Organic pioneers and the sustainability transformation of the German food market: a politically structuring actor perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the socio-ecological co-evolution and transformation of organic pioneers and the organic food market from a politically structuring actor perspective. It aims to identify strategies and activities used to contribute to the change of structures in the organic market and how the companies, in turn, reacted to the structural influence of the changing environment to position their company successfully in the market.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is based on interviews with four managing directors who were responsible over several decades for the strategic corporate management of the pioneer companies they founded as (or converted to) organic. Content analysis was used to analyse the data.

Findings – Strategic challenges regarding building up, maintaining and using resources, shaping actor constellations, and professionalising management are explained. The analysis demonstrates that also small pioneers have the possibilities and scope to influence and change markets and structures.

Originality/value – The results are significant for developing sustainable transformation strategies for markets, considering the interaction of the micro and meso-levels over time and the role of small businesses that might be struggling with growth and loss of values. The study answers recent calls in the literature to empirically investigate sustainability transformations from a practice perspective and gain insights into the roles of corporate actors.

Keywords Multi-level perspective, Sustainability transformation, Entrepreneurship for sustainable development, Organic food sector, Politically structuring actor

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The organic food market is an impressive example of the socio-ecological transformation of a fast-moving consumer goods market in Germany. Organic food sales grew from 2.1 billion euros in 2000 to 15 billion euros in 2020 (Statista, 2021), with 22.3% growth in 2020 being the most recent annual increase (BÖLW, 2021). This recent significant growth is commonly attributed to the entry of large food retailers into the organic market (Trávnícek *et al.*, 2021).

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However, the market was previously co-developed over several decades by organic pioneers who either began as start-ups or converted existing small- and medium-sized enterprises to organic food production to become established and successful brands in the sustainable food sector after several years.

This paper explores the socio-ecological co-evolution and transformation of organic pioneers (micro-level) and the food market (meso-level) through in-depth interviews with four founders and business leaders of German organic food processing companies who, as organic pioneers, have helped shape the development of the organic sector in recent decades. Their strategic actions and measures are examined with the help of Uwe Schneidewind's (1998) theory of the "enterprise as a politically structuring actor", and the interactions between the micro-level (enterprise) and the meso-level (regime) are illuminated (Geels, 2002; Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013). The focus is thus on niche-level actors and how they have developed their own businesses and helped develop the organic market.

The literature claims a lack of empirical evidence and practical studies about actors (especially enterprises) and their activities in practice and how they influence or shape their market environment (Dias *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b; Habicher, 2021; Hörisch, 2018; Johnson and Schaltegger, 2020; Lau *et al.*, 2012; Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013). To address this gap, our study examines the following research question: "What strategies and design elements were used by organic pioneers to develop their business and help change structures in the organic market?". By exploring how sustainable strategies are shaped in practice (rather than writing about how they should be shaped), our study makes a contribution to the practice research literature (e.g. Behnam and Rasche, 2009; Galbreath, 2009). It examines the micro-processes that are usually taken for granted (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2015) and sheds light on the micro-level activities for organisational (Egels-Zanden and Rosen, 2015; Kasim *et al.*, 2021) and market transformation towards sustainability.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes our theoretical-conceptual framework: the politically structuring actor approach by Schneidewind (1998) and the literature on sustainability transformation. Section 3 presents the design of our study, including qualitative content analysis (the method of data analysis). Section 4 presents the results of the in-depth interviews, which (in Section 5) are subsequently discussed regarding the politically structuring and transformative sustainability impact of companies. In the final section (Section 6), we provide our conclusions and offer their implications for corporate practice.

2. Theoretical-conceptual framework

We use the concept of Uwe Schneidewind (1998) to understand organic pioneers as politically structuring actors who actively shape the environment in which they are placed. We take up a multi-level perspective (MLP), as reflected in Schneidewind's approach that combines the entrepreneurial with the market point of view, to allow for a more comprehensive picture of transformational change over time. Furthermore, when examining how change is managed by organic pioneers and is strategically influenced at the meso-level, our analysis draws upon the literature that Johnson and Schaltegger (2020) termed "entrepreneurship for sustainable development". More specifically, we use Schneidewind's framework for an empirical analysis of strategies and design elements used by organic pioneer companies to help change structures in the organic market. The use and interweaving of theoretical perspectives is a common characteristic in the emerging field of entrepreneurship relating to issues of sustainable development.

2.1 Enterprise as politically structuring actor

According to Schneidewind's (1997, 1998, 2010) concept of "enterprise as politically structuring actor", the relationship of an enterprise to its (market, political and social)

environment plays a central role since a power-based assertion of interest is pursued in social contexts and structures not only to limit action but also to actively shape, reproduce and use it as a "playing field" for entrepreneurial activities (Schneidewind, 1997, p. 228). By influencing the environment (i.e. the *market*, *politics* and *public* arenas), companies can change and expand their scope of action and contribute to transformation processes. In this way, the understanding of entrepreneurial action breaks away from the passive image of an (ever new) mostly profit-oriented adaptation to a changing business environment, in which reactive action and decisions are made to best meet external customer expectations, market structures, government regulations and social and technological trends (Schneidewind, 2018, pp. 376–377).

To illustrate possible applications of his theory, Schneidewind (1997) used ecologically committed companies or corporate environmental protection as fields of application to present his theory. While being largely illustrative, he pointed out possibilities for an ecological reorganisation of the textile industry. This was followed by analyses of the energy sector – for example, by Amthor (2005) and Schneidewind and Rehm (2010) – with most of these early studies attempting to describe and rationalise the link between corporate social engagement and industry developments.

Debor (2018) provides a comprehensive use of the politically structuring actor concept to empirically analyse existing and potential corporate impacts on energy sector development. Using interviews with key actors on the development, activities and impacts of three energy cooperatives, Debor's study aims to understand the interactions between emerging innovative actors and actor groups and to link them to the direction and extent of ongoing socio-technical change. She points out that this issue is not only relevant for research on energy cooperatives regarding changes in the energy system, but also for other sectors such as food or mobility. There are no other empirical studies that examine (from a micro-political perspective) how companies or individual company founders succeed in actively and strategically shaping structures.

