Value tensions and actionable knowledge in grassroots innovation: a study of invitational ambiguity and implementation challenges

Gabriella Esposito, Paola De Bernardi, Alberto Bertello and Demetris Vrontis

Abstract

Purpose – This research paper explores how grassroots innovation initiatives address and resolve the challenges of translating broad and inviting values such as sustainability, inclusiveness and aesthetics into practical and actionable structures. This study examines the tensions and difficulties projects face in operationalizing these values, revealing the gap between idealistic goals and real-world implementation. Moreover, this paper analyzes how role expectations and the concept of invitation ambiguity affect top down and bottom up approaches, offering insights for improving mechanisms to support grassroots innovations.

Design/methodology/approach – This study uses an exploratory qualitative methodology with an embedded case study design, focusing on the New European Bauhaus (NEB) and its award-winning projects. Data were collected through online self-assessment surveys, secondary data analysis, and semi-structured interviews with project owners and NEB Unit representatives.

Findings – The findings reveal significant challenges in translating broad and inviting values (sustainability, inclusion and aesthetics) into actionable outcomes for grassroots projects. Key issues include the need for clearer role definitions, tailored support, and adaptability. Conflicts between those values and a mismatch between expectations about stakeholders' contributions highlight the need for designing more flexible and robust frameworks and robust frameworks.

Originality/value – This research explores the effects of invitational ambiguity within grassroots innovation, revealing how broad values - like sustainability, inclusion and aesthetics - are operationalized in real-world settings. By applying collective action theoretical frameworks to the unique case study of NEB projects, this study provides fresh insights into the dynamics between top-down European policies and bottom-up grassroots practices.

Keywords Challenges, Actionable knowledge, Grassroot innovation, New European Bauhaus

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition among both practitioners and researchers that addressing contemporary societal challenges requires innovative organizational forms that foster collective action (Ferraro *et al.*, 2015; George *et al.*, 2024). The fundamental premise is that complex societal issues necessitate collaborative efforts across multiple stakeholders (Del Giudice *et al.*, 2017; Dentoni *et al.*, 2018). Innovation policies have predominantly focused on top-down, conventional research and development approaches, often overlooking the potential of alternative, grassroots initiatives that could enhance plurality and reflexivity (Smith *et al.*, 2014). Within this scenario, grassroots innovation movements have emerged as significant actors in promoting more inclusive innovation processes and engaging local communities in

knowledge creation, decision-making and outcomes (Smith *et al.*, 2014). Despite their promise, these movements have historically faced challenges such as limited access to financing (Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010) and difficulties in forging broader community connections (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Recent policy changes have begun to address these challenges by emphasizing the empowerment of local communities and marginal stakeholders to promote entrepreneurial solutions tailored to specific community needs (Hossain, 2016). This change has led to the development of new policy models that aim to create social impact by involving a range of different actors, including governments, universities, private companies, citizens and marginal stakeholders (Bertello *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b; Papaioannou *et al.*, 2024), giving life to complex and nested multi-stakeholder collaborative initiatives (Dentoni *et al.*, 2018; Foray *et al.*, 2012; Mazzucato, 2018). Nonetheless, the intricate processes of knowledge creation and mobilization, particularly in complex domains such as climate change, social inequality and urban regeneration, warrant further investigation.

Research on disruptive innovation highlights how grassroots innovations can challenge established practices and shift societal norms (Christensen *et al.*, 2018; Christensen and Bower, 1996; Hill and Lineback, 2011), whereas other work examines how evidence from grassroots initiatives can inform policy decisions and practical applications (Cartwright and Hardie, 2012; Cowen and Cartwright, 2022; Joyce and Cartwright, 2022).

However, there remains a gap in understanding how collective knowledge can be effectively mobilized and implemented through policies that provide financial and institutional support for grassroots innovation projects while maintaining their connection to specific community issues. This research addresses this gap by analyzing the New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative, which, inspired by the European Green Deal, aims to reimagine sustainable living in Europe. The NEB initiative seeks to recognize and support projects that improve living spaces in Europe, centered on three core values: sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion. The rhetorical strategy implemented by the NEB provides an empirical context to analyze how storytelling and narratives create inter-organizational spaces for ambiguity that allow for multiple interpretations and bottom-up, participatory approaches (Boje, 2014; Henderson and Boje, 2015; Larsen *et al.*, 2020). Using the concept of invitational ambiguity – where appealing to common values invites participation in specific actions (Sillince *et al.*, 2011) – this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do broadly defined invitational values, such as sustainability, inclusion and aesthetics, affect the implementation and operationalization of grassroots initiatives in practice?

RQ2. What are the challenges encountered when translating invitational ambiguity into actionable frameworks for grassroots projects, and how can these challenges be addressed to better support grassroots innovation?

To explore these questions, we conducted an embedded case study collecting data through online self-assessment surveys, secondary data analysis and semi-structured interviews. Our findings reveal two primary sources of tension in transforming mobilized knowledge into actionable outcomes: difficulty in harmonizing NEB core values and misalignment of role expectations between NEB representatives and grassroots projects. This paper contributes to understanding the effects of ambiguity on knowledge mobilization and implementation in multi-stakeholder collaborations aimed at addressing social and environmental challenges (Ferraro *et al.*, 2015). It also offers insights into the dynamic interplay between top-down and bottom-up forces in innovation policies (Njøs and Fosse, 2019; Ostrom, 1990).

2. Theoretical background

Over the past 15 years, grassroots innovation has gained considerable scholarly attention for its transformative potential in addressing complex societal challenges (Fait *et al.*, 2022; Hossain, 2016; Martin and Upham, 2015; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010, 2010; Seyfang and

Smith, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2014). Despite this growing interest, the research field is still struggling with the need for a unified framework and deeper integration of grassroots perspectives within mainstream management and innovation discourses. Grassroots innovation emphasizes community-driven solutions rather than profit motivations, contributing uniquely to sustainability, social equity and resilience. This approach underscores the importance of shared knowledge and participatory practices in promoting sustainable development and tackling pressing environmental and social issues.

Grassroots innovation represents a shift from traditional innovation models by prioritizing community values and addressing local needs (Fait *et al.*, 2022; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). It emerges as a response to social injustices and environmental challenges, operating outside formal institutions and emphasizing community empowerment and participation (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). Nevertheless, grassroots initiatives face many challenges, including organizational vulnerability and limited funding (Gupta, 2012; Roysen *et al.*, 2024). Overcoming these barriers requires a nuanced understanding of the factors that drive and hinder grassroots innovation dynamics. On the other hand, participatory approaches are critical in promoting innovation within grassroots contexts, facilitating knowledge sharing, skills development and community empowerment (Hossain, 2018). The Grassroots Innovation Movements framework, developed by Smith *et al.* (2014), offers a foundational understanding of how community-led initiatives function outside the conventional market and institutional structures. This framework emphasizes the role of local knowledge, participatory governance and social networks in driving innovation, elucidating how grassroots movements can influence broader socio-technical transitions, particularly in the context of sustainable development. Complementing this, the socio-technical transitions and multi-level perspective framework (Geels, 2019) offer insight into how technological innovations emerge and stabilize through interactions at different societal levels. This framework helps to understand the scaling and mainstreaming of grassroots innovations by examining the interplay between niche innovations, mainstream practices (regimes) and broader socio-cultural trends (landscapes) (Geels, 2002; Smith and Raven, 2012). Another relevant framework to understand grassroots innovation is the Inclusive Innovation Framework (Foster and Heeks, 2013; Heeks *et al.*, 2013). This framework explores how innovation processes can be made more inclusive, particularly for marginalized groups, and it is relevant for understanding how grassroots projects can foster broader participation in innovation processes, thereby addressing social inequalities and promoting sustainable development. Finally, Ostrom's model of collective action in the commons explores how communities can collectively manage shared resources sustainably (Ostrom, 1990; Poteete *et al.*, 2010). This framework is particularly relevant for understanding grassroots efforts in managing urban commons and promoting stewardship, considering the resource limitations that are endemic to such projects and that require institutional arrangements between different actors at the societal level.

