

Distributed Leadership in Multisite Social Enterprises

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Abstract

Multisite social enterprises face a distinctive leadership problem because their operations must remain responsive to different communities while preserving a coherent social mission across geographically dispersed units. Excessive centralization can slow decisions, weaken local adaptation, and underuse site-level expertise, whereas poorly structured decentralization can generate inconsistent practices, duplicated effort, accountability ambiguity, and mission fragmentation. This study develops a distributed-leadership framework specifically for multisite social enterprises and evaluates its organizational implications through a transparent simulation-based design. Distributed leadership is conceptualized not as the unrestricted transfer of authority but as the purposeful distribution of leadership work among formal and informal actors according to expertise, proximity to stakeholders, decision consequence, and organizational accountability.

Five synthetic organizational scenarios ranging from highly centralized leadership to mature distributed leadership were examined using a Leadership Distribution Maturity Index comprising local decision autonomy, role clarity, mission alignment, cross-site coordination, and shared accountability. Simulated outcomes indicate that the proportion of decisions resolved at the appropriate local level increases from 41% in the centralized scenario to 87% under mature distributed leadership. The modeled scenarios also show shorter decision turnaround, stronger cross-site implementation consistency, higher local innovation uptake, and fewer duplicated unresolved problems.

The analysis nevertheless emphasizes that distribution without integrative mechanisms can produce fragmentation. Effective multisite leadership therefore requires a dual architecture combining locally situated authority with common mission standards, information-sharing routines, escalation protocols, and collective accountability. The study contributes to distributed-leadership and social-enterprise research by explaining how leadership distribution may help organizations reconcile local responsiveness with organizational coherence. Because all analytical values are simulated, the findings represent theoretically informed propositions rather than empirical estimates of actual enterprises.

Keywords: distributed leadership, social enterprise, multisite organization, local autonomy, organizational hybridity, social mission, cross-site coordination, shared leadership

1. Introduction

Social enterprises operate at the intersection of social purpose and economically sustainable organizational activity. Their distinctive character arises from the simultaneous pursuit of social and commercial objectives, which can expose them to competing institutional demands, multiple stakeholder expectations, and persistent tensions concerning resource allocation, accountability, growth, and mission protection. Mair and Martí described social entrepreneurship as an organizational process directed toward social change and unmet social needs, while later scholarship positioned social enterprises as hybrid organizations combining practices and logics traditionally associated with different organizational sectors. When such enterprises expand beyond a single location, leadership becomes particularly consequential because social impact increasingly depends upon decisions made across multiple communities, operational environments, stakeholder networks, and service contexts.

Multisite expansion can create strategic benefits for social enterprises by increasing geographical reach, replicating socially valuable practices, improving access to resources, and extending impact beyond an original community. At the same time, scaling can introduce organizational barriers associated with values differences, institutional conditions, business models, and the difficulty of maintaining coherence during growth. Davies, Haugh, and Chambers found that social-enterprise growth barriers emerge from interactions among individual, organizational, and institutional factors, while Bauwens, Huybrechts, and Dufays demonstrated that social enterprises pursue different scaling pathways partly because hybrid organizational characteristics influence how expansion is organized. These challenges become more pronounced when sites differ in beneficiary characteristics, regulatory arrangements, labor markets, partner networks, funding structures, or local cultures.

Traditional hierarchical leadership offers one response to this complexity by retaining authority at the organizational center. Centralized leadership can protect strategic consistency, standardize operating procedures, and establish clear accountability. However, it may also produce delays when site leaders must seek approval for routine decisions, weaken responsiveness to community-specific conditions, and create information asymmetry between central decision makers and locally embedded employees. Distributed-leadership theory provides an alternative perspective by treating leadership as an organizational activity extending beyond the actions of a single formally appointed leader. Gronn proposed distributed leadership as a distinct unit of analysis concerned with the combined contributions of multiple actors, while Bolden's review emphasized that leadership distribution focuses attention on interactions, practices, and collective forms of influence rather than leadership being located exclusively in individuals occupying formal positions.

