Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Edited by
David F. Murphy and Leda Stott
Printed Edition of the Special Issue Published in *Sustainability*

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This is a reprint of articles from the Special Issue published online in the open access journal *Sustainability* (ISSN 2071-1050) (available at: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/sustainability/special_issues/Partnerships_SDGs).

For citation purposes, cite each article independently as indicated on the article page online and as indicated below:

LastName, A.A.; LastName, B.B.; LastName, C.C. Article Title. *Journal Name* **Year**, *Volume Number*, Page Range.

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About the Editors

David F. Murphy is Senior Lecturer in Strategic Collaboration and Sustainability, and Academic Lead of the Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS), at the Ambleside campus of the University of Cumbria in the heart of the English Lake District. David has extensive international experience working on multi-stakeholder engagement and collaboration with senior leaders and change agents in academia, business, government, NGOs, and the UN system, including related teaching, applied research, and consultancy on partnerships for sustainable development. He holds a Ph.D. in International Policy from the University of Bristol that explored business–NGO relations in sustainable development. Recent research projects include an international study on collaboration for deep adaptation to climate change and a review of the transformational potential of place-based partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Leda Stott is an international specialist in multi-stakeholder collaboration and sustainable development. Over the last 25 years, she has managed and conducted partnership research, training and evaluation activities with intergovernmental bodies, bilateral development agencies, and a wide range of foundations, businesses, and non-governmental organizations in different countries and regions. She has a Ph.D. on the topic of partnership from the University of Edinburgh and has taught postgraduate programmes relating to this theme at universities in the UK, Spain, Norway, and South Africa. She is a Research Fellow at the Innovation and Technology for Development Centre at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (itdUPM) and Learning Advisor for the Partnership Brokers Association. Leda's recent research work has included exploration of the potential of SDG 17, place-based collaboration, and participatory approaches to partnership evaluation.

Preface to "Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)"

Partnerships between diverse stakeholders are viewed as essential to addressing the complex and multidimensional problems encompassed by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this Special Issue of *Sustainability* on 'Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)', our colleagues David F. Murphy and Leda Stott have brought together a valuable collection of articles on collaborative approaches and processes that seek to support the achievement of the United Nation's 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Spanning different countries and sectors, the Special Issue contributions explore distinct partnership arrangements and the relationships that underpin them from several angles, including concept, rationale, and purpose; forms, structures, and governance arrangements; principles and processes of participation; the role and contribution of intermediaries, conveners and partnership brokers; collaborative challenges and solutions to them; the nature of impact to date and how this has been measured; and the transformational potential of SDG partnerships.

As collaborative initiatives centered in academia, we are delighted to recommend this collection of articles. As well as bringing together important insights from both academics and practitioners, their perspectives promote a deeper appreciation of the value of partnership and exploration of its transformational potential, for the SDGs and beyond.

Professor Kaz Stuart, Director of the Centre of Research in Health and Society and Professor of Social and Health Inequalities, University of Cumbria, UK.

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Editorial

Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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In her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood gives voice to the importance of both context and experience in making sense of thought and action: "Context is all; or is it ripeness? One or the other" [1] (p. 192). Similarly, social scientists have long recognised the value of identifying contextual data in the research process. From the reflexive sociologist Alvin Gouldner [2] to the celebrated anthropologist, systems theorist, and philosopher Gregory Bateson [3,4], we are reminded that the significance of words and deeds only emerges by relating them to their contexts. As argued by Gouldner: "the meaning and consequences of a behaviour pattern will vary with the contexts in which it occurs" [2] (p. 12). Or as more evocatively articulated by Bateson: "it is the context that fixes the meaning" [4] (p. 14).

Various contemporary academics and practitioners have emphasised the importance of context in different fields: leadership research [5]; partnership evaluation [6]; resource conservation [7]; business–NGO partnerships [8]; health care quality [9]; HIV/AIDS implementation research [10]; entrepreneurial innovation [11]; corporate social responsibility [12]; and the development of sustainability goals and targets [13].

