

How Organizing Matters for Societal Grand Challenges

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HOW ORGANIZING MATTERS FOR SOCIETAL GRAND CHALLENGES

Ali Aslan Gümüşay, Emilio Marti, Hannah Trittin-Ulbrich and Christopher Wickert

ABSTRACT

Societal grand challenges have moved from a marginal concern to a mainstream issue within organization and management theory. How diverse forms of organizing help tackle – or reinforce – grand challenges has become centrally important. In this introductory paper, we take stock of the contributions to the volume on Organizing for Societal Grand Challenges and identify three characteristics of grand challenges that require further scholarly attention: their interconnectedness, fluidity, and paradoxical nature. We also emphasize the need to expand our methodological repertoire and reflect upon our practices as a scholarly community.

Keywords: Grand challenges; impact; organization theory; management; methodology; research; teaching

THE TURN TOWARD SOCIETAL GRAND CHALLENGES

Research disciplines are not merely a collection of methods and theories; they also foster a sense of what questions are “worth answering” (Davis, 2015, p. 314). Organizational scholars are continuously rethinking and reframing what these questions are and how their research addresses current and important phenomena in the real world with a view to impacting society (Marti & Scherer, 2016; Wickert, Post, Doh, Prescott, & Prencipe, 2021). Societal grand challenges have been a key construct that have motivated and propelled these efforts (Ferraro,

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Etzion, & Gehman, 2015; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016; Gümüşay, Claus, & Amis, 2020). Resonating with an enduring interest in societal issues (Freeman, 1984; Walsh, Weber, & Margolis, 2003), this renewed and intensified focus on societal grand challenges, which proliferated in the past few years, is based on an understanding that organizations play a key role in creating and addressing these challenges. On the one hand, organizations are often part of what gives rise to grand challenges, for instance, when they engage in practices that fuel the “dark” and problematic societal aspects of the digital transformation (Trittin-Ulbrich, Scherer, Munro, & Whelan, 2021). On the other hand, organizations can help tackle or address such challenges, for instance, by promoting responsible innovations that mitigate climate change (Scherer & Voegtlin, 2020). The papers in this volume consolidate and expand organizational research on societal grand challenges. In doing so, it shows that grand challenges need to be a key concern for organizational scholars and how they can exert an impact on these challenges through their research and engagement with practice.

Societal grand challenges are all around us. These challenges are “societal” insofar as they affect members of society and their environments. They are “grand” insofar as their effects are large scale and potentially global. Key grand challenges include the climate emergency, the digital transformation, and different forms of inequality. As such, grand challenges are highly complex and wicked in nature and may never be fully solved (Rittel & Webber, 1973). They are commonly defined as “specific critical barrier(s) that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem with a high likelihood of global impact through widespread implementation” (*Grand Challenges Canada*, 2011, p. iv). These definitions also suggest that business-centric challenges such as ensuring competitive advantage or increasing innovation performance are *not* societal grand challenges – an attempt to overstretch the research agenda in this way would be problematic as it would weaken the conceptual clarity and value of the underlying construct.

We conceive of “societal grand challenges” as a perspective rather than a theory. By perspective, we mean that the construct expands the questions worth answering for organizational scholars, that it offers conceptual ideas on how to engage with central societal concerns of our time, and that it creates an umbrella term that facilitates interaction and collaboration among scholars (Hirsch & Levin, 1999). At the same time, organizational research on societal grand challenges must draw on organizational theories to develop thorough theoretical contributions. As a new perspective, the societal grand challenges approach should also motivate researchers to rethink their role within society – a topic that several papers in this volume cover. We now turn to an overview of the volume.

THE VOLUME *ORGANIZING FOR SOCIETAL GRAND CHALLENGES*

This volume offers an organizational perspective on societal grand challenges. Section I (“Diverse Forms of Organizing & Societal Grand Challenges”) features six papers that examine how diverse forms of organizing tackle or reinforce grand challenges. Section II (“Scholarship & Societal Grand Challenges”) includes five

papers that focus on the implications of engaging with grand challenges for scholarship. Section III (“Reflections & Outlook”) concludes with two reflective essays that ponder and expand upon two seminal papers by [Ferraro et al. \(2015\)](#) and [George et al. \(2016\)](#), respectively.

