

# Zones of participation (and non-participation) in open strategy: Desirable, actual and undesirable

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Accepted by former editor in chief Laure Cabantous

**Abstract.** This paper shows how strategic initiatives in the context of well-established open strategy processes at two producer co-operatives reveal four tensions related to inclusion and transparency at the level of both the firm and the individual actor. We derive a “zones of participation” model that shows how tensions created by the interplay of the content, process and context of strategy cause actors to participate (or not participate) in open strategy formulation and implementation. We address theoretical and practical implications regarding the open strategy content, process, and context interplay, including a range of management tactics required in different participation zones.

**Keywords:** open strategy, inclusion, exclusion, transparency, opacity

## INTRODUCTION

As managers contend with contemporary demands for broader involvement in strategy by those beyond the managerial ranks, to include the knowledge, ideas, and opinions of other organizational members (Stieger, Matzler, Chatterjee, & Ladstaetter-Fussenegger, 2012; Dobusch & Kapeller, 2013), they have sought to address this through greater inclusiveness and transparency (Whittington, Caillaud, & Yakis-Douglas, 2011). Although attempts at “opening up” are often centered on the processes of strategy formulation in general (e.g., Tavakoli, Schlagwein, & Schoder, 2017), and on strategizing in particular (Whittington et al., 2011), scholars have paid little attention to the content of the strategy. This oversight surprises us as “it no longer makes sense to exclude or even marginalize strategy content (*what strategy is about*)” (Huff, Neyer, & Möslein, 2010, 203, emphasis in original) because strategy does not occur in a vacuum (Pettigrew, 1990). Similarly, the current research into open strategy overlooks the organizational context in which openness is pursued despite important and well-known linkages between the strategy process, the context in which strategizing takes place, and the content of the strategy (Rumelt, 1984; Pettigrew, 1987; Rasche, 2008). In this paper, we are concerned with the relationship between openness in the strategizing process and the forms of participation of actors, in a situation where organizations, at least in principle, are expected to adopt open strategy.

The context of this research is that of producer co-operatives (co-ops thereafter); a type of organization that has institutionalized processes around the openness of their strategizing (Österberg & Nilsson, 2009). We focus on the tensions related to inclusiveness and transparency in the context of co-ops undertaking strategies to move down the value chain.

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Those initiatives led to challenges to the existing openness of their strategizing. Although it may be intuitive that strategizing, the work of doing strategy (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007), can affect the content of strategy, our findings show how openness of strategizing affects actors' participation. The findings describe four tensions that actively work against the firms' need for openness. At the level of the firm, tensions arise around activities that foster inclusion versus those that are exclusionary, and tensions between activities that promote transparency versus those that engender opacity or secrecy. At the level of the individual, inclusionary–exclusionary tensions exist around members' desire for participation versus their willingness and capability to participate, and tensions between the member's visible participation in strategy versus their private disobedience.

In synthesizing these findings, we make two contributions. First, we derive a model that depicts zones of participation (and non-participation) in open strategy that shows how strategic initiatives can shift the boundaries of open strategy participation. The value of our model is that it brings to the fore the dynamics between the firm and the other actors involved in open strategy. Second, in explaining the content, process, and context interplay, we show that open strategy spreads beyond strategy formulation and occurs in strategy implementation, suggesting the current focus on open strategy formulation is too narrow and that what is needed is a wider view of open strategy processes.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the current literature on open strategy and the interconnections between process, content, and context. This is followed by an outline of the research design, methods, and the empirical setting. We then present our findings, discussing our model of zones of participation in open strategy. The paper concludes with some managerial implications arising from the research.

## **THE “OPENING UP” OF STRATEGY: TOWARDS GREATER INCLUSIVENESS AND TRANSPARENCY**

One of the earliest and most enduring conceptualizations of deliberate strategy holds that it is composed of two interrelated elements: formulation and implementation (Christensen, Andrews, Learned, & Bower, 1965; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). Historically, and with much scholarly attention (for a summary see, Pettigrew, Thomas, & Whittington, 2002), formulation was considered the fiat of top management (Bourgeois & Brodwin, 1984; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Hax, 1990). Yet, those lower in the hierarchy have also been shown to have contributions to strategizing beyond simply carrying out its implementation, demonstrating an important and sustained role by middle managers (Mantere, 2008; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013; Wright et al., 2016) and other stakeholders beyond the managerial ranks in strategy processes. Driven by organizational, societal, cultural and technological forces (Whittington et al., 2011), the opening-up of strategy beyond the managerial ranks occurs either downwards (i.e., to include organizational members lower in the hierarchy (Yanow, 2004; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013) or outwards (i.e., to include interactions with key actors, such as governments (Schmitt, 2011), suppliers (Tavakoli et al., 2017), competitors, and users (Appleyard & Chesbrough, 2017; Chesbrough & Appleyard, 2007).

This phenomenon has recently been labelled “open strategy” (Matzler, Füller, Koch, Hautz, & Hutter, 2014) and is defined as “a process of social interaction based on the beliefs and shared understanding of an organization's members” (Stieger et al., 2012, 65)

through which knowledge, ideas, and opinions are shared (Dobusch & Kapeller, 2013). Two characteristics underpin open strategy: “inclusiveness” and “transparency” (Tavakoli et al., 2017; Whittington et al., 2011).

