilot projects aiming at developing innovative practices reconciling flexibility and security in two industrial reconversion regions: the Liège labour pool in Belgium and the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region in France. Researchers had detected certain of flexibility and security needs of the economic and social actors in their respective regions and, with their collaboration, designed, put into practice and/or evaluated new reconciliation systems in various types of partnerships, with varied success. Amongst these experiments let us note the conception of a flexpool in the logistics sector, the creation of job pools between small and medium sized enterprises which share support functions, and an economic interest group composed of social economy businesses aiming to pool their respective constraints of flexibility and security, or further still the follow-up support and evaluation of a ‘reverse company’ scheme put into practice by a large steel company in order to secure the professional end-of-career paths of those of its workers who could not be retrained.

It should also be noted that this experimental work was carried out in a participative manner. Within the framework of this European project the research teams mobilised various representative actors of the local labour markets: the human resources managers of various businesses, the representatives of a temporary work federation, sector unions not directly involved in the businesses of the pilot projects, representatives of public and private socio-professional insertion and training organisations, the managers of local authority groups responsible for regional redeployment, the directors of chambers of commerce, etc. The objective was to avoid ‘desk based work’ in order to suggest a theorisation of the conditions of the institutionalisation of ‘desirable’ flexicurity compromises, based on the experience and mental representations of those primarily concerned by these compromises, and which are socially legitimate because anchored in the actors’ practices. These varied stakeholders have thus been involved in two ‘regional partnerships’ which were brought together many times over the whole of the project’s two year span. Researchers and labour market stakeholders have thus collaborated at every stage of the project, from the identification of existing practices to the designing, the follow-up support and evaluation of pilot projects, from the analysis of the data collected to the drawing up of an analysis grid of flexicurity compromises and to the identification of the conditions of a balanced and sustainable flexicurity. This continuous theorisation work was carried out in an abductive manner, through repeated movements between practice and theory allowing for meaning to be given to observations coming from the ground.

2. An example of an emergent compromise: the case of Trilogi’s multi-active workers

The conditions for institutionalising balanced and sustainable compromises which we will suggest later on in this article have been identified by going back and forth between observation, experimentation and referring to the existing literature on the subject. In this section we will describe one of the emergent practices which we provided follow-up support for in the context of this European research-action project. It has as its point of departure the income insecurity faced by the warehouse workers of the Trilogi business company, due to their atypical working conditions.

Trilogi is the European hub of a transnational freight express air transport business company. Its activity is heavily restricted by the specificities of the logistics profession. This organisation’s central activity, at the heart of an international network operating on a ‘just in time’ process, consists of receiving thousands of parcels from numerous European countries and ensuring that they are sorted out overnight so that they can be delivered to their final

recipients the next morning. At the centre of a process involving multiple entities, the company is subject to very strict time objectives, the meeting of which is of prime importance from a financial point of view. Each minute late is counted in thousands of lost Euros: every delay in delivering the parcels means paying compensation to the clients.

Working conditions are particularly difficult in such a context: the work is carried out almost exclusively at night, within a framework of atypical contracts where part time is the rule. The majority of the staff, in other words around 1100 people out of the 1500 who make up the company, work from 23.00 to 03.00 in the morning, or from midnight to 04.00, five times a week, or twenty hours a week. Moreover, the nature of the warehouse tasks and sorting out the parcels, humdrum and tiresome, also conditions the hiring of a very poorly qualified and multicultural workforce which it proves very complex to manage.