## 3. Research context – The New European Bauhaus

The NEB initiative aims to translate the European Green Deal into tangible, positive experiences that encourage collaborative action to address pressing societal challenges (EU NEB Website, 2024). It is a creative and interdisciplinary initiative that links the European Green Deal to living spaces through three core values: sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion (EU NEB Website, 2024). By fostering innovative and entrepreneurial endeavors through multi-level, multidisciplinary and participatory approaches, the NEB Awards, which is one of the main initiatives launched by the NEB, celebrate exemplary projects and concepts that reflect these values. Established as an annual competition, the awards highlight local efforts to create more sustainable and aesthetically pleasing communities, places, products and processes. In the last three editions – 2021, 2022 and 2023 – the awards have recognized 52 winners out of over 4,500 applications, showcasing promising talent across various European countries. The finalists include 7 projects from Spain, 5 from Italy, 4 from Greece and 3 each from Denmark and

Belgium, with additional projects from Austria, France, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Portugal and Romania.

The NEB Compass, developed by the NEB Unit representatives, serves as a guiding framework (Figure 1 – NEB framework) for practitioners and scholars to integrate and evaluate NEB values in their projects (EU NEB Compass, 2023). It outlines essential pathways and principles for projects to authentically embody NEB's ethos. The NEB Compass provides multivocal definitions of the three core values: aesthetics, sustainability and inclusion. Aesthetics pertains to the visual and emotional appeal that enriches a space or environment. Sustainability addresses climate goals, circular practices and biodiversity preservation, ensuring efficient resource use and ecosystem protection. Inclusion spans social diversity, accessibility and affordability, aiming to provide equal opportunities and access to resources.

The NEB initiative was initiated in September 2020 (EU Commission, 2021) and launched by Ursula von der Leyen. It seeks to make climate-neutral cities more livable and redefine the Bauhaus movement's scope in the context of contemporary environmental challenges (EU Commission, 2021). The NEB's core values were established by the NEB High-Level Round Table in 2018 (EU Commission, 2023), which included experts from diverse fields such as architecture, venture capital, urban planning, biology, ecology, innovation, activism and the arts.

Figure 1 NEB framework

Source: Author's own elaboration based on NEB Compass, 2023
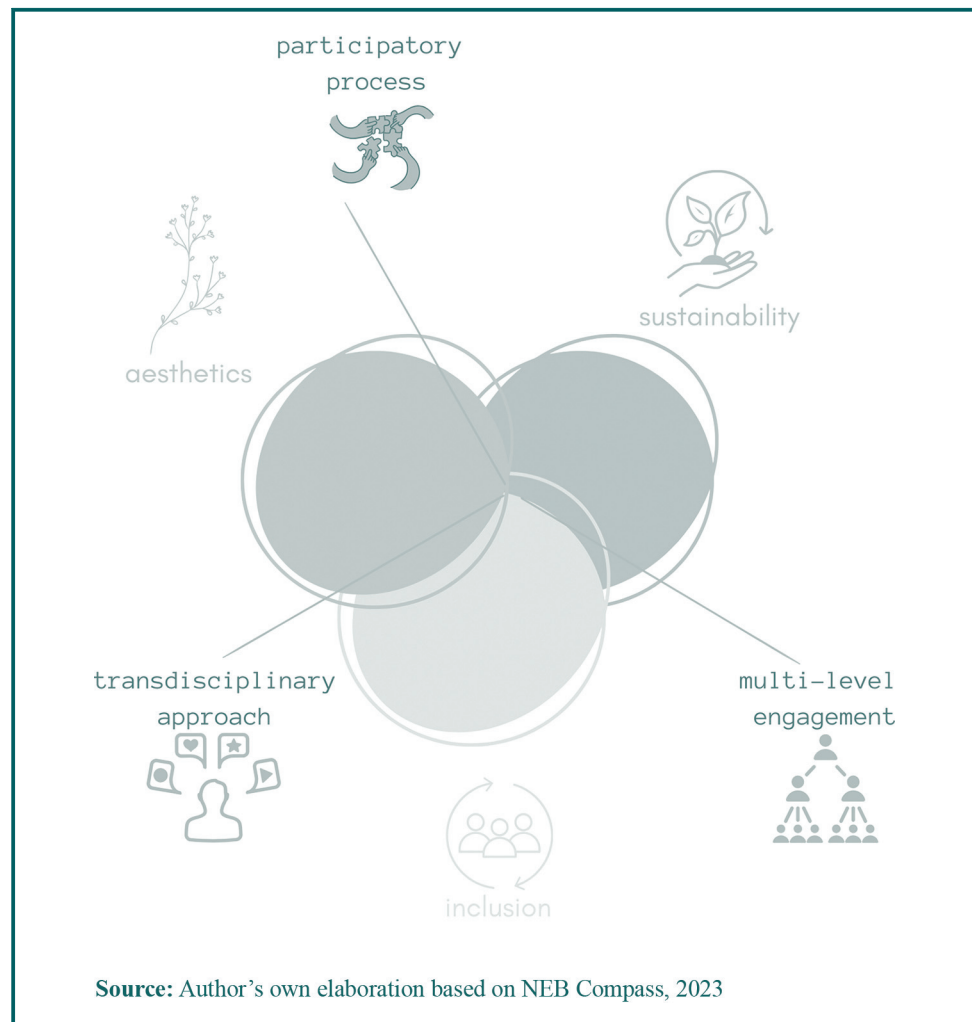
This round table used participatory methods through collaborative workshops to formulate these values, reflecting a holistic approach that integrates human, community and planetary scales (EU Commission, 2021). The broad definitions of these values have elevated the NEB's visibility, leading to 624,000 visitors and 1,881,400 page views. The official social media channels have 24,700 followers and 37,900 interactions in the past year (EU Commission, 2023). With 600 official partner organizations ranging from EU-wide networks to local initiatives, the NEB engages millions of citizens. Although the broad nature of these values has effectively mobilized a wide range of projects and stakeholders, the inherent ambiguity can pose challenges during implementation.