Greater “inclusiveness” sees an increase of “participation in an organization’s ‘strategic conversation’, the exchanges of information, views and proposals intended to shape the continued evolution of an organization’s strategy” (Whittington et al., 2011, 536). It is aimed at including a wider range of internal and external actors to improve the organization’s sensemaking abilities (Teulier & Rouleau, 2013; Dobusch, Seidl, & Werle, 2015). Although greater inclusiveness centers largely on the processes of strategy formulation, it is not simply a matter of opening the process to a wider variety of actors. Inclusiveness is predicated on those actors being capable of participating (Ackermann & Eden, 2011) and having the desire to participate in the process (Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017). Open strategy, by itself is thus “not a democracy of actual decision making” (Whittington et al., 2011, 536), nor does it necessarily drive greater participation. The inclusion of a more diverse set of actors can in fact surface a wider variety of issues, ideas, and perspectives of the proposed strategy (Burgelman, 1983; Mantere, 2008). These are known to lead to increased tensions (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Ashforth & Reingen, 2014) or failure to participate from those the strategy opening was intended to involve (Luedicke, Husemann, Furnari, & Ladstaetter, 2017; Matzler et al., 2014). The entire strategy formulation process has thus not always been completely opened up and the strategy formulation continues to reside at the organization’s strategic apex (Narayanan & Fahey, 1982; cf Luedicke et al., 2017).

The second characteristic of open strategy relates to greater “transparency”, meaning “the visibility of information about an organization’s strategy, potentially during the formulation process but particularly with regard to the strategy finally produced” (Whittington et al., 2011: 536). Such attempts to increase transparency can lead to some tensions around what should be shared and with whom it should be shared, due to, for example, the risk of imitation by competitors, and that sharing might consequently be restricted to certain types of information (Whittington et al., 2011).

Although existing literature infers that the opening up of strategy might lead to increased tensions around both the strategy process (e.g. inclusion in formulation and implementation) and strategy content (e.g., sharing details of the new strategy), questions of how these influence each other remain largely neglected (Baptista, Wilson, Galliers, & Bynghall, 2017). Research has also focused largely on open strategy in the contexts of either relatively new organizations (e.g. Wikimedia, see Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017) or on relatively new initiatives to open up strategy in established organizations (e.g., IBM, see Bjelland & Wood, 2008), where open strategy is the particular strategic initiative of interest. There have indeed been few, if any, hints about tensions arising from openness in strategy or the relationship between openness and participation in strategy processes. This leads us to ask the question “*What is the relationship between openness in strategizing and the resulting participation (and non-participation) by actors of the organization?*”

## METHODS

The origin of this paper is in a larger three-year program of study into innovation in producer co-ops reported elsewhere (authors' reference). During that research, issues that seemed to correspond with the topic of open strategy surfaced in our data. With a view to "extend the emergent theory" on open strategy, we used theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989, 535; Pettigrew, 1990) to select the most fitting cases from within the dataset of our larger research program and re-analyzed the existing data to further refine our understanding of the characteristics of open strategy and related tensions. It was clear, from our earlier work, that there were political and commercial sensitivities associated with openness. Given those sensitivities, we reveal only the detail and information about the two co-ops that is strictly necessary. In this paper, we refer to the cases as *Delta* and *Meta*.

### SUITABILITY OF CO-OPS AS RESEARCH SETTING

In principle, organizations with co-operative structures are associated with transparency in a way that goes beyond a superficial use of information, and into the legal, technical and organizational structuring of co-operative activities (Fairbairn, 2004). Co-ops are a mature organizational form, with established principles of member-based ownership and control rights with democratic decision making (Österberg & Nilsson, 2009).

Co-ops are typically governed by a board elected from the membership (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014), an organizational arrangement that is to ensure representation and involvement of members in decision making but, at the same time is associated with a range of tensions and problems. Co-ops are traditionally associated with being commodity oriented (Knudson, Wysocki, Champagne, & Peterson, 2004), risk averse (Nilsson, 2001; Katz & Boland, 2002), defensive (M. Cook & Plunkett, 2006), and, due to property and voting rights, unlikely to engage in innovation processes (M. Cook & Iliopoulos, 1999; Kyriakopoulos, Meulenberg, & Nilsson, 2004; Nilsson & Ohlsson, 2007). Co-op's growth is indeed often hindered by horizon and portfolio problems and resultant underinvestment in the areas of growth (Katz & Boland, 2002; Giannakas, Fulton, & Sesmero, 2016) as management and members cannot reach consensus about strategic direction (Katz & Boland, 2002; Cornforth, 2004).

The literature suggests that these tensions are heightened in co-ops that have embarked on growth-oriented strategies (M. Cook & Iliopoulos, 1999; Knudson et al., 2004) and can lead to heightened tensions related to much-needed inclusiveness and transparency. For example, Bijman et al. note that the co-ops undergoing such changes need to encompass changes to the board-management relationship, increasingly blurring the line "between decision making and executing the strategies and policies of the co-operative" (2013: 215). Consequently, considering the heightened tensions when new entrepreneurial strategies are proposed and implemented, we see the context of co-ops undergoing such changes as particularly fitted to research the relationship to transparency and openness in strategy.