The organisation of Trilogi's logistical activity can be termed atypical rather than flexible. In effect, whilst strongly constrained, the volume of activity involved in the nightly reception, sorting and sending of parcels is nonetheless completely plannable. Trilogi moreover experiences peaks of activity, but these are seasonal and also predictable. That does not prevent Trilogi from voicing a pressing need to secure its labour force supply. In such a context the company negotiated, in advance of setting up at the site of the regional airport, an agreement with the trade union organisations. This compromise was made formal through a convention signed by the different stakeholders, with the support of the local political authorities. In exchange for the flexibility required by its business activity, it offers its workers open ended contracts: consequently 90% of the workers benefit from an open ended contract, the company employs very few interim workers and the seasonal temporary workers are hired on fixed-term contracts. In thus playing the worker loyalty card, Trilogi kills two birds with one stone, as it provides security for its workers as well as securing its own labour supply. The workers in effect appreciate the open-ended contract they are provided with. They also value the predictability of their night shifts and the fact that this work offers them long free time periods during the day. On the other hand, they all voice a need for greater income security, whilst if the salary paid for these twenty hours a week is considered a proper one, it is not enough to live on, and even less in terms of supporting a whole family. Yet the majority of these workers are foreign born and/or come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and are very often the only ones who provide for an extended family. This is why a good number of them devote their free time during the day to further paid activity, sometimes as a salaried employee or a freelance worker, sometimes in the form of undeclared work.

Trilogi seized the opportunity of an inquiry into the social climate, arranged by the group to which it belongs, to ask our centre to take in hand the drawing up, administering and the statistical analysis of a section of a questionnaire specifically dedicated to the particular problematic of reconciling flexibility and security their workers were confronted with. It more specifically wanted to examine the question of an extra job. The questions asked on this subject aimed at objectivising the needs of the workers in terms of additional work, and to define the type of aid that the workers would want, if necessary. The questionnaire was distributed to 1172 of the company's workers, of every type of status, and had a response rate of 67%, in other words 785 respondents.

The results of the questionnaire confirm the existence of a need in terms of additional work. In effect, 81% of the respondents consider that an extra job is necessary when an operator works part time, and 22% of the respondents declared that they did an extra job. The need expressed touches both on the necessity of doing an additional job and on the desire for help

in the matter: 76% of the respondents consider that Trilogi should help the people who are looking for an additional job and 67% amongst them would want to benefit from this assistance were Trilogi to set it up. It is to be noted nonetheless that the desire for such aid is not felt to the same extent according to the job function practiced. It is mainly the manual workers (over 80% of them) who express this need.

In light of the size of the phenomenon of additional work and of the need expressed, we refined the data through 15 qualitative interviews carried out with multi-active workers, which aimed at grasping the situation's complexity and at testing different forms of possible response on the part of the company. The analysis we carried out on this basis showed that for a same profile of responses the needs and expectations vary strongly according to individuals. We observed that these needs differ according to the vagaries of the workers' existence, such as changes in their family situation, but also and above all the greater or lesser 'priority' nature of the job at Trilogi for those employed there. In effect for some this job is considered as supplementary to a main or developing activity, and seen as transitional. For others the job at Trilogi constitutes their main activity, topped up with something on the side, and these workers wish to keep this job as long as possible and even to increase the number of hours worked. For all of them nonetheless the different security providing mechanisms that Trilogi could put in place for its workers must remain absolutely optional. If some think that Trilogi has a responsibility to its workers, others consider that the organisation of this 'security' is a matter for the private domain and that the employer cannot and should not interfere with it.

These qualitative interviews enabled us to discover that around thirty of the workers combine part time work at Trilogi with working part time at the PiecElec company, whose activity peak takes place each day between 17.00 and 21.00, in other words just before Trilogi's activity peak. PiecElec is part of a global group which distributes electronic, electrical and computer components. The Belgian unit manages distribution for the whole of Europe. More than 400,000 orders leave each day, destined for every type of client. At the moment the activity is organised on a daily and nightly basis, with a large peak between 17.00 and 21.00, linked to the constraints of having to deliver within 24h. Around a third of the workforce works part time (half or three quarter time) and is mobilised during this high activity time slot. The company is growing, however: investments are planned which should lead to the company increasing its part time workforce.

This combining of activity between Trilogi and PiecElec at present takes place on a completely informal basis, on the sole initiative of workers who are trying to reach a level of income equivalent to a full time post. This 'compromise' also allows the workers to organise their workday in a continuous fashion, and thus to keep a large portion of time available for rest and private activities, which constitutes an important factor of security from the point of view of the worker. Nonetheless the informal nature of this arrangement generates pernicious effects and risks for the worker as much as for his employers, all the more so when the employers are not informed of this combination: workers' tiredness, the difficulty of working extra hours at PiecElec, difficulties in attending training sessions before the shift at Trilogi, difficulties in managing accidents and work incapacity, administrative complexity linked to a single worker having two different types of work contract, a drop in safety at work in the two companies, etc.