The papers in this volume cover diverse forms of organizing; they consider an entrepreneurial initiative, an advocacy hub, a digital platform, and a meta-organization. They also focus on a wide variety of regions – including Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America – and engage with multiple grand challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, decent work, hunger, inequality, and poverty. [Table 1](#) provides an overview.

[Ferraro et al. \(2015, p. 365\)](#); see also [Gehman et al., 2022](#)) have highlighted three analytical facets of grand challenges: complexity, uncertainty and evaluativeness. Complexity refers to the entanglement of grand challenges with feedback loops and tipping points as well as their nonlinearity. Uncertainty highlights difficulties in predicting and preparing. Evaluativeness relates to the plurality of meanings, understandings, and assessments due to the diversity of evaluation criteria. [Ferraro et al. \(2015\)](#) further argue for a participatory architecture, distributed experimentation, and multivocal inscription to tackle grand challenges organizationally. Participatory architectures are structures and rules that allow for engagement and interaction among diverse actors to constructively pursue long-term plans. Distributed experimentation refers to a joint effort to iteratively explore different pathways to generate small wins. Multivocal inscription is a material and discursive activity that enables coordination and engagement despite different interpretations and without consensus over meaning. Extending these considerations, the papers feature three themes that organizational engagement with grand challenges have in common: (1) governance, partnerships, and regulation; (2) fluidity and temporality; and (3) communication, imagination, and narratives.

Insights into the Complexity of Grand Challenges

Three papers in this volume explore how the complexity of societal grand challenges triggers the emergence of certain forms of organization and new regulatory infrastructures. [Kaufmann and Danner-Schröder \(2022\)](#) insightfully review the existing research on grand challenges with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The authors outline the various organizational forms that can address these grand challenges and suggest a framework how to analyze them in relation to their organizational segment and their communicational technological qualities. [Gegenhuber, Schüßler, Reischauer, and Thäter \(2022\)](#) illustrate how new infrastructures of private governance emerge in response to the growing platform economy and the proliferation of precarious platform work. The authors outline how new institutional infrastructures that address grand challenges are based on creatively recombining existing templates to allow multiple actors from different domains to take part in collective organizing efforts. [Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer \(2022\)](#), in turn, draw on the notion of meta-organization and the case of the International Whaling Commission to investigate how incompatible social orders emerged, evolved, and clashed between the meta-organization

Table 1. Papers in This Volume.

Paper	Core Argument	Key Contribution	Grand Challenge	Theoretical Perspective(s)	Context
1. Kroeger, Siebold, Günzel-Jensen, Saade, Heikkilä	Value-driven sensegiving mobilizes heterogeneous stakeholders who ordinarily would not collaborate with each other	Demonstrates the centrality of values for mobilizing heterogeneous stakeholders across boundaries to collectively tackle grand challenges	Gender inequality	Sensegiving	Entrepreneurial initiative in Lebanon
2. Gegenhuber, Schußler, Reischauer, Thäter	Templates for new institutional infrastructures enable actors from various field to organize for grand challenges together in new private governance efforts	Pre-existing templates are important to build new institutional infrastructures in emerging fields	Decent work	Institutional theory	“Crowdwork Agreement,” a jointly developed initiative by platforms and the trade union IG Metall in Germany
3. Schoeneborn, Vásquez, Cornelissen	Metaphorical communication may help to coordinate multiple actors to tackle societal grand challenges	Framework for metaphorical communication based on a metaphor’s vividness and responsible actionability	COVID-19 pandemic	Communication perspective	Theoretical framework for metaphorical communication
4. Arciniegas Pradilla, Bento da Silva & Reinecke	Grand challenges or wicked problems present themselves in different manifestations over time, which in turn shape how organizations respond to these problems	There is never a “true” formulation of a grand challenge, only a narrative construction that informs the responses to grand challenges	Poverty	Narratives	Fe y Alegria (FyA)
5. Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer	Different social orders interfere with each other in the process of meta-organizing, which can create problems that prevent a meta-organization from effectively tackling a grand challenge	Demonstrates that meta-organizational decidability is necessary to ensure the continuity of collective action in governance-mandated meta-organizations	Marine ecosystem conservation	Meta-organizational lens	International Whaling Commission
6. Stjerne, Wenzel & Svejnova	Different temporalities in shared narratives help different actors to commit to fluid forms of organizing	Illustrates importance of different temporalities in shared narratives for collectively tackling grand challenges	Hunger	Narrative perspective	SDG2 Advocacy Hub

