

Université de Montréal

Towards a Communicative Understanding of Organizational Change:  
Koumbit's Change Process

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Cette thèse intitulée:  
Towards a Communication-Based Understanding of Organizational Change:  
Koumbit's Change Process

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## Abstract

Although organizational change is part of our daily experience of organizations and the literature that explores it is vast, we have limited knowledge of the ways change is actually accomplished (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Chia, 1999). I suggest that the key to answering this question can be found in communication. However, extant conceptualizations of change fail to account for the role that communication plays in the production of organizational change. Hence, the main goal of this dissertation is to describe how organizational change takes place in communication, that is, how organizational change is interactionally brought about.

The understanding of organizational change I develop in this research conceives of communication as a process in which realities are interactively created, negotiated and changed. This conceptualization of communication is grounded in a *plurified view of interactions* (Cooren, Fox, Robichaud & Talih, 2005; Cooren, 2010) that acknowledges the contribution of beings of diverse ontologies (e.g., computers, bylaws, principles, emotions, rules, etc.) to action.

Mobilizing this view of communication I studied the changes that were taking place in Koumbit, a Montreal based non-profit organization in the field of information technology. Data were collected by means of observation, interviews and archival research.

The findings of this study show that organizational change is an incremental process, that takes place one interaction at the time, where a difference is created in the state of affairs by composing and recomposing sets of associations. While accomplished in the *here and now*, interactions account for what happened in the past and have a bearing for what will happen in the future. In turn, this study suggests that from a communication viewpoint, the mechanisms through which organizational change is accomplished are not very different from those that produce organizing.

**Keywords:** organizational change, organizational communication, translation, staging practices, text and conversation theory, interactional analysis.

## Résumé

Comment comprendre les dynamiques qui sous-tendent les changements des organisations? Le changement organisationnel fait partie de la réalité quotidienne des organisations et, comme en témoigne une vaste littérature, le sujet a été abordé à partir de diverses perspectives conceptuelles. Toutefois, plusieurs questions fondamentales demeurent quant à la façon dont le changement organisationnel est accompli (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Chia, 1999).

Je suggère que la clé pour répondre à ces questions se trouve dans l'étude de la communication. Cependant, le rôle de la communication dans la production du changement reste peu exploré dans les conceptualisations actuelles sur le sujet.

Ainsi, l'objectif principal de cette thèse est de décrire la façon dont le changement émerge *dans* la communication, en d'autres termes, comment il est accompli à partir des interactions.

Dans cette recherche, je propose que la compréhension du changement passe par une vision de la communication comme un processus constant dans lequel les réalités sont créées, négociées et transformées de manière interactive.

Cette conception est fondée sur *a plurified view of interactions* (Cooren, Fox, Robichaud & Talih, 2005; Cooren 2010) qui prend en considération la contribution d'êtres appartenant à diverses ontologies (e.g., ordinateurs, règlements, principes, émotions, règles, c.) dans l'action.

En mobilisant cette vision de la communication, j'ai étudié les changements qui ont eu lieu à Koumbit — une organisation à but non lucratif basée à Montréal qui œuvre dans le domaine des technologies de l'information. L'observation, les entrevues ainsi que la révision de documents officiels ont été les techniques choisies pour cueillir les données.

Ma recherche m'a permis de déterminer que le changement organisationnel est un processus progressif qui se matérialise d'interaction en interaction. C'est en

composant et en recomposant des ensembles d'associations que se crée une différence dans l'état des choses. Si bien les interactions sont accomplies dans le *ici et le maintenant*, leur caractère hybride leur permet de rendre compte de ce que l'organisation a été et de ce qu'elle sera. Cette étude suggère que, d'un point de vue communicationnel, les mécanismes à partir desquels le changement organisationnel est accompli n sont pas aussi différents de ceux qui produisent les processus organisants (*organizing*).

**Mots clés:** changement organisationnel, communication organisationnel, traduction, *staging practices*, théorie du texte et conversation, analyse des intections.

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## Chapter 1

### **Understanding Organizational Change: A Balancing Act Between Substance and Process, the Ordinary and the Extraordinary**

*The point is that usually  
we look at change, but we do not see it.  
We speak of change, but we do not think about it.  
We say that change exists, that everything changes,  
that change is the very law of things: Yes,  
we say it and we repeat it; but those are only words,  
and we reason and philosophize as though  
change did not exist.*

*Bergson, 1946, p. 131*

The main goal of this dissertation is to describe how organizational change takes place in communication. By closely analyzing organizational members' interactions, I attempt to document how organizational change is interactionally brought about. Such a description brings together two sets of ideas: First, a view of the world in general, and organizations in particular, as being a plenum of agencies (Cooren, 2006a); second, a vision of organizational change as a communication-based phenomenon. The study proposes that from a communication viewpoint, the mechanisms through which organizational change is accomplished are not very different from those that produce organizing.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in the organizational communication approach of the Montreal School (Brummans, 2006; Cooren & Taylor, 1997; Taylor et al., 1996; Taylor & Van Every, 2000), most particularly, Cooren's (2000, 2004, 2006a, 2008a, 2010) appropriation of Actor Network Theory (Callon, 1986; Callon & Latour, 1981; Latour, 1987, 1996, 2005). I use this approach to explain the communicative constitution of organizations and how they change.

This study of organizational change was conducted at Koumbit, a small non-profit organization in the field of Information Technology (IT) that was experimenting with a new organizational structure, intended to improve their

decision-making process. By taking a close look at interactions, I learned that organizational change can be understood as a *process of translation* by which members transform a state of affairs. Change takes place as agents transform their ideas into accounts (i.e., texts) that propose new sets of associations. Members' translations are aimed at convincing other agents to adhere to the sets of associations they are proposing. This mobilization is accomplished in conversation through the formulation and resolution of problems. The latter constitutes a communicative process through which organizational members attribute and subtract agency to and from a wide variety of human and nonhuman agents (Castor & Cooren, 2006; Cooren, 2010).

Hence, I found that organizational change is an incremental process that takes place one interaction at the time, where a difference is created in the state of affairs by composing and recomposing sets of associations. While accomplished in the *here and now*, interactions account for what happened in the past and for what will happen in the future.

In the pages that follow, I define the problem addressed in this study by looking at the ways other authors have approached it and tried to come to terms with it.

### **1.1. Competing Views of Organizational Change: Process vs. Outcome**

Undeniably, organizational change constitutes a major research area in the field of management and organization studies (Pettigrew et al., 2001; Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). Several academic journals devoted to the subject<sup>1</sup> and an important number of articles and books published each year stand as proof of its significance in the field. Moreover, the focus on the subject is not exclusive to the academic sphere. Often, large-scale organizational changes make newspaper headlines and slight

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<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *Research in Organizational Change and Development* and *Journal of Accounting and Organizational Change*.

adaptations in our work practices populate our everyday talk. So, whether it is the arrival of a new boss, a downsizing initiative or the introduction of a new work procedure, organizational change is an integral part of our experience of organizations. Thus, it is one of the main concerns of academics, practitioners and those who work day after day to sustain their workplaces.

As an approach to the study of organization, change is not only crucial for understanding how organizations evolve throughout time, but also how they are brought to life by their members. Although the centrality of organizational change is unquestionable, other issues about change have been challenged and brought to the center stage for closer examination (e.g., the lack of unity in approaches and methods to study change and the divide between academic and practitioner views of change). Recently, questions about the nature of organizational change have encouraged researchers not only to rethink this notion but also to reflect on how they study and account for it.

Debates surrounding the nature of organizational change revolve around two sets of interrelated tensions. One tension pertains to the articulation of stability and change and the other addresses how researchers conceive of change as a result or a process. Van de Ven and Poole's (2005) typology of approaches to the study of organizational change is particularly useful for plotting these tensions (see Table 1.1.). According to these authors, privileging stability as the natural state of organization or focusing on ongoing change depends on how we conceive of organizations. Thus, our conceptions of organization inform our view of change and how it takes place. The authors identified two distinct visions of organization<sup>2</sup>. First, as a *noun*, organization is viewed as a social entity or structure "occupying a relatively-fixed space and manifesting an interior and an exterior" (Smith, 1993, p.

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<sup>2</sup> These views are grounded in two different philosophical traditions: the philosophy of substance and process philosophy. The first, which is also recognized as the philosophy of being, views substance as the key to understand and explain the world, "nature is composed of stable material substance or things that change only in their positioning in space and time" (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005, p. 1378). Consequently, fixity, persistence and continuity are privileged. In contrast, process philosophers privilege activity over substance, process over product, and change over continuity (Rescher, 1996).

12). Second, as a *verb*, organization becomes *organizing* “a process that is continuously being constituted and reconstituted” (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005, p. 1380).

**Table 1.1. Van de Ven and Poole’s Typology of Approaches for Studying Organizational Change**

		Ontology	
		An organization is represented as being:	
		A noun, a social actor, a real entity (‘thing’)	A verb, a process of organizing, emergent flux
<b>Epistemology</b> (Method for studying change)	Variance method	<b>Approach I</b> Variance studies of change in organizational entities by causal analysis of independent variables that explain change in entity (dependent variable)	<b>Approach IV</b> Variance studies of organizing by dynamic modeling of agent-based models of chaotic complex adaptive systems
	Process narratives	<b>Approach II</b> Process studies of change in organizational entities narrating sequences of events, stages or cycles of change in the development of an entity	<b>Approach III</b> Process studies of organizing by narrating emergent actions and activities by which collective endeavors unfold

Source: Van de Ven & Poole, 2005, p. 1387

When organization is conceived as a social entity, its stable and unchanging character is stressed and change becomes a rare event that disrupts its natural state. This means that change seldom happens, and when it does, it is by means of rational, deliberate action (i.e. managerial intervention, planned change initiatives, etc.). Change is considered to be a manageable process. In this view, “an organization is always something in some particular state or phase of a process” (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005, p. 1380). Stability therefore precedes change.

Conversely, when organization is viewed as a process, its moving and changing nature are highlighted. Change is constant and it is not necessarily manageable. Interestingly, change and stability are explained in the same way: as reifications of processes that depend on the observer’s point of view. In this sense,

“stability and change are judgments, not actual states, because the organization is a process that is continuously being constituted and reconstituted” (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005, p. 1380).

Looking at the ways researchers defined organizational change, Van de Ven and Poole (2005) recognized two overarching visions of change: as an *observed difference over time* and as a *sequence of events*. These views imply distinct epistemological claims. For example, when change is conceptualized as an observed difference, change becomes a dependent variable that is generally studied by using a variance approach. The focus on the variance approach is on how dependent and independent variables relate and affect each other. When change is conceptualized as a sequence of events, change is viewed as a process and researchers tend to use a process theory. The focus of the study is on the temporal order of events to explain how change unfolds.

According to Van de Ven and Poole (2005), both studies that view organization as a social entity and studies that use variance methods have dominated organizational change studies. Conceptualizations of change that stem from these ontological and epistemological outlooks are useful for determining causes and mechanisms that drive processes; however, they are not suitable for studying “important questions of how the change comes about” (p. 1388).

Since the dominant approaches in organizational change do not address questions of how change is actually *accomplished*, what these authors are telling us is that there is a need for studies that focus on this issue.

This claim is not new, though. Over the years, similar claims about the need to focus on *how change is accomplished* have been made by other researchers. James March was one of the first organizational scholars to draw attention to the *actions* behind organizational change. In *Footnotes to Organizational Change* (1981), the author contested several well-established assumptions about organizational change (e.g., its episodic, rational and manageable nature) and presented a view that focused



on everyday ordinary action to explain change in organizational settings. March conceived of change as a continuous process that results “from relatively stable, routine processes that relate organizations to their environments” (p. 564). In so doing, he demystified change by stressing its prosaic nature and the ordinary character of the actions and people that bring it about.

Several years later, a number of researchers in the field of organization studies (Chia, 1999; Orlikowski, 1996; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999) restated the need to rethink the notion of change. They argued that change has often been conceptualized by taking stability as the norm and change as the exception. This assumption underlies various change models (e.g. planned change, technological imperative, punctuated equilibrium<sup>3</sup>) that depict change as the difference in the state of a variable at different moments in time. The problem with this conceptualization of change is that researchers focus on describing what is different, the content of what has changed, leaving the processes that *leads to* that difference unaccounted for. In other words, “change is reduced to a series of static positions.... Change per se remains elusive and unaccounted—strangely, it is whatever goes on between the positions representing change” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 571).

By depicting change as what is unusual, researchers tend to conceive of it as episodes, discrete events that are separated from organization members’ everyday actions and routines. Thus, change is reified and the central role of individuals in the creation of change is downplayed.

## **1.2. Overcoming the Primacy of Stability Over Change: A Focus on Action**

Researchers tend to suggest that a process-based view of change is in line to tackle the problems resulting from mobilizing an outcome vision of change. Some of

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<sup>3</sup> Although this perspective recognizes the existence of piecemeal change, its main focus is on radical change.

the alternative visions of organizational change these researchers propose include *situated change* (Orlikowski, 1996), *continuous change* (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Feldman, 2000; Weick & Quinn, 1999), a *rhizomic model of organizational change and transformation* (Chia, 1999), a *performative model of change*<sup>4</sup> (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) and *contextualism* (Pettigrew, 1985). The theoretical bases of these views comprise situated action (Suchman, 1987), structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), process metaphysics (Bergson 1913, 1992) and postmodern/post-structuralist philosophers (Deleuze, 1988; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988).

According to Orlikowski (1996), *situated change* is “grounded in the ongoing practices of organizational actors, and emerges out of their (tacit and not so tacit) accommodations to and experiments with the everyday contingencies, breakdowns, exceptions, opportunities, and unintended consequences that they encounter” (p. 65). This author’s conception of change shifts our attention from the content of change (i.e. what is being changed) to organizational members’ actions in context (i.e. how are things being changed). This study is very successful in linking situated actions (micro level) with grander transformations (macro level) in the studied organization.

*Continuous change* constitutes one side of a well-known dichotomy that describes organizational change in terms of its pace or frequency. Although some researchers had theorized discontinuous change (Nadler et al., 1995; Romanelli & Tushman, 1994; Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985) and its counterpart, incremental change (Quinn, 1980), it was Weick and Quinn who formalized this dichotomy in their 1999 literature review of organizational change. They defined continuous change as “a pattern of endless modifications in work processes and social practice.” (p. 366). Thus, change is seen as an emergent process that evolves through time and is cumulative. Weick and Quinn (1999) posited that change is not exclusively produced by the systems’ “reactions” to environmental pressures; it rather is an integral part of everyday organizing processes. For these authors, episodic and continuous change refer to different levels of analysis:

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<sup>4</sup> This model is based on Feldman’s (2000) performative model of routines.

From a distance (the macro level of analysis), when observers examine the flow of events that constitute organizing, they see what looks like repetitive action, routine, and inertia dotted with occasional episodes of revolutionary change. But a view from closer in (the micro level of analysis) suggests ongoing adaptation and adjustment. (p. 362)

Quite a different view of change was presented by Chia (1999) in his *rhizomic model* of change process. This view is grounded on process philosophers' contentions about the ontological primacy of process over substance<sup>5</sup> and Deleuze's work on change and transformation. The *rhizomic model* of change stresses "the precarious, tentative and heterogeneous network-strengthening features of actor-alliances" (p. 211). According to this view, change is subtle, it takes place by variations and opportunistic conquests. No point of initiation can be traced and the process is unending. As Chia claimed, "there is no unitary point to serve as a natural pivot for... drawing boundaries that define inside and outside and that distinguish 'macro' and 'micro'" (p. 222). This conceptualization promotes a view of change as the constant state of reality; it happens naturally (no intervention is needed) in a variety of locations. Organization as its counterpart consists of attempts to arrest and stabilize this constant flux.

In a similar vein, yet in a more conservative way, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) proposed their *performative model*. For these authors change and stability lie in the eye of the beholder, whether one sees change or stability depends upon the level of action one has chosen to observe. From a macro perspective, phenomena seem more stable; patterns and commonalities can be observed. From a micro perspective, phenomena are constantly changing. The authors located their performative model of change at the micro level. A performative view entails a focus on individual's actions and interactions. Therefore, change is a performance enacted by organizational members over time. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) considered that both views are necessary to understanding change, but only performative accounts of change can "offer us insights into the actual emergence and accomplishment of change" (p. 572).

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<sup>5</sup> A focus on process emphasizes the moving and changing nature of reality.

With few exceptions (see Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Feldman, 2000; Orlikowski, 1996), these extant views of change are mainly theoretical. Nevertheless, they contribute to knowledge about change in several important ways. First, they demystify change by depicting it as an everyday situation. Second, they illustrate how small, routine everyday action may have an impact in the larger context. Third, they show how significant changes are not always the outcome of a planned strategy. However, these authors barely mention an element I deem essential in understanding how change and organization come about, that is, communication. It is in organizational members' daily interactions that change is accomplished, negotiated and adjusted. It is in communication (i.e., by making sense of and giving sense to action) that change is brought about by organizational members.

### **1.3. Studying Change from Within: A Focus on Interactions**

So far, I have established that an important part of the existing literature on organizational change tends to conceptualize change as an outcome, a result. This view fails to account for the ways change is accomplished and obscures the inner workings of this process. Alternative ways to conceptualize and account for change call for a focus on action. However, these views are for the most part still conceptual.

In light of the previous reflections, several questions come to mind: How can the study of change-in-action be approached both conceptually and empirically? How can we conceptually define organizational change to be able to account for change-in-action? What elements should such a conceptualization include? How can they be empirically studied (“operationalized”)? How can we account of change-in-action? Are these accounts very different from accounts of organizing?

In light of these questions, the objective of this dissertation is to study and account for change-in-action empirically. In order to meet this objective, I propose to study organizational interactions. While most empirical studies of change involve the observation of interactions, very few focus on what is accomplished in actual

interactions to understand organizational change. To do so, I will use the Montreal School approach to organizational communication, which is known for its focus on action (Brummans, 2006), in particular the work of Cooren (2000, 2004, 2006a, 2010) on organizing and agency.

By focusing on the organizing capacity of communication, I show how during interactions organizational members change their organizing patterns by framing and reframing problems/solutions in which they allocate and subtract agency to agents of hybrid ontologies. Although this view of change may seem extremely focused on the micro-dynamics of organizing/changing, I content that due to the dislocal character of interactions, communication is capable of explaining organizational dynamics beyond the here-and-now of interactions.

In general, my study will supply information about the actions organizational members collectively perform when they are attempting to change some element(s) of their organization/organizing practices. This focus offers an important contribution to the growing understanding of the inner workings of organizational change. This understanding is crucial for those who design, manage and experience change initiatives because, as Tsoukas and Chia (2002) have stated,

Unless we have an image of change as an ongoing process, a stream of interactions and a flow of situated initiatives, as opposed to a set of episodic events, it will be difficult to overcome the implementation problems of change programs reported in the literature. (pp. 568-569)

Theoretically, this study may contribute to the articulation of change processes with organizing processes (March, 1981; Feldman, 2000), as March (1981) noted that change comes about through conventional, routine activities. As the author pointed out, “neither success nor change requires dramatic action” (p. 575).

A focus on action may also shed light on the role of agency in change processes. Agency has been recognized as a crucial element in effecting societal (Giddens, 1984) and organizational change, yet this concept has been undertheorized in studies of organizational change (Caldwell, 2005; 2006). Literature on this subject

tends to focus on a very particular set of change agents (e.g., consultants, top management, change champions, etc.) whose capacity to act is not problematized. I think that looking at other kinds of change agents will enrich research on organizational change, not only in terms of the variety of actors who intervene but also in terms of their modes of intervention.

Moreover, as I have already stated in this introduction, very few studies have used a process approach with a focus on action to empirically study organizational change as it unfolds (Feldman, 2000; Orlikowski, 1996). Hence, this study will contribute to empirically grounding this claim, yet from a new angle that foregrounds the importance of interactions.

Finally, the change process I studied displayed some very interesting characteristics that have not received sufficient attention in recent literature. For example, this change was a deliberate initiative, in the sense that members had identified something they wanted to change and had also selected a course of action. Nevertheless, this course of action was very general and had not been formalized in a document or plan. They referred to this way of doing change as “organic,” a type of change that has not been theorized before. In addition, the participative nature of this organization had important implications for the way change came about.

#### **1.4. Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This study’s goal is not to create a universal model for the understanding of organizational change. Rather, it aims to shed light on the dynamic of change as it takes place through/during organizational interactions. In other words, my work presents a conceptual framework for the empirical study of organizational change as a communication-based phenomenon. My approach is therefore decidedly partial, as I account for *some* issues of change, while downplaying others (e.g., gender related issues, the role of the larger context in this organization’s change, meaning issues surrounding change, etc.).

The exploratory nature of this study and the focus on the analysis of interactions pose some limitations. First of all, the level of detail of the analysis makes it difficult to analyze large amounts of data in the same depth. This may seem constraining, considering that change is a process thought to unfold over long periods of time. However, while interactions are locally accomplished, they are able to transcend the here and now. Thus, the dislocal nature of interactions actually makes them valid material to study and understand change.

The rest of the dissertation is organized in six chapters. In the next chapter, I further develop my review of extant literature, this time focusing particularly on the work that has been done in the field of organizational communication. This allows me to make an inventory of the ways scholars have addressed the relationship between communication and change, how they study it and how they account for it. Following the literature review, I present the communication approach that guides my study of organizational change-in-action (Chapter 3).

Chapter 4 addresses methodological issues, such as the research design, data collection techniques, as well as the reasons that inform some of the methodological choices I made. In this chapter, I also describe the organization I studied, called “Koumbit.”

The results of the study are presented in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 5, I present a longitudinal account of the change process I studied. The main goal of this account is to contextualize the actions and interactions that I analyze afterwards. Using a conversation analysis inspired approach, I then analyze a series of excerpts that illustrate how change takes place in communication. The goal of this second account is to describe who is acting, what is being accomplished in those interactions, and the mechanisms through which change is brought about.

The discussion of the implications of the previous analysis is presented in Chapter 7. Here, I situate the findings of this study in the extant literature and explore how this findings contribute to the ongoing debates. I also address the limitations of

my approach and suggest new avenues for the study of organizational change through the lens proposed in this study.



## Chapter 2

### Communicating Change or Communicating to Change?

*There is hardly an organizational change which does not involve the re-definition, the re-labeling, or the re-interpretation of an institutional activity. Such acts of re-definition and re-interpretation are, partly at least, performative speech acts that help bring about what speakers pronounce.*

*Tsoukas, 2005, p. 99*

In the previous chapter, I explored two sets of tensions pertaining to the nature of organizational change (i.e., stability vs. change, substance vs. process) that influence how researchers view, study and account for this phenomenon. Conceptualizations of change that favor stability and substance have dominated organizational change studies. The problem with this view is that we lose sight of the process of change itself; in other words, the question of how change was or is being produced is left unanswered.

Several researchers (Chia, 1999; Dawson, 1997; Pettigrew, 1985, 1997; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) have mobilized a process view to account for how change happens in organizations. However, most process-based views of change still remain entirely theoretical (Chia, 1999; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) and the few processual empirical studies that have been conducted (Dawson, 1997; Pettigrew and his colleagues) tend to gloss over actions and interactions due to their contextual and longitudinal focus. Hence, these studies provide accounts that are historically and contextually embedded but present a view from “afar” in which interactions are theoretically and empirically underdeveloped. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) have suggested that to understand how change is actually accomplished “change must be approached from within ... as a performance enacted in time” (p, 572). For me,

interaction and communication can contribute to understand the performative nature of organizational change.

Thus, in the following pages I review a selection of studies from the field of organizational communication that address organizational change. Communication has been treated as an important component of change processes in organizations (Ellis, 1992; Lewis, 1999, 2000). According to Ford and Ford (1995), conceptualizations of communication in organizational change literature mainly fall into two categories: studies that view communication as a tool and those that conceptualize change as “a phenomenon that occurs within communication” (p. 542). I adopt this distinction to organize my review of the literature.

### **2.1. Communication as a Tool for Change: Information Sharing, Channels and Sources**

The tool metaphor views communication as “an instrument, a device, a function, or a means of accomplishing an instrumental goal” (Putnam, Phillips & Chapman, 1996, p. 380). Researchers who follow this metaphor are particularly interested in “how communication influences work effectiveness, improves performance feedback, diffuses organizational innovations, and fosters organizational change” (p. 380). Consequently, communication is conceived as the transmission of information that is vital for the performance of organizational tasks. This transmission is mainly a one-way linear flow and researchers focus on managers as the foremost composers and senders of messages in organizational settings.

Within studies of organizational change, the tool metaphor translates into communication as the “main mechanism of change” (Lewis, 2000), an “integrating component of the change process” (Ellis, 1992) and an “ingredient of successful change” (Young & Post, 1993). Researchers are interested in discovering better and more efficient ways to communicate change, so that employees will accommodate to it more easily, which (supposedly) reduces potential resistance. Communication

becomes the tool used to transmit information about change and communication efforts are aimed at facilitating the enrollment of organizational members. Issues of information sharing, types of channels and sources (Lewis, 1999; Smeltzer, 1991, Ellis, 1992), media use (Timmerman, 2003), timing (Young & Post, 1993; Smeltzer, 1991), rumors (Smeltzer, 1991), ambiguity and uncertainty (Ellis, 1992; Rogers, 1995) are some of the main themes studied in this literature.

Within this literature, planned organizational change is generally seen as an overwhelming event that increases the levels of anxiety in those touched by the change effort and those towards whom the change is directed (i.e., targets of change). Since change affects the status quo and threatens the sense of control of organizational members, it generates feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty. Brummans and Miller (2004), for instance, affirmed that much traditional work on organizational change views uncertainty and ambiguity as “sources of stress and resistance among those affected by the change and thus should be reduced to the extent possible through strategies such as employee participation ... and strategic information sharing from top management” (p. 2).

Hence, a common premise in these studies is that the right information at the right time (Smeltzer, 1991; Young & Post, 1993; DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998) can decrease the levels of uncertainty employees experience and that this may lead to a more positive perception of the change process and ease its acceptance. For example, Smeltzer (1991) asserted that the initial message of change is crucial for the success of any change effort because this is the moment when perceptions of the change (e.g., beneficial, necessary, detrimental) as well as perceptions of how management is handling the situation (e.g., secretly, upfront, trustfully) are constructed. He found that bad timing and the spread of rumors were among the elements that were present in most ineffective announcements.

As Ellis (1992) contended, though, merely communicating is not enough; the way change is communicated and who is communicating it have a significant

influence on employees' attitudes towards change. In a similar vein, Lewis (1999) focused on implementers' choices of channels and sources for the formal communication of organizational change. Her study confirmed some of the mainstream arguments, such as the prominence of face-to-face channels vs. mediated channels in communicating *about* change, but her study also challenged some of the highly recommended strategies suggested in most of the practitioner literature, such as mobilizing line supervisors as sources of information during a change effort.

These studies have underscored the central role of communication during the implementation of planned organizational change by showing the effects of how information is transmitted to organizational members, by highlighting the differences between communication channels and the importance of who is transmitting the information. Yet, by focusing on these aspects of communication researchers have left some other aspects in the dark, such as questions related to the co-construction of meaning and sensemaking. Moreover, the concentration on planned change has ignored other types of change (e.g., continuous, emergent). Consequently, little is known about the role of communication in those types of changes.

Furthermore, these authors approach communication as a separate component of the change process. For this reason, most authors study the communication *of* change rather than *how* change is accomplished in communicational exchanges. Communication amounts to the best ways of providing and sharing information about change. Its main goal is to inform and persuade organizational members. Change is somehow reduced to a message that travels through the communication channels.

In accordance with this observation, much of this literature is based on cause-effect reasoning. It focuses on ways to help managers achieve successful implementations of change. Thus, it aims to create models that predict outcomes and recipes for success. These models are generally grounded in empirical data collected through quantitative methods (e.g., surveys, structured interviews and quasi-experiments). Also, these studies tend to privilege managerial points of view and

issues over those of other organizational stakeholders. Organizational members who are not managers, implementers or change agents tend to be reduced to one all-encompassing category: employees who are viewed as reactive agents, which minimizes their agency and their role in the accomplishment of change. In addition, researchers taking this perspective tend to conceptualize both change and communication as entities, as realities “out there.” Perhaps this last point distinguishes this literature most clearly from the studies reviewed in the next section.

## **2.2. Change as a Communication-based Phenomenon**

Contributions to the study of organizational change as a communication-based phenomenon have mostly been undertaken by researchers who conduct different kinds of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis has been defined in very disparate ways. According to Keenoy, Marshak, Oswick and Grant (2000), within the organizational literature, “discourse has been portrayed as encompassing the study of ‘stories and novels’ (Boje, 1995), ‘text’ (O’Connor, 1995), ‘narrative’ (Hay, 1996; Phillips, 1995), ‘metaphors’ (Dunford & Palmer, 1996), ‘conversations’ (Ford & Ford, 1995) and ‘language games’ (Mauws & Phillips, 1995)” (p. 148). As Hardy (2001) has stated, discourse analysis is more than a set of methods to collect and analyze data; it is an approach that, while embracing very diverse research practices, is tied together by a group of basic assumptions about language. Within discourse analysis, language does not represent a reality out there, but “brings into being situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relations between people and groups of people” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258 cited in Hardy, 2001, p. 27). Consequently, discourse analysis is based on a constructivist epistemology that is mainly concerned with how reality is constructed and sustained through language practices. Discourse is thus understood as “a system of texts that brings objects into being” (Hardy, 2001, p. 26). Here the notion of text goes beyond the realm of written documents to encompass talking, visual representations and cultural artifacts (Grant, Michelson, Oswick & Wailes, 2005).

In the field of organizational change, an increasing number of researchers seem to embrace a discursive approach to understanding and accounting for change in organizations. Some authors (Grant et al., 2005; Tsoukas, 2005) contend that this approach enables researchers to heed the call to “re-think” and “re-conceptualize” change more seriously. For Grant et al. (2005), this re-conceptualization of change stems from approaching it “as a discursively constructed object” (p. 7). From this viewpoint, change becomes a process of re-definition, re-labeling or reinterpretation (Tsoukas, 2005). Communication is not a tool for change but rather the locus of change: “[C]hange is produced through the ways people talk, communicate and converse in the context of practical activities, and collectively reassign symbolic functions to the tasks they engage in and the tools they work with” (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 102).

In the paragraphs that follow, I explore a sample of papers that study organizational change from a discourse analysis approach.

### *2.2.1. Managing Organizational Change through Conversations*

Ford and Ford (1995) were among the first researchers to posit that change is a communication-based and a communication-driven phenomenon. They defined communication as “the very medium within which change occurs” (p. 542) and change as “a recursive process of social construction in which new realities are created... sustained, and modified in the process of communication” (p. 542). Building on Austin’s (1962) and Searle’s (1969) assertion that speaking is performative and that speech acts establish a new state of reality, Ford and Ford claimed that “speech acts produce change, although on a miniature scale” (p. 544). They were interested in how change is intentionally produced in managers’ conversations. Thus, they considered speech acts as “five different ways a change agent can take action in communication.” (p. 544). They further analyzed how combinations of these types of conversations can be intentionally used at different stages of a change process to produce specific outcomes.

In a later article, Ford (1999) further developed this idea. He suggested that the production of change relies on modifying conversations, that is, “shifting what people pay attention to” (p. 448). These shifts create a reality that encourages new actions. According to the author, this is achieved by altering the existing tapestry of linguistic products and characterizations that underlies human behavior and environment.

While Ford and Ford’s (1995) argument showed how changing, and organizing more generally, are communication processes, both the managerial bias and the cause/effect way of thinking these authors employ to highlight the usefulness of their model for change management are problematic. Realities are not unilaterally constructed; meaning is intersubjective, it is a collective construction achieved through interaction. Although managers may have a privileged status to communicate and make decisions, they are not the only ones who define and “assign” meaning to organizational life.

### 2.2.2. *Setting the Stage for Change: Narratives, Metaphors and Other Discursive Devices*

Other researchers have focused on the power of discourse in framing change and how it is understood by organizational members. Here discourse takes different forms, such as linguistic devices (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1988), speech and email messages (Harrison & Young, 2005), and narratives (Doolin, 2003). Regardless of the form discourse takes, it always acts as either a sensemaking or a sensegiving device. As sensemaking, discourse is “the meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempted to developed a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of the intended strategic change” (Gioia & Chittipedi, 1991, p. 442). Conversely, discourse as sensegiving is viewed as “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (p. 442).

Adopting this view, Czarniawska and Joerges (1988) studied the linguistic devices (e.g. labels, metaphors and platitudes) used by organizational members during the Submunicipal Committee Reform in Swedish Municipalities. The authors claimed that these linguistic devices reduced ambiguity and uncertainty and control action by conveying a meaning that is seldom questioned. In the case of the municipal reform they studied, they found that the labeling of those changes as a “decentralization” not only “gave meaning to the entire range of changes proposed in municipal reform: It created a context of positive expectations, thereby blocking potential protests” (p. 176). Thus, the use of the decentralization label framed the way change was understood and acted upon.

For their part, Harrison and Young (2005) focused on how attempts to accomplish certain things in discourse (e.g. welcoming staff members, creating a sense of unity, obtaining cooperation, etc.) can be successful or not. They analyzed the texts of two discursive events (i.e., an informal speech delivered by the Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) to senior managers and his welcoming email memo to the staff) that took place during a major reorganization in Health Canada. After an in-depth analysis of both texts the authors concluded that the speech was more successful than the email in achieving the goals of the ADM. In the email the ADM used a traditional management style that stressed hierarchical command and control. This discursive strategy sent the wrong message to employees, who “knew that decisions were being made .... They knew that the invitation to participate was not real” (p. 67).

Furthermore, Doolin (2003) studied change as a narrative, a mode of ordering (Law, 1991) that attempts to structure organizational relations and that simultaneously takes into account the discursive, social and material dimensions of change. In the author’s hospital case study, the ordering narrative was built around the notion of clinical leadership: Clinicians were transformed into “managers” and “the production line became the dominant metaphor for healthcare management among the hospital’s managers” (Doolin, 2003, p. 760). Hence, in this study, ordering



narratives functioned as sensegiving devices (i.e., strategic resources) that provide the frame and the vocabulary with which different actors define and change the strategies to accomplish it.

Viewing discourse as a framing device thus focuses on the power of communication in creating realities. It also encourages researchers to be suspicious of the actors' choice of words, metaphors, and classifying/ordering devices. This critical view of discourse highlights the existence of power relations in organizing processes and shows how this gap is created, maintained and reproduced in the way actors talk and the discourses they appropriate. While communicating, organizational members define change, they establish its reach and they set its limits. This is achieved by describing change through labels, metaphors and narratives that provide meaning and loosely prescribe actions.

What seems problematic in this view of organizational change and its relation to communication is that change is reduced to its meaning dimension (for an exception see Doolin, 2003) and although meaning is always intersubjective and contextually grounded, these authors sidestep its interactional nature. Consequently, accounts tend to focus either on the point of view of a person or group of persons who are framing the new reality or on the mechanisms used to create this new reality. Little attention is paid to the "uptake" of the new reality, to how it is interpreted, translated and appropriated, and to the actions it may encourage. Moreover, communication becomes a unidirectional/monologic message or event that is removed from the daily routine of organizational life.

### **2.3. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have reviewed a selection of works that study change from either a communication point of view or a discursive approach. These studies have underlined the important role communication plays in change processes. However, extant conceptualizations of the relationship between communication and change

either see communication as a separate component of the change process, a device that transmits information about the change initiative or as constitutive part of the change process, since it is *in* actual communication that members make sense and give sense to the ongoing changes. While in this view communication is part of the change process, it is rare that researchers will show us how change comes about in communication. Also both views pay little attention to the role of agency in the change process: their view is limited to the traditional change agents ignoring that there is a wide variety of agents that participate in change.

In light of these limitations, the current study aims to explain organizational change from a communicative perspective that focuses on interactions. Instead of viewing communication just as message transmission or the meanings that set the stage for change, therefore, communication is viewed as a process where realities are interactively created, negotiated and changed. This conceptualization of communication is grounded on a *plurified view of interactions* (Cooren, Fox, Robichaud & Talih, 2005; Cooren, 2010) that acknowledges the contribution of beings of diverse ontologies (e.g., computers, bylaws, principles, emotions, rules, etc.) to action.

I will further develop this view of communication in the next chapter along with a series of constructs that allow me to explain how change takes place in communication.

## Chapter 3

### **Towards a Communication-based Understanding of Organizational Change**

*Theories of change in organizations are primarily different ways of describing theories of action in organizations, not different theories.*

*James March, 1981, p. 563*

The previous chapter revealed the need for more empirical studies that take a communication-based approach to the study of organizational change. Several authors have contributed in important ways to the development of this view, although mostly conceptually.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Ford and Ford (1995; see also Ford 1999) mobilized Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969) to uncover the power of conversations to generate change. Anderson (2004), for his part, showed how writing transforms change into an object that can be distributed and consumed/used by organizational members. However interesting, these conceptualizations favor a limited view of discourse as either language-in-use (i.e., conversations) or written language (i.e., texts). In this chapter, I therefore elaborate a theoretical framework that allows for the study of organizational change as a process that takes place *in* communication.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I develop the premises on which my communicative understanding of organizational change is grounded. In the second section, I explain how organizational change takes place in communication.

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson's (2004) article is an exception because it is an empirical study.

### **3.1. Defining the Foundations of a Communication-Based Understanding of Organizational Change**

#### *3.1.1. Premise 1: Organization has a dual nature: it is both a process and an entity*

Any theory that attempts to explain how an organization changes has to start by explaining how it conceives of organization (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). The way scholars understand and study organizations has evolved over time. Barley and Kunda (1992) characterized the pattern of evolution of managerial thought as the movement of a pendulum that swings from one side to the other. According to these authors, our understanding of organizing has alternated between a rhetoric of *design* and a rhetoric of *devotion*. A rhetoric of design stresses rational control and, thus, tends to view organization as “a machine, either mechanical or computational, that could be analyzed into its component parts, modified and reassembled into a more effective whole” (Barley & Kunda, 1992, p. 384). In this view, organization becomes a technical problem, a puzzle for the manager to solve. Taylor’s Scientific Management and contingency theory are examples of rational control. A rhetoric of devotion stresses normative control. Consequently, the human, symbolic and normative dimensions of organizations are brought to the fore. An organization is viewed as a collective, “a locus of shared values and moral involvement” (p. 384). Controlling it amounts to “shaping workers’ identities, emotions, attitudes, and beliefs” (p. 384). The Human Relations’ movement and the cultural approach to management tend to support this view.

For Barley and Kunda (1992), debates surrounding our understanding of organization have shifted between a techno-rational view of organization and a socio-cultural one. The last decade has shown yet another debate surrounding the nature of organizations, that oscillates between two contrasting ways of understanding an organization, as an *outcome* or *entity* and as a *process*.

On one side, we have researchers who view organization as an entity, a well-delimited system with discernable frontiers and a formal structure. These researchers

think of organization as a container: “a reified, three-dimensional phenomenon with height, depth and breadth, occupying a relatively-fixed space and manifesting an interior and an exterior” (Smith, 1993, p. 12). On the opposite side, we find researchers who argue that organization implies a complex assembly of processes. Thus, they rather speak of *organizing* (Weick, 1979) or *organization-in-the-making* (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004) instead of organization, because for them an organization is not a ready-made object or entity, but one in-the-making.

The increasingly central role of discourse in understanding organization (Oswick, Keenoy and Grant, 2000; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004) and the introduction of process philosophy in organization studies have contributed to challenging the traditional reified view of organization.

On one hand, the linguistic turn in the social sciences has offered an alternative way of conceptualizing social reality, one that is grounded in a *constitutive* view of language. As a result, language is thought to construct and shape social reality. This view goes against the traditional *representational* conception that conceives language as a mirror that accurately represents reality (Heracleous, 2002). Within this frame of thought, the apparent stability of an organization is challenged. Hence, it is no longer a given object but rather one “in-the-making.” Studying an organization then entails “unpacking the full range of activities that produce ... and sustain them” (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996, p. 207).

The introduction of process philosophy in organization studies, on the other hand, has contributed new ways to conceptualize organization by focusing on the fluid and changing nature of organization. For process philosophers our world is composed solely of processes and what we understand as entities or objects are instantiations of those processes. The primacy of process over substance places change at the forefront of our understanding of reality and, thus, the central question, is no longer how is change accomplished but rather how is stability achieved. Researchers that subscribe to this view of the world are interested in showing how organization emerges in the wake of constant change.