Drawing on the structuration theory of Giddens (1984), Schneidewind demonstrates that only participation in surrounding systems guarantees *agency*, which is the possibility to act at all (and to act differently; to follow or reject a habit). According to Whittington (2010), agency is fostered by control over resources and is exercised according to whether rules are followed or not. No matter how action is taken, it contributes to the reproduction or negation of a system and its structures. Thus, the approach considers structure as a "structure of order" created by markets, political processes and the formation of public opinion, alongside the actions of actors (Schneidewind, 1998). It is this understanding of structural policy – namely, the question of the extent to which enterprises influence structures or "pursue structural policy" (Schneidewind, 1998, p. 35) – that makes this approach so profitable for the study of sustainability transformations. Political action is understood here as the interest-led action of individual actors that are closely correlated with positions of power and the exercise of power. This makes it clear that the understanding of *politics* according to Schneidewind's concept is neither state or party politics nor structural politics, as we know them from socio-political discourse on regional promotion or support for certain industries, for example. Rather, the approach provides a basis for examining the extent to which companies can change structures and what resources give them this power. Although Schneidewind (1998, p. 41) points to the importance of "a sufficient amount and the right combination of appropriate resources", further research on this topic remains to be done. To date, the literature on sustainable transformation processes has scarcely addressed these questions, at least empirically.

To be able to have a structuring effect, the actors use various *design levels* (also called *modalities*), which differ according to whether they enable companies to exert direct or indirect influence (i.e. structural change). Table 1 provides an overview of all the modalities of

	Immediate			Indirect	
Design level	*Influence on modalities* Modalities as mediators between actor and structure			*Changing the sets of actors*	*Structural reproduction* Influencing its functional mechanisms
Design elements	*Resources* (determine the external capacity of the actors to act)		*Rules* (are incorporated into the practical knowledge of actors)	(Changes have repercussions on the (re)production of social practices)	Changing *discursivity* Changing *reflexivity*
	Allocative resources (e.g. marketpower)	*Authoritative resources* (e.g. dependencies)	*Interpretive schemes* *Norms*		

Source(s): Own representation, compiled from Schneidewind (1998)

Table 1.
Design levels and modalities for structural policy of companies

Schneidewind's concept, which also serves as a framework for our qualitative content analysis.

Four mediating modalities at the core of workplace structural policy are mentioned as *immediate*: *allocative* and *authoritative resources* alongside *interpretive schemes* and *norms* (both rules). Allocative resources convey power over material things and objects, whereas authoritative resources exert power over persons. The more resources an actor possesses and the more rules that they can follow, the more capacity for agency (Whittington, 2010, p. 111) they have so that they must be structurally active and effective. Rules include formalised legal regulations (i.e. norms) as well as less formalised things such as habits, routines and conventions (e.g. societal, social and sector- or discipline-specific). Schneidewind (2000, p. 239) refers to the latter as "interpretive schemes". They can serve to ensure that market partners can (or want to) coordinate among themselves (e.g. through a similar "interpretation of key ecological problems"). This can also generally include actions that ensure greater visibility of certain topics in the media (so-called *agenda setting*) that shape knowledge regarding certain contexts or communicate business or growth understandings. In contrast, norms "judge something as positive or negative or as justified or unjustified" (Schneidewind, 2018, p. 238) and are generally stricter than interpretive schemes. Non-compliance with norms can potentially lead to sanctions, thus demonstrating references to legitimacy theory (Hahn and Lülfs, 2014; Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Suchman, 1995). According to this theory, companies are granted (or denied) the *licence to operate* according to the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of social expectations placed on them.

The starting points for *indirectly* influencing structures do not originate from structuration theory but from competition theory (market structures, market actors) and Giddens' (1984) "stratification model of the actor" (Schneidewind, 1998, pp. 134, 202). Companies can indirectly influence or change market structures, politics or the public by *influencing actor sets*. The (change in the) number of competitors on the supply or demand side, for example, can impact market events or outcomes. If companies promote new interest groups in the political process (and thus possibly displace old actors) and use new media for agenda-setting processes, or support new actors in entering arenas previously denied to them, then this can have repercussions on structures and practices (Schneidewind, 1998).

The indirect influence on "fundamental functional mechanisms of structural reproduction" (Schneidewind, 1998, p. 202) aims at the *discursive* and *reflexive* characteristics of entrepreneurial action. By dealing with partly unintended consequences of action (and those affected by them) and by engaging in discourse with them, the company can rethink and reflect on its behaviour and then shift priorities and values, use resources differently and change modalities. This reflection also includes becoming aware of how one's actions are controlled by others.

Overall, the conceptualisation of the design levels of corporate action in the Schneidewind approach provides a useful analytical framework not only for examining micro-level activities and strategies for organisational transformation towards sustainability (Egels-Zandén and Rosén, 2015; Engert *et al.*, 2016) but also for analysing possible contributions of companies to sustainability transformations at the meso-level.

2.2 Role of companies in sustainability transformation

The literature on the transformative role of companies has so far been heavily influenced by the discussion of business models (e.g. Bidmon and Knab, 2018; Boons and Lüdeke-Freund, 2013; Boons *et al.*, 2013; Geels, 2006; Loorbach, 2010; Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013; Wells, 2013; Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016). According to Schaltegger *et al.* (2016), many sustainability pioneers are niche providers that integrate sustainability principles as a *core aspect* in their business model. However, their "range of influence" regarding contributing to market

transformation is limited (comparable to the "capacity for agency"), unless they grow, multiply or influence others (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016, p. 265). Furthermore, it is assumed that the actors (making relevant contributions to sustainable market transformations) who influence and shape their structural environment and society (culture, social) in the direction of sustainable development are those who have sustainability both as a core business and who are successful in the mainstream (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016, p. 266). Their theoretical framework develops a co-evolutionary business model in which the interaction between sustainability-driven niche players and conventional incumbents makes the difference for a sustainable transformation (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016, p. 272). *Co-evolution* refers to different actors (also at different levels) mutually and reciprocally influencing each other's development through "specific, reciprocal and simultaneous interactions that impact the ability [. . .] to persist" (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016, p. 273). However, Schaltegger *et al.* (2016) also criticise the lack of evidence and (practical) studies to better understand the dynamic role of business models for sustainability transformations of markets.