The applicability of this perspective to multisite social enterprises is theoretically compelling but organizationally complicated. Social enterprises must often give local actors enough discretion to respond to beneficiary needs while simultaneously protecting social purpose, financial discipline, organizational identity, ethical commitments, and external accountability. Hybrid-organization research shows that social and commercial objectives can produce enduring tensions rather than problems that can simply be eliminated through structural redesign. Smith, Gonin, and Besharov therefore conceptualized social-business tensions as persistent organizational challenges requiring active management, while Ebrahim, Battilana, and Mair emphasized governance arrangements that protect dual



objectives and accountability to multiple stakeholders. Distributed leadership must consequently be designed as coordinated plurality, not as unrestricted local independence.

The present study examines Distributed Leadership in Multisite Social Enterprises by developing a leadership-distribution framework that connects local autonomy with organizational integration. The paper adopts a simulation-based design because no real enterprise dataset was provided. It asks how leadership responsibilities might be distributed across sites without sacrificing mission consistency or collective accountability and how increasing maturity in leadership distribution could theoretically influence decision responsiveness, innovation uptake, operational consistency, and cross-site coordination.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Conceptualize Distributed Leadership for Multisite Social Enterprises

The first objective is to develop a context-sensitive interpretation of distributed leadership for organizations that combine multiple operating locations with an explicit social mission. General distributed-leadership theory challenges leader-centric assumptions by examining leadership as a product of interaction among multiple individuals, situations, and organizational practices.

Gronn's foundational formulation shifts the unit of analysis away from isolated formal leaders, while subsequent reviews by Bolden and Thorpe, Gold, and Lawler demonstrate that distributed leadership encompasses relational, structural, and practice-based processes rather than simply delegating tasks downward.

2.2 To Develop a Leadership Distribution Maturity Framework

The second objective is to construct an analytical framework capable of distinguishing between superficial delegation and structurally mature distributed leadership. Leadership cannot be considered genuinely distributed merely because branch managers receive additional operational responsibilities. Distribution becomes meaningful when authority, information, competence, and accountability are aligned.

The proposed Leadership Distribution Maturity Index (LDMI) therefore incorporates five dimensions: local decision autonomy, leadership-role clarity, mission alignment, cross-site coordination, and shared accountability. Together, these dimensions capture the tension between differentiation and integration. Local autonomy and role clarity facilitate timely decisions, whereas mission alignment, cross-site coordination, and accountability reduce the possibility that decentralization becomes organizational fragmentation.

2.3 To Examine Simulated Effects on Multisite Organizational Outcomes

The third objective is to explore the theoretical relationship between increasing leadership-distribution maturity and selected multisite organizational outcomes. The simulation examines local decision responsiveness, decision turnaround time, implementation consistency, local innovation uptake, mission consistency, and duplicated unresolved problems.



These outcomes were selected because they represent both the benefits and risks associated with distributed leadership. Faster local decisions would have limited value if sites progressively diverged from the social mission, while strong central consistency would be equally problematic if locally relevant decisions were unnecessarily delayed. The study therefore evaluates distributed leadership through a balanced set of responsiveness, coordination, innovation, and mission-related indicators.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Distributed Leadership as Collective Organizational Practice

Distributed leadership emerged partly as a response to theories that conceptualized leadership primarily through the characteristics and actions of singular formal leaders. Gronn's work proposed distributed leadership as an alternative analytical perspective in which multiple actors may jointly produce leadership effects through coordinated action. Leadership from this perspective exists not merely because responsibility has formally been delegated but because interdependent actors contribute to direction, coordination, problem solving, and organizational influence.

