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(Article begins on next page)

## SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE



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# The collaborative and contested interplay between business and civil society in circular economy transitions

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## Abstract

We know from the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature that civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in helping businesses transition towards more responsible and sustainable business models. Yet, in the circular economy (CE) field, such understanding is still scarce. This article develops a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between business and civil society in CE transitions, understanding their mechanisms and strategies for cooperation and contestation. We develop the concept of ‘CE boundary work’ to understand how CSOs interact with firms to bring about CE innovation, outlining three ideal types: campaign based, resource efficiency based and circular design based. This contributes to our understanding of how CE transitions can be brought about effectively through cross-sectoral interplays between civil society and business.

## KEYWORDS

boundary work, circular economy, civil society organizations, cross-sectoral collaborations, waste

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The circular economy (CE) has received considerable attention in recent years, not only by major policymakers (e.g., EU Commission and Chinese Government) and large businesses (e.g., the CE100 network of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation) but also by small- and medium-sized enterprises (Dey et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2021), NGOs (Wachholz, 2020) and grassroots civil society organizations (CSOs) (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2020; Charter & Keiller, 2018; van Langen et al., 2021). The CE approach holds the promise of bringing about a genuine transition towards a more sustainable world (Corvellec et al., 2020; van Langen et al., 2021) by promoting new, sustainable business models (Bocken et al., 2016; Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2019; Urbinati et al., 2017) that ‘integrate multiple dimensions

of economic, social and environmental value’ and consider ‘value creation to a broad scope of stakeholders, society and the natural environment’ (Velter et al., 2020, p. 1).

Besides CE business model innovation (Bocken et al., 2016; Geissdoerfer et al., 2018; Geissdoerfer et al., 2020), most CE research has focused on designing close-loop material flows (Jawahir & Bradley, 2016), circular supply chain management (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018; Mishra et al., 2018), zero-waste engineering solutions (Kerdlap et al., 2019; Weber et al., 2020) and policymaking (Fitch-Roy et al., 2020; McDowall et al., 2017). While authors have recently noted that systemic CE transition efforts require engagements with multiple stakeholders (Velter et al., 2020), relatively little emphasis has been put on the wider societal dimensions of the CE (Moreau et al., 2017; Schroeder et al., 2019), understanding the role of CSOs and grassroots CE innovation actors (Ziegler, 2019).

We know from stakeholder theory and corporate social responsibility (CSR) literatures that the relationship between CSOs and

**Abbreviations:** CE, circular economy; CSOs, civil society organizations; CSR, corporate social responsibility.

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businesses can be collaborative but also contested (de Bakker et al., 2013; Laasonen et al., 2012; Van Alstine, 2009). That is, CSOs engage strategically in contested fields, either seeking collaborations with policymakers and businesses to transition towards the CE (Herczeg et al., 2018) or developing more oppositional stances particularly when stakeholders' interests and objectives differ substantially (Corvellec et al., 2020; Niskanen et al., 2020).

This article develops a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between business and civil society in advancing the CE, understanding strategies for cooperation and contestation. While we have seen empirical evidence emerging of the relevance of CSOs in CE transitions (Barreiro-Gen & Lozano, 2020; Konietzko et al., 2020; Saha et al., 2021), understanding the specific mechanisms of the collaborative and contested interplay between civil society and business is still scarce (Brandão et al., 2020; Kovacic et al., 2019).

Following the work of Velter et al. (2020) and Zietsma and Lawrence (2010), we develop the concept of 'CE boundary work' to understand how CSOs interact with businesses to trigger CE innovation. We specifically outline three approaches, that is, campaign based, resource efficiency based and circular design based, to conceptualize CSOs' different strategies of collaboration and contestation. This contributes to our understanding of how CE transitions are brought about through the dynamic interplay between civil society and business.

## 2 | CE TRANSITIONS

Transitioning towards a CE has been a fast-growing field of research in recent years, with, according to the Web of Science database, over 11,000 articles published since 2015. The CE's central objective is to challenge the dominance of unsustainable, linear business and production models, designing closed-loop flows of materials to reduce pollution and increase resource efficiency (Geng et al., 2012; Jawahir & Bradley, 2016; Winans et al., 2017). The Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2015, p. 2) defines CE as an economy that is 'restorative and regenerative by design', stating that circular models should make an 'alignment of economic, technological, and social factors in order to accelerate the transition to a circular economy' (p. 18). The CE transition debate has focused on three main intervention fields (Ghisellini et al., 2016; Merli et al., 2018): macrolevel, or regulatory approaches led by cities or governments (Fitch-Roy et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2006); mesolevel, or eco-industrial parks and industrial symbiosis (Lieder & Rashid, 2016; Murray et al., 2017; Winans et al., 2017); and microlevel, or individual firms, focusing on business model innovation and strategies (Bocken et al., 2016; Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2019; Urbinati et al., 2017).

Understanding these interventions separately has prevented a full understanding of the interplay of cross-sectoral or cross-level actors. As Barrie and Kanda (2020) state, CE transition encompasses all levels of society, across microlevel, mesolevel and macrolevel (Barreiro-Gen & Lozano, 2020). Accordingly, there has been increasing focus on collaborative business models (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018; Mishra

et al., 2018), suggesting that stakeholders should be involved across the whole business supply chain, building up trust and shared understanding to facilitate CE transitions (Mishra et al., 2021). Yet Brown et al. (2021, p. 14) remind us that CE collaboration should go 'beyond business-to-business relationships, such as within triple or quadruple-helix innovation networks', for example, public sectors, market actors and civil society. In addition to economic actors, other stakeholders, such as customers and local communities, play an important role (Bocken & Geradts, 2020).