The involvement of Trilogi and workers' representatives in our European Flexicurity project gave us the opportunity to objectivise the situation and the respective needs. Now better informed as to the risks and expectations linked to this state of affairs, but also concerning the

benefits they could discover in developing and framing this ‘sharing’ of workers (insofar as they cannot offer more part time positions), they were open to the idea of a support follow-up of this emergent compromise within the context of the project’s pilot activities. We thus mobilised the different stakeholders – Trilogi, PiecElec, workers’ representatives at the two companies, as well as managers from other companies having manifested an interest in part time workers – and developed the analysis of needs and expectations of the diverse actors gathered together within the pilot project. Once the data was available to everyone and validated we explored three pathways: (1) the combining of a part time salaried employee contract with freelance work; (2) the combining of two salaried employee contracts; (3) the creation of a job pool association by the two companies (and possibly other partners) which would hire the workers and share them between its members. We put these scenarios to the different partners, in order to evaluate them, to choose between one or more formulae and to put them into practice.

The process was nonetheless slowed and then blocked by two events which constitute significant brakes on the project: on the one hand a ‘wildcat’ strike at Trilogi, very badly received by the company’s management, which has consequently decided that it cannot carry on, in parallel with negotiations with the same union actors, a proactive and innovating discussion; on the other hand the departure of the two human resources managers at Trilogi and at PiecElec, and the arrival of a new CEO at Trilogi, imbued with a maximisation of profit logic which is not very compatible with the socially responsible step which had just been initiated. These changes in casting have required and continue to require new work in raising awareness and mobilising the actors, made all the more difficult by the situation of the present crisis. These events also make necessary the task of ‘relegitimising’ our action plan as an external contributor, a task which we are engaged in as we write these lines.

3. The emergence of an inter-organizational governance analysis framework

The analysis of this attempt to reconcile flexibility and security put into practice by the Trilogi workers has been carried out at the same time as examining data gathered from the diverse ‘flexicurity’ practices which have been inventoried, as well as from other pilot projects designed and followed-up within the framework of the European project. This work of analysing and evaluating has been undertaken collectively, in co-operation with the stakeholders of the practices themselves and with the actors of the labour market brought together within the ‘regional partnerships’ responsible for the project’s support back-up. This research-action dynamic has permitted various useful variables to be identified in order to portray the arrangements observed: it was a question of describing respective needs, of detailing the process having led to the emergence of the practice, or even to its becoming formalised and transferred into other contexts, and also of objectivising the evaluation of the more or less balanced and long-lasting character of the practices studied.

This work gave rise to the identification of around thirty variables. The diversity of the actors involved over the course of the theorization process generated a multitude of analytical categories. This was due to the diversity of the respective mental representations of what a flexicurity practice which maintains the public interest actually is. The particular stakes and interests of the categories of the actors involved also played an important role. However, this heterogeneous ensemble consisted of numerous redundancies and was sprinkled with value judgements. It was the repeated going back and forth between groundwork and theorization

work which has enabled a purge of this inventory in order to arrive at the analysis grid we present below. This characterization work offers a description of arrangements structured around polarized dimensions, which have the benefit of bringing to light the diversity of the effective and practical modalities of emerging inter-organizational governance practices. These are sometimes just the opposite of the prescriptions made by a normative literature which only makes provision for some of these modalities.

