

Professionalization and Organizational Identity: Tunisian Scout Managers Facing Sustainable Performance Requirements

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Abstract

Associations today position themselves as essential actors for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). This research examines the transformation of the associative manager profession when confronted with tensions between professionalization and maintaining traditional identity. Through a case study of Tunisian scouts, we analyze the institutional and identity processes by which managers appropriate organizational mechanisms required by new sustainability demands. Our results reveal a complex dynamic of interactions between environmental context, central transformation mechanisms, concrete manifestations of change, and identity dimensions. This study enriches understanding of the evolution of the associative manager role by highlighting the importance of institutionalization mechanisms in transforming managerial practices and the integrative role of organizational identification in adapting to new requirements while preserving fundamental values.

Keywords: Associative management, Organizational identity, Sustainable performance, Professionalization, Scouts

Ethical Declaration: *This research is part of a broader study on associative management transformation, which has been presented under different angles: this article focuses on organizational identity and professionalization processes, while a conference version emphasizes managerial transformation aspects. The authors declare this multi-format publication in accordance with academic research ethics.*

I. Introduction

Associations are now positioning themselves as essential global actors for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) and building a more equitable and sustainable future. As Nordin et al. [1] emphasize, their contribution is expressed both through services directly benefiting their members and through missions, ideas, programs or services they dedicate more broadly to the community. The recent global health crisis has particularly highlighted both the strategic importance of the associative sector and the major challenges it faces. Plaisance [2] demonstrated how this period considerably accelerated the already ongoing transformation in this sector, particularly in terms of digitalization of practices and diversification of funding sources.

These new constraints require increasingly sophisticated managerial skills, combining general know-how and specific competencies for the associative world. Cazenave [3] and Hoarau and Laville [4] have documented how these requirements profoundly transform the profession of associative manager. Our research question is structured around the following inquiry: **How do associative managers negotiate tensions between professionalization and maintaining organizational identity in a context of societal transition and growing demands for sustainable performance?**

II. Theoretical Framework

A. Neo-institutional Theory and Isomorphism

Neo-institutional theory offers a relevant framework for analyzing the processes by which associations adopt certain managerial practices in response to environmental pressures. In their foundational work, DiMaggio and Powell [7] identified three mechanisms of institutional isomorphism that lead organizations in the same field to progressively adopt similar structures and practices. The first mechanism, coercive isomorphism, results from formal and informal pressures exerted by funders and regulators. In the contemporary associative context, characterized by growing dependence on external funding, these pressures play a determining role in adopting standardized practices, as demonstrated by Nordin et al. [1].

The second mechanism, mimetic isomorphism, occurs when organizations imitate other organizations perceived as legitimate or performing, particularly in situations of uncertainty. Plaisance [2] highlighted the acceleration of this mimetic phenomenon during crisis periods. Finally, normative isomorphism, linked to professionalization and the diffusion of professional norms, constitutes the third mechanism. The growing training of associative executives and their participation in professional networks contribute to the diffusion of common standards, as highlighted by Cazenave [3] in his analysis of humanitarian management.

B. Organizational Identity and Identification

The organizational identity approach complements the neo-institutional perspective by focusing on the symbolic and subjective dimensions of the organization. According to the conceptualization of Albert and Whetten [12], then developed by Ashforth and Mael [8], organizational identity corresponds to the central, distinctive and relatively enduring

characteristics that define "who we are" as an organization. In the associative context, this identity takes on particular importance and is built around shared values, an explicit social mission and a common history.

Hoarau and Laville [4] emphasized that this identity dimension constitutes both a resource and a constraint in association transformation processes. Organizational identification refers to the process by which members appropriate this collective identity. The work of Dutton et al. [14] highlighted how this identification influences organizational behaviors and receptivity to change. Gioia et al. [16] demonstrated that organizational identity possesses "adaptive instability" that allows continuous reinterpretations of central characteristics without breaking the sense of continuity.

III. Methodology

A. Research Design and Study Field

This research follows a qualitative interpretive approach, based on an in-depth single case study, following the methodological recommendations of Yin [5]. This choice is justified by our desire to deeply understand the complex processes at work in the transformation of the associative manager profession. As Eisenhardt [6] emphasizes, case study constitutes a research strategy particularly adapted to explore emerging dynamics.

The selected case is that of the National Organization of Tunisian Scouts (ONST), founded in 1933. This choice is based on several characteristics: its remarkable longevity testifying to a strong organizational identity, its dual local and international anchoring, its hierarchical structure allowing analysis of transformation diffusion, and its recent confrontation with professionalization issues after the 2011 Tunisian revolution.