## THE CASE STUDIES

Both cases are producer co-ops that are vertically integrated and have recently embarked on (significantly) more market-oriented competitive strategies in the pursuit of higher value-added products aimed at export markets. In the broader context, deregulation of agricultural products through the 1980s saw the complete removal of all tariffs on imported goods, and removal of all agricultural subsidies by the mid-1990s. In the regulated environment, the co-ops' strategies were relatively stable in that they focused on simple production operations to ensure commodities were processed efficiently and delivered to a national dairy marketing board which was responsible for all international exports. In this context, some strategic discussion with members revolved around price patterns that were set predominantly by global trends, and production efficiency to ensure profits returned to members.

In the face of potential local competition from cheaper imported milk products and actual competition for exported milk products into economies where subsidies remain, dairy farmers were looking for ways to secure better returns for the milk (Lind, 2014). In the local market, various dairy co-ops amalgamated to achieve economies of scale and by 2003 the National Dairy Marketing Board was dissolved, leaving co-ops to control and manage the international sales of their products.

Both co-ops had been progressively pursuing competitive strategies to secure commercially viable markets for their members' milk. By the mid-2000s, the pursuit of value-adding strategies saw them moving downstream in the value chain, accompanied by their significant investments in technologically advanced processing and marketing capabilities beyond their traditional milk processing and distribution capabilities. Scientific developments in human nutrition and a growing consumer awareness about health and well-being, especially for infant and elder person nutrition, provided some market opportunities to transform milk from a commodity good into various value-added health products.

In order to move out of the insecurity of commodity price cycles and achieve greater long-run returns for the co-operatives, Delta and Meta both went from being commodity producers, with strategy focused predominantly on serving the members' interests, to a situation where food processing technology and consumer branded products, rather than farming production systems, were more important sources of value creation.

Typical of many producer co-ops seeking to maintain ownership control, investments in the new capabilities were funded by withholding share rebates over successive years and by taking on debt against the existing equity and not taking third-party investment (Chaddad & Cook, 2004). Unlike the traditional investments that focused on capital infrastructure for milk collection and processing, the strategic shifts saw both co-ops investing in new types of tangible and intangible assets. The development and large-scale processing of value-added products required significant capital investment in manufacturing technologies that were unfamiliar to members in both co-ops, and up to four times the cost of the traditional types of infrastructure investments made. Similarly, investment in intangible assets, including brand development, and sales and marketing for consumer markets, as opposed to commodity markets, were unfamiliar to members. In this situation, shareholder/member buy-in for the strategy was necessary as the withholding of share rebates to invest in multiple areas with which members were unfamiliar affected their short-term income, and the rising debt levels increased risk for their long-term

profitability. Members' inclusion in the strategy process and transparency about the commitments required resulted in the new strategic initiatives being considered necessary at both co-operatives. Both cases provide rich sites to explore the interaction of strategy content (the new strategic initiatives), strategy process (inclusiveness and transparency) and strategy context (co-ops as sites of established open strategy).

#### DATA COLLECTION

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 52 participants in the wider research program, of which 18 participants were from Delta and Meta. Participants represented multiple levels in both co-ops, from suppliers to middle managers and scientists, up through the board members and into shareholding members. Each participant was interviewed once, and we sought out individuals involved in strategizing, either because of their role or by referral from other participants. One of the co-ops uses a small number of suppliers who are not shareholders, allowing us to explore if non-member suppliers were included and/or excluded in open strategy. Interviewing people at different levels and with differing knowledge and experience of the topic helps to reduce the impact of bias and retrospective sensemaking in this type of research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

All interviews were conducted by two or more interviewers, with the "passive" interviewer both monitoring the process and following up on relevant questions (cf Bechhofer, Elliott, & McCrone, 1984). Semi-structured interview guides enabled conversations that were wide ranging in scope and captured topics that include strategy and innovation content, as well as the participation of members of the co-ops in those processes. The interviews lasted between 50 and 120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To further ensure data accuracy, we offered the transcripts back to participants for review. The data collected for the two cases was cross-sectional in character, and although such data can be problematic when investigating change-related issues (Miller & Friesen, 1982; Bono & McNamara, 2011), this is not the situation here as our research question was orientated around understanding the nature of an established open strategy.

Secondary data about strategy practices came from the analysis of each co-op's constitution concerning strategy and from a variety of reports about the co-operatives in the media. The details of the primary and secondary data collected are summarized in Table 1.

Firm	Participant type	Number of interviews	Quote Code
Delta	Chief scientist	1	Delta #1
	Middle Manager	3	Delta #2- Delta #4
	Managing Director	2	Delta #5- Delta #6
	Member support technician	1	Delta #7
	Board of Directors Chair / shareholder-elected member	1	Delta #3- Delta #8
	Informal interviews during workshop and conference conversations	4	
Meta	Member shareholders	4	Meta #1- Meta #4
	Non-Shareholder supplier	1	Meta #5
	Operations Manager	1	Meta #6
	Middle Manager	4	Meta #7- Meta #10
	Informal interviews at conferences	3	
SECONDARY DATA			
		Delta	Meta
	Constitution	93 pages	35 pages
	Media reports	3 articles	48 articles