Bolden's review subsequently demonstrated that distributed leadership encompasses several related intellectual traditions, including shared, collective, collaborative, and relational leadership. Although these approaches differ conceptually, they challenge the assumption that leadership can be fully understood through formally designated positions. Thorpe, Gold, and Lawler similarly argued that distributed leadership must be located within organizational context because the conditions under which leadership becomes distributed are shaped by structures, relationships, professional knowledge, and patterns of participation.

The distinction between distribution and delegation is especially important. Delegation typically involves a superior assigning bounded responsibility while retaining the fundamental hierarchical structure of authority. Distributed leadership concerns a broader organizational configuration in which leadership influence may emerge across multiple actors and may be exercised horizontally as well as vertically. Evidence from team research also indicates that leadership-network patterns can matter for team performance, suggesting that leadership relationships are organizational resources rather than properties belonging exclusively to designated supervisors.

3.2 Social Enterprises, Hybridity, and Mission Protection

Social enterprises are not conventional profit-maximizing firms with an additional philanthropic activity attached to their operations. Their social objectives are integrated into organizational purpose, creating a hybrid structure that draws on multiple institutional logics. Doherty, Haugh, and Lyon's review identifies hybridity as a defining feature of social enterprises and emphasizes its implications for mission management, financial resources, and human-resource mobilization. Battilana and Lee similarly describe social enterprises as an important setting for understanding organizations that combine elements historically associated with different organizational forms.

Hybridity creates leadership challenges because decisions cannot always be evaluated using a single performance criterion. A local unit may identify a commercially attractive activity that contributes limited social value, while another site may favor a socially valuable activity that places substantial



pressure on financial sustainability. Smith, Gonin, and Besharov describe such social-business contradictions as persistent tensions that require organizational actors to navigate competing demands rather than simply select one objective and eliminate the other.

The central organization can define minimum ethical, financial, safeguarding, and social-impact expectations, whereas local leadership teams can determine how those expectations are achieved within their contexts.

3.3 Scaling, Local Adaptation, and Cross-Site Coordination

Scaling social impact involves more than reproducing an organizational model in additional geographical locations. Bloom and Chatterji's work on scaling social entrepreneurial impact highlights the strategic complexity involved in extending social outcomes, while subsequent research demonstrates that social enterprises employ multiple scaling strategies rather than following a uniform growth trajectory.

Bauwens, Huybrechts, and Dufays specifically connect social-enterprise hybridity with scaling strategy, showing that organizational mission and hybrid characteristics influence how scaling choices are made. Their work is especially relevant to multisite leadership because geographical expansion may depend upon relationships with locally embedded stakeholders whose participation cannot always be centrally prescribed.

Davies, Haugh, and Chambers further demonstrate that social-enterprise growth is constrained not merely by shortages of resources but also by organizational and institutional barriers, including value-related tensions and differences in business models. A multisite structure can magnify such differences because sites may encounter distinct funding opportunities, local institutions, community norms, partner expectations, and workforce capabilities.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Analytical Logic

The study uses a simulation-based explanatory design. This methodological choice is necessary because no completed survey, field experiment, longitudinal dataset, case archive, or multisite enterprise records were supplied. The study therefore does not claim that the modeled percentages represent actual organizations. Instead, synthetic organizational conditions are constructed to test whether the proposed distributed-leadership framework produces logically coherent and empirically testable relationships.

Five leadership configurations are modeled: Centralized, Emerging Distribution, Coordinated Distribution, Networked Leadership, and Mature Distributed Leadership. These scenarios correspond approximately to LDMI maturity levels of 20%, 40%, 60%, 80%, and 100%. Each condition represents an increasingly developed combination of local autonomy, role clarity, mission alignment, cross-site coordination, and shared accountability.

The simulation does not employ inferential statistics because artificially generated scenario values do not justify significance testing. Reporting p-values, confidence intervals, or causal effect estimates would create an appearance of empirical precision unsupported by observational evidence. The analysis therefore uses comparative scenario logic and descriptive indicators. Future empirical studies

could validate the framework using multilevel regression, longitudinal modeling, social-network analysis, or structural equation modeling.