As more stakeholders get involved, it becomes apparent that there is little consensus about how to bring about CE transitions. According to Geng et al. (2012, p. 118), 'the involvement of a broader set of stakeholders (e.g., consumers, communities, non-governmental organizations, and even a broader industrial sector representation) may have resulted in differing measures identified'. Given the often differing backgrounds and interests of stakeholders, CE transitions need to be not only understood as technical and supply chain flow but also as a social and political process (Blomsma & Brennan, 2017; Gregson et al., 2017; Korhonen et al., 2018). This inevitably involves conflicts, trade-offs and divergent behaviours and diffusion mechanisms amongst different stakeholders.

Within this context, several studies have investigated cross-sectoral collaborations in the CE literature. For example, studies have been carried out on the role of intermediaries (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2020; Levänen et al., 2018) and so-called 'transition brokers' (Cramer, 2020a, 2020b), translating between the above outlined microlevel, mesolevel and macrolevel. Barrie and Kanda (2020, p. 247) suggest an 'ecology of circular intermediaries' to 'plug the structural holes between the various niche-regime levels and connect necessary stakeholders' since the intermediaries can enhance knowledge exchange and accelerate collaborations between different social systems. Bocken and Geradts (2020) focus on actor typologies, that is, government, industry and civil society, to examine how they interact towards sufficiency outcomes in the CE transition. Similarly, Hansen and Schmitt (2020) show that intermediaries can be facilitators and 'co-orchestrator' of CE innovation communities.

Yet this literature has not fully accounted for the dynamic interplay between different stakeholders in CE transitions. Little is known about the role of civil society and particularly grassroots initiatives and their strategic engagement with businesses in CE transitions (Naustdalslid, 2014). An emerging literature has identified different civil society organizational forms in regional CE transitions, including (1) informal organizations, like civic crowdfunding campaigns (Doan & Toledano, 2018); (2) formal organizations, such as the Repair Café Foundation (Hobson, 2019; Keiller & Charter, 2014); and (3) partial organizations, such as grassroots initiatives, for example, the Alternative Food Network (Pascucci et al., 2021). While these CE initiatives are often driven by CSOs, they usually involve market actors, public sectors and other societal organizations. Yet we know relatively little about the dynamic interplay between these different actors. How do CSOs engage with businesses in CE transition initiatives? What strategies of engagement do they use? Although such questions are debated in the CSR literature (Doh & Guay, 2006;

Hoffman, 2001; Maher et al., 2021), there has thus far been little attention to the dynamic interplay between business and civil society in the CE field.

### 3 | THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATIONS

Civil society, as a generic term, has been widely used in the past decades, but also defined in different ways. For example, CIVICUS (2021), a global alliance of CSOs and activists, defines civil society as 'the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interests'. VanDyck (2017, p. 5) positions the role of civil society in the sustainability context, defining it as 'an ecosystem of organized and organic social and cultural relations existing in the space between the state, business, and family'. Importantly, civil society, in his view (p. 1), will continuously engage with dominant actors through 'deliberate strategies of mobilizing and effectively utilizing diversified resources'. In order to understand the interplay of civil society and market actors, we adopt the term 'civil society organization', a more actor-centred perspective, which encompasses all actors, that is, organizations, groups or individuals, that are not controlled by the state and the market (Arenas et al., 2013), such as NGOs, non-profit organizations, grassroots associations, social movement, social entrepreneurs or other informal networks (R. Cooper, 2018).

The debate on the interplay between firms and civil society often revolves around collaborations and contestations (Covey & Brown, 2001; den Hond & de Bakker, 2007; Fabig & Boele, 1999). The collaborative approach draws attention to win-win situations, showing how civil society can proactively and positively engage with firms to bring about change. Here, business is viewed as strategic partner to influence social change (Fabig & Boele, 1999; Selsky & Parker, 2005). For example, Rana and Sørensen (2021) show how multinational enterprises work with CSOs to develop different levels of legitimacy. While difficulties and barriers exist in this collaborative approach, these can be overcome through dialogue and collaboration (Burchell & Cook, 2006, 2013). Within this frame, CSOs provide vital knowledge and skills, access to network resources and their staff and volunteers bring with them the motivation and passion to bring about social and environmental change (Arenas et al., 2013; Gray & Stites, 2013; Ordonez-Ponce et al., 2021). A classic example is the collaboration between the Body Shop and the NGO Ogoni (Fabig & Boele, 1999).

In contrast, the contestation approach can be traced back to social movement theory which puts emphasis on how activist groups campaign against firms (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007). Here, companies are seen as enemies, and CSOs believe that firms are more likely to go beyond profit maximization, engage in sustainability and mitigate social problems when they feel institutional pressures at the community level (Arenas et al., 2013; Marquis et al., 2007) such as through consumer boycotts and media campaigns. This means that cross-sectoral collaborations are hotly contested political processes (Rana & Sørensen, 2021), involving stakeholders that do not

necessarily see eye to eye. This is, in part, because of the different ideologies and worldviews amongst different cultures and communities (Djelic & Etchanchu, 2017; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2019; Haase & Raufflet, 2017).

Extant research tends to treat this interplay in a binary way, either there is collaboration or contestation. This neglects the complexity of cross-sectoral interplays, as Covey and Brown (2001) argue. They present a continuum—from conflicting interests to converging interests—suggesting a focus on 'critical cooperation', emphasizing the mixed interests at the centre of this continuum. In addition, Arenas et al. (2013) highlight that a successful collaboration usually starts with confrontation or conflict, suggesting different pathways to collaboration. den Hond and de Bakker (2007) note that the movement of activist group may shift from outside to inside the organization and may seek support from other powerful actors within or across organizations, such as external activist groups, unions or other potential allies. In this scenario, scholars have shifted the focus to vulnerable individuals or insiders (activists) in their workplace (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Davis et al., 2008; Scully & Segal, 2002) and how they mobilize resources within and across organizations. For example, Lounsbury (2001) demonstrates how networks and coordination amongst insider activists (i.e., student activism and newly hired full-time recycling coordinator) and outsider activists (i.e., Student Environmental Action Coalition, a social movement organization) accelerate a successful recycling programme in the organization.