VARIABLE	DESCRIPTION
Deliberate/ Emergent	Voluntary negotiation, in reference to clearly expressed needs and accepted by the parties <i>v.</i> gradual or recurring adjustments, in reference to needs which appear progressively
Multilateral/ Unilateral	The involvement of the different parties in the different stages of the processes leading to the compromise (pluralism) <i>vs</i> an involvement restricted to certain parties.
Inclusive/ Selective	The ability to make the stakeholders put behind them their conventional roles and to go beyond defending their initial interests <i>vs</i> the maintenance of the pre-existing identity divisions between the stakeholders.
Generic/ Specific	Compromise applied uniformly to all the members of one of the negotiating groups <i>v.</i> compromise responding to specific problematics expressed by an individual or restricted group
Evolving/ Static	Possibility of adapting and enriching the compromise over the course of its existence <i>v.</i> Rigidity of the negotiated compromise
Formalised/ Informal	Compromise based on an official agreement between the stakeholders (explicit, documented, accessible) <i>v.</i> informal agreement
Means of regulation	Existence or otherwise of a system of supervision or sanctioning linked to the compromise (based on cultural norms, interdependence between the partners, collective conventions, rules and regulations)
Consistent/ Inconsistent	Consistent or dispensatory link-up of the content of the compromise in relation to other levels of regulation

This analysis allows for the field of the possible to be opened up, the laying down of signposts and the mapping of what is observed, rather than only considering social regulation to be what corresponds to the pre-established definition. Nonetheless, this work, which to begin with was purely descriptive, progressively discovered for itself an evaluative dimension. The participative process of the co-construction of the grid gave rise to debate and negotiation between the stakeholders in the pilot projects and between the members of a 'regional partnership'. The characterization of practices could not in effect be separated from an assessment of them, itself highly dependent on respective mental representations and individual interests. The choice and formulation of variables, as well as their description and evaluation, were the result of an agreement on a characterisation of what is current, capable of transcending particular interests. If we take the example of the category 'Formalised', the stakes were thus to find a formulation which transcends the fear of bureaucracy expressed by the employers, and the need for an officialisation and documentation of the agreement expressed by the workers' representatives.

The next process carried out in collaboration with these various actors is to find agreement on what, according to the context in which it is inscribed, can be considered as a desirable compromise, *i.e.* balanced and potentially long-lasting. It is in fact a question of identifying the action levers which allow for an increase in the sustainability of one or another inter-organizational governance practice. The conversion of analysis variables into levers of sustainability seems to us to proceed from a double legitimacy, in the sense that it rests on a solid empirical base and on an interaction between the social partners involved. It is a normativity constructed with the actors, on the basis of the realities on the ground, and not on the basis of ideological premises. It is in effect important to go beyond a purely speculative

and theoretical normativity, anchored on an ideal case vision of a regulation of the labour market decreed a priori, in order to reach a normativity which is at the same time empirical, because constructed on the observation of concrete realities, and pragmatic, in the sense that it is orientated towards action (Dorf and Sabel, 1998).

This set of variables thus constitutes a tool enabling guidance for the actions of the labour market actors facing the need for a new compromise, and who wish to build it within a balanced and long-term perspective allowing the general interest to be maintained. The diverse polarised dimensions must not nevertheless be understood in a Manichean manner, giving value to one of the poles to the detriment of the other, but more as pointers allowing the arrangements to be finely analysed and nuanced. They indicate an ideal to be worked towards, without ruling out compromises which do not meet the whole ensemble of conditions.

4. The multi-activity of the Trilogi workers: characterising the existing compromise and the levers of change

In order to give our remarks a more concrete character we will now apply our tool to the multi-activity situation which a certain number of the Trilogi workers are confronted with. We will first of all characterise the existing arrangement in the light of our analysis variables. We will then see how we can put the latter to use to provide follow-up support in order to push this emergent practice in the direction of a more balanced and long lasting compromise.

The multi-activity solution put into practice by the Trilogi workers is purely **emergent**: faced with the necessity of topping up and securitising their income, the Trilogi workers acted in an autonomous and spontaneous manner, and looked for additional activities in various forms (salaried employment, freelance work, undeclared work). This arrangement is also **unilateral**, in the sense that that it leans on the initiative of just one of the parties concerned. It also proves to be particularly **exclusive**, in that each party – the workers, their representatives, the employer Trilogi, the other employers – act in conformity with their traditional role and areas of expertise, without even envisaging that another solution is possible.