This Special Issue of *Sustainability* on "Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)" brings together ten articles from a diverse range of cross-cutting collaboration contexts. These include individual and organisational contexts such as inter-personal and inter-organisational relationships; alliances, platforms and foundations; private, public and civil society environments; different country settings, from Ireland to Spain, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Germany to Mexico and to Saudi Arabia, as well as local, regional, and global locations that look at partnerships in relation to thematic focus areas such as urban development, coffee certification, inter-organisational learning, and post-COVID scenarios. Implicit in these rich and varied contributions is an acknowledgement that, whatever the context, the complexity of addressing economic, environmental, and social goals through multi-stakeholder arrangements requires more robust mutual exchange and learning about the issues and challenges of working in this way.

We begin the Special Issue with our conceptual article 'An Inclusive Approach to Partnerships for the SDGs: Using a Relationship Lens to Explore the Potential for Transformational Collaboration' (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/19/7905), which explores how terms such as 'collaboration', 'partnership' and 'cooperation' embrace a broad spectrum of personal and organisational interactions within, between and across different sectors, domains, disciplines, and contexts. In order to promote a more inclusive understanding of these collaborative connections, we suggest that exploring them through a relationship lens, with deeper appreciation of the importance of inter-personal connections, may assist partnership arrangements to generate the systemic change that is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Our framing piece is complemented by Tulin Dzhengiz's article, 'A Literature Review of Inter-Organizational Sustainability Learning' (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/12/4876), which further captures the enormous variety of different collaborative

arrangements currently pursuing sustainable development goals. Building upon a litera-ture review, Dzenghiz proposes a model for deepening inter-organisational sustainability learning in order to enhance our understanding of the complex processes that underpin the contribution of partnership arrangements to the SDGs.

The complexity of working in collaboration is further explored by Stella Pfisterer and Rob Van Tulder in 'Navigating Governance Tensions to Enhance the Impact of Partnerships with the Private Sector for the SDGs' (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/1/111), an article that looks at how to navigate governance tensions in appraisals of partnership im-pact for the SDGs. With a special focus on partnerships with the private sector, the authors suggest that partnership impact assessments need to find ways of balancing monitoring and evaluation practices that focus on result-based, upward accountability with those that seek to promote learning, participatory and complexity-based approaches.

Partnership effectiveness and impact are also themes addressed by Jaime Moreno-Serna, Wendy M. Purcell, Teresa Sánchez-Chaparro, Miguel Soberón, Julio Lumbreras and Carlos Mataix in 'Catalyzing Transformational Partnerships for the SDGs: Effectiveness and Impact of the Multi-Stakeholder Initiative El día después' (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/17/7189). Here, the authors consider the transformational potential of the "El día después" (The Day After) partnership, which was established to provide an SDG-oriented collaborative response to the COVID-19 crisis in Spain. In addition to important pointers on early-stage collaboration, the article highlights the importance of organisational facilitators who provide the space for partnerships for the SDGs to incubate and grow in the current context and beyond.

The role played by facilitators or intermediaries in supporting collaborative initiatives is highlighted in two other articles in the Special Issue; the first, by Theresa Gehringer, 'Corporate Foundations as Partnership Brokers in Supporting the United Nations' Sus-tainable Development Goals (SDGs)' (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/18/7820), examines how far corporate foundations may assume this "partnership broker" role and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. Drawing from survey data among corporate foundation managers in Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Germany, Gehringer suggests that corporate foundations could do more to develop their bridge-building capacities, pool resources and initiate partnerships between different sectors for the SDGs. In the second piece on collaborative facilitation in our Special Issue, 'Cross-Sector Partnerships for Sustainability: How Mission-Driven Conveners Drive Change in National Coffee Platforms' (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/7/2846), Iteke van Hille, Frank G.A. de Bakker, Julie E. Ferguson and Peter Groenewegen look at how change is enabled by "mission-driven conveners" in national coffee platforms in six different countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Their findings indicate that certification efforts can be enhanced by working with non-profit organisations (NPOs) that assume this role because of positive cross-level dynamics between international and national actors and the realisation of early outcomes.