Both the linguistic/discursive turn and process philosophy have challenged—based on different grounds (i.e., the constitutive role of language and the primacy of process over substance)—the traditional view of organization as a stable, “thing-like” phenomenon, suggesting that “it” is a phenomenon-in-the-making. In light of the previous arguments, we could (or should) ask, then: *What is an organization?* Is it an entity or a process? On closer inspection, the etymology of the word organization reveals that it can refer to both of these contrasting conceptions. It implies both “the state of being organized and the act of organizing” (Cooper & Law, 1995, p. 240).

The dual nature of organization has been studied through different lenses. Cooper and Law (1995), for example, refer to *distal* and *proximal* thinking. Distal thinking focuses on “results and outcomes, the ‘finished’ things or objects of thought and action” (p. 239) which, when applied to organizations, yields an image of “structures that can be measured” (p. 240). Proximal thinking, on the other hand, attends to “the continuous and unfinished ... what is always approximated but never fully realized” (p. 239). A proximal view of organization thus entails disentangling the multiple processes of organizing.

In the same vein, and following the trail left by Cooper and Law, Chia (1995) refers to different styles of thinking, distinguishing between the *modern* and the *postmodern*. A modern style of thinking implies viewing “actions, interactions and the local orchestration of relationships ... as the incidental *epiphenomena* of basic social entities such as ‘individuals’, ‘actors/agents’ or ‘organizations’ rather than as the primary ‘stuff’ of the world” (Chia, 1995, p. 581). According to this author, this view originates from an ontology of *being* that gives priority to effects over processes. A postmodern style of thinking subscribes to an ontology of *becoming* that gives primacy to “emergent relational interactions and patternings that are recursively intimated in the fluxing and transforming of our life-worlds” (Chia, 1995, p. 582). The focus as well as the point of departure is quite different here: Those who subscribe to a postmodern style of thinking do not assume the existence of outcomes or effects (e.g., individuals, organizations), but concentrate on “the myriad of

heterogeneous yet interlocking organizing micro-practices which collectively generate effects such as individuals, organizations and society” (p. 582).

Finally, Poole and Van de Ven (2005) explored this tension by distinguishing between organization as a noun (i.e., a thing) and organization as a verb (i.e., a process). As a noun, stability and fixity are highlighted. Organizations are therefore viewed as social entities. As a verb, the central characteristic is ongoing change and flux. Organization is conceived, in this regard, as a constellation of processes.

Although these researchers have used different terms and concepts to explore the duality that surrounds the nature of organization, their reflections do share some commonalities. Distal thinking, modern thinking and the organization-as-noun all conceive of organization as an outcome, that is, a reified entity, as a thing that can be measured and accounted for in terms of patterns because of its stable state. Proximal thinking, postmodern thinking and the organization-as-verb, in turn, conceive of organization as a process that is never finite, and always in the making (Weick, 1979, 1995). All three highlight action and the relatively unstable nature of organization. These positions regarding the dual nature of organization are considered to be opposed, antagonistic, and even incompatible. Consequently, most researchers generally ground their conceptions of organization in one side of this duality or the other. Nevertheless, authors like Cooper and Law (1995), Chia (1995), Tsoukas and Chia (2002), and Van de Ven and Poole (2005) claim that a better understanding of organization will be achieved by studying *the relation* between the outcome view of organization and the process view.

Hence, instead of denying the existence of one mode of being or the other, the dual nature of organization must be explored by adopting a both/and view: An organization exists as an entity, an actor to which people attribute “intentions, emotions, and understandings” (Robichaud, Giroux & Taylor, 2004, p. 618). Therefore, it is not uncommon in everyday life for the “Parliament to approve a new law”, for “Microsoft to be holding an important share of the technology market”, and so forth (see Taylor & Van Every, 2000). However, this entity is the effect of the

assemblage of a multiplicity of processes (Cooper & Law, 1995; Chia, 1995). How may we approach organization to understand and account for its dual nature? For Montreal School scholars the answer to this question lies in taking communication as the starting point.

### 3.1.2. Premise 2: Communication is the site and surface where organization emerges

While the formalization of the label “Montreal School” is relatively recent (see Brummans, 2006), scholars identified with this school of thought (James Taylor and his colleagues, Boris Brummans, François Cooren, H el ene Giroux, Nicole Giroux, Carole Groleau, Lorna Heaton, Daniel Robichaud, and Elizabeth Van Every) have been contributing to the field of organizational communication for more than a decade. Their work has offered an alternative view of the relationship between organization and communication. While many organizational communication scholars take organizational theories as the starting point to develop a communicative understanding of organizations (Putnam & Fairhurst, 1999), Montreal School scholars take communication as the point of departure to find answers to the question: What is an organization?

Probably the single most distinct trait that characterizes the Montreal School’s approach is the assumption that *organization emerges in communication*. For these scholars, communication is not a mode of *knowing* (i.e., epistemology) but rather a mode of *being* (i.e., ontology)—or perhaps I should say *becoming*. Thus, communication is not a lens we use to understand organization. As Taylor (2006) contends, it “is *how we do organization*“ (p. 143). Moreover, these scholars see communication as having a dual nature; it is “both locution (representation) and illocution (action with practical consequences)” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 4). According to these authors, these views of communication correspond to two distinct research traditions within the broad category of discourse studies.

On the one hand, they identify a research tradition that focuses on interaction-mediated-by-talk (to which we could add, interaction-mediated-by-writing) and that



focuses on the mechanics of the process of joint/collective sensemaking. This research tradition builds on the situated character of social organization (Goffman, 1959), the assumption that our experience of the world is intersubjectively shared with others (Schütz, 1962, 1964, 1967, 1970) and a view of order as an ongoing social accomplishment (Garfinkel, 1964). Such ideas are at the heart of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. The conception of communication that springs from these ideas is not that of communication as messaging but rather as

[a] continuous process of adjustment in which each participant's speech provides the material for the interpretive skills of the hearer to fill in the gaps, to guess at the speaker's meanings and motives, to verify assumptions, and to correct misapprehensions. (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 9)

Thus, scholars within this tradition study discourse (and communication) by analyzing what is accomplished in interactions and, most particularly, in conversations.

On the other hand, Taylor and Van Every identify a research tradition that is grounded in French linguistics, structural semiotics (Greimas, 1987) and post-structural thought (Foucault, 1972; Derrida, 1988). This research tradition focuses less on the ways meaning is made; it rather centers in on the structuring capacity of language and the analysis of texts. Here language does not represent our social reality but it creates the very things we interact *with*. Discourse is viewed as “[a set of] practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49 cited in Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 19). Language frames interactions. For example, a manager who refers to his coworkers as “colleagues” establishes a different relationship with them than the manager who refers to them as “employees.” There are benefits and responsibilities that accompany each label and thus members attend to this relationship with certain expectations.

Each tradition favors a distinct view of discourse and how it ought to be studied. The first tradition focuses on discourse as it is accomplished within a particular context (i.e., talk, conversation). The second tradition focuses on discourse

as sets of interrelated texts that bring into being objects (e.g., organizations, economy, etc). Instead of keeping these traditions apart, Taylor and his colleagues have tried to build on both of them to understand how organization emerges in communication. Thus, Taylor and Van Every (2000) define communication as both the *site* and *surface* of organization, which they relate to the notions of conversation and text. Communication is regarded as a site because organization emerges and is sustained through *conversations*. Without them organization would not exist. As Boden (1994) states,

[t]alk is at the heart of all organizations. Through it, the everyday business of organizations is accomplished.... In meetings, on the telephone, at work stations, on the sales floor, at doorways, in corridors, at the cafeteria, in pairs, in groups, from the boardroom to the janitor's closet, talk makes the organizational world go round. (p. 1)

However, as Taylor and Van Every (2000) point out, conversation by itself cannot account for the organizational phenomenon. Organization also has to be recognized by its members. There has to be a representation of its existence, so that organization transcends the localness of everyday action. This representation is achieved through *text*, which they consider the surface of organization.

Thus, the notions of conversation and text are crucial for understanding what communication is and how organization emerges in it. However, how these authors mobilize the constructs of conversation and text deserves further explanation since they are not used in their literal sense.

### *3.1.2.1. Fluidity and self-organization: conversing*

In Taylor and Van Every's (2000) thinking, conversation refers to "the total universe of shared interaction-through-languaging of the people who together identify with a given organization" (p. 35). This means that conversation encompasses all sorts of communicational situations, both formal and informal, ranging from board meetings, to executive briefings, to corridor conversations. It is not limited to face-to-

face interactions since it also includes interactions mediated by technology (e.g., telephone, computer, etc).

According to Giroux and Taylor (1994/1995), conversation represents “l’organisation vivante” (i.e., the living organization). Conversation pertains to the realm of action; not individual but collective action, since it requires “interlocking commitments” and involves a transaction (i.e., giving and taking). Thus, it is not “two joined actions, one of speaking, one of listening, but a joint accomplishment, one which, in the absence of a partnership, is impossible” (Taylor & Van Every, 1998, p. 110).

This definition of conversation as action is mainly grounded in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), which focuses on actors’ methods accomplishing and accounting for social, and conversation analysis (CA) (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson 1974), which focuses on the ways individuals structure their talk and accomplish specific goals through their modes of talking. These research traditions have developed a view of conversation as a self-organized and self-organizing sphere of action. CA in particular has unveiled the underlying mechanisms of conversation, showing how even the simplest conversation is an organized achievement governed by unspoken rules and procedures (such as taking turns in speaking). As “a locally managed organizational system: ‘party administered’” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 12), conversation contains the seed of self-organizing and, as we will see later on, the seed of change.

So what is achieved in conversation? As I noted earlier, conversation is the site where organization emerges and is sustained. It is in conversing that members attain a commonality of knowledge, as they

carry forward the interactively constructed themes of organizational life and situate the people who accomplish such an accounting process with respect to each other to create a recognizable system of relationships linking them to what they do and who they do it with. (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 36)

However, conversations are not to be understood as isolated units. They intersect with each other and overlap. This idea resembles Boden’s (1994) notion of a *lamination of*

*conversations*, which implies the knitting together of multiple local interactions into a pattern that unites the organization as a whole. Conversations can also be linked together by their common preoccupation with shared objects (e.g., annual budget, hiring procedure, strategic planning). It is through these common elements—what Taylor and Van Every (2000) call *a theme*—that a complex discursive tissue is constructed that integrates multiple actors from different conversation situations. Although we can account for organization by studying conversations and their self-organizing properties, organization is more than a series of processes; it is also an entity. Here is where text becomes crucial.

### *3.1.2.2. Instantiation and dislocation: textualizing*

Taylor and Van Every (2000) think of text as systematically-organized discourse, that is, “words and phrases, strung together ... to produce a coherent, understandable piece of language” (p. 37). For them, text does not necessarily have to be written down. For example, when one participant refers to a previous conversation, or to a tacit rule that exists in an organization, we are dealing with a text that is spoken. Nonetheless, the fundamental nature of either spoken or written text is the same: strings of language (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 37). Text is thus a mediator of transaction that becomes accessible via a conversational exchange (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004). It is a discursive object—an object/text—circulating through multiple overlapping conversations (Cooren & Taylor, 1997).

As an object, text presents certain properties that differ from conversation. First, it has the capacity to exist beyond the specific situation of its creation (Fairhurst & Putnam, 1999). Let us take a look at how this is possible. In work settings, people strive to produce texts: They make plans, budgets, working procedures that, most of the time, are written down. We can also say that people work with those texts: Plans are linked to action in a variety of ways (Suchman, 1987). Memos, schedules and working procedures all constrain and encourage certain actions. Even in the absence of printed pages, texts circulate and organizational members can mobilize them in

conversations. We can well imagine a board member saying: “As the head of the board said in our last meeting, we don’t have the power to make this decision.” In this case, a previous conversation or the spoken words of a board member become a text that is mobilized, called into action in another space and time.

Second, text can also be defined as an agent (see Cooren, 2004; see also Brummans, 2007)—in the sense proposed by Actor Network Theory (here after ANT), that is, as something that makes a difference in the way a given situation unfolds through everyday interactions. For example, you have to leave work early and you send an email to your colleague. The email includes a list of the things you did and a list of pending issues that have to be tended to by your colleague. Your colleague arrives and reads the email and knows exactly what he/she has to do. The email has a crucial role (i.e., it makes a difference) in this situation. It is what makes the interaction possible since you have delegated the action of communicating what should be done to this note. We can also say that the note told your colleague what was to be done.

Furthermore, the textual agent has the capacity to *represent or make present* (Cooren & Taylor, 1997; Cooren, Brummans & Charrieras, 2008). Again, let us see how this is possible. We may all agree that an organizational chart is a textual representation of an organization. Nevertheless, adopting a stance similar to that of some of the Montreal School’s scholars (notably Cooren, 2004, 2006), this object is more than a discursive representation; it is an agent that can make the organization present in a meeting through its mobilization in the conversations that take place there. This text can also act to clarify an organizational member’s position or authority (see also Fauré, Brummans, Giroux & Taylor, 2010; Taylor & Van Every, 2011). It can even be mobilized to justify the making of a particular decision. This same argument can be applied to other non-written textual agents, such as membership categories<sup>7</sup>, organizational roles, etc.

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<sup>7</sup> This notion is taken from observations of Koumbit members’ interactions. For them, membership categories referred to the different organizational member’s statuses in terms of the privileges and duties assigned to members.

### 3.1.2.3. Translations: from conversation to text and the other way around

Hitherto, I have described the dimensions of conversation and text as separate but their real power lies in their interplay. Taylor and Van Every (2000) view the interplay as a process of translation, where each dimension of communication is transformed, that is, takes the form of the other. They refer to the translation of conversation to text as *textualization*, the turning of circumstances into language; and the translation of text into conversation as *actualization*, the turning of language into action. According to them,

[C]onversations, although they are the locus and generation of knowledge, nevertheless need to know what they know, and this is only possible in the translation of their collectively generated knowledge into an (imperfect) textual rendering of it, which then has to be, once again, recognized in the interpreting processes of the network. (p. 230)

It follows that conversations generate texts, collective and negotiated interpretations of the world that serve as a springboard for action (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). However, for these texts to circulate, to be shared, negotiated or even contested (i.e., to actualize themselves) they must be enacted and reinterpreted in daily interactions. This is how text and conversation mutually constitute each other and it is in this mutual constitution—the translation of the conversation into text and of text into conversation—that organization emerges in communication. Organization, then, emerges in two ways, as far as it is textually described: organization becomes “an object about which people talk and have attitudes”; and as it is realized conversationally, it is a “continued enactment in the interaction patterns of its members’ exchanges” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 4).

As we see, the organization that emerges in communication has a dual nature. Whether we take an organization to be a conversation or a text is a matter of perspective. For the Montreal School researchers, an organization is both, since neither text nor conversation can account by themselves for the phenomenon of organization. This last point is rather important in terms of how we understand

change, especially in a moment when process thinking is becoming increasingly popular in organization studies and change seems to be the most salient feature of our social reality. Although, this line of thinking places change in the forefront, there has been a tendency to conflate process and change. Conflating these distinct notions makes us to lose sight of the potentials that each construct has to offer.

### 3.1.3. Premise 3: Change and process are two different constructs

A number of authors (Chia, 1999, 2002; Orlikowski, 1996; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) insist that change has often been studied as an epiphenomenon. Sturdy and Gray (2003) disagree with this view, for them, a “change bias” pervades organization studies literature. According to these authors, the change bias consists of academic and practitioner discourses that advocate the pervasive, inevitable and desirable character of change. These authors assert that this bias is becoming ontological: “it is not that everything changes but that *everything is change* ... being is change and change has no outside” (p. 655).

This ontological view of change is grounded on process philosophy, mainly the works of William James (1906) and Henri Bergson (1946). Process philosophers posit the primacy of process over substance, both epistemologically and ontologically. This means that process is considered the “most appropriate and effective conceptual instruments for understanding the world we live in,” but also “the most pervasive, characteristic, and crucial feature of reality” (Rescher, 1996, p. 27-28). This approach posits that “things” are better understood as “instantiations of certain sorts of process or process-complexes” (Rescher, 1996, p. 33).

However, organization scholars have translated the *primacy of process over substance*—proposed by process philosophers—into the *primacy of change over stability* (or organization). Thus, “change *is* reality itself, and ‘organizations’ are nothing more than ‘temporary arrestations’ in a sea of flux and transformation” (Chia, 2002, p. 863). However, it is noteworthy that there is a fundamental difference between change and process: It is not the same to say that change is an *ongoing*

*process* or to say that process is *ongoing change*. While process philosophers do believe that change is “the pervasive and predominant feature of the real” (Rescher, 2002), the latter does not reduce process to change, process is more than just change. In process metaphysics, processes are viewed as a composition of events (i.e., activities, transactions, changes, occurrences, developments) that are sequential, coordinated and integrated. In other words, process implies order since the events, stages or phases it involves are not arbitrarily juxtaposed; they rather form a program (delimiting but not determining). The following example illustrates this point:

The earth’s water is used over and over, so, it is in continuous movement from the ocean, the air and land. In the water cycle the sun heats the earth's surface water, causing that surface water to evaporate (gas). This water vapor then rises into the earth’s atmosphere where it cools and condenses into liquid droplets. These droplets combine and grow until they become too heavy and fall to the earth as precipitation (liquid if rain, solid if snow). (Water: A Never-Ending Story, n.d., para 1-2)

This short account of the natural process of precipitation shows us how water changes its form and position throughout the process. However, there are actions (e.g. heating, evaporating, rising, etc.) and instantiations of other processes (e.g., sun, clouds, etc) that are constant and necessary for this process to produce precipitation. It follows that process is not only change or constant flux; it also involves order and continuity.

While an ontological view of process is interesting because it conceives of change as the norm and not the exception, reducing reality to pure change makes as much sense as reducing it to continuity. To further explore why process cannot be reduced to change, let us look at two ways in which scholars see change happening in organizations: continuously and deliberately.

*Continuous*<sup>8</sup> change, as described by Weick and Quinn (1999), refers to changes that “tend to be ongoing, evolving and cumulative” (p. 375). These changes are seen as “the realization of a new pattern of organizing in the absence of explicit or

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<sup>8</sup> The way I am using the label of continuous change differs from the way Weick and Quinn (1999) conceive of it. These authors contrast conceptualizations of change based on the frequency with which change takes place. Thus, there is the view of change happening all the time (continuous change) and one of change as a seldom occurrence (episodic change).



a priori intentions” (Orlikowski, 1996, p. 65), as “alert reactions to daily contingencies” (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 366). Thus, they take the form of adaptations and adjustments “in work processes and social practice.” This kind of change generally goes unnoticed. However, it is necessary for the continuity of processes (i.e., for things to remain the same). Let us remember that stability is not a given state but rather an accomplishment, one that requires constant adjustment.

Nonetheless, change also happens in a more *deliberate* way: Not necessarily as an adjustment to a changing context but as a desire *to make a difference*. There are moments when organizations, or more precisely their members, decide that some aspect (e.g., meetings, hiring procedures, control mechanisms, strategy, etc.) of their organization is not working and they initiate a series of actions to make that “something” work. Making that something work will involve varying degrees of difference between the previous situation and the subsequent ones. Such changes generally alter the way organizational roles and tasks are negotiated and accomplished. Thus, they alter the pattern of organizing, the interpretive schema that underlies members’ understanding of their social reality; stated more simply, *the way we do things around here*. This type of change rarely goes unnoticed. It requires legitimization and negotiation and, generally, produces resistance. Here, change becomes the process by which a new state of affairs is brought into being.

Both of these “types” of change contribute to our understanding of how an organization maintains its existence while evolving in time. Thus, although it is safe to say that *change happens all the time*, it does not mean that change is the only thing happening. In other words, this assertion does not give us grounds to conflate the concept of change with that of process or the other way around.

Following this line of thought, Van de Ven’s (1987) distinction between change and process is very useful. He posits that change is *what we experience* while process is *our understanding or rationalization of those experiences*. Whereas change is “an empirical observation of differences in time on one or more dimensions of an entity” the process of change is “an inference of a latent pattern of differences noted

in time” (p. 331). According to Van de Ven, “change processes are not directly observed: instead, they are conceptual inferences about the temporal ordering of relationships among observed changes” (p. 331). It seems as though process is viewed as a device for understanding and knowing (i.e., epistemological mobilization).

In this study, I adopt the notion of process as a conceptual device for understanding organizational change. Therefore, I conceive of process as a *sequence of activities and transactions* that in each case constitutes an elaborate *story of interconnected developments* (Cooren, 2000). Studying change by mobilizing this view of process allows me to account for change in terms of the actions, agents and mechanisms that bring it about.

#### 3.1.4. Premise 4: Accountability and accounts count in understanding how organizational change happens

An important part of what we are doing while we engage in interaction with others has to do with accountability. For Garfinkel (1984), “the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with member’s procedures for making those settings accountable” (p. 1). But what does it mean to be accountable? According to *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, accountable has two meanings: a) *subject to giving an account*; and, b) *capable of being accounted for*. Thus, accountability is both about being *answerable*, that is, being responsible for something, and about being *explainable*, that is, the capacity of making oneself or oneself activities understandable, intelligible to others. As Garfinkel (1984) argued, *account-able* means “observable-and-reportable, i.e., available to members as situated practices of looking-and-telling”, those practices, he continues, are an “endless, ongoing and contingent accomplishment” (p. 1).

This view of accountability is grounded in the view that individuals are competent and knowledgeable actors engaged in interactions and who take their

knowledge and competences for granted. Accounts are characterized by being occasion-framed or indexical (i.e., in reference to a particular context) and their meaning is constructed in relation to the context in which they take place. For Garfinkel (1984), the situation is not merely described in such accounts; it is rather “constituted by the accounts that occur in it” (p. 10).

The concept of accountability is particularly useful for fleshing out the translation process that Taylor and Van Every (2000) see as the site and surface of the emergent organization. Accountability is precisely about translating conversation into text. Such a translation involves sensemaking, “the interplay of action and interpretation” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). Following Taylor and Van Every (2000), I take action to be represented by *conversation* and interpretation to be represented by the construct of *text*. Sensemaking, then, is the site where meanings are materialized (Weick et al., 2005) and this materialization occurs when “a flow of organizational circumstances is turned into words and salient categories” (p. 409).

Let us take a closer look at how this happens. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is always retrospective; we can only try to understand or make sense of something that has already happened. Our experience of the world is a continuous flow and to understand it, we have to step out of the stream of experience to be able to reflect on what is going on. This “stepping out of the stream” resembles Garfinkel’s (1967) notion of accountability: “[P]eople in interaction...are engaged in making what is occurring around them accountable to each other, in the sense of furnishing comprehensible descriptions and explanations of what is going on” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 10). The latter shows that our understanding of our experience is “mediated by the typifications introduced by the categories of language” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 71). It is *in* communication that we construct and understand our experience. The latter is grounded in a view of language as constitutive of social reality rather than as being descriptive or a window to it (see also Alvesson & Deetz, 1996).

Accounts are co-constructed in everyday interactions. Thus, they are not a unilateral creation, but rather the interactive work of those participating in the exchange. Furthermore, these accounts are not created for the unique purpose of understanding; they are created so that those participating in the exchange know what to do next. Hence, sensemaking is also about action.

So far, I have shown how part of conversation is to create a text that makes the situation intelligible (i.e., reduces equivocality) and, thus, works as a springboard for action (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). However, accounts can also be seen as narrative texts that possess certain features which are crucial for understanding how organizational change is produced in communication.

Narratives convey the unfolding of action over time. Yet it is not the sequence of actions that makes a narrative meaningful, it is rather *the plot*. The plot has to do with a precipitating event or, as Greimas (1993, p. 22 cited in Taylor and Van Every, 2000, p. 44) labeled it, “the destruction of the social order”. Consequently, narratives are not only aimed at making sense of the situation but also at re-constructing (i.e., altering, shifting, transforming) a social order. Reconstructing entails establishing new sets of associations between agents, roles and events. This implies the selection of agents (Castor & Cooren, 2006) as members assign and subtract agency to a wide variety of agents in their narratives/accounts. As Castor and Cooren (2006) argued, “[a]ccounts illustrate the various ways that agency may be negotiated” (p. 581).

In sum, accounts have an important role in understanding the communication basis of organizational change since it is by means of these interactively constructed narratives that new sets of associations are created by attributing and subtracting agency to a wide variety of agents. The view of communication I am mobilizing has important implications in terms of change agency since it extends the number of agents participating in organizational change beyond the usual human agents (i.e., change agents or those who planned and implement the changes).

### 3.1.5. Premise 5: Populating the change scene: from change agency to hybrid agency

Although agency has a central role in change initiatives and some scholars (Van de Ven, 1987; Caldwell, 2006) have identified it as a necessary component of any theory of change, it remains an underdeveloped concept in organizational change and organizational development literature (Caldwell, 2006). The tendency has been to parallel agency with the *change agent*, “an expert facilitator of group processes of planned change” (Caldwell, 2006, p. 1). This conception of agency stresses the rationality and intentionality of human intervention and makes us think of change as a process that can be managed and controlled. It corresponds to an *internalist or substantialist view of agency* that conflates agency and the individual actor (Robichaud, 2006). This view is grounded in Giddens’s (1984) conception of agency. For Giddens, agency refers to “the capacity to have acted otherwise” (Robichaud, 2006, p 14). Giddens views this capacity as transformative because “to be able to ‘act otherwise’ means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs” (Robichaud, 2006, p 14). In this way, Giddens links *choice* with *power*, a power that rests upon “the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events” (Robichaud, 2006, p. 15).

Giddens’s (1984) view of agency is interesting for those who study change because it conceives of agency as a transformative force or changing power. However, it focuses on individual human action, which excludes a wide range of agents that are not necessarily human but that nevertheless play an important part in our daily interactions. Therefore, understanding agency in Giddens’s terms provides a partial account of how action and change take place in organizations because there are far more “things” acting when we act than we notice.

Cooren’s work (2000, 2004, 2006a, 2010) has contributed to extend the notion of agency. For him, “[w]e are in a world full of agencies and only agencies” and “understanding how this world works or fails to work consists of accounting for *whatever* happens to make a difference in a given situation” (2006a, p. 86, emphasis

added). Notice that Cooren did not use *who*; instead, he referred to *whatever* because, for him, agents are not defined by their nature or ontology (i.e., what they *are*) but rather by what they *do* in a given situation. This is why

the annual report that *summarizes* the company's results, the tray that *collects* the paperwork on the desk, the lamp that *lights* your office ...are all different types of contribution ..., but to the extent that they *contribute* to given processes, nothing should prevent us from saying that they represent agency. (Cooren, 2006a, p. 86)

This author's conception of agency is grounded in the view of action developed by the proponents of ANT (Callon & Latour, 1981; Callon, 1986; Latour, 1986a, 1986b, 1987, 1996, 2006; Law & Hassard, 1999). The next paragraphs sum up several tenets of this theory of action that are relevant for my study.

*Action is shared:* The capacity to act is not considered to be an individual ability, but rather one that is shared with others. To act means "to make happen" and "when one acts, others proceed to action" (Latour, 1996, p. 237). An example will better illustrate this claim. I am writing this text. I am typing out these pages on my laptop. I am using other authors' texts to support my arguments. And I am writing this document following the guidelines established by the Université de Montréal for doctoral dissertations. Although writing a dissertation may be regarded as an individual course of action, in this short account, we are able to trace a number of "things" that contribute to the action of my writing: for instance, the laptop is processing and storing my data, other authors' arguments are supporting my thesis, and the guidelines are informing the formatting of my document. It is my association with these agencies (i.e., laptop, texts, guidelines) that makes the writing of the dissertation possible. This is why Latour (2006) describes action as "a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled" (p. 44). Now the question we may ask is: Who are these others who are acting and how is it that they act?

*Action is hybrid.* By conceiving of action as a shared accomplishment, we are acknowledging that action is not transparent in the sense that it is never clear who or

what is acting. This is why action must be approached as a source of uncertainty, and it must be questioned in terms of who or what are the others proceeding to action in a given situation (Latour, 2006). Asking this question allows us to look beyond traditional actors (humans) and to redefine agency by considering that “*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor” (Latour, 2006, p. 71). In so doing, a plethora of agencies that are not necessarily human is uncovered.

By taking a closer look at interactions, Cooren (2006a, 2010) has broadened our understanding of who or what acts in a given situation. Thus, we are not only acting by associating ourselves with material objects such as laptops, walls, cars, etc. (see also Cooren et al., 2008). We associate ourselves with other types of beings (e.g., feelings, principles, values, utterances, gestures) that we mobilize, invoke or evoke in our accounts of action. Cooren (2010) labels these beings *agents/figures* to underline their dual nature:

While the term agency focuses on the active or actional dimension of a given being, the term figure insists on the fact that this being needs to be “made up” in a given interaction in order to be active (etymologically, figure has the same root as “to make” or “to fabricate”). (Cooren, 2010, p. 3)

Unlike a building, computers and the artwork hanging on the wall, these *beings* need “to be made, fabricated, cultivated” by organizational members “in order to exist in their conversations and worlds” (Cooren, 2010, p. 140). The hybrid character of action accounts for what makes our interactions durable (Latour, 1996) and dislocal (Cooren, 2000; Cooren, 2010; Cooren et al., 2005 Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009).

*Action is dislocal.* Extending the nature and number of the agents that participate in interactions allows us transcend the “here and now.” According to Latour (1996), what distinguishes the complex social world of simians from the complicated social world of humans are the objects that not only frame our interactions but also allow these to dislocate themselves and allow us humans to travel in space and time. The simian social world is grounded in face-to-face

interactions. The complexity of their social world is negotiated and renegotiated in each interaction. The human world, on the other hand, is characterized by interactions that are “most often localized, framed, held in check. By what? By the frame, precisely, which is made up of non-human actors” (Latour, 1996, p. 238). These objects dislocate the local and help us to be present at a distance or in a different time—effects of spacing and timing (Cooren et al., 2005; Cooren, 2010). We delegate our presence to other agents that accomplish things for us. Latour (1996) illustrates this with the example of the shepherd. The shepherd delegates the action of keeping his herd in a specific place to a wooden fence. In so doing, the shepherd transforms a complex relationship, one that required his constant presence, to a complicated one that does not, because his presence is substituted by an object: the fence, that is a “disengaged, delegated, translated and multiplied” (p. 239) version of the shepherd.

This view of action has important methodological implications. It means that, as organizational analysts, we have to

(a) take into account what entities with variable ontologies appear to be doing in a given situation; that is, *what difference they seem to make* as well as how their actions can be appropriated or attributed; and (b) pay attention to what humans say or write when they ascribe agency to these very entities, whether they are documents, machines, or even organizations. (Cooren, 2006a, p. 82)

What is accomplished by recognizing that action is shared? This reconceptualization of action allows us to acknowledge the contribution of other agents (e.g., computers, guidelines, institutions, emotions, principles) to action. Acknowledging the contribution of nonhuman agents amounts to recognizing that interactions “always participate in something that transcends them” (Cooren, 2010, p. 88). This point is important for understanding the communicative basis of organizational change. If I am positing that organizational change is produced in interaction, I have to show how these interactions are capable producing shifts that go beyond the site of their production. The shared and hybrid character of action is what accounts for what makes our interactions durable and dislocal (Latour, 1996). The effects of timing and



spacing produced in interaction makes these exchanges a valid site for the study of organizational change.

These five premises are the pillars in which the communicative understanding of organizational change that I am developing in this dissertation is grounded. In the next section, I use elements of the five premises to offer a conceptual explanation of how change happens in communication.

### **3.2. A Communicative Approach to Organizational Change: Creating and Stabilizing Sets of Associations**

In this section, I aim to explain how organization (i.e., process and entity) changes. As I mentioned, organization emerges in the dynamic interplay of text and conversation (i.e., communication). This implies a series of *translations* as conversations (i.e., action) are *textualized*; that is, they are transformed into narratives that make sense and give sense to action (Gioia & Chittipedi, 1991). In turn, texts are *actualized*, they are injected into the flow of action and become the material of ongoing conversations. While translating (i.e., transforming) conversations into texts and texts into conversations, members negotiate *sets of associations* in which they assign/attribute and subtract agencies to a variety of agents. The notion of translation, then, is, a central element in explaining how organizational change is brought about in communication.

#### **3.2.1. Translation**

I conceive of organizational change as a process that relies heavily on *translation*.<sup>9</sup> Since it is by translating interests, goals and identities that agents create new sets of associations and attempt to stabilize them (i.e., keep those associations in place). The notion of translation is rich. Probably the first meaning that comes to

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<sup>9</sup> Although my understanding of translation is grounded in Callon's sociology of translation (1986), I do not mobilize the different moments of the process this author proposes.

mind is its linguistic meaning that signifies “rendering from one language to another” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*). However, translation goes beyond this meaning. According to Latour (1993), it also implies “displacement, drift, invention, mediation, creation of a new link that did not exist before and modifies in part the two agents” (p. 6 cited in Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 24). As we can see, translation implies transformation, which is achieved in different ways, for example, by altering the position of elements or substituting elements (i.e., displacement) one can change the structure and appearance of a given entity.

In Callon’s (1986) and Latour’s (1987) work, translation is viewed as a *negotiation process*, one that transforms an idea (e.g. the restocking of scallops, the creation of a diesel engine) into an object (e.g., a more numerous population of scallops in the bay, the actual engine). The materialization of an idea involves the recruiting of a series of agents. In other words, convincing others of the need, the importance or the legitimacy of our idea. This is achieved by successfully translating interests, that is, by “offering new interpretations of these interests and channeling people in different directions” (Latour, 1987, p. 118). Agents adhere to, or partially share, the interests of those proposing the idea. To adhere means accepting those interests as their own, this can also mean displacing their own interests and goals to assume a given role and identity.

Callon’s (1986) article “Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fisherman of St Brieuc Bay” illustrates the latter. Callon’s account of the restocking of scallops in St Brieuc Bay presents a team of researchers as the prime movers who struggled to mobilize agents (e.g., scallops, fishermen, anchoring nets, ocean currents, quantitative data) to be part of their research project<sup>10</sup> (i.e., a narrative). Adhering to the project implied that agents were accepting to play a particular role within the narrative. To play their part, agents’

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<sup>10</sup> The researchers had three objectives in mind. First, they wanted to restock the scallops in the St Brieuc bay –their number had gone significantly down. Second, they wanted to replicate the cultivation techniques they witnessed in Japan. And third, they wanted to generate knowledge about the mechanisms behind the development of scallops, since little was known about these mechanisms.

identities, goals and interests needed to be displaced and transformed. For example, when the fishermen accepted to participate in the research project, their interests were displaced. As Callon (1986) wrote, “[I]nstead of pursuing their individual short term interests, the fishermen are invited to change the focus of their preoccupations and their projects in order to follow the investigations of the researchers” (p. 223). Accepting to be inserted or integrated into a plan, project, initiative not only means to adhere to the proposed interests and assume a given identity it also amounts to giving another entity the capacity of speaking in your name. The delegation of this action to a spokesperson is crucial in the creation of the actor-network (i.e., a set of associations), because by expressing in its “own language what others say and want, why they act in the way they do and how they associate with each other” (Callon, 1986, p. 223). Consequently, a discourse is created that brings them “into a relationship with one another in an intelligible manner” (p. 223).

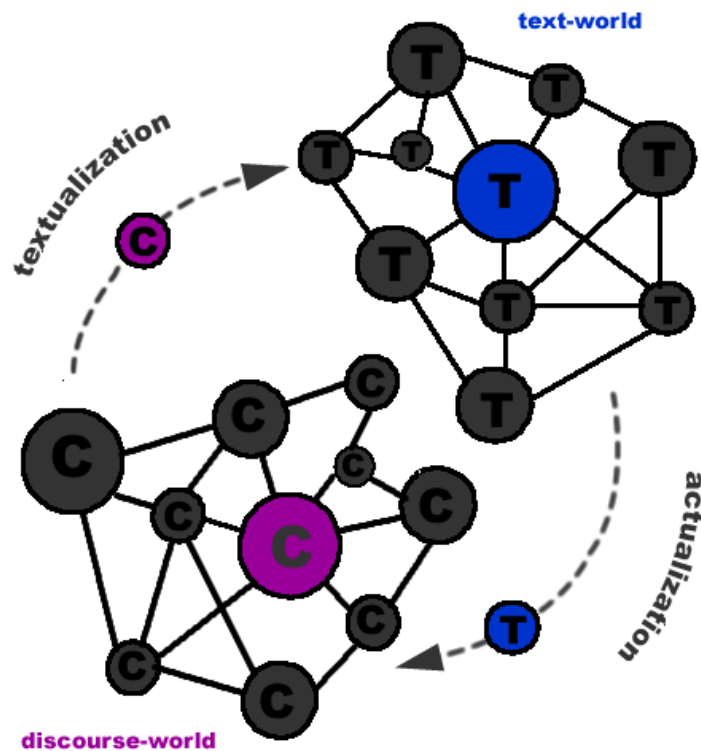
What I just described is a situation where the process of translation has been successful, that is, where the negotiations and adjustments succeeded in bringing these entities together in a specific way. However, translation is not a unilateral process. As I mentioned, it is a negotiation process where the roles, identities and relationships assigned by the project (i.e., narrative) can be accepted, transformed or refused. Also, what was accepted at one moment can be rejected or renegotiated at another moment. Going back to Callon’s illustration, in the development of the project, the interests of the fishermen shift this time favoring their own needs. Thus, they “penetrate the barriers and, refusing to follow the researchers, devastate the fish reserve” (1986, p. 223). Here the fishermen refused to be inserted in the research project, they defined their own project, identity, interests and goals.

As we can see, the strength and durability of associations created through a process of translation will depend on how well the translation of the interests fits the actual interests and goals of those involved.

### 3.2.2. *Organizational change as translation*

Understanding organizational change as translation implies viewing change as a *discursive process* as well as a *discursive object*. As a discursive process, change involves the *negotiation* of sets of associations; it is the reordering, restructuring or reconfiguring of the elements that make up what we understand as organization. As a discursive object, change becomes a *text* that goes beyond the here and now of the negotiation process to become part of the whole. I take the “whole” (see Figure 1) to be the set of interrelated texts that maps the organization’s “territory” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) or what Werth (1993) refers to as the *text-world*, “an interpreted world of collectively held and negotiated understandings that link the community to its past and future and to other conversational universes of action” (Taylor & Van

**Figure 1: The dynamic of conversation and text**



Every, 2000, p. 34). However, reordering or reconfiguring (i.e., organizational change) takes place in the *discourse-world*, “a lived world of practically focused collective attention to a universe of objects, presenting problems and necessitating responses to them” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 34).

Thus, change happens as conversations (i.e., action) are weaved into narrative accounts (i.e., texts, interpretations of action) that establish new sets of associations. These accounts are collectively created and negotiated. Once accepted, they either become an addition to the set of texts that give voice to the organization as a macro actor or a modification of existing texts. As we can see communication is the locus of change, and the force that drives change lays in the process of translation as conversations are textualized and texts are actualized. Let us take a closer look at how this happens.

Our experience of the world is mediated by our understanding that usually takes the form of accounts/stories. According to Pearce (1994), human experience is made up of two types of stories: those that are *lived* and those stories that are *told*. On one hand, *stories lived* are an ongoing process, an observable performance accomplished by social actors. *Stories told*, on the other hand, “are the narratives provided by the actors to account retrospectively for their performances” (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2002, p. 86).

Textualization (i.e., the translation from conversation to text) consists of transforming stories lived into stories told by making sense of and, I would add, giving sense to action (Gioia & Chittipedi, 1990; Maitlis, 2005). Sensemaking and sensegiving amount to establishing associations (i.e., ordering) between actors, between actors and their actions, between actions and their context, etc. Such associations are central, because they impose a particular order to otherwise “unordered external cues” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 23). I view the establishing of associations as a process through which agency is attributed and subtracted to a wide variety of agents that take part in organizing and change. Proposed associations are accepted, challenged, rejected or reconstructed by organizational members in the

search for solutions to the problems they face, or solutions searching for problems (Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972).