4. Methodology

To address the research questions – *RQ1 How do broadly defined invitational values, such as sustainability, inclusion and aesthetics, affect the implementation and operationalization of grassroots initiatives in practice?* and *RQ2 What are the challenges encountered when translating invitational ambiguity into actionable frameworks for grassroots projects, and how can these challenges be addressed to better support grassroots innovation?* – this study uses an exploratory qualitative research design to provide new insights into grassroots innovation (Eisenhardt, 1989). Given the limited existing research on this topic, we have chosen an embedded case study (Bertello *et al.*, 2022b) focusing on the NEB awards initiative and the projects awarded by the NEB. This methodology is particularly suited to the study's objectives because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the nuanced and multifaceted processes involved in grassroots initiatives (Maine *et al.*, 2015). By examining NEB as the primary unit of analysis and the prize-winning projects as sub-units, the embedded case study method provides a comprehensive understanding of how broad, abstract invitational values are operationalized in real-world settings with diverse stakeholder interactions and varying levels of institutional support. This approach captures the nuanced dynamics and contextual factors that influence how these values are translated into practical actions, which is crucial for addressing the specific challenges and misalignments identified in our research. The in-depth, multi-layered analysis facilitated by the research design is essential for uncovering the intricacies of how invitational values are applied in practice. It also offers valuable insights into the difficulties faced by both the NEB Unit representative (top-down perspective) and the grassroots projects (bottom-up perspective) in aligning their roles and expectations.

4.1 Data collection and analysis

Data collection for this study involved triangulating multiple data sources (Yin, 2009) to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the NEB dynamics (Figure 2). The process began in September 2023 with the distribution of an online self-assessment form to all finalist NEB prize projects. This form, created using Google Forms, contained 20 questions in Likert scale or

| Figure 2 | Data collection plan |

Data mining online
–
June–September 2023

Survey
–
September–December 2023

Interviews
–
December 2023 March 2024

Source: Author's own elaboration

multiple-choice formats. It was designed to be completed within 20 min and was structured into sections: an initial segment for background information, followed by a primary section exploring NEB adherence, coherence of values and operational principles. This online self-assessment form assessed how well the projects aligned with NEB's identity, as outlined in the NEB Compass Framework, including the ambition levels for each value.

Table 1 – *NEB Projects Secondary Data* reports the self-assessment results in terms of adherence coherence to NEB values based on NEB project owner perspectives. Table 1 displays the interviewee, the code we assigned to them and the project name, along with their responses to how each of the following core values – "aesthetics," "sustainability" and "inclusion" – represents the identity of their project. Each column (Tables 1 and 2) explains how those values are melded into the project's overall identity according to the interviewees' perspectives. After collecting responses from the online self-assessment (Table 1 – *NEB Projects Secondary Data*), we further examined project descriptions and statuses by reviewing secondary data available online, including social media and project websites, in addition to the NEB website project fiches. The combination of these online data sources and the self-assessment responses provided a foundational understanding of the extent to which each claims to align with NEB values and principles.

This preliminary understanding was deepened through semi-structured interviews with nine NEB project owners (from December 2023 until March 2024). This qualitative method was selected to gain richer insights into the experiences and perspectives of project participants (Rowley, 2012). Project selection for interviews was based on criteria including diversity across NEB prize categories (i.e. mobilization of culture, arts and communities; regaining a sense of belonging; buildings renovated in a spirit of circularity; prioritizing the

Table 1	NEB Projects secondary data		
No. Project name	*To what extent is NEB's aesthetic value in line with the identity of your project?*	*To what extent is NEB's sustainability value in line with the identity of your project?*	*To what extent is NEB's inclusion value in line with the identity of your project?*
1 Esseri Urbani (Italy, Puglia) 2021 Finalist	High	Medium/High	High
2 Genius Loci (Lithuania, Kaunas) 2022 Winner	High	Medium/High	High
3 *Noi Ortadini* (Italy, Basilicata) 2023 Finalist	Medium	Medium/High	High
4 Klimaatspeelplaats (Belgium, Flanders) 2023 Finalist	Medium/High	Medium/High	High
5 Sacromonte Caves Museum (Spain, Andalusia) 2023 Finalist	High	High	Medium/High
6 Roofscapes (Paris, France) 2023 Finalist	Medium/High	High	Medium/High
7 INCLUD (Milan, Italy) 2022 Finalist	Medium	Medium	High
8 Odyssea Academy (Rendis, Greece) 2022 Finalist	Medium/High	High	High
9 Symbiotic Spaces Collective (Germany, Berlin) 2022 Winner	High	High	Medium

Source: Authors' own elaboration

No.	Project name	Short description	Interviewee
		Table 2 Research sample – NEB projects and interviewee	
1	Esseri Urbani (Italy, Puglia) 2021 Finalist	The project aims to transform urban spaces through interactive art, fostering cultural accessibility, sustainable tourism and employment. Through open-air exhibitions and APP-guided circuits, it revitalizes heritage, engages diverse audiences and promotes multicultural exchange for sustainable growth	Co-founder
2	Genius Loci (Lithuania, Kaunas) 2022 Winner	The project aims to empower citizens to create interactive maps safeguarding Šančiai against top-down decisions. It preserves cultural heritage, landscapes and environment, fostering a sustainable vision through community engagement and data-driven insights	Founder and Co-Founder
3	*Noi Ortadini* (Italy, Basilicata) 2023 Finalist	The project aims to transform an abandoned patch of land into a thriving community garden in Matera, Italy. Through agriculture, education and events, it promotes sustainability, socialization and environmental awareness among citizens	Project owner
4	Klimaatspeelplaats (Belgium, Flanders) 2023 Finalist	The project aims to transform the concrete playground at Sint-Paulus Primary School in Kortrijk, Belgium, into a green oasis, fostering biodiversity and sustainability and enhancing students' learning experience through hands-on interaction with nature	Project owner
5	Sacromonte caves museum (Spain, Andalusia) 2023 Finalist	The project, led by the residents' organization "Vaivén-Paraíso," aims to restore natural, cultural and social heritage in Granada's Darro River valley, preserving ethnic minority history and biodiversity through collaborative rehabilitation efforts	Founder and Co-founder
6	Roofscapes (Paris, France) 2023 Finalist	Roofscapes convert unused pitched rooftops into green havens, combating urban heat, fostering biodiversity, managing stormwater and creating urban oases in European cities. Using prefabricated timber modules, it facilitates sustainable urban adaptation	Co-Founder
7	INCLUD (Milan, Italy) 2022 Finalist	INCLUD, a digital platform, that evaluates buildings based on Universal Design principles using objective indicators. It aids designers in creating inclusive spaces for diverse abilities, tested in Italy, for both new constructions and renovations	Research team lead
8	Odyssea Academy (Rendis, Greece) 2022 Finalist	Odyssea Academy fosters job integration for marginalized groups in Athens' Metropolitan area. Once an abandoned warehouse, it is transformed into a nurturing space through inclusive renovation, involving locals and reclaimed materials	Founder
9	Symbiotic Spaces Collective (Germany, Berlin) 2022 Winner	Symbiotic Spaces Collective uses open-source 3D printing and local clay to craft diverse habitats for urban wildlife. Inspired by nature's architecture, these structures aim to bolster biodiversity, emphasizing humanity's interconnectedness with ecosystem guardians	Founder
10	Not applicable	New European Bauhaus Unit at Joint Research Centre at the European Commission	Head of unit
11	Not applicable	New European Bauhaus Unit at Joint Research Centre at the European Commission	Policy officer

Source: Authors' own elaboration

places and people that need it the most; and reconnecting with nature) and geographic diversity to capture a range of socio-economic and cultural contexts. Table 2 – Research sample – NEB projects and interviewee list the projects illustrating their innovative ideas. Table 2 presents a detailed overview of the research sample, including the names of NEB projects, brief descriptions of each project and the roles of individuals who were interviewed. The semi-structured interview questions explore various aspects related to the interviewee's project status, implementations and future perspectives.