Table 1 - Data sources

Although Table 1 reports the direct data that we used in the process, we also utilized other forms of data available to us, including field notes and informal conversations with a range of stakeholders. This allowed us to interpret the overall involvement and communication with participants beyond simple analysis of the transcripts. That is, “as interpretative social scientists, we listen beyond, between and underneath participants’ words to understand apparent contradictions in their accounts” (Power, 2004: 858), as well as behaviors. This played a particularly important role in the case of Delta, where we do not report any direct interviews with the shareholder members (with the exception of the Chair of the Board of Directors). Although we, and the reviewers, recognize this as a certain methodological limitation, the reason for this situation further informs our findings. It was an explicit decision of the management to restrict our access to shareholders so that we would not gain any additional information, their reason being that the co-op management wanted to “shield” their members from various surveys and interviews. Although we thus had limited direct insights from the member perspective, the engagement with the management, Chair and other Board members through workshops and a member-facing veterinarian provided us with sufficient understanding of the motives for restricting our access, which we further theorized later as one of the processes of controlling the transparency of the pursued strategy. Our theorizing was further aided by drawing on a wider understanding of co-operative firms gained through engagement with other case studies (an additional four cases) in the wider and ongoing research program.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis occurred in three phases using NVivo software to manage our data. We initially broadly followed Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton's (2013) procedure. One of the authors who had not conducted the interviews, systematically analyzed each interview transcript, followed by both constitutions and finally media reports to corroborate findings. In the first round, coding used an inductive thematic approach (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Huberman & Miles, 1994) creating nodes in NVivo to represent the first-order categories related to transparency and inclusion. A variety of nodes emerged including actor attributes such as "actions", "attitudes", and "behaviors", strategy processes such as "information dissemination", "value-adding", and context such as "overseas markets". One of the authors who had conducted some of the interviews next reviewed the coding, and then, together with the first and second codes, developed descriptions of the nodes, re-coding data and integrating nodes as first-order categories.

In the second round, the focus pertained to the strategy content, context, and processes (formulation and implementation) by developing themes apparent in the first-order coding. The other authors, one who had conducted interviews and one who had not, became involved in the analysis in this phase. With a more theoretical focus, we focused on themes associated with the types of internal and external actors included in and excluded from strategy formulation and implementation, and the types of strategy content made visible and made opaque in strategy formulation and implementation. It was at this point that we used media reports to corroborate the informant voice-researcher observations of the inclusion and transparency concepts. In practical terms, the authors who initially coded the data from interview transcripts coded the additional sources in light of the second-order themes. This was an iterative process of coding materials, checking the others' interpretation, re-coding, and engaging in further discussions about the meaning of each category. In refining our data analysis, finally, aggregate dimensions emerged with contradicting concepts. These represent the four tensions associated with the different strategizing practices, which we explain in the Findings section. Table 2 provides illustrative quotes of those tensions.

By the third phase, which included dialogue with the editor and reviewers, and extended discussion among the authorial team, our data structure became more complex and "messy". In the second iteration we consciously moved away from the Gioia (2013) approach, focusing on constructing tables and models to capture the concepts that emerged in the analysis of the data, and using the participants' words verbatim to connect our concepts and their experiences, and what they mean regarding our research question, which we present in the Discussion section.

## FINDINGS

We present our findings in three sections. First, we illustrate how the move downstream in the value chain affected transparency at Delta and Meta, leading to increased opacity in some areas. Secondly, and similarly, we show how those strategies also influenced inclusionary activities at the co-ops, creating situations of exclusion. Finally, we describe the four tensions that we find together with their relationship to the opening up, and closing down, of strategizing.



## OF TRANSPARENCY AND OPACITY

Top-level management at both co-ops recognized the need to be transparent so that informed decisions could be made and buy-in from stakeholders secured. Based on their constitutions, it appeared, at first, that both Delta and Meta were relatively transparent. For example, at Meta, in light of what the Chairman referred to as members' "fierce independence and a genuine desire to keep control in local hands", the top management team and the board, undertook extended discussions with members about the level of investment needed to develop the market and innovation capabilities and significant capital assets to manufacture nutrition products. As our analysis progressed, we found that the level of transparency varied depending upon the strategic issue at hand and the type of actor involved. As one participant acknowledged, sometimes greater opacity was considered necessary to protect commercial prosperity:

Commercial sensitivities around [sharing board papers] And I mean, again, with board papers and things like that, yeah, those bits will be removed. Or they'd be separate papers handed in by management or whatever. So we never see that (Meta #10).

It became clearer that the need for secrecy was quite a recent feature of their strategy, arising from the change to the content of their strategy; i.e., move downstream. Seeing themselves as commodity producers, the co-ops' managers believed they had few commercially sensitive matters, and there was thus little hindrance to being transparent. This also influenced inclusion, as members were involved in most areas of strategy development. However, the move downstream was a shift away from being commodity producers, and top-level management sought opacity as a means of protecting their proprietary assets and, at least in one of our cases, to avoid unnecessary attention from potential competitors.

This introduced a number of tensions as, on the one hand, the co-ops' management sought greater buy-in, which often required transparency, and, on the other hand, was trying to reduce transparency to protect parts of the strategy. This interplay is illustrated in their efforts to improve milk quality. Improvement in animal feed can gain considerable operational improvement regarding volume and quality of milk produced, measured predominantly by fat and protein levels. It is also an area that draws on considerable practical knowledge that is oriented towards on-farm management and operations. At the same time, increasing consumer awareness about food safety (genetic modification, pesticide use, and residue) and animal welfare meant that animal feed consumption became an issue that had an increasing impact on the overall strategy. The following excerpts from interviews with a middle manager and a top-level manager (the chair) at Delta illustrate the tensions between the members' attempts to strategize around the issue of animal feed to increase efficiency in the farm production system, and top management's efforts to close those down in light of the risks at the market end:

*Interviewer:* “Do you think your farmers secretly do things just to try out and not tell you?”