Narratives are collectively constructed in the self-regulated process of conversation. Each turn of talk adds new elements (e.g., agents, associations) to the narrative or challenges the old ones by proposing a competing narrative grounded in alternative associations. Thus, narratives are created from a particular point of view; they imply a *selection process* that puts certain actors and events in the forefront while silencing others. Constructing a narrative raises the question of “where one should end in the chain of agents” (Cooren, 2006a, p. 87) who or what is seen as having a participation in action or not. Therefore, “agents are not fixed or given but instead may be called on in a variety of ways to describe and explain problems” (Castor & Cooren, 2006, p. 578). The selection process is informed by our interests and goals, likes and dislikes, as well as, contextual cues (e.g., who is participating, the venue, the type of event: informal conversation, weekly meeting, strategic meeting).

In selecting agents, actions and events and in translating others’ interests and goals the spokesperson might appropriate the actions of certain agents. To clarify this point, let us go back to the conception of action I am mobilizing. Action is always a shared accomplishment. It is about being associated with others: when one acts others proceed to action. However, we (human beings) have the tendency to overlook the contribution of nonhuman actors in our accounts. So, normally, we would rather say, “I drove home” instead of “I was able to drive home due to my associations with my car, the road, the driving signs, and conventions.”

Appropriating others’ actions has another effect that seems to be crucial in organizational settings: It allows “one to act from a distance and across time,” it is “how managers and employees in general achieve coordination by maintaining a relative and distant control over their own and other’s work” (Cooren, 2006a, p. 82). Policies, contracts, work orders and the like are the agents that allow organizational

members to act from a distance and across time. It is also, as I will now show, how organizational change can be brought into being.

### 3.2.3. The seed of organizational change: the change sequences

So far, I have explained how organizational change happens through/in communication as a process of translation where new sets of associations are created and stabilized. The translation process entails the *textualization* of conversations and the *actualization* of texts. Conversation holds the seed of organizational change, as it is “the site of organizational emergence” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 37). The seed consists of what I call a *change sequence*, a series of actions that take place in conversation and that come to alter the sets of associations that make up aspects of the organization (e.g., membership, decision-making procedures) or the nature of the organization itself (e.g., participative, hierarchical). It might take several episodes of interaction (e.g., meetings) for the whole sequence to unfold. Let me describe the actions that compose change sequences, which are not to be understood as clear-cut phases or stages, but as moments in which certain actions take precedence over others.

#### *3.2.3.1. Identifying and communicating that something is not working*

Change is generally prompted by a *breach*, the realization that something is not working as it should (e.g., our sales have been down for the past month, we have not been able to reach a decision in relation to X). In these moments, what has become invisible because we have come to take it for granted appears unusual and unexpected. The identification of a problem marks the starting point of a change sequence since it opens the possibility to challenge the present situation. At this moment, what is considered as problematic consists of the unilateral reading of the situation a member or coalition of members is putting forward. For the change sequence to start, other organizational members have to acknowledge this member’s

(or group of members’) claim. However, as Schön (1983) has stated “problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain” (p. 40 cited in Castor & Cooren, p. 578). At this stage, those who identify and communicate the breach therefore have to build a compelling case to convince others to actually initiate the change sequence. If other members acknowledge the breach, then a process of problem and solution setting begins.

### *3.2.3.2. Problem solving: defining problem and solution*

Problems do not exist somewhere “out there”; they are constructed by organizational members in interactions. Problem setting is an interactive process where versions of the problem are collectively constructed, deliberated and transformed. Thus, problem setting takes the form of narratives (i.e., longer strings of language linked by a plot). What are these narratives about? They are about negotiating “agency by determining who or what might be held responsible for what is happening” (Castor & Cooren, 2006, p. 571). By ascribing and subtracting agency to a variety of agents (e.g., humans, technology, documents, collectives, etc.) members propose new sets of associations. To the extent that these new sets of associations are accepted, they define a new state of affairs. In this sense, “there is no antinomy between a constructed and a real world: Any real world is a constructed world whether discursively or physically” (Latour, 1999, p. 576). The setting of the problem simultaneously involves devising its solutions; it implies a back and forth process between the problem and its solution(s). Once certain elements of both the problem and the solution are no challenged, one can say that some stabilization took place.



### 3.2.3.3. *Materializing organizational change: Temporal stabilization*

Hitherto, I have stated that organizational change happens in a dynamic of problem solving, where both the problem and the possible solutions are collectively constructed by negotiating narratives in which agency, identities, relationships are defined, in other words, the creation of narratives constitutes a translation process. What is accomplished through this process of translation is the *materialization* of new sets of associations that compete with the existing sets of associations.

Following Czarniawska and Joerges (1996), to materialize is to turn “something that exists in someone’s head” (e.g., ideas, interests, solutions, projects) into an object or an action that can be shared, circulated or observed by others. For these authors, language plays a central role in materializing since it is through words and the images these produce that ideas become known, that ideas circulate, that ideas travel. Materializing an idea, causes change because “unknown objects appear, known objects change their appearance, practices become transformed” (p. 20). However, materializing an idea is not only about giving the idea a “physical form” (sound or graphic) so that it can be shared. It is also about trying to stabilize it, even if only for a moment. This is what nonhuman agents (particularly, texts) do.

Derrida (1988) made a strong point about this. For him, saying something ultimately constitutes an act of production that creates a trace or mark (i.e., a text, a spoken text). Once produced, the trace or mark is separated from its producer (i.e., origin), yet this does not hinder its ability to continue functioning on its own. The producer always has a limited control over the produced object and “it is the turn of the utterance or text to *produce* or *perform* something and become itself an *agent*” (Cooren, 2000, p. 82). From this we can understand that communication does not only imply the circulation of objects, but also the production of an object (e.g., utterance, text, trace). However, once created, this object has the quality of acting on its own. This is what Cooren (2004) called *textual agency*, acknowledging that texts do things and by so doing span space and time.

Textual agency is crucial in organizational change in the measure that texts will accomplish mechanical translation that will imply minimal displacement. Consequently, “[t]he simplest way of objectifying ideas is turning them into linguistic artifacts by a repetitive use in an unchanged form, as in the case of labels, metaphors, platitudes” (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 32). Thus, members negotiate a new text by altering the narrative to fit the perceptions or interests of members. The continued discussion (i.e., negotiation) transforms the text little by little and members’ agreement on some aspects of the text stabilizes those aspects only temporally.

Stabilization can be understood as a successful translation, the creation of a new text or the actualization of an old text that is not only recognized but also accepted by a number of members. Acceptance of the text means that members interpret their reality and act following its cues. An alternative reading would be that the texts are successful in making individuals do certain things (e.g., account for their work by using the standard form). Therefore, a text is fully accepted when it becomes an object that is mobilized to ask for compliance or to justify action. This means that it is no longer challenged; it is taken for granted, it has been naturalized: it has become part of text-world (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). In other words, it stands for *the way we do things around here*.

The new state of affairs is enacted when members accept those associations as *the way we do things around here*; that is, when members invoke those texts to mobilize others, when their actions are justified by these texts. In other words, when these texts are used as resources to understand situations in a certain way. Thus, stabilization means that these texts are no longer challenged, that they have become taken-for-granted. However, stabilization does not mark the end of the process, certain aspects will still be challenged or new definitions of the problem may arise. These situations will restart the sequence.

### 3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described how *in* conversation organizational members create a negotiated text that establishes new sets of associations between the agents, actions and events. So far, I have described how the narrative is created and I have stressed the ordering character (Law, 1994; Doolin, 2003) of this textualization. The ordering character of narratives depends on members' acceptance and recognition of these texts as having authority. This textualization transforms change into an object that can circulate and be used by others that were not part of the conversation that created this object.

In light of this theoretical articulation, my study aims to provide insight into the communicative nature of organizational change. To guide this study, I used the following research question (RQ):

RQ: What communicative actions do organizational members perform during their everyday interactions that contribute to the production of differences in the state of affairs?

In the next chapter, I will discuss the methods I used to investigate this research question and introduce the organization I studied.

## Chapter 4

### **On Making Sense and Accounting for Organizational Change from the Inside: Collecting and Analyzing Data about Interactions**

*We want to tell everybody who wants to listen to a complex story of how changes come about and leave the actors to decide which conclusions to draw*

*(Czarniaska & Joerges, 1996, p. 16)*

In this chapter, I present the research design and the methodological choices I made to conduct this study. This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I discuss the approach I mobilized to study organizational change. The next section describes the organization in which I studied organizational change. The third section focuses on the methods I used to collect my data. And section four explains the methods I used to analyze these data.

#### **4.1. Studying Organizational Change from “the Inside”**

The main aim of this study was to understand how organizational members come to change an aspect of their organization (e.g., decision-making, remuneration system, etc.) from a communicative point of view. The latter posed an interesting methodological challenge, because it meant that I needed to find a way to study change as it was being brought about (i.e., change-in-the-making). To explore change-in-the-making, I adopted a particular vantage point, one that allowed me to focus on “the internal dynamics that produce organizational change” (Demers, 2007, p. 192). This entailed looking at change from the *inside*, that is, as a process enmeshed in members’ everyday, ordinary action.

A qualitative approach seemed most appropriate to study the internal dynamics that produce organizational change, because this approach allows the researcher “to focus on actual practice in situ” (Silverman, 2000, p. 832). Thus,

understanding about organizational change was achieved by closely examining members' actions and interactions. These were studied in a naturalistic way (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Lindoff & Taylor, 2002), that is, there where they are taking place and as they take place. Hence, studying organizational change from the inside allowed me to gain insight into members' sensemaking and sensegiving practices. These practices took the form of accounts or narratives that aimed to convince other members to accept a particular configuration of social reality.<sup>11</sup> To produce these narratives, members select and mobilize a wide variety of agents/figures that support a particular configuration of social reality. Hence, my research focused on the people or things that members mobilized to produce change rather than the meanings members' assigned to change. In other words, I studied members' *staging practices* (Cooren, 2010), which are crucial since "it is through them that *the world comes to be (re)configured*" (p. 79 original emphasis). Focusing on this aspect of interactions allowed me to illustrate the communicative basis of the process of change. It also allowed me to extend the number of agents that are considered as participating in bringing change about.

#### **4.2. Context of the Organizational Change Studied**

Since the main goal of this study was to account for organizational change as it is accomplished through everyday interactions, I needed to find an organization that was going through a particular organizational change. The stage of development of the change initiative was not important, since I wanted to focus my study on the actions that are performed to bring change about. Thus, I needed to observe an organized group of people that was attempting to alter some aspect(s) of its organization. To account for the ways this was accomplished, it was crucial to have access to observable organizational interactions that could either be audio or video recorded.

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<sup>11</sup> Note that members' efforts to persuade others could be aimed at altering or stabilizing the status quo—it depends on a given member's interests.

These two seemingly unproblematic criteria turned out to be quite difficult to pin down. Executives of some of the organizations I contacted stated that the implementation of change was completed and that they were not changing at the moment. Others considered that the changes they were implementing were not sufficiently significant to be studied. Most executives were not at ease with the observation of interactions. They considered that implementing organizational change was very difficult and they felt it was inappropriate to add another source of pressure to the workforce (i.e., being observed while coping with the newness of the imposed changes). After several months of searching, I found an organization whose members were implementing organizational change and also felt at ease with the proposed data collection methods.

Thus, I conducted my study at Koumbit<sup>12</sup>, a small<sup>13</sup> non-profit organization in the field of information technologies based in Montreal, Canada. Koumbit's members are mostly web developers, programmers and graphic designers who assist social and community groups to disseminate and manage their information in the World Wide Web (WWW). Koumbit's activities can be understood as part of a larger movement in information technologies that contributes to the enhancement of community groups (Lietsala & Sirkkunen, 2008). They do this by providing these groups with access to information technologies that grant them visibility, the possibility to share information and stay in contact with their members as well as to reach prospective members. Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) has facilitated this access by offering software solutions that fit the limited resources of these organizations. Koumbit's services are grounded in the idea of giving autonomy and control to the users. Hence, members do not only develop websites, but also instruct their clients on how to maintain and update them. In addition, Koumbit offers a self-managed hosting service that allows clients to easily control aspects of their electronic communication

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<sup>12</sup> The organization's name is derived from "the Haitian Creole word *Konbit* which translates roughly to 'association of people towards the realization of a common goal'" (Koumbit, 2006, para. 1).

<sup>13</sup> At the time of the study (December 2006 to May 2007), Koumbit had about 21 members registered in their Wiki. A year later (May 2008), Koumbit reported to have sixty individual and organization members (Koumbit, 2009, para. 2).

that are usually needed to be done by specialized technicians. Commitment to this line of service has turned this young organization into “un des principaux organismes offrant de l’hébergement Web et des sites dynamiques et participatifs aux groupes militants et communautaires de Montréal” (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 1).

From the start of my contact with Koumbit members, I realized that I was not dealing with an ordinary organization. A researcher who was conducting a study at Koumbit put me in contact with its members. She arranged for me to attend an upcoming meeting to propose my study. I arrived at the address she gave me. At that time, Koumbit’s headquarters were located in a big old apartment. I knocked on the door and the owner of the house let me in with a smile. He did not ask me who I was or what I was doing there, but acted as though he already knew me. After taking off my boots, coat and the rest of the winter paraphernalia, I walked towards the main room where, I presumed, the meeting was going to take place. The room was cozy. It had a non-working fireplace. Some of the walls were red and exhibited artwork. A big wooden table and many chairs of different styles populated the right hand side of the room. The left-hand side of the room had two workstations and a drawing table. The decor gave away some of this group’s ideals: a classic Ché Guevara picture was hanging on one of the walls, while a cute stuffed penguin – the Linux icon – stood proudly on top of one of the desks. There were people everywhere. Some of them were sitting at the table – it seemed as though they were working (they could not take their eyes off their laptops). Some were talking animatedly in the hallway, while others were at the kitchen.

I looked for my contact. She introduced me to some of Koumbit’s members who seemed interested in my study. I was thinking to myself: “Well, who is the boss? Who do I have to speak to?” It turned out that Koumbit had no boss or hierarchical structure; they were a self-managed organization, governed by a Workers’ Council (WC) that was integrated by all workers. So, instead of having a private meeting with a director or head of a department, I had to present my research project to all workers present at that meeting and asked them permission to conduct my study. All members

agreed on granting me access to their organization. That first meeting marked the beginning of a research relationship with this interesting organization.

Koumbit's alternative way of organizing work is the result of the organization's mission and founding principles. Koumbit has a double mission: On the one hand, it aims to "promote the appropriation of free/libre and open source software (FLOSS) by social groups in Quebec, in Canada and abroad" (Koumbit, 2006, para 1). On the other hand, it aims to document the creation of a non-hierarchical and participative organizational structure (Goldenberg, 2008b). Koumbit members' actions and decisions are supposed to be guided by eight founding principles: collective management, educational space, transparency, copyleft (free software), self-sufficiency, solidarity, equity and equality and participatory economy (Koumbit, 2006). Anyone who aspires to be a member of this organization has to adhere to these principles.

Koumbit's mission and founding principles are grounded in two distinct, yet compatible, sources: (1) FLOSS and its values of democratization of information technologies and collaborative software development; and (2) Participatory Economics (ParEcon) (Albert & Hahnel, 1991, 2002; Albert, 2001, 2004), which promotes an alternative model to capitalist ways of organizing. To understand Koumbit's work and organizing practices, we therefore have to become acquainted with both FLOSS and ParEcon.

#### *4.2.1. FLOSS: Software More Than Just a Technical Issue*

FLOSS<sup>14</sup> is an inclusive expression that designates an international cooperation movement for software development and distribution. It combines two terms, *free software* and *open source software*. Each term refers to a particular software development and distribution philosophy.

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<sup>14</sup> Its first mention can be traced to the Free/Libre and Open Source Software: Survey and Study appointed by the European Commission in 2002 (Flora.ca, 2005).



For some scholars (Proulx, Couture & Rueff, 2008), the scope of FLOSS goes beyond the development and distribution of software. It constitutes a social movement with a legitimate claim and a far-reaching cause. According to these researchers, economical and technological transformations have led to the emergence of a “code industry,” a new kind of industry “dont la majeure partie des activités capitalisent sur la propriété du code, c’est-à-dire la propriété de la connaissance mise en code formel (brevets, protocoles, standards techniques, logiciels)” (p. 17-18). Software companies are good examples of this new industry. Oversimplifying a rather complex process, we could say that software programming consists of writing a series of instructions in a programming language.<sup>15</sup> These series of instructions are known as the *source code*. For the computer to execute these instructions, the source code has to be translated into a machine language (i.e., the binary code). Once this translation is done, the source code becomes useless, unless you want to modify the program. When buying software, you acquire the binary code, which does not allow you to do any modifications on the program. The source code is a property of the software company who has the only legal authority to develop, distribute and enhance the product.

The FLOSS movement emerges in response to the code industry. It is grounded in the idea that software is knowledge, not a commodity. Hence, it has to be shared and distributed to enable further innovation. This is why partisans of FLOSS believe that the source code of any software has to be readable, modifiable and open for reuse by other parties (see Proulx et al., 2008). Leaving the code “open” means that software can be modified and improved by others who are elsewhere. Consequently, software is no longer the property of a particular company but rather a public property that is protected by means of several alternative-licensing practices (e.g., GNU General Public Licensing).

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<sup>15</sup> This language is usually derived from English.

The origins of FLOSS can be traced to the Free Software movement that was initiated by Richard Stallman<sup>16</sup> in 1984. For Stallman, “the knowledge that constitutes a running program – what the computer industry calls the source code – should be free” (DiBona, Ockman & Stone, 1999, p. 2). By “free” he meant “liberty, not price (...) a matter of the users' freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software” (Free Software Foundation, 2009, para 2). According to Stallman (2007), the users’ freedoms are essential not only because they promote social solidarity, but also because “[i]n a world of digital sounds, images and words, free software comes increasingly to equate with freedom in general” (para 2).

In 1997, a group led by Eric Raymond came up with a new term for Free Software: Open Source. The new term was launched to avoid the ambiguity generated by the word *free*, yet also as a marketing campaign that would focus on the practical benefits of free software instead of the moral and ethical issues surrounding this software development model. The pragmatic focus adopted by open source developers and supporters marked a substantial difference that did not sit well with the values of the Free Software movement. In the eyes of Stallman (2007),

Open Source is a development methodology; free software is a social movement. For the free software movement, free software is an ethical imperative, because only free software respects the users’ freedom. By contrast, the philosophy of open source considers issues in terms of how to make software “better”—in a practical sense only. (para 7)

While the Free Software movement stresses the importance of this model on the basis of the users’ rights, the Open Source movement emphasizes the advantages and superiority of this collaborative mode of software development in relation to the traditional proprietary mode. However different these approaches may seem, they share three common principles: (1) users are considered as having the necessary skills to transform software as they want; (2) transparency and collaboration are the guiding principles for any contribution; (3) and software development is not anarchism, it is a

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<sup>16</sup> Researcher at the MIT Artificial Intelligence LAB, founder of GNU project and the Free Software Foundation (umbrella organization for the GNU project) (DiBona et al., 1999, p. 2)

regulated system (Proulx, 2006). FLOSS sympathizers have turned a seemingly technical issue into a political one: “Ils cherchent à mettre en débat les conséquences sociales et politiques des choix qu’une société se donne en matière de logiciels informatiques et d’architectures des réseaux techniques” (Proulx et al., 2008, p. 17). Hence, Proulx and his research colleagues have labeled these individuals committed to free-software computing “*les militants du code*” (i.e., code activists).

As part of this social movement, Koumbit members strongly believe in equal and equitable access to technical resources. Therefore, they have developed alternatives to what the market offers, not only in terms of prices, but also in terms of empowering the users by granting them more control over technical issues through training. In this sense, FLOSS has both triggered (i.e., because it is part of the organization’s mission) and enabled (i.e., because it is the means to an end) Koumbit’s activities.

From the outset, Koumbit members were very committed to the use and development of Drupal, an open source content management platform<sup>17</sup>, in order to provide their web development services to their clients. So far, Koumbit has developed over 40 Drupal/CivicSpace<sup>18</sup> websites (LeWikideKoumbit, 2006). However, Drupal is more than just an open source software to develop web projects. It is also a community (Drupal, 2009) of users/developers who are collectively and collaboratively improving the tool. As a member of this virtual community, Koumbit’s contribution

has taken the form of modules<sup>19</sup>, patches to modules, translations, graphical templates/themes and comprehensive training. Moreover, many of the

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<sup>17</sup> Content Management System (CMS) is a computer application designed to simplify the publication of Web content to Web sites. It allows content creators to submit content without requiring technical knowledge of HTML or the uploading of files (Wikipedia, 2009, Web Content Management Systems).

<sup>18</sup> CivicSpace was a CMS that was based on Drupal and was developed for political websites supporting Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential campaign. The functionalities of this CMS were integrated in Drupal 5.0 and now those functionalities are developed and maintained as CiviCRM.

<sup>19</sup> Modules are not part of the Drupal platform. They are plug-ins that extend, build on or enhance the features of Drupal’s core functionality (Drupal, 2009). Koumbit develops, maintains and sponsors several modules: Decisions, Dynamic Persistent Menu, Update Status Aggregator, OG Read Only as

completed projects have involved advanced techniques such as integrating multiple instances of Drupal, implementing various multilingual configurations (including right-to-left languages), migrating data and functionality from other CMSs and developing custom user-interfaces. (LeWikideKoumbit, 2006, DrupalExperience, para 3)

As a result of this sustained involvement in the community, “Koumbit is increasingly recognized as one of Canada's leading authorities on Drupal” (LeWikideKoumbit, 2006, DrupalExperience, para 1).

Koumbit’s use and development of FLOSS is not restricted to its services. Members use a wide array of FLOSS applications to do their daily work. Their computers run on open source operating systems, they use SQL Ledger for their accounting, the Time Tracker for monitoring worked hours, RT for handling in coming projects, and Open Office for email and text editing among other applications.

The use and development of software is guided by certain values that pervade the FLOSS movement (e.g., sharing and user appropriation). In the context of software development and distribution, sharing is closely related to licensing practices that refer to how distribution, use and reproduction of a particular production (e.g, software, manuscript, art, music) are going to be regulated. Copyleft<sup>20</sup>, one of Koumbit’s founding principles, refers to how Koumbit is sharing its productions. By adhering to the copyleft licensing scheme, Koumbit allows users to copy, adapt or distribute Koumbit software as long as the copies or adaptations respond to the same licensing scheme. Applied to the software industry, this view of sharing puts users and the development of software to the foreground and leaves the

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well as several components of the Aegir hosting system (i.e., Hostmaster, Hosting, Provision and Eldir).

<sup>20</sup> According to Stallman (2011) “Copyleft is a general method for making a program (or other work) free, and requiring all modified and extended versions of the program to be free as well” (What is copyleft?, para. 1).

author(s)/developer(s) in the background. It also promotes users'<sup>21</sup> appropriation of software, as they can copy or adapt them to their changing needs.

Aside from this politicized view of software and the technical and social motivations, this movement has important consequences in terms of organizational structures and governance. The way free and open source software is produced, challenges traditional principles of organizing, as Benkler (2002) explained:

Free software projects do not rely either on markets or on managerial hierarchies to organize production. Programmers do not generally participate in a project because someone who is their boss instructed them, though some do. They do not generally participate in a project because someone offers them a price, though some participants do focus on long-term appropriation through money-oriented activities, like consulting or service contracts. But the critical mass of participation in projects cannot be explained by the direct presence of a command, a price, or even a future monetary return, particularly in the all-important microlevel decisions regarding selection of projects to which participants contribute. In other words, programmers participate in free software projects without following the normal signals generated by market-based, firm-based, or hybrid models. (p. 5 non paginated pdf version)

FLOSS constitutes a new mode of production, one that is grounded on networks of cooperation and a new mode of knowledge sharing based on “le don et l’échange” (Proulx, 2006, p. 4). Benkler (2002) has labeled this mode of production commons-based peer production. It is characterized by

[c]ollaboration among large groups of individuals, sometimes in the order of tens or even hundreds of thousands, who cooperate effectively to provide information, knowledge or cultural goods without relying on either market pricing or managerial hierarchies to coordinate their common enterprise (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006, p. 384).

If traditional principles of organization are not the cornerstones of this mode of production, then what principles are being mobilized? According to Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006), there are two:

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<sup>21</sup> Here the term *user* designates a user/developer that has the needed knowledge to modify or adapt software.

The first is decentralization. Authority to act resides with individual agents faced with opportunities for action, rather than in the hands of a central organizer, like the manager of a firm or a bureaucrat. The second is that they use social cues and motivations, rather than prices or commands, to motivate and coordinate the action of participating agents. (p. 400)

Some of the principles that seem to guide the production of FLOSS software, a particular kind of production that transcends organizational and international boundaries, can be found in Koumbit's organizing practices.<sup>22</sup> First of all, Koumbit members do not believe in managerial hierarchies as viable structures for coordinating work; they believe in a collective authority. They also think work is better done in collaboration. So, instead of assigning a task to one single person, tasks are divided among several members. This demands a greater effort in terms of coordination, yet the outcome is considered to be of superior quality due to the combination of varied efforts. In terms of Koumbit members' motivations to participate, promoting the use and appropriation of FLOSS, is generally deemed as more important than making money out of it.

Ideas similar to the ones proposed by this new mode of production developed in the software industry have matured under the name of "participatory economics" or "participatory economy" (abbreviated Parecon). In the following paragraphs, I will address some of the main characteristics of this economic model. I will give special attention to organization of labor issues, because these issues guide Koumbit's organizing practices.

#### *4.2.2. Participatory Economy: Challenging Traditional Management Principles*

Participatory economy<sup>23</sup> was advanced by economy professor Robin Hahnel and social activist Michael Albert in the early 1990s as an alternative model to capitalism "based on public ownership and a decentralized planning procedure in

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<sup>22</sup> I will address governance-related issues in more detail in the next section.

<sup>23</sup> Although this model touches both the production and the consumption spheres of economy, I will only review issues relative to the organization of work in this section.

which workers and consumers propose and revise their own activities until an equitable, efficient plan is reached” (Hahnel & Albert, 1991, p. 4). The principles that are at the basis of this model are equity, understood in terms of payment according to effort; self-management, translated into participation in decision-making; solidarity, standing for “granting others equal consideration in their endeavors”; and variety, which means “attaining a diversity of outcomes” (Hahnel & Albert, 1991, p. 9). Hence, Parecon “strives for equitable consumption and work which integrate conceptual and manual labor so that no participants can skew outcomes in their favor, so that self-motivation plays a growing role as workers manage their own activities” (ibid, p. 4). According to Albert (2004), the central institutional and organizational components of this model are social ownership of the means of production, workers’ and consumers’ councils, balanced job complexes, remuneration for effort and sacrifice, and participatory planning.

Next, I will briefly discuss some of the components that were more significant to Koumbit’s organizing practices.

Traditional workplaces are grounded in the principles of “hierarchical relations of production and segregation of conceptual and executionary labor” (Hahnel & Albert, 1991, p. 23). According to the Parecon model, these principles are incompatible with economic justice. Accordingly, a horizontal and flat workplace structure is proposed. Horizontality is achieved by creating a Workers’ Council (WC) that governs the workplace. This organizational body is grounded in the premise that “how the people in a work group organize themselves affects almost exclusively themselves” (Albert, 2004, p. 92). Thus, the decision-making power should be in the hands of those who do the work and that are most affected by the outcome of a given decision. Therefore, in the WC “each worker has the same overall decision-making rights and responsibilities as every other” (ibid, p. 92). This decisional structure grants workers an appropriate impact over decisions. As Albert (2004) stated,

[I]n a situation where each worker has an interest in self-management, and no worker has disproportionate power, it is not unreasonable to assert that workers' councils will actuate decision-making structures and ways to delegate responsibility that accord with self-management rather than with unjust hierarchies of power. (p. 93)

At Koumbit, the principles of equity and equality translate into a flat organizational structure in which workers have equal participation rights. There is no official boss or a management elite; the organization is governed by a workers' council that—at the time of the study—was in charge of operational and strategic decision-making. The workers' council (WC) is composed of all workers, because they are the ones that have to make decisions that affect their work conditions (e.g., schedules, pay, methods of work, hiring). Each worker has a vote and voice during the decision-making meetings.

Another important component of Parecon, and a very difficult one to achieve in everyday practice, is the *balanced job complex*. A workplace governed by a workers' council does not necessarily guarantee an equitable workplace. How labor is organized will determine if equal opportunities for real participation are available for everybody. The traditional division of labor (i.e., mechanical work and conceptual work) prevents some workers from having information that is crucial to exercise their right to an informed participation in decision-making, while it gives others a systematic access to that information because of the tasks they routinely perform. Consequently, partisans of Parecon assert that “[p]eople should not do one type [of work] all the time. To foster participation and equity people must be assigned to a balanced mix of tasks” (Hahnel & Albert, 1991, p. 25).

At the time I conducted the study, Koumbit was struggling to put the balanced job complex principle into practice. Hence, a series of tasks systematically rotated so that everybody was able to perform them from time to time. The *meeting coordinator* was one of them. Thus, each monthly meeting was preceded by a different member who was in charge of conducting the session, following the agenda and organizing members' interventions. *Meeting secretary* was another task that was shared by



different members who rotate note-taking during the meetings. However, the balanced job complex principle goes beyond the rotation of tasks; it implies that every member performs certain jobs that are rewarding as well as some others that are less rewarding. This part was harder to put in place. For instance, there were other tasks (e.g., accounting, secretarial work, office keeping) that could rotate or be shared but the majority of members systematically refused to assume them. A small group of members was forced to do those tasks all the time.

Parecon establishes a different way to remunerate work, one that does not reward property but rather output and effort. In this model, ownership, skills, tools or other “possessions” are not regarded as things for which a worker has to be paid. Instead, workers should be remunerated for “the pain and loss they undergo while contributing to the social product” (Albert, 2004, p. 114). “Effort” is conceptualized in this model as personal sacrifice that can take many forms: “longer work hours, less pleasant work, or more intense, dangerous, or unhealthy work. It may consist of training that is less gratifying than the training experiences others undergo or than the work other do during the same period” (p. 114).

Remuneration of work was a delicate matter at Koumbit at the time of my study and it was closely related to what the organization considered to be work (Goldenberg, 2007). Being a self-managed organization, Koumbit’s members carried out two types of tasks. On the one hand, tasks related to the projects (i.e., web development, programming, design, coordination, client service) and, on the other hand, tasks that pertain to the realm of governance (i.e., decision-making and policy making) and management of the organization (i.e., strategic, managerial and operational decision-making, coordination, accounting). Tasks related to the projects were paid, because they generated income whereas the time and effort dedicated to the democratic life and management of the organization were not paid. Thus, the latter were done voluntarily, even though they were essential to the organization’s survival.

Members had different thoughts/opinions about this subject. Some members were against voluntary work. They thought the organization should reward every effort. They also thought that for work to truly be voluntary, the idea must come from the worker. Other members felt that voluntary work was necessary. They viewed it as a measure to assess members' commitment to the organization. For these members pay was a right you had to earn through the sacrifice and commitment voluntary work implied.

In trying to put these principles into action, Koumbit chose an alternative path, one that was not necessarily the easiest one. The Parecon model has been criticized for being highly theoretical. Hence, it does not have what it takes to ease its practical application. This explains Koumbit's interest in documenting their experience to help others in putting the model into practice.

#### 4.2.3. Getting to Know How Koumbit Works

While explaining the main tenets of what Parecon proposes, I explained some aspects of how Koumbit organizes work (i.e., workers' council, rotation of tasks, paid vs. voluntary work). In this section, I will describe them in more detail.

Hitherto, I explained that Koumbit organizes work by trying to sidestep some of the traditional principles of management, most notably, hierarchy and central control. Rothschild-Whitt (1979) has labeled organizations that eschew these principles as *alternative*, *contrabureaucratic*, *collectivist* or *collectivist democratic* organizations.<sup>24</sup> According to this author, such collectives are grounded in a value-rational view of authority that “involves commitment to an absolute goal regardless of consequences to the organization” (Satow, 1975, p. 528). In other words, these organizations are more committed to a cause (e.g., equitable economy, democratic workplace, democratization of information technologies) or ideology (e.g., Parecon) than to an organizational structure. However, “the more the preservation and

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<sup>24</sup> Hereafter, I will use the term *collectivist organization*.

continuity of the organization takes precedence over goal commitment, the more bureaucratized the organization becomes” (Satow, 1975, p. 528).

One of the most salient characteristics of collectivist organizations is how authority is established: Authority does not reside “in the individual, whether on the basis of incumbency in office *or* expertise, but in the collectivity as a whole” (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979, p. 511). Thus, hierarchy is substituted by *consensus*: “[O]nly decisions which appear to carry the consensus of the group behind them, carry the weight of moral authority” (ibid, p. 512). Furthermore, these organizations tend to function in an *ad hoc* manner by using a reduced number of rules. This means that social control is achieved by relying on “personalistic and moralistic appeals ... compliance is chiefly normative” (ibid, p. 513). Consequently, the process of selection is critical: Members are selected according to their sharing of the same values and principles.

Rothschild-Whitt (1979) also stresses the fact that collectivist organizations “rely primarily on purposive incentives (value fulfillment), secondarily on solidarity incentives such as friendship, and only tertiarily on material incentives” (p. 515). This translates into members paying themselves low salaries (or no salaries at all) when the organization cannot afford them. As Rothschild-Whitt put it, “work in collectives is construed as a labor of love” (p. 515). Sometimes, the low income can be compensated by the larger control members of these organizations have over their work: “[M]embers can structure both the product of their work and the work process in congruence with their ideals” (p. 516).

Finally, this mode of organizing relies heavily on coordination. Less rules, collective decision-making, “equitable distribution of labor and wholistic work roles” (p. 518) translate into members negotiating and coordinating issues that in other organizations are decided unilaterally. Therefore, collectivist organizations devote a considerable amount of time in meetings that are crucial for the organization to function properly.

The previous paragraphs have given us an idea of the type of organization Koumbit is. In the following section, I will discuss some of Koumbit's most salient organizing features.

#### *4.2.3.1. Koumbit's membership categories*

When Koumbit was founded, there were two types of members: *members* and *working members*. To become a member, the individual had to adhere to the organization's founding principles. Members were individuals or organizations that shared interests similar to those of Koumbit (e.g., FLOSS, Parecon, collaborative practices). Some of Koumbit's clients were also members of the collective. In other words, members were Koumbit sympathizers or clients who were not involved in the organization's production and day-to-day activities. Members participated in deciding Koumbit's strategic direction once a year in the context of the General Assembly.

Working members were those involved in Koumbit's production processes (e.g., web development, web hosting, design). In the beginning, all working members worked as *freelancers*. Consequently, their engagement with the organization was on a project basis. However, the participative nature of the organization required further commitment from them. As I mentioned before, they also had to accomplish governance and managerial tasks. These tasks were not paid. They were done on a voluntary basis.

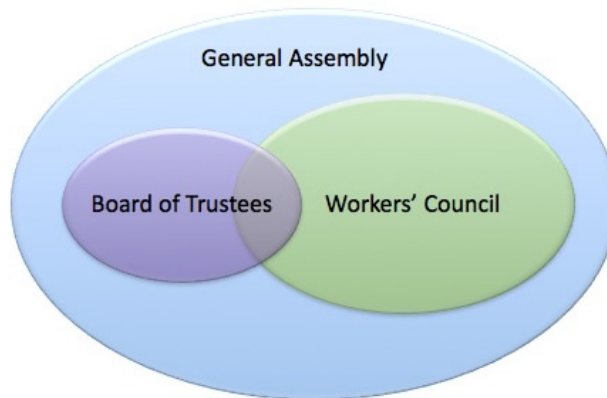
During my fieldwork, I witnessed the emergence and consolidation of two new membership categories: the *permanent worker* and the *salaried worker*. The first category surfaced after the introduction of roles (i.e., ensembles of tasks, for example, web development, systems administration, communication) and permanent hours (i.e. a fixed number of paid hours per week to accomplish a role). The second one emerged as the next logical step after becoming a permanent worker. Thus, the all-encompassing category of "working member" was subdivided into: freelance worker, permanent worker and salaried worker. At first, the differentiation among

membership categories was about the pay. So, being a permanent worker meant having a certain financial stability since these members had a fix number of hours guaranteed per week. Salaried workers, for their part, had a monthly salary and social advantages (i.e., paid vacations, sick days, etc). However, these categories were not ready-made. They were constructed and challenged by the members in their daily interactions. In this sense, they transcended remuneration issues.

#### 4.2.3.2. *Koumbit's structure*

When I started my study, Koumbit's organizational structure was rather simple. It was composed of three non-hierarchical organizational bodies: the Workers' Council (WC), the Board of Trustees (BT) and the General Assembly (GA).

Figure 2 –Koumbit's organizational structure



Adapted from Goldenberg (2008a, p. 121)

The Workers' Council (WC), Koumbit's main decisional body sees to "le bon fonctionnement des contrats, projets et opérations régulières de Koumbit ainsi qu'à la distribution équitable des tâches. Il a le contrôle général et surveille les affaires de la corporation" (LeWikide Koumbit, 2006, Comité de Travail, Mandat, para. 1).

The idea behind this organizational entity is to warrant “that each actor has an impact on outcomes in proportion to how much she or he is affected” (Albert, 2004, p. 95). In the words of a Koumbit member, “the decisional power has to be in the hands of those who do the work and that are the most affected by those decisions” (Omar, interview, 2007). Hence, Koumbit’s WC is composed by all the working members, that is, those members who offer their skills and time to achieve the organization’s productive goals and who are more at risk of being affected by decisions that are work related. From the outset, the WC oversaw both operational and strategic issues. To accomplish this, working members would meet<sup>25</sup> once a week to coordinate day-to-day work but also to discuss more strategic matters.

During the course of the study, the WC suffered an important change. As I have mentioned, Koumbit’s decision-making was centralized in the WC. However, as the organization grew, decision-making became more difficult and less efficient. Thus, members agreed to break down decision-making into more manageable decisional areas that were delegated to smaller groups (i.e., committees). The latter had an impact in the WC that shifted from being Koumbit’s main decisional unit to the overseer of the committees’ decision-making—even though some decisions were still taken by the whole group. These changes will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Individuals and organizations that adhere to Koumbit’s founding principles and sympathize with its activities are considered members. All members are part of the General Assembly (GA). Their participation in the organization’s decision-making process is limited to the Annual Meeting where they can vote. During the Annual Meetings, Koumbit’s working members and the The Board of Trustees (BT) report on the organization’s activity. The goals and objectives for the next year are discussed and collectively approved in these meetings too. The BT is composed of two working members, two organizational members and at least one individual

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<sup>25</sup> These meetings were referred to as “Coordination Meetings.”

member. The BT works as a counselor who advises the WC in relation to strategic affaires (e.g. middle and long term vision) and operational affairs (e.g. admission, suspension or exclusion of members, creation of committees, setting up the criteria of eligibility for the WC, settlement of internal conflicts). The WC reports the organization's activities to the BT 4 times a year (LeWikideKoumbit, Conseil d'Administration, 2006).

#### *4.2.3.3. The virtual office and the coordination of work*

In the beginning, Koumbit functioned without an office. Working members developed projects and attracted clients in the name of Koumbit, but they used their own resources (i.e., computers, transportation means and homes) to deliver the service. However, they had a virtual office composed by a series of applications (e.g., Time Tracker, Le Wiki de Koumbit<sup>26</sup>, email lists, IRC channels) that allowed Koumbit's working members to account for and coordinate their work but also to stay in touch. During this period in Koumbit's history, meetings constituted the moments where all working members were physically together. Coordination Meetings took place every week in different public places (e.g., libraries, coffee shops or restaurants). During these meetings, members organized work (i.e., checked the progress of the projects, assigned new projects, distribute members' pay checks, etc), but also discussed more strategic issues (i.e., policy, image, etc.). Although coordination meetings tended to be very long (they could last up to four hours) members really appreciated being together. These meetings were part of the "glue" that held the organization together—the other part being the members' commitment to Parecon and FLOSS.

It was not until September 25<sup>th</sup> 2006 that Koumbit's working members rented an office space. It was a big apartment that was home to two of Koumbit's working members and that also was office to FACIL, a non-profit association that promotes

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<sup>26</sup> Wikis are "websites that allow people to contribute or edit content in a collective way, without losing track of different versions of the document after updates" (Lietsala & Sirkkunen, 2008, p. 32).

free-software computing (FACIL, 2010). This office space offered members a big table for holding meetings and two workstations. Shortly after acquiring the office space, some members started to have regular office hours. For others, working at the office was difficult, either because they were used to the liberty of working at home or because they did not have the equipment to work away from home (e.g. a laptop, applications, etc.).