The interviews conducted online through the Webex platform with durations ranging from 30 to 50 min were initiated after obtaining informed consent from the participants. The objective of the interview was to explore several key aspects: (*RQ1*) the projects' alignment with NEB values and their consistency with these values and (*RQ2*) the mutual engagement between the projects and the Joint Research Centre (JRC) team. Interviews aimed to uncover various aspects of each project, including its origin, alignment with NEB values and ongoing consistency with these values. Each interview began by exploring the project's inspiration, determining whether the NEB values were intrinsic to the project's conception or integrated later. The discussion then focused on how the NEB values manifested in the project's implementation. Further, the interviews investigated the project's long-term alignment with NEB values and principles, including reflections on how adherence has evolved. Interviewees were

asked to identify areas for improvement and suggest measures for better adherence to NEB values in the future. Finally, the interviews evaluated the role of the JRC, i.e. the NEB Unit representatives, in supporting the project post-award and during the NEB Award Event and highlighting any positive or impactful interactions. The detailed findings from this analysis will be presented in Section 5 of the paper. Interviews continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no new significant insights emerged, ensuring that the sample was representative.

To complement the insights from the NEB project interviews, we conducted two additional interviews with members of the JRC Research Team (see Table 2 *"Research Sample – NEB Projects and Interviewee"*). These interviews provided top-down perspectives on how NEB values were interpreted and disseminated across different levels of the program, contributing to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the NEB community's dynamics.

The data analysis for this study used a rigorous coding approach, treating transcribed interviews and collected documents as primary units of analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). The study followed the Gioia methodology, which is known for its systematic approach to concept development and grounded theory, aiming to bring qualitative rigor to inductive research (Gioia *et al.*, 2012).

5. Findings and discussion

Our analysis revealed two primary sources of tension in the process of translating invitational ambiguity into actionable knowledge. First, the NEB's core values – sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion – though defined with a sense of harmony by the NEB, have proven challenging to implement simultaneously. Projects often encountered difficulties in integrating these aspirational values, highlighting an inherent incompatibility between them when put into practice. Second, we observed significant misalignments in role expectations. NEB representatives used invitational ambiguity to engage and mobilize grassroots innovation projects, but their involvement was largely limited to providing support without assuming direct control. In contrast, the projects anticipated a more hands-on approach, expecting closer guidance to align with an actionable framework based on NEB's core values.

These issues are addressed in Section 5.1, titled "Translating Aspirational Values into Actionable Knowledge," which explores how broadly defined values impact the implementation and operationalization of grassroots initiatives (*RQ1*). Section 5.2, "Misalignments in Role Expectations: NEB vs Project Expectations," deepens the specific challenges and misalignments encountered when translating invitational ambiguity into actionable frameworks and offers ways to address these issues to better support grassroots innovation (*RQ2*).

5.1 Translating aspirational values into actionable knowledge

Our study has uncovered the challenges faced by different projects selected as finalists for the NEB Prize during project implementation, as they strive to reconcile the coexistence of the three NEB core values: sustainability, inclusion and aesthetics. The semantic ambiguity used by the NEB in defining these values has contributed to the development of a conflict-free framework. However, our case studies have revealed how these conflicts emerge once these projects attempt to put these values into practice (Table 3 *"Translating aspirational values into actionable knowledge"*). For instance, *Sacromonte* (project nr5 in Table 3) faced challenges balancing sustainability and inclusion. While prioritizing the preservation of a unique landscape, the project's efforts to maintain environmental integrity often conflicted with the need to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities. The project owner noted:

> Our mission mainly focuses on the conservation and promotion of caves, which act as bioclimatic homes. It is important to note that these caves have preserved their environmental integrity for centuries. We have made a conscious effort to minimise our environmental footprint by not altering the land or landscape. Furthermore, sustainable tourism is a key objective for us.

Table 3 Translating aspirational values into actionable knowledge

No.	Project name	Paradoxical value – the value contains seemingly contradictory or self-defeating elements	How the conflict with the value identity emerges
1	Esseri Urbani (Italy, Puglia) 2021 Finalist	*Sustainability*: in the implementation of the "Esseri Urbani" project, a significant conflict emerges between the project's ambitious sustainability values and its practical limitations. While the project is committed to promoting sustainability through localized, smaller-scale actions and internal practices, it faces difficulties in addressing broader, large-scale environmental challenges. This discrepancy creates a tension between the project's value identity, which aspires to have a substantial impact on environmental sustainability, and its operational capacity, which is confined to incremental changes. Consequently, the project's efforts to uphold sustainability values are often at odds with its ability to effect systemic environmental improvements, revealing an inherent conflict between its idealistic goals and practical realities Integrated values (sustainability, inclusion, beauty)	The *Esseri Urbani* project faces a challenge in aligning its sustainability goals with its limited capacity to address large-scale environmental issues. This tension between promoting sustainability through smaller-scale actions and achieving broader environmental impacts can be understood through *the Commons and Collective Action Framework* by Elinor Ostrom. This framework highlights the importance of collective management of shared resources and adapting strategies to local contexts. By leveraging this approach, Esseri Urbani can integrate community-driven solutions and adaptive strategies, thus aligning its sustainability efforts with broader environmental goals while ensuring effective, collaborative resource management
2	Genius Loci (Lithuania, Kaunas) 2022 Winner		
3	Noi Ortadini (Italy, Basilicata) 2023 Finalist	*Inclusion*: Conflicts arise in the implementation of the inclusion value within the "Noi Ortadini" project, particularly when reconciling diverse perspectives among community garden users. The clash centers on differing views regarding the aesthetics of the space and its intended community purpose. Without clear policies to guide these varied opinions, achieving a cohesive vision of inclusion proves challenging. This lack of alignment underscores the inherent tension between the ideal of inclusive participation and the practicalities of managing conflicting individual preferences, revealing a fundamental struggle between upholding inclusive values and effectively overseeing diverse stakeholder expectations Integrated values (sustainability, inclusion, beauty)	The *Noi Ortadini* project grapples with "inclusion" as divergent user perspectives create tensions over the community garden's aesthetics and purpose. This challenge reflects the broader issue of managing diverse community interests. Applying the *Collective Action Framework* by Elinor Ostrom, *Noi Ortadini* can enhance its approach by involving all stakeholders in decision-making processes, thus fostering a more inclusive environment that harmonizes different viewpoints and improves collective stewardship of the community garden. This alignment with the framework not only enhances the project's inclusion but also advances its goals of sustainable development and social cohesion
4	Klimaatspeelplaats (Belgium, Flanders) 2023 Finalist		
5	Sacromonte Caves Museum (Spain, Andalusia) 2023 Finalist	*Inclusion*: The "Sacromonte" project faces a conflict in implementing NEB's inclusion value due to landscape constraints, hindering full accessibility while preserving natural beauty and environmental integrity. Despite efforts to ensure access, limitations exist, underscoring the tension between inclusion goals and environmental conservation	The *Sacromonte* project struggles with "inclusion" due to landscape constraints that limit accessibility while preserving environmental integrity. This conflict underscores the challenge of integrating diverse community needs with ecological preservation. The *Commons and Collective Action Framework* by Elinor Ostrom provides valuable insights for addressing this issue. It emphasizes how communities can collaboratively manage resources and balance competing needs. Applying this framework to *Sacromonte* can facilitate a participatory approach, enabling stakeholders to develop inclusive solutions that respect both accessibility and environmental values, ultimately promoting equitable resource management and community engagement
6	Roofscapes (Paris, France) 2023 Finalist	Integrated values (sustainability, inclusion, beauty)	