It is thus to be observed that as things stand now, the compromise put into place is essentially based on individual initiative within a single category of stakeholder. The solutions chosen are diversified and specific to the workers who put them into practice, even though there are a number of them who feel the need to secure their income in combining several activities. This compromise is thus **specific**. We also note that this multi-activity is subject to no form of **formalisation**: the employers concerned are hardly aware of it. The corollary of this informal character is that no system of **regulation** has been put in place. Let us finally note that the current solutions, whilst rickety, are **consistent** with the existing legal framework, apart obviously from activities carried out ‘on the black.’

The multi-activity solutions practiced by the workers are in essence **evolving** and opportunistic, because they are modified according to the needs and restrictions of the latter, as well as by the job and activity opportunities offered by the regions’ employers and prime contractors. Nonetheless the various stakeholders express the wish for change towards a step which is more **deliberate, inclusive and formalised**.

The workers as well as their employers in effect note that the current situation consists of numerous pernicious effects. The solution found by the workers to secure their income makes other dimensions precarious and insecure, such as their health and work-life balance. The fatigue and stress linked to reconciling various constraints are mentioned by all the multi-active workers. The employers also find that tired and stressed workers could represent a danger to themselves and their colleagues. They also point out the problems they encounter in terms of co-ordination. The rigid timetable connected to combining two jobs makes the company insecure and constitutes a brake on efficient and flexible production.

In order to go beyond the status quo, the actors thus become aware of the usefulness of an analysis of mental representations, needs and stakes involved in a more systematic manner, from which sprang Trilogi's appeal to a research centre. The results of this analysis bear witness to the human resources managers involved becoming aware of the issues and becoming progressively actively engaged, thus gradually meeting the criteria of **multilateralism**. Nonetheless, these results also plead in favour of an increased involvement on the part of management and union representatives, as well as an extension of the perimeter to other companies, in order to be able to deploy the multi-activity system on a wider scale. This has constituted the first step taken in the direction of a more **deliberate** dynamic, because based on an explanation of the respective needs and expectations, and which is **inclusive**, as it enables the actors to have a sense of the new forms of interaction within the partnership which is being built up.

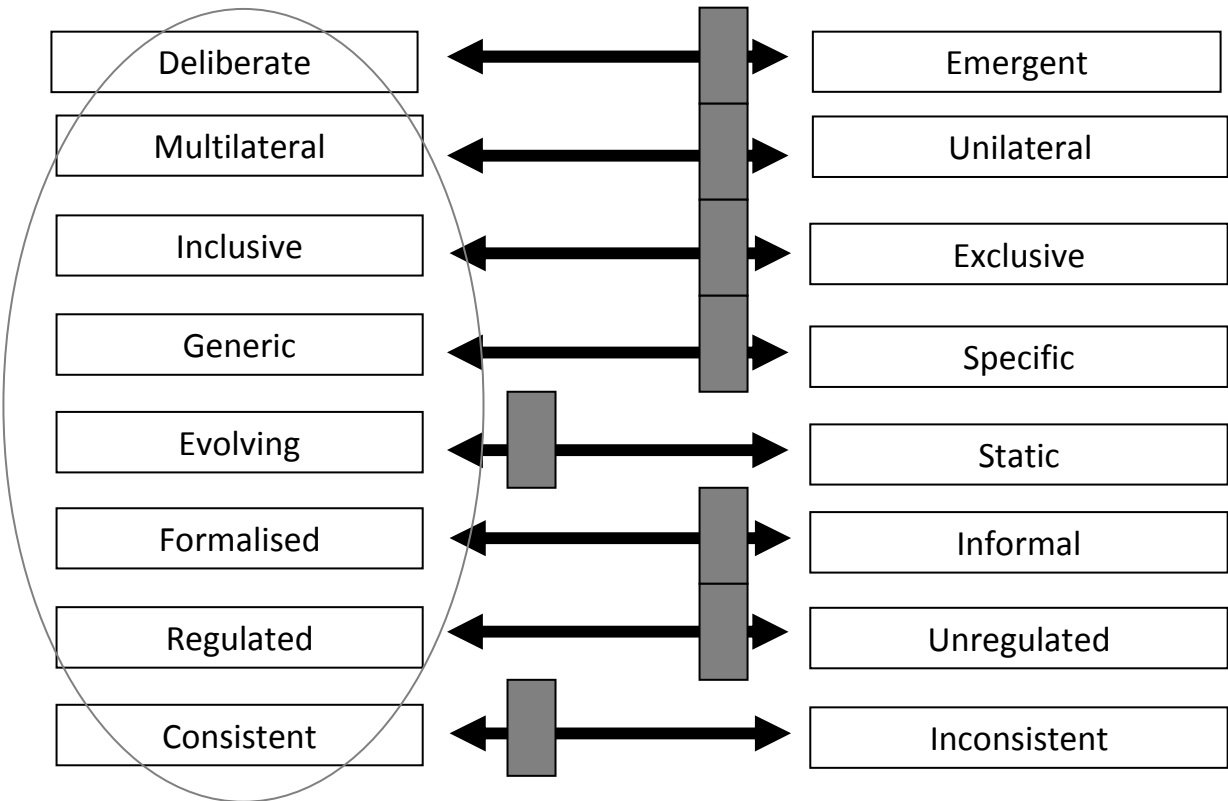
This collective work also prepares the ground for a **formalisation** and an increased **regulation** of the practice. Previously, the absence of the employers' involvement made any **regulation** impossible. It can nonetheless be observed that they were gradually brought around to exchange information – for example to make the co-ordination of different shifts easier – and that they were indeed beginning to put in place a form of **regulation** of the system, which it is henceforth a question of developing. Furthermore, the compromise presented should be more **generic**, in the sense that it will become an option, or even a right, which can be activated optionally by every worker, and not only on the initiative of a handful of workers who are shrewder and more resourceful than their colleagues.