#### *4.2.3.4. Remuneration, accounting and the Time Tracker*

Working members' pay was calculated on an hourly rate. In general, projects were assigned to small teams that would be in charge of and responsible for every aspect of the project. The project started with an estimate that was calculated in terms of hours. Members working on a project would be paid by proration and Koumbit would keep 30% of the estimated cost of the project. If members exceeded the estimated hours for the project, the WC had to decide if Koumbit would pay for those extra hours. In order to get paid, members had to submit an invoice. The member in charge of the pay would corroborate the total of the invoice with the reported hours to extend the check.

Thus, remuneration was linked to members' report of work hours. Accounting for work hours was facilitated by the *Time Tracker* application, a virtual punching machine. Members kept track of their hours in this application. Each working member had an account that he/she would log into as soon as he/she started working on a project. At the end of the work session, he/she would enter the number of hours he/she had worked, indicating the project they were working for, since he/she could be working on several projects at the same time.

This remuneration system became more complex with the introduction of permanent hours that had a fixed rate (lower than the proration hours). So, members working on a project would have both proration and permanent hours. This hybrid payment system was difficult to keep track of and prompted the emergence of new



membership categories that challenged Koumbit's traditional accounting practices (this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5 and 6).

Voluntary work also was accounted for, members considered that it was important to keep track of those hours to have an idea of how much work was necessary to keep the organization up and running.

#### *4.2.3.5. Who are these code activists?*

At the time of the study, Koumbit had around 21 working members. However, I only met 12 of them on a regular basis. In this section, I will introduce those members who, according to their actions, played a central role in the processes I studied.

Antoine is one of Koumbit's founding members. From the beginning and throughout the years, his work and commitment to the organization have given Koumbit a lot of stability. Antoine is a programmer. He is in charge of Koumbit's systems administration, which involves the surveillance and maintenance of the servers (named Romulus and Remus) and the development of projects and infrastructure (LeWikideKoumbit, 2006, AdministrationSystèmes). His programming skills led him to conceive some of the tools Koumbit's members use to plan and coordinate their work (e.g., the TimeTracker, AlternC). At the time I conducted the study, he was also in charge of Koumbit's accounting. On top of these duties, Antoine was also responsible for documenting the experience of this unique organization. His duties granted him access to crucial organizational information (i.e., financial and technical), putting him in a privileged position but also making the organization very dependent on him.<sup>27</sup>

Omar is also one of the founders. He is a web developer and an activist. He is in charge of internal coordination and external promotion of the organization. In his

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<sup>27</sup> Antoine was aware of this situation and he was not particularly happy about it. At the time I conducted the study, he was trying to delegate some of the responsibilities he had acquired over time. He tried to get other people involved, since he believed that this dependency was not healthy for the organization's development and for his own well-being.

role of coordination, Omar faced moments where Koumbit members needed to be guided and others where members were not at ease with his coaching or direction. This coordination role is particularly difficult because of the organization's rejection of hierarchy and vertical control. Omar is also responsible for informally recruiting members and clients. Moreover, he informally assesses the quality of Koumbit's work, a role that is rather controversial. Omar and Antoine were the first members to be paid a permanent salary.

Jean-Sébastien, also known as Tatién, is part of the founding group, too. He works as a web developer and has been deeply involved in the governance of the organization. He is well known within the organization for his ability to make propositions that will articulate and harmonize divergent interests. He worked in budgeting and also prepared grant proposals for the organization. Unlike Omar and Antoine, for whom Koumbit is their sole source of revenue, Jean-Sébastien has a parallel artistic career.

Myriam<sup>28</sup> worked as a graphic designer. Although she was not part of the founding group, she had been with the organization almost from the beginning. Myriam developed Koumbit's graphic image. While she worked at Koumbit, she was in charge of Communication and Marketing issues. She was very committed to Koumbit's founding principles and very interested in the organization's governance. Her point of view was particularly interesting because she was a minority within the organization (i.e., woman and graphic designer). At Koumbit, men outnumber women and most of working members are programmers and web developers. There has always been friction between programmers and graphic designers in terms of the distribution of resources. Graphic designers resent that organization's work priority is web development.

Mathieu is one of Koumbit's old-timers. Although he was not part of the founding group, he has been involved with the organization almost since its creation.

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<sup>28</sup> Myriam resigned from Koumbit while I was conducting the study.

He left Koumbit on several occasions for long periods because of his life projects. He was coming back from a long leave when I started my fieldwork. He works in web development, but also contributes to the system's administration tasks.

Marco joined the collective more recently than the other members. He is known for his direct way to state things and also for his tendency to encourage situations of open argumentation. He is very vocal and committed to Koumbit's project of creating a freer and more equitable workplace. His role in Koumbit was not as clear as that of other members, at the time of the study. He was learning the ropes of web development and he worked with the graphic designers as he was very creative and a talented graphic artist. He contributed by doing clerical work, checking and responding RT tickets. The big apartment he shared with two other roommates became, for more than a year, Koumbit's office space.

Caroline and Helène are both graphic designers. Caroline works only part-time at Koumbit and the rest of the time at Communautique – an older organization with interests <sup>29</sup> similar to those of Koumbit. Thanks to her contacts with Communautique, she brings a lot of projects to Koumbit. Her point of view on most issues is well-appreciated by her colleagues who respect the knowledge she has acquired by her involvement in similar organizations. According to them, this involvement gives Caroline an external point of view. It is for this reason that she was chosen to deal with hiring issues and work conditions. Helène, on the other hand, is an involved member, however, she is not prone to expressing her point of view.

A description of Koumbit's actors would not be complete without mentioning a series of other agents (e.g., applications, computers, servers, information systems, etc.) that actively contribute to members' activities. Obviously, Koumbit is a technology-based organization and their services are grounded in the functionality of

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<sup>29</sup> “La préoccupation de Communautique est, depuis ses débuts, de placer le mouvement communautaire dans l'espace des politiques canadiennes et québécoises en matière de TIC. Il soutient que les organismes communautaires et de l'économie sociale, par leurs contacts privilégiés avec les collectivités des milieux urbain et rural et les populations potentiellement exclues, sont des acteurs cruciaux pour la diffusion et l'appropriation des TIC”. (Communautique, 2006, Historique, para. 2).

these entities. Also, as we will see in the following chapters, the role of these agents is not bounded to the technical sphere.

**Romulus and Remus:** They are Koumbit's servers, they store the clients' websites and most of Koumbit's information resources (e.g., website, wiki) run in them. They also handle Koumbit's and their clients' email accounts and systems. Consequently, their well-being is crucial to the functioning of the organization. Hence, an organizational role (i.e., systems administration) was created to make sure that they are up and running at all times. Their status is so important that information about it features in the main page of their wiki and website.

**Computers:** Most members work with their own laptops that are personalized with stickers that refer to activism. Computers are their connection to work, other members, clients and the world of information. They all run on open source software.

**Applications:** Numerous applications are used, although some of them play a more central role in everyday activities, most notably the Time Tracker, the virtual punching machine the RT that keeps track of incoming demands of service and the wiki (i.e., a collaborative information system) that documents Koumbit's life.

**Textual agents:** Organizational roles, permanent hours, membership categories, the hours report, the rights and ought of the workers were some of Koumbit's most salient textual agents.

#### *4.2.3.6. A Sequence of Organizational Changes*

As I mentioned before, my first contact with Koumbit took place during a meeting that members held on December 19<sup>th</sup> 2007. This was a very important meeting. An ad hoc committee had been appointed to study workers' satisfaction with Koumbit's working conditions and the results of this research were going to be presented in this meeting. The session was not intended to be just informational; they

were supposed to decide what to do about the problems that were identified by the study.

Two main issues were identified. The first issue pertained to the uneven distribution of responsibilities due to the different degrees of commitment of the members. The other was related to the remuneration system and volunteer work. To address the first problem, the appointed committee proposed the creation of several committees that would alleviate the Workers' Council's onerous decision-making process by taking care of decision-making in specific areas (e.g., finance, hiring, etc). This would also allow more participation and a better distribution of responsibilities. In relation to the remuneration issues, the appointed committee suggested the creation of some sort of stock options (i.e., *parts de participation*) as an alternative mode of payment. Both propositions were submitted to a vote and they were accepted. The meeting took the form of a workshop to further develop both propositions. A preliminary list of the potential committees, their composition and their mandate were the results of the workshop.

My intentions were to follow both changes simultaneously. However, the implementation of the *parts de participation* did not take off as swiftly as the committees. This slow start was indicative of a lack of interest from the members who soon thereafter officially abandoned the idea. So, I focused on the implementation of the committees. Members of each committee were responsible for planning the meetings and defining the scope of action of their committee. Since there was no formal plan for their implementation, I closely followed their actions. These actions took place, for the most part, in regular meetings. I attended each of the new committees' work meetings.

The first thing I learned by attending these meetings was that the organization had been going through a series of important changes during the last year (i.e., the creation and implementation of organizational roles and permanent hours). Some of them were still being worked out. The putting in place of the committees seemed unproblematic at the time of my observations. Members would occasionally complain

about having to attend more meetings than before, but there was no (noticeable) opposition or resistance to this new decision-making structure. What did seem problematic at the time of my observations were issues related to the creation of *organizational roles* and the attribution of *permanent hours*. These issues were a constant theme in members' conversations. The working out of organizational roles and the permanent hours constitutes one of the main themes of the collected data and thus the focal point of this research.

### **4.3. Data Collection**

The on-site data collection started on December 19<sup>th</sup> 2006 and ended on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007. I used three data collection methods: observation, interviews and the gathering of organizational documents. Each method allowed me to approach organizational change from a different vantage point since each one facilitates the collection of a specific kind of data. Interviews, for example, are well adapted for collecting data about participants' lived experience while observations are well-suited for collecting data about ongoing actions and interactions. Organizational documents are ideal resources for reconstructing past actions and events. Thus, each method presents certain advantages as well as certain limitations. The combined use of the three methods helped me make the most out of each method while minimize their limitations.

#### **4.3.1. Observation**

In order to explain organizational change from a communicative point of view that focuses on organizational members' interactions, I needed a data collection method that would grant me access to those interactions. The observation method was fitting because it enables the researcher to explicitly record and account for "the here and now of everyday life situations and settings" (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 13). This data collection method is grounded in the idea that access to members' practices can only be gained through detailed observation, since "interviews and narratives merely make

the accounts of practices accessible instead of the practices themselves” (Flick, 2006, p. 215). Hence, first-hand observation of members at work allowed me to collect detailed data about what members did and said, but also about the context in which those interactions took place. Moreover, being an external observer gave me “the opportunity to see things that may routinely escape awareness among the people in the setting” (Patton, 2002, p. 262).

The way Koumbit members worked determined what I was able to observe during the data collection period. As I mentioned previously, it was until October 2006 that Koumbit members rented an office. So, they had developed work practices that did not require them to work together at the office all the time. At the office they only had two workstations. This prevented members who did not have a portable computer from coming to work at the office. As a result, only a few members worked at the office. Thus, besides meetings, most of Koumbit’s work practices were virtual and more difficult to observe. Since I was interested in the interactional and collective nature of bringing about change, the richest occasions for understanding how change was accomplished were their meetings. Moreover, meetings were Koumbit’s lifeblood because its participative decision-making system relied on them. Meetings provided occasions for members to coordinate work, reflect on and debate about their organization. It was also in meetings that changes were proposed, negotiated, decided upon, worked out, and further changed. In other words, it was in the meetings that the organization was created, recreated and also changed.

At the time of the study, most meetings were held at La Bande Passante. The apartment had a big table in the main room that could seat about 12 people. Members sat around the table with their laptops. They produced detailed minutes of the meetings. This task was done collectively (they took turns to take notes). This dynamic allowed me to blend in easily. I sat with them at the table and took notes on my laptop, like everybody else. I did not intervene in their conversations. My role as an observer evolved a little during the period of the study, because of the trust I established with the participants. My role changed from being an observer to having a

very moderate participation. For instance, during the meetings, I was occasionally asked to go through my notes to provide a piece of information that they missed in their notes. Also, as I gained a better understanding of organization's issues and problems, the urge to participate, to speak my mind increased. I refrained from doing this, although this sort of involvement would have been highly appreciated by Koumbit members. Close to the end of my data collection, I collaborated in the development of the communication plan and I assisted to two meetings of the Associative Life committee to informally communicate some of my research findings in relation to their internal communication.

I attended and observed a total of 19 meetings, ranging from Strategic Meetings, the Committees' Meetings and the Administrative Council Meetings (see Table 4.1 for the number of times I assisted to each one of these meetings).

**Table 4.1. : Meetings and Number of Observations**

<b>Type of Meeting</b>	<b>Number of times I was present</b>
Strategic Meetings	5
Production Committee	3
Communication and Marketing Committee	2
Hiring Committee	4
Finance Committee	2
Associative Live Committee	2
Administrative Council Meeting	1

Most of the meetings (i.e., 18) were audio-recorded, except for one that was video-recorded. The recorded meetings had a duration that ranged from two to four hours. I produced field notes for all the meetings I attended. These notes guided me through the material, allowing me to identify relevant meetings and moments within the meetings. Meetings that were relevant for the purposes of the research were transcribed partially.



Observations were unstructured, meaning that I did not use an observation grid. I started with what Spradley (1980) labeled *descriptive observation*. I recorded data that described the setting, the members, their actions and interactions, the social dynamics of meetings, the topics that were discussed in the meetings. These initial observations helped me get acquainted with how the organization worked and how the committee structure was coming into being. I noticed that the word “change” (or synonymous words) was not mentioned very often. Instead, members talked about the allocation of permanent hours, the confusion with organizational roles and the uneven distribution of responsibilities. These issues happened to be linked with some changes the collective had introduced the previous year. It was clear that these changes were still in the making. So, my subsequent observations paid close attention to the challenging, redefining and negotiation of these issues.

#### 4.3.2. Interviews

To complement my observations, I conducted four semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. These interviews were conducted at different moments during the data collection period. So the interview protocol was slightly different for each interviewee. Differences in the protocol responded to new issues that emerged during observations, but also to the particular experiences and knowledge each interviewee brought to the table.

I approached interviews as interaction situations that produce situated accounts (Alvesson, 2003) rather than the mere “reporting of external events” (p. 17). Interviews were used to explore members’ sensemaking of Koumbit’s change process. They were particularly important for *re-constructing* past events. These events turned out to be crucial for understanding the changes that the organization was putting in place. These interpretations were mainly needed to understand some of their organizational practices (e.g., remuneration system) that could not be understood by simply observing because of their complexity. In this sense, members’ accounts

clarified and uncovered interesting features of their organizing practices that were not observable.

I chose to interview members who had been in the organization either from the beginning or who had had a continuous relationship with the organization. In other words, I selected members that had had enough experience and insight to make sense of the organization's past and of what was happening at the time of the study. Hence, I interviewed three of the founding members (Antoine, Omar and Jean-Sébastien) as well as Myriam.

It was true that Koumbit had no formal boss and no formal hierarchical structure. Nevertheless, seniority did matter and it weighed not only in terms of knowledge about the organization but also in terms of influence. Therefore, I approached interviewees as "politically aware and politically motivated actors" (Alvesson, 2003, p. 22) who advanced political views in more or less overt ways. For example, the way members perceived the organization and their possibility to influence its direction and outcomes differed considerably between the founding members and the graphic designer. Founders felt that their opinions had an impact on organizational outcomes. They viewed Koumbit as a democratic workplace where everybody can speak their mind and influence the direction of the organization. The graphic designer, for her part, felt that Koumbit was increasingly becoming more of a traditional organization. According to her, the possibility to speak one's mind to influence the direction and outcomes of the organization was very limited.

In sum, the interview accounts showed me how these members made sense of their organization as well as of particular organizing processes (e.g., organizational change, decision-making). I viewed these constructions as particular versions of "how things hang together and how they can be represented" (Alverson, 2003, p. 23). Consequently, the account I produced based on them is also a particular version of Koumbit's change process.

### *4.3.3. Collection of Documents*

I collected documents from the following sources: Koumbit's website (<http://koumbit.org/>), Koumbit's wiki<sup>30</sup> (<https://wiki.koumbit.net/>) and their mailing lists (i.e. work list and members list). Each source provided different kinds of information. For example, the website provided me with general information about the organization and its services (i.e., information for external publics). The wiki was conceived of as a work tool, so it had all sorts of work related information (e.g., budget, procedures, schedules), yet it was also conceived of as tool to record the experience of creating and working for a Parecon-inspired organization. Thus, they also had reflexive content about their organizing practices (e.g., meeting minutes, editorial pages). The mailing lists had information about the projects and clients, social events, meeting schedules and the like.

The Wiki was the most useful source. Its information (most particularly the meeting's minutes) allowed me to further<sup>31</sup> connect Koumbit's present with its past. Although the past was evoked and invoked in members' interactions (i.e., the connections were already there), this information helped me to develop a deeper understanding of those connections. It helped me put the changes Koumbit was implementing into perspective (i.e., the big picture).

I analyzed all the minutes that were available in the wiki. These minutes went back as far as February 2004, around the time the founding members had the idea to create the organization. I identified events, issues, decisions and the members participating. I downloaded the minutes of the meetings that took place from October 2006 to June 2007<sup>32</sup> for a more detailed analysis. It was a total of 27 meeting

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<sup>30</sup> Only working members had access to the wiki. Members granted me access to this valuable information.

<sup>31</sup> Interviews were a first step in establishing connections between Koumbit's present and past. However, the wiki's detailed accounts of Koumbit's past actions helped me establish deeper connections.

<sup>32</sup> This period constituted a turning point in Koumbit's life.

minutes.<sup>33</sup> These meetings included coordination meetings, strategic meetings, the Hiring Committee's meetings and the meetings held by the Associative Life special committee. Another important feature of the information in the wiki is that it included links to other documents, meetings or web pages members mentioned during their meetings. I also consulted other documents, for example, the texts that described organizational roles and committees, the tables that illustrated the allocation of permanent hours and the statement of rights and owes of the workers.

#### **4.4. Data Analysis**

This study aimed to provide insight into organizational change from a communicative point of view that takes interactions as the starting point. I posed the following research question: What communicative actions do organizational members perform during their everyday interactions that contribute to the production of differences in the state of affairs?

I conducted two types of analyses to answer this question. First, I carried out a process-inspired analysis to make sense of the collected data. I used what Langley (1999) labels a "narrative strategy." This strategy involves the "construction of a detailed story from the raw data" (p. 695). Data from members' interviews and the different types of documents (i.e., meetings minutes, official documents, working documents) that members had stored in Koumbit's Wiki were the main sources I used for the construction of the detailed story. The story or account I created/produced constituted my version of how Koumbit's change process unfolded. This account focuses on the sequence of events, the actors and the content of change. I combined this narrative strategy with what Langley (1999) calls a "visual mapping strategy". This allowed me to present not only the events that led to the transformation of two of Koumbit's organizing processes throughout time, but also how different types of

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<sup>33</sup> The quality of the notes varied from secretary to secretary. Some secretaries took very detailed notes that reproduced the actual turns of talk of the participating members. Some made summaries of what members said, while others just summarized the issues discussed in the meeting.

change (i.e., purposeful, emergent, opportunistic) are articulated in a change process. Langley (1999) describes these strategies as “ways of descriptively representing process data in a systematic organized form. As such, they often, although not always, constitute the initial rather than final steps in the sensemaking process” (p. 707). As an initial step, both Koumbit’s narrative of the change process and the visual map provided a detailed description of the context against which to understand members’ actions and interactions.

The next step involved taking a magnifying glass and focusing on actual interactions. Thus, I selected a series of excerpts from the observed meetings that allowed me to illustrate how change comes about in members’ interactions. My analysis was based on the conversation analysis-inspired tradition that has been developed by some of the Montreal School scholars (see Cooren 2006, 2007; Cooren, Matte, Taylor & Vasquez, 2007; Cooren, et al., 2008; Katambwe & Taylor, 2006, Robichaud, 1999). In keeping with conversation analysis (CA), this tradition also focuses on “how and what people do locally” but they extend “this action-oriented approach to entities that have been traditionally neglected... namely what Latour calls non-human actors” (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2005, p. 124). By extending the concepts of communication and agency<sup>34</sup>, these authors argue that their analyses offer a “bigger picture,” one that illustrates how we can account for what constitutes an organization by considering the dislocal nature of interactions. The analysis of Koumbit’s meetings excerpts focused on: (1) identifying change sequences; (2) analyzing the actions within the change sequence; and (3) organizational members’ staging practices (i.e., who or what members mobilized in their interactions to build cases for either producing change or maintaining the status quo).

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<sup>34</sup> Thus, communication is not a process that involves a speaker and receiver since other beings are also considered as participating in the exchange. This also extends the concept of agency since it no longer depends on having a particular ontology (human) but rather it depends on making a difference in a particular situation.

#### *4.4.1. Data Selection*

Selecting the materials for the conversation analysis was an interesting challenge, considering the amount and richness of the data I collected. During the data collection, I observed a wide range of change-related activities (e.g., introduction of new workers, the emergence of new membership categories, putting in place of new decision-making structure). However, two agents/figures were present in almost all of the meetings: The permanent hours and organizational roles. These agents/figures materialized the changes Koumbit had started to implement several months before I started my fieldwork. While the implementation of a new decision-making structure, was being put in place rather smoothly, the permanent hours and organizational roles were still not clear. As a result, members were challenging these agents/figures almost in every meeting. The definition and redefinition of these agents/figures was the most discernable pattern in the collected data. In addition, permanent hours and organizational roles played a central role in Koumbit's organizing since both touched upon the organization's social contract, membership categories and the remuneration system. Thus, I focused on them to select the data for the analysis. Next, I needed to identify episodes that would allow me to illustrate the communication-based approach to organizational change I proposed in Chapter 3.

#### *4.4.2. Choosing the excerpts.*

During the fieldwork I noticed that the Hiring Committee meetings and the Strategic Meetings were the most interesting events in terms of organizational change, because they were occasions in which members challenged, negotiated, defined and redefined the texts (e.g., permanent hours and organizational roles) that made up the organization. Thus, I carefully went through the audio/video-recordings of these meetings several times, looking for change sequences.

#### *4.4.3. Transcription*

Since the Hiring Committee Meetings and the Strategic Meetings contained the richest data, I produced complete transcriptions of the following meetings: January 16, 2007; February 1, 2007; and March 15, 2007. I also fully transcribed the Hiring Committee Report that was presented in the Strategic Meeting that took place on February 2, 2007. Further, I worked with partial transcriptions of the Strategic Meeting of March 3 2007 and the Administrative Council Meeting of March 21 2007.

Transcriptions followed the conventions proposed by Zimmerman (2005) (see Appendix A). I highlighted the passages that I deemed crucial for my analysis in bold.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have described what it means to study organizational change from the inside. The following chapter presents the first part of a twofold analysis of the collected data. This part of the analysis is grounded in a narrative and a visual mapping strategy that allows me to describe and examine the series of events and the agents that participated in the transformation of two main aspects of Koumbit's organizing (i.e., remuneration of work and decision-making). As we will see Koumbit members are not alone in this process, to bring change about they need to associate themselves with a wide array of agents.

## Chapter 5

### **Cascades of Change: Koumbit's Movement Towards Fixed Remuneration and Efficient Participation**

*Observing organizational change  
is like looking for a hidden  
treasure without a map,  
no landmarks to look for  
and no directions to follow,  
you are on your own*

*(Fieldnotes, January 19th 2007).*

Change is not an isolated event as many academic accounts present it. It is deeply entwined in everyday action and organizational routines. While organizational members may easily identify the beginning of a change, it is hard to know when an organizational change is completed, as change itself mutates and transforms.

I approached Koumbit to study the changes they were making to their decision-making structure. However, I did not witness just one change, but what could be called a *cascade of changes*. Koumbit's changes were both significant and numerous, and they happened in a rather short period of time (i.e., one year). Furthermore, the changes were somehow sequenced and linked, as if each transformation resulted from a previous one and generated yet another alteration.

Thus, I discerned two major cascades in Koumbit's change process.<sup>35</sup> Each one was composed of a series of events that gradually transformed an important aspect of the organization. Cascade I describes the changes made to the remuneration system from the organization's inception until May 2007. Cascade II focuses on the actions

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<sup>35</sup> Although I present Koumbit's change process in the form of two separate cascades, this partition was not there in practice. It is a strategy for ordering, presenting and analyzing complex data. Hence, the reader should keep in mind that "any sharp partitioning of change is misleading" (Orlikowski, 1996, p. 69) since change is rather fluid and ongoing.



surrounding the transformation of Koumbit's decision-making structure from the beginning of the organization until May 2007.

What had triggered these cascades of change? The type of organization (i.e., collectivist) and its field of expertise (i.e., new information technologies) could explain this organization's flexibility and tendency towards change, but there was something else. In fact, it was there in the members' accounts. The common thread in their stories was the increase in membership Koumbit had experienced. The change in the organization's size was not planned and it triggered other important changes. I saw those changes originating in three different ways.<sup>36</sup> Some changes were *intentional*<sup>37</sup> in that members set themselves to alter some aspect of their organization. However, the course of action to attain the desired state or outcome was not fully planned. The putting in motion of an intentional change can trigger two types of change, *emergent changes* that "arise spontaneously from local innovation and that are not originally anticipated or intended" and *opportunity-based changes* that "are not anticipated ahead of time but are introduced purposefully and intentionally during the change process in response to an unexpected opportunity, event, or breakdown" (Orlikowski & Hoffman, 2003, p. 267). Acknowledging that change happens in different ways allowed me to show that organizational change is not a sporadic event but rather an integral part of everyday ordinary action.

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<sup>36</sup> The types of changes I identify are inspired in Orlikowski and Hoffman's (2003) improvisational change model. This model proposes that change happens in three different, but connected, ways in organizations: *anticipated change*, *emergent change* and *opportunity-based change*.

<sup>37</sup> In light of Koumbit's change process, I opted to reconceptualize these authors' first type of change as *intentional* instead of *anticipated*. Anticipated change stresses the planned nature of change and the way it unfolds. It supposes that the implementation of change was carefully thought out and transferred into a plan that states the stages and actions members have to carry out to attain the desired outcome. This description does not fit the way Koumbit changed. Intentional change, on the other hand, stresses the voluntary nature of the action; that is, the determination to attain a certain outcome or state. However, it leaves open the part of how this outcome or state is going to be attained. In this sense, "intentional change" captures how Koumbit went about change in a better way: Members identified a problem. They had the intention to change that aspect of the organization that they thought was not working properly, and they would agree on a solution that would be implemented. The implementation of the solution was not detailed in the form of a plan; it was a loose course of action that left plenty of space to accommodate and adjust the solution in light of the upcoming situations.

The story that follows narrates the intricacies of a young organization that, as it grows, experiences the need to formalize its practices. Communication has a central role in this process. It is in members' interactions that new sets of associations are created which transform the state of affairs. Human agents are not alone in putting in place those transformations. Other agents of a different ontology (e.g., documents, principles, emotions, technological devices) also play an important role in this process. Most notably, they contribute to the materialization of change (i.e., new set of associations).

### **5.1. Koumbit's "Growing Pains"**

It was in October 2004 that Koumbit officially saw the light of day. Yet the idea of Koumbit was in the air well before that. As Antoine, one of Koumbit's founding members, remembered, the beginnings of Koumbit were closely linked to another organization the Centre des Médias Alternatifs du Québec<sup>38</sup> (CMAQ) and more precisely the transformation that this organization experienced after the Quebec Summit of the Americas in April 2001.

After the coverage of the Quebec Summit of the Americas, members of the CMAQ felt the need to follow the steps of other similar organizations (e.g. Indymedia) that had changed their publishing platforms from a "proprietary" code to an "open source" code.<sup>39</sup> This change incorporated the CMAQ in the broader open source movement and also added certain important features for its users.

At that time, there was an increasing demand for website hosting services. The CMAQ started hosting the websites of other community projects, but it was not reliable to provide this service free of charge. Anticipating that this situation could

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<sup>38</sup> The CMAQ is an organization committed to the production of independent information and its diffusion in alternative media "[i]t constitutes both a meeting point and a virtual platform where independent journalists as well as members of civil society can participate in debates related with globalization and the promotion of social justice" (CMAQ, 2004, Definition and Goals, para. 1).

<sup>39</sup> This refers to a method and philosophy for software licensing and distribution in which the code used to write a software program is available to the greater public.

not last much longer, some members of the CMAQ's technical team<sup>40</sup> and the editors of L'Insomniaque, another independent media<sup>41</sup>, started thinking about ways to guarantee the CMAQ's survival. The solution was the creation of another organization that could host the CMAQ website and offer this service to other community projects. The new organization was designed with a

double vision : donner de services toujours communautaires, mais en même temps, se créer un milieu de travail à nous, qu'on pouvait changer, qu'on pouvait contrôler euh et donc créer une plateforme pour les travailleurs en informatique dans la région de Montréal.  
(Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007)

After several months and many rounds of discussion about the nature of the future organization (i.e., cooperative or Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)), the founding members decided to create Koumbit as an NGO, a flexible structure that would allow them to develop information systems services for community organizations and a work cooperative for the professionals in the information technology field.

Soon thereafter, Koumbit was ready to start: “Donc, c’est à partir d’octobre 2004 qu’on a eu notre premier client, en terme de site web là (...) qui était la Fédération de Centres d’Action Bénévole de Québec (FCBQ) qui est encore un client à ce jour” (Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007).

The open character of the collective and its interesting ideas in terms of the organization of work started attracting new members, mostly young people with a formal education in computing, web programming or graphic design. At that time, they did not have a formal selection process. The only criterion to become a Koumbit member was to adhere to the organization's founding principles. As Antoine mentioned: “Au début c’était très très, extrêmement ouvert, c’est-à-dire que n’importe qui voulait pouvait venir faire un contrat dans Koumbit, amener son

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<sup>40</sup> This team was integrated by Omar Bickell, Stéphane Couture, Sébastien Grenier who would later contribute to the creation of Koumbit.

<sup>41</sup> Antoine Beaupré and Jean-Sébastien Senécal, future founding members of Koumbit, edited this online independent journal. They were both committed to the Open Source Movement.

contrat, Koumbit prenait un pourcentage et le travailleur s'arrangeait avec le reste" (Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007).

In no time, Koumbit had increased its membership considerably<sup>42</sup>, as this founding member confirmed: "Quand j'ai quitté Koumbit et que je suis revenu, une des grosses différences qu'y avait, c'est qu'y avait à peu près le double des personnes qui assistaient aux meetings, y avait aussi plus de travail" (Jean-Sébastien, interview, March 20<sup>th</sup> 2007). Koumbit's growth reached a critical point in the summer of 2006. The collective's new size demanded changes in the way members organized their work. These changes touched upon two important processes: the remuneration of work and the structuring of participative decision-making.

## **5.2. Cascade 1: Movement Towards the Stable Remuneration of Work**

During the period that followed the summer of 2006, Koumbit members realized that they were no longer a group of friends, working together for a common cause or principle. Rather, they were a team of professionals delivering services to the community while trying to make a difference in terms of management practices (i.e., horizontal structure, no boss, participatory decision-making). However, being a larger team had considerable implications. For example, the amount of coordination and administrative work (e.g., keeping track of contracts and clients, billing, payroll, accounting) had doubled.

While Koumbit was still a small group, all working members were paid as freelancers. Their salary varied according to the projects they were working on. At this point, the organization was not able to provide stable work conditions (i.e., a fixed number of projects per month or a fixed salary) to its members. Actually, all tasks not related to the projects (e.g., accounting, management, billing) were done as voluntary work. As these tasks became more complex and time-consuming because

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<sup>42</sup> By June 2005, there were 27 registered members according to Koumbit's meeting attendance records.

of the number of people involved in the organization, “il a fallut créer vraiment des rôles spécifiques qui sont pas rémunérés par les contrats pour ces tâches-là” (Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007).

In this way, Koumbit’s journey towards formalization started. Accounting for this change process from the communication perspective developed in Chapter 3 implied disentangling “a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies” (Latour, 2006, p. 44) that contributed in different ways to the process. So, what follows is an account of how human agents associate themselves with various agents/figures<sup>43</sup> (Cooren, 2010) to challenge, redefine and stabilize aspects of their organization.

### 5.2.1. From Allocations to Permanent Hours: The Raise of a New Membership Category

The movement towards the remuneration of voluntary work – essential to the survival of the organization – started in January 2005 (Figure 3 graphically represents this change process). It was at this point that Koumbit’s Workers’ Council agreed to pay for work not directly related with the projects. So, a small *budget or allocation*, as members called them, was assigned to Antoine<sup>44</sup> who had been taking care of systems administration issues (i.e., keeping the servers up and running).

In September of that same year, a similar budget was allocated for accounting purposes, once again, to Antoine who had been in charge of this issue on a voluntary basis. At the end of October 2005, a proposition was made to transform the systems administration allocation into systems administration *permanent hours*.

The move from allocation to permanent hours implied an important change in terms of the distribution of work and responsibilities. Allocations were intended for

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<sup>43</sup>Many of the agents/figures participating in Koumbit’s change process (e.g., organizational roles, permanent hours, Parecon principles) have a textual dimension. This means that they are incarnated in written documents that stabilize their definitions (members’ understandings of them). Thus, when this dimension is the one that takes the forefront, I refer to these agents/figures as texts, following Taylor and Van Every’s (2000) view of the concept.

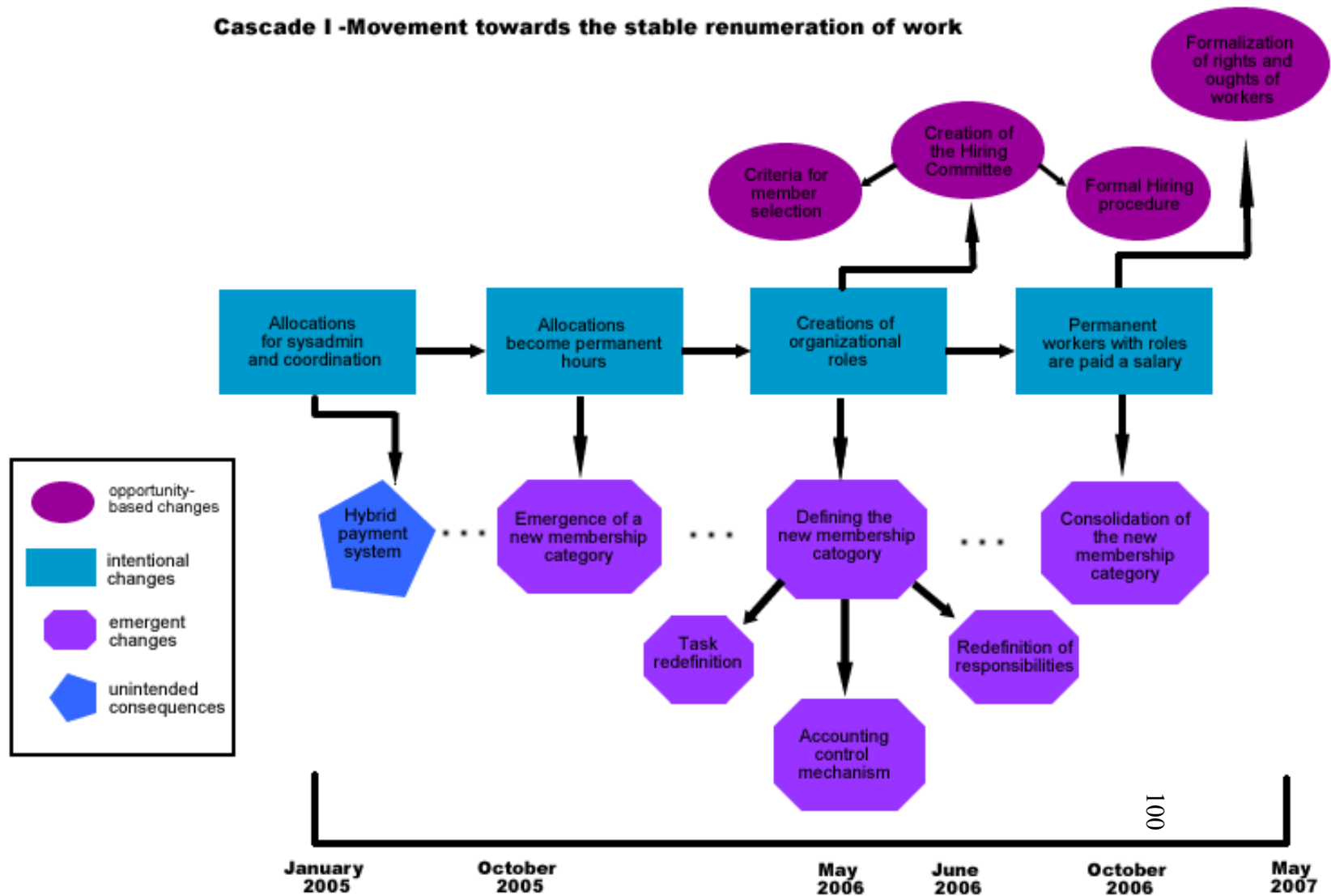
<sup>44</sup> He is one of Koumbit’s founding members.

one member who had the whole responsibility of a particular task (e.g., accounting) or area (e.g., systems administration). The permanent hours, on the other hand, transformed the budget into a fixed number of hours per week that could be distributed among several members who could share not only the work but also the responsibilities.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This was particularly important for systems administration tasks that demanded constant surveillance and availability in case of a server crash or other related problems.

### Cascade I - Movement towards the stable remuneration of work



Here we see that changes to the remuneration system (i.e., paying for tasks not directly related with the projects) materialized with the creation of two agents/figures: allocations and permanent hours. They brought to life things that were not there before, for example, financial stability. Members who were assigned permanent hours knew that part of their monthly pay was fixed. It also established new responsibilities and expectations for both the workers and the organization. In terms of responsibilities, workers that had permanent hours had to account for those hours. It was the collective's duty to warrant the funds to pay for the permanent hours. Practices also were altered by the introduction of these agents/figures, accounting for work changed from being a source of information to a tool for assessing performance.

It is interesting to notice how both allocations and permanent hours were created by demand. These changes in the remuneration system were proposed by two of the founding members (Antoine and Omar) who considered that their *dedication* to the organization had given them the right to ask for stable remuneration. Other members approved their requests because they acknowledged their dedication and commitment. Here we can see how the values of dedication, devotion and commitment are central in this organization to the point that they can be invoked as what authorizes or allows members to ask for stable remuneration. A disposition such as dedication or allegiance ends up participating in what justifies change.

In November 2005, members assigned 8 permanent hours per week to Omar – another founding member – for sales and project coordination. This was, as Antoine stated, “le plus gros budget débloqué à date” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, MeetingsCoordination 14/11/2005, Paid Sales & Project Coord, para 2). Although members were happy about formalizing the role Omar had been playing, they also wanted to make sure that the money was put to good use. So, members established some ground rules: a list of tasks, reporting every two weeks and a monthly evaluation. What is interesting is how the definition of permanent hours (i.e., text) evolved according to the organization's requirements. As the amount of hours increased, so did the conditions that regulated the work of those who had permanent



hours. These regulating agents (i.e., task description, reports and evaluation) not only contributed to the monitoring of the work but also contributed to defining the permanent worker category by establishing boundaries in terms of what can and cannot be done. Also, we can see the task description, the reports and the evaluations as *incarnations* of the membership category.

By the end of 2005, both Antoine and Omar decided to work full-time for the organization. They were aware that Koumbit could not pay for all the hours they would be working but they accepted this situation. Since Koumbit's revenue was on the rise, these members hoped that soon the organization would be able secure them financial stability but also that this working conditions would be offered to more members.

Notice how once more the materialization of change is linked with the creation of agents/figures. The difference created in the remuneration system by the implementation of permanent hours (i.e., an intentional change) took the form of a *fixed monthly pay*. This important financial distinction contributed to the materialization of differences in the status of Koumbit's members giving rise to a *new membership category*: the permanent worker (i.e., emergent change). At this point, the emergent membership category incarnated in the values of *sacrifice* and *commitment* that were linked with Antoine and Omar's work for Koumbit. Thus, permanent hours were not assigned; they were rather earned with hard work (i.e., commitment and sacrifice). However, what it meant to be a permanent worker still needed to be defined.