*Middle Manager:* “Mm, mm. I know they do (Laughter). It’s okay. Within boundaries.” (Delta #3)

*Top level manager:* “We simply say to our members they are not permitted [to experiment with a different animal] feed, it might be cheaper, you might want to use them, but you cannot.” (Delta #4)

As we further explored this, it became clear that besides the tension based on what the organization did or did not do—be transparent or be opaque—there was a countervailing tension based on member’s visible participation in the content of the strategy versus their private non-participation or non-compliance with the agreed strategy. The evidence shows instances of non-participation by members, which later attracted a strong response from the organization. The explanation suggested by the data was a lack of understanding by members of how their activities might negatively influence the (not fully transparent) strategy; and members not being fully informed about the technicalities of the operational choices and the consequences for the product. For example, the fat and protein measurements, which underpin the payment system, are only part of the more elaborate quality metrics of milk. Members were not aware of what the other aspects were; e.g., there was a lack of information about certain components of the milk that new products required.

At another level, individuals displayed some additional facets of strategizing and “misguided participation” that were not officially accepted (or endorsed) by the management. One example is the adoption of sustainable farming practices; some members undertook the initiative with the claim that sustainability was potentially supportive of the co-op’s brand. Although management did not endorse the practices, they were nevertheless allowed to continue. Management suggested that they preferred not to channel any energy into publicizing these practices as these were not part of the “official” strategy. The increasing opacity around aspects of the new strategy resulted, overall, in some members—in their attempts to participate—misinterpreting (or over-interpreting) aspects of the strategy.

## INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

In looking at who was included and excluded in the co-ops’ strategizing, we observed multiple interactions within and across the various roles in the co-ops (management, shareholders, board members). Some of the interactions were typical of what we would associate with strategizing, including board member-to-shareholder and top-level manager-to-middle manager interactions. However, other interactions gave us insights into the dynamics of open strategy that included some actors while excluding others.

Despite being the legal owners of the co-operative and “strategic” suppliers, our analysis suggests that, at least initially, shareholders’ inclusion in the strategy formulation was rather arm’s length and superficial, and implementation was mostly through top-down directives. As explained by one of the middle managers:

[Once a year] they will usually have what they call strategy meetings and they'll go round and talk to the suppliers about our long-term strategies (Meta #2).

Those meetings were seen as necessary because of the changes that the co-operatives were undergoing. A board member elaborated on the intention of these strategy meetings:

Because the company's growing so much, the purpose of the strategy meetings was really to keep the farmers informed of what's actually happening here (Meta #1).

But such an approach led to tensions, especially as the consultations did not necessarily lead to the greater inclusion of members in the strategy. For example, strategy implementation was mostly through an increasing number of directives and structures as the management sought to align the members' operations with the nature of the product and the brand. Although the initial process of idea generation and formulation included middle managers and shareholders, these actors were increasingly excluded in the process of implementation. Furthermore, the increasing interdependence between the final product quality and the branding efforts of the management led to a corresponding erosion of the value of the farmer, suppliers and shareholders' expertise in the organization. As one member lamented:

They're telling us now how to farm, and that's where the whole thing's gone haywire (Meta #5).

Similar dynamics were also present in the other co-op, which also implemented a range of rules and restrictions on the on-farm operations, but without discussing or developing these together with members. Many of the members lost their willingness and capability to contribute to the strategy, often due to the speed of changes happening:

It's like a losing battle; there's always something. And then they [the farmers] just think they're getting on top of it and then there's a new regulation. Now this new code of practice, or whatever you call it, there's another code coming through. And you've got to go through all this bloody rigmarole you see (Meta #5).

The net effect of the co-ops pursuing a content strategy of "value-add" by moving downstream worked against their strategy process of an open strategy. As indicated by a middle manager:

There's been a few deputations to management I understand, behind closed doors. There's been the odd time I think where a few farmers have been in together (Meta #6).

The above tensions were further evident at the levels of public participation. Participants' experiences of meetings illustrate how public attempts at inclusion were privately experienced as exclusion when actors felt unwelcome and unable to contribute:

A high percentage [of members], who wanted to have their voice heard but didn't have the courage themselves to speak up in the meeting.... So, well, I'm never going to put my hand up and do that coz I don't want to be made a fool of (Meta #10).

In some situations, middle management recognized that actors were too scared to speak up because of strong social pressures and out of fear of being belittled by board members. In response, they created informal spokesperson roles to be "their voice" indicating the paradox between espoused inclusion and practiced inclusion:

It was my job actually to be the voice for these other guys who didn't want to put their hand up. Coz, they never wanted to be thought of in the minds of the board, going forward, as one of those people who, you always, if you're going to say something it's going to be a challenge (Meta #10).

Such drifts around the inclusion of shareholders, especially at times of formulation and implementation of the new market-oriented strategy, amplified the tensions: Not all members were willing to fully implement the required changes and (as we discuss in more detail in the next section), in some cases members could not relate the overall strategy to their operations. This resulted in the lax implementation of the rules, with members complaining increasingly about the situation and the risk, recognized by the management, of opposing the current strategies or jeopardizing the brand and product quality. The management seemed to be caught: On the one hand, they required the buy-in from members to implement the changes, but on the other hand the nature of the strategy content (i.e., a significant shift from simple farming towards science and market-led niche strategies) posed increasing difficulties to include members and middle managers in the process of strategy formulation. A key characteristic of inclusion/exclusion is the capability of actors to contribute to the strategy, together with their willingness to do so.