7. Kaufmann & Danner-Schröder	Different and novel forms of organizing need to be employed creatively to tackle grand challenges	A trichotomous relationship between different forms of organizations is necessary to tackle grand challenges	SDGs	–	Literature review
8. Dittrich	Consider the “scale” of grand challenges as a social construction	Researchers can better understand the meaning of grand challenges for different people in different contexts where scale is not necessarily a static phenomenon	–	–	Individual researchers’ methodological repertoire
9. Rauch & Ansari	Using diaries can uncover otherwise hidden perceptions about grand challenges	Evaluate how analyzing diaries can be a valuable source to illuminate the innermost thoughts and feelings of people at the forefront of grand challenges	Doctors without Borders as illustrative case	–	Individual researchers’ methodological repertoire
10. Gatzweiler, Frey-Heger, Ronzani	Grand challenges need to be a core feature of business school curricula	Identifies three barriers to learning about grand challenges and how to overcome them	–	“Uncomfortable knowledge”	Business Schools and their curricula; Individual academic as teacher
11. Friesike, Dobusch, Heimstädt	Early career scholars should adopt a postheroic understanding of impact	Five common concerns are addressed that early-career researchers face when they strive for societal impact	–	Post-heroic conception of impact; Impact work	Individual academic as researcher, and teacher
12. Gehman, Etzion, Ferraro	Robust action is a novel theoretical framework for tackling grand challenges	Three promising research directions are scaffolding, fictional expectations and distributed actorhood	–	Robust action, pragmatism	Reflection on Ferraro et al. (2015)
13. Howard-Grenville & Spengler	Research needs to explore the construction, persistence, and unintended consequences of grand challenges	Grand challenges research so far can be classified according to the justifying context, motivating theory, elaboration of the grand challenges concept, and engagement in academic introspection	–	Management scholarship	Reflection on George et al. (2016)

and its members over time. The authors outline that the “nondecidability” of controversial social orders can lead to the failure of organizing efforts that attempt to tackle societal grand challenges. By investigating issues of governance, partnerships, and regulation, these papers provide new insights into how organizations deal with the complexity of grand challenges.

Insights into the Uncertainty of Grand Challenges

The uncertainty of societal grand challenges demands that organizations engage in temporal coordination. Along these lines, [Stjerne, Wenzel, and Svejenova \(2022\)](#) illustrate how the different temporalities of various narratives support the organizing efforts of an SDG#2 advocacy hub, which is a quite fluid form of organizing. The authors outline how different temporalities enable the commitment of multiple actors to tackle the grand challenge of zero hunger by 2030. [Kroeger, Siebold, Günzel-Jensen, Saade, and Heikkilä \(2022\)](#) outline how value-driven sensegiving allows heterogeneous stakeholders to make sense of and mobilize for a common future vision based on shared values. Focusing on a Lebanese entrepreneurial initiative that aims to tackle the grand challenge of inequality, the authors describe how collective sensemaking around values enables successful joint organizational efforts over time. By investigating issues of fluidity and temporality, these papers examine how organizations deal with the uncertainty of grand challenges.