### 5.2.2. The Emergence of Organizational Roles: Steps in Defining "Les Permanents"

Another important shift took place in May 2006. During Koumbit's Annual Reflection Day, members stated the need for more stable jobs with the possibility for fixed remuneration and advancement. They pointed out that Koumbit relied too much on the voluntary work of its members. As Jean-Sébastien mentioned,

Présentement, ce sont les membres travailleurs qui assument le fardeau de la dette. C'est pas viable à long terme, l'organisme devrait être là pour assumer au moins une partie du risque. ... Il faut faire quelque chose de général, qui inclut tout le monde, nouveaux, anciens (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting 02/05/2006, Discussion et vote sur une proposition, para. 21).

After a round of discussions, members agreed to “étendre les ‘permanences’ déjà existantes dans Koumbit en ‘rôles’ et de créer de nouveaux ‘rôles’” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, CatégorieRôle, para. 1). Thus, the members who had permanent hours (i.e., Antoine and Omar) would now perform organizational roles (i.e., *systems administration* and *accounting* in Antoine’s case and *coordination* for Omar) and have their monthly hours increased. Other working members would have the possibility to perform roles and have a fixed number of paid hours per month.

Roles were defined as “plus qu’une tâche: c’est un ensemble de tâches. De plus, ce n’est pas une ‘position’ ou un ‘poste’ car plusieurs personnes peuvent s’échanger, partager ou ‘jouer’ le rôle au fil du temps” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Rôles, Qu’est-ce qu’un rôle, para. 1). Notice how a new agent/figure (i.e., organizational role) was created to extend the working conditions that were given to Antoine and Omar. As we will see in more detail in Chapter 6, these agents/figures (i.e., permanent hours and organizational roles) were delegated the task of telling members what tasks they were supposed to accomplish and which ones they were paid for.

A month later, June 2006, accounting, coordination, and systems administration were transformed into roles. At that time, they defined the tasks that conformed each role and created a page in their Wiki. The Wiki played an important role throughout Koumbit’s change process. This collaborative content management system (CMS) helped members record their decisions (e.g., meeting minutes) and produce collective texts (e.g., description of roles, procedures, policies) that members could refer to. The textualization that the Wiki made possible contributed to the materialization of change as it gave the ideas developed in conversation a more permanent mode of being. This mode of being gives ideas a different status. They become part of the *text-*

*world* (Werth, 1993), “an interpreted world of collectively held and negotiated understandings” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 34) that serve as a springboard for action.

The following excerpt<sup>46</sup> is an example of a text created in the wiki to define the systems administration’s role.

La tâche est séparée en deux partie(s). La première est d'être disponible avec le téléphone cellulaire en cas de pépin (la PermanenceDeSurveillance). La seconde consiste à s'assurer du bon fonctionnement des serveurs de Koumbit, mais aussi au développement de nouveaux projets, comme le CommunityColocationProject ou les nouveaux serveurs (romulus.koumbit.net, remus.koumbit.net).

**Liste de tâches:**

Support et maintenance

- Mises à jour de sécurité
- Maintenance de routine
- Interventions d'urgence
- Support technique (répondre aux questions sur IRC/mail sur l'utilisation des services à l'interne et à l'externe)
- Maintenance de la DocumentationTechnique
- VérificationDesBackups

Développement et stabilisation

- Ajustements de configuration
- Création et développement de nouveaux services
- Développement futur d'alternc

PermanenceDeSurveillance

- Monitoring des serveurs (vigile du SyslogService, entre autres)
- Réponse téléphonique 24/24, 7 jours sur 7 (...)

Administration Réseau (NetAdmin) :

- Supervision et surveillance constante du réseau pour contrôler les abus
- Rétablissement d'un système de statistiques de bande passante par adresse IP
- Veiller quotidiennement au bon fonctionnement et à l'amélioration à long terme de l'infrastructure réseau
- S'assurer du bon fonctionnement des systèmes de sauvegarde
- Réponse aux demandes clients concernant l'infrastructure réseau

(Le Wiki de Koumbit, Rôles, Administration Système, Description de tâche)

Six new roles were suggested: (1) communication/marketing, (2) web development, (3) graphic design, (4) human resources, (5) sales, and (6) secretarial. The idea was to implement those roles according to the organization’s needs.

<sup>46</sup> The last modification to this page was made on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2006.

Little by little, the WC started assigning permanent hours to certain members<sup>47</sup> to accomplish roles. Soon thereafter, the allocation of permanent hours became a delicate issue. Questions about *who* was getting the permanent hours and *why* were brought to the table. Members therefore agreed that they needed to come up with a procedure to make sure that the allocation process was fair and that all members would have the same possibilities of obtaining permanent hours. The procedure, a series of instructions that constitute an accepted way of doing something, that is, a textual agent is given the role of legitimizing the allocation of permanent hours. The procedure can be considered an agent since it is supposed to make an important difference in the allocation process: make fair and legitimate.

Members addressed these issues during a series of meetings in the month of October. These meetings were crucial in defining Koumbit's new decision-making structure – the main change I was following – but they were also central in differentiating and defining membership categories.

We have reached a point in this story where issues of remuneration (i.e., Cascade I) and participation (i.e., Cascade II) started to overlap, and separating them is not only difficult but also unnatural. However, for the sake of emphasizing how remuneration evolved and what emergent changes were prompted by the deliberate decisions of the collective, I separated them. So, in this version of what happened in the coordination meetings of October 2006, I favor issues that pertain to remuneration and membership categories.

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<sup>47</sup> It is not clear from the data I collected how the hours for the roles were assigned. Before the creation of the roles, the WC was in charge of assigning the contracts. They had established a list of criteria for distribution. These criteria included (in this order): “competences, fiabilité, statut, implication, disponibilité, volume, affinité, revenu externes/dette, préférences des travailleurs” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, 2006, Critères de distribution).

### 5.2.3. *Beyond Responsibilities: Permanent Workers Want More Power*

During the Coordination Meeting, held on October the 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006, a discussion about increasing the hourly rates prompted a proposition to restructure the WC. In fact, the three permanent workers (i.e., Antoine, Omar and David) proposing this change had motives other than dissatisfaction with the rates they were charging their clients. Yet, Antoine introduced their proposition in the meeting's agenda by framing it as a solution to that particular problem: "Voici une proposition qui, je crois, est susceptible de régler les insatisfactions aux taux horaires et je propose donc de concentrer la réunion sur cette discussion" (Le Wiki de Koumbit, 2006, Refonte du Comité de Travail, para. 1). Nevertheless, the proposed change was the expression of the need to clarify and further define a membership category: "les permanents." The formalization of the membership category was not in terms of their responsibilities, though. They were trying to legitimize the power they were already exercising to accomplish their work in the organization; a power that was there, but was not acknowledged by the collective.

In a nutshell, the proposition<sup>48</sup> suggested that the WC was to be composed of permanent workers who worked 20 to 30 permanent hours per week. Other members could attend the WC meetings, but only the permanent workers would be able to vote. The proposition suggested alternative spaces where other working members (i.e., freelancers and those who had less than 20 permanent hours) and members could participate and exercise their decisional power, for example, the general assemblies.

Led by Antoine, the proposing side expressed its growing dissatisfaction with "l'accomplissement personnel au sein de Koumbit, la productivité de l'organisme" (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting 03/10/2006, Réflexion, para1). They also felt "un sentiment d'impuissance" (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting 03/10/2006, Réflexion, para1). They argued that their proposal was grounded on the *Participative Economy*

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<sup>48</sup> The original proposition is cited on page 124, where I analyze it in terms of its implications for their participative decision-making structure.

*(Parecon) principle* that states that decisional power should be proportional to the member's involvement in work. In other words, those who worked the most needed to have more decisional power.

Once more, we see how a principle is invoked to legitimate an important change. The Parecon principle *lends weight* to these members' proposition to shift the decisional power in the WC. These permanent workers considered that they had more responsibilities than the rest of the members. They represented Koumbit with the clients. They were at the office in regular hours taking care of the situations that came up on a daily basis. They were also in charge of coordination, accounting, payroll and finances. Antoine pointed out that there were different levels of accountability in the organization: "les pigistes sont redevables, mais si Koumbit se plante c'est surtout les permanents que ça touche" (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting 03/10/2006, para 18). Thus, decisional power had to reflect these differences.

On the receiving end, the proposition generated a lot of discussion. At that time, only three members met the criteria to be in the WC (i.e., Antoine, Omar and David). Thus, a number of members were not comfortable with losing some of their decisional power and giving it to such a small group.

The proposed change was about to alter the role of freelance workers and working members that had less than 20 permanent hours from *decision makers* to *supervisors* of the decision makers. As Antoine explained, "[L]'idée c'est que le travailleur permanent a des comptes à rendre. Le CT est comme le DG de Koumbit et s'occupe des décisions 'day-to-day.' Les membres ont le pouvoir de remettre en question les décisions du CT " (LeWiki de Koumbit, 2006, Réflexion, para 7). So, power that was given/granted to the rest of the working members was the power to challenge the permanent workers' decisions, yet not to make actual decisions. Freelance workers and the other working members interpreted this proposition as a demotion rather than a promotion. They could not understand how they were

supposed to exercise a supervisory role from a membership category<sup>49</sup> that had traditionally lacked power and that had been distant from the day-to-day functioning of the organization. Some members were also concerned by how this would affect the distribution of work. As a freelancer, Caroline, was concerned about what role the freelancers would have in relation to the projects.<sup>50</sup> “Qu’est-ce qu’on fait quand c’est un pigiste qui amène un contrat dans Koumbit? Est-ce que c’est le pigiste qui le fait ou c’est le CT? Est-ce qu’un pigiste peut être un contact client principal?” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting 03/10/2006, Réflexion, para 23).

Antoine’s response to Caroline’s concerns was interesting, because he tried to demonstrate how the freelancers’ status would not be affected:

La question des pigistes ne change rien. Un pigiste pourrait être le contact principal avec le client, n'est pas obligé de donner son contrat au comité de travail. Il peut encore y avoir des équipes de travail composées de pigistes et de membres du CT. On ne change rien au fonctionnement actuel. Il y a déjà plein de projets qui ne sont pas nécessairement toujours discutés à la table.<sup>51</sup> (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting 03/10/2006, Réflexion, para 24)

In his last sentence, Antoine is pointing to the fact that being part of the CT members does not guarantee to know everything that happens at Koumbit in terms of projects.

While Antoine’s discourse focused on showing members how little things were going to change, Omar acknowledged that there would be an important shift in power and urged members to take action “[C]eux qui ont moins de pouvoir pourront peut-être le réaliser et s’unir ensemble.” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting 03/10/2006, para 38).

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<sup>49</sup> As I described in chapter 4, Koumbit members could exercise their power once a year during the General Assembly. Besides this annual gathering, members had little presence and influence in the day-to-day activities or decisions of the organization.

<sup>50</sup> Clients who wanted to hire Koumbit’s services could contact the organization directly – they had a system called the RT that created a virtual ticket for every demand. Members could also bring their contracts to the WC. In any case, it was the WC who decided who would work on a given project. As I stated elsewhere in this chapter, to guarantee a fair distribution of contracts, working members had elaborated a list of criteria that guided this distribution process.

<sup>51</sup> “La table” refers to Koumbit’s Workers’ Council (WC). They started calling it “la grande table” after the creation of the committees.

These permanent workers claimed their proposition had above all a practical import: As Antoine said, “[O]n veut un truc stable, fonctionnel et performant” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting 03/10/2006, Refonte du Comité de Travail, Réflexion, para. 21). In the same vein, Omar stated: “[Ç]a clarifie également qui fait quoi” (Idem, para. 59). These members felt powerless against their slow participatory decision-making. According to them, they needed the power to make prompt decisions to make the organization work.

What is happening here is illustrative of how change takes place in/through communication. It is in conversation (by means of a *proposition*) that permanent members build a case for change. This proposition can be understood as a *textualization*, that is, a translation that proposes new sets of associations by assigning roles, goals and identities to human and nonhuman agents. Permanent workers hope that this translation (i.e., text) is solid enough to convince other members of recognizing and accepting it as the way Koumbit is going to go about decision-making (i.e., stabilization). The permanent workers’ proposition materializes a particular idea of how Koumbit should be (e.g., Koumbit’s decision-making process should more agile and it should be led by those who have more responsibilities) by assigning new identities and roles to agents. So, permanent workers staged themselves as the day-to-day decision makers, while other members were staged as the ones in charge of supervising the decision makers. The associations suggested by the permanent workers dissociate other members from the decision-making process. However, the translation process is not unilateral, since the translation has to be accepted in order to be effective, and this is not the case here. Working members do not agree with the identity and goals that permanent workers are attributing them.

Hence, the proposition went through several transformations during the meeting. Caroline proposed to have an “in between” situation:

Avoir un comité de travail qui serait le ‘core’ d’un comité de pigistes. Les décisions pourraient être prises conjointement (...). Le ‘core’ serait comme un noyau dans le comité de pigiste. Le ‘core’ aurait certains droits, le comité de



pigistes aurait d'autres droits. Les réunions CT + comité pigistes prendraient des décisions communes au CT et pigistes et le reste du temps le CT pourrait prendre des décisions qui ne touchent que le CT. (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting 03/10/2006, Refonte du Comité de Travail, Réflexion, para. 43)

WC would become a smaller group within a bigger group that would be a freelancers' committee. The altered proposition did not take away decisional power from non-permanent workers. It granted differentiated powers to each group. It also gave independence to both permanent workers and freelancers to make their own decisions, yet stated that some decisions were common to both groups.

The reformulated proposition seemed to interest other members. For instance, Myriam labeled the subgroup "*comité de permanents.*" Later on during this meeting, Jean-Sébastien took the liberty of restating Caroline's idea as a counter-proposition. The counter-proposition suggested the creation of a permanent workers' subcommittee within the WC.

Permanent workers did not abide by it. Antoine's response was very clear: "La contre proposition ne marche pas: un comité de permanence ayant en charge de faire marcher le bateau, mais sans pouvoirs réels (...). Le pouvoir recherché est celui de faire marcher la patente" (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting 03/10/2006, para 90).

Nevertheless, after several more rounds of discussion, they agreed to amend the original proposition. The final proposition stated the creation of a new agent/figure: the permanent workers' committee (PWC) within the WC. The PWC would have the same power as the WC, except that the former would not be able to modify neither the General Rules nor the Internal Rules. In addition, the WC would have the final word in any decision.

The agreed upon translation (textualization) established associations that were different from the ones stated in the original version. Although the amended proposition gave additional decisional power to the permanent workers, through the

creation of the PWC, their power was limited since the WC continued to be the main legitimate authority.

Although the idea of a PWC was not implemented thereafter, this proposition revealed the existence of alternative interpretations of some principles on which Koumbit stands. On the one hand, it disclosed membership differences and brought them to the agenda. The arguments that were discussed set the basis for differentiating the existing membership categories. On the other hand, it was the seed of the committee structure that was implemented several months after. I will discuss these issues in more detail in the section dedicated to Cascade II.

The previous discussion is a good example of how different types of changes are interconnected in practice. Here we see how the putting in place of intentional changes (allocations, permanent hours and organizational roles) prompted an emergent change, the materialization of a new membership category. This new membership category did not appear from one day to another, it silently built up in everyday work. This change was emergent in that it is not the result of a deliberate orchestration, since no one openly suggested to create a new membership category. It was rather the result of members' *accommodations* and *adjustments* to their work environment (Orlikowski, 1996).

At this point, some members had realized that Koumbit was no longer a pet project, but a serious organization that was responsibly offering services to community-based projects. These members sensed that part-time commitments were not sufficient to guarantee the survival of the organization. So, gradually, conditions were intentionally created to extend some members' work hours at the organization. With more hours, these members started assuming more work and thus felt responsible for giving the organization continuity.

According to what was discussed in this meeting, permanent workers<sup>52</sup> were those working members that had a contract with Koumbit for a fixed number of hours per week. For some of them (i.e., Antoine and Omar), Koumbit was their main source of income. Permanent workers considered that they worked more and had greater responsibilities than freelancers and members. Permanent workers also saw themselves as being accountable in two ways: (1) to the WC in terms of their decisions and actions in day-to-day operations, and (2) to the clients as a guarantee for Koumbit's work. In a way, they felt they gave Koumbit the continuity and stability that freelance workers could not provide.

Thus, they claimed they needed a kind of power that was proportional to their work and commitment in order to make the organization work, a power that would allow them to make timely decisions and attend to problems promptly. This would prevent them from having to run everything by the WC, which had become an unwieldy decision-making body.

In contrast, freelancers were regarded as working members who developed client projects. They did not have permanent hours; they were paid by project and Koumbit was not their only source of income. Freelancers also contributed to the democratic life of the organization and its participative management on a voluntary basis. For those who were interested in developing a more permanent workplace in Koumbit, doing voluntary work was a way of earning a place. Even though they could not be there all the time, because of their other jobs, the most involved freelancers (e.g., Caroline, Hélène) felt they did contribute in important ways to the organization. Aside from their expertise, they brought an external point of view that helped to put Koumbit's issues in perspective. Hence, freelancers wanted to differentiate themselves from members that were not involved in the day-to-day functioning of Koumbit.

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<sup>52</sup> Notice how the defining characteristics of the permanent worker category were formulated by the permanent workers *themselves*. The part of the definition that caused dissent was the one related to decisional power. More power for permanent workers meant less power for freelancers.

Nevertheless, some members found themselves in “membership limbo.” Myriam, one of the three graphic designers, had permanent hours, although not enough to be in the same league of permanent workers as Antoine, Omar and David. For some issues she was considered to be a permanent worker while for others she was not. For example, she was supposed to account for her permanent hours in the same way the “real” permanent workers did. Yet, every time she asked for more hours or resources to do her work, her demands were dismissed. Thus, she did not feel as a permanent worker at all and she thought this was problematic:

Je trouve que des fois, je l’avais dit au meeting de vie associative là, on joue (trop) avec les mots, t’sais comme un permanent à 4 heures c’est un pigiste pas un permanent, un permanent, c’est un employé. On réinvente les mots, moi, je trouve que c’est un peu trop de fois-là, on ne peut pas demander l’implication totale à un pigiste, c’est pas trop réaliste, des fois là. (Myriam, interview, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2007)

Myriam’s comment shows how the emerging differences among members and the way membership categories were being defined affected members’ commitment to the organization. Having four permanent hours did not make her a permanent worker. She considered herself a freelancer and, as a freelancer, it was not fair for the organization to ask more from her.

#### *5.2.4. The Creation of the Hiring Committee: Distributing and Monitoring Permanent Hours*

The appointment of a Hiring Committee played an important part in the movement towards stable remuneration in Koumbit. This change could be understood as an opportunity-based change (Orlikowski & Hoffman, 2003) because members deliberately took advantage of the circumstances to create the new organizational body. The Hiring Committee emerged as part of the proposition to create a Permanent Workers’ Committee, but it also responded to the long-standing need to formalize

Koumbit's selection process.<sup>53</sup> Some criteria were already in place, but nobody had been appointed to implement them. Hence, for some time, they thought that Koumbit would benefit from having an organizational body that would make sure that those entering the organization had what it took to be part of it.

Furthermore, the creation of roles and permanent hours created a situation (i.e., an opportunity) where the process of distribution needed to be as transparent as possible to avoid any irregular practices. This marked the birth of Koumbit's most contentious committee, the Hiring Committee, who was in charge of selecting members, distributing permanent hours, (i.e., who gets some financial security) and assessing performance. The newly appointed committee would look after the appropriate application of the rules and criteria that were already in place to regulate issues related with distribution, membership and the quality of work.

A central task of the Hiring Committee was to assess performance, which was done by monitoring members' permanent hours. Thus, permanent workers were responsible for reporting their work hours on a monthly basis. Defining what it meant to be a permanent worker, which involved defining the other membership categories, was also negotiated through the way these members accounted for their work.

#### *5.2.5. Roles and Accounting for Work*

As I explained in Chapter 4, accounting for work was a usual practice in Koumbit. Members had to report all the hours they had worked on a monthly basis in the Time Tracker. Accounting for work hours was not meant to serve as a control mechanism; it was intended to generate information about the organization's activities and, more specifically, about the amount of work needed to keep the

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<sup>53</sup> Some members considered that Koumbit had to be more selective in terms of its members. Antoine, for his part, considered that the success of an organization like Koumbit (a *value-rational organization*, see Rothchild-Whitt, 1979) relied on how well members got along, which depended on the sharing of certain values.

organization running. This information was deemed particularly useful for grant applications.

The creation of roles not only stressed the importance of members' accounting; it also slightly changed the purpose of accounting. Since the payment of permanent workers was a big financial effort for the organization, members who had this privilege were accountable to the WC. This meant that the WC checked their work hours at the end of the month to assess their performance in quantitative terms (i.e., whether they had completed the amount of hours that they were paid or not). If the permanent worker did not meet his or her weekly quota, he or she would have to complete those hours in the following week. Thus, accounting was no longer an information mechanism. Instead, it became a control mechanism. However, other than asking the worker to complete the hours, the WC did not have other mechanisms to discourage non-compliance.

Moreover, roles had an impact on how working members accounted for their work. Before the creation of roles members reported the hours worked for each project. After the putting in place of roles, members had to specify to which role the hours worked belonged. For this purpose, the Time Tracker had "tags" that members used to mark hours according to their roles (e.g., web development, coordination, accounting). Marking hours according to the role performed was not as easy as it seemed, though. At this point in time, both the roles and the tags were new additions to Koumbit's existing working practices. Although members had worked on defining each role, the old way of understanding certain tasks (e.g., web development and coordination) was still in members' minds. Hence, they started having doubts about how to account for their work, since the new role definitions did not seem to correspond with the way they used to account for certain activities. It was clear that members did not understand certain roles in the same way.

The systematic differences among members' accounting and the gaps between the assigned hours and the reported hours of certain members, led the Hiring

Committee to revise their allocation of hours for the roles of web development and coordination. These events and their consequences for the definition and consolidation of the permanent worker membership category are discussed in great detail in Chapter 6.

#### *5.2.6. Salaried Workers: The Conquest Over Stable Income and Employee Benefits*

The final step towards stable remuneration (i.e., salaried worker) did not happen in the same participative way that had characterized decision-making for other relevant issues. Antoine described the introduction of salaried positions as an arbitrary and less participative process: “c’est dans une période de crise de Koumbit, alors c’est compréhensible, il n’y a pas eu beaucoup d’effort mis sur qu’est-ce qu’il vont faire ces gens-là, les grilles horaires... c’est le comité d’embauche qui les a écrits, c’était pas sa job pantoute” (Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007).

The introduction of a new agent/figure (i.e, salaried worker) can be traced back to the reflection meeting that took place on January 9<sup>th</sup> 2007, when Antoine and Omar asked the WC members to become employees. At that moment, Omar told the WC members:

The recent reallocate of hours would result in some of us no longer being able to claim the ‘travailleur autonome’ status. In order to be legal we would have to create salaried positions, something that we adopted as a goal many many moons ago. Anyway, I added it to the agenda as we have to resolve this as soon as possible in order for the affected individuals to be able to be paid. (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting de Reflexion, 09/01/2007, Salariés, para 1)

It is interesting to analyse this proposition in terms of *ventriloquism* (Cooren, 2010), that is, by focusing on who or what is being mobilized to lend weight to what is being proposed. If we compare this proposition with the propositions for allocations and permanent hours, we can notice an important difference in terms of how the case for change is framed. While the other propositions stressed these members’ commitment to the organization, this proposition appealed to more rational arguments. It is not that

they are unhappy as autonomous workers but rather that the number of hours they work prevents them from claiming that status. So, there is an agent, presumably, Quebec's Ministry of Labour, that has a disposition in this regard. In a way, Omar is speaking in the name of this disposition, lending *legal* weight to the case for change he is building. Thus, the case for change was no longer formulated as *Koumbit needs to approve this change because we have earned it and we deserve it*, but as *Koumbit needs to approve this change because the law requires us to do so*. What had motivated or animated the creation of allocations and permanent hours came from within the organization (i.e., their values and principles). Now, what moved them or triggered the proposed change was an external agent/figure: the legal disposition, which was staged as justifying/authorizing and even forcing Koumbit to change its members' status.

Thus, the creation of salaried positions was framed as a legal issue that involved a series of administrative procedures, arranging with a bank to automate the pay, asking for a company number to deal with social security issues and taxes, among other things. The future salaried workers were in charge of these administrative procedures.

However, being a salaried worker was far more than just an administrative formality. It was the last and higher step in Koumbit's ladder of membership categories, as Antoine commented:

Alors, on est passé peu au peu d'un système où est-ce qu'on payait les gens au contrat vers un système hybride où est-ce qu'on paye encore certaines personnes au contrat mais où est-ce qu'on vise à impliquer les gens beaucoup plus dans l'organisation, en les embauchant finalement avec des contrats réguliers ou carrément comme des salariés avec de descriptions des tâches complètes de postes à 20 ou 40 heures par semaine. (Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007)

What made a permanent worker different from a salaried one? Answering this question led members to elaborate a document that would specify workers' rights and responsibilities. Such a document would finally clarify what was expected from each



membership category and what each member expect to receive from the organization. This document, *Droits et Devoir des travailleurs*, was developed by the Associative Life Committee. In it, membership categories or worker statuses were defined as follows:

<b>Pigiste:</b>	Membre de Koumbit disponible pour du travail au sein de l'organisme et rémunéré à la tâche mandatée et sur facturation seulement.
<b>PermanentE:</b>	Membre du Comité de travail engagé par le Comité d'embauche pour des heures récurrentes de travail.
<b>SalariéE:</b>	PermanentE qui bénéficient de retenues à la source et d'avantages sociaux tels que définis dans le présent document.
Les permanents (ce qui inclut les salariés) se distinguent également en deux catégories, selon leurs horaires:	
<b>Temps partiel</b>	PermanentE avec un contrat de travail de moins de 32h par semaine.
<b>Temps plein</b>	PermanentE avec un contrat de travail de 32h ou plus par semaine.
(Le Wiki de Koumbit, Les Droits et Devoirs des Travailleurs, Statut des travailleurs)	

As we can see, what sets salaried workers apart from permanent workers is that Koumbit takes care of social security issues for the former.

Once more, we see an agent/figure (a textual agent; see also Cooren, 2004) contributing to the materialization of the change process (i.e., new membership categories). The document gives these ideas a material form (i.e., paper and ink, bits and bytes) that can transcend the moment of their creation (i.e., travel in space and time) and *tele-act* (i.e., act at the distance; see Cooren, 2006a). This is why, Koumbit members can delegate the task of reminding members of their rights and responsibilities to this textual agent. However, materialization is not restricted to inscription (i.e., written text). In the document, membership categories are associated with other agents/figures that *incarnate* them. For example, we see that invoices are related to the freelancer role and salaried positions are associated with payroll

retentions and employee benefits. These incarnations give a material dimension to the immaterial character of membership categories. What this textual agent does is a “matter of control/definition/circumscription” (Cooren, 2010, p. 157), it limits the number of possible interpretations of concept. Given the legitimate nature of the text, it contributes to the stabilization of the membership categories.

Although creating salaried positions was a consensual decision and all members approved Antoine and Omar’s demand, some members felt that this decision contributed to changing the nature of the organization. Myriam mentioned, in this regard: “Koumbit est en train de se fermer, de devenir une boîte selon moi-là.” Also, she referred to the increasing tension between voluntary and paid work: “Tu vois que certains, parce que vu que ça devient des employés, c’est sûr que tu as moins le goût de t’impliquer bénévolement s’il y a des employés pareil” (Myriam, interview, May 17th 2007). The introduction of salaried positions made those members who worked on a voluntary basis question their commitment and their future in the organization. As Myriam stated, “l’impression générale, qu’on a les filles, c’est qu’on n’a pas le pouvoir associé à qu’est-ce qu’on apporte comme avant, tu as l’impression, finalement, de leur payer leur salaires” (Myriam, Interview, May 17th 2007).

As we have seen throughout this account, the movement towards stable remuneration was made possible by a series of agent/figures (e.g., permanent hours, organizational roles, membership categories, documents) to which Koumbit members delegated some actions. Thus, the permanent hours “told” the members how much fixed remunerated time they have to work. Organizational roles “instructed” the members on what they had to do with their work hours. Membership categories differentiated members and, according to these differences, they “told” them what they could expect from the organization and what the organization could expect from them.

By instituting these new figures, Koumbit members end up creating a new configuration.

### **5.3. Cascade 2: Shifts in the Workers' Council towards the formalization of an efficient participative structure**

Probably the most evident consequence of Koumbit's sudden growth was the strain it placed on its participative decision-making system (Figure 4 graphically represents this change process). Koumbit's members strongly believe in a worker's right to define his or her work environment by actively participating in decision-making. This principle is embodied in the Workers' Council (WC), Koumbit's main decision-making body.

Around the summer of 2006, the number of members attending the WC meetings increased significantly. The number of hours<sup>54</sup> needed to decide things in these meetings also increased. Organizing participation for a slightly bigger collective was challenging at that time. As one member noted, "plus on va mettre de personnes ...dans ce travail là, plus ça va être difficile" (Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007).

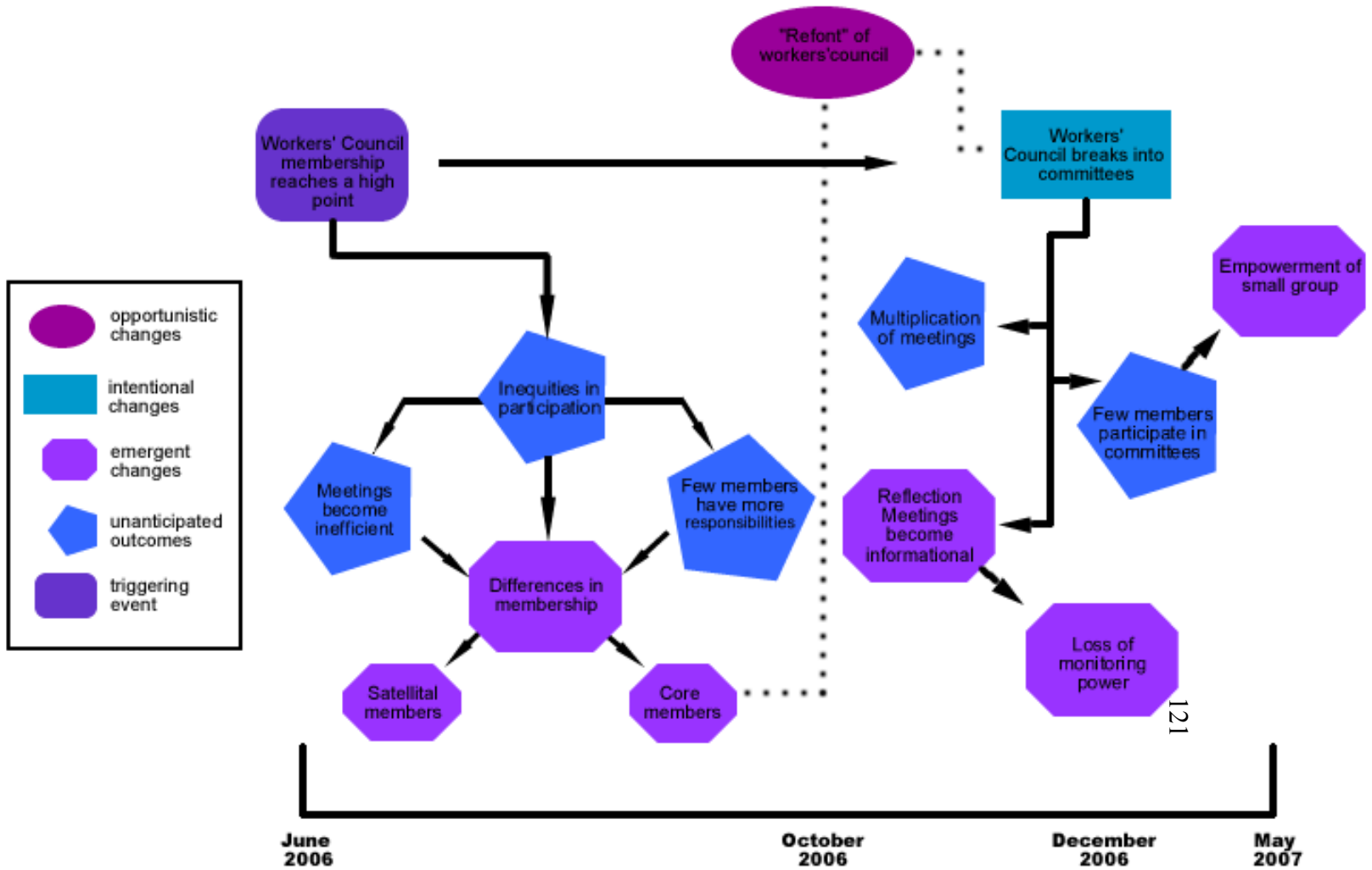
Gradually, members started to complain about the amount of time these meetings were taking, but also about the participatory dynamic and its outcomes. As Jean-Sébastien asserted,

Moi, je trouvais ça super démotivant, la façon dont les meetings de coordination se déroulent (...) puis, je sentais qu'on abordait pas toutes les questions, on manquait du temps pour passer à travers tous ces trucs, il y avait des gens qui n'arrivaient pas à s'exprimer (Jean-Sébastien, interview, March 20<sup>th</sup> 2007).

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<sup>54</sup> Each meeting was taking, on average, three to four hours.

**Cascade II - Shifts towards the formalization of an efficient participatory decision making system**



Members felt that meetings were ineffective, because closure of certain discussions was not possible and some topics were systematically moved to the next meeting for further discussion. As one of the members pointed out, “Le meeting général, ce n’est pas-, c’est ni efficace d’un point de vue, comme procédural, que c’est efficace d’un point de vue démocratique” (Jean-Sébastien, interview, March 20th 2007). In other words, meetings were not working.

This represented a major problem for an organization that relies heavily on participative decision-making for functioning. Yet another set of issues arose from the increase in membership.

The participatory nature of Koumbit was not limited to decision-making, it also involved doing administrative work. Since Koumbit’s philosophy stated that workers needed to have the means to control their work environment, they refused to separate managerial work from production work. Thus, all members were expected to do some of the tasks that were necessary to keep the organization up and running (e.g., accounting, billing, answering the phones, follow-up of clients, office cleaning).

Attendance to the meetings indicated that a lot of participation was taking place. However, it was a selective participation. While most members were interested in participating in decision-making, very few members were contributing with managerial work. In fact, members referred to most of these tasks as “*les tâches plattes*” (i.e., the lame tasks) and a small group was stuck doing these tasks over and over again. In the words of a member, this is how this small group felt:

Two and a half years of essentially the same subgroup of people ((pause)) sharing most of the ( ) of the work, but then every week, everybody else showing up for the big discussion, the theoretical part of the equation. Theory, practice, theory-practice, ... everybody showing up for the theory and a small group consistently showing up to do work, uh. There was a desire to, uh to kind of come back to one of the other conceptual (frameworks) that we had in our original meetings, which was: ‘power to the workers’ and workers means: ‘people doing the work’, you know, that’s what *the workers* mean, it doesn’t mean that you are in the workers committee ‘cause you show up at meetings ... we saw that our original, uh, original concept wasn’t resulting in participation,

sure everybody was empowered but very few people were *responsabilisés*. (Omar, interview, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007)

This quote shows that the problem went beyond doing the “lame tasks” or an unfair distribution of tasks. For Omar, they had strayed away from the principle or concept that was underlying their participatory decision-making system. The privilege to decide went to those who were doing the job, because they not only had a better idea of the stakes of decisions, but also were directly affected by them. For example, let us say that there is just one member working on accounting and the WC decides to hire an assistant. The member doing the accounting has to have a say on that hiring procedure, because he or she is going to have to deal with the new member directly. In other words, he or she is going to be directly affected by this decision.

At this point, according to some of its members, Koumbit was in a crisis. It was not functioning properly and most members were frustrated and disappointed. They faced a conundrum: How to balance participation with efficiency?

### *5.3.1. A radical proposition for restructuring the WC: the creation of a permanent workers' council (PWC)*

As I mentioned in the previous section, there was a group of members that was particularly frustrated with the way the decision-making process was taking place. They decided to do something about it. So, Omar called a meeting with Antoine and David and “on the corner of a napkin, a kind of proposal was developed” (Omar, interview, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007). The next day, October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006, they brought the proposition to the Coordination of Meeting. According to Antoine, the proposition was radical. It suggested a drastic transformation of Koumbit’s organizational structure. The proposal had four points. It recommended the creation of a Hiring Committee composed by a representative of the Administrative Council, a working member of the WC and a member. It also advised to strengthen members’ status by giving them

fuller access to Koumbit's information. And it suggested the creation of a monthly budget for 2006-2007. The radical part of the proposition was related to the restructuring of the Workers' Council. This is an excerpt of that part of the proposition:

- le comité de travail sera composé de personnes embauchées par le comité d'embauche sur des contrats à horaires fixes (e.g. 20h/semaine, 30h/semaine) et à taux égal (e.g. 25\$/hre pour tout le monde)
- les 'pigistes' devront être membres de Koumbit pour travailler mais ne seront pas membres du comité de travail (à moins d'embauche, dans lequel cas il ne sont plus pigistes)
- tous seront libres, comme toujours, d'assister aux réunions du CT, mais seuls les membres du CT auront pouvoir décisionnel (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting de Réflexion, 2006/10/03, Proposition, para. 2).

In a nutshell, the restructuring of the WC consisted of reducing the number of members involved in the decision-making process, since there were very few members that met the new criteria (i.e. having 20 to 30 permanent hours per week). This part of the proposition was controversial and raised all sorts of questions and comments. For example, Jean-Sébastien did not like the idea of having a "petit groupe qui va décider pour tout le monde, c'est pas mieux, ça crée de gens qui sont affectées par les décisions de ces petits groupes là, qui ont aucun pouvoir par rapport aux décisions qui sont prises" (Jean-Sébastien, interview, March 20<sup>th</sup> 2007). As Antoine mentioned, others viewed this move as "une menace ... les gens ont vu ça comme une prise de pouvoir" (Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007). Patrice was among the members who stated that he had "l'impression qu'on veut déplacer le pouvoir vers un noyau qui agit au jour le jour" (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting de Réflexion, 2006/10/03, Réflexion, para. 22). He also mentioned the need to balance these powers. He was afraid that, in practice, this core would control Koumbit.

Antoine, the author of the proposition, remembered feeling "un profond malaise par rapport à ça, parce que c'était pas du tout l'intention" (Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007). What happened with this proposition, illustrates a

form of textual agency, that Brummans (personal communication, October 31<sup>st</sup> 2010) labels the *Frankenstein effect*. The proposition, once created, start to do things that were not at all anticipated (apparently) by its own author. According to him, the proposed change was motivated by “des besoins extrêmement immédiats et urgents des travailleurs permanents qui sentaient une grande insatisfaction dans leur, dans le pouvoir qu’ils avaient dans l’organisation et dans leur capacité à changer les choses” (Antoine, interview, May 24th 2007). As Omar explained, the spirit of this proposition was to go back to one of their main principles: “people doing the work should be the people making the decisions” (Omar, interview, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007). He admitted that, in the present situation, it meant a concentration of power, because responsibilities were concentrated in a small group but for him, “c'est déjà un peu comme ça, mais on le formalise.... On a un faux sens d'égalité” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting de Réflexion, 2006/10/03, Réflexion, para. 27).

The false sense of equality to which Omar referred pointed to the selective participation that had been taking place in the organization. That is, there was equity in terms of participation, because everybody had a say in the decision-making. Yet there was no equity in terms of responsibilities, because they were concentrated in a few members. According to Marco, the problem was that the group was not acknowledging what was really happening. For him, there was a “groupe qui travaille beaucoup dans Koumbit et un éventail de personnes qui ont des intérêts variés. Il y a des gens qui ont une influence qui n'est pas assumée” (Marco, Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting de Réflexion, 2006/10/03, Réflexion, para. 30).

After a thorough discussion and an indicative vote, the radical proposition was altered and accepted (see pages 106-111 for the unfolding of the negotiation process that lead to the accepted proposition). It's final version stated that a the permanent workers' committee (PWC) would be created within the WC.



Although members arrived at a consensus about the altered proposition, there was a general feeling of uneasiness with the creation of a Permanent Workers' Council (PWC). In spite of feeling that way, Myriam remembered that “le monde osait pas vraiment scissionner” (Myriam, interview, May 17th 2007). Nevertheless, this uneasiness motivated another proposition that was put on the table during the next Coordination Meeting.