Although the strategy formulation was increasingly moving up within the co-op's structures, the management recognized the close coupling between final product characteristics, the brand position, and on-farm operations. In response, they devised a range of committees, such as on-farm compliance, that they hoped would bridge some parts of the strategy with member operations, increasing exposure to the strategy and the capability of members to contribute to [it](#). Despite the recognition of the need for greater involvement however, some actors remain excluded. As our analysis teased out inclusion and exclusion, a set of organizational activities associated with "opening the door" on wider inclusion in strategy formulation and "closing the door" or being exclusionary became apparent. These were paralleled by members' capability and willingness to participate.

## THE OPENING UP AND CLOSING DOWN STRATEGIZING

From the two empirical cases, it is evident that the co-ops sought to open up their strategy in a variety of ways, involving a range of internal and external actors. However, unlike much of the current open strategy literature, which claims that opening up is mainly a matter of pooling knowledge, ideas and opinions (Dobusch & Kapeller, 2013; Morton, Wilson, & Cooke, 2015) and developing shared understandings (Stieger et al., 2012), our analysis suggests that this might be an unwarranted

simplification. Taken as a whole, we found a range of activities in each case associated with the opening up and closing down strategy. These activities manifested themselves as four tensions associated with the “doing” of open strategy. The four tensions are summarized in the matrix shown in Figure 1, capturing both co-op- and actor-level activities for both inclusion/exclusion and transparency/opacity. The co-ops could undertake activities that would either open or close the door on inclusion, and actors could seek to participate, moderated by their capability/skills and their willingness to participate. The co-ops could in turn, undertake activities that would either increase or decrease transparency around issues associated largely with the content of the strategy, while actors could either visibly participate in the content of the strategy or privately be disobedient in their participation. Thus, the content of the firm’s strategy can work for and against inclusion and transparency, creating tensions around open strategy.

Characteristics of openness			
		Inclusion/exclusion	Transparency/opacity
Activities	Firm level	Creating opportunities for participation in the strategy process versus excluding members from formulation or implementation	Fully sharing strategy with members versus being opaque or secretive around parts of the strategy
	Individual actor level	Members seeking to participate in the strategy process versus being unwilling to or lacking the capability to participate	Making public participation in the formal strategy versus exercising private non-participation or private participation that is misaligned with the overall strategy

Figure 1 - Tensions associated with open strategy

Tensions	Explanation of tension	Examples from opposing poles of the tension	
The co-op's inclusionary activities versus its exclusionary activities	Identifying when participation from all members is necessary	<p>Inclusionary Activities: "They gave us the option of, you know we want to do this, so the majority of us said yep. Because they pitch it to us and we decide if we want to do it or not. If the majority of us didn't want it to happen it wouldn't have happened I guess." Meta #9</p>	<p>Exclusionary Activities: "It wasn't very clear to the farmers ... that this was going to be in stone. This was what they were going to do... well, the shareholders thought that this was just stuff that was being floated as ideas that they would get to have a say on.... the board agrees to the strategy in the boardroom, and then they had to go and sell it to the farmers as well." Meta #10</p> <p>Exclusionary Activities: "We simply say to our members they are not a permitted feed, it might be cheaper, you might want to use them but you cannot ... end of story" Delta #4</p>
Members' willingness to participate versus their capability to participate	There was a tension between members desiring participation and wanting to be involved in strategic decisions as well as farming versus having the ability to comprehend what is being strategized	<p>Desire to Participate: "We're not the experts in the strategy, and we're not, we're only there for the communication purposes." Meta #1</p>	<p>Capability and Willingness to Participate: "A high percentage [of actors], who wanted to have their voice heard but didn't have the courage themselves to speak up in the meeting.... So, well, I'm never going to put my hand up and do that coz I don't want to be made a fool of" Meta #10</p>
The co-ops' desire for transparency versus the need for secrecy	There is the need to be open and transparent to allow informed decisions to be made, but the desire of transparency is conflicted by what information needs to be shared and when	<p>Transparency: "It is about making sure everyone is well informed and has got enough information to be confident in your decision." Meta #10</p>	<p>Opacity: "I fully know why you can't see the board papers, but you know, that's part of it. In that you don't know [because of] commercial sensitivities ... us [stakeholders] never see that." Meta #10</p> <p>Opacity: "I've asked to see board papers at other times. And as I say, they've just come back and said, no, we don't have to show you that." Meta #10</p>
Members' visible participation in the strategy versus their private disobedience	Ensuring that what actors espouse publicly is what they practice privately	<p>Visible Participation: "We like the shareholders to evaluate the information and share it amongst themselves and come to a common conclusion, rather than the board be driving things with a big stick." Delta #5</p> <p>Visible Participation: "Circular because they're connected to the co-op in part because of the small size and part because of the willingness of the management of the co-op to communicate regularly, and it just can maintain a virtuous kind of cycle." Delta #4</p>	<p>Private Disobedience: "There's been a few deputations to management I understand, behind closed doors. There's been the odd time I think where a few farmers have been in together." Meta #6</p> <p>Private Disobedience: "There are farmers out there that just, look, it's my business and I'll do what I want to do, and I've never graded for the last ten years so what the hell are you worried about?" Meta #2</p>