4.2 Leadership Distribution Maturity Index

Each dimension is scored between 0 and 100. The weighting scheme is conceptual rather than empirically estimated. Local decision autonomy receives the largest weight because the principal differentiating feature of distributed leadership is the placement of meaningful authority beyond the organizational center. Nevertheless, autonomy represents only one-quarter of the total index because distribution without coordination and accountability would measure decentralization rather than mature distributed leadership.

Table 1: Operationalization of the Leadership Distribution Maturity Index

Dimension	Weight	Operational Definition	Illustrative Organizational Evidence
Local Decision Autonomy	0.25	Authority of site actors to make context-specific decisions without unnecessary upward approval	Local budget discretion, staffing adjustments, service adaptation
Role Clarity	0.20	Shared understanding of leadership authority and decision boundaries	Decision-right matrices, escalation rules, documented role responsibilities
Mission Alignment	0.20	Consistency of local choices with the organization's social purpose and hybrid objectives	Shared mission criteria, beneficiary safeguards, social-impact standards
Cross-Site Coordination	0.20	Capacity of sites to exchange knowledge and coordinate interdependent decisions	Cross-site councils, peer forums, shared information systems
Shared Accountability	0.15	Collective responsibility for outcomes rather than isolated local authority	Joint reviews, transparent metrics, peer accountability and central oversight

The index deliberately combines enabling and constraining dimensions. Local decision autonomy creates flexibility, whereas role clarity prevents overlapping authority. Mission alignment provides normative boundaries, cross-site coordination protects organizational learning, and shared accountability reduces the possibility that authority becomes detached from responsibility.

The index should therefore not be interpreted as a psychometrically validated instrument. Empirical validation would require item development, expert review, pilot testing, construct-validity assessment, reliability testing, and examination of predictive relationships using real organizational data.

4.3 Simulation Procedure and Evaluation Measures

Each maturity scenario was assigned synthetic organizational outcomes using monotonic but non-perfect relationships. The model assumes that better leadership distribution generally improves local responsiveness but that benefits become progressively harder to obtain at advanced maturity levels. No scenario is allowed to reach perfect performance because real organizations remain subject to uncertainty, capability differences, conflicting stakeholder expectations, and resource constraints.

Six outcome measures were examined. Local decision responsiveness represents the proportion of decisions resolved at the organizational level possessing appropriate contextual knowledge. Median decision turnaround represents the simulated time required to close routine leadership decisions. Cross-site implementation consistency captures whether decisions requiring organization-wide alignment are implemented comparably across sites.

Local innovation uptake estimates the proportion of viable site-originated practices adopted locally or shared more widely. Mission consistency represents alignment between local activities and common social-purpose standards. Repeated unresolved problems represent recurring operational problems that persist because sites do not learn effectively from one another.

5. Analysis

5.1 Local Decision Responsiveness and Decision Speed

The simulation shows a progressive increase in decisions resolved at the appropriate local organizational level as leadership distribution matures. In the centralized scenario, only 41% of decisions are resolved at the level possessing the most relevant local information. The value rises to 53% under emerging distribution, 66% under coordinated distribution, 78% under networked leadership, and 87% in the mature distributed-leadership scenario.

This progression illustrates the principal advantage of placing authority closer to operational knowledge. A site manager responsible for relationships with a local community partner, for example, may be better positioned than a distant headquarters executive to adjust schedules, modify outreach processes, or reallocate a small operating resource. Gronn's conception of distributed leadership supports this movement away from locating leadership exclusively within singular positions, while Bolden emphasizes that leadership can be enacted through interactions among multiple actors distributed across organizational systems.