The remaining articles in the Special Issue explore perceptions of partnership among non-state actors such as NPOs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private sector partners in partnerships for the SDGs in a selection of different countries and regions. These articles reflect the fact that, although partnerships for the SDGs are positioned as avenues for promoting transformation, the reality is that collaborative initiatives are faced with a range of contextual impediments that are likely to limit this potential. In Ire-land, Aparajita Banerjee, Enda Murphy and Patrick Paul Walsh share findings from a study on civil society and private sector perceptions of multi-stakeholder partnerships in 'Perceptions of Multistakeholder Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals: A Case Study of Irish Non-State Actors' (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/21/8872). Among the many challenges encountered, a fragmented understanding of the SDGs, the need for more leadership from government, and an overly goal-based focus on SDG implementation by organisations are highlighted.

Meanwhile in their article 'The Effects of Organizational Traits on NGO–Business En-gagement in Mexico' (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/23/10108), Dennis J. Aigner

and Luli Pesqueira, explore organisational traits that might increase NGO engagement with businesses to support the SDGs in Mexico. Their survey work suggests that NGO participation in partnerships with the private sector is influenced by factors such as NGO size and scope, activities, level of professionalisation, the ability to sustain broader stakeholder relationships, and the extent to which transparency about the mission and goals of the NGO is revealed.

In a similar vein, the key characteristics of engagement between Saudi Arabian NPOs and other actors working for the SDGs are investigated by Hazem S. Kassem, Mohammed Aljuaid, Bader Alhafi Alotaibi and Rabab Ghozy in 'Mapping and Analysis of Sustainability-Oriented Partnerships in Non-Profit Organizations: The Case of Saudi Arabia' (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/17/7178). Their survey of charitable associations in the Riydah region of the country finds that NPOs mostly engage in partnerships to enhance their financial stability. Rather than the transformational arrangements promoted for the SDGs, the authors suggest that the vast majority of the partnerships they mapped could be described as "transactional partnerships" that focus primarily on philanthropic and social investment issues.

A final article on partnership perceptions comes from the Andalusian region of Spain. In 'Can Differing Opinions Hinder Partnerships for the Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals? Evidence from Marginalized Urban Areas in Andalusia' (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/14/5797), Antonio Sianes and Rocío Vela-Jiménez focus specifically on disadvantaged urban areas and the extent to which partnerships for the SDGs can build habitable spaces for town dwellers. The authors note that commitment to multi-stakeholder partnerships depends on many factors, including the perceptions that local stakeholders themselves have about their reality and the problems they face. Understanding and engaging with these perceptions is, they believe, a critical starting point for ensuring local collective action and putting people at the centre of the SDG agenda. This argument links neatly back to our framing piece where we emphasise the importance of positioning inclusiveness as central to partnership and collaborative arrangements that seek to meet the transformational ambition of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Context may not be all, but in our efforts to enhance knowledge about partnerships for the SDGs and to strengthen their development and implementation, the exploration of multi-stakeholder collaboration within the contexts they occur is critical. These contexts are, of course, subject to constant evolution and change; something that was manifested most starkly in 2020 with the global impact of COVID-19. While some political leaders have reacted to the pandemic by closing national borders and encouraging xenophobia, both of which undermine two foundational goals of the 2030 Agenda—SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)—many have understood that the achievement of the SDGs and their associated targets cannot be realised without sustained international cooperation. This latter sentiment is captured in the positive and determined call to action offered by The Lancet Public Health in response to COVID-19: "Achieving the transformative vision of the SDGs by 2030 requires a major realignment of most countries' national priorities toward long-term, cooperative, and drastically accelerated action" [14] (p. e4600).

All the contributions to this Special Issue were impacted in one way or another by the COVID-19 pandemic; some as a result of personal and professional challenges which meant that writing and review tasks could not be achieved within expected timeframes; others, in seeking to explore new or different responses to address sustainability issues and concerns; and all with an understanding that, in the face of a common threat that has set us apart physically, collaboration among all actors in society is more important than ever. In the words of *The New Yorker* writer Jia Tolentino, "physical connection could kill us, but civic connection is the only way to survive" [15].