Table 2 - Tensions involved with 'opening up' and 'closing down' strategy formulation and implementation

## DISCUSSION

This paper developed out of observations of open strategy in a larger project on innovation in producer co-ops. Open strategy is an emerging strategy concept (Matzler et al., 2014) and the interplay of open strategy processes, strategy content, and strategy context as part of wider strategizing is yet to be examined. Recent literature has provided a detailed examination of open strategy processes focusing on firm-level arrangements (Dobusch & Kapeller, 2013; Matzler et al., 2014; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017). Our focus on the interplay of strategy processes (open strategy), strategy content (moving downstream), and strategy context (co-ops) allowed us to understand the openness characteristics and the activities involved that created multiple tensions. As summarized in Figure 1, the change in the strategy content in the co-operative context produced tensions in the strategy process at both the firm and individual actor levels, which manifested in the constant tugs-of-war between and with inclusion/exclusion and transparency/opacity.

In this section, we synthesize our findings of the tensions created in the strategy content, process, and context interplay at the firm and individual level, in a model that depicts zones of participation (and non-participation) in open strategy (Figure 2), which we explain next.

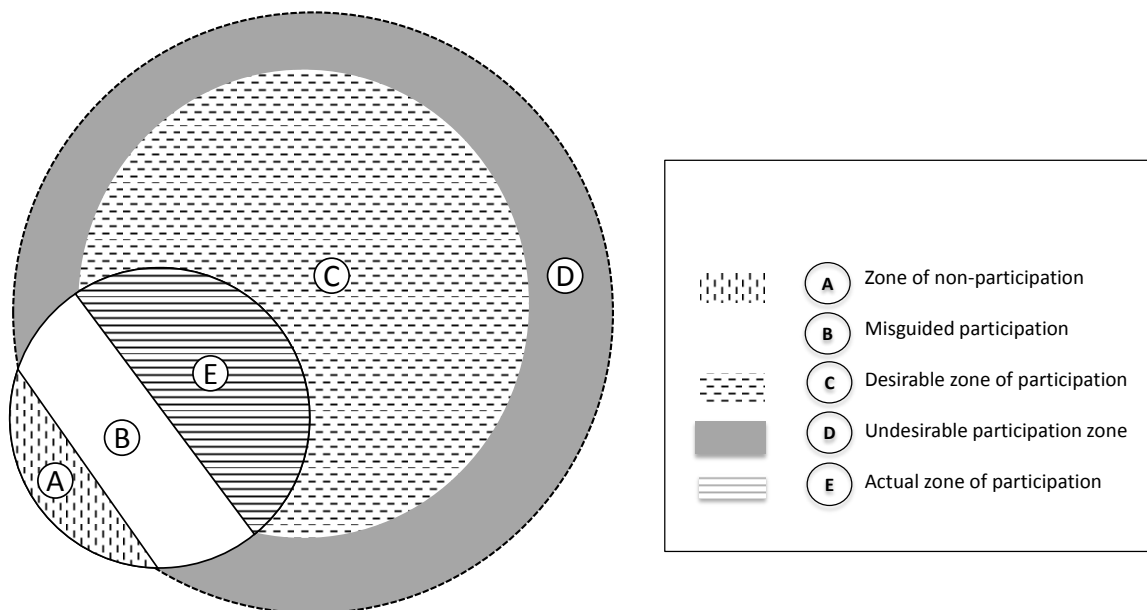


Figure 2 - Zones of participation (and non-participation) in open strategy

## ZONES OF PARTICIPATION (AND NON-PARTICIPATION) IN OPEN STRATEGY

Opening up strategy involves a broader set of participants (Whittington et al., 2011), which helps to shed light on why top management might find it difficult to open up strategy. Drawing on works from Mantere (2005) on champions, and Ackermann and Eden (2011) on preparing individuals to participate in the strategic process, we see that both sensemaking and encouragement are needed for actors to feel empowered to participate in strategizing. If an actor lacks support, is unable to make sense of knowledge, or feels ill-equipped (with knowledge or other resources), the actor is unlikely to contribute (is not a champion) in the strategy process. Although the extant scholarship assumes that actors want to participate in open strategy (Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017), insights from strategy-as-practice show that such assumptions overlook the agency of actors to choose not to participate in strategizing (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Similar insights from co-operative theory suggest that actors' involvement in strategy goes beyond matters of inclusion and involves matters inducing participation (Österberg & Nilsson, 2009). Capability and willingness are their key characteristics distinguishing actor participation (depicted as Zones B-E in Figure 2) and non-participation (depicted as zone A in Figure 2) in open strategy.

When actors' interests differ from the goals of the organization, multiple tensions arise around their non-participation in open strategy (depicted as zone A in Figure 2). Although non-participation initially appeared to be about actors not participating, upon closer examination we realized that it was the actors' private interests taking precedence over the organization. This led to non-participation in the strategy because privately actors were strategizing to support their agendas. In concrete terms, this played out in members declaring to support production practices, yet privately ignoring or even breaking them.