This suggests that collaboration and contestation is not a dichotomy but a spectrum (Covey & Brown, 2001) and dynamic process (DiVito et al., 2021). The level of confrontation or collaboration depends on factors such as (a) CSOs' strategy and their influencing capacity (Arenas et al., 2020), (b) firms' capacity to change and their level of engagement and (c) an agreed object to resolve differences or satisfy requirements from both parties. While these dynamics have been discussed within CSR (Bhattacharyya & Verma, 2020) and sustainability transition literatures (Ordóñez-Ponce et al., 2021; Pedersen et al., 2021), there is little or no research into how the interplay between collaboration and contestation operates in CE transition fields. Specifically, we know very little about how CE collaborations and contestations come about and whether different mobilizing approaches result in different CE outcomes. To shed light on this phenomenon, we will now discuss the concept of 'boundary work' to further explore the dynamic interplay between CSOs and firms.

### 4 | BOUNDARY WORK IN SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS

Originally coined by Gieryn (1983) in relation to the demarcation of science and non-science, the notion of 'boundary work' has been deployed to shed light on the dynamics of collaboration, inclusion and exclusion between different groups and organizations in sustainability transitions (Offermans & Glasbergen, 2015; Pedersen et al., 2021). Offermans and Glasbergen (2015), for example, use the term to analyse the interplay between different stakeholders in the Round

Table on Sustainable Palm Oil. Similarly, Eden et al. (2006) consider the role of NGOs in the waste debates, focusing on the continuous processes of negotiating and renegotiating knowledge and insights between different actors. Boundary work, which refers to 'the attempts of actors to create, shape, and disrupt boundaries' (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010, p. 190), is often achieved through the adoption of 'boundary objects' that can be seen as 'devices that are able to mediate different actor worlds' (Briers & Chua, 2001, p. 238). 'Stewardship' is an example of such a boundary object in sustainability transitions (Enqvist et al., 2018).

According to Langley et al. (2019), three conceptually distinct but interrelated forms of boundary work emerge from the literature. Competitive boundary work (or work for boundaries) involves mobilizing boundaries to distinguish themselves from others, marking the territory (e.g., a profession). In contrast, collaborative boundary work (or work at boundaries) is concerned with (re)aligning boundaries to enable collaboration and coordination, requiring people to engage in practices to connect or productively align their differences. Finally, configurational boundary work (or work through boundaries) involves manipulating boundaries to ensure that certain activities are brought together within bounded spaces, whereas others are at least temporarily kept apart, producing particular kinds of collective action.

In CE scholarship, boundary work has only recently been identified as important for the interactions of companies and their external environment, establishing new organizational fields and business models in nascent circular enterprises and markets (Korhonen et al., 2018; Svingsstedt & Corvellec, 2018; Ziegler, 2019). In line with the literature on cross-sector innovation (Oskam et al., 2021), Velter et al. (2020, p. 4) emphasize the need for a collaborative alignment of stakeholder relations on normative, strategic and instrumental dimensions, enabling 'conversation, interaction and coordinated action between the focal organization and other actors, while accommodating actors to have their specific own value perspective, consideration and interests'.

While this literature correctly highlights the importance of boundary work in cross-sectoral CE partnerships, it tends to play down differences amongst actors to enable strategic collaboration, neglecting the importance of conflictual relations and contestation in shaping nascent organizational fields. Tensions and conflicts resulting from actors' divergent goals and interests are often seen as an obstacle to the alignment of actors' purposes and visions. Yet recent research suggests that collaboration can also be enabled by playing up actors' differences (Henry et al., 2020), allowing contestation to become a complementary means for advancing negotiations and realigning boundaries.

In this context, we adopt the conception of boundary work put forward by Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) to identify the processes of how firms and CSOs interact with each other. According to them, the practice of boundary work refers to 'cycles of institutional innovation, conflict, stability, and restabilization', involving 'the work of actors to create, maintain, and disrupt the practices that are considered legitimate within a field' (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010, p. 189). Social entrepreneurship and innovations are typical examples of such boundary work.

## 5 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THREE TYPES OF CSO–FIRM INTERPLAY IN CE TRANSITIONS

Based on our above reading of the literature, Figure 1 develops an analytical framework that illustrates the dynamic interplay between CSOs and firms in CE transitions. Given that CSOs and firms are embedded in different socio-economic and cultural fields, characterized by different languages, knowledge and practices, we would expect their approaches to CE transitions to differ, as would their respective boundary strategies of engaging with other actors in the emergent CE field. This article focuses on the practices of boundary work, which takes place precisely at the intersection of the boundaries of CSOs and firms where CE initiatives are incubated, established, maintained and expanded.

The top layer of Figure 1 depicts CSOs' CE practices and innovation initiatives. According to Fischer and Newig (2016), civil society represents a crucial actor in societal transitions as it represents general cultural trends at landscape level that can both contribute to regime stability and prompt relatively rapid and effective regime changes. However, CSOs' unsettling and stabilizing actions and behaviours depend on reaching a critical mass in order to create change. In the CE context, they may (1) promote and diffuse innovative (niche) ideas and practices (e.g., repair café or food bank), (2) use lobbying and protests to unsettle linear and unsustainable practices and (3) encourage other actors (e.g., government or business) to seek new CE solutions. Accordingly, the second layer refers to CSOs' boundary work strategy to approach companies, ranging from contestation to negotiation and actively seeking forms of collaboration.