### 5.3.2. Fragmenting decision-making: the subcommittees' proposition

On October 17, 2006, Jean-Sébastien presented a proposition that was meant to counter the creation of the PWC. He formulated the new proposition with Patrice<sup>55</sup>. They considered that the adopted proposition was not a viable solution because it concentrated a lot of power in a very small group. They also had faith in “la force de travail que le gens étaient prêts à mettre” (Jean-Sébastien, interview, March 20<sup>th</sup> 2007). Their proposition suggested the distribution of

les tâches de coordination et de réflexion parmi plusieurs sous-comités du CT qui **agissent en son nom** et ont donc **complète autorité sur les décisions** concernant leur domaine d'application spécifique. Les réunions hebdomadaires du CT existeraient toujours mais interviendraient de façon plus espacée (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meetings de Réflexion, 19/12/2006, sous-committees, para. 4).

Thus, instead of dividing the group into *decision makers* and *decision supervisors*, the idea was to divide the decision-making process into distinct work areas or issues (e.g., hiring, finance, communication, production, among others) that would be addressed by independent groups. According to Jean-Sébastien,

l'idée c'est de trouver des façons de composer ces comités-là pour que ça soit, pour que ça reste, finalement, pour encourager les valeurs de l'organisme, la solidarité, l'autonomisation, l'autogestion, la diversité

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<sup>55</sup> He was one of the founding members, but he was no longer a working member. Nonetheless, he continued to be involved in the organization as an external member.

aussi, qui sont les valeurs de l'économie participative, qui sont les valeurs de Koumbit. (Jean-Sébastien, interview, March 20th 2007)

It is interesting to note how both propositions to change the decision-making structure (i.e., the permanent workers committee and the specialized committees) invoked Parecon principles to lend weight to their cases for change. This illustrates the *fabricated* nature of these agents/figures (Cooren, 2010). They do not exist out there. They are mobilized and staged by members to support different cases. The power of the associations made by the members depends on other members' acceptance of these associations.

On the receiving end, the proposition triggered different reactions. For example, some were concerned because they thought this meant not only more work but, more precisely, voluntary work, since meeting time was not paid. Omar underlined, in this regard: “[F]our committees x 3 hours per meeting adds up to a lot of hours pour les personnes impliquées, alors que c’est bénévole. Il faudrait calculer combien d’heures de plus il y aurait dans le nouveau système”. (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting coordination, 17/10/2006, Proposition pour les sous-comités, para. 7). Members who had been pointing towards the lack of involvement from a good part of Koumbit membership, like Marco, were concerned with the fact that the suggested system would

requiert que plein de gens soient vraiment impliqués et prennent vraiment leurs responsabilités. C’est pas une affaire de ‘quand j’ai le temps’. Ça va pas marcher si les gens ne viennent pas à leur sous-comités, donc le même bordel que présentement sauf en sous-comités. (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting coordination, 17/10/2006, Proposition pour les sous-comités, para. 8)

Omar shared Marco’s concern “unless more people get involved the existence of committees won’t create more productivity” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting coordination, 17/10/2006, Proposition pour les sous-comités, para. 12).

Antoine drew attention to the fact that there was no need discuss this proposition, since what was being suggested was already possible within Koumbit’s current structure and procedures. During the conversation, members

realized that Antoine was right: They had been working in committees for some time now. Mathieu brought up two examples: (1) the *business plan* that was developed by a rotating group; and (2) the way they had been managing system administration issues. The technical nature of those issues demanded a small group of specialists who had the knowledge necessary to address them. Caroline pointed out that graphic designers had also been working in a small specialized group. Thus, the only difference between the committees proposed by Jean-Sébastien and the ones mentioned by other members was that the latter had not been formalized.

Another important concern, brought up by the subcommittees, was the fragmentation of information. Traditionally, coordination meetings had been a space where all sorts of issues were discussed. Members like Marco appreciated that

[L]e meeting de coordo permet à tous d'être exposés à des trucs qu'on ne connaît pas à prime abord. On gagne à avoir les discussions sur tous les sujets. Présentement, la transparence est totale. (...) la séparation en sous-comité va diluer cette richesse-là. (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting coordination, 17/10/2006, Proposition pour les sous-comités, para. 6)

Marco's arguments support the status quo, he is orienting members towards certain characteristics of the current arrangement that he considers positive and valuable. He resists the more limited role he has been given by this proposition, instead of having access to most of Koumbit's issues, he will have access to those of the committees he participates in. This fragmentation would also affect members' compliance with the principle of transparency.

Others, like Myriam, pointed to the fact that "il y a une force à être en commun, ensemble" (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting coordination, 17/10/2006, Proposition pour les sous-comités, para. 37). The subcommittees' proposition did take this aspect into account, since a general meeting was foreseen—yet not as often as they were used to.

This meeting illustrated that there were at least two identifiable positions in relation to how decision-making was supposed to take place in Koumbit. On one side, were the permanent workers, who believed that decisional power had to be proportional to member's commitment and sacrifice. Thus, they thought that decision-making had to be restricted to a smaller group, that is, those who were truly doing the work. Antoine, Omar, Marco and David were clearly on this side, a side that wanted to stabilize and further formalize the organization to make production more efficient. Antoine explained the logic behind this position:

[C]e n'est pas réaliste d'avoir 15 personnes ou 20 personnes autour de la table quand on avait un chiffre d'affaires de 80 mille dollars par année. Moi, je fais le calcul, puis on distribuait cet argent-là parmi tout le monde, sans compter le overhead, sans compter les serveurs, sans compter ça. Ça faisait quatre mille pièces par personne par année... on peut pas faire fonctionner une organisation en payant plusieurs personnes à quatre mille pièces par année. Ça marche pas. (Antoine, interview, May 24th 2007)

On the other side, there were members and freelancers who did not want to lose their decisional power, because they felt they were contributing to the organization in significant ways even though they were not committed to the organization on a full-time basis. Jean-Sébastien, Patrice and Myriam were clearly on this side.

Other members, like Caroline and Mathieu, did not see the propositions as an either/or choice. They saw aspects that could be beneficial for the organization in both propositions.

At the heart of the subcommittees' proposition was the idea of delegation: The WC would be handing over some issues to a small groups that would work out those issues. As Mathieu put it, "[o]n a une grosse force de travail présentement qu'on gaspille. Il faut pouvoir déléguer du travail. Les sous-comités: c'est pas du pouvoir décisionnel qu'on délègue, c'est du pouvoir de travail avec lequel vient du pouvoir décisionnel" (Le Wiki de Koumbit,

Meeting coordination, 17/10/2006, Proposition pour les sous-comités, para. 12).

The subcommittees' proposition presented by Jean-Sébastien was not accepted. As he mentioned, "il y avait beaucoup des questionnements autour de ça" (Jean-Sébastien, interview, March 20<sup>th</sup> 2007). However, consensus was formed around Marco's proposal to continue the discussion during the next meeting and to make a simulation of how the subcommittee structure would play out (i.e., who would be on the different committees, and how this would be organized). This would give them an idea of how much the new structure would take in terms of commitment.

Attendance at the meeting, the following week, was very low. As a result, members hesitated to make any decisions concerning the subcommittees. They agreed to discuss the subcommittees' composition, as well as the issues each committee would address. A list of possible subcommittees was created, and a distinction was made between *permanent* and *ad hoc* subcommittees. The preliminary list included the following subcommittees: (1) project coordination, (2) finances, (3) hiring, (4) communication, (5) Drupal strategy, (6) *vie associative*<sup>56</sup>, (7) systems administration, (8) graphic design, and (9) training.

The discussion about the committees was interrupted to make way to the election of the Hiring Committee, a decision that had been postponed because of the lack of quorum in previous meetings. According to certain members, could no longer be pushed away. The election of the Hiring Committee was one of the elements necessary to creating the permanent workers' committee (PWC).

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<sup>56</sup> This term roughly refers to "life of the association" or "associative life". At Koumbit, associative life has to do with how members experience the organization, their life within the organization. This is why the Associative Life committee was created to support and enhance the community.

Thus, two propositions that would change Koumbit in significant ways were on the table. On the one hand, the creation of a permanent workers committee, a proposition that was consensually adopted, yet that was viewed as limiting participation. On the other hand, the creation of subcommittees, a proposition that was neither adopted nor abandoned, that claimed to streamline decision-making while preserving participation. Koumbit members were at a crossroad; they were divided between two paths, with no clear idea which path to follow.

### 5.3.3. Different paths leading in the same direction: the subcommittees

During the coordination meeting of November 7, 2006, Jean-Sébastien, who was concerned about the organization's situation, prompted members to discuss what they were going to do next. This discussion led to yet another proposition: “[t]hat a committee be named to find solutions to the problems ‘de vie associative’ qu'on a: (1) identify the problem, (2) identify solutions” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meetings Coordination 7/11/2006, Comment régler les problèmes actuels concernant la vie associative, Propositions possibles, para. 12). This new ad hoc committee was labelled *Comité Spécial de Vie Associative* and was composed of four members.

Now, two committees were functioning officially; they were actually working on special issues and showing results to the group. The creation of these two committees and the outcomes of their work showed members the potential utility of working on smaller groups.

On November 29, 2006, the newly appointed Hiring Committee held its first meeting. Members worked on a hiring procedure and hiring criteria. It was in this context that the idea of the permanent workers council came back to the stage. Members were wondering if they had to appoint the PWC. Antoine, who had presented the original proposition for the restructuring of the WC felt that “le CTP a pas de légitimité après les discussions autour des comités, il n’y a pas de consensus. Le comité d'embauche a à peine de la légitimité. Ça devrait

être un ComitéDeProduction” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting Comité d’embauche, 29/11/2006, Critères et procédures d’embauche, para. 21). Patrice acknowledged the existence of membership differences in Koumbit, but he saw the permanent workers grouped in an executive committee “qui aurait le pouvoir de réviser les sous-comités et de les dissoudre” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting Comité d’embauche, 29/11/2006, Critères et procédures d’embauche, para. 22). Antoine insisted on the idea of a production committee that would grant permanent workers the working conditions they demanded: “Les permanents veulent de la stabilité, pas du pouvoir, ou plus précisément, des pouvoirs/responsabilités. On a pas besoin d’élire un CTP maintenant” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting Comité d’embauche, 29/11/2006, Critères et procédures d’embauche, para. 24). In this way, the HC recommended to “mettre le CTP sur la glace au prochain meeting” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting Comité d’embauche, 29/11/2006, Critères et procédures d’embauche, para. 29).

Meanwhile, the Special Committee started to work. Although its mission was not clearly stated by the WC, committee members interpreted it as having to renegotiate Koumbit’s social contract. Jean-Sébastien stated:

On devrait amener un nouveau contrat social. Avec tous ces liens, la permanence, la rémunération... Une solution globale. Pour que cette solution là fasse l'affaire de tout le monde, il faut aller chercher des idées, c'est quoi la liste des idées que les gens ont. Il faut qu'on inclue comment la mettre en application. (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting Comité Spécial de Vie Associative, 17/11/2006, Tour de table, para. 17)

The group considered that the new social contract would address the following aspects: “membership, gestion du travail, gestion des décisions, rémunération, économie participative, réconcilier nos bases théoriques avec la réalité” (Meeting Comité Spécial de Vie Associative, 17/11/2006, para. 27). The elaboration of this new social contract was based on a consultation process that was done through an anonymous questionnaire and the analysis of the meetings’ minutes. The idea was to identify those issues that members thought

were the most critical and the solutions that seemed to have more acceptance among members.

This research revealed that Koumbit's main problem was in terms of implementing solutions. As Jean-Sébastien mentioned,

[O]n s'est rendu compte (...), qu'on prenait beaucoup de décisions pour aller dans une certaine direction et améliorer les choses, mais qu'on les appliquait pas, (...) personne n'était payé pour le mettre en application, personne. Puis dans les meetings de coordination, il n'y avait pas le temps de travailler sur des trucs comme ça, sur l'implantation des systèmes comme ça. (Jean-Sébastien, interview, March 20th 2007)

This is why the committee was regarded as part of their mission to contribute to the implementation of the solutions that were going to be brought forward as a result of their consultation and research process.

Thus, they found that issues of accountability and participation were critical, but also issues related to the remuneration and recognition of work. Among the propositions that members had been putting on the table during the last year, two seemed to have progressively generated consensus and appeared to be suitable solutions for the defined problems. So they considered that “[p]our la question de la responsabilisation et de la motivation” the subcommittees seemed like a viable and interesting solution. For issues of remuneration, risk sharing and distribution of wealth, they proposed “les parts de participation<sup>57</sup>” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meetings de Réflexion, 19/12/2006, Presentations des objectives et des propositions, para. 2).

On December 19<sup>th</sup>, the special committee held a meeting to present both the results of the research as well as a road map to guide action during these critical times. Members were eager; they anticipated this meeting with great hope.

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<sup>57</sup> *Les parts de participation* were similar to company shares. The creation of these shares would allow Koumbit to pay for some of the work that was being done on a voluntary basis. This idea was eventually abandoned.



All members agreed that the organization was not working properly. The meetings were unmanageable; too many issues to address and many opinions to hear. Some members considered that there was a lack of involvement from most members, while others felt their efforts were unappreciated. Some others were not satisfied in terms of the pay. In the previous months, many decisions had been adopted to address those issues but none had been fully implemented. Thus, members felt the urgency to go beyond deciding, they wanted results. The general feeling was to come out of this meeting having accomplished something.

The special committee was very clear about the need to move forward with decisions. Therefore the meeting focused on implementing two ideas around which a certain consensus had formed and which could address some of the problems that had been discussed during the last months.

In view of previous discussions, the special committee expected to find more resistance towards the subcommittees' idea, however, it was adopted rather easily. Using a list of the possible committees, which was elaborated on a previous coordination meeting, members selected those that they deemed as most essential to the organization.

At a certain point during the meeting, Marco challenged the hierarchical connotation of the word subcommittee. Members agreed with Marco's reasoning and decided to call them "committees" instead to underline their autonomous nature. However, they all agreed that committees would have to report to the WC on a monthly basis.

Six permanent committees were created to address the following issues (see Figure 5): (1) production, (2) associative life, (3) communication and advertisement, (4) systems administration, (5) hiring and finance/R&D One ad hoc committee was approved to deal with Drupal Strategy issues.

**Figure 5**  
**Fragmenting decision-making: the committees**



During the workshop, members worked on defining the basic characteristics of each committee along the following lines:

1. Nom
2. Mandat
3. Ad hoc/permanent
4. Composition
  - a. Rotation/permanence
  - b. Adhésion
  - c. Eligibilité
  - d. Nombre de personnes
5. Autonomie budgétaire (si le comité a un budget ou pas)
6. Pouvoir décisionnel
7. Fréquence des réunions (sugg: 1/semaine)
8. Antennes/*lead* (qui)
9. Rémunération membres
10. Transparence
  - a. Fréquence des rapports
  - b. Documentation des décisions

(Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meeting de Réflexion, 19/12/2006,  
Caractéristiques des comités)

Full descriptions of committees were presented on the reflection Meeting on January 9. Now, members were supposed to start meeting in the committees. Members agreed to try this working structure for a month. After that period, they would evaluate its viability.

#### 5.3.4. Consensus leads to compromise: Living with Koumbit's tensions

Antoine, who was initially not keen to this idea, because it did not address the problem of the different degrees of involvement and accountability of members, described this shift in the organization as follows:

[J]e pense, qu'au bout du compte, qu'est-ce qui est arrive, c'est que la ((pause)), la volonté, la volonté de participation, la volonté participative de Koumbit a eu le dessus, c'est-à-dire qu'on désirait avoir de quoi de plus égalitaire où est-ce que les gens pouvaient s'impliquer facilement que- on a choisi finalement, la démocratie par dessous (la productivité), pour utiliser des gros mots. (Antoine, interview, May 24th 2007)

In a similar vein, Omar stated:

[A]nother way of characterizing this whole period is: When the organization (I said) shifted uh ((pause)), I hate to say, towards the left, because uh, I don't like (kind of just saying) left, right, but for me, one of the... fundamental things about Koumbit was the (talk about) between the ( ) theoretical ideals and utopian ideals and prag, pragmatism. ... uh I feel that in this period we flipped uh, we shifted more towards the utopian, idealist side and away from the pragmatic, can we do it, can we actually monitor the stuff and do it. And, I generally felt like that, that was unfortunate, but I'm not washing my hands of responsibility for that even happening. (Omar, interview, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007)

These two interpretations of what happened in Koumbit at that time reveal the tension that underlied this organization, a tension that these members described by using opposing terms, such as *idealism vs pragmatism*, *democracy vs productivity*, *left vs right*. The terms idealism (i.e., what the organization wants to be) and pragmatism (i.e., action in light of concrete circumstances) summarize Koumbit's tension very well.

Thus, on the one hand, Koumbit was committed to a series of values that were supposed to dictate the nature of the organization (e.g. participative, egalitarian, self-managed) and guide members' actions. On the other hand, the concrete work circumstances members faced sometimes challenged those values. For instance, they believed workers should participate in decisions that affected them. However, their experience had shown them that if everybody

participated, decision-making would become unmanageable. They struggled for an egalitarian workplace, yet in practice, there were inevitable differences. For example, a new member could not participate in decision-making in the same way a senior member did because of the lack of knowledge. Koumbit was a self-managed organization, but self-management was extremely difficult when members had different levels of involvement. Thus, some members had to ensure stability and follow up on action, (i.e., fill the gaps left by non-continuous participation), which sometimes translated into informal supervisors or bosses.

Living with these tensions made Koumbit a very reflexive organization as members were constantly assessing their organizational practices in light of their founding principles.

### 5.3.5. *Beyond deciding: materializing the committees*

At this point, the committees' mode of being was textual (i.e., a wiki page<sup>58</sup>). It was now time for the new configuration to incarnate in other things or beings, since its mode of existence depends on those “representatives be they material, architectural, human, or textual, and their configurations or assemblages” (Cooren, 2010, p. 157).

As the committees started meeting, a series of traces (i.e., incarnations) stand as evidence of their existence. A list of the upcoming meetings became part of the main page of the wiki. Minutes of committee's meetings also populated the wiki. Members were able to follow each committees' actions by reading these minutes. Each committee had designated an *antenna*<sup>59</sup> a member that represented the committee. Also, a section called *Le retour des comités*

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<sup>58</sup> Except for the hiring committee, which had been appointed the month before and had already met and produced a hiring procedure.

<sup>59</sup> In their wiki page, they defined an “antenna” as “le point de contact du comité avec l'extérieur. Cette personne est chargée de ramener au ComitéDeTravail la progression dans le temps du comité et de signaler les lacunes à corriger dans le groupe” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, 2007, Antenne de Comité, para. 1).

was included in the agenda of the monthly Strategic Meetings.<sup>60</sup> In this segment, each committee would inform about the main issues addressed during the month. They would also bring up issues they thought were out of their sphere of action.

It was interesting to see how smoothly members settled into their new mode of working. Committees were not only making decisions; they were creating useful information and accomplishing significant tasks, but also they were establishing links amongst them. The following excerpt is an example of how Strategic Meetings were used to coordinate work among committees. This happened during the Strategic Meeting of February 2007, two months after the implantation of the committee structure. The Hiring Committee made the following demand to the Finance Committee by asking them “de vérifier s’il est possible de débloquer des heures de permanence en coordination, vente et sysadmin” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meetings de Réflexion, 06/02/2007, Retour de comités, Demande du Comité d’Embauche, para. 1). The Finance Committee immediately gave an answer to the demand: “Antoine va faire une analyse budgétaire de mi-année avant le prochain meeting pour être capable de réviser les nouvelles allocations. Pat et Myriam sont intéressés à aider” (Le Wiki de Koumbit, Meetings de Réflexion, 06/02/2007, Retour de comités, Demande du Comité d’Embauche, para. 2).

Another factor that contributed to the coordination among the committees was the fact that their membership was not that varied: The same members were involved in several committees. This allowed for information to be shared and compared on informal basis keeping committees informed of what happened in other committees.

Some members were very enthusiastic about the committees and the outcomes of the new structure. Jean-Sébastien was one of those members. He mentioned:

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<sup>60</sup> Monthly Strategic Meetings were held instead of the weekly coordination meetings.

[M]oi, je trouve ça beaucoup plus motivant, parce que les meetings qu'on a maintenant de- sur les questions comme l'embauche ou les communications ou whatever, c'est plus de meetings de travail, des meetings où est-ce qu'on collectivement- on avance vraiment sur des choses. C'est ça, c'est plus efficace, c'est plus motivant que ce qu'on avait avant. Ce qui est le fun, c'est qu'il y a beaucoup de tâches qu'on faisait pas avant sur lesquelles on commence à avoir un peu plus de suivi, justement, mettons la façon (dont) le travail est distribué, par exemple, à l'intérieur de l'organisme, avant on passait pas du temps assis à regarder qui faisait quoi, là c'est le comité d'embauche qui se penche là-dessous, on peut passer vraiment trois heures à travailler sur ça. Avant on le faisait pas, même si quelqu'un s'était levé pour essayer de le faire, ça marche pas, une question comme l'embauche, c'est pas à une personne de prendre la décision, ben à 15 on peut pas prendre la décision non plus, fait que, là d'avoir un comité plus restreint qui a ce mandat là, ça fait en sorte que ça se fait, alors que ça se faisait pas. (Jean Sébastien, interview, March 30th 2007)

To understand what Jean-Sébastien said here, we have to remember that Koumbit's working members used to work independently from home. It was not until September 25<sup>th</sup> 2006 that they acquired office space. So, before this, the only moments they worked together as a group were during the meetings. However, the way the meetings were structured did not allow them to work on particular issues. Meeting in smaller groups that would concentrate on specific issues was a more efficient way to take advantage of the time working members were willing to give to the organization.

Even if great progress had been achieved in terms of work with the new structure, some unsolved issues started to arise.

### *5.3.6. The infamous unanticipated outcomes of change*

One finding that is consistent throughout organizational change research is that change seldom unfolds as anticipated (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; March, 1981; Orlikowski, 1996). As March (1981) suggested, “[o]rganizations change (...) but they rarely change in a way that fulfills the intentions of a particular group of actors” (p. 563). If we conceive of action as a shared and hybrid accomplishment, the number of agents participating in

action is multiplied and answering the question of *who is acting* suddenly is not that simple. Multiple agents crossing paths while carrying multiple courses of action makes it extremely difficult to anticipate and determine the outcomes of our actions. Actions directed at changing organizing/organization are bound to produce unanticipated outcomes that can trigger further change. Koumbit's change process was not an exception.

#### 5.3.6.1. *The Big Table nostalgia: At odds with the new group dynamic*

So far, the nature of Koumbit's work (i.e., web development, hosting services, training) had allowed the organization to function without having office space. Koumbit members worked in a virtual office: They punched their hours in the Time Tracker; they had meaningful discussions over Koumbit's IRC channel; they received work orders via RT; and they collectively edited the annual report in the wiki. However, they were also used to meeting each week to coordinate work and to reflect about the future of the organizations.<sup>61</sup> Even if members were not happy about the duration of these meetings, they appreciated being together and working as a group. As Antoine stated, “c'était épouvantable ces réunions-là, mais on était tous-là, on n'était pas en confrontation, mais on travaillait fort sur l'organisation. Puis tout le monde était-là, puis tout le monde avait son opinion, ça bourdonnait, t'sais” (Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007).

With the creation of the committees, weekly coordination meetings were abolished. Instead, working members would meet once monthly in the Strategic Meeting to discuss issues that needed to be decided by the WC. The committees<sup>62</sup> would also meet on a monthly basis. This meant that the whole group of working members would be together less often and this seemed to affect some members.

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<sup>61</sup> These meetings were labeled *Meetings de Coordination* and were held in different public locations, such as coffee shops, restaurants, libraries each week.

<sup>62</sup> Except for the Production Committee that held a production meeting each week.

During the Strategic Meeting of March 2007, three months after the implantation of the committees, Omar asked members to express how they felt in relation to the recent changes in the organization. Marco, a freelancer who had recently become a permanent worker and who was very critical of Koumbit's latest changes, said:

[M]oi, je pense que quelque chose que je vois de différent depuis qu'on a changé de style de réunion, c'est pas forcément que je regrette le, le, la réunion par semaine, mais je trouve que par rapport à la- l'appropriation de l'organisme par le gens, le fait que les réunions peuvent être dispersées et nombreuses, on perd un petit peu le sentiment d'équipe et de travail en commun. Et, évidemment on est incapable de, d'avoir de vraies sessions de travail comme on les a prévues et à plusieurs reprises on a essayé là, mais ça fonctionne pas, donc voilà. (Marco, Meetings de Réflexion, 06/03/2007)

He pointed to the loss of the team spirit and sense of ownership of the members. He was not alone in feeling this way. Hélène and Caroline, both graphic designers who worked as freelancers for Koumbit, felt the same way. As Hélène stated, "on dirait qu'en dehors de mes contrats, je me sens moins impliquée (...) on dirait que ça- je me retire un peu de l'organisation en tant que tel" (Hélène, Meetings de Réflexion, 06/03/2007).

Antoine acknowledged this position and urged members to work in the office. He invited members to build a new space to be together outside of meetings. However, at that time, the office did not offer the conditions that some members needed to work there (i.e., computers, or in the case of the graphic designers, graphic designing software). As a permanent worker, Myriam, for example, tried working at the office and faced other problems aside from the more material and technical ones: "[I]l y a toujours de conflits là-bas, ...tout le monde est pressé, j'ai l'impression peut-être, ça fonctionne pas comme il devrait" (Myriam, Interview, May 17th 2007).

This feeling of disengagement with the organization could also be understood as an effect of the change in the nature of Koumbit's meetings. Before the creation of the committees, decision-making (i.e., operational and



strategic) took place during the WC's weekly Coordination Meetings. These weekly meetings were the venue where working members *contributed to building* Koumbit by actively expressing their opinions and formulating propositions. As Omar stated, with the creation of the committees, the WC Meetings became rather *informational*. Although in theory, anyone could counter a decision taken by any committee, in practice, "that's not how it comes to life" (Omar, interview, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007). Strategic Meetings were about "finding out what all the decisions were, and, you know, kind of maybe ask a few questions and then live with it. If you want to change it, go to the next committee meeting" (Omar, interview, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007). Thus, conversations contributing to building the organization took place elsewhere, in the committees. In addition, the monitoring role of the WC was not encouraged by the new informational dynamic of the Strategic Meetings. Hence, some members felt that they were no longer part of the organization. Their voice was no longer heard, because the space that was traditionally open for this was working differently now.

#### *5.3.6.2. The Committees' Paradox: fragmenting decision-making to centralize it*

As I described, the committee structure emerged as a counter proposition to block permanent workers' demands for more decisional power and autonomy. Thus, this change was motivated by the permanent workers' dissatisfaction with the way the organization was working at that time). However, the outcome of this process (i.e., the committee structure) was not what permanent workers were looking for. They were afraid that the committee structure would translate into more work for those who were already committed to the organization. For them, the committee structure did not address the main problem: members' lack of commitment and accountability. Regardless of these concerns, the collective reached a consensus and implemented the committee structure.

Early on during the implementation of the new structure, members realized: “[W]e don’t have enough people (...) actually, that structure is made for a group that has more full time participants than we actually have, and that’s a fundamental problem” (Omar, interview, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007). According to the characteristics the collective had defined for the committees, each committee had to have at least one permanent worker and three members. At that time, Koumbit had about 21 working members, six among them were permanent workers (i.e., Antoine, Omar, Mathieu, Marco, Jean-Sébastien and Myriam) and six committees had been appointed (i.e., System Administration, Production, Communication/Marketing, Finance, Hiring, Associative Life). As permanent workers had suspected, the new structure implied a lot more of work for them<sup>63</sup> as only a few members were participating regularly in committees (i.e., Patrice, Caroline, Hélène, Frédérick).

For example, Antoine was part of five out of the six committees (i.e., Production Committee, Systems Administration Committee, Hiring Committee, Finance Committee and Associative Life Committee). This is how Antoine felt about Koumbit’s committee structure:

[J]’avais beaucoup de frustration au début dans la création des comités parce que justement, ça reflétait pas la réalité. T’sais au fil de temps, il s’est créé une grosse dépendance organisationnelle, puis j’ai énormément de pouvoir dans l’organisation, la façon de changer cette situation là, c’est pas de créer plein de comités... que je suis obligé de participer, parce que c’est moi qui a le pouvoir ou qui a l’information de tout ça. Moi, j’étais très frustré par ça, parce que moi, c’était arrivé du jour au lendemain, pour les gens c’est facile de dire ‘ben, là on crée plein de comités, je vais m’impliquer dans le comité que je veux et comme ça j’aurais pas besoin de venir à toutes les semaines’ t’sais. C’est facile, mais moi, ça a décuplé mon nombre de réunions. J’ai passé d’une réunion par semaine à quatre réunions par semaine... Ça va, t’sais, je m’en sors. Je trouve que, je trouve que ça, c’était pas comme, tu vois, pas *fair*, c’est pas juste, c’est pas juste pour moi. (Antoine, interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007)

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<sup>63</sup> They had one advantage over other working members: They had permanent hours that covered most of the work they did. Freelancers involved in committees were not paid for this work; it was done on a voluntary basis.

Hence, it was clear that the problem of lack of involvement was not addressed by the new structure. Instead, the new structure made the problem more evident. Ironically, the goal of this structure was to organize decision-making in a way that would allow all members to participate while keeping the process agile and manageable. However, it increased the participation of those few members who were already committed to the organization, giving them the power they were actually looking for in the first place:

I think it's ironic, ...so, remember this, (the committee structure) was in reaction to a desire to have more autonomy for these people doing a lot of work ...but in actual fact, the new system definitely means that more, big, high impact decisions are taking place between little groups of people, who, sorry, turns out to be the same, more or less the same group of people, because they are the ones who actually go to the meetings. And, so, ironically, it has led to more big decisions taking place between fewer numbers of people. (Omar, Interview, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007)

Koumbit was experiencing the exact situation members had tried to prevent, that permanent workers (the core) take control of the organization. The creation of the committees centralized decisional power in a small group instead of distributing it:

Ce que Patrice redoutait, je pense que c'est arrivé finalement, c'est-à-dire, que Patrice redoutait que le comité de production se ramasse avec tout le pouvoir, qu'il y ait une espèce d'état dans l'état qui contrôle tout, puis ça c'est arrivé. (Antoine, Interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007)

We may ask: Why did this happen? As the quote suggests, Antoine thought that the structure was not to blame. For him, "les gens ont laissé tomber, finalement. Les gens laissaient partir l'organisation, puis ont cessé de s'impliquer personnellement" (Antoine, Interview, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2007). According to him, the way people referred to Koumbit was symptomatic of how they felt:

C'est le phénomène de, quand les gens commencent à parler, à arrêter de parler de nous, mais à parler de Koumbit: 'Koumbit fait pas ça comme il faut,' 'Koumbit devrait faire ça', 'Koumbit prend pas à cœur ses affaires-là.' ... moi, je trouve ça frustrant, parce que ça veut dire que, c'est à

partir de ce moment que t'es plus dans Koumbit, t'es pas plus dans Koumbit, mais [je considère c'est plus] ta responsabilité.

It seems as though the emergence of different statuses and the creation of agents/figures caused some members to feel like they were no longer part of the configuration (i.e., Koumbit). This feeling was expressed in the way they spoke of the organization as something that did not really concern them. As long as there was the weekly coordination meeting with everyone involved, members felt that *they* were Koumbit, that they embodied *it*. Conversely, we see that the new associations encouraged by the fragmentation of decision-making and the emergence of the permanent workers translated into a process of *disincarnation*, of *disembodiment*, to the extent that some members felt that Koumbit was presentified/incarnated/ embodied elsewhere, in the permanent workers, for instance.

Why would members disengage themselves from the organization, particularly an organization that granted its members a voice and allowed them to build the work place they wanted. The answer to this question lies in viewing Koumbit as a political arena where coalitions of interests were competing in spite of the principles and values that members shared and respected. Thus, within the limits established by the founding principles, different versions of Koumbit could emerge and coexist. However, the one that stood out was the one that the majority of the members supported. Thus, what version of Koumbit stood out depended on the members' ability to make a case and convince others of the validity of that particular version.

Myriam's experience in Koumbit offers a good example of the previous argument. As we know, Myriam was one of the three graphic designers who worked as freelancers at Koumbit. She was the first designer to have permanent hours. Very committed to the organization and its founding principles, Myriam was not afraid to speak her mind. From the outset, Koumbit's work priorities revolved around web development. Graphic design was incorporated later on, and it was developed as a secondary activity within

the organization. As a graphic designer, Myriam was interested in promoting and further developing Koumbit's graphic design activities. It seemed like she was going against the flow with this idea. As she mentioned, "j'ai toujours de bâtons dans les roues" (Myriam, interview, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2007). Apparently, Myriam's version of Koumbit (i.e., with a strong graphic design area) was not compatible with the current version of Koumbit. In a way, she felt as though her version was being suppressed. This is why she thought she was turned down to work on Koumbit's business plan: "[J]'aurais mis ma vision dedans, je trouve que c'est pour ça qu'ils ont pas voulu que je le fasse" (Idem). But why was this vision so controversial, according to Myriam it had to do with control:

inconsciemment, ils veulent pas que ça aille vers ça, parce qu'ils auront pas de contrôle sur ça (...) si le design graphique devenait très important dans Koumbit, ils aurait pas le contrôle là-dessus, ils sont pas des designers, tu comprends, c'est pas leur métier. (Myriam, interview, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2007)

Collectivist organizations struggle to organize themselves in alternative ways avoiding the traditional principles of hierarchy and centralization that promote inequalities in terms of members' power and influence (Cheney, 1999; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). Self-management and participation in decision-making are some of the ground rules in the creation of more egalitarian workplaces. However, these principles are not infallible. Informal hierarchies can emerge and the use of discursive strategies can systematically block participation.

#### **5.4. Conclusions**

This second cascade of change is about members negotiating their power to influence the direction of the organization. The creation of a series of agents/figures (i.e., the committees) contributes to the reconfiguring of decisional power. Although the committees materialized rapidly by means of various incarnations, they also brought about changes that were unexpected

and that, in some cases, overturned the benefits produced by the new configuration.

The analysis presented in this chapter shows the details of the changes that took place in Koumbit (i.e., what changed). It also illustrates the various ways in which change happens (e.g., intentional, emergent and opportunity-based) and how these different trajectories of change coexist.

The next chapter presents the second part of the analysis. This time selected excerpts of meetings are analyzed to illustrate how organizational change is interactionally accomplished.

## Chapter 6

### Sequences of Translations: How Organizational Change Takes Place in Interactions

*Je dirais qu'il y a deux outils pour changer Koumbit. Le premier outil c'est la réunion, c'est la proposition, en fait, c'est de concevoir une nouvelle structure, une, une chose à faire-là, qu'on amène en proposition dans une réunion du comité de travail qui après impose ça à tout le collectif, si c'est adopté. Le deuxième outil, c'est un outil strictement technique, de patenter un objet technique, d'inventer un outil pour faire quelque chose, ça, ça change Koumbit même par son existence*

*(Antoine, interview, May 27<sup>th</sup> 2007)*

In the previous chapter, I recounted Koumbit's cascades of change in terms of the sequences of events and actions that transformed two central aspects of the organization (i.e., remuneration and decision-making). In this chapter, I will take a closer look at members' interactions to show how a particular change (i.e., emergence, definition and consolidation of the permanent worker membership category) was brought about in communication. To do so, I will first restate the salient concepts of the communication-based view of organizational change that I articulated in Chapter 3. Then, I will illustrate this view with extracts from my fieldwork in Koumbit.

#### **6.1. A communication-based view of organizational change**

In simple terms, change can be viewed as the process by which a *difference* is created (deliberately or unintentionally) in a state of affairs. This difference can be understood as *a new set of associations* among agents (human and nonhuman), events (present, past and future) and goals. In other words, it is the creation of links that did not exist before.

New sets of associations are created through a *process of translation*. Agents' interests, roles, identities, goals are translated, that is, they are *transformed, interpreted in different ways*. When an agent is doing this work of translation, s/he is constructing a narrative in which s/he is attributing and subtracting agency to the selected agents. In so doing, the agent is assigning roles and identities to others. Translation can then be understood as a *staging practice* (Cooren, 2010) where an agent associates her/himself with various agencies and “figures (principles, absent persons, facts, institutions, expertise) that implicitly substantiate or corroborate what [s/he is] standing for” (p. 14).

Translation is an interactive process since any successful translation involves the creation of a text/narrative (i.e., set of associations) that is recognized and accepted by other agents as being legitimate (i.e., having authority). It implies a back and forth process where agents *negotiate* their interests, roles, goals and identities. Thus, an important part of translation is *mobilizing and convincing* others to adhere to the sets of associations that are proposed. Agents must then build compelling narratives.

This process takes place in interaction. I approached interactions by breaking them down into change sequences. Change sequences are nothing other than sequences of translations. Each one of the three moments that make up a change sequence<sup>64</sup> constitutes a certain type of translation (i.e., it produces some sort of transformation). For instance, identifying and communicating is about challenging the present situation. This translation transforms the personal understanding of a member (e.g., interpretation, hunch, feeling) into a situation that is potentially problematic for the group or organization. In other words, this moment is about challenging a text. It entails the creation of an account (i.e., another text) that is directed at convincing other members that something is wrong. This translation is successful in as long as the other members acknowledge the new text as being valid. Defining the problem and setting a solution implies the refining of the problem. Here agents locate sources of

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<sup>64</sup> Identifying and communicating, problem and solution setting, and stabilization



agency and attribute blame. So, the text, which was created in the previous moment and stated in general terms that something was wrong, is translated into several narratives that propose sets of associations similar to this one: A and B are doing X, which is causing Y. Hence, this is the moment of the change sequence where the attribution and subtraction of agency are central. In Latour's (2008) terms, agents are *above* the text in that they are defining it. Stabilizing is the moment where the text acquires an agency of its own. The text has no longer an author but is rather recognized as having authority. It has the authority to guide members' actions. Here the translation is in terms of the roles of the agents. The authors are now being acted upon by their creation and the creation is acting on them. Members are *under* the text (Latour, 2008), and the text, so to speak, acts on them, in that it makes them behave in certain ways.

Change, then, is a *discursive process* where agents create a difference in the state of affairs by negotiating and adhering to particular translations of their interests, roles, goals and identities (set of associations). This discursive process materializes change (translates change into a discursive object), it gives change a form that can be recognized by organizational members. This materialization of change is possible by mobilizing agents/figures that make present that which is absent, that incarnate that which has no material form and speak in the name of others.

## **6.2. How organizational change happens in communication?**

The following pages show through the analysis of several excerpts how a membership category emerges and evolves in organizational members' interactions. As I explained in the previous chapter, the permanent worker membership category was an emergent change that surfaced from the creation and implementation of the permanent hours and organizational roles. Focusing on this particular change allows me to illustrate how different types of change (i.e., purposeful, emergent and opportunity-based) are articulated in members'

interactions. Hence, we can see how a deliberate change (i.e., the creation of permanent hours and organizational roles) generated an emergent change (i.e., a new membership category) that, in turn, prompted some opportunistic changes (i.e., the official statement of the Rights and Obligations of the Workers).

This section is divided in two subsections. In the first subsection, I illustrate the kind of analysis that can ensue from the identification of change sequences and the moments that make them up. Here I present the actions that characterize each moment and show the progression through the different moments of the sequence. The focus is on the members' translations and their uptake. The second subsection focuses on certain characteristics of interactions (i.e., their dislocal nature, their material dimension, the hybrid nature of those involved in them) that allow us to understand important aspects of organizational change (i.e., timing and spacing, multiplying the number and variety of agents participating in the process).

### *6.2.1. Change Sequence Analysis: Defining Permanent Workers and the Coming to Terms with Organizational Roles*

The excerpts that compose this change sequence were taken from the Hiring Committee's meeting that was held on January 17<sup>th</sup>. Committee members were discussing working conditions when suddenly Marco brings up the permanent hours distribution. Through out the collected data, this meeting marked an important moment in process towards defining the permanent worker membership category.