In recent years, a growing number of transition studies have adopted a MLP to analyse change processes in, for example, societal (sub-)systems (e.g. see Johnson and Schaltegger, 2020) as well as investigate structural change processes, which are the subject of the present study. Co-evolutionary structural changes in economy, culture, technology, environment and institutions lead to a "transition", and a "fundamental change in structure, culture and practices" (Rotmans and Loorbach, 2011, p. 108). This understanding of structure also includes the "material infrastructure (resources . . .), economic infrastructure (markets . . .) and institutions (regulations . . .) that shape the structure" (Schneidewind *et al.*, 2012, p. 501).

The MLP serves as a "descriptive model of transition dynamics" (Geels, 2002) and (like Schneidewind) is based on Giddens' structuration theory (Bidmon and Knab, 2018). The three central functional levels at which transitions take place or have an impact are the socio-technical niche (micro-level), the socio-technical regime (meso-level) and the socio-technical landscape (macro-level) (Geels and Schot, 2011; Schneidewind *et al.*, 2012, p. 501). According to Hörisch (2018; see also Geels, 2002; Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013), "innovative ideas, projects, technologies" are located at the micro-level, as are "sustainable entrepreneurs". The meso-level includes the dominant structures, cultures and practices alongside the established *incumbent corporations* that mainly shape the *regime* despite path dependencies. The macro-level is formed by fundamental, hardly influenceable framework conditions and "global rules and institutions" that limit or frame the changes on the other two levels (Schneidewind *et al.*, 2012, p. 501).

Against this background, organic pioneers are classified in this study at the micro-level in their niche. The surrounding (market, political and social) environment at the meso-level and the food market (and the mass suppliers central to it) form the regime whose structural change is being sought. Hörisch (2018) has noted a paucity of empirical research examining how economic actors have contributed to transformation processes (a recent exception is Habicher, 2021). According to Loorbach and Wijsman (2013, p. 20), different strategies such as reactive, adaptive, proactive or even transformative approaches can be identified in sectors undergoing major change processes (e.g. energy, construction, mobility or food) (see also Boons, 2009). They also emphasise that ". . . in actively pursuing a transformative role, businesses can simultaneously help shift the market they operate in as well as transform their own business. In doing so, they can contribute to actively shape transitions towards sustainability" (Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013, p. 20). Furthermore, it is seen as a defining element of sustainability entrepreneurs when they aim to transform the mass market as well as the eco-niche in which they find themselves (Fussler and James, 1996). However, Loorbach and Wijsman (2013) focus on how transformative business strategies affect social and societal contexts (and thus also environmental and social problems that affect companies) and identify a need for further research beyond the firm level or industry level. Thus, there

remains a lack of knowledge regarding how companies develop and successfully implement transformative strategies and how sustainable entrepreneurs manage to create future market space (Fussler and James, 1996, p. 9).

Therefore, this paper aims to use Schneidewind's approach to examine which structural policy approaches have been adopted by sustainable entrepreneurs to enable the co-evaluative transformation of both their enterprises and the organic food market. The approach also allows for consideration of the market and its associated political and public (societal) arenas, which is consistent with the MLP in transformation research, and it also does not remain only on the micro-level and meso-level of markets but also substantially considers the macro-level as social and cultural framing.

The study responds to calls in the sustainability transformation literature for more empirical research on the roles of actors, especially entrepreneurial actors (Habicher, 2021; Hörisch, 2018; Lau *et al.*, 2012; Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013). It does so by examining, from a micro-political perspective (CEOs and entrepreneurs of pioneering organic companies), how change is managed and strategically influenced in interaction with the meso-level. Johnson and Schaltegger (2020) demonstrate and review the developing and ongoing research streams around what they name "entrepreneurship for sustainable development", also using and interweaving several methodological and theoretical perspectives, as we do.

Sustainable transformations in the agri-food sector have already been studied, with a particular focus on consumer–producer relationships using the example of maize in China (Ely *et al.*, 2016) and the role of regime actors in the Dutch food sector (van Amstel *et al.*, 2013). Dias *et al.* (2019b) provided the first literature review on "agricultural entrepreneurship". Furthermore, Hörisch's (2018) investigation of the linkages between niche-level innovation and incumbents in the transformation of the German egg industry demonstrates that niche-level entrepreneurs can contribute to innovation-driven sustainability transitions and influence regime-level actors via market growth. His corroborating case study is largely based on desktop research and market-related observations, complemented by interviews at the primary production and retail levels. Unlike Hörisch's study, which supplements a case study with two short interviews, this study concentrates on the micro and practice perspective, using in-depth interviews and drawing on the long-term entrepreneurial perspective itself. It explores micro-level activities for organisational transformation towards sustainability (Egels-Zandén and Rosén, 2015; Engert *et al.*, 2016), focusing on niche-level actors and how they have developed their business and helped develop the organic market.

By interviewing owners and managers of organic food processors who have pioneered the organic market and developed their business and the market over 35–45 years, this study aims to uncover and identify activities and practices that link the micro-level of strategic management actions to the meso-level of the surrounding (social) regime (the market). It also looks at how their politically structuring activities help to avoid betraying values and persisting in a highly competitive environment, in which managing value production and supply chains have gained in importance (Riahi Dorcheh *et al.*, 2021). Finally, the findings from our study might also inform research on network relationships, such as those discussed by Razavi *et al.* (2021) in the context of innovation design and entrepreneurship.

3. Study design and methods

The following section explains how the study was designed, including selecting companies and using in-depth interviews to obtain data related to how organic pioneers have managed and developed their businesses during the co-evolution of the organic sector.

The data were collected through interviews with four organic pioneer companies that are considered crucial players and drivers in the German organic market and are widely known for their product development and production innovations. They are considered organic

pioneers in various public sources and academic literature (e.g. Brehl, 2020). Two of the four companies took over long-standing family businesses from their parents approximately 40 years ago, one of which had long been run employing an anthroposophical approach, while the other was subsequently converted to organic (both beverage producers producing organic soft drinks and juices; abbreviated as BP-A and BP-B). The other two pioneers (food processors producing dry goods, spices, tea, bakery goods, cereals and cookies; abbreviated as FP-A and FP-B) founded their companies approximately 40 years ago and built them up as organic businesses. All four companies, each with 130–250 employees, are among the most traditional organic companies in their sector and have developed into leading brand manufacturers in the organic food and natural products sector. For many years, however, they have also successfully pursued strategies for distribution in other markets, including international ones. They represent companies that, as Hörisch (2018, p. 1155) puts it, have achieved "relatively comprehensive changes ... via reconfigurational pathways of transitions".