Insights into the Evaluativeness of Grand Challenges

Three papers in this volume provide insights into the evaluative nature of societal grand challenges by showcasing that commonly shared narratives, metaphors, and communication about grand challenges play a crucial role in coordinated and organized attempts to address these challenges. [Schoeneborn, Vásquez, and Cornelissen \(2022\)](#) develop an analytical framework based on two dimensions of metaphorical communication that may support co-orientation among various actors attempting to tackle grand challenges. The authors argue that two dimensions – vividness and responsible actionability – bolster the organizing capacity of metaphorical communication, a form of communication that enables multiple actors to respond to grand challenges. Ideally, according to the authors, to facilitate co-orientation among multiple actors, metaphors about societal grand challenges should generate novel insights across various domains and indicate specific, tangible, and ethically responsible forms of coordinated action. [Arciniegas Pradilla, Bento da Silva & Reinecke \(2022\)](#) study Fe y Alegría, likely the world’s largest nongovernmental organization, which provides education for the poor across 21 countries in Latin America and Africa. The authors empirically illustrate the emergence of shared narratives about the societal grand challenge of poverty and potential solutions to it. They outline how ongoing cycles of narration about poverty and potential solutions to the challenge helped the organization to provide and adapt its poverty alleviation efforts over time. By highlighting issues of

communication, imagination, and narratives, these papers investigate how organizations deal with the evaluativeness of grand challenges.

Reflecting on Our Scholarly Practices

Engaging with grand challenges also requires us to reflectively engage with our research practices, both with the methods we employ and how we go about having an impact with our research within and beyond academia (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2021). In this regard, two papers offer methodological innovations to address societal grand challenges. Dittrich (2022) suggests considering “scale” as a social construction and treating it accordingly when examining how actors experience grand challenges at different levels of analysis. The author argues that, from a methodological point of view, scalar terms such as “local” and “global” or “big” and “small” are fundamental to how academics and practitioners make sense of and respond to grand challenges. Yet, scale is so taken-for-granted that we rarely question or critically reflect on the concept and how it is used in our research methodologies. To address this, Dittrich seeks to identify scale as an important methodological concept in research on grand challenges and suggests seeing scale as an epistemological frame that participants employ in their everyday practices to make sense of, navigate, and develop solutions to grand challenges. Looking at methodological innovations from a different angle, Rauch and Ansari (2022) suggest that diaries are a useful yet underappreciated methodological tool for studying grand challenges. The authors illustrate how different ways of compiling and analyzing diaries can enable a “deep analysis of individuals’ internal processes and practices” (Radcliffe, 2018, p. 188), and the insights thus gained cannot be gleaned from other sources of data, such as interviews and observations. In essence, diaries serve to enrich our methodological toolkit by capturing what people think and feel behind the scenes but may not express or display in public.

Two further papers reflect on our role as academics and on the challenges of making an impact beyond the scholarly community. In an analysis of the role of academics that combine teaching and research, Gatzweiler, Frey-Heger, and Ronzani (2022) discuss how scholars can overcome barriers to learning and uncomfortable knowledge related to grand challenges. Focusing on recent programmatic attempts to advance “responsible education” in business schools, they identify three barriers to learning about grand challenges: cognitive overload, emotional detachment, and organizational obliviousness. Ultimately, the authors seek to contribute to the discussion on barriers to learning on grand challenges and how to make business school education more attuned to the transformational and societal challenges of our time. Friesike, Dobusch, and Heimstädt (2022) take this discussion further by highlighting several challenges that early-career scholars specifically face in their quest to reconcile their research and teaching duties, as well as their own career aspirations and ambitions to achieve societal impact. These authors argue that many early-career researchers are motivated by the prospect of creating knowledge that is useful beyond the academic community. However, as they add, these aspirations often come hand in hand with multiple challenges faced by early-career researchers when they strive for societal

impact. The paper concludes with a reflection on these concerns in light of the authors' own experience with impact work, alongside the sketch of a "postheroic" perspective on impact, according to which seemingly mundane activities are inter-linked and aggregated in a meaningful way.

Finally, two essays review existing work and outline avenues for future research. [Gehman, Etzion and Ferraro \(2022\)](#) revisit their award-winning paper in *Organization Studies* ([Ferraro et al., 2015](#)). They take their original framework further and refine their argument for robust action as a theoretical framework to engage with grand challenges. They then identify three promising research directions – termed scaffolding, fictional expectations and distributed actorhood. [Howard-Grenville and Spengler \(2022\)](#) take the influential 2016 editorial by [George et al. \(2016\)](#) as a starting point for a forward citation analysis. They find that existing work can be classified according to the justifying context, motivating theory, elaboration of the grand challenges concept, and engagement in academic introspection. Future work, they argue, should further scrutinize the construction and consequences of grand challenges.