#### *6.2.1.1. Identifying and Communicating: There is Something Wrong with the Distribution of Permanent Hours*

The following extract illustrates the initiation of a change sequence. Change sequences start with the identification and communication that

something is not working. Here Marco is trying to convince the other members that there is a problem with organizational roles.

### Hiring Committee Meeting

January 17<sup>th</sup>

#### Excerpt 1:

- 151 Marco Euh, quand on a découpé les heures, ( ) et on a réparti une  
 152 grosse partie d'heures de webdev, en fait, on a expliqué ça  
 153 14, moi je fais 8 ((someone else interjects, making it difficult  
 154 to understand what is said)) (1.0) on est censés tous de faire  
 155 juste du web dev, t'sais (2.0)
- 156 Jean-Séb Ah?=  
 157 Marco =On est censé de faire du webdev, je suis censé de faire du  
 158 webdev, oui. L'affaire, c'est que j'ai cherché (what ever) oh,  
 159 ou que t'appelais ou que c'était déjà (à quelqu'un)
- 160 Jean-Séb C'est ça  
 161 (2.0)
- 162 Antoine C'est ça  
 163 (4.0)
- 164 Marco Sais pas (0.3) ((he chuckles)) c'est compliqué
- 165 Jean-Séb Oui, c'est un peu compliqué. (Ben, casuellement) hier, ben,  
 166 t'sais, Myriam a amené qu'elle a un contrat avec la CMN puis  
 167 elle voudrait vraiment demander de réévaluer ( ) parce  
 168 qu'elle, ( ) elle en a marre de travailler pour Koumbit ( ) que  
 169 commence à faire d'autres choses ( ), c'est correct ça, Omar  
 170 va (la passer en entrevue) et je vais faire, faire l'évaluation  
 171 (0.3) parce qu'on n'a pas d'heures en, on n'est pas payés pour  
 172 faire ( ) (0.2) c'est vrai, que c'est peut-être pas la meilleure  
 173 façon de fonctionner là ((he lowers his voice))=

Here identifying and communicating consist of building a case to convince the other members that there is something wrong with the present situation. In line 151, we see Marco building a case, which orients the other members to the issue he has identified as problematic: the distribution of permanent hours for organizational roles. Marco is calling their attention to the fact that a good part of the permanent

hours was allocated to the web development role. In lines 153-154, he states a preliminary version of the problem<sup>65</sup> “on est censés **tous** de faire **juste** du web dev”.

To do this, we see how Marco creates a set of associations. He implicitly brings a figure (i.e., the distribution of permanent hours) to the conversation. The invocation of this figure implies at least two translations (transformations). The first transformation is in terms of form: the distribution of permanent hours is embodied in a spreadsheet that states the number of hours allocated to each permanent member. Marco’s implicit *presentification* (Cooren, et al., 2008) of the spreadsheet gets translated when he says “on est censés **tous** de faire **juste** du web dev,” meaning that it is the distribution of permanent hours that dictates how they are supposed to just work on web development. This translation thus creates a second transformation, this time in terms of what this spreadsheet performs. The spreadsheet is no longer a simple description of the distribution of paid work. It has become a *prescription* of how members have to use their work hours.

Notice how Marco first identifies themselves (i.e., the Hiring Committee) as being the authors of the distribution of permanent hours: “on a découpé ... on a réparti... on a expliqué” (lines 151-152) and then how he positions themselves as somehow commanded by the text “on est censés **tous** de faire **juste** du web dev” (lines 153-154). The shift in the role played by Koumbit’s members in Marco’s account illustrates how it is that “*the world acts on us as much as we act on it* (Mead 1932/1980)” (Cooren, 2010, p. 21 original emphasis). Latour’s (2008) idea of living *under and above the script*<sup>66</sup> is useful in understanding the tension expressed by Marco. As Latour mentioned:

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<sup>65</sup> Notice how the moments in the change sequence overlap. While identifying and communicating the member is also defining the problem. It is an initial formulation of the problem. This is the starting point for the negotiation process that characterizes the problem and solution setting moment of the change sequence.

<sup>66</sup> For Latour (2008), a “script is a set of goal-oriented instructions that delegate to some other actors more or less specific tasks” (p. 5). The notions of being *under* and *above* the script describe what for him is characteristic of the mode of existence of organizations. Actors never are simultaneously under and above, they are sequentially either under or above a given script.

[w]hen we live under the script we are the ones *to which* the script delegates instructions to be carried out. ...at the deadlines, the situation change[s] completely, and we are suddenly made to be the ones who insert instructions *into* the script. (p. 7)

This shift in the attribution of agency is crucial in building the case and thus in initiating change. Intentional change seldom happens when things are going well; it is rather triggered by breakdowns. Thus, building a case for change involves identifying a breakdown or problem. By making the distribution of permanent hours appear as limiting and constraining (i.e., problematic), Marco is able to bring this text to question. This attempt will be successful as long as other members acknowledge his case.

However, the other members do not seem to understand why Marco is bringing this up now. Marco insists “on est censé de faire du webdev” (line 156) and then emphasizes the fact that he is also supposed to work on web development. There are no comments from the other members. So, Marco tries to be more specific by talking about the difficulties he has encountered while looking for web development projects to work on. Jean-Sébastien interjects a “c’est ça” (line 159). Still there is no uptake from the other members. We can see a shift in line 161, when Jean-Sébastien brings up Myriam’s<sup>67</sup> situation: she had secured an important contract and she asked for a reevaluation of the permanent hours’ distribution. She wanted Koumbit to invest more in other organizational roles (e.g., graphic design) not just web development. By bringing up the fact that another member felt that the distribution of permanent hours had to be looked at, Jean-Sébastien is validating the case Marco is building. His final remark “[C]’est vrai, que c’est peut-être pas la meilleure façon de fonctionner là” (line 166-167) is evidence of uptake.

Marco’s translation of the distribution of permanent hours was successful in that he was able to make another member (Jean-Sébastien) challenge the seemingly

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<sup>67</sup> At the time of the study, Myriam was one of Koumbit’s three graphic designers. She had 4 permanent hours to work on the Communication & Marketing role. Thus, she worked mostly as a freelancer.

non-problematical character of this figure. By challenging it, they are both opening up the situation for the creation of new sets of associations that can change Koumbit's organizing.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, action is shared with others: “[W]hen one acts, others proceed to action” (Latour, 1996, p. 237). Thus, let us take a look at who or what is acting in this sequence. At first sight, we could say Marco, Antoine and Jean-Sébastien are acting and mobilizing each other. However, if we look closer at what they are doing when they talk, we see that other agents/figures are also participating.

For instance, the organizational roles, the permanent hours and the budget appear to be non-negligible agents that are implicitly invoked in this conversation. Although these agents are also supposed to be embodied in written texts, i.e., documents that have a material presence (printed or electronic), we also see how they are artfully mobilized in the discussion. This presentification in the discussion allows them to exist beyond their written embodiment and thus contributes to materializing the new remuneration system in the conversation. In a larger sense, roles, permanent hours and the budget display a form of agency in that they not only convey specific information about the situation, but also do things by enjoining members to act in specific ways (Cooren, 2004).

In this particular interaction, the combination of two agents (i.e., roles and permanent hours) results in giving members, according to Marco, a very strict command: “faire **juste** du web dev” (lines 153-154). Also notice how the *raison d'être* and the budget are made present in the conversation when Jean-Sébastien appears to incarnate their “logic,” so to speak. When he refers to Myriam's demand to revise the allocation of hours, he says: “[O]n n'a pas d'heures en, on n'est pas payés pour faire” (line 166), which is an implicit way to say that the *raison d'être* of their organization *dictates* that web development be the priority in terms of paid work.

In terms of the definition and consolidation of the permanent worker membership category, this excerpt shows how a permanent worker resists how the

distribution of permanent hours translates and dictates what is expected of him in terms of work. So, by challenging the distribution of permanent hours he is challenging this initial definition of what permanent workers are, which could then lead them to propose new sets of associations to define the new membership category.

*6.2.1.2. Problem Solving: Organizational roles are fragmenting vs. the paid work logic*

As the conversation continues, members further define the problem. In the previous excerpt, Marco stated the problem in terms of the limiting nature of organizational roles. Permanent workers are supposed to work only on web development. He also suggested that there was a lack of web development projects, according to what was agreed on, i.e., the work distribution. We then saw Jean-Sébastien agreeing with Marco's presentation of the situation: for him the precedence of the web development role over other roles is problematic.

In the following excerpt, Marco adds another dimension to the problem. He considers that organizational roles fragment the work process. As a result, a web developer has to wait for a salesperson to sell and produce the estimate before he or she has some work to do. However, the problem goes even deeper, beyond the managerial principles of work division and specialization. It has to do with Koumbit's nature, with its participative management principle.

This excerpt is interesting because it illustrates how different types of change (e.g., purposeful, emergent, opportunity-based) are entwined in ordinary action. Here we see how the implementation of a purposeful change implies adjusting and adapting change to the circumstances. It was the creation and implementation of roles and permanent hours that brought the permanent worker category to life; however, the permanent workers resist how these textual agents or figures define their work and who they are. This resistance translates itself into the need to change what is understood as a permanent worker. Here a purposeful change that is

materialized in a series of texts (implementation of organizational roles and permanent hours) is being challenged so that it can be altered.

Let us not lose sight of the twofold process that is taking place here. While these members are conversing they are producing change, they are altering (in small but not negligible way) the organizational state of affairs. At the same time, the theme of this conversation is about change too, that is, the results of the implementation of organizational roles and permanent hours. A change that has become a discursive object, a figure, that tells members how they should use their work hours. So, by bringing this figure in the conversation, they are altering aspects of the change initiative. In other words, they are “changing change.”

**Hiring Committee Meeting**  
**January 17<sup>th</sup>**  
**Excerpt 2:**

- 241 Marco Avant cette transformation, l'idée davantage de que moi, par  
 242 exemple, j'étais encouragé à vouloir à faire **mes devis**, etc, pour  
 243 pouvoir faire de tout, un peu de tout, la vente, du webdev, du machin,  
 244 du bidule, moi, je m'intéressais à tout pour apprendre le plus de  
 245 choses [possibles
- 246 Jean-Séb [Va, mais c'est aussi que=  
 247 Marco = Je suis pogné sur le webdev, et que j'attends que tu vas être  
 248 capable de vendre ((to Antoine)) et que tu fasses ton devis ((to Jean-  
 249 Séb)), pour faire mon webdev, j'y perds, j'y perds tout
- 250 Antoine Non, non, là, la **différence** que t'as fait, là c'est qu'avant tu faisais  
 251 les devis, mais tu étais pas payé, la seule différence c'est que dans  
 252 ton webdev t'es payé, t'as un **salaire payé**
- 253 Marco Humhum
- 254 Antoine **C'est la même chose qu'avant là**, la (motivation) est la même
- 255 Marco Oui, mais=  
 256 Antoine = Je veux dire, dans le temps, dans le temps que tu parles, c'est juste  
 257 du bénévolat, c'est sûr que tu en perds, c'est certain
- 258 Marco Bien sûr

As Castor and Cooren (2006) noted, an important part of problem formulation is the creation of an account that establishes a network of associations between agents (human and nonhuman). It also implies a negotiation process where



competing accounts are confronted. Here both Marco and Antoine present their respective accounts of Koumbit's recent changes.

What is interesting about the accounts that are shown in this excerpt is that they are of a comparative nature. They construct a network of interrelated agents that compares Koumbit's situation before and after the creation of organizational roles and permanent hours to elicit differences in the work practices. This type of narrative is characteristic of change processes since it is part of how members make sense of what is happening.

They are also about assessing the process. As Pentland (1999) stated, narratives "encode, implicitly or explicitly, standards against which actions of the characters can be judged"; in other words, "they embody a sense of what is right and what is wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, and so on" (p. 713). Marco's assessment of Koumbit's recent changes (lines 247-249) is negative, given that he is challenging the results of those changes. Thus, the way he positions the events and agents allows him to strengthen the case he is building against Koumbit's current organizing practices. Antoine's narrative, on the other hand, supports the status quo and thus counters what Marco is proposing. Let us take a closer look at both narratives.

According to Marco, before the transformation he was encouraged to perform different tasks (e.g., quotes, sales). This allowed him to learn about other tasks (lines 243-245). Note that in this part of the narrative, he positions himself as having agency. He stages the present situation very differently as he positions himself as having less agency: He is trapped in the web development role and depends on others to do his work. Others now appear to have bearing over what he can do and cannot do. As he says, "[J]'y perds, j'y perds tout" (line 249).

For him, the introduction of organizational roles and permanent hours operated an important change in terms of his role as worker. Before the transformation, his role involved contributing at various stages of the work process and learning about them, whereas now he feels the work process is fragmented and he only contributes to one specific task of the process. According to Marco's

account, the scope of the operated changes is quite significant since they touched upon members' work practices but also, even if it is not explicitly mentioned, the principles (e.g., participative economy) that underlie these practices.

But Marco's account does not seem to translate Antoine's interpretation of the situation. While for Marco the difference between Koumbit's past and present is that members now have to work on what the role prescribes them to do, which limits members' actions, for Antoine the difference lies in getting paid for the work done. By attributing the source of the difference to a salary, Antoine minimizes the scope of the changes that are enacted at Koumbit. This is clearly illustrated when he says "[c]'est la même chose qu'avant là, la (motivation) est la même" (line 254). With this line Antoine thus appears to be dismissing Marco's formulation of the problem and in a way the problem itself. How can being paid for work be a problem? Antoine makes a series of simple associations (e.g., paid work is good, volunteer work is bad) that lead to this conclusion: making quotes was not that good because it was volunteer work while web dev is good because you have a salary. Instead of focusing the problem on what members can or cannot do, Antoine centers the problem on having or not having financial stability.

The excerpt ends with a mark of agreement from Marco "bien sûr" (line 258).

### *6.2.1.3. Stabilization: Coming to terms with organizational roles*

As the conversation continues, Marco then figures out a way to fit the salary logic with the principles he vows for. He partially subscribes to the paid salary logic that Antoine has been promoting:

[M]oi, j'ai des heures payées qui sont cliquées webdev, si je peux pas les faire, je vais faire autre chose, je vais faire de la vente, du whatever, mais ça tu perds de vue que moi, je suis pas payé pour faire de la vente, mais, moi, ok, je vais la faire bénévole, pas un problème, de tout façon je vais être payé, je veux dire, c'est ça le ( ), je vais être payé les 10 heures même si j'ai dépassé la semaine d'après, ou le mois d'après ou l'année d'après, je le ramasse ça va être payé on

va évaluer ça, ( ) on va voir si ça fonctionne ou pas (Marco, Hiring Committee Meeting, January 16<sup>th</sup> 2007).

Marco's point makes room for a different understanding of responsibilities. In a way, Marco is saying that the permanent worker has to worry about working, about filling the assigned hours with work. It does not matter in which capacity, because the permanent worker is always going to receive a monthly pay. However, he introduces the notion of evaluation. By introducing it, he is transferring the responsibility of following the roles and permanent hours from the permanent workers to another group: those who evaluate (i.e., the Hiring Committee). They are the ones who have to say if the situation is working or not.

Jean-Sébastien is not sure he understands, so he invents a hypothetical situation to corroborate his understanding:

### **Hiring Committee Meeting**

**January 17<sup>th</sup>**

#### **Excerpt 3:**

- 348 Jean-Séb Ok, je vais donner un exemple là, mettons, sensé de faire, je pensais  
349 faire 14 heures par semaine de webdev, ces heures là vont juste se  
350 faire si il y a de la vente de faite, d'accord? Mettons que, qu'une  
351 semaine que (2.0) Omar a pas eu le temps, a pas eu le temps de faire  
352 de la vente les deux dernières semaines parce qu'il avait plein  
353 d'autres affaires à faire, (0.5) pis?
- 354 Antoine (Priez pas le diable)
- 355 Marco Ben, t'es au chômage, mais t'es payé quand même (1.0) tes 14  
356 heures sont payés quand même
- 357 Jean-Séb Il y a pas de problème? (0.3) Ok
- 358 Marco Le truc c'est que, je ne sais pas à tout le combien tu va être évalué,  
359 il me semble que oui qu'on évalue à tous les trois mois
- 360 Antoine Je pense que tu es évalué à la fin du mois=
- 361 Marco =à la fin du mois
- 362 Antoine Le comité d'embauche regarde les heures que tu as fait dans le  
363 dernier mois, je pense aussi que (0.2), moi, je pense que le  
364 travailleur aussi, a le devoir de signaler ces problèmes
- 365 Jean-Séb Ok, fait que, c'est quoi notre prochain, ça peut être par rapport au,  
366 noter les heures du monde, c'est comment qu'on (pourrait le faire)

- 367 Marco À la fin du mois, on prend le time tracker tous les trois puis on fait  
 368 un bilan, on passe au travers ((he ends by clearing his throat))  
 369 Antoine =ouais, on va encourager à:::  
 370 Marco Si à faire nos ( )  
 371 Antoine Les travailleurs devraient mettre, en fait, un mot clé correspondant  
 372 à leur rôle=  
 373 Jean-Séb =ouais=  
 374 Antoine =qu'ils punchent leur rôle

Towards the end of this meeting, members agree on a way to understand how to deal with their monthly permanent hours. A new element is added to the definition of what it means to be a permanent worker. As we can see, some stabilization has taken place with regard to the remuneration aspect of the permanent worker membership category. So far, the permanent worker membership category was defined in terms of having permanent hours and thus in terms of a fixed salary per month. The new element that is added to this definition is that permanent workers are always going to get paid, whether they complete all the hours or not. However, there are two caveats: (1) permanent workers are evaluated on a monthly basis, and (2) they have the responsibility of reporting any problems related to their workload.

It is important to note that at the same time that members are discussing these issues, they are taking notes and incorporating their agreements or decisions in Koumbit's wiki. This inscription of how the system works constitutes a translation that makes the conversation that happened between Antoine, Marco and Jean-Sébastien that day to go beyond that moment and reach other members. This text is supposed to work on behalf of the Hiring Committee. It is supposed to tell permanent workers how they should account for their permanent hours (line 371). They insist on the fact that permanent workers have to identify their permanent work hours by using a keyword for their role. This highlights the importance that accounting for work has, and how they are trying to standardize the way permanent workers account for their work.

What we see throughout this excerpt illustrates the micro dynamics of how change is brought about. Implementing change is never a straightforward process. It is an exercise of constant adjustment and negotiation that takes place in

communication and interaction. This exercise can be understood as a series of translations. Translations take a narrative form by proposing associations among events, actors, their goals and identities. A translation is successful as long as others accept or adhere to what it is proposing (i.e., the plot or project). We see how at the end of the meeting members, after many rounds of discussion, they arrive at a set of associations that apparently satisfies them. This stabilization is only temporal, as elements of the plot may be challenged and become problematic in the context of another interaction. Then, another process of negotiation (i.e., series of translations) would take place in order to establish new sets of associations.

Another interesting aspect of change that is illustrated by the previous excerpts is the role agents of variable ontologies play in bringing change about. We see how Marco, Jean-Sébastien and Antoine try to mobilize each other, to make the others adhere to the plot they are laying out. To do this, they mobilize agents/figures that they presentify or invoke in the interaction. However, we also see how figures such as the organizational roles, the permanent hours, and the budget animate these actors and make them do things. For instance, we saw how the existence of new organizational roles led Marco to complain about how Koumbit is organizing work and, in the context of everyday work, to the extent that these organizational roles are giving members a very strict mandate that Marco finds incompatible with the way he conceives of his work in Koumbit. In turn, we saw how Jean-Sébastien appeared to be compelled to speak in the name of the budget to counter some of the ideas that Marco was putting forward.

Together, these three excerpts taken from the same meeting show us the unfolding of a change sequence. They illustrate how organizational change is brought about in communication as members challenge the way things work and negotiate to either adjust what is currently working or create a new procedure, and finally recognize this new procedure as part of the what informs, i.e., gives a form to, the organization. Hence, the distribution of permanent hours for organizational roles is challenged. Members in interaction negotiate to define what is the problem with the permanent hours and organizational roles as some members think these figures are constraining members' work. Finally, they agree that permanent workers have to

accomplish their organizational roles but that their pay should not depend on the completion of the assigned hours. Permanent workers are always going to be paid, but they are going to be evaluated.

However, as I mentioned before, change is an incremental process that happens throughout time. Hence, what I showed is part of a more complex process that can be broken down into many change sequences. These change sequences are constituted as such because of the theme that underlies them: the permanent member category.

In this interaction, members agreed that an element that distinguishes permanent workers from the freelancers is that they have to be accountable. They have the responsibility of reporting their hours to the Workers' Council. As we will see in the next sequences, this element of the permanent worker definition becomes problematic and is actively challenged by some of the permanent workers.

#### *6.2.2. Vignettes about the Change Process: Making the Difference One Interaction at the Time*

In this section, I move the focus away from the change sequence (although this logic underlies the whole analysis) to illustrate how a *plurified view of interactions* (Cooren et al., 2005; Cooren, 2010) allows us to understand the communicative actions that organizational members perform during their interactions that contribute to the production of differences in the state of affairs.

##### *6.2.2.1. Redefining the problem: presentification, incarnation and embodiment*

This excerpt builds on what had happened in the Hiring Committee's previous meetings (January 17<sup>th</sup> and February 1<sup>st</sup>). In the first meeting, Marco was successful in convincing Jean-Sébastien that there was something wrong with the distribution of permanent hours for organizational roles. The problem was defined and they were able, in that same meeting, to come up with solutions (e.g., determining that the permanent workers' pay did not depend on their completion of the assigned hours,

establishing a monthly evaluation for permanent workers and guidelines for reporting their work hours). These agreements contributed to define the emergent permanent worker membership category, particularly, in terms of the members' rights and obligations.

In the next Hiring Committee meeting (February 1), the distribution of permanent hours is once again challenged, this time on a different basis. The Hours Report reveals that some permanent workers are not completing their web development hours, they are spending most of their paid time on coordination. Antoine, the member who calls attention to this situation, considers that assigning a few hours to several members is inefficient, because more time has to be spent in coordinating the disperse efforts. He proposes to distribute the 50 web development hours between two workers. This is problematic because only one of the four permanent members working on web development has the possibility of working 20 to 30 hours a week for Koumbit. Members of the committee develop polarized positions that are unsuccessful in translating the other part's interests and goals. Since no agreement comes out of this meeting, members of the committee decide to bring this issue to the Workers' Council during the next Strategic Meeting.

The following excerpt is part of the report delivered by Hiring Committee to the Workers' Council during February's Strategic Meeting. Jean-Sébastien, the designated spokesperson of the Hiring Committee, presents the Hours Report. He reads out loud the amount of hours each permanent worker had reported and compares it with the workers' official workload. The excerpt starts when Jean-Sébastien delivers the Hiring Committee's conclusions of the report.

This sequence is illustrative of members' staging practices. It shows members constructing accounts that identify different sources of the problem. We will also see how these accounts are negotiated as members accept, transform or reject these constructions.

**Monthly Strategic Meeting**  
**The Committees Feedback: The Hours Report (February 2)**  
**Excerpt 4:**

- 32 Jean-Séb Donc, une question cruciale, c'est que les **heures de coordination,**  
33 **de vente et de sysadmin** semblent insuffisantes, (0.3) euh (0.3) et  
34 autre chose c'était que les ((he stops reading and looks at the  
35 members around the table)) **50 heures de webdev** qu'on avait  
36 attribuées, dans la façon dont on a pris les candidatures tout ça on,  
37 on. En fait, ce qui se passe, c'est qu'on a deux personnes, en fait on  
38 a une personne qui est à 9 heures, une personne qui est à 8 heures,  
39 une qui est à 12 puis, une qui est à 22 heures, je pense, à peu près.  
40 Donc, euh, y a un point qui est amené que ça semblait ((il regarde  
41 Omar)) peut-être complexifier **la tâche de coordination**, ça  
42 pouvait peut-être être à l'origine du, de surplus de tâches de  
43 coordination que, Omar se retrouve à faire. [Je ne sais pas si ça  
44 peut être confirmé par Omar?
- 45 Omar [Moi, je pense c'est  
46 vraiment pas ça l'affaire
- 47 Jean-Séb Non, ok , ok (0.3) donc euh, ben, c'est pour ça qu'il fallait l'amener  
48 à la table, parce qu'on pensait peut-être qu'un 20 heures, 30 heures,  
49 30 heures à la place pourrait être mieux quitte à trouver quelqu'un à  
50 l'externe, mais:::
- 51 Omar À l'instant, juste [honnêtement,  
52 Jean-Séb [Ouais,
- 53 Omar Moi, je préfère, [...] moi, j'aime ça en avoir plusieurs, je préfère  
54 avoir 4 personnes que je peux essayer de déborder de travail que  
55 deux personnes qui sont déjà débordées euh, [t'sais
- 56 Jean-Séb [Ok
- 57 Omar Ah, euh, la coordina-, le problème de coordination, ((he gestures  
58 air quotes)) je pense c'est plus ben, de surcoordination, c'est plutôt  
59 une euh, une résultat de **notre redéfinition** de ces choses-là, que  
60 beaucoup de, de, dans le passé j'aurais considéré ça du webdev sur  
61 un contrat, maintenant à cause que je vois **mon rôle**, je voyais mon  
62 rôle comme plus permanent, euh j'arrêterais de puncher sur tous les  
63 'tits contrats, puis je voyais plus mes tâches globales, ça fait que  
64 quand on analyse le time tracker, c'est, ça rentre pas.

Jean-Sébastien is playing a particular role in this interaction. He is the Hiring Committee's spokesperson or antenna and thus he speaks in its name. This member *represents/incarnates* the committee in that he has been “authorized to voice what the [committee] thinks, believes or wants” (Cooren, 2010, p. 137). So, Jean-Sébastien is



not speaking only for himself but for a *collective* to which he belongs. His constant use of the French pronoun “on” (i.e., “we” in English) evidences the collective nature of what he is saying. The effect of representing/incarnating the Hiring Committee allows Jean-Sébastien to do two things. First, he is able to deliver a report that touches a very delicate issue (i.e., worker’s performance) and to even state that there is a problem without being identified as the originator of this negative assessment. Although he is part of the committee, the report does not represent his point of view or that of any individual in particular but rather that of the committee. This allows him to efface himself and not be perceived as exercising individual authority. The latter is important in Koumbit because legitimate authority emanates from the collective rather than any individual member. Second, speaking in the name of the Hiring Committee lends weight (Cooren, 2010) to what he is saying, since it is not his point of view (i.e., tainted by his subjectivity) but that of the recognized and legitimated organizational body (i.e., a committee).

The account that he builds to translate the Hiring Committee’s formulation of the problem is very interesting in terms of his staging practices (i.e., selection and allocation of agency). Without going into the details of the report, it reveals that some workers are not doing what they are supposed to do. They either worked less hours or exceed the number of hours. Instead of blaming the workers for a performance that deviated importantly from the set goals, Jean-Sébastien stages the permanent hours (lines 32-33) and their distribution as the probable source of problem (lines 35-43). According to this account, there are two problems: (1) insufficient permanent hours for sales, systems administration and coordination; and (2) a surplus of coordination tasks. This last problem was directly linked to Omar’s work. However, Jean-Sébastien stages Omar as having almost no choice. It is the distribution that makes the task of coordination more complex, making Omar’s allocation of additional hours inevitable.

Notice how, towards the end of his turn of talk, Jean-Sébastien intensifies the use of words like “semblait” (seemed), “pouvait” (could), “peut-être” (maybe). These words convey caution and uncertainty. Thus, the associations he is making are by no

means presented as facts, they are rather a hypothesis that could be verified or falsified. The open character of Jean-Sébastien's account of the situation is evidenced by his explicit request for Omar's confirmation "Je ne sais pas si ça peut être confirmé par Omar?" (lines 42-43).

Omar rejects the Hiring Committee's translation (i.e., set of associations) of the situation. Omar's rejection may seem unusual, considering that Jean-Sébastien's account offered him the possibility of being released from the responsibility of exceeding his coordination hours. However, accepting this translation would imply accepting that he would be doing something wrong. Jean-Sébastien takes the rejection in a positive way. For him, it validates the Hiring Committee's decision to bringing the issue to the Workers' Council "c'est pour ça qu'il fallait l'amener à la table" (lines 46-47). Then, in lines 47-49, he presents one of the Hiring Committee's solutions to the coordination surplus problem: reducing the permanent members working on web development from 4 to 2. Once more, Omar does not agree with the Hiring Committee's ideas. He states his work logic or philosophy "je préfère avoir 4 personnes que je peux essayer de déborder de travail que deux personnes qui sont déjà débordées" (lines 52-54). This logic is counter to what the Hiring Committee is trying to establish. The logic that Omar has implicitly invoked dates from the times when Koumbit did not have the resources necessary to offer any kind of work stability to its members. Freelance and volunteer work were the rule. Projects were distributed among many members that very often found themselves doing most of their work on a volunteer basis. Although there were mixed thoughts about the status of volunteer work in Koumbit, most members were on board with the logic of paying for the work done.

In line 56, Omar goes back to the Hiring Committee's formulation of the problem. He begins by questioning if there is really a problem of over-coordination. This questioning is incarnated not only in Omar's words but also in his body language when he gestures air quotes while saying "surcoordination" (line 57). Then, he stages *their* redefinition of organizational roles as the source of the problem "notre redefinition de ces choses-là" (line 58). There are two interesting things to notice here

about interactions and their power to make us see different things about the process of organizational change.

At first sight, interactions may seem as limited units of analysis to understand organizational change. Their situated nature may not appear compatible with the “big picture” approach that has traditionally characterized organizational change literature (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). However, this depiction of interactions is not entirely accurate. Several authors (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2004; Cooren et al., 2005; Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009) have suggested that while interactions are locally accomplished. They are *dislocal* in that “their local achievement is always mobilizing a variety of entities (documents, rules, protocols, architectural elements, machines, technological devices) that dislocate, i.e., “put out of place” (...) what initially appeared to be “in place,” i.e., local” (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009, p. 122-123). It is precisely this association with a variety of entities that accounts for the capacity of interactions to transcend the “here and now” of their accomplishment. This makes interactions valuable occasions for understanding organizational change because “the past, the present, and future are simultaneously embedded” (Keenoy & Oswick, 2004, p. 138) within them.

This is clearly illustrated in both Jean-Sébastien’s and Omar’s turns. In lines 35-36, Jean-Sébastien invokes the past when he explains how the Hiring Committee distributed the 50 web development hours. Then, in lines 47 to 49, he takes the members to the future when he talks about the Hiring Committee’s idea of hiring less people for web development.

Omar’s turn is more interesting because here we can see how his presentification of Koumbit’s past has some bearing on the organization’s present situation. Omar stages their redefinition of organizational roles as what is causing the problem they are discussing now.

Second, this excerpt illustrates the flip-flopping of positions (Latour, 2008), which is part of members’ staging practices: how, at one time, members act upon the roles and how, at another time, the roles act on them to the point that roles are

identified as the source of the problem. At first, Omar assigns agency to Koumbit members: they act upon organizational roles to redefine them. The roles here are like clay in the hands of the potter. The major redefinition was in terms of web development role. At that time, the web development role included sales, coordination and web integration. After the redefinition each one of this tasks became a separate organizational role. Then, there is a shift in agency and the ones acting are acted upon. The roles take on a life of their own.

Another thing that Omar includes in this account is his interpretation of the permanent worker category. Notice how his interpretation is slightly different from what the Hiring Committee has established. According to this committee, permanent workers are accountable to the Workers' Council, they have to report their work hours and they are evaluated each month. There is a difference between what the Hiring Committee considers as being accountable and Omar's accountability. On the one hand, we have the Hiring Committee asking Omar to account for every work hour, and, on the other, we have Omar who thinks that as permanent work he does not have to account for his work in such detail.

Omar's account clearly formulates the problem as a definition problem, one that has to do with how they label and understand things. The way he frames the problem makes the other members question their definition of organizational roles rather than Omar's own performance. We will see how in the next excerpt a member challenges Omar's definition of the problem.

Notice how discussing a problem related to the distribution of permanent hours leads the members to discuss and define the permanent worker membership category. The way permanent members should account for work is particularly important in defining this membership category. It is these agents/figures (nonhumans) that frame interactions and give this group of individuals an organization or configuration.

*6.2.2.2. Reconfiguring time to place blame: invoking the past to understand the present*

In this excerpt members continue to define the problem. In the previous excerpt, we saw how members selected certain agents as being the source of the problem and assigned them particular roles. This excerpt illustrates textual agency. We see how organizational members are underneath the agents/figures they have created since they stage themselves as being constrained by what these agents/figures establish. Once more it is clear that blaming nonhumans in this case exonerates members from the actions that are being sanctioned.

**Monthly Strategic Meeting**

**The Committees Feedback: The Hours Report (February 2)**

**Excerpt 5:**

- 82 Caro : Si je comprends bien, tu devais faire 21 heures par semaine<sup>68</sup>, mais,  
83 et tu passes plus de temps à faire la coordination, dans le fond, (ces  
84 heures-là), ça c'est une autre chose là=
- 85 Omar: =Attend, juste clarifier ce que je viens de dire, c'est que je pense  
86 que c'est plutôt une question d'définition
- 87 Caro: Oui
- 88 Omar: En fait, j'aurais très bien pu puncher une grande partie de ces  
89 heures-là, comme coordonner du webdev et donc c'est du webdev
- 90 Caro: C'est du webdev
- 91 Omar: Dans la façon que le webdev était concev- euh euh, était dans  
92 l'année passé et qu'a été rentré dans notre budget et qui résoudre  
93 dans les 50 heures qu'on essaye de distribuer. Donc, il y a une  
94 partie qui est ça, y a une autre, y a d'autres enjeux là-dedans aussi,  
95 mais je pense qu'on se donne un mois pour les trouver

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<sup>68</sup> These 21 hours were assigned for Omar's web development role not for coordination.

Caro opens her turn with a question directed at validating her understanding of the situation. This question explicitly addresses the gap between Omar's assigned workload and what he actually did. She finishes her turn by passing judgment of the situation as she considers web development and coordination are different things.

Omar does not agree with Caro's interpretation. He assumes his previous turn of talk was not clear and thus further explains. Omar seems to be trying to convince the members that the problem rests on how he accounted for the work he did and not in the work he did. To support his point, he associates himself with another agent/figure: the old definition of the web development role. This definition encompassed the tasks of sales and coordination<sup>69</sup> as part of the web development role. According to this definition, most of Omar's hours were dedicated to web development. This association actually does not make Omar's argument stronger since this is no longer a valid definition of web development. However, by associating this definition with yet another agent/figure (i.e., the budget), Omar proves that this definition is still in use in Koumbit (lines 92-93). This association is crucial because it brings into question the amount of permanent hours that was allocated to each organizational role. Members' accounts of their work hours played an important role in estimating the budget. It was based on these reports that the Finance Committee estimated the hours for each role. Thus, the 50 web development hours were estimated based on the old web development definition that included sales and coordination as part of the web development role. In other words, the estimated amount of web development permanent hours was flawed. Notice how this account actually places him as doing the right thing because he is working and accounting for his work following the definition of web development that underlies the budget and the distribution of permanent hours.

By linking the non-valid definition of web development with other agents (budget and distribution of permanent hours) that are committing Koumbit members to work in particular ways, Omar is challenging the whole system. Hence, important

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<sup>69</sup> When the web development role was redefined, the tasks of sales and coordination became roles on their own right.

texts that underlie the organization are being challenged and opened for redefinition. In turn, he is successful in diverting the attention that Caro brought to his performance by associating himself with other agents that he staged as having a more important role in what is happening.

By now, the definition of the problem has clearly changed. It is not the surplus of coordination that is problematic. The problem is that both the budget and the distribution of permanent hours are flawed because they were estimated based on definitions that do not fit with how members are working now.

Once again the projection of time in interaction is evident as we see members alternating between present, past and future in their discourse. Caro questions (i.e., interactional present) Omar's work performance (i.e., recent past). Then we see Omar is trying to prove that he did what he was supposed to do. This means that he has to reformulate the problem (i.e., present). His reformulation of the problem involves some agents/figures from the past (i.e., last year's definition of web development, last year's monthly hours reports). These agents/figures were the foundations on which Koumbit's current budget and the estimation of permanent hours rested. The budget and the permanent hours dictate respectively Koumbit's financial priorities and the organization of work. The mistake of the past (the use of flawed information for estimation of budget and permanent hours) is invoked to invalidate their current financial priorities and work practices. Then, Omar mentions that there are other probable sources of the problem but that they have a month to explore them (i.e., near future).

Notice how the timing effect of interaction is not accomplished by simply referring to the past but rather as "a process of 'presentification' or 'instantiation,' in the present, of a reconfigured past and a projected future" (Cooren et al., 2005, p. 270). Omar goes beyond mentioning the old web development definition. The definition plays a role since it makes a difference in how things played back *then* and how they are unfolding *now*. For instance, the definition is embodied in the budget since it is the monthly reports based on this definition of web development that informed the estimation of the budget. Also, the 50 web development permanent

hours ensue from this definition. It is a reconfigured past (Cooren et al., 2005) because the way in which Omar associated/staged these agents/figures results in framing the situation as a mistake. Before this interaction both the budget and the permanent hours were not viewed as mistakes, they were valid -although sometimes contested- agent/figures. The effects of timing and spacing (i.e., dislocation) are not neutral (Cooren et al., 2005); they serve the interests and goals of those interacting. In this case, Omar's reconfiguration of the past contributes to the case he is building to exonerate himself. The reconfiguration helps him to place the blame elsewhere.

#### *6.2.2.3. Solutions: Negotiating the role of accounting*

As the conversation continues, Jean-Sébastien explains how the Finance Committee had estimated the budget and the permanent hours for each organizational role. This explanation supports Omar's formulation of the problem. Then, Jean-Sébastien takes the liberty to propose solutions to the problem. Moving towards the formulation of solutions is evidence of a temporary stabilization of problem. Jean-Sébastien proposes two actions to alleviate the formulated problem. First, the Finance Committee would have to transfer some of the web development hours to the coordination role. Second, the Hiring Committee would have to clarify the organizational roles so that accounting for work hours is less confusing and time consuming. This last proposition generates an interesting discussion about the articulation of permanent hours, organizational roles and accounting.

#### **Monthly Strategic Meeting**

#### **The Committees Feedback: The Hours Report (February 2)**

#### **Excerpt 6:**

192	Marco	On essaye de faire quelque chose d'assez strict là, de vérifier le
193		nombre <b>d'heures</b> que t'as fait li- que t'as fait là sur <b>une prévision</b> ,
194		basée sur <b>des punchs de</b> l'année dernière qui étaient pas du tout
195		prévus pour faire cette prévision là. Donc, moi, après avoir réfléchi
196		puis après avoir vu la confusion que ça a apporté puis qu'on essaye de
197		<b>s'mettre dans un moule qui n'existe pas vraiment</b> , moi j' propose
198		carrément de faire du (flag), c'est-à-dire, de dire on, on, on, on
199		demande à Omar de travailler 35 heures par semaine pour Koumbit,



200 puis on sait que, il a des compétences pour faire ça, ça et ça et qu'il  
 201 fait très bien, puis quand il y aura de ça à faire, mais c'est lui qui va le  
 202 faire, puis euh un autre qu'il a telle compétence, ben, on propose de se  
 203 le payer à mi-temps ou un quart de temps, puis qui va faire ça, ça va  
 204 être son rôle, ça va être de faire ça. Que ça soit relativement, la marge  
 205 de manœuvre et puis les punchs, ben, les **punchs, pour moi, c'est**  
 206 **plutôt informat-, de l'information interne**, pour nous, savoir ce quoi  
 207 qu'on fait, mais pour les gens qui sont permanents, ben, t'sais, ils ont  
 208 une marge de manœuvre sachant que de tout façon, ils **dépassent**  
 209 **quand même souvent les heures qu'ils font par semaine**, c'est pas,  
 210 c'est super souple, en fait, dans la réalité puis on s'emmerde un peu  
 211 avec des **procédures strictes**, c'est un peu, c'est vrai qu'on perd  
 212 beaucoup de **temps** là-dedans ( )

Marco's turn of talk can be divided in three parts according to what he is accomplishing with what he is saying. The first part of the turn (lines 192-197) is about stating the problem "**s'mettre dans un moule qui n'existe pas vraiment**". Next, he states his solution to the problem: to eliminate the organizational roles (lines 197-206). The problem and the solution he is stating are directed at the permanent workers. So, the last part of his turn is about differentiating this membership category. Justifying why accounting for work should be less strict for these workers (lines 206-211).