Table 3

No.	Project name	Paradoxical value – the value contains seemingly contradictory or self-defeating elements	How the conflict with the value identity emerges
7	INCLUD (Milan, Italy) 2022 Finalist	*Beauty*: The *INCLUD* project encounters a conflict in implementing the NEB value of "beauty" because of its subjective nature. While striving for inclusivity in architectural design, the project focuses on developing a framework for accessibility, prioritizing functionality over aesthetic appeal. This highlights the challenge of reconciling abstract concepts of beauty with practical needs in creating inclusive spaces	The *INCLUD* project faces challenges in implementing the NEB value of "beauty" because of its subjective nature, prioritizing accessibility and functionality over aesthetic appeal. This highlights the difficulty of reconciling abstract notions of beauty with practical design needs. The *Commons and Collective Action Framework* by Elinor Ostrom is relevant here, as it explores how communities manage shared resources sustainably. By applying Ostrom's principles, the project can address this tension by incorporating collective decision-making processes. This framework aids in balancing the subjective value of beauty with practical considerations, ensuring that inclusive design meets both functional needs and communal values
8	Odyssea Academy (Rendis, Greece) 2022 Finalist	Integrated values (sustainability, inclusion, beauty)	
9	Symbiotic spaces collective (Germany, Berlin) 2022 Winner	Inclusion: The Symbiotic Spaces Collective project is struggling with a conflict in implementing the NEB value of "inclusion" as it seeks to extend inclusion beyond human participants to include the diverse ecosystem it aims to protect. This reveals a tension between traditional notions of inclusion, which focus primarily on human involvement, and the broader perspective of inclusion that recognizes the importance of non-human entities in environmental initiatives	The *Symbiotic Spaces* project faces challenges in "inclusion" by extending its focus beyond human participants to encompass the surrounding ecosystem. This broadens the traditional concept of inclusion to include non-human elements in environmental initiatives. The *Commons and Collective Action Framework* by Elinor Ostrom is pertinent here, as it highlights how communities manage shared resources through collective action. Applying this framework, symbiotic spaces can leverage community involvement to balance human and ecological needs, ensuring that both people and the environment benefit from inclusive, sustainable practices, thus integrating diverse perspectives into resource management

Source: Authors' own elaboration

> We strive to educate visitors about the importance of conservation while ensuring that our activities are not harmful to the environment. From the recycling of water to the use of second-hand furniture, sustainability is woven into every aspect of our project.

However, they also express concerns about the evidence that efforts to protect a unique landscape and geographic context often result in struggles to accommodate people with disabilities and ensure access for those with mobility issues, as this would require the installation of structures that might deface the surrounding environment, highlighting the challenge of simultaneously upholding sustainability and inclusion.

Similarly, *Noi Ortadini* Project Owner (project nr3 in Table 3) encountered issues balancing aesthetics with sustainability and inclusion. While the community garden project aimed to foster inclusion through its design and community engagement, disagreements among participants about the garden's aesthetic and maintenance led to conflicts. By introducing elements such as wooden garden arbors and botanical species in the process of extinction, *Noi Ortadini* aims to cultivate a communal garden, rediscovering the art of simplicity. Inclusion is at the heart of the project, which seeks to create a unique community space that encourages the sharing of ideas and collaboration between residents and visitors. Participation goes beyond young people, involving all members of the local community to enrich the authenticity of the project. Sustainability, on the other hand, is at the core of its philosophy, primarily focusing on social and environmental sustainability. Weekly meetings serve to further understand these issues, empowering participants to effect meaningful change. However, despite the efforts to strengthen the community bonds, the biodiversity and aesthetics of the garden were not unanimously appreciated by all participants in the community project. One member expressed a different perception and conception of aesthetics from that of the group, preferring daily pruning of the garden, which was not feasible. Consequently, this individual decided to appropriate part of the garden for personal use, so the *Noi Ortadini* committee invited the "disabler" to try to autonomously manage and follow and align with the rules imposed by the municipality. One participant's differing view on garden maintenance exemplified this tension:

> He has taken over a significant piece, putting up a fence always in line with. – The "disabler" remarks –
> If you don't have consistency with mowing and everything, I'll adopt it and do it myself.

This case illustrates the complexities of aligning various viewpoints within community projects and the inherent paradoxes of inclusion.

Esseri Urbani (project nr1 in Table 3) faced difficulties in integrating sustainability with its broader aesthetic goals. The project, focused on urban regeneration, acknowledged its limitations in addressing large-scale environmental issues. The *Esseri Urbani* Co-Founder expresses conflict during the implementation of the sustainability dimension:

> Regarding sustainability, we recognize that it is not the project that acts on the big environmental issues. I think of pollution: the massive dumping of waste into the seas and all the big environmental issues. Of course, we do have measures that led us to see how we could help, through the use of technology, to limit as much as possible, for example, paper advertising material, and where it is used, we always try to use recycled materials anyway. But it is clear that our project is not the kind of initiative that can take massive action on major environmental issues.

5.2 Misalignments in role expectations: New European Bauhaus vs project expectations

The NEB initiative aimed since the beginning to integrate bottom-up innovation and experimentation with top-down policymaking, providing a supportive framework and EU funding for projects that respond to the ideas of aesthetic, sustainability and inclusion. However, there were notable misalignments in role expectations between the NEB Unit representative and project teams (Table 4 *"Misalignment in role expectations: NEB vs project expectation"*).