B. Data Collection and Analysis

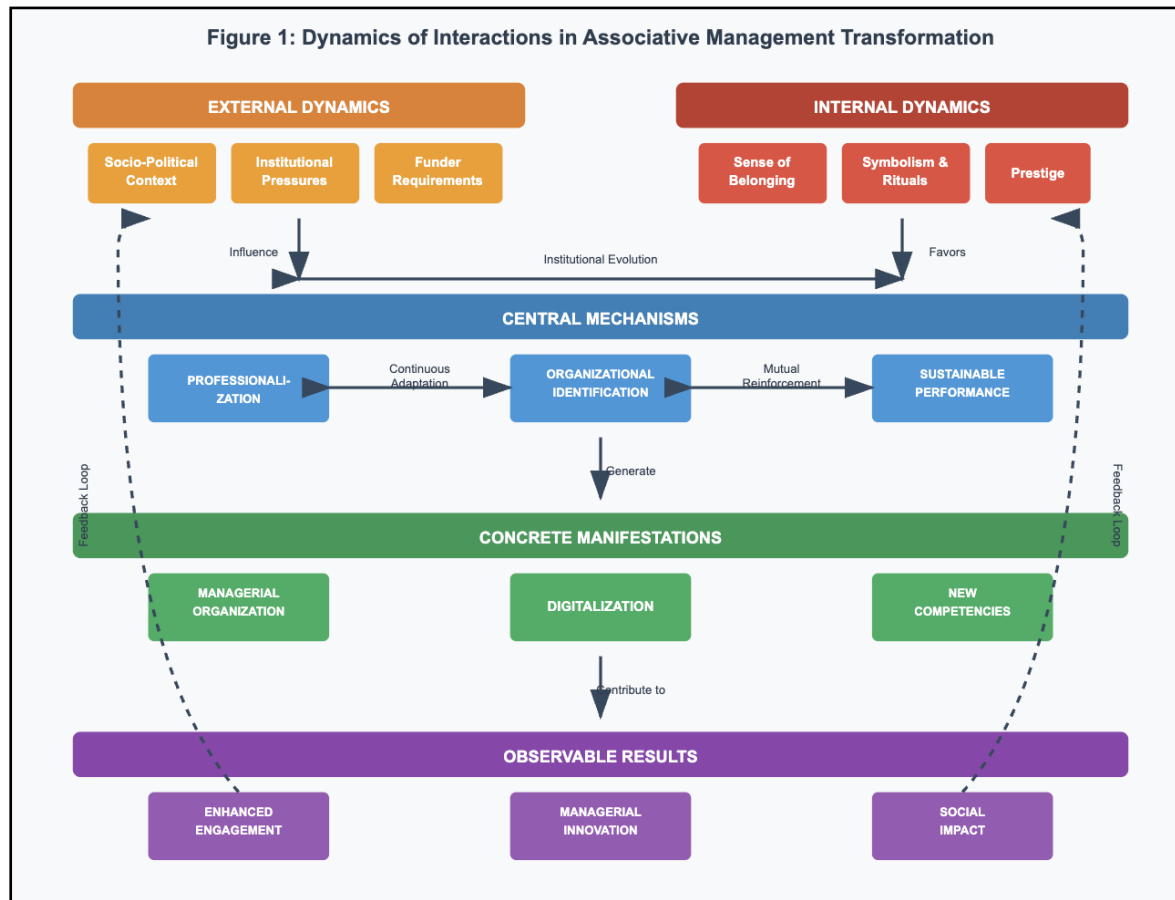
Data collection was conducted over 18 months (January 2022 to June 2023), mobilizing three main complementary sources. First, 18 in-depth semi-directive interviews were conducted with different stakeholders: national and regional leaders, unit chiefs, former scouts, and institutional partners. Second, non-participant observation during key events (governance meetings, training sessions, major events) provided access to actual practices. Finally, documentary analysis constituted the third source, encompassing strategic documents, activity reports, and communication materials.

The analysis followed an iterative process of back-and-forth between empirical data and theoretical frameworks, in accordance with the abductive approach advocated by Eisenhardt [6]. Rigorous thematic coding was performed in three phases (open, axial, selective), assisted by NVivo software, resulting in five main dimensions in our interpretive framework.

IV. Results

Our analysis reveals a complex dynamic of interactions between different organizational dimensions, which we have modeled in the interpretive framework below (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Interpretive Framework of Associative Management Transformation Dynamics



This framework illustrates how managerial transformation operates through continuous interactions between five main components, highlighting the interactive and iterative nature of the organizational adaptation process.