Table 2: Simulated Organizational Outcomes Across Leadership Distribution Models

Leadership Model	Appropriate Local Decisions	Median Decision Turnaround	Cross-Site Implementation Consistency	Local Innovation Uptake	Mission Consistency	Repeated Unresolved Problems
Centralized	41%	11.8 days	62%	31%	74%	34%
Emerging Distribution	53%	9.6 days	68%	44%	77%	28%



Leadership Model	Appropriate Local Decisions	Median Decision Turnaround	Cross-Site Implementation Consistency	Local Innovation Uptake	Mission Consistency	Repeated Unresolved Problems
Coordinated Distribution	66%	7.2 days	75%	58%	81%	21%
Networked Leadership	78%	5.3 days	82%	71%	85%	15%

Note: All values are simulated analytical outputs. They do not represent empirical observations from actual social enterprises.

5.2 Cross-Site Coordination and Innovation Uptake

One possible criticism of distributed leadership is that local autonomy could reduce organization-wide consistency. The simulation intentionally tests the opposite proposition: when distribution includes coordination rather than operating as isolated decentralization, cross-site consistency may improve alongside autonomy. Implementation consistency rises from 62% in the centralized scenario to 88% under mature distributed leadership.

This apparently counterintuitive result reflects the role of horizontal coordination. Under highly centralized systems, consistency may depend upon headquarters issuing standardized instructions that are not always understood or locally feasible. Mature distributed systems instead allow site leaders to participate in interpreting common standards, sharing implementation experience, and identifying adaptations that preserve the intended organizational objective. Leadership becomes distributed in execution while common purpose remains shared.

Local innovation uptake shows an even stronger simulated increase, rising from 31% to 82%. The finding reflects a theoretical mechanism in which distributed authority gives locally knowledgeable actors permission to test improvements and cross-site coordination provides a pathway through which successful practices can travel. Evidence from distributed-leadership research has similarly emphasized collective and networked leadership relationships rather than assuming that valuable leadership knowledge resides exclusively with formal managers.

5.3 Mission Consistency and Reduction of Repeated Problems

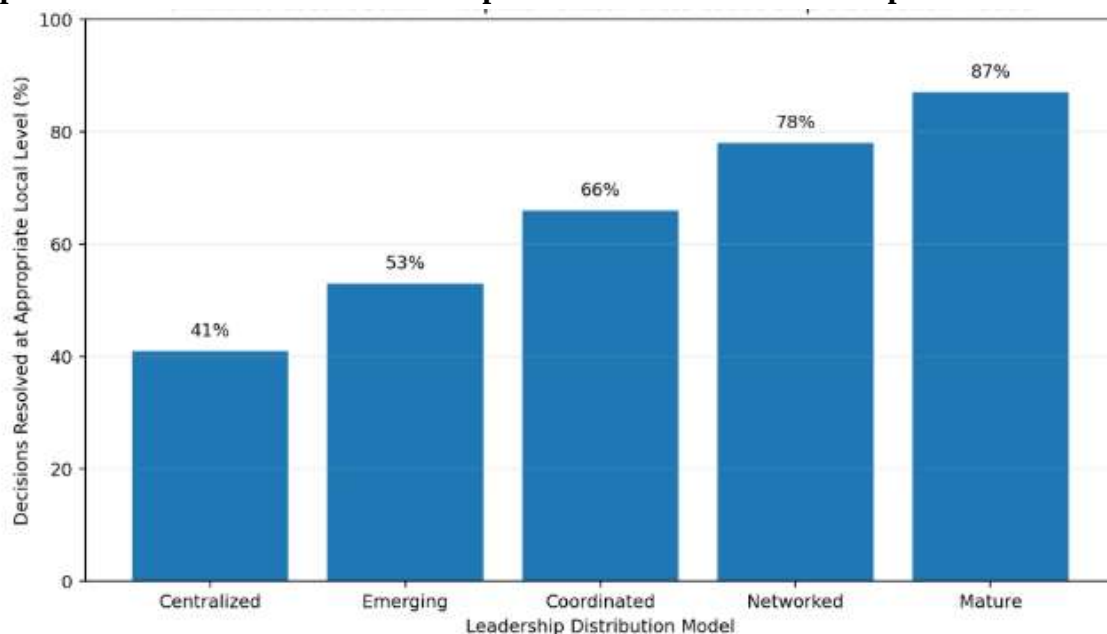
The simulation also evaluates whether stronger leadership distribution can coexist with mission protection. Mission consistency rises from 74% under centralization to 88% under the mature distributed model. The increase is not attributed to autonomy itself but to the combined architecture represented by LDMI. Mission alignment and shared accountability provide common criteria against which local choices are evaluated.