MOVING FORWARD

Based on the papers in this volume, we outline (1) a research outlook on how to move forward research on societal grand challenges and (2) ideas on how researchers can make their scholarly practices more impactful.

Research Outlook

There is still considerable promise and potential in researching grand challenges from an organizational perspective. In particular, we identify three characteristics of grand challenges that are conceptually related to the three facets (complexity, uncertainty, evaluativeness) classified by [Ferraro et al. \(2015\)](#). These characteristics are the interconnectedness, fluidity, and paradoxical nature of grand challenges.

First, grand challenges are interconnected. This highlights that grand challenges are not just individually complex, as highlighted by [Ferraro et al. \(2015\)](#), but collectively interwoven. Tackling one grand challenge may lead to another one being negatively reinforced. As a result, while lists of grand challenges, such as the United Nations SDGs, are useful guiding categories, they need to be treated with caution. They may lead to cognitive rigidity and create an image of mutually exclusive individual grand challenges that are collectively exhaustive. The universal spread of COVID-19 has shown that new grand challenges may rapidly appear. As work by [Sachs et al. \(2019\)](#) highlights, the 17 SDGs can be grouped into 6 larger categories of deep societal transformations pertaining to social, health, energy, ecological, community, and digital concerns. The authors indicate that these grand challenges are highly intertwined, which makes tackling them all the more difficult. As a result, engaging with them commonly requires coordinated, collaborative, and collective efforts. Thus, we encourage case-study research that explores how organizations tackle the entanglement of multiple

grand challenges – for instance, by exploring key trends such as digitalization and sustainability as well as their positive and negative repercussions.

Second, grand challenges are fluid. They are dynamic and evade simple demarcation. This relates to their uncertainty (Ferraro et al., 2015) and highlights the need to approach them as n-order problems with feedback loops and unintended consequences. For example, crowdsourcing and other new forms of platform-organized work are fueling the proliferation of precarious, self-employed, and low-paid work that is undermining social welfare systems and are thus endangering modern democracies (Bauer & Gegenhuber, 2015; Karanović, Berends, & Engel, 2021; Morozov, 2015). Similarly, while digitalization can arguably support organizational efforts to tackle grand challenges, new, seemingly efficient big data management techniques have the potential to promote racism, inequality, and discrimination rather than reducing it (O’Neil, 2016). Yet, we lack thorough analysis and theorizing of these double-edged outcomes of organizing for society. We need to pay close attention to organizing, and not just as a potential solution to various grand challenges, as called for by George et al. (2016) – the potential dark side of organizing efforts for grand challenges and their negative social impact also require attention. One possible research pathway involves considering the implications of the fluidity of grand challenges for forms of organizing – such as fluid memberships and boundaries (Gümüşay, 2012). Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) emphasize specific criteria, namely interconnected decision-making, actorhood, and identity. Based on these criteria, the authors introduce the notion of “organizationality” to describe how fluid social collectives achieve coordinated organizing. There may thus be a link between the fluidity of the grand challenge and the fluidity of actorhood and of the response mechanisms. More research is needed to examine both how grand challenges cause 2nd or nth-order problems and how organizing can tackle these problems through dynamic, fluid engagement.

Third, grand challenges are paradoxical. They entail contradictory yet inter-related parts that need to be addressed jointly. Paradoxes are “persistent contradiction between interdependent elements” (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016, p. 10). The paradoxical nature of grand challenges relates to the evaluative facet that Ferraro et al. (2015) have highlighted. Grand challenges have multiple criteria of worth that are potentially interdependent yet contradictory. Hence, organizations need to consider developing strategic ambiguity (Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw, 2010) and elastic organizing (Gümüşay, Smets, & Morris, 2020) to embrace diverse perspectives and approaches. Tackling this facet requires a paradox mindset (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018). The response mechanism to this facet is thus a “both-and” mindset and “both-and” action. We see strong potential for applying a paradox perspective when researching grand challenges. We encourage research examining the relationship between seemingly paradoxical response strategies and forms of organizing. For instance, we wonder whether certain forms of organizing are better suited to addressing paradoxical grand challenges, given that, for many forms of organizing, such as organizational hybrids, paradoxes are inherent to their existence.