The corporate cases were also selected because the pioneering companies are not only known to the public for their transformative innovations but are also characterised by particularly high growth figures in their industries, including double-digit growth in recent years. Such a dynamic role of companies in transforming markets is often accompanied by major challenges in developing balanced corporate strategies (Gond *et al.*, 2012) and sustainable business models (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016). Of further interest was to investigate whether (and if so, how) companies ensure that no "mission drift" occurs in the implementation of their growth strategies (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016), which could potentially reduce corporate sustainability performance and affect corporate values.

Following Schneidewind's (2010) study, in-depth interviews with longstanding, well-established organic food companies are suitable for identifying retrospective and current management practices and strategies regarding the design rules of a *progress-oriented* structural policy organisation. An exploratory approach was suitable because no other studies addressed our research question. With the assumption of Schneidewind's approach that all players in the market place are actors who influence their environment and the structural policy, it was necessary to collect more than one perspective in order to determine views and understandings of the market and doing business. Considering that actors are involved simultaneously in the same structures and that they attempt to influence them at the same time, it was suitable to collect some different actors' views (instead of only one, for example) (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016). We therefore employed semi-structured in-depth interviews (as also done, for example, by Debor, 2018 and Hörisch, 2018) to focus on the history and experiences of the organic pioneers and how they position themselves and their role in the organic market and movement (i.e. regarding other actors and structures).

The aim was to get an "inside view" to meet our research interest – not an "outside view" as provided by quantitative questionnaire surveys or qualitative content-analytical studies of secondary data such as media and marketing material. Using an interview guide, the interviews addressed the following themes: biography of the entrepreneur, leadership style, corporate vision and purpose, organisational structure, strategy/strategic goals, performance assessment and management systems. These themes were explored retrospectively and with regard to the current situation of the company (including company succession) while paying particular attention to changes over time and the reasons for these changes.

All interviews took place within the company to provide a familiar environment for the interviewees and were carried out by two researchers (one of whom is the co-author of this study) in 2018. The interviews lasted a total of 419 min, while individual interviews with the managers and owners of the organic enterprises each lasted from 77 to 129 min. The audio recordings were fully transcribed by an external service provider and analysed using qualitative content analysis and MaxQDA software (also used by Debor, 2018), which is a

helpful tool for data and knowledge management to systematically examine and code large amounts of text. All interviews were conducted and transcribed in German and the statements relevant to this study were translated into English.

Content analysis of the data was carried out following the approach of Mayring (2010), except for the first step, when one of the authors inductively marked and coded statements that seemed potentially relevant to the research interest. This preliminary open coding served to break open the data and was intended to create broad and initially less ordered access to the data material (Strübing, 2014). Such a small-step sequential examination of the text makes it possible to open dimensions of meaning behind the often taken-for-granted surface of the manifest text.

In the next step of reading and coding, concrete correspondences between the marked text passages of interest and the concept of the politically structuring actor (which served as a theoretical-conceptual basis) were worked out. This was done using the theory-guided framework (like a "deductively obtained set of categories", Gläser and Laudel, 2013), whose individual components function as categories (see Table 1). In this way, the statements of interest for the research question were ultimately identified and categorised using the framework on structural policy elements (Table 1).

4. Results

This section explains which design elements the companies used to achieve their goals for each dimension of Schneidewind's (1998) politically structuring actor concept. In doing so, the connection between the development status of the company and the organic market and the companies' approaches to action is revealed.

4.1 Resources

4.1.1 Allocative resources. In the interviews, all four organic pioneers pointed to heavy investments of time and money in research and development, as well as staff and production capacities, to secure and expand organic production in the long term. They had taken great risks in doing so, especially at the beginning of their pioneering period when they had relatively few financial resources and experienced high raw material prices and uncertainties in sales. Although they were aware that a mistake could cost a business "a lot of money . . . and also reputation" (BP-A), the financial resources were invested to secure other allocative resources in the long term. This also concerned the further development of the organic and biodynamic idea in supplier countries – according to BP-B, such transformation processes could start and be driven forward from within the company and be financed there.

Expertise and experts were often bought from outside to develop and test organic products and raw materials together with actors in the supply chain. For example, BP-A reported that for a long time, theirs was the "only company in its sector in Germany . . . to employ an agricultural engineer" to provide farmers with technical and agricultural advice. FP-A also reported on the outsourcing of part of the expertise gained and the research tasks to a newly founded organisation to "better serve these big issues" and to counter the controversy regarding the production of a raw material that had until then been sourced internationally through regional cultivation.

The respondents also demonstrated a high willingness to learn and display openness: over the decades and during the company's growth, they often drew on external expertise in the field of business management and leadership and took account of their corporate responsibility through environmental and sustainability managers who "really had no other task than to implement sustainable business management" (FP-B). Various references by the interviewees provide evidence for staff being an essential part of the allocative

resources used by organic entrepreneurs, along with the expansion of trainee positions and the respectful treatment of employees. Their statements demonstrated that the measures and practices described serve to bind (but above all promote) and secure allocative resources to gain agency over "material things and objects". In turn, this has enabled pioneer enterprises to grow in tandem with shaping and expanding their influence on the structures surrounding their enterprise.

4.1.2 Authoritative resources. A significant factor for authoritative resources revealed from the data is (corporate) networks. Examples of this are memberships or involvement in associations that promote authoritative resources, such as public credibility and image, and radiate into the sector. In this way, the organic pioneers set standards and (due to the strength of the group) reached a broader public and influenced association, sector and political decisions (if necessary). Moreover, they not only contributed to organic production becoming more "normal" and the networked farmers producing at a similar level (under the same professional guidance) but they also allowed "organic" to be brought closer to conventional farmers and hence the pioneers gained recognition, legitimacy and acceptance (and thus "power over actors").