The bottom layer depicts firms' practice and boundary work. In the CE transition, firms are widely seen as key actors as they can bring circular and more sustainable products and services to the market. Firms' practice work involves incremental or radical CE innovation (Brown et al., 2019) within the product lifecycle, that is, from material, design, production and distribution, to use and end of use (ETC/WMGE, 2021; European Environment Agency [EEA], 2016). Typically, firms can perceive CE as a business opportunity for (1) cost efficiency, (2) access new resources and capabilities and (3) acquire political influence and legitimacy (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2005; Velter et al., 2020). On the other hand, firms 'often do not seem eager about alternatives that could interfere with their business' (Fischer & Newig, 2016, p. 8), which restricts the potential for collaboration with CSOs. Firms' boundary work refers to business boundary strategy of collaboration or confrontation vis-à-vis CSOs' strategies.

The middle layer of Figure 1 illustrates the boundary dynamics of interactions between firms and CSOs. As discussed above, boundary work dynamics can be characterized as competitive, collaborative and configurational (Langley et al., 2019), while firms and CSOs will have differing understandings of circularity and approaches to circular solutions (Brown et al., 2019).

Building on this theoretical framework, we can identify three ideal types of CSOs' CE boundary work: outsider campaign based, resource

efficiency based and circular design based. To conceptualize CSO–firm relations further, Figure 2 depicts these three types of CE boundary work by visualizing CSOs' CE practices and the CSO–firm boundary dynamics (e.g., their level of collaboration), which, we argue, affects the scope of CE innovation. Let us now explore these three ideal types in more detail.

### 5.1 | Type A: Campaign-based CE boundary work

The campaign-based approach aims to create pressure through CE campaigns such as beach cleaning, media exposure and consumer boycotts to push firms to effectively deal with the end-of-use products that they produced, for example, litter on the beach, ocean

plastics or other perceived environmental or waste issues. These end-of-use products usually act as boundary object in CSOs' boundary work.

Arenas et al. (2013) suggest 'conflict-resolving interactions' as one type of cross-sectoral collaboration. In this approach, the conversations between CSOs and firms usually start from CSOs' radical activist position, such as campaigns, framing narratives or other confrontative approaches, particularly when it comes to interplays with large companies. The campaign approach aims at 'deinstitutionalization' (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007, p. 909) and 'boundary breaching' (Ungureanu & Bertolotti, 2018), as CSOs pressurize firms to take notice and respond.

As CSO campaigns usually draw attention to end-of-life issues, such as the important boundary object of litter and other waste, firms