Table 4 Misalignments in role expectations: NEB vs project expectation

No.	Project name	The misalignment surfaced in the roles and expectations	How can these challenges be addressed to better support grassroots innovation
1	Esseri Urbani (Italy, Puglia) 2021 Finalist	Tensions refer to the need for greater attention, support and flexibility from the NEB entity, particularly in addressing the specific challenges faced by the NEB projects in Southern Italy. They emphasize the importance of consistent engagement and a more inclusive approach to ensure that the NEB entity's initiatives have a meaningful impact on peripheral territories	To better support grassroots innovation in peripheral regions such as Southern Italy, the NEB entity should apply Elinor Ostrom's Commons and Collective Action Framework. This involves strengthening local governance by empowering community-led decision-making, enhancing stakeholder engagement through continuous and inclusive dialogues and adapting support mechanisms to address specific regional challenges. Facilitating resource sharing and collaboration among stakeholders will leverage local knowledge effectively. Additionally, implementing adaptive management practices allows for flexible adjustments based on feedback and changing conditions. These strategies ensure that NEB initiatives are responsive and impactful, aligning with local needs and promoting sustainable grassroots innovation
2	Genius Loci (Lithuania, Kaunas) 2022 Winner	Role expectations were aligned	
3	Noi Ortadini (Italy, Basilicata) 2023 Finalist	Role expectations were aligned	
4	Klimaatspeelplaats (Belgium, Flanders) 2023 Finalist	Tensions revolve around the scale-up process of the Klimaatspeelplaats project and the level of assistance the NEB provides or expects to provide during this phase. The project may feel that they need more guidance, resources, funding or other forms of assistance to successfully tackle this critical phase of expansion. This could include help with strategic planning, securing additional funding or partnerships, navigating regulatory requirements or accessing relevant networks or resources	To address the challenges faced by the Klimaatspeelplaats project during its scale-up phase, the NEB entity can draw on Elinor Ostrom's commons and collective action framework. First, it should enhance local governance by fostering collaborative decision-making among project stakeholders and community members to better align support with the project's needs. The NEB can provide targeted assistance in strategic planning and securing funding by facilitating access to networks and resources and offering guidance on regulatory navigation. Additionally, establishing clear channels for ongoing communication and feedback will allow for adaptive management, ensuring that support is responsive and tailored to the evolving needs of the project during its expansion
5	Sacromonte caves museum (Spain, Andalusia) 2023 Finalist	While Sacromonte recognizes the potential benefits of engaging with the NEB, it is however unable to fully participate or contribute due to a lack of adequate funding. Without sufficient resources, it is unable to take advantage of the international venues or networking opportunities offered by the NEB	To address the funding challenges faced by the Sacromonte project, the NEB entity can apply Elinor Ostrom's commons and collective action framework by focusing on several key strategies. First, it should facilitate the creation of a local governance structure that allows Sacromonte to effectively participate in decision-making processes and leverage collective resources. By providing targeted financial support or facilitating access to additional funding sources, the NEB can help overcome resource constraints. Additionally, fostering partnerships and networks within the NEB framework can enhance Sacromonte's access to international venues and opportunities, ensuring that the project can fully engage with the broader innovation ecosystem and contribute meaningfully

(continued)

Table 4

No.	Project name	The misalignment surfaced in the roles and expectations	How can these challenges be addressed to better support grassroots innovation
6	Roofscapes (Paris, France) 2023 Finalist	The tension between roofscapes and the NEB entity arises from roofscapes' stable position in the French market but a lack of understanding regarding the NEB's role and minimal follow-up in community engagement activities. Clarity and proactive communication are needed to bridge this gap and fully utilize potential collaboration opportunities	To address the challenges faced by roofscapes in its relationship with the NEB entity, the commons and collective action framework by Elinor Ostrom provides valuable insights. First, establishing clear and transparent communication channels can help bridge the gap in understanding the NEB's role and expectations. Regular, proactive interactions and feedback loops should be implemented to ensure both parties are aligned and can effectively collaborate. Second, integrating roofscapes into the NEB's community engagement activities through targeted initiatives can enhance its involvement and leverage its market position. This approach aligns with Ostrom's emphasis on collective decision-making and shared resources, thereby facilitating a more cohesive and productive partnership
7	INCLUD (Milan, Italy) 2022 Finalist	The tension between Includ and the NEB entity stems from the project's dependency on research departmental funds, with minimal support from the NEB other than visibility at the NEB festival. Includ may feel neglected and seeks more substantial engagement and support from the NEB to align with the project's needs and expectations	To better support grassroots innovation like the Includ project, challenges identified by the commons and collective action framework can be addressed through targeted strategies. First, enhancing reciprocal relationships by increasing the NEB's engagement and resource support can align with Includ's needs, moving beyond mere visibility to substantial backing. Additionally, improving communication and feedback mechanisms will facilitate better understanding and responsiveness from the NEB, aligning with Ostrom's emphasis on transparent dialogue and continuous mutual support for effective collective action
8	Odyssea Academy (Rendis, Greece) 2022 Finalist	Role expectations were aligned	
9	Symbiotic spaces collective (Germany, Berlin) 2022 Winner	The tension between the "symbiotic spaces collective" and the "NEB entity" stems from the fact that symbiotic spaces have received adequate visibility through the NEB festival but have not had consistent follow-up and engagement from the NEB team. They desire more proactive involvement and support to pursue their initiatives beyond the initial exposure	To support the symbiotic spaces collective effectively, the NEB should focus on enhancing ongoing engagement by establishing regular communication and follow-ups, moving beyond the initial visibility provided at the festival. This approach aligns with Ostrom's principle of sustained interaction in resource management. The NEB should also adopt reciprocal feedback mechanisms to align support with the collective's evolving needs, ensuring that resources and guidance are relevant and timely. Additionally, the NEB must offer targeted support and mentorship, facilitating strategic planning and access to essential networks. These steps, rooted in the commons and collective action framework, will foster deeper collaboration and sustained innovation

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The NEB's strategy focused on fostering innovation by providing institutional support while allowing significant freedom in project implementation. This approach was intended to promote a diverse range of solutions and encourage experimentation. As the Head of the NEB Unit representative expressed (Interview nr10 in Table 2):

> We welcome feedback and comments as part of this continuous dialogue, particularly as we strive to further interpret and refine our values. The bottom-up approach is integral to our methodology, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of diverse stakeholders are heard and incorporated into our initiatives.

However, projects often expect more systematic support and guidance throughout the implementation phase. The lack of tailored, ongoing support led to perceptions of insufficiency and standardization. For example, the *Essere Urbani* project owner (project nr1 in Table 4), revealed the challenge of extending their network of collaboration in the Southern regions of Italy:

> We need more focus on the Southern regions. It feels like everything related to Europe stops at Rome and doesn't reach further south. Some local projects have been abandoned due to limited "top-down" interactions. NEB needs to be a constant presence, not just a yearly event.

Conversely, *Kammersplatz's* project owner (project nr4 in Table 4) reflected on how NEB's support sometimes failed to address specific project needs:

> I believe NEB should have dedicated contacts or groups responsible for specific activities, like networking or sharing resources. Grassroots projects like ours need readily accessible support, even if we don't require financial assistance. NEB could play a crucial role in facilitating partnerships and collaborations. We're scaling up our initiatives, and it would be beneficial to have NEB's practical support in highlighting opportunities and facilitating discussions on project strategies. We need more than just putting information on a platform and hoping for the best.