However, the design tool of authoritative resources is also used when it comes to human resource management or the person of the managing director. For example, adhering to (or not disregarding) recommendations and regulations in human resources (e.g. diversity) was generally seen to contribute to a good corporate image. Good planning is the be-all and end-all for BP-B, not only for financial reasons, but also because otherwise it can cost a company its reputation, and as in the case of economic mistakes, reputation can quickly suffer. Hence, good governance was acknowledged as influencing the authoritative power of a company.

According to several organic pioneers, with the attainment of a certain reputation in the industry, it later became possible to attract other professionals – new corporate members who were key figures and contributed to attaining greater power and influence vis-à-vis competitors or in the industry. However, the pioneers also knew about their authority, which grew over time and led to "a lot of people following you" (FP-B) – and which was sometimes needed to positively charge or enforce strategies or decisions.

In supervisory boards, as association chairperson or as an expert for the federal government or ministries, further market development was shaped in cooperation with other actors of the organic movement. Initially being an ecological and then sustainable role model for others, a signboard for the sector, and having a positive image were important authoritative resources to all the pioneers interviewed and contributed to their having more capacity for an agency to influence structures.

4.2 Rules

4.2.1 Interpretive schemes. All the organic pioneers explained how they worked on values in their companies. Since the founding or takeover of the company, a variety of measures had been taken at different levels to influence the understanding of values and existing patterns of interpretation and meaning in society. In the process, certain values (e.g. "environmental management", "sustainability", "energy", "togetherness", "communication", "continuity" and "consideration") were positively affixed and promoted. From management's point of view, it was seen as helpful and important during later growth to work out, write down, and name values that were previously "just there" and lived by in their companies (e.g. BP-A, FP-A). This was expressed via more in-depth staff communication and leadership principles drawn up on a grassroots democratic basis and in "vision and values" or "canons of values" communicated to the outside world.

An understanding of business was shaped by an emphasis on aspects such as cooperation, communication instead of competition, and perception of partners, thus creating a common

basis for co-economy. In addition to creating partnerships and direct cooperation with economic actors, it also included high-profile events and civil society campaigns to shape knowledge about contexts, influence public opinion ("agenda-setting"), and pressure politicians. The political-social views, ideas regarding appropriateness, and the perception of social responsibility were clearly articulated by the interviewees. This can be understood primarily as an interpretive pattern and as constituting meaning. Now that their companies were big enough, there were opportunities to "shape things with others" (FP-A). In any case, it was seen as an essential task to spread the "organic" concept further, bring it to the population and enlarge the market. "I see us as a mission . . . as a mediator", said BP-B, while FP-A referred to a "bigger task", which was about "people eating our product", which was of high quality.

However, although the interviewees were firmly convinced that the organic market will continue to grow in the future and that more large corporations will also become interested in organic food, the organic pioneers in the interviews clearly separated themselves from unlimited growth movements – and thus their niche from the regime. Concentrating on a different understanding of growth can also be perceived as an essential attempt to influence interpretive schemes, with which one clearly distinguishes oneself or one's company from growth, profit and capitalism theories: "earning a lot", "making a career", "glitz and glamour", "status symbol" and other factors – "that's not right for us". More important than career opportunities in FP-B's understanding of values are "a good environment", "good food", "educational opportunities", "being allowed to develop", "a nice atmosphere" and a "working environment" where one is "well looked after" and "where people are friendly". Moreover, they would have nothing against growth, just "organic growth". This classification is also surprising, as the companies surveyed have mostly recorded quite high growth figures for many years.

4.2.2 Norms. In addition to the propagated understanding of values, the organic pioneers also shaped and promoted standards to justify their responsibility. All the companies interviewed were certified organic (not only to the European regulation for organic production but also according to the stricter criteria of organic growers' associations), and they considered this to be self-evident for them and their understanding of right and wrong. Additionally, they reported numerous certifications, standards and management systems that they implemented in their companies and used to secure social legitimacy. The deliberate use of these demonstrates, on the one hand, that the interviewees want to operate within such standards, and at the same time, they contribute to their confirmation and reinforcement over time. However, it was clear that new standards cannot simply be introduced "overnight", but are (according to FP-B) a "permanent training ground". However, in the early stages, one could still work on the agreements oneself, influence the criteria to be set and install adjustments in one's company initially. In this way, one would also be well ahead of other companies in the sector.

BP-A chose a slightly different path that caused a stir within and beyond the sector by striving for an even higher standard (in contrast to the existing standard), which only products made under clearly defined ecological criteria could achieve. This strategy not only sensitised and informed consumers, but also challenged competitors and questioned the traditional production process that had been generally accepted as the norm. Even though legal regulations and standards were ultimately not revised, the organic pioneer influenced existing patterns of interpretation with their actions. The company still successfully adheres to this principle and communicates and promotes the organic production process, which is now also used by other organic producers in the market.

4.3 Changing sets of actors

The organic pioneers reported on their intensive involvement in the establishment and development of networks over approximately five decades and, through this, in the

constellation of actors in the market (and indirectly in the market mechanisms). The example of an organic orchard association, enabling micro-producers to be retained as organic suppliers so that small gardeners and the tradition of meadow orchards could be preserved (BP-B), demonstrates that the promotion of biodiversity and habitat (alongside maintaining food for insects and the preservation and transfer of knowledge about old fruit varieties) are intended effects of entrepreneurial action. Moreover, as BP-B explained, such small quantities are irrelevant for economic production or even a minus business economically. Most of the interviewees (e.g. BP-B) mentioned producer groups as being important partners and networks that are understood as independent actors: through long-term partnerships, the expansion was promoted and the market position consolidated, whereby farmers interested in converting to organic have approached them and established cooperation. This can generally increase the number of players in the organic market. Another example was codes of conduct (FP-B), which exert influence on contractual partners and with whose help or gradual introduction suppliers or producers are introduced to higher standards. A consistent goal mentioned by the interviewees was to "expand organic farming", thus supporting farmers and continuously increasing the organically farmed land and number of organic farmers.