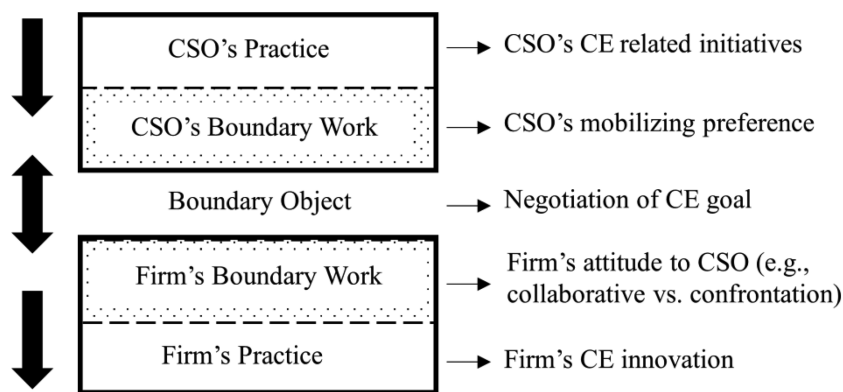


FIGURE 1 Analytical framework

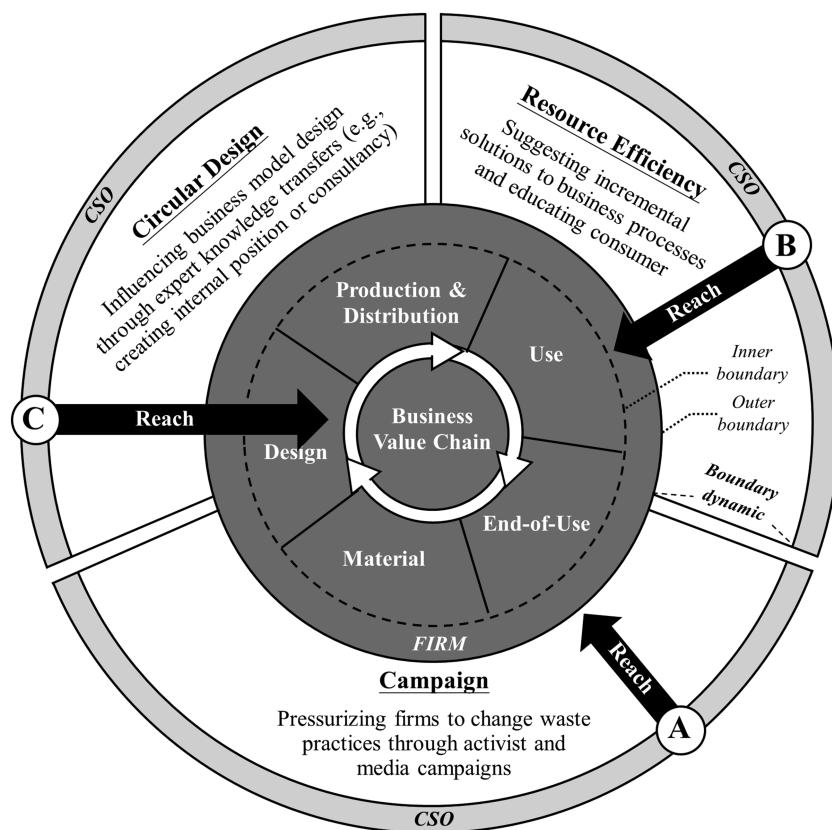


FIGURE 2 A roadmap for CSO–firm boundary work in CE transitions



often respond by implementing CE recycling strategies that specifically deal with specific waste lines. In this approach, however, CSOs do not tend to get involved with firms directly. Their role is limited to raising public awareness of waste and pollution, suggesting potential solutions to it. This usually results in relatively superficial responses and low-level circular innovations by firms. Therefore, as illustrated in Figure 2, the campaign-based approach can only reach the outer boundary of the firm, and only if managers are willing to listen and establish some form of communication with CSOs.

However, it is worth noting that campaigning is not necessarily an end but a means to trigger a conversation with firms. According to Fabig and Boele (1999), the confrontational approach often creates space for stakeholders to find solutions and mitigate divergent interests. That is, once they communicate with each other, their relationship shifts from being conflictual to becoming more collaborative (Arenas et al., 2013). The alliance between McDonald's and the Environmental Defense Fund (Livesey, 1999) and Unilever's relationship with Greenpeace (A. D. Cooper, 2009) are two examples of successful collaborations that started out with confrontations.

**Proposition 1.** CSOs' CE campaigns attempt to illicit responses from firms, targeting particularly end-of-use issues, such as waste and litter. As CSOs do not enter direct collaborations with firms, the latter tend to respond with relatively low-level CE innovations, such as better recycling mechanisms.

## 5.2 | Type B: Resource efficiency-based CE boundary work

The resource-efficiency approach seeks closer collaboration with firms, as CSOs make businesses aware of waste issues in the entire product lifecycle, suggesting incremental solutions to business processes and educating consumers. The boundary work is characterized by viewing 'partnerships with businesses as a way to influence social change' (Selsky & Parker, 2005, p. 856). Rather than 'deinstitutionalization', CSOs focus on reforming the business agenda through 'reinstitutionalization' (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007). Here, CSOs see themselves as part of the environment in which organizations are embedded in, including 'market structures, public policies, networks and history' (Arenas et al., 2020, p. 759). This implies a much more blurred boundary between CSOs and firms, and hence, firms are much more willing to collaborate with CSOs, which they see as having a direct benefit of reducing operating costs.

Within the CE field, CSOs try to find the right balance between pressurizing and engaging with firms. They will normally avoid conflict and consider firms' bottom line so to keep communication channels open. For example, CSOs will target reuse and reduce initiatives that can deliver 'win-win' internal cost savings for firms and pollution reduction. Starting from consumer needs is also a good entry point, as these are normally firms' customers. CSOs will make significant efforts in jointly finding solutions with businesses, and only once most of the

local businesses are on board, they will try to raise the bar and move to more ambitious initiatives. Refill schemes (e.g., for coffee, milk or water) are typical examples, as CSOs focus on the 'use' and 'distribution' stages of the product lifecycle, aiming to influence consumers and businesses to rethink the material process and lengthen the useful life of products.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the resource efficiency-based approach allows CSOs to penetrate the firm boundary to some extent. On the one hand, CSOs can influence firms' behaviours and processes, as they understand their operations and bottom line. On the other hand, however, change will only be incremental and relatively slow, as mostly the 'use' and 'distribution' stages of the product lifecycle are targeted, aiming to implement CE strategies of reduce and reuse.

**Proposition 2.** CSOs become more engaged with firms as they seek incremental CE approaches that strive for resource efficiency. In this pragmatic approach, firms' bottom lines are considered, as CSOs target the 'use' and 'distribution' stages of the product lifecycle, aiming to jointly implement CE reduce and reuse strategies with firms.

## 5.3 | Type C: Circular design-based CE boundary work

This approach is based on close CSO-firm collaborations and expert knowledge transfers, in order to create fundamental and long-lasting system change. The central goal of this approach is to directly target circular design processes within firms, in line with the needs of the wider circular system in question. This will typically involve a champion within the firm who spearheads the change and redesign process, working closely with CSOs. Businesses can either create an internal position to oversee sustainability in the organization as a coordinator between internal and external stakeholders (Aksoy-Yurdagul et al., 2021) or hire an external consultant from a professional company or indeed a CSO.

In this approach, CSOs and firms enter a close collaboration, as firms allow CSOs to have direct access to their internal operations and strategic management functions. CSOs hence gain deep insights and authority to provide ideas and solutions and even make decisions. They develop great knowledge of the organization and its internal processes, establishing trusting relationships with firm staff to coordinate or deploy organizational resources into CE activities. In this context, tensions are usually internal to the organization. Both sides understand this collaboration to aim at completely redesigning product lifecycle and business process in order to design waste out of systems. As this redesign effort goes to the core of firms' business models, support by the management team and key internal stakeholders is crucial. As in all system change processes, there are important trade-offs and tensions to consider that normally occur as business-as-usual practices are abandoned in favour of more circular system practices.

**Proposition 3.** CSOs become closely engaged with firms in an attempt to redesign entire product and service processes in line with wider system circularity needs. CSOs have direct access to core firm operations and management functions to fundamentally change business models, designing waste out of firms' products and services.