The different **formalisation** and **regulation** scenarios must themselves take into account this necessity for **consistency** with existing regulations. One of the formulae suggested, the 'job pool association', allows member companies to carry out a sharing of workers in a flexible and secure manner, in giving the latter a single full time and open-ended job contract. Nevertheless, the legal framework which in Belgium underpins the setting up of such associations obliges the latter to only employ long term unemployed people, who do not correspond to the profile of multi-active workers to whom we are trying to offer security. Through the work of raising the awareness of public authorities that it involves, the experimental and pilot framework of our project could nonetheless allow the non 'orthodox' job pool association that Trilogi and PiecElec could create to be made consistent with the spirit and the letter of the law.

If this 'adapted' job pool association formula seems to bring the diverse stakeholders to the discussion table, it however involves the employers officially committing themselves and formalising the systems of interaction and sharing. Yet the changes in casting that have taken place at the moment when a decision needs to be taken have stopped the dynamic in its tracks. Trilogi's new CEO and the new human resource managers at Trilogi and PiecElec need to be mobilised and convinced before committing their companies to the path of making official

and framing the practices of sharing a labour force and of multi-activity. Moreover, the unhealthy atmosphere linked to the strike climate prevents the actors giving concrete shape to a collective project requiring the presence of a certain dose of mutual confidence.

We represent, with the aid of cursors positioned in the summarising table below, the characteristics of the emergent compromise (dark grey). The circle surrounding the variables of the left hand column underline the modalities that should be strived for to make the compromise more balance and durable, in other words more ‘sustainable.’



The case of the Trilogi workers’ multi-activity clearly shows how the diverse analysis variables we propose can acquire the status of conditions for a balanced and sustainable compromise established at inter-organisational level. It is only through moving a maximum of cursors, of which we try to show the effective and potential developments, towards the left of the table, that one could genuinely speak of a compromise which maintains the public interest.

5. Towards sustainable and balanced social compromises at inter-organisational level: proposition for a methodological stance

It is important to note that the variables which make up our analysis grid essentially refer to formal and processual dimensions. They do not aim at characterising the content of the compromise, on which it would be very difficult to find agreement, but rather the conditions in which it can emerge in a legitimate manner. The relative and contextual character of governance practices in effect makes it difficult to identify substantive characteristics contributing to maintaining the public interest. The latter are always likely to be called into question according to developments in context, respective needs and the power relationships between actors.