Looking forward, we offer a number of contextual questions and reflections to encourage researchers and practitioners interested in such a process of inquiry. How might a deeper consideration of context add value to our understanding of partnerships for

the SDGs? Why and how might more attention to contextual and relational dimensions of such partnerships strengthen our future research about SDG-related collaboration in diverse situations? For example, this might include taking greater account of contextual complexities and developing explanations about how and why a collaborative arrangement is successful in a specific milieu "by exploring the relationships between context, mechanism and outcome", and by asking questions such as "how does this intervention make a difference in this particular situation?" (rather than just asking "does it work?"), and "why it might work over here and not over there?" [6] (p. 218).

If the arguments and relationships presented in this Special Issue prompt you to respond, we encourage you to undertake further research in this area. Such explorations might integrate your own or other individual, organisational and/or socio-cultural context into wider efforts to strengthen and implement partnerships for the SDGs and support the broader 2030 Agenda in the face of COVID-19 and beyond. In this spirit, we close with the hopeful reflections of writer, historian, and activist Rebecca Solnit about the diversity of mutual aid and other collaborative responses to the pandemic, particularly in local contexts: "What all these projects around the world tell us is that they can be the foundation for bigger projects, both practically and as the imaginative and ideological basis for something new, based on generosity, abundance, horizontality, mutuality, inclusion" [16] (p. xv). Debates and exchanges between and across global–local partnership learning and research communities are vital to advancing these diverse interactions.

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Article

An Inclusive Approach to Partnerships for the SDGs: Using a Relationship Lens to Explore the Potential for Transformational Collaboration

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Abstract: Partnerships are positioned as critical for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the United Nations transformational agenda for 2030. The widespread use of terms such as 'collaboration', 'partnership' and 'cooperation' has, however, led to debates about the expectations of such relationships and calls have been made for more rigorous clarification and classification of these related concepts. Drawing upon a comprehensive literature review, we argue in this conceptual paper that the broad spectrum of personal and organizational interactions within, between and across different sectors, domains, disciplines and contexts makes the quest to delineate and categorize these diverse forms of collaboration a seemingly impossible task. We further suggest that such efforts advance a narrow view of partnership as little more than a means to an end, thus limiting understanding of the integrative and intrinsic value of working in this way. We believe that a more inclusive understanding of partnerships may be achieved by exploring them through a relationship lens that acknowledges the importance of inter-personal connections in partnerships more deeply. In doing so, the capacity of partnerships to generate the systemic change that is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development may be enhanced and ultimately realized.

Keywords: partnerships; sustainable development; SDGs; relationships; transformation; collaboration; inter-personal connections

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1. Introduction

In December 2019, the four shortlisted contenders for the annual Tate Turner Prize [1] awarded to a British visual artist asked the judges if the prize could be presented to all of them. Oscar Murillo, Tai Shani, Helen Cammock and Lawrence Abu Hamdan described this as a request that was consistent with their values of "commonality, multiplicity and solidarity" [2,3]. In addition to a call for collaboration and inclusion, Shani further observed that the appeal for a collective win was a way of questioning established power structures and "renegotiating hierarchies" [4].

Both the joint petition by the Turner Prize nominees and ultimate co-winners, and the language used by them to frame their request, resonate with what Seitanidi and Ryan (2007) describe as " … evidence of a paradigm shift away from arm's length, atomistic and transactional notions of exchange between organizational actors, towards an approach which foregrounds intense interaction, relationships and networks" [5] (p. 256). Relationships, which are defined here as "the way in which two or more people are connected, or the state of being connected" [6], are at the center of this new configuration. A growing interest in collaborative relationships that have empathy and reciprocity at their core [7–10]

further highlights the important role played by individuals and "underlying emotional and cognitive processes" in these arrangements [11] (p. 105).