## 6 | CSO–FIRM CE INTERPLAYS IN PRACTICE: THREE ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

We will use three cases from Cornwall, a county in Southwest England (United Kingdom) to illustrate the above-mentioned types of CSO–business CE boundary work in practice. The area is noted for its varied coastline and species diversity where many places are designated as nature reserves. Due to its location, citizens living in Cornwall are devoted to protecting the natural environment. Beach clean activities, plastic-free campaigns and water-refill stations initiated by civil society have been diffused all over the county. Such environmental activism is also visible in the county's small- and medium-sized businesses and its policymakers. This has brought about various forms of CE society–business engagement, supported also by Cornwall Council, the unitary authority for the county of Cornwall (Cornwall Council, 2021). Accordingly, we present three illustrative cases that can provide insights into the microdynamics of how CSOs interact with businesses to advance CE transitions. Here, we focus on plastics initiatives, as this has been one of the most pertinent CE topics recently, as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017) report, 'Circular Plastic Economy' (CPE) confirms. It should be noted that these case examples are purely for illustrative purposes to provide practical application of our above-presented theoretical framework.

### 6.1 | Type A Case: Beach Guardian/PepsiCo

The first case illustrates how a small Cornish CSO, Beach Guardian, was able to trigger rapid changes in PepsiCo, producer of Walkers Crisps and one of the largest food manufacturers worldwide, by attracting media attention and mobilizing the public.

Beach Guardian is a community interest company (CIC) founded in 2017 and aimed at engaging, educating and empowering against single-use plastic pollution. Because of the large number of crisp packets found while doing beach cleans, some of them 20 and 30 years old, Beach Guardian activists decided to contact Walkers, suggesting the adoption of a recycling scheme. Frustrated by the lack of response, Emily Stevenson, Beach Guardian co-founder, started a campaign against PepsiCo. In 2018, she attracted vast media attention by wearing a protest outfit for her graduation made of 23 ancient Walkers crisp packages. The photo of the dress became viral, and Stevenson was interviewed live on BBC and Sky News (BBC News, 2018; The Guardian, 2020). This became part of a nationwide campaign against Walkers' plastic waste, including an online petition

that reached over 300,000 signatures. As the campaign gained traction, activists started posting packets back to Walkers in protest. The successful campaign changed the relationship of power between CSO and firm, providing Beach Guardian the opportunity to have direct access to PepsiCo managers, triggering a negotiation based on the environmentalists' demands. According to Stevenson,

That is exactly what we need to do with all forms of campaigning, that is, providing solutions and ideas and working together on designing sustainable approaches. (Interview)

Initially, PepsiCo pledged to make all packaging recyclable, compostable or biodegradable by 2025. However, Stevenson objected that '[b]etween now and 2025 they will have created another 28 billion non-recyclable crisp packets. I want them to reduce the time it will take to implement their plan' (BBC News, 2018). By the end of 2018, PepsiCo launched a UK-wide recycling scheme and formed a partnership with TerraCycle, setting up 191 drop off points for recycling collection of their packets. After that, recycled material can be cleaned, shredded and turned into plastic pellets, which will be converted into various products like park benches, plant pots, watering cans and cool bags (Edie Newsroom, 2019).

This case illustrates how CSOs' CE campaigns can trigger action in businesses. As we outlined above, this type of CE boundary work normally targets end-of-use issues, such as waste and litter. While Beach Guardian successfully changed PepsiCo's practices, a relatively low-level CE innovation, a recycling scheme, was implemented.

### 6.2 | Type B Case: SAS and Plastic Free Communities

In 2017, Surfers Against Sewage (SAS), a marine conservation charity campaigning to protect the marine environment, launched Plastic Free Communities, a network of local communities united to fight against plastic pollution. Each Plastic Free Community is autonomous from SAS and relies on the creation of local groups of volunteers. A list of conditions has to be met in order to be awarded the status of Plastic Free Community, including the adoption by local businesses of more sustainable practices, removing at least three single-use plastic items. In order to facilitate this objective, SAS designed a business toolkit that outlines the best way for local Plastic Free Communities to mobilize businesses. The SAS business toolkit is explicit about how to remove single-use plastic with a list of initiatives targeting plastic bags, shifting from drinking straws to paper alternatives, encouraging refill practices, avoiding plastic wraps (e.g., opt for buying 'naked' fruits and vegetables) and promoting fully compostable solutions.

As Cornwall's economy heavily depends on small family businesses in the tourism, hospitality and food sectors, the CSO's strategy is to find a common ground, starting from solutions that are feasible, cost-effective and beneficial to the business organization as well as environmentally sustainable. For example, SAS tends to highlight



economic benefits, pointing out that customers are willing to buy more if it is an eco-friendly business, and there could be savings by giving out certain items only 'on request'. In the words of a community leader,

you have got to be respectful of businesses who are on a very tight economic budget and might be quite time poor. So, you have got to make everything very cheap and simple. (Interview)

Thus, the creation of Plastic Free Communities establishes a new space for CSO-firm collaboration, outside the competing boundary dynamic between SAS and businesses. Indeed, the open-endedness and fluidity of Plastic Free Communities suggests that they are boundary organizations, helping to reconfigure established boundaries and create experimental spaces for negotiation and cooperation. The CSO hopes that this pragmatic, efficiency-based approach to boundary work creates small, incremental changes, eventually leading firms to embrace greater CE innovations. However, this process is not without challenges. For example, there could be tensions about the costs of available solutions. In this case, the Plastic Free Community network can help to share knowledge about plastic-free suppliers and suggest possible alternatives.

This case illustrates the ambivalence of the resource efficiency-based approach. This can be seen as a step forward from campaigning, leading to incremental changes through the adoption of more constructive and processual configurational boundary work (Langley et al., 2019). On the other hand, in order to offer 'cheap and simple' solutions that are appealing to business, CSOs risk to embrace a structurally limited approach to CE, which is not fundamentally contesting business as usual nor is able to radically redesign how the economy is run (Corvellec et al., 2020; Corvellec et al., 2021).