The first part of Marco's turn is illustrative of those moments where human agents realize they are acted upon by their own creations (e.g., budget, distribution of permanent hours) and come to question them. Hence, they place themselves *above* these agents/figures by creating an opening for changing them. However, to challenge them, the member has to show how these entities have acted upon them (i.e., place themselves underneath) and how this action has produced negative consequences. So, he implicitly states that the implementation of permanent hours and organizational roles have led them to have a strict system where they verify the work hours of the members. Here Marco is questioning some of the agents/figures that contribute to the structuring of their work because they are grounded on flawed information. The joint action of these three agent/figures creates the *mold* (i.e., rigid structure) inside which their work has to fit. In lines 196 and 197, he states "on essaye de s'mettre dans un moule qui n'existe pas vraiment". What he is saying is that since their forecast was erroneous this frame that structures their work is an invention it does not exist.

He then offers an alternative to this strict system (the budget, the permanent hours and organizational roles) by proposing the elimination of organizational roles. Instead, members would be hired for a number of hours per week and they would work on what they are best at. The practice of accounting for work hours is not eliminated. However, its purpose is altered in that it would be informational rather than evaluative. Notice how the members are taking control of these agent/figures to reconfigure their work practices.

In lines 207-209, Marco establishes an important difference in terms of how permanent workers are supposed to account for their work hours: they have room to maneuver. This difference/privilege constitutes an *incarnation/embodiment* of the permanent worker category. Marco mobilizes these workers' dedication to the organization to justify the privilege. The quality of being dedicated or devoted is incarnated in the amount of time these members allocate to the organization "ils dépassent quand même souvent les heures qu'ils font par semaine" (lines 208-209).

Jean-Sébastien gives the next turn of talk to Caroline. She builds on Marco's ideas to introduce two new agents: another membership category and the job description. Caro refers to this membership category as a *salaried position* and associates this agent with *task description or post description* that will be a guide for the members' action. Instead of estimating how many hours a worker should spend on a task, it would establish tasks and percentages, giving the worker more flexibility and agency to decide how to distribute his or her work time. The salaried worker would not have to report his work hours for pay purposes since he or she will no longer have to produce an invoice in order to get paid.

Jean-Sébastien takes the next turn. Although he mostly agrees with the direction the conversation is taking, he feels that this unstructured mode of working may not be appropriate for a decentralized organization like Koumbit. He invokes the nature of the organization (i.e., decentralized) to support his argument. He is afraid that the distribution of work would not be efficient as members will be able to do what ever they want even if they are not the most qualified to do those things. Actually, although he says he supports the changes other members are proposing, he is struggling to maintain the status quo. He tries to find similarities between what the other members are

proposing and what they have right now with the roles.

Jean-Sébastien is arguing that organizational roles play a part no other organizational member plays: controlling. This agent has been delegated by the Hiring Committee to keep members in line in terms of what they are supposed to do. Instead of presenting organizational roles as Marco did when he was building a case for change in the Hiring Committee meeting as limiting and constraining, Jean-Sébastien tries to make the members see how roles are very similar to the flexible job description Caro had introduced.

### **Monthly Strategic Meeting**

#### **The Committees Feedback: The Hours Report (February 2)**

##### **Excerpt 7:**

122 Jean-Séb on continue d'avoir ce système là, pour pas que, c'est une question de  
 123 ((pause)) gestion euh participative, parce qu'on n'a pas de boss pour  
 124 checker les heures que les gens font, on a pas de boss pour dire à  
 125 quelqu'un « ben, là toi, ta job c'est pas de répondre au téléphone, c'est  
 126 de, de, de faire, sais pas, de laver le plancher » fait que, il faut qu'il, je  
 127 pense que c'est bon comme système, mais comme système indicatif  
 128 qui vas nous permettre de savoir que ce qui se passe dans le temps que  
 129 et pouvoir réagir, comme là dans cette question [...]

This excerpt shows that Jean-Séb does not agree with just assigning job descriptions to workers (lines 104-106), because he firmly believes that some sort of monitoring is necessary to keep Koumbit up and running. The way he justifies the kind of monitoring they have now is very interesting in terms of the part that nonhuman agents play in organizing. Participatory management implies that authority and control are not centralized in one person or group; authority and control belong to the group and thus members manage the organization collectively. So, how does monitoring take place in such an organizational context? The collective delegates the power to monitor to a hybrid agent who is responsible for keeping working members in track. At Koumbit, nonhuman agents play a central role in constituting this network. Organizational roles (textual agents) tell members what it is they are supposed to do. Permanent hours (another textual agent) establish the amount of time members have to allocate to their roles. The Time Tracker helps members account for their work. The Hiring Committee analyses these

accounts and addresses any gaps or anomalies.

Although Jean-Sébastien compares the role played by the system with that of a boss, he is trying to convince the other members that the system plays an informational role rather than a controlling one. For him, the system produces data that is necessary to assess short-term objectives and prepare their annual planning (lines 137-139). This meeting supports Jean-Sébastien's point because thanks to the system they were able to spot the problem that they are now trying to address.

#### *6.2.2.4. Stabilizing and the Role of Agents/Figures: Explicitly Defining the Permanent Workers membership category*

A month has past since the last Strategic Meeting. In spite of the measures<sup>70</sup> members had agreed to put in place after the last Strategic Meeting, the February's Hours Report still shows important gaps in both Antoine's and Omar's work performance.

In light of these findings, the Hiring Committee decides to meet with these workers to discuss their distribution of permanent hours. At a first glance, this meeting is about negotiating a way to monitor work efficiently. Interestingly, defining this system is closely linked to establishing what is expected from members (responsibilities) and what can members expect from the organization (rights and privileges). Thus, the conversation leads to an open discussion about what the permanent worker membership category.

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<sup>70</sup> Increasing the permanent hours for the coordination role and using tags for punching the hours in the Time Tracker.

**Hiring Committee Meeting**  
**March 15<sup>th</sup>**  
**Excerpt 8:**

- 183 Omar Euh, moi, je quand même un question à vous poser. Pour vous **c'est**  
 184 **quoi la permanence**, quand on parle d'Antoine et moi qui serait  
 185 permanent **comment ça se distingue**, parce que à date là pour  
 186 quelqu'un qui travaille pas assez, on va plus tarde lui réclamé ces  
 187 heures là carrément, non, on paie pas une semaine parce que tu est  
 188 rendu à nous devoir une semaine, je comprends qu'il faut **avoir un**  
 189 **mécanisme** quelconque pour arrêter euh like a bleeding, you know  
 190 une hémorragie comme ça d'argent, mais euh, c'est pas, pour moi dès  
 191 qu'on va me dire ça, ben ça c'est plus une j, ça **c'est pas la**  
 192 **permanence**, un boss va jamais te dire, « Ok, j'ai remarqué que  
 193 t'étais pas productif trop tôt dans les dernières deux semaines, donc je  
 194 te *dock* une paie de moins » Non, t'sais, c'est comme « Change or  
 195 leave », mais c'est pas une question de *dock* de paie. Et j'aimerais  
 196 juste, la question, pour moi, c'est je trouve qu'il y a un flou, **je**  
 197 **soupçonne qu'il y a grand flou dans ce qu'on veut dire par**  
 198 **permanence**. Pour moi, ça voulait dire, justement, que t'as plus de  
 199 flexibilité dans tes punchs, qu'euh, qu'on prévoit que dans une  
 200 période normale tu vas avoir du temps *off*, donc, c'est des, ce qu'on  
 201 appelle des « *sick days* » *those days where you are not working and*  
 202 *you still get paid for those days*, and so=  
 203 Caro =la permanence ça va avec des conditions de travail, pour répondre,  
 204 commencer à répondre un peu là, pour moi, je pense que ça va être un  
 205 des rôles du comité de embauche commencer à rédiger des conditions  
 206 de travail fait ce=

Omar's question, "Pour vous, c'est quoi la permanence?" (lines 183-184), does two things in this interaction. On the one hand, it brings to light the fact that the Hiring Committee's understanding of permanent positions may be different from how permanent workers see themselves. On the other hand, it creates the context to revise and change these competing understandings.

In lines 184-185, Omar makes the question more specific by stating: "quand on parle d'Antoine et moi qui serait permanent comment ça se distingue". Thereafter, Omar offers a series of arguments to justify the relevance of his question. These arguments also define the permanent position. Omar's exercise of defining "la permanence" is interesting in terms of the phenomenon of *incarnation*, that is, in

terms of the material dimension of this membership category. As Cooren (2010) argued, “for something to incarnate/embody/materialize itself, it means that it has to somehow have a immaterial dimension” (p. 145). “La permanence” invoked by Omar is the kind of agent/figure that has an immaterial dimension because the name “permanence” means and represents something. However, “this name can remain a sort of empty shell as long as it is not incarnated in various definitions, identifications, invocations, visualizations, and mobilizations” (Cooren, 2010, p. 149). In other words, the meaning of “la permanence” remains open, it depends “on the various ways it incarnates or embodies itself, whether through specific documents, utterances, or even enactments” (Ibid, p. 146). Let us take a look at how Omar fills the empty shell of “la permanence”.

He starts by clearly stating what is not part of his definition. For example, he dissociates the permanent position from the Hiring Committee’s control mechanisms “à date là pour quelqu’un qui travaille pas assez, on va plus tarde lui réclamé ces heures là carrément, non, on paie pas une semaine parce que tu est rendu à nous devoir une semaine” (lines 185-188). Although Omar acknowledges the importance of having a mechanism to control the organization’s money flow, for him, “ça c’est pas la permanence” (line 189).

To build his case against these control mechanisms, he invokes an agent/figure that does not exist in Koumbit: the boss. This is very interesting in terms of ventriloquism. First (lines 189-191), Omar makes the boss speak, but the words the boss is speaking are the Hiring Committee’s words (the ones the Hiring Committee uses when a permanent worker has not completed his/her workload). These words sound very strange coming from a boss, this is not what a boss would say. This act of ventriloquism is aimed at showing how their current system makes no sense. Then, Omar actually makes the boss speak the words of a boss. These words are in line with Omar’s point of view. For him, performance problems are not to be fixed by docking the pay but rather in a more drastic way “change or leave” (lines 191-192).

In line 195, Omar shifts to stating what he thinks permanent positions entail. Here he associates permanent positions with more flexibility to report work hours

(i.e., punch hours in the Time Tracker) and paid time off. Both flexibility and paid time off incarnate the permanent position. They give this membership category a certain form, one that puts certain characteristics in the forefront while leaving others in the dark. Notice how Omar only mentions what he expects from the organization, yet does not mention what the organization can ask or expect from him.

It is clear that “la permanence” cannot be reduced to any of these incarnations since they have to be debated and negotiated in interaction. In the next turn of talk, Caro finally gets a chance to answer Omar’s question. She associates permanent positions with working conditions (line 202). This is in line with Omar’s previous intervention. It is interesting that something that does not exist yet incarnates/embodies/materializes the permanent position. At this time, Koumbit had not written working conditions for their members. Nevertheless, everybody knows what working conditions means (e.g., working hours, holidays, health and safety issues) and it is logical to associate a membership category with a set of working conditions. She then allocates the responsibility of writing the working conditions to the Hiring Committee. If these working conditions are a central element in defining the permanent position, then, she is authorizing the Hiring Committee to define this membership category.

If we go back to the first meetings we will see how the definition of permanent worker has evolved through the conversations. At first, permanent workers were those workers that had a fixed number of paid hours per week to work on a particular role. Then, there were several additions to this simple definition. Permanent workers will always receive their pay, even if they have not completed the assigned hours for the role. Permanent workers would be evaluated on a monthly basis. Permanent workers are accountable to the Workers’ Council (i.e., the Hours Report). Some permanent workers resisted this last point because they associated having a permanent position with more flexibility in reporting their work hours. This is why, at some point, certain permanent workers wanted to dissociate themselves from organizational roles to have positions with job descriptions. Next, the permanent

workers' category is associated with working conditions. So, permanent workers not only have a fixed salary but also paid holidays and vacations.

Notice how the permanent worker definition is a network of agents/figures that contribute to set the limits of what is and what is not a permanent work. These agents/figures (i.e., the fixed pay, the monthly evaluations, the Hours Report, the working conditions) also contribute to the materialization of the membership category.

At first glance, this conversation may seem to focus merely on defining or redefining a membership category. However, this conversation accomplishes far more. Regulatory agents (Cooren, 2010), such as membership categories, determine boundaries (e.g., who is in or out), but also suggest behaviors (e.g., what is expected of someone with this status and what can expect someone with this status). Boundaries and suggested behaviors are elements of a contract. So, these members are renegotiating and redefining their organizational contract: that text, or in Taylor and Van Every's (2000) terms, that map which "locates members on the emergent organizational surface and provides them with a guide to navigation" (p. 280).

So, once more, this excerpt illustrates a moment when members are *above* the agent/figure (e.g., membership categories, contracts, procedures) defining it, acting on it. It is in these moments that members reconfigure their sets of associations to create new links, new interpretations. It is there and then that members produce intentional/deliberate change. However, this is not the only type of change taking place. As Latour (2008) argued. in practice

we are never completely "under" nor completely "above" a script. (...) Conversely, while you carry a course of action that has been written for you by a script —and thus when you live "under" the script that seems to be "above" your head— you nonetheless keep a floating attention to where it is leading you —you remain also "above" it". (p. 7 )

This *floating attention* that allows us to stay *above* the script while we are *under* it is what accounts for emergent and continuous change, for adaptation and improvisation.



Being *under* or following the script is also an important part of the process of change. It is the moment where change materializes and is thus temporarily stabilized.

### 6.3. Conclusions

The analyses presented in this chapter show how organizational change is a process that takes place in communication, one interaction at a time. Analyzing the excerpts through the lens of the change sequence allowed me to focus on the unfolding of change as a translation process where members build cases for change aimed at convincing others agents of adhering to the sets of associations they are putting forward. Cases for change are built by staging a series of agents/figures that lend weight to the case. Members negotiate, adjust or refuse the sets of associations depending on the agents' interests, roles and goals.

The plurified view of interactions (Cooren et al., 2005; Cooren, 2010) that I mobilized throughout the analysis helped me uncover the wide variety of agent/figures that reconfigure members' sets of associations and thus participate in organizational change. In this view, "interactions are never purely local" (Cooren, 2010, p. 2); they are dislocal, they articulate different spaces and times. These effects of spacing and timing have important implications for our conceptions of both time and change. Traditionally, change is thought to unfold in long periods of time. Thus, to witness change we would have to study it longitudinally. However, the study of interactions is not only about studying the present, since in interactions agents articulate the "past-in-the-present" and the future-in-the-present (Keenoy & Oswick, 2004).

Finally, this view of interaction proved to be very useful for reconstructing members' strategies (e.g., staging practices) to either produce change or try to maintain the status quo. These strategies involved associating with and dissociating from certain agents/figures, speaking in the name of others, invoking agents/figures that are not present in the interaction, and reconfiguring the time (past, present, future). Staging practices imply *oscillation* in terms of how members position themselves in relation to the agents/figures they create and mobilize. This has

important implications for organizational change. Building a case for change implies challenging the present situation and proposing new sets of associations. Thus, it implies *living above* the script (Latour, 2008) or staging oneself *above* of agents/figures that configure the situation. Stabilizing an accepted set of associations involves *living under* the script, following or doing what these agents/figures tell us to do (e.g., work on web development instead of coordination). However, as Latour (2008) mentioned, the situation is far more complex: We are never completely under or above the script, we are always aware of where the script is taking us. This awareness is what accounts for continuous, emergent change, but also for those occasions where purposefully members want to alter the direction, the content and the nature of the script.

## Discussion

*[E]ach interaction plays a role,  
as minimal as it might be, in the evolution  
of our collectives or pluriverses.*

*(Cooren, 2010, p. 171)*

This dissertation was inspired by a question that was raised by several researchers (Brown & Eisenhardt 1997; Ford & Ford, 1995; Orlikowski, 1996; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999) between the late 1990s and early 2000s: How do organizational members produce organizational change? According to these authors, dominant approaches to organizational change had studied this phenomenon from a distance (i.e., the macro level of analysis), preventing researchers from focusing on the actual accomplishment of change. For them, the answer to this question was to be found in the study of action. For me, the answer lays in the study of communication.

Hence, this dissertation focused on answering the following research question: What communicative actions do organizational members perform during their everyday interactions that contribute to the production of differences in the state of affairs? Although research and literature in the field of organizational change is abundant and rich in terms of its findings, answers to this question have not been satisfying, particularly from a communicative point of view.

On close inspection, organizational communication studies that address organizational change present several limitations in their conceptualization of the relation between communication and change. Some authors (Ellis, 1992; Lewis, 1999; Smelzter, 1991, Timmerman, 2003; Young & Post, 1993) conceptualize communication as a *tool* for transmitting information about change. This research aimed to discover better and more efficient ways to communicate change to reduce employees' potential resistance. These authors view communication as a separate component of the change process. Although these studies highlighted the central role of communication in the implementation of organizational change, reducing

communication to *transmission* obscures the role of interaction in bringing change into being.

Other researchers (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1988; Doolin, 2003; Ford & Ford, 1995; Ford, 1999; Harrison & Young, 2005; Tsoukas, 2005) argued that change is constituted through members' discursive practices. In this view, it is in people's talking, writing and the texts they produced that a new social reality is created. While these researchers generally study organizational change in real time, very few of these studies (Anderson, 2003, 2005; Ford & Ford, 1995) analyzed interactions to understand how change takes place in communication.

In light of these limitations, I pursued the goal of explaining how change is produced in a particular organizational setting from a communication point of view. From a communicative standpoint, organizational change can be viewed as translation (Callon, 1986; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Latour, 1987, 1995), a process of negotiation directed at creating and stabilizing new sets of associations. In this process, agents create new texts and actualize old texts (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) where roles, identities and goals are negotiated. When change is studied through the analysis of interactions the process can be broken down into what I call change sequences, composed of three different moments: (1) identifying that something is wrong, (2) problem and solution setting and (3) stabilizing. Hence, the shifting of the sets of associations is accomplished one turn of talk at the time.

The analysis of organizational members' staging practices (Cooren, 2010) allowed me to trace the agents and how their actions shifted the sets of associations. Approaches to organizational change that focus on discursive practices have been criticized for viewing change as pure discourse neglecting the materiality of this process (Fairclough, 2005). The approach developed here accounts for the material dimension of change by mobilizing a plurified view of interactions (Cooren et al., 2005; Cooren, 2010), which takes into account the contribution of beings of diverse ontologies to ongoing action. This view allowed me to extend the number of agents participating in change and also to account for the various roles they played in the process.

This view of organizational change and the particularities of the change process I studied in Koumbit inspired the following insights.

1. Communication is the site and surface where organizational change takes place.

This insight follows directly from Taylor and Van Every's (2000) explanation of how organization emerges in communication. I could simply state that if organization emerges in communication, then it is logical for it to change in communication too. However, this second argument needs further elaboration, since explaining change was not the main object of research in their famous book, *The Emergent Organization*.<sup>71</sup>

Communication is the *site* where change takes place because it is in the turn-by-turn dynamic of conversations that members come to alter the state of affairs. Ford and Ford (1995) (based on Austin's [1963] speech act theory) suggested that certain types of conversations produced change, although in *miniature scale*, while big scale "change emerges through the diversity and interconnectedness of many microconversations" (p. 560).<sup>72</sup> The latter supposes that conversations (micro level phenomena) have to be scaled-up in order for them to account for organizational change, i.e., a macro level phenomenon. Throughout this study, I have shown that it is not necessary to leave the site of interactions to understand and account for organizational change. Interactions are valid units of analysis to understand both the constitution and the re-configuring of organizations. However, to accomplish this we have to adopt a plurified view of interactions (Cooren, 2010; Cooren et al., 2005) that allows us to extend the dialogic scene (traditionally made up of human agents), that is, to take into account the contributions of nonhuman agents (i.e., beings of varied ontologies, semiotic/textual, architectural, artifactual or technological).

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<sup>71</sup> Taylor and Van Every (2000) dedicated a small section of their book to explain organizational change. Change is viewed as *back propagation*, a learning process by which a network self-organizes. According to them, "[l]earning occurs when the pattern of interconnection changes" (p. 233). The pattern is changed by adding new elements to conversations (e.g., conversational partners). Taylor and Van Every acknowledged that this is not a complete theory of back propagation as it does not explain "how organizations come to have transcendent properties" (p. 236).

<sup>72</sup> The way conversations scale-up resonates with Boden's (1999) *lamination theory*.

In turn, organizational change not involves only organizational members, but also ideas, plans, information systems, principles (just to cite a few) who also participate in the process. These agents' participation contributes to dislocate interactions (i.e., displace them, make them go beyond the here and now) because these agents' capacity to communicate "appears to transcend time" (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009, p. 132) and space. Taking into account the contributions of these beings amounts to acknowledging that "any act of communication consists of implicitly or explicitly making beings speak or say things, beings that, inversely, also makes us speak and say things" (Cooren, 2010, pp. 134-135).

This study showed that change is a negotiation process in which members build cases for change (i.e., new sets of associations to alter the state of affairs) by translating their goals, roles and identities as well as those of other agents. The building of these cases involved staging practices: attributing and subtracting agency to various agents/figures, making these agents/figures play certain roles, and also speaking in the name of others. Thus, communication is the surface of change because it is through conversing and textualizing that ideas, propositions and plans come into existence. Communication gives new sets of associations (i.e., configuration) a material form in spoken and written words. The new configuration is defined and enacted in the various incarnations members assign in their interactions. Hence, interactions account for the material and immaterial, the local and the dislocal, as well as for the present, the past and the future. The latter makes them valuable occasions for understanding how collectives emerge, stabilize and change.

*2. Actions taken to produce organizational change are not that different from the actions taken to organize. The main difference between organizing and changing lies in the sets of associations that underlie action.*

Looking closely at members' interactions during the implementation of several organizational changes (e.g., permanent hours and organizational roles, committee decision-making structure) at Koumbit, I noticed that actions taken to enact change were not that different from actions that routinely organize work.

Members organized work during meetings. It was also during these meetings that members presented ideas (e.g., creation of permanent hours, committees, organizational roles) directed at changing certain aspects of their organizing (e.g., their pay system, participation in decision-making, distribution of work). These ideas materialized in their spoken and written words but also got incarnated or embodied in other “things.” Let us take the implementation of the committees as an example. Since their creation, the committees had several incarnations that gave them a material dimension: The wiki pages that described the committee’s terms of reference (e.g., vision, objectives, roles, responsibilities and resources); the meetings members held to work on specific tasks (e.g., the communication plan, the formulation of working conditions, hiring members); the decisions they made (e.g., transferring web development hours to the role of coordination) and the reports they presented to the rest of the organization.

So, holding meetings, writing reports and making decisions were some of the actions that members undertook to put in place the new decision-making system. How are these actions different from what Koumbit members usually do to organize their work? In fact, these actions are not that different. This idea is in line with what James March (1981) claimed almost three decades ago. According to him, we tend to think of organizational change as the product of “extraordinary organizational processes or forces” when change is rather the result of “relatively stable, routine processes” (p. 564). March’s assertion implies that change is not a rare event but rather a continuous process deeply enmeshed in our everyday ordinary actions.

Hence, what makes ordinary actions produce outcomes that were not there before? According to the framework developed throughout the dissertation, it was the reconfiguring of the associations between agents, roles, goals, interests and events that made the difference. Reconfiguring associations has an impact on how actions are accomplished, who accomplishes certain actions and the articulation between those actions. For instance, the introduction of the committee agent/figure<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Note that I refer to committees as agents/figures because these beings were not ready-made; they were brought into existence in members’ interactions. It was in those interactions that they incarnated in different things that gave them a material dimension.

contributed to the reconfiguration of Koumbit's meetings. Meetings were no longer the weekly occasions where all members meet to decide both strategic and operational issues. Meetings were transformed into monthly occasions in which members were informed of the decision made by the committees. New meetings were institutionalized as the working sessions of the committees. Thus, meetings that involved all working members (i.e., the Workers' Council meetings) were no longer the locus of decision-making. They became informational and the committees' meetings, which involved fewer members, were now the locus of decision-making.

In sum, studying organizational change should focus on tracing the staging practices and how these shift the sets of associations that underlie action.

3. *There are more agents bringing change about than the ones identified by organizational change and organizational development scholars.*

When the term *change agent* is used in organizational change and organizational development literature, it normally refers to an "expert facilitator of group processes of planned change" (Caldwell, 2006, p. 1). The organizational members who implement change are not considered change agents; they are usually the *targets* of change. The notion of change agent has several implications in terms of how change is conceived and the role of agency in the process. So, change is viewed as a top-down initiative that can be managed or facilitated and agency is equated with *rational human action* that takes the form of *expert intervention*. According to Caldwell (2003, 2005, 2006), one of the few scholars who have systematically studied the articulation of organizational change and agency, the notion of change agency has shifted from a focus on rational action and intervention to a *dispersed or decentered* view of change agency that stresses no central control. Thus, the notion goes beyond the expert facilitator to take into account the contributions of other agents that have traditionally been overlooked. However, Caldwell's conception of agency follows from Giddens (1984) and thus is limited to the human agent. He considers the attribution of agency to other agents (i.e., objects, semiotic beings) as *agency with no intention or embodied agency*, which raises the following question



“Can we have theories of organizational change without purposeful or intentional concepts of agency?” (p. 1).

The approach to change developed in this dissertation implies a different conception of agency that is based on the *association thesis* (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). In this case, agency is conceived as making a difference in a given situation (Cooren, 2006a). This view of agency does not take purposeful actions out of the interaction scene; it just acknowledges the existence of other courses of action that also have an import on the scene. Consequently, I presented change as a multifaceted process displaying various overlapping trajectories or paths that came into being in different ways (i.e., some were intentional others were emergent while others were opportunity-based) yet they were articulated in everyday action. It was in interactions that these changes were created, negotiated and stabilized. As I mentioned in the previous section, materialization and (temporary) stabilization were possible because of the participation of a series of nonhuman agents that dislocated what was locally accomplished and gave a material form to that which was immaterial. Therefore, my account of Koumbit’s change process would not be complete without mentioning the contribution of the permanent hours, the organizational roles, the committees, the time tracker, the hours report, the Parecon principles, the wiki, etc. to the process. Also these nonhumans (i.e., agents/figures) played an important role in how authority was played out in Koumbit.

At Koumbit, both cascades of change had important implications in terms of authority, the legitimate power to do something. However, this power is not something an agent has a priori but rather something that is negotiated. Authority, as accomplished in action, is shared and hybrid in that it results from our association with other beings (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). In Koumbit’s change process, the permanent hours, organizational roles, Parecon principles and committees were made to play various roles in members’ interactions. In some occasions, while building a case for change, members represented, embodied and incarnated these beings (Cooren, 2010) to lend weight to the sets of associations they were putting forward. The permanent workers’ proposition to change the composition of the Workers’

Council is a good example of this. Permanent workers mobilized a Parecon principle to justify a proposition that allocated more decisional power to themselves. Speaking in the name of this principle made these members more powerful and rightful<sup>74</sup> (Cooren, 2010). In these occasions, members are *above* these beings since they are capable of mobilizing them according to their needs and goals.

In some other occasions, these beings may “hold or attach” members “to certain obligations and principles” (Cooren, 2010, p. 75). For example, the permanent worker membership category was associated with the obligation of accounting for work and accomplishing an organizational role (i.e., predetermined set of tasks). These obligations circumscribed what it meant to be a permanent worker. To claim this status, members had to comply with these obligations. In these occasions members were *under* these beings, since the beings, so to speak, acted upon them by telling them what to do. The latter explains how authority is negotiated and enacted in interactions (see also Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009).

Acknowledging how we make these beings do things but also how they make us do things too is empowering and liberating as Cooren (2010) suggested. Thus, it implies that the possibility of altering a state of affairs in which we are participating lies in our next turn of talk.

### **Limitations of the study and future research directions**

Organizational change has increasingly been studied by mobilizing discursive approaches (Tsoukas, 2005; Demers, 2007). However, the study of organizational change through the analysis of interactions has been scarce (see Anderson, 2004; 2005; Ford & Ford, 1995; Ford, 1999). Thus, the communicative point of view developed throughout this dissertation could make valuable contributions to extant organizational change literature.

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<sup>74</sup> The negotiated nature of authority tells us that for this translation to be effective, it has to be acknowledged by others.

*Timing and spacing and their role in large-scale organizational change.*

I conducted this study in a small organization committed to participatory management. At the time of the study, Koumbit was a completely horizontal organization with no boss and no hierarchical levels. All members had an equal chance to directly influence the direction of the organization by participating in strategic and operational decision-making.<sup>75</sup> Even though organizations now tend to have flatter organizational structures and participatory management is increasingly practiced, hierarchy is still a central principle of organizing and strategic decision-making is still a task that is reserved for top executives. Consequently, it would be interesting to use the framework developed here to study organizational change (intentional, emergent and opportunity-based) in more complex and less participative contexts. For example, studying the movement of the cases members build for change in a context with more horizontal and vertical differentiation would be very useful to develop knowledge about the role that the effects of timing and spacing (Cooren et al., 2005) have in producing organizational change. Furthermore, considering the crucial role the delegation of action plays in the production of change, the study of change in this context would be a great opportunity to extend our understanding not only of the diverse agents participating in change and their modes of action but also the shifts these various beings experience in interactions (i.e., at certain moments they appear to be immutable while at others they appear to be flexible).

The mobilization of my framework to understand organizational change in less participatory contexts (i.e., where the majority of members do not have a direct access to decision-making) could contribute to the body of knowledge about bottom-up change. To my knowledge, the study of how changes proposed at lower levels of the hierarchy come to be accepted at other levels and even become organization-wide changes has never being explicitly explored from a communicative point of view. Some interesting work exists on the subject of *issue selling* (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997; Dutton &

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<sup>75</sup> This influence was exerted in meetings and it depended on members' ability to speak in public, articulate arguments to convince others. So, having direct access was just one part of what is required to produce change.

Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neil & Lawrence, 2001) that focuses on the strategies or moves used by lower level managers to direct senior management's attention toward specific issues. In general, these studies do not explore the interactional dimension of these exchanges. Thus, issues of co-construction, uptake or counter strategies have been overlooked. Also, little attention has been paid to the role played by nonhumans in members' issue selling moves. Paying attention to the unfolding of these episodes and to various agents who/that participate in them can account for what makes this local moves *matter*, in other words, transcend the here and now.

*Extending our knowledge about planned change: The plan as a textual agent.*

Koumbit's change process unfolded in the absence of a detailed plan. It was an open-ended process with no predefined steps to follow or deadline. It would be interesting to study the unfolding of change in presence of a plan, though, viewed as a textual agent. This can bring new light to the planned change model, which has been so criticized for its linear mode of thinking (Burnes, 2004). Conceptualizing the plan as an agent can counter this linear thinking (see Suchman, 1987). Also conceiving the plan as an agent can raise some intriguing questions: What is this agent's role in the production of change? What are the modes of action of plan? To what extent does the production of planned organizational change depend on being under this particular *script* (Latour, 2008)? Is being above (challenging, resisting) this script detrimental to the unfolding of planned change? How does this agent evolve during the process and what are the implications for the unfolding of change? Answering some of these questions can give us new insights into the process of planned change.

*Understanding how other types of organizations change.*

Koumbit is not a traditional organization. While trying to understand its change process, I realized that a very small portion of the organizational change literature was devoted to non-traditional organizations (i.e., not-for-profit, contra-bureaucratic, collectivist). I think there are important lessons to be learned from these

organizations not only in terms of how they change, but also in terms of their organizing. These organizations emerged in reaction to capitalist managerial practices. Hence, they either sidestep or redefine the traditional principles of management (e.g., hierarchy, centralization, division of tasks, authority) by proposing new modes of organizing based on collective authority, democracy and participation. These collectives (as members like to call them) are extremely interesting in terms of how power and authority are distributed and enacted in their daily interactions. Thus, as researchers we must pay more attention to them.

*Methodological issues: the tension between breadth and depth.*

This study showed that conversation analysis provides relevant insights to understanding the communicative dynamic of how organizational change is produced. I will briefly recapitulate the main contributions of this kind of analysis. The analysis of conversations is well suited for describing the discursive strategies members use to build and negotiate cases for change. However, change is not presented just as a discourse (a relatively immaterial dimension). Its material dimension is illustrated through its various incarnations. Analyzing interactions allows the research to trace how the sets of associations that underlie action evolved in time (i.e., one or various episodes). The agents, their actions, their goals and the roles they are assigned can be extracted from this type of analysis. Although interactions unfold in the *here and now*, conversations are dislocal, they produce effects of timing and spacing (Cooren et al., 2005; Cooren, 2010).

Members travel in time as the past and future are re-constructed through interaction. Different spaces are created as other conversations (that took place elsewhere) are brought to the here and now of conversations. This feature is particularly relevant for the study of change, because by closely studying interactions researchers are not only observing the present but also having access to members' constructions of other spaces and times. This makes interactions valuable resources for understanding change as an interactive process that articulate different spaces and times. Thus, they provide a non-linear view of change.

Nevertheless, there are some aspects of this type of analysis that need further tuning. One of them is the tension between breadth and depth. On the one hand, organizational change is traditionally studied over long periods of time, which generates an extensive amount of rich data. On the other hand, the detailed nature of conversation analysis can provide very long analyses of just a few turns of talk. Hence, if the researcher wants to account for the process of organizational change by using conversation analysis alone, the account produced would be extremely long and so detailed that at some points the reader could end up completely lost. How can this tension between breadth and depth be worked out?

My study attempted to tackle this limitation by combining a narrative strategy (process oriented) with a conversation-analysis inspired study (action oriented). The narrative strategy allowed me to cover and articulate long sequences of events while the analysis of conversations allowed me to trace the staging practices of agents. Taken together, the two analyses provide an account of what changed and how it changed. However, it would be desirable to find ways to combine these two types of accounts in one single analysis.

### **Practical implications**

Telling executives and managers that change happens continuously is useful in that it allows managers to acknowledge their organization's ability to change. It also raises awareness about the complexity of change and its management, since change will happen in spite of the manager's goals and interests. However, managers are more interested in managing specific changes or in giving a particular direction to ongoing changes. The analyses I conducted can offer various insights in this respect.

Approaching organizational change through a problem-solving dynamic helps members view change as a routine event instead of a rare occurrence that is imposed in their daily routines. It also stresses members' participation, communication skills and creativity as both the problem and the solution, resulting from a negotiation process where ideas are put forward and are collectively transformed. Approaching change in this way is more participative since organizational members are given a

chance to contribute with their ideas to the change process. However, participation implies an investment in terms of time and human resources, as the process of negotiation can be time-consuming and organizational members have to be prepared or instructed for their participation to be optimal.

This study demonstrated a series of communicative actions (i.e., staging practices) that members undertook while initiating, defining and trying to stabilize change. While this study did not focus on measuring the effectiveness of these actions in producing change, my analyses provide insight into an interesting repertoire of actions that can provide insights about the role of communication for organizational members interested in effecting or directing organizational change. The analyses were not intended as recipes guaranteed to produce change; they rather provided detailed illustrations of what agents (human and nonhuman) do to alter certain aspects of their configuration. Thus, this study shows that the role of communication in organizational change processes goes beyond the traditional view of communication as a tool to inform about change. Practitioners as well as organizational members who wish to change an aspect of their organization could benefit from paying more attention to daily interactions—to the things people say and do. Since it is through the sets of associations people build, negotiate and enact that collectives are formed and changed. The key to bringing about change, then, lies in altering these associations, which implies the use of staging practices that serve as the building blocks of interaction. In turn, bringing about change is not an exclusive task of change agents or managers but one of any agent that can propose and convince others to adhere to their ideas.

Attending to how change happens in organizations (intentional change, emergent and opportunity-based change) and how these different types of change and their paths relate, collide and contaminate each other is important when managing change processes. Being aware of the complexity of the process may lead managers and members in general to be more in touch with what happens in the ground instead of what they have planned. Consequently, attention to what is actually taking place

can make both managers and members aware of issues that were not considered initially and take advantage of these opportunities or adjust the course.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the dissertation, the study of organizational change could be viewed more broadly as an approach to understand organizations (i.e., their mode of being and their mode of action), since change is not only crucial for understanding how organizations evolve throughout time, but also how they are brought to life on a daily basis. In other words, accounts of how organizations change provide valuable insights about how they actually work and are constituted, communicatively speaking.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol<sup>76</sup>

#### Première partie:

1. Depuis combien de temps travailles-tu chez Koumbit?
2. Qu'est-ce que t'as motivé à rejoindre (créer) Koumbit?
3. Quel est ton rôle chez Koumbit?

#### Deuxième partie:

4. Pourrais-tu me parler un peu de **l'émergence de l'idée** de s'organiser en comités, comment est née cette idée?
5. D'après toi, qu'est-ce que vous a amené à **passer de l'idée à l'action** (materialisation)
6. Pourrais-tu me parler un peu de ton **expérience avec les comités**?
  - a. Peux-tu décrire comment ça marchait **avant** les comités et **après** l'implantation des comités.
  - b. Ce mode de travail est-il différent du mode précédent? En quoi est-il différent, **comment se traduit cette différence quotidiennement** dans ton travail?
  - c. Quelles sont les **avantages et les désavantages** de ce mode de travail?
7. Lors que j'ai commencé à assister à vos réunions, vous avez décidé d'implanter parallèlement deux idées : celles de sous-comités et celle des **parts de participation**. D'après toi, qu'est-ce qui a influencer la trajectoire si différente que ces deux idées ont pris : implantation et laissé un peu de côté.

#### Troisième partie:

8. Une phrase qui revient constamment dans les interventions de membres dans vos réunions est « **il y a du flou** ». Comment te sens-tu par rapport à ça, au flou, le rôle du « flou » chez Koumbit?
9. Depuis que tu travailles chez Koumbit,
  - a. Qu'est-ce que tu as appris par rapport à comment vous faites les choses chez Koumbit?
  - b. Qu'est-ce que tu as appris par rapport à comment **les gens** de Koumbit **interagissent** pour accomplir le travail?

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<sup>76</sup> Interview guides were slightly different for each interviewee. Hence, the aspects that appear in Appendix A are those that were present in the 4 interviews.

10. La création des rôles, des permanences, des comités, et maintenant le taux horaire fixe, vers où penses-tu que s'en va Koumbit est-ce que tu le monde est sur le même bateau?

11. D'après toi quel est **le défi le plus grand** de Koumbit actuellement?

## Appendix B

### Transcription Conventions<sup>77</sup>

[ ] =	square brackets equals sign	overlapping talk no discernible interval between turns (also used to show that the same person continues speaking across an intervening line displaying overlapping talk)
(.)	period in parentheses	discernable pause or gap, too short to measure
( ) (bring) ((coughs))	empty single-parentheses word(s) in single-parentheses word(s) in double-parentheses	transcriber unable to hear word transcriber uncertain of hearing transcriber's comments on, or description of, sound: other audible sounds are represented as closely as possible in standard orthography (e.g., "tcht" for tongue click; "mcht" for a lip parting sound)

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<sup>77</sup> These transcription conventions follow Zimmerman's (2005) adaptation of the conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (1974).

## Appendix C

### Translation conventions for Koumbit's lexicon (from French to English) and their corresponding abbreviations

#### Organizational bodies:

Comité de travailleurs (CT)	Workers' Council (WC)
Comité d'embauche (CE)	Hiring Committee (HC)
Comité de financement (CF)	Finance Committee (FC)
Comité de communication et marketing (CCM)	Communication et marketing Committee (CMC)
Comité de vie associative (CVA)	Associative Affaires Committee (AAC)
Comité de production (CP)	Production Committee (PC)
Conseil Administrative (CA)	Board of Trustees (BT)
Asssemblée Générale (AG)	General Assembly (GA)

#### Membership categories:

Membre travailleur	Working member
Travailleur permanent	Permanent worker
Pigiste	Freelancer
Salarié	Salaried worker

#### Other labels

Les heures de permanence	Permanent hours
Une o la permanence	Having permanent hours
Permanent	Permanent worker
La grande table or la table	The big table (refers to the WC)
Règlements Generaux	General rules
Règlements Internes	Internal rules
Meetings de Coordination	Coordination meetings
Meetings de Réflexion	Strategic meetings