Relevant links can also be made to the idea of relational intelligence: "a capacity to engage in relationships: an ability to connect and interact effectively and respectfully with people and stakeholders from various backgrounds, diverse cultures and with different interests, inside and outside the organization, at home as well as across distances, businesses, sectors, countries and cultures" [12] (p. 2). More recently, the idea of relational intelligence has been popularized by psychotherapist Esther Perel as a way of understanding, valuing and enhancing different kinds of relationships [13–16]. Perel's success in linking the personal and the organizational suggests that how we relate to each other at home, work and the wider community is a crucial ingredient for more cooperative and sustainable lives, careers and societies.

On a broader level, these tendencies suggest that collaboration among both individuals and organizations within and between workplaces, families, communities, countries and regions is increasingly needed [13,17], not just to address the complex or 'wicked' problems at the heart of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [18,19] but also to mitigate impediments to their transformational aspiration to "leave no one behind" [20,21].

In this article we argue that those promoting partnerships for the SDGs have much to learn from new and emerging ways of understanding and working in collaboration, such as those manifested by the joint winners of the 2019 Turner Prize. It is our contention that by giving greater consideration to personal connections in organizational relationships, and attention to how these linkages mutually reinforce one another, a more inclusive basis for collaborating for the achievement of the SDGs (and beyond) may be realized.

Following an overview of our methodological approach, we proceed with an analysis of the challenges of defining partnership and categorizing the diverse and evolving forms in which it is manifested. Arguing that due to their wide range and scope, the creation of comprehensive typologies of partnerships is extremely difficult, we suggest that a more inclusive understanding of partnership may be developed by using a relational lens to analyze them. To do this, we present an overview of a variety of different personal and organizational relationships that make use of the terminology of partnership, collaboration and related words to describe and present these interactions. In order to further refine this approach, we suggest that interpersonal connections and the values they espouse are central to partnership and other collaborative relationships that seek to promote the transformation and inclusiveness stipulated in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We build upon this idea by proposing a model for exploring partnership relationships that promotes a move away from the mainly instrumental and extrinsic to embrace interactions that are more integrative and intrinsic at both individual and organizational levels. We conclude with a summary of the rationale for developing a more inclusive appreciation of partnerships and how this might be leveraged to promote the systemic changes required for more sustainable forms of development.

2. Methodology and Approach

This conceptual paper aims to provide theoretical and practical insights into how relational aspects of partnering might contribute to the achievement of the transformational change highlighted in the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda [20]. In order to map the focus area, synthesize the state of knowledge, and serve as a catalyst for future investigation, an integrative literature review of different collaborative forms and characteristics was conducted. Such an approach is designed to encourage assessment, critique and synthesis of a broad range of materials on established or emerging topics so that new theoretical frameworks and perspectives can emerge [22,23]. In this case, the integrative literature review focuses on the "mature" theme of partnership from which a substantial body of research offers openings for review and reconceptualization [23]. This kind of focused and pragmatic approach empowers researchers to consider both the aims and context of a study [24] and to integrate diverse, macro perspectives from a wide variety of relevant domains [25].

The literature was located through databases such as Academia.edu, Google Scholar, ProQuest, ResearchGate and Scopus using a Boolean search with keywords such as: 'partnership', 'collaboration', 'sustainable development', 'SDGs', 'relationships', 'transformation', 'collaboration' and 'inter-personal connections'. As well as collating information from a range of different disciplines and thematic areas, the authors also sought to combine insights from both academic and practitioner literature, including guidebooks, practical case studies and opinion pieces. The selection of materials included in the review aimed to capture and combine chronological trends and ideas, including pioneering articles and seminal works on the theme of partnership as well as a variety of more recent resources. The paper further draws upon the extensive knowledge and experience of the authors who have, since the mid-1990s, engaged in both academic and practitioner research relating to a large variety of partnership arrangements addressing sustainable development concerns in different contexts [26–33].

Findings from the literature review are used as the basis for proposing a conceptual model that may be utilized to stimulate further research into relational aspects of partnering in practice. The model, which makes use of resources that inquire into different forms of motivation for second language learning, seeks to encourage deeper consideration of relational dimensions in the development of partnerships for the SDGs.