Our findings further indicate that actors might be willing to participate but their lack of understanding of the new strategy, which can sometimes be an outcome of decreased transparency, can lead to what we termed "misguided participation" (depicted as zone B in Figure 2). Although members might appear to participate in the strategy process, as we learned from another case not included in this particular dataset, their activities are not always informed by the strategy content. The outcome of such is lessened comprehension and misinterpretation of the co-op's strategy, with misguided efforts to participate detracting from the strategic initiative.

The change in strategy content—moving down the value chain—changed the boundaries of what is now "in" the strategy, for example, advanced manufacturing. There were two effects of this change. First, the relative value of organizational activities changed, with the traditional areas becoming relatively less valuable. Secondly, members had fewer capabilities for contributing to the new areas since these changes move away from their areas of expertise. Furthermore, as the strategic initiative re-drew the boundaries of the strategy content, both the process and context were affected, creating a desirable zone of participation (depicted as zone C in Figure 2). This desirable zone of participation represents the area of strategy content and process that the organization perceives as appropriate spaces for stakeholder participation.

Establishing the new boundaries of inclusion and transparency were, however, the key sources of tension that required constant readjustment in the case organizations (as well as the other cases in our larger study).



Unlike open-strategy attempts that focus on strategy formulation only, inclusion and transparency covered the whole area of strategy, with actors involved in both formulation and implementation. At the same time that openness occurs, commercial sensitivities regarding the content strategy (i.e., commercially sensitive information, proprietary knowledge) do require levels of opacity and exclusion. Although in our cases, the need to be opaque was associated with strategies of moving down the value chain, other studies show that commercial secrecy is not isolated to this strategy, but is far more common (Dufresne & Offstein, 2008), suggesting that setting undesirable zones of participation (depicted by zone D in Figure 2) is part and parcel of open strategy.

Finally, there is also the gap between the actual zone of participation (zone E in Figure 2) and the organizationally desirable zone of participation (Zone C), which can be a source of some additional tensions. In our cases, there is a close interdependence between the final product and member operations that require certain levels of participation as explained earlier. Members' lack of knowledge to understand the strategy content inhibits their capability to participate, despite their willingness. When the basis for inclusion is expertise, and the actors' domain expertise is somewhat distant from the strategy content (as is evidenced in the Delta and Meta cases), there is likely to be a lower willingness by actors to participate in strategizing. In this zone, greater transparency will have little impact. Additional mechanisms for participation are required to help bridge the actual zone of participation (Zone E) and the desired zone (Zone C). In our cases, such participation mechanisms included seminars, market visits and visits from key consumers, to increase the understanding of the member-shareholders of this part of the strategy formulation, and new committee structures to ensure better communication about, and adoption to support, strategy implementation by the members.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS.

This paper set out to answer the question: "*the nature of the relationship between openness in strategizing and the choice of strategic initiative*". We make two contributions that advance extant knowledge on the emergent open strategy concept based on our examination of strategic initiatives in a context where open strategy is expected to be long established: that is, producer co-ops.

First, we derived a zones of participation (and non-participation) model that shows why participation in open strategy is the result of the firm's strategy and individuals' capability and willingness to participate. Our model builds on work that shows the agency of middle managers (Wooldridge et al., 2008; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013; Wright et al., 2016) and other stakeholders (Appleyard & Chesbrough, 2017; Yanow, 2004; Chesbrough & Appleyard, 2007; Schmitt, 2011) in strategizing. We extended this by showing how actors' choices to participate in open strategy are shaped by firm-level and individual-level tensions related to inclusion and transparency. Along those lines, and recognizing the importance of the capability to contribute, future work might benefit from examination of the forms of legitimacy (domain expertise being just one) that actors employ to advance their agendas in and through strategy processes and management responses to such forms of power (Ackermann & Eden, 2011). Closer attention to the discourses that (traditional) strategists and other actors employ to include and exclude the different voices in open strategy could provide new insights into the political processes that underlie inclusion and transparency.

Second, we extended existing knowledge about the tensions associated with open strategy by showing how such tensions come about through the strategy content, process and context interplay. As our study shows, certain types of strategies can cause certain strategy processes to shift from being open towards being closed. That is, although open strategy principles are built into the co-operative organizational form, the shift in strategy content has significant impacts on the processes of inclusion and transparency in strategizing. Beyond the reminder that strategy content, processes, and context cannot be divorced (Pettigrew, 1987), our study showed that open strategy is not limited to strategy formulation only. The currently held view is that open strategy is a matter of strategy formulation (Luedicke et al., 2017), with strategy implementation remaining the work of strategists (Whittington et al., 2011). What our study shows is how open strategy can involve both strategy formulation and implementation. We think that our study signals the need for greater attention on wider strategizing processes, not only strategy formulation.

Finally, the managerial implications of our study are two-fold. In recognizing the strategy content, process, and context interplay, managers tasked with opening up their organization's strategy are well-advised to carefully consider how their current strategy processes can accommodate a wider set of actors, which could involve issues of commercial sensitivity and how those processes might be affected by changes in the content of the firm's strategies.

Secondly, and related to attempts to broaden participation, management should also consider the different capabilities that actors can bring to strategizing and how the current strategy processes should be adjusted to foster participation that leverages those capabilities through knowledge-translation processes. With regard to the zones of participation, there is a need for more robust knowledge transfer and translation techniques (authors' reference) for actors in the non-participation and misguided participation zones to ensure their move towards the desired participation zone.

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