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JOURNAL OF INNOVATION ECONOMICS & MANAGEMENT

Call for papers – Special Issue

Innovation strategies and firm transformation trajectories in constrained contexts: capabilities, learning, and reconfigurations

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Innovation lies today at the heart of firms' transformation strategies. The literature on strategic innovation management has been built overwhelmingly from firms situated in mature institutional contexts, endowed with substantial financial and human resources, and embedded in well-developed innovation ecosystems (Birkinshaw, Hamel et Mol, 2008; Teece, 2018, 2023). Yet a considerable share of contemporary firms operates under markedly different conditions: SMEs with limited capabilities, firms located in emerging or developing economies, subcontracting firms caught in asymmetric relationships, firms confronted with prolonged crises (health-related, political, economic), and firms situated in peripheral regions with incomplete infrastructures.

These configurations share a cross-cutting characteristic that sets them apart: the scarcity, asymmetry, or instability of strategic resources (financial, human, technological, institutional, informational). We designate these configurations as constrained contexts, in the precise sense that the constraint there is durable rather than cyclical, and that it structures the organisation's innovation rather than limiting it. This is the premise that underpins this special issue: constraint does not constitute a mere deficiency relative to a reference model, but rather structures distinctive innovation logics, particular allocation and governance arrangements, and distinctive transformation trajectories (Keupp et Gassmann, 2013; Williamson, 2010; Kammoun et Le Bas, 2020).

These constrained contexts are, moreover, embedded within market structures that themselves constitute major constraints bearing upon firms' innovation strategies. Situations of oligopoly or monopoly, dependence on dominant actors, or asymmetric subcontracting relationships restrict strategic room for manoeuvre and define the field of possibilities with regard to innovation. The notion of barriers to entry and to mobility (Porter, 1980) offers, in this respect, a relevant analytical framework for grasping how competitive structures reinforce, constrain, or orient the innovation trajectories of constrained firms. Furthermore, the institutional dimension of constraints warrants closer specification: beyond economic pressures alone, it is regulatory regimes, public innovation policies, sectoral norms, and national innovation systems that structure the institutional constraints firms face. These arrangements may either stimulate or impede innovation, depending on their degree of stability, their orientation, and their compatibility with the capabilities of the firms concerned.

Pioneering work on frugal innovation (Haudeville et Le Bas, 2016 ; Kammoun et Le Bas, 2020), on cost innovation (Williamson, 2010), on innovation triggered by resource constraints (Keupp et Gassmann, 2013 ; Sarkar et Mateus, 2024), as well as on the microfoundations of dynamic capabilities in constraining contexts (Teissandier et al 2026) - that is, contexts marked by pressures and difficulties bearing upon firms and not solely by structural constraints to which they must adapt- has begun to shed light on these dynamics. But these contributions remain dispersed across separate fields: innovation economics, international strategy, SME entrepreneurship, subcontracting management, and organisational resilience. The central question that brings these contributions together is the following: how does resource constraint reconfigure firms' innovation strategies and capabilities, and along what transformation trajectories? This question unfolds across three complementary entry points that structure this special issue: (1) strategic innovation capabilities and their microfoundations in constrained contexts; (2) arbitration and resource-allocation arrangements under conditions of scarcity; (3) innovation trajectories and their inter-organisational configurations.

First, strategic innovation capabilities in constrained contexts. How do constrained firms build and reconfigure the resources, competencies, and knowledge that underpin their innovation trajectories? What mechanisms of learning, recombination, and strategic bricolage make it possible to turn scarcity, or other structural constraints, into a creative lever (Keupp et Gassmann, 2013)? How are dynamic capabilities built within firms dependent on asymmetric relationships such as subcontracting (Teissandier et al, 2026)?

Second, arbitration and strategic allocation arrangements under conditions of scarcity. When resources are constrained, strategic trade-offs become more acute: between exploration and exploitation, between the short term and the long term, between conservation and transformation (O'Reilly et Tushman, 2013; Saibi et Naji, 2020). In this context, how do constrained firms structure their allocation choices? What governance and arbitration arrangements (informal, distributed, community-based) emerge to support innovation when the formal arrangements usually studied are absent or weakened?

Third, innovation trajectories and their inter-organisational configurations. Constrained firms do not operate in isolation, but rather embed themselves within ecosystems, alliances, and inter-organisational relationships that may offset, prolong, or aggravate their constraints (Adner, 2017; Bogers et al., 2019; Ben Selma et al, 2024). How do cooperations unfold between SMEs and large firms, between firms of the Global South and firms of the Global North, between public, private, and civil-society actors, when resource asymmetry structures the relationship? How are innovation ecosystems built in peripheral territorial contexts or in contexts marked by prolonged crises?

This special issue favours an intermediate level of analysis, that of strategies, arrangements, and trajectories, without confining itself to any particular type of constrained firm. Contributions addressing SMEs, firms in emerging or developing economies, subcontracting firms, firms in prolonged crisis, firms situated in peripheral regions, or hybrid configurations combining several of these characteristics are equally welcome. Comparative approaches, drawing on several national contexts or several types of constraint, are particularly encouraged.

Research questions:

Contributions may be organised around the following questions, without exhausting their scope:

- What learning, bricolage, and resource-recombination processes, and what individual, structural, and processual microfoundations of dynamic capabilities, including intrapreneurial dynamics, enable constrained firms (SMEs, subcontracting firms, firms in prolonged crisis) to turn scarcity into a lever for innovation?
- What arbitration and resource-allocation arrangements (formal, informal, distributed, community-based) support strategic innovation choices under conditions of scarcity?
- How do constrained firms orchestrate their innovation portfolios between exploration and exploitation, and between the incremental and the radical, when financial room for manoeuvre is restricted?
- In what ways do asymmetric inter-organisational cooperations (SME/large-firm relationships, North-South partnerships, public-private alliances, territorial intermediations) influence the innovation trajectories of constrained firms?
- How are innovation ecosystems built in peripheral territories or in contexts of prolonged crisis, and with what effects on transformation trajectories?
- How do institutional constraints, notably regulatory regimes, public innovation policies, and national innovation systems, and market structures (oligopolies, monopolies, barriers to mobility) differently orient the innovation strategies and trajectories of firms in constrained contexts, beyond the sole question of resource scarcity?

- What types of constraint (institutional, structural, territorial, relational), beyond resource scarcity alone, generate the most distinctive innovation dynamics, and how do they interact within firms' transformation trajectories?

These questions open the way to theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions. Qualitative, quantitative, comparative, conceptual, and mixed approaches are equally welcome, with particular attention to longitudinal studies and cross-context comparisons.

Keywords: innovation strategies; firms in constrained contexts; microfoundations; SMEs; dynamic capabilities; transformation trajectories; asymmetric cooperations.

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Timetable for submission and acceptance of papers:

- **30 April 2027**: Deadline for complete manuscripts through online paper submission: https://jiem.manuscriptmanager.net

Guideline for authors: http://innovations.cairn.info/en/instructions-for-authors/

- **June 2028:** Final notification for acceptance:

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