### 6.3 | Type C Case: A Grain of Sand/The Wave

A Grain of Sand is the brainchild of Chris Hines, founding member of SAS and former sustainability director at the Eden Project. The organization works to trigger CE and sustainability changes in local businesses through a combination of activism and entrepreneurship. Here, we focus on the relationship with The Wave, a company operating an artificial lake, which generates surfing waves in a field near Bristol. Nick Hounsfield, founder and chief visionary officer of The Wave, asked Hines' advice on finding a more sustainable approach to their purchasing policies. Hines suggested that they drop the use of single-use plastic within their business operation and helped The Wave to reach this goal. Supported by Hines, The Wave started a negotiation with its supplier with the aim that all products (e.g., wetsuits, wetsuit boots and gloves) should arrive without plastic. Furthermore, Hines worked with Nick Rees, The Wave's Surf Commercial Manager, responsible for sales, partnerships and events. For example, The Wave's employees reported some damaged wetsuits which cannot be repaired under warranty. They worked together to find innovative CE

solutions, such as looking for companies who would like to reuse these wetsuits for other purposes, such as making bracelets or bags. Rees told us:

When we have an item, which has finished its lifecycle with us, we then pass it on to somebody who can use it for their lifecycle within their company, and they can produce products from it, rather than us basically put it in the landfill. (Interview)

Similarly, The Wave had a problem with surfboard leashes, a urethane cord that attaches to the tail of a surfboard and is worn around a surfer's ankle with the use of a Velcro strap. They established a purchasing policy based on a set of technical criteria: Their leash should include a 20% recycled content of polyurethane, while the ankle straps are made of 100% recycled plastic bottles.

We were like a byproduct of the circular economy. Because somebody made that bottle to serve a drink. Then because the bottle has been recycled, we then take it and use it as a leash, which then hopefully has a really long lifespan. And after that, I do not know what could happen to it, but it would move on [...] The leash that we have ended up with has come on quite a lot of journeys to get here. (Interview)

Hines and The Wave reached an agreement with a company that when the leashes break they can take them back and repurpose them into bags and other products.

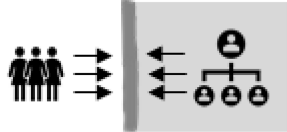
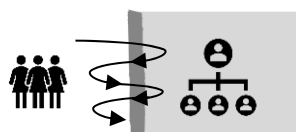

This case illustrates how CSOs can become closely engaged with firms in an attempt to redesign entire product lifecycles. Here, Hines' A Grain of Sand worked hand in hand with The Wave owners and employees to come up with innovative CE solutions, redesigning entire products and processes.

## 7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have argued that the emergence of CE practices allows new forms of interaction between CSOs and firms, entailing opportunities for collaboration but also contestation. This boundary work (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) has only recently been identified by the CE literature as a critical component of successful CE multi-stakeholder initiatives (Velter et al., 2020). Drawing on this literature, we have developed a theoretical framework to understand three ideal types of CSO-firm boundary work that trigger CE innovations: campaign-based approach, resource efficiency-based approach and circular design-based approach. Table 1 summarizes our argument, showing the varying extent of CSOs' impact on firms' CE innovation capacity, suggesting opportunities for collaboration towards a higher level of circularity.

Table 1 depicts three ideal types of CSO-firm interaction in the CE field. In Type A, the campaign-based approach, CSOs focus on

**TABLE 1** Types of boundary work in CE transitions

Approach		A. Campaign	B. Resource efficiency	C. Circular design
				
Modes of boundary breaching (CSOs)	↓	Disruption of boundary through media and public mobilization	Reconfiguration of boundary through transactional coordination	Overcoming or downplaying boundary through mutual learning and collaboration
Target product lifecycle stage		End of use	Distribution use	Product design
Modes of boundary work		Contesting/Defending	Negotiating	Codesign
Consequence of boundary work		Recycle and repurpose (Closing resource loop)	Reuse and reduce (Narrowing resource flows)	Refuse and holistic design (Effective circular flows)
Level of collaboration		Lower	Intermediate	Higher

Note: Adapted from Langley et al. (2019, tab. 1, p. 707).

disrupting business as usual by mobilizing activists and media organizations. Here, CSOs typically focus on single issues, such as waste and litter, in the hope to trigger a response by the company. In our illustrative case, Beach Guardian's campaign successfully changed PepsiCo's practices as they adopted a crisp bag recycling scheme. However, the levels of collaboration and CE innovation remain relatively low. In Type B, the resource efficiency-based approach, CSOs enter more collaborative relationships with firms, aiming to renegotiate lifecycle practices, focusing on the distribution and use of products that are deemed as polluting. In our illustrative case, SAS helped to set up Plastic Free Communities, which worked with local businesses to eliminate single-use plastic from their operations. In Type C, the circular design-based approach, the level of CSO–firm collaboration and CE innovation are the highest, as a joint approach is taken to redesign entire products and services. In our illustrative case, A Grain of Sand entered a close relationship with The Wave to design single-use plastic out of the firm's operations and redesign surfboard leaches.

Drawing on Santos and Eisenhardt's (2005) categorization of organizational boundaries, we can identify the Type A approach to be focused on boundary work of 'power', as we can observe a dynamic of contesting versus defending. Here, CSOs use traditional activist techniques of naming and shaming to get firms' attention, in the hope to trigger a response and positive change. The Type B approach, on the other hand, is based on 'efficiency' boundary work, focusing on CE solutions that reduce transaction costs. Here, CSOs are more concerned to understand the needs of firms and their bottom line, while targeting consumption practices to illicit positive CE transitions.