3. Partnerships for the SDGs

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out a blueprint for a more peaceful and prosperous planet with countries agreeing to meet the interconnected targets of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [20]. The SDGs focus on measures to end poverty and eliminate hunger, improve access to basic services such as energy, water and sanitation, health and education and reduce inequality, while also tackling climate change and working to conserve our natural environment. The final goal, SDG 17, is a transversal one which aims to strengthen the means of implementing the SDGs through partnerships. SDG 17 promotes a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development led by governments to strengthen international cooperation and development assistance. This Global Partnership is intended to work alongside multi-stakeholder partnerships at global, regional, national or subnational levels that "mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources to support the implementation of the SDGs" [20] (p. 27).

Although described as pivotal to the transformational efforts required for the realization of all the SDGs, the main focus of SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) is on securing support for increased aid from 'developed' to 'developing' countries with long-term debt assistance, technology transfer and support for a universal, fair and open trading system under the purview of the World Trade Organization [34–39]. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are grouped with "systemic issues" that need to be "enhanced" to support the achievement of the SDGs such as policy and institutional coherence, and data, monitoring and accountability [20]. In general, Goal 17 fails to transmit the much wider potential that partnerships have for generating the transformations at the heart of the Sustainable Development Agenda which include the advancement and endorsement of positive rules, norms and connections at policy level; shifts in individual and organizational behaviors; and the empowerment of vulnerable and marginalized stakeholders [38,40–42]. We suggest that the potential of partnerships to augment these changes may be enhanced by promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of partnership that explores the interaction between personal and organizational relationships in relation to the SDGs.

4. The Challenge of Defining and Categorizing Partnerships

Although the term 'partnership' has a long history (see Box 1), and the use of partnership language in the field of international development dates back at least half a century [43], it has become something of a buzzword in recent years. The advance of globalization and the increasingly intertwined nature of complex problems faced by society have given rise to a more widely accepted conceptualization of partnership as an association that brings together different sectors of society to pool their diverse resources, capitalize on synergies, and share risks and benefits in order to accomplish something that they could not do alone [44].

Box 1. Partnership: Origin of the term.

> The term 'partner' originates from the Latin word 'partitio' or partition which related to the act of dividing, sharing or parting. Following the Norman conquest of England in 1066, both Anglo-Norman French and Middle English used the word 'parcener' to describe a partner as a joint heir with shared inheritance rights to an undivided estate. The word partner in English eventually came to be understood as someone associated with another in a common activity or interest. 'Ship' meanwhile, when linked to a noun, denotes a property or state of being, e.g., relation-relationship; owner-ownership, leader-leadership. Partnership thus demotes the state of being associated with a partner [45].

Since the first UN General Assembly resolution "Towards Global Partnerships" in 2000 [46], the idea of partnership in an international development context has evolved with the most recent of the biennial UN resolutions [47] defining partnership as: "voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both public and non-public, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and, as mutually agreed, to share risks and responsibilities, resources and benefits" (A/RES/73/254, para. 4).

In parallel, in the field of sustainable development, partnerships were endorsed as a key approach for achieving environmental and developmental change at the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. While initially centered mainly upon collaboration between public and private organizations, sustainable development partnerships are now accepted as embracing "a broad alliance of people, governments, civil society and the private sector, all working together to secure the future we want for present and future generations" [48].

This evolution is reflected in use of the terms 'multi-actor', 'multi-party' or ´multi-stakeholder partnerships' that are situated at the heart of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda [20,21]. In a related vein, the most recent General Assembly resolution "stresses that partnerships will be critical to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, as an effective instrument for mobilizing additional human and financial resources, expertise, technology and knowledge, while reiterating that partnerships are a complement to, but are not intended as a substitute for, the commitment made by Governments with a view to achieving the Goals" [47] (A/RES/73/254, para. 5).