This distinction is essential in social enterprises because local leaders may confront strong economic, institutional, or stakeholder pressures. Hybrid-organization research shows that balancing social and commercial demands can generate enduring tensions, and governance scholarship emphasizes

the importance of protecting multiple organizational objectives. Mature distributed leadership therefore requires local discretion inside mission boundaries, not discretion over whether those boundaries apply. Repeated unresolved problems decline from 34% to 10% across the modeled scenarios.

This result represents the contribution of cross-site learning. In a fragmented enterprise, several locations may independently encounter the same problem without recognizing its organizational significance. A distributed but networked leadership architecture provides formal mechanisms through which recurring issues can be surfaced, compared, assigned to appropriate leaders, and addressed collectively.

Graph 1: Simulated Local Decision Responsiveness Across Leadership Distribution Models



Interpretation: The simulated bar graph demonstrates a progressive increase in the proportion of decisions handled at the organizational level possessing appropriate local knowledge as the maturity of distributed leadership increases.

Key finding: The modeled advantage does not arise from decentralization alone. Responsiveness is greatest when local authority is supported by explicit decision rights, mission alignment, cross-site coordination, and shared accountability.

6. Discussion

6.1 Distributed Leadership as Structured Autonomy

The central theoretical implication of the study is that distributed leadership should not be interpreted as the abandonment of hierarchy. Multisite organizations still require formal accountability, strategic direction, legal responsibility, safeguarding oversight, financial governance, and mechanisms for resolving disputes. Distributed leadership changes the location and interaction of leadership work, rather than making formal organizational authority irrelevant. This interpretation is consistent with Gronn's



emphasis on concertive forms of leadership and Bolden's observation that distributed leadership draws attention to collective and relational processes that coexist with formal organizational structures.

The concept of structured autonomy is particularly useful in social enterprises. Local actors should possess sufficient authority to respond to community conditions, yet their choices must remain recognizable as expressions of a common organizational mission. An effective governance model can therefore classify decisions according to consequence. Routine operational choices may be locally controlled; higher-risk decisions may require joint site-central review; and decisions affecting the fundamental mission, legal position, major capital commitments, or organization-wide standards may appropriately remain centralized.

This decision architecture also addresses a common weakness in poorly implemented decentralization: ambiguity. Employees can become less empowered rather than more empowered when responsibility is distributed but authority remains unclear. Mature distribution therefore requires explicit answers to four questions: who may decide, who must be consulted, what requires escalation, and who remains accountable for the resulting outcome. The LDMI dimension of role clarity is designed to capture precisely this requirement.

6.2 Reconciling Local Responsiveness with Mission Coherence

The second major implication concerns the tension between local adaptation and organizational coherence. Social enterprises typically operate in environments where stakeholder needs differ across communities. Uniform procedures may therefore fail to generate uniform social value. A multisite organization may need different service-delivery practices, partnership models, volunteer arrangements, or engagement strategies while maintaining common commitments concerning beneficiary dignity, inclusion, safeguarding, quality, and social impact.