Finally, in the Type C approach, the CSO–firm collaborative dynamic is based on 'competence', contributing to developing new business capabilities and resources. Here, CSOs fully enter firms' operations, collaboratively redesigning products and services, achieving the highest form of CE innovation.

## 7.1 | Implications for CSOs

CE transitions are contested. Not only policymakers and businesses have a stake in these transitions but CSOs too. This article has outlined a theoretical framework for understanding CSO–firm interactions in CE transitions. CSOs' prominent role in advancing CE best practices is rarely acknowledged and deserves greater attention. As our framework shows, CSOs can adopt a wide variety of ways to mobilize change, from more traditional campaign approaches to direct circular design engagements with firms. The three types of CE boundary work we presented in this article are intentionally labelled as 'ideal types'. In practice, CSOs may choose a combination of these approaches, as there are significant overlaps but also trade-offs between them. Choosing Type A may, for example, close firms' doors completely, while Type C's codesign approach may reduce the CSO's capacity to challenge the firm's CE record. Equally, CSOs might start with a Type A campaign approach, while then progressing towards Type B or C stages later on. It is also conceivable that a CSO uses a Type B approach, for example, while still campaigning, using a Type A approach. SAS is a good example for a CSO using multiple ways of

engaging with firms, using Type A, B and C approaches. Our theoretical framework does not prescribe a best of way of CSO–firm CE interactions. CSO members will decide on their approach depending on their strategy and context, and often there is a good dose of trial and error involved. Our framework simply maps the range of possibilities of interaction when it comes to CSO–firm engagement in CE transition efforts. It is clear that by connecting traditional forms of campaign-based activism to emerging forms of collaborative engagement with firms, CSOs display a remarkable capacity to become more entrepreneurial, bridging environmental and sustainability expertise with commercial knowledge. In particular, the circular design approach is likely to reframe the relationship between business organizations and CSO activism by creating new forms of collaborative engagement, which, we argue, is more likely to lead to high forms of CE innovation and socio-economic change.

## 7.2 | Implications for firms

From a business point of view, CSOs' initiatives to advancing a CE directly link to growing external pressures coming from consumers and social and environmental activists. The interplay between civil society and firms is an established field of research in the CSR literature (Moog et al., 2015; Moon & Vogel, 2008). Companies might be very familiar with stakeholder management and they tend to acknowledge the need to come up with credible responses to external pressure (e.g., NGOs social and environmental activism). However, when it comes to CE, companies seem to underestimate civil society's influence in the transition process. Our framework suggests that CSOs have a remarkable ability to understand cross-sectoral and cross-level underlying conflicts, highlight possible trade-offs and facilitate the diffusion of CE best practices. Accordingly, we underline the need for companies to formally and informally recognize the role of CSOs, engaging with their demands and needs. We suggest that CSOs can be sources of knowledge, expertise and change initiative for firms, which can be invaluable when it comes to the challenges posed by CE transitions.

CE initiatives present potential economic benefits that can be fully attained in collaboration with CSOs. For example, recycling schemes create more consumer acceptance (Type A), circular strategies can lead to firms' internal cost savings (Type B), refill schemes can bring more customers into stores (Type B), repurposing can address problems relative to the high costs (e.g., externality) involved in waste disposal (Type C) and circular design can have a positive impact on the firms' brand (Type C). Engaging with CSOs can also lead to benefits for firms' internal culture, as employees and suppliers become more engaged and aligned with firms' strategies and missions.

## 8 | CONTRIBUTION

Our contribution to the extant CE literature is twofold. First, this article draws attention to the microfoundations of CE by looking at

the boundary dynamics through which CSOs and firms trigger organizational change and circular innovations. This research builds on two intertwined and understudied elements: the role of civil society in the CE field and CSOs' collaborations with firms in CE transitions. Our framework identifies three ideal type approaches taken by CSOs in advancing the CE—campaign based, resource efficiency based and circular design based. Second, our theoretical framework argues that in order to undertake wider and deeper CE system changes, CSOs and firms need to collaborate more closely together. While a campaign-based approach (Type A) tends to only lead to the establishment of recycling scheme, and the resource-efficiency approach (Type B) focuses on resource efficiency, it is only the circular design approach (Type C) that allows produce lifecycles to change, triggering more mature CE innovations. Hence, we argue that CSOs play a crucial role for helping firms to transition towards CE systems.

We hope that our conceptual framework could inspire several avenues for future research. First, we hope to see future research that refines our framework. In particular, we encourage systematic empirical research that tests the role of CSOs in triggering various forms of CE innovation across a wide range of companies, from micro to larger enterprises. Indeed, we encourage research papers to investigate how forms of CE cross-sectoral boundary work are diffused, reproduced and even institutionalized. Second, we suggest scholars to expand on our conceptual framework by considering the synergic relationship amongst different types of CSO–firm interactions. While our conjecture is that contestation can lead towards greater cooperation and knowledge exchange between CSOs and firms, further research could clarify this relationship. For example, research could investigate how 'internal activists' (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Skoglund & Böhm, 2020) accelerate or instigate cross-sectoral boundary work and organizational change. Under what conditions internal and external forms of CE activism converge to support the adoption of deeper CE system changes (Ho et al., 2021)? What resources, contacts and competences CSOs can provide to internal activists in supporting the adoption of circular business models? Lastly, by looking at the 'triple or quadruple-helix innovation networks' (Brown et al., 2021, p. 14), future research could include public authorities in the analysis. For instance, research can focus on how regional CE networks (public, market and civil society actors) emerge and the role of government institutions in triggering cross-sectoral collaborations.

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