Additionally, the *Esseri Urbani* co-founder highlighted issues with NEB's rigid support procedures. The project owner has highlighted how, despite providing funding opportunities and visibility, the NEB award ceremony "forces" projects to be submitted by a specific deadline, without taking into account the timeline of the projects. In this case, the support is seen as constraining rather than empowering, contradicting both NEB and the projects' ambitions.

Finally, the INCLUD Research Team Lead (project nr7 in Table 4) expressed a desire for more active involvement within the NEB community:

> We'd like to have a more active role within the NEB community. After the selection process, we haven't had any communication and we're eager to participate in other activities. Are these follow-up evaluation activities being created by the EU Commission for this purpose?

These findings underscore the need for clearer role definitions and more tailored support to bridge the gap between NEB's strategic goals and the practical needs of grassroots projects.

5.3 Discussion

The cases investigated in this research paper, illustrate the difficulties NEB projects encounter when translating abstract values into practical actions, highlighting the importance of adaptability and the need for ongoing negotiation and adjustment in collective action settings (Gehman *et al.*, 2022). *Sacromonte* founders faced a conflict between environmental conservation and accessibility, which suggests that managing common resources involves addressing trade-offs and balancing different uses. *Noi Ortadini* experienced internal conflicts within the community, reflecting that collective action can be hampered by divergent perceptions and expectations (Ferraro *et al.*, 2015; Ostrom, 1990). Similarly, *Esseri Urbani* struggled to balance sustainability with aesthetic goals echoing the challenge of aligning diverse stakeholder interests in the management of shared resources.

The findings highlight the difficulty projects face when trying to integrate the three core NEB values – sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion. This struggle (5.1 paragraph) reflects a broader challenge often discussed in collective action settings (Poteete *et al.*, 2010), where individuals or groups must balance multiple, sometimes conflicting, objectives within shared resources or community settings. For instance, Ostrom's work emphasizes the complexity of managing common-pool resources (Cole and McGinnis, 2017) and the need for mechanisms that help reconcile diverse interests and values among stakeholders. Related to the misalignment in role expectations (paragraph *5.2 Misalignments in Role Expectations: NEB vs Project Expectations*) – our research shows a tension between the NEB's role in providing support and the expectations of the projects for more direct involvement and guidance. This builds on Ostrom's observations (Ostrom, 2000) about the need for clear role definitions and agreements among stakeholders in collective action scenarios. Moreover, the NEB's strategy to support projects through the ambiguous definition of invitational values triggered projects' expectations for more systematic guidance, including the establishment of clear boundaries, agreed-upon roles and mechanisms for conflict resolution. These insights suggest that successful collective action depends on the presence of effective and supportive institutions that can provide both guidance and flexibility, addressing the disconnect between the NEB's support and the projects' needs. In conclusion, our research identifies a need for adaptive mechanisms to better support grassroots initiatives.

6. Conclusions

This research explores how grassroots innovation initiatives address the challenges of translating broad and inviting values – such as sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion – into practical and actionable knowledge, focusing on the NEB initiative and its award-winning projects. Our research, grounded in qualitative methods such as self-assessment surveys and interviews, reveals that while these projects are deeply committed to NEB values, they often grapple with practical constraints that necessitate trade-offs. These findings underscore the challenges inherent in balancing competing ideals when facing limited resources and divergent stakeholder priorities. The implications of this research offer strategic guidance for practitioners, policymakers and scholars, highlighting the need for adaptive frameworks, enhanced support structures and comprehensive monitoring systems. However, limitations such as sampling bias and the subjectivity of qualitative analysis suggest that future research should expand participant diversity and incorporate longitudinal and mixed-method approaches. By addressing these gaps and exploring new research directions we can further enhance our understanding of how grassroots projects can effectively lead and integrate NEB values.

6.1 Implications

Understanding the practical impact of our findings is critical to effectively addressing industry challenges and opportunities. This section explores the key implications (*see* Table 5 - *Implications*) of our research for managers and practitioners in the field, offering

Table 5	Implications	
Practitioners	*Policymakers*	*Scholars*
Drive value integration	Establishing decentralized hubs	Research on value integration and trade-offs
Enhanced support structures	Balancing aspirational values and practical goals	Investigating institutional support dynamic
Implementing monitoring metrics	Developing a comprehensive monitoring system	Integration of invitational ambiguity into collective action frameworks
Source: Authors' own elaboration		

insights and strategic recommendations. By translating theoretical insights into practical guidance, we aim to help those in leadership and operational roles leverage our findings to improve their practices and achieve positive results in their projects. These implications are intended to bridge the gap between research and practice, ensuring that the insights gained contribute to more informed and effective decision-making.

6.1.1 Implications for practitioners. Drive value integration: Practitioners should be prepared to address the complex trade-offs between different values such as sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion. The research's findings underscore that while aligning with NEB values was crucial for the projects, practical constraints often require prioritizing certain values over others. Managers should develop strategies that enable projects to balance these values more effectively without losing their own project identity. This could involve creating adaptive frameworks that offer practical guidance for reconciling conflicting values and creating tools to assess the impact of these values across different contexts. For instance, as seen with *Sacromonte*'s struggle between environmental preservation and accessibility, practitioners should be equipped with strategies to make informed decisions about which values to prioritize in specific scenarios.

Enhanced support structures: The research's findings suggest that projects expect not only initial funding but also ongoing support throughout the project lifecycle. Managers and practitioners should support and seek additional resources beyond initial funding. This could include the creation or involvement of bridging organizations that provide closer and more personalized support to projects, facilitating better alignment with NEB values. For example, creating networks of mentors or technical advisors could help projects overcome the complexity of integrating NEB values into concrete steps.

Implementing monitoring metrics: To address the challenge of tracking progress and performance, practitioners should focus on developing and implementing clear metrics that assess the degree to which a project is aligned with NEB values. Metrics should be designed to capture both the intended and unintended impacts of integrating these values. Practitioners should work with stakeholders to define these metrics and ensure that they reflect the various dimensions of sustainability, aesthetics, inclusion and experimentation of project outcomes and impact. This will help projects continually evaluate and adapt their strategies to better achieve their goals.

6.1.2 Implications for policymakers. The insights from this study offer significant implications for policymakers, who played a crucial role in shaping the environment in which NEB projects operate. This section outlines how research findings can inform policy development and implementation, providing a basis for creating strategies that address the challenges identified. By understanding the implications of our research, policymakers can better align regulations and incentives with the needs of grassroots initiatives, ensuring that policies promote innovation, inclusion and sustainability. The goal is to guide policy decisions in ways that create enabling environments and improve the effectiveness of initiatives at various levels.

Establishing decentralized hubs: Policymakers should consider establishing decentralized hubs to provide localized support for NEB projects. These hubs would serve as points of contact and offer tailored guidance and resources to projects based on their specific needs and contexts. This approach addresses the gap identified in the study regarding the need for more hands-on support and helps bridge the divide between institutional expectations and practical project requirements. Decentralized hubs could also facilitate better communication and feedback loops between NEB and grassroots projects.