Social-enterprise hybridity research indicates that organizational actors continually manage tensions among social and commercial demands. Doherty, Haugh, and Lyon describe hybridity as affecting mission, resources, and organizational management, while Battilana and Lee emphasize the importance of understanding how hybrid forms combine elements from otherwise distinct institutional domains. This makes social enterprises especially appropriate contexts for studying leadership distribution because decisions cannot be standardized purely through financial performance measures.

Distributed leadership may strengthen mission coherence when local leaders become active interpreters of mission rather than passive recipients of central instructions. This argument differs from the assumption that tighter central control necessarily provides stronger mission protection. Where site actors participate in defining how common principles apply to their communities, they may develop greater ownership and contextual understanding. Mission alignment then becomes a shared leadership practice supported by common standards, cross-site deliberation, transparent impact information, and escalation processes for contested cases.

6.3 Cross-Site Leadership Networks as a Scaling Capability

The third implication is that distributed leadership becomes strategically important when multisite growth exceeds the informational capacity of a small senior leadership team. Davies, Haugh, and



Chambers show that growth barriers in social enterprises are not exclusively financial; they also arise from organizational, value-related, and institutional conditions. Bauwens, Huybrechts, and Dufays similarly demonstrate that scaling strategies are shaped by the hybrid character and mission of social enterprises.

As the number of locations increases, central leaders may become increasingly dependent upon summaries rather than direct knowledge. Leadership networks can compensate for this information distance by creating lateral relationships through which site managers, professional specialists, operational teams, and central leaders exchange knowledge. Such networks do more than accelerate communication. They enable collective interpretation, allow one site's experience to inform another, and expose locally emerging patterns that may require organization-wide intervention.

Cross-site leadership councils, rotating problem-solving groups, practice communities, peer-review mechanisms, joint mission reviews, and shared digital knowledge systems can provide the organizational infrastructure for such interaction. These arrangements should not become additional bureaucratic layers. Their purpose is to move knowledge to the actors who can use it, while reducing duplicated meetings and unnecessary upward reporting.

7. Conclusion

Distributed leadership offers a valuable framework for understanding how multisite social enterprises can organize leadership beyond the limitations of either strict centralization or unrestricted decentralization. The central argument of this study is that leadership distribution is most effective when authority is located close to relevant knowledge while organizational mechanisms preserve common purpose and collective accountability. Leadership therefore becomes a coordinated organizational capability rather than the possession of a single executive role.

The proposed Leadership Distribution Maturity Index conceptualizes this capability through five interdependent dimensions: local decision autonomy, role clarity, mission alignment, cross-site coordination, and shared accountability. The simulation demonstrates the logic of combining these dimensions. As modeled maturity increases, local decision responsiveness improves, decision turnaround declines, innovation uptake increases, cross-site consistency strengthens, mission alignment improves, and recurring unresolved problems become less frequent. These outcomes should not be interpreted as predictions for actual social enterprises; they are synthetic illustrations designed to make the conceptual framework explicit and empirically testable.

The study also highlights an important governance principle. Distributed leadership should not distribute every decision equally. Effective multisite organizations require differentiated decision rights. Operational issues closely connected to local knowledge can be locally determined, interdependent issues can be collectively governed across sites, and high-risk or mission-defining decisions can remain subject to central governance. Such differentiation protects the benefits of local discretion without allowing organizational fragmentation.

For social enterprises, this balance has particular significance because geographically dispersed operations must continually reconcile contextual responsiveness with commitment to social purpose. Future empirical research should therefore test the LDMI framework using longitudinal multisite data,



compare formal and informal leadership networks, examine beneficiary perspectives on local decision authority, and determine whether mature distributed leadership predicts social-impact performance, employee engagement, innovation diffusion, mission stability, and organizational resilience. Comparative studies across cooperatives, community enterprises, work-integration social enterprises, social-care organizations, educational nonprofits, and environmentally oriented enterprises would further establish the boundary conditions of the framework. The overall conclusion is that multisite social enterprises should distribute leadership where knowledge resides, but connect that leadership through mission, coordination, and accountability.

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