In later phases of company development, when the pioneers had more financial power, actor constellations in the market were also controlled by lending and prices. FP-B, who is also strongly active in B2B business and maintains close and lasting relationships with (primary and international) producers and suppliers, justified the purchase at fair prices, as it would also be of no use to him if suppliers were put under pressure and failed. In such a "community of fate", imbalances (e.g. high harvest losses) are balanced through sales volumes, advance financing, guarantees for loans or even their own lending. The latter attitude was underpinned by the preference to support partner enterprises as actors in the organic market instead of having banks as co-investors in the actor environment. Where minority shareholdings of shareholders from outside the sector are currently used for further growth or risk hedging, this is only done with those who "consciously invest in sustainable companies" over generations and are "authentic" (FP-B). This also allows outsiders to become more active as players in the sector and thus help shape it (at least in a way that strengthens capital and reduces risk).

When organic products entered the conventional market in the late 1990s, further tools for changing actor sets were introduced. During that time, second brands began to prove themselves. FP-A used a second brand (next to its original organic pioneer brand) to explore the new market, which was promising but unproven. Simultaneously, the focus on the natural food market (which remains popular) maintained loyalty to the specialised retailers "who helped you build the product" (FP-A). Similarly, for many years, BP-B has served a growing market by producing goods for other retailers' private brands, whereby the company's sales have increased and production capacities have been better utilised without endangering the "premium status" that had been built up.

In addition to the positive influence, the organic pioneers also expressed negative feelings regarding actors from whom they wanted to distance themselves and the organic sector and whom they do not want to give any space or opportunities for action in this environment. This points towards their politically structuring understanding of business actor's roles. Codes of conduct are a concrete means of understanding the filtering of actors in the market. In the case of FP-B, the requirements that suppliers must fulfil to participate in the market were quite demanding. Agencies or investors who wanted to buy a company to be able to skim off the profits were rejected just as much as, for example, interested parties "from China" who were (and still are) interested (for profit-oriented reasons) in German SMEs and the quality of their products as well as their know-how.

The organic pioneers were critical of conventional competitors who wanted to swallow up organic enterprises in the interests of competition and organic competence. They were also critical of banks despite often being heavily dependent on them: "I do not want to be dependent on the banks in the long run, even if the interest rates are favourable now" (FP-B). In such cases, influencing the sets of actors meant turning down purchase or investment requests; to check interested parties carefully to determine their goals, motives and extent and if they would fit the company and the sector (including its values); and to make it difficult for unwanted actors (e.g. "agencies", "fund people" or "requests from China") to enter and get involved in the market.

The interviews further demonstrated that the handover of the company is another moment when actor sets can be influenced, for example, when selling the company. To prevent an unwanted entry of a previously non-market investor (with whom a new actor would enter the organic market) or the sale to someone who does not correspond to the values of the company, several pioneers have recently decided to transform their company into a foundation to protect the value orientation of the company through an appropriate statute.

Ultimately, new players who helped shape (and grow) the organic market were innovative, and those who broke new ground have also been repeatedly promoted. Beyond the measures followed in earlier growth phases, this has often occurred in recent business history whereby the pioneers, who are particularly strong financially, support new businesses (start-ups) financially – and/or ideally (e.g. both FPs) participate in other businesses or invest in start-ups (FP-B), participate in international plantations (FP-B) or set up small regional production facilities (FP-A).

4.4 Changing discursivity and reflexivity

Particularly in the early days of the two start-up companies (FP-A and FP-B), discursivity and reflexivity were carried by the "collective". This exchange, which was "simply the most important thing", proceeded in an increasingly structured way as the company grew. FP-A's explanations demonstrated how discursivity and reflexivity are given space and time in today's business – even in a company that has already grown: "We meet every fortnight . . . then we talk . . . about money, about the market, about the direction of the company, about innovation . . .". There is a reflection on goals and the future, both looking back and looking ahead. Moreover, the interviewees reported that they critically reflect and always value discourse regarding the "core brand values of the company" as noted specifically by FP-B. Ultimately, the above-mentioned conversion of the business into a foundation also demonstrates a willingness to be discursive and reflexive, while generally questioning things, with the help of a company advisory board, for example, which "asks questions that others . . . just do not otherwise ask" (FP-B).

Additionally, professionalisation efforts are evident in many of the organic pioneers' actions. The organic pioneers repeatedly reported that they had specifically introduced external competencies and knowledge into the company. This desire for professionalisation is coupled with the openly admitted self-recognition that, at points where one's competence ended, it was better to buy in expertise and advice from outside. In doing so, they paid attention to "people of integrity" whom they knew and "who tick the same as we do" (FP-B). The pioneers reported that at the beginning, they had hired consultants or trainers, or had already joined forces with experts from other disciplines and founded the company together with them, as they were dependent on their competencies from the ground up. However, obtaining consulting expertise was not always possible or financially feasible at every point in the company's history.

5. Discussion

Schaltegger *et al.* (2016) pointed out that the growth of sustainable companies in consolidated markets automatically leads to structural changes that can increase sales of sustainable products or the displacement of actors selling less sustainable products. Building on this, the results of the present study allow for further, differentiated consideration of a possible transformative scope for action, considering the constellation of different actors and providing valuable indications for the design of future transformation processes. For example, the organic pioneers (especially the beverage producers) particularly emphasised the importance of establishing networks (such as producer groups or orchard associations), even if it initially seemed economically questionable (at least in the short term) due to limited sales volumes. The creation and dissemination of knowledge and long-term consolidated or newly emerging partnerships provided advantages: for example, farms interested in conversion, which appear as new actors and partners in the market or increase the share of those actors who farm sustainably or are starting to do so. In this way, but also through the active promotion of new and spin-off companies, lasting relationships can be built up with producers and suppliers that support and consolidate the growth strategies of local companies. This was observed with FP-A, who enabled the regional cultivation of raw materials (previously only available internationally) by starting a production facility in the vicinity of their company. Our study demonstrates that, from the very beginning, organic pioneers have used the co-design of actor constellations as a strategic approach to control the co-evolution of the business environment and their positioning in the market.

Moreover, in the initial phase, namely, when setting up a business or converting to organic farming, high risks were taken in using allocative and authoritative resources. In all these pioneer enterprises, there has been evidence – especially in the start-up or conversion phase, but also in the further development phase – of a strong willingness to invest allocative (e.g. financial, personnel and knowledge-related) and authoritative (e.g. image) resources with an uncertain and sometimes even unclear outcome or return to be able to help build up the respective pioneer enterprise and its environment. As identified in this study, there are many and various reasons for this: from the spirit of innovation and pioneering (new products and production processes), to the possibility of building up and even increasing allocative production capacities in the long term (conversion of additional arable land in the supply chain), to the ethical motivation of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs (see also Boons and Lüdeke-Freund, 2013; Hockerts and Wüstenhagen, 2010).