The partnership landscape, however, extends far beyond the fields of international and sustainable development. The broader partnership terrain encompasses a vast array of collaborative relationships across numerous academic disciplines and professions that have many different forms, names, partners and goals, and operate at global, regional, national and local levels. In a literature review conducted by Creech and Paas [49], for example, the following diverse types of partnerships were identified:

> Business Partnerships; Strategic Alliances; Public-private partnerships; Tri-sector or Cross sector partnerships; WSSD [50] Multi-stakeholder Partnerships; Mandated partnerships; Enacted Partnerships; Community partnerships; Negotiated partnerships; Local partnerships; Locally led partnerships; Participatory international partnerships; Non-participatory international partnerships; Nascent partnerships; R&D (research and development) partnerships; Production partnerships; Transactional partnerships; Integrative partnerships (p. 5)

It is not surprising then that both the looseness of the term and the variety of different relationships that are being promoted under the banner of 'partnership' have raised questions about how these relationships might best be understood and categorized [33,44,51–53].

While there appears to be general consensus on the impossibility of arriving at a concrete universal definition of partnership, useful efforts have been made to distinguish partnerships from looser collaborative forms such as networks and coalitions [26,27,42,54,55]. Another helpful distinction has been made between statutory or mandated partnerships required by legislation for a specific purpose and more voluntary partnerships among organizations working together for a common strategic purpose [56]. Although the terms are widely used interchangeably [57], Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) in which public sector agencies contract businesses to provide services or build infrastructure have also been differentiated from more flexible, often non-contractual Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs) [42]. In addition, it has been noted that cross-sector partnerships such as those involving companies and NGOs cover a wide spectrum from sponsorship and cause-related marketing activities through to much more strategic collaboration on sustainability, policy development and implementation [26,27,29,58].

Further attention has been drawn to the fact that while 'partnership' is most often depicted as a structural form or construct, it can also be construed as 'partnering'—a process or way of working cooperatively [33]. The European Union's (EU) 'partnership principle', for example, outlines a process of engagement and 'multilevel governance' between different social actors and levels of government that ensures the effective delivery of European Structural and Investment Funds [59]. 'Partnership' has also been positioned as a form of 'collaborative' governance in which different actors work together to address societal problems [60–62] and as a paradigm for international development cooperation between North and South [63].

Because of the enormous range of forms and shapes that partnerships take, the quest to develop a comprehensive typology of partnerships is a challenging one [49]. Some examples of the diverse typologies that have been put forward include the three types of collaboration identified in the pioneering work of Murphy and Bendell [26] on business–NGO partnerships:

- Process-oriented: developing strategies, policies and relationships.
- Project-oriented: focusing on discrete activities linked to core business practices.
- Product-oriented: delivering improvements to products, services and sales.

Selsky and Parker [53], meanwhile, propose a typology for cross-sector partnerships that address social issues which outlines four categories of partnerships that are characterized by the actors and sectors involved:

- Non-profit organizations and businesses.
- Governments and businesses.
- Governments and non-profit organizations.
- Actors from all three sectors.

Moving away from a focus on participating organizations, Kelly and Roche [64] classify partnerships involving the Australian Council for International Development according to focus areas that include:

- Development partnerships working for more effective development at the local level.
- Partnerships to support civil society development.
- Partnerships which leverage a more effective response to complex change situations.
- Partnerships which add quality to the work of all partners.
- Partnerships and alliances for social change.

In contrast, Tennyson [65] presents a partnership typology based on "the choice of partnership structure that is put in place to best support the achievement of particular goals and approaches." This categorization includes partnerships that range from policy and consultative arrangements, and multi-stakeholder relationships at different geographical levels, to partnerships that are temporary and dispersed, and those that focus on learning. A further typology is offered by Austin and Seitanidi [41] who propose a continuum that distinguishes between philanthropic, transactional, integrative and transformational partnerships on the basis of their capacity to create collaborative value.

While all of these efforts provide interesting avenues for exploring partnerships, in addition to their various forms and goals in different contexts, the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of collaborative arrangements makes it impossible to contain them within static categories. Furthermore, these classification exercises focus primarily on organizational and structural relationships and most pay limited attention to the individual, relational and process dimensions that these initiatives involve. The premise of this paper is that personal relationships and dynamics are central to the organizational connections that form the basis of partnerships, and that acknowledgement of this aspect can promote a more inclusive approach to partnerships for the SDGs that, through shifts in individual and organizational behaviors, will enhance their possibilities