Balancing aspirational values and practical goals: Policymakers should recognize the paradoxical nature of values, such as sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion, and design policies that accommodate the complexities of balancing these values. Policies should be flexible enough to allow projects to navigate trade-offs and adapt their approaches as needed. This might involve creating guidelines that offer a range of acceptable practices

rather than rigid standards, allowing projects to make context-specific decisions while still aligning with overarching NEB goals.

Developing comprehensive monitoring systems: To effectively track the impact of NEB projects, policymakers should develop comprehensive monitoring systems that evaluate both short-term and long-term societal impacts. These systems should include metrics that capture the multifaceted nature of NEB values and provide insights into how well projects are meeting their goals. Policymakers should work with researchers and practitioners to develop these metrics and ensure they are integrated into funding and support structures.

6.1.3 Implications for scholars. The results of this study offer valuable insights for scholars engaged in management and innovation research. By exploring the intersections of value dynamics and knowledge mobilization within grassroots initiatives, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how these elements influence project success and stakeholder engagement. This section highlights how our research findings can advance theoretical frameworks and empirical investigations in these domains. The goal is to encourage further scholarly inquiry into the nuanced roles of collaborative practices and value integration in promoting innovative outcomes and sustainable practices in various organizational and social contexts.

Research on value integration and trade-offs: Scholars should further explore the complexities of integrating aspirational values within grassroots innovation projects (Ameels *et al.*, 2002; Beauregard, 2015; Breuer and Lüdeke-Freund, 2017; Contu and Girei, 2013; Kenzer, 2006; Martin and Upham, 2015). Research should focus on developing theoretical frameworks that address the practical challenges of reconciling values such as sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion. This includes studying case examples to identify best practices and strategies for managing conflicting values. The findings from this study, such as the challenges faced by *Sacromonte* and *Noi Ortadini*, provide valuable insights for developing more nuanced theoretical models.

Investigating institutional support dynamics: The study highlights a gap in understanding how institutional support impacts grassroots projects (Lewis *et al.*, 2020; Ostrom, 1990; Sassen, 2018; Sewell, 1992). Scholars should investigate the dynamics of institutional support with projects' expectations and needs. Research could focus on how different types of support (e.g. financial, technical, advisory) influence project outcomes and identify ways to improve alignment between institutional support and project needs. This could involve examining successful support models and proposing new approaches for enhancing institutional support.

Integration of invitational ambiguity into collective action frameworks: Most of the projects examined in this study were organized around the management of common resources, making them examples of commons (Ostrom, 1990). Our research highlighted how the use of ambiguously defined value systems can help mobilize resources and knowledge, even in grassroots innovation contexts where resources are limited. However, this approach also led to friction and organizational challenges in the medium to long term, as divergences emerged during the implementation of the knowledge generated.

6.2 Research limitations

This study has made a substantial contribution by analyzing empirically how grassroots designs align with the NEB values of sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion. However, several limitations must be considered to fully understand the scope and implications of our findings. A notable limitation is the representativeness of our sample. Although we surveyed a diverse range of projects, the selection of participants in the semi-structured interviews may not represent the full spectrum of grassroots initiatives. This potential sampling bias could affect the generalizability of our results. To address this limitation, future research should seek to include a larger and more representative sample of projects and stakeholders. While engaging key stakeholders, our research would benefit from broadening the range of perspectives included. In future studies,

incorporating feedback from a broader range of voices, such as local community members, end users and external evaluators, could provide a more holistic view of how NEB values are implemented and perceived. Engaging a diverse set of stakeholders could bring out additional insights into the effectiveness and challenges of grassroots projects in integrating sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion. In terms of methodological limitations, although we endeavored to mitigate confirmation bias by triangulating data from interviews, secondary sources and document analysis (Yin, 2009), the inherent subjectivity of qualitative research remains an issue. Our research team has engaged in multiple discussions and iterations to reconcile different interpretations, but qualitative data are still susceptible to researcher biases. Future studies could improve the robustness of results by incorporating mixed-method approaches. The combination of qualitative insights and quantitative data could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and successes associated with integrating NEB values into grassroots projects. Another major limitation concerns the scope of data collection. Our study relied primarily on interviews and document analysis, which, while useful, offer a rather limited perspective on the real-time dynamics of project implementation. To better understand how projects adapt and respond to challenges, future research should include participant observations. For example, observation of project steering committee meetings or workshops could provide a richer and more nuanced view of the day-to-day processes and decision-making practices within these projects.

6.3 Future research

Building on the insights of this study, several avenues for future research emerge, each offering the potential to deepen our understanding of grassroots innovation and collective resource management. One promising research direction is to conduct comparative studies on the use of invitational ambiguity across different contexts and sectors. Invitational ambiguity, which allows for flexible interpretation and construction of meanings (Sillince et al., 2011), has shown both potential benefits and challenges in grassroots innovation settings. Future research should investigate how this concept plays out in various environments – from community-driven projects to corporate sustainability initiatives – and assess its impact on collective action. By examining different case studies, researchers can determine whether invitational ambiguity facilitates more innovative and inclusive solutions or if it leads to confusion and misalignment. This comparative approach will help clarify the conditions under which invitational ambiguity enhances or hinders the effectiveness of collective resource management and provide guidance for its optimal application. Another critical area for future inquiry is the development of adaptive governance models that integrate collective action principles with the contemporary challenges faced by grassroots initiatives. As the complexities of modern resource management evolve, there is a need for governance frameworks that are both flexible and robust (Ferraro et al., 2015). Future research could focus on designing and testing governance models that address the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of grassroots projects. These models could incorporate Ostrom's principles, such as clear boundaries and collective decision-making (Ostrom, 2000, 1990), while also adapting to new challenges such as digital transformation and global interconnectedness. By developing adaptive frameworks, researchers can offer practical solutions that enhance the resilience and effectiveness of grassroots governance. Finally, future research should explore mechanisms for resolving value conflicts within grassroots projects. The tension between competing values – such as sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion – can significantly impact project outcomes and stakeholder satisfaction. Research could focus on creating and testing tools or strategies designed to manage and reconcile these conflicting objectives. This might involve developing frameworks for prioritizing values, facilitating stakeholder negotiations or implementing adaptive management practices that can adjust to changing circumstances. By providing practical mechanisms for addressing value conflicts, researchers can support grassroots initiatives in achieving their goals while maintaining a balanced approach to multiple, often competing, priorities.

By addressing these limitations and pursuing the future research avenues outlined, scholars can build on our findings to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the complexities (and potentialities) involved in grassroots projects.

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Author affiliations

Gabriella Esposito is based at the Department of Management "Valter Cantino", University of Turin, Turin, Italy and Academy of Architecture and Urban Studies, Tallinn University of Technology, Tallinn, Estonia.

Paola De Bernardi and Alberto Bertello are both based at the Department of Management "Valter Cantino", University of Turin, Turin, Italy.

Demetris Vrontis is based at the Gnosis: Mediterranean Institute for Management Science, School of Business, University of Nicosia, Nicosia, Cyprus; Department of Management Studies, Adnan Kassar School of Business, Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon and S P Jain School of Global Management – Singapore Campus, Singapore, Singapore.

Corresponding author

Gabriella Esposito can be contacted at: gabriella.esposito@unito.it