Environmental Context comprises various pressures that trigger and orient change: pressure from international funders requiring standardized processes, evolution of the post-revolution regulatory framework, increased competition between organizations, and growing stakeholder expectations. A partnerships manager (40 years) testifies: *"After 2011, we were overwhelmed with funding proposals for 'democratic governance' or 'active citizenship' projects. We accepted certain funding, but always by reinterpreting objectives to correspond to our scout method."*

Central Transformation Processes position themselves at the heart of the interpretive framework. The institutionalization of new managerial practices manifests through the adoption of strategic planning tools and evaluation systems. As a regional manager (42 years) expresses: *"We don't take management tools as ready-made recipes, we transform them to serve our educational project and not the reverse."* Skills formalization also appears crucial, with the creation of reference frameworks and development of structured training paths. Finally, reconfiguration of actor networks involves integrating new partners and redefining relationships with public authorities.

These processes give rise to concrete manifestations of change: creation of new specialized functions, implementation of integrated information systems, and adoption of managerial language borrowed from the private sector. A national bureau member (52 years) observes: *"In ten years, our organizational chart has completely changed. Before, we had a simple structure with commissioners by age groups. Now, we have specialized departments: international relations, communication, resource development..."*

Identity Dimensions play a crucial role. Anchoring in traditional scouting values persists, as affirmed by a national commissioner (55 years): *"The non-negotiable foundation on which any innovation must be built is our law and our promise."* Reinterpretation of social mission in light of contemporary issues and construction of a new professional identity complete these identity dimensions.

These interactions produce observable results: strengthening external legitimacy, hybridization between formalized managerial practices and traditional approaches, and development of new competencies among organizational executives.

V. Discussion

A. Institutionalization Processes and Their Specificities

Our results confirm the importance of institutional isomorphism mechanisms described by DiMaggio and Powell [7] in transforming managerial practices of associative organizations. However, contrary to what classical neo-institutional theory suggests, the adoption of new practices is not done through simple imitation or passive conformity. It involves active appropriation and translation work that makes these practices compatible with the organization's identity and values. This translation process, conceptualized by Callon [11], appears as a key mechanism for resolving potential tensions between professionalization and identity preservation.

Furthermore, our results show that institutional pressures do not act uniformly across the entire organization. They are filtered and interpreted differently according to hierarchical levels, leading to differentiated organizational responses. This heterogeneity of institutional responses, also observed by Dubosq [9] in his analysis of the French associative sector, testifies to the agency capacity of actors despite structural constraints.

B. Organizational Identification as an Integrative Mechanism

Our study reveals the central role of organizational identification, theorized by Ashforth and Mael [8], in adopting new practices while preserving fundamental values. This strong identification allows actors to maintain a sense of identity continuity despite important changes in their practices and roles. This psychological mechanism, deepened by Dutton et al. [14], appears determining in the process of adapting to new managerial requirements.

We identify three main mechanisms underlying this internal legitimation process. The first is narrativization, which consists of integrating new practices into the organization's historical narrative. The second mechanism is symbolization, which gives particular meaning to managerial tools by associating them with organizational values. Finally, the third

mechanism concerns local anchoring, which allows adapting standardized practices to Tunisian context specificities, as also highlighted by Dahmani and Saidani [10].

C. Specificities of the Tunisian Context

Our study distinguishes itself from Western analyses by examining professionalization in the post-revolution Tunisian context. The period following the 2011 revolution created a particular institutional environment, characterized by an explosion in the number of associations and a redefinition of their role in democratic construction. This evolution, where organizations move from a peripheral status to a central role in social fabric reconstruction, has also been observed by Nordin et al. [1].

Simultaneously, this period was marked by an important influx of international funding, accompanied by specific requirements in terms of governance and transparency, thus accelerating isomorphic pressures on local organizations. In this particular context, the professionalization of Tunisian scouts appears not only as an adaptive response to external pressures but also as a deliberate strategy to strengthen their legitimacy and impact in a recomposing associative landscape, joining Cazenave's [3] work on the proactive dimension of "new humanitarian management."

VI. Conclusion

This research enriches understanding of the evolution of the associative manager role by highlighting the importance of institutionalization processes in transforming managerial practices and the integrative role of organizational identification in adapting to new requirements while preserving fundamental values. As Hoarau and Laville [4] have shown, these processes do not function as simple transfers of practices imported from the market sector, but involve active appropriation work that preserves associative specificity.

Managerial implications are multiple: importance of accompanying professionalization with explicit work on identity, necessity of developing training approaches integrating technical skills and value transmission, and interest in creating reflexivity spaces allowing managers to analyze their practices, as valued by Dahmani and Saidani [10].

Despite its contributions, this research presents certain limitations: the single case study limits generalization, the temporal dimension would merit being deepened by longitudinal studies, and the beneficiaries' perspective could be more integrated to understand how these transformations affect the social impact of organizations, a central dimension in Nordin et al.'s [1] work.

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