It is then a question of de-contextualising particular problematics to ensure the primacy of the generic over the specific. In this perspective, it is respect for the ‘procedure’ which constitutes the validation criteria for the negotiated compromise (Rawls, 1987), and in a wider sense for the new form of regulation devised. Our grid consequently enables a highlighting of the conditions in which co-operation between actors leads to sustainable and balanced solutions. It is in effect a question of de-contextualising particular problematics to ensure the primacy of the generic over the specific.

If we look a little closer, it can be observed that the different variables of our grid refer to two different and complementary processes. In the first place the variables concerning the degree of inclusivity, the deliberate character, the multilateralism, the generic and evolving nature of the compromise respond to the question of the actors involved, their identities, interests and respective roles, as well as their interactions. More fundamentally they relate to the issue of the stakeholders’ satisfaction, a ‘black box’ which it is nonetheless important to open if we want to lead to balanced and ‘suitable’ compromises for all the stakeholders (Freyssinet, 2000).

The criteria of formalization, regulation and consistency for their part refer to the compromises’ mechanisms of institutionalization. This second process proves to be particularly crucial in the inter-organisational context, an emerging perimeter in which there are very little pre-existing regulation mechanisms. In these contexts, in effect, the social compromises are all the more fragile as they cannot be anchored in pre-established interaction habits and a regulatory framework. The institutionalisation not only transforms into regulations practices which had been of an informal nature. It above all has the objective of reducing the uncertainties of the framework of their practice in order to make it durable and predictable (Alter, 2007).

In unstable contexts filled with uncertainties, the putting into place of social regulation is thus not a natural inclination. It in effect risks appearing at any moment beneficial to one of the parties, to the detriment of the others, at least in a short term perspective. Furthermore, the inter-organisational field is not at all signposted from a normative point of view: the mechanisms of governance must thus be defined from scratch and lean largely on the inventiveness of the stakeholders involved.

We would add that the success of these two processes – in other words the satisfying of the stakeholders’ divergent interests and the institutionalisation of the discovered compromises – depends on putting into practice the function of an important element: that of a **third party function**, or in other words ‘terceisation’ (Lenoble and Maesschalck, 2007). In this

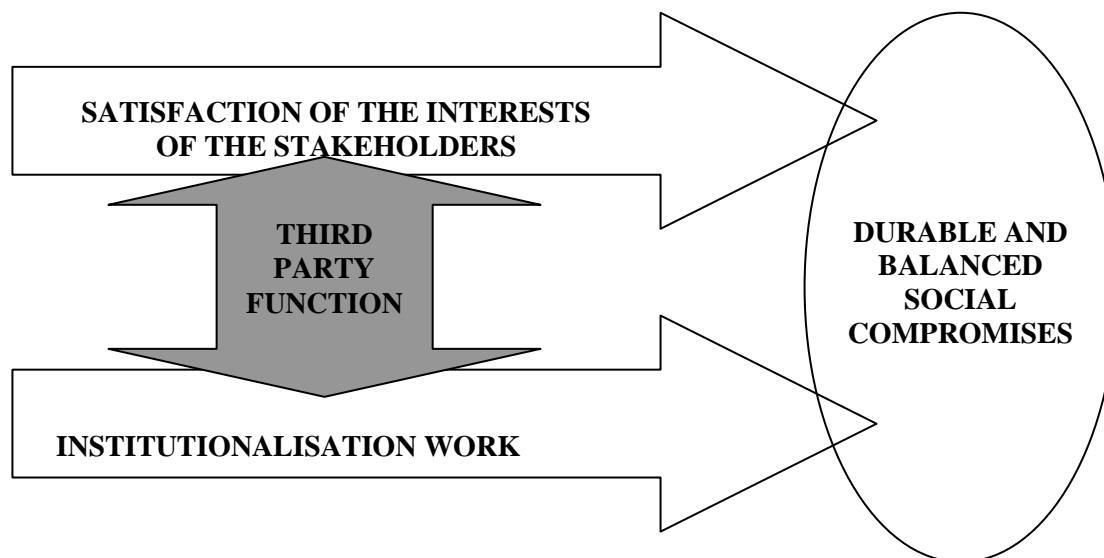
perspective the function of the third party constitutes the essential condition of a real involvement on the part of the stakeholders, in terms of the meaning given to it by Andriof *et al.* (2002), in terms of making possible new forms of inter-organisational governance. In contributing to the success of the two aforementioned processes, it allows the perpetuation of routines to be avoided and enables the stimulation of new dynamics, through carrying out work at two levels.