In this context, growth appears to be unhindered in the early phase of business. According to Hockerts and Wüstenhagen (2010), this could be due to the business model initially not offering sufficiently attractive or visible market opportunities for already established companies (incumbents). However, as the size of firms increases and the organic market grows, our results also show a clearer and more active exclusion of certain actors, such as investors or banks. This is exemplarily demonstrated by BP-A's attempt to revolutionise a traditional quality standard in his sector: the organic pioneer wanted to enforce a (legal) "organic production standard" for the manufacturing process and announced this step in a nationwide press conference. In doing so, rules and standards would have changed (the regulation was to apply to all producers of this product), while the corresponding public relations work ensured "agenda-setting", as the pioneer received great press coverage across industry boundaries. Furthermore, competitors were challenged, and their long conserved production habits questioned – which can also be interpreted as an approach to attack or marginalise certain players.

Our findings demonstrate that the exclusion of actors will be pursued currently and into the future (after the transfer of the business): if financial investments appear to make economic sense (risk hedging), then this is only done via investors who prove to be particularly interested in (and competent in) sustainability issues and who also have

family-related values and characteristics or via family-internal succession solutions regarding management and ownership. Likewise, corporate foundation solutions are chosen to maintain the value orientation that has been built up. Accordingly, the statement by Schaltegger *et al.* (2016, p. 276) that the growth of organic pioneers is made possible by incumbents who are "unable to cope with sustainability-related market opportunities" can be differentiated from the practice perspective underlying this study. The growth potential in the organic market being exploited by the pioneers over many years – almost undisturbed by competitors – is not due to the (lack of) capabilities of already established market actors, but rather to the structural policy actions of the organic pioneers. The power-related expansion of structures based on the use of allocative resources, the innovating abilities of the pioneers and the set of rules shows the conscious, active exclusion of others.

Moreover, while the literature on sustainability pioneers refers to the risk of growth phases affecting the sustainability and quality of products and company services (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016), the results of our study demonstrate that organic pioneers can benefit from a growing demand for organic products by using a second brand strategy to serve the rapidly growing demand for organic products without undermining their core market or neglecting their value orientation. Sales of organic products can be increased overall in this way, and the position of the company is strengthened – regarding both the changing overall market and an ongoing leading role in the organic market or natural food trade. Growth can thus be achieved while preserving the authoritative resources (image and networks) of the pioneers. In this context, an interpretive scheme also comes into play, which emphasises the importance of balanced values by labelling them as "organic growth" (FP-B), thus demonstrating that the organic pioneers do not want to become a "mass player", nor want to be pushed into the background. Instead, the pioneers, through the interplay of awareness and further development of standards and proactive standard setting, for example, try to stay ahead of others while preventing a simple mainstreaming of the organic industry.

Although the growth of sustainable entrepreneurs is, according to Schaltegger *et al.* (2016, p. 275), "the straightest form of contributing to a sustainability transformation of the market" compared with other evolutionary processes, the present analysis shows overall that the impact and functioning of micro-political structures in social contexts with recourse to power is extremely complex. With the help of the politically structuring approach, insights were gained into the steering of corporate success in an emergent environment that was significantly co-designed by the organic pioneers. However, the co-design of structures also poses great challenges to the internal organisation (see also Grubnic *et al.*, 2015) – challenges met by professionalisation efforts in organisational development after initial room to grow.

The classification of purchasing expertise or advice in a politically structuring sense is complex. It could be seen as an expression of discursive responsibility and self-reflection ("somehow I cannot do it alone", BP-B) or as an attempt to help shape or shift the interpretation of professional management and good entrepreneurship. Furthermore, hiring the same consulting firms that advise other companies in the sector can reinforce certain values and business attitudes or counteract other understandings. This underpins sets of actors and habits (several actors in the market draw on the same set of ideas and the same basis of advice and values) and makes it clear that consultants and experts also have a significant power to be effective in terms of structural policy – by advising and steering content, selecting clients and strongly carrying knowledge, experience and values from one organic company to the next.

Regarding the literature on ecopreneurship and transformation (e.g. Schaltegger and Petersen, 2001), interestingly, the organic pioneers did not specifically pursue the strategy of conquering the mass market. Rather, they first tried to understand how to move towards the mass market as a relatively small enterprise. In differentiation from the scene member and

mass market provider, our results prove the niche position of the pioneers, in which they repeatedly confirm themselves, for example, when they distinguish themselves from the (growth-driven) regime (the market at the meso-level) with alternative interpretive schemes.

In many statements, after initial scene affiliation, a consolidated niche provider role and the will to maintain specialisation are evident. However, marketability and a certain striving for profit or growth are indispensable to achieving entrepreneurial goals (especially the continued existence of the business and the sustainability transformation of today's society). The specialist organic food and natural goods sector is also addressed as a niche threatened by the entry of large food retailers, but which should continue to exist and receive exclusive supply and support. However, to do justice to the simultaneous development of a mass market supplier, several of the interviewed organic pioneers additionally pursued second brand strategies to serve the mass market.

These organic pioneers move on the threshold between their niche and the mass market and want to enlarge their niche (more organic space) and increasingly "green" the mass market (set higher standards). Conversely, they do not want to give up their niche and only want to participate in the mass market to a limited extent (through higher market shares, through second brands and through cooperation in order to be bigger). Johnson and Schaltegger (2020) also highlight this in their literature review, in which transformations of markets are identified as one of the most crucial areas of attention for the research field in terms of "entrepreneurship for sustainable development".

Contrary to the assumption that entrepreneurs can only sustain themselves or grow until they are bought out (by Goliaths), our results demonstrate that organic pioneers actively work against this themselves. They use plenty of resources and involve themselves in networks, discourse and the sector. Additionally, they exclude undesirable actors and deliberately refuse to cooperate if necessary. This demonstrates that they have an (active) strategy to avoid being swallowed (or defeated) by the competition. Secondary brands, for example, have proven to be a successful means of balancing the tightrope walk between niche and mass markets (and thus maintaining their value orientation). This confirms that organic pioneers pursue transformative strategies and have developed them proactively.