Outlook for Scholarly Practice

Addressing societal grand challenges requires organizational researchers to reflect on their role as academics and expand their methodological repertoire as well as how they go about striving to make an impact. Several of the papers in this volume, specifically those in the section entitled “Scholarship & Societal Grand Challenges,” provide food-for-thought about how to reflect on our scholarly practice and enhance our impact on practice.

Methodological creativity and innovation are needed to shine light on those yet underexplored aspects of societal grand challenges related to organizations and organizing. While we do not wish to argue for a move away from the established quantitative and qualitative methodological toolbox, the turn to grand challenges provides complementary opportunities for organizational scholars to leave their methodological comfort zone. Several contributions in this volume attest to the benefits of such endeavors (Dittrich, 2022; Rauch & Ansari, 2022). More generally, we concur with Eisenhardt et al. (2016) that research on important societal phenomena, such as grand challenges, must not come at the expense of rigorous methodology. However, we need to appreciate the complexities of the empirical settings that are part and parcel of this type of research (Gümüşay & Amis, 2020). While scholarship on grand challenges is still developing its methodological repertoire, we as authors will have to show the highest possible degree of methodological transparency and to thoroughly justify our choices if we are to create credible scholarship that is appreciated by the mainstream audience we want to reach. As authors, we also need to anticipate what reviewers are familiar with and explain our methodological pathways. As reviewers of research on grand challenges, in turn, we need to be open to methodological innovations while expecting their authors to explain them properly.

These considerations about where and how we collect and analyze our data concur with recent calls for more problem-driven and phenomenon-oriented research when examining grand challenges (de Bakker et al., 2021; Hoffman, 2021; Wickert et al., 2021). In essence, problem-driven research that can be both qualitative and quantitative takes an empirical “complication” as a starting point for the inquiry which then informs subsequent theorizing. As Wickert et al. (2021, p. 303) suggest,

a theoretical contribution should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to the end of solving or at least better understanding and raising awareness about an important real-world problem.

As such, contributions to theory should not stand in opposition to contributions to practice – quite the opposite is true.

Moving away from the methodological concerns that accompany potentially impactful research, we should also consider important ways to raise awareness about grand challenges – by bringing them into the classroom (Wickert et al., 2021) and making this knowledge openly available to nonstudent learners (Trittin-Ulbrich, 2020). Organizational scholars, like other academics in business schools, are in an ideal position to engage in conversations with the business leaders of tomorrow, who will likely have the capacity to make decisions that can affect

grand challenges in different ways, positively and negatively. Research shows that raising awareness about such topics in business school curricula is a critical yet often underemphasized aspect of how academics can have an impact on practice and society more broadly (Campbell, 2007; Gatzweiler et al., 2022).

Despite the importance of impact work and the various opportunities we have as scholars to engage in it, we should not forget that striving for impact can become yet another task on our ever-growing to-do list and we must find ways to manage this pressure. Friesike et al. (2022) draw attention to the challenges that particular early-career scholars face when juggling with all those growing expectations. Some division of labor might thus be not only necessary but also desirable, as the expectation to produce regular A-level publications, to excel in teaching, and, in addition, to be featured in the media may be overwhelming to many of us. Balancing the need to change the world for the better with the need to maintain a healthy work–life balance is important, particularly for younger scholars. Honest conversations about this are thus important and we encourage scholars to put this topic on the agenda of workshops and conferences.

Overall, we believe that the scholarly practices of organizational theorists that tackles societal grand challenges need to involve reflexivity about methodological choices and how we develop our self-understanding as scholars based on what are probably the three most important building blocks of scholarship: research, teaching, and creating societal impact.

CONCLUSION

Organizing is front and center in addressing grand challenges and organizational theorists need to engage with grand challenges more closely and extensively. With this volume, we hope to contribute to this endeavor. More work is certainly needed to further theory development but also to achieve methodological advancement as well as community building – all with a complementary focus on impact.

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