The first role of the function of a third party consists of cognitive work, which aims at getting the actors to leave behind their habitual framework (reframing), to enable them to go beyond their institutional routines and their identity divisions to reformulate their own needs and interests in a generic perspective. In placing the compromises' stakeholders in a reflexive posture, the function of the third party is that of dismantling the roles of their interlocutors in order to re-enrole them in a renewed interactional process capable of going beyond a conflict based on position taking, unilateral power relationships, to give rise to balance and polyphonic compromise (Pichault, 2009).

The second role of the function of a third party consists of pragmatic work whose objective is to inscribe the actors in an exploratory dynamic, constituted of trial and error, for the iterative construction of a common framework, with its rules of the game, its 'investments in form' (Thévenot, 1986), its performance indicators and its evaluation methods. This setting up of points of convergence must enable the reduction of the uncertainty of the relational system through the progressive institutionalization of the compromise, through the creation of a shared action framework, which is both evolving and capable of reducing the risks taken by the stakeholders of this new interaction.

In the case of the multi-activity of the Trilogi workers, we will note that the function of the third party was invested in by both the research centre and by the various representative actors of the labour market involved in the process.

This normative stance, composed of two interlinked processes and the role of a third party which constitute its conditions of possibility, can be represented in the following manner:



Conclusion

The co-ordination of a European research-action plan interrogating the relevance of the flexicurity approach at the micro-economic level offered us the opportunity to provide, for close to three years, follow-up support for diverse emergent governance practices being put in place at the level of a region, a labour pool, a business partnership, etc. Our interrogation focused on the conditions of the institutionalisation of new social compromises emerging at the heart of these diverse partnerships. Through this experimental step, our objective was to genuinely open up the black box of these processes, to understand how to construct a balanced and sustainable collective dynamic within these new perimeters.

The participative methodology which we put into practice for this occasion has permitted us to provide some elements of a response to this question, through the identification of indicators allowing the existing compromises to be characterised and to determine the action levers required to confer legitimacy and longevity on these compromises. These different variables, descriptive and evaluative at the same time, constitute the plinth of a collective dynamic founded on two interlinked processes – the first aiming at satisfying the divergent interests of the compromise’s stakeholders, the second stressing the necessity of the job of institutionalizing the agreement – and the taking in hand of a third party role which enables the two processes to be carried through to a successful conclusion.

The taking in hand of this third party role has only been lightly touched upon in this article. We will nevertheless observe that it constitutes an essential dimension of the normative stance we are putting forward. Our experience on the ground has shown us that it can be successively undertaken by a local authority, a chamber of commerce, a research centre, an advisory body, etc. It can be taken in hand in an individual manner by a single actor, but can also constitute a collective process in which several actors with complementary areas of expertise intervene. The aim of our few concluding comments is not to resolve this important question, but to stimulate the academic community’s thinking around the subject. The various cases of inter-organisational governance we have studied in effect question the classic conception of the third party actor, a neutral and disinterested expert possessing ‘superior’ knowledge and playing a mediating or triangulating role. They on the contrary indicate that this function could be carried collectively by the actors concerned, with issues which can be identified and interpreted by the stakeholders of the compromise but which are distinct from them, and whose role is not that of a mediator but rather that of a ‘stimulator’ allowing those who are brought face to face within it to rethink their own identity and to reposition themselves in the emerging institutional field which is the inter-organisational partnership.

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