Our study thus also supports Loorbach and Wijsman's (2013, p. 20) thesis that "a transition management perspective for business offers a way to systematically conceptualise this transformative strategy and pro-actively develop it, ... in actively pursuing a transformative role, businesses can simultaneously help shift the market they operate in as well as transform their own business. In doing so, they can contribute to actively shape transitions towards sustainability".

6. Implications, conclusions and limitations

This work aimed to understand the design elements that organic pioneer companies (micro-level) use to co-design transformative and co-evolutionary processes in their environments (meso-level). Micro-political strategies for co-designing structures and a socio-ecological co-evolution or transformation have hardly been analysed empirically thus far. Previous studies have mostly focused on business models (e.g. Zott *et al.*, 2011) and rarely attempted to examine the strategic development of companies and markets and their interplay from a practice perspective (Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013). Hörisch (2018), one of the few exceptions with a study of the organic egg market that takes a more internal perspective using supplementary interviews with business managers, points out that "so far most MLP research is conceptual and exploratory, rather than using primary data". He also identified "a knowledge gap on the roles of different actors in sustainability transitions".

The present study used in-depth interviews with four business managers to analyse (from both micro-political and practical perspectives) which strategies were used to contribute to

the change of structures in the organic market and how the companies themselves reacted to the structural influence of the changing environment. This was done considering the MLP and the approach of business models for sustainability by Schaltegger *et al.* (2016). In doing so, the study demonstrates how the different approaches can be linked and used in (sustainability) transformation research in the future.

Regarding theory and the literature on sustainability transformation and (organic) pioneer research, this paper offers important insights into how entrepreneurial actors contribute to transformation in business practice. Through the micro-perspective and the focus on activities in practice, it was possible to demonstrate how existing and growing in a niche and resisting the mainstream are actively shaped by entrepreneurs and managers. By investigating which strategies individual (also smaller) practice actors use and how they implement them, we have learned that there is a very broad spectrum of tools already used in practice and that it makes little sense to focus on the uniformity or frequency of tools in research.

As Geels (2011, p. 25) states: "Sustainability transitions are necessarily about interactions between technology, policy/power/politics, economics/business/markets, and culture/discourse/public opinion". However, this multidimensional perspective has not been sufficiently considered in research on sustainability transitions. Our study fills this gap, as it demonstrates that the value-oriented organic pioneers interviewed have not only structurally influenced their market environment but also focused on their business success. In contrast to previous business model case studies and analyses of market transformations or environmental innovations, our results also demonstrate the importance ascribed by pioneers to activities in the social, public and political contexts (non-governmental organisations' campaigns, educational work, resource protection and legal standards on embedding business in social, cultural or political contexts; see, e.g. Sadeghi *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, the organic pioneers continuously raise expectations and standards (see also Hörisch, 2018), which is not only aimed at a singular competitive advantage but also concerns legal frameworks and societal interpretive schemes in general. This perspective enables the application of Schneidewind's concept, which locates the business environment not only in the arena of the market, but also in the arenas of politics and the public sphere.

Conclusions for practice and policy can also be drawn from the results. For example, we identified strategies on how respondents deal with growth without losing their values: they seek external advice and expertise (in time); they focus on moderate "organic" growth; they spread their business risk more broadly, investing not only in one thing but also in external start-ups, in internally grown ideas (which are spin offs at low risk) and in direct and trustworthy partners (suppliers as well as customers and distributors). In this way, they make themselves as least dependent as possible on investors and banks – even if this means that their (purely financial) success could come to fruition less quickly.

These examples can be of great help to small businesses that may currently be struggling with growth and loss of value. Even after decades, organic pioneers promote "doing business together" instead of competing with other companies, and they communicate their values and work on them constantly and actively. However, they also participate in the drafting of regulations and create codes of conduct, even if this restricts their actions. In this way, our paper, like those of Schaltegger *et al.* (2016, p. 271) and Debor (2018), demonstrates that not only do large players have the possibilities and scope to influence and change the market and structures, but so do small pioneers, beyond the boundaries of their niche (or scene). The numerous opportunities and tools we have identified could also be applied in other sectors – at least by enterprises that want to operate in a value-oriented and sustainable manner – thus enabling companies to help shape their own environment and thereby compete in the long term.

Our study also has limitations. While the results are based on extensive in-depth interviews, they are only based on a small number of cases (four), all of which are in the same

niche market (organic food). Other secondary data sources were used only to a limited extent (e.g. newspaper articles and company reports for selecting and preparing interviews). We refrained from using such data for data triangulation, as they cannot be understood and analysed on the same level as interviews conducted orally, which are characterised by spontaneity and sometimes unconsciousness. Moreover, the data used were purely retrospective. To obtain a more appropriate temporal perspective, organic pioneers could be accompanied and interviewed over a longer period. Finally, the research design of future studies could incorporate methodological elements from action research (e.g. MacIntosh *et al.*, 2010) and participatory and ethnographic research (e.g. Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2015) and apply a strategy-as-practice approach (e.g. Kasim *et al.*, 2021). Other research designs might allow to more comprehensively analyse causal relationships between market entry barriers and decision-making (e.g. Amoozad Mahdiraji *et al.*, 2021) or use mixed qualitative-quantitative methods (e.g. Garousi Mokhtarzadeh *et al.*, 2020).

Our findings also point to further research avenues and research questions. For example, we explained strategic challenges, such as building, maintaining and using resources to shape actor constellations and professionalise management. In the context of the latter two, the roles of (corporate) consultants and experts stood out. These are commissioned as additional and powerful actors and have unlocked the potential to influence structures. The role of these and other actors – or networks and initiatives in the agricultural context, for which Lans *et al.* (2018) call for more research – was not analysed in more depth in this study, which focused on entrepreneurial actions of the interviewed organic pioneer companies or studied the role of other actors from the perspective of the pioneers. Future studies could build on this and apply empirical research designs that include a broader involvement of different actors, such as in Debor (2018), as this appears promising for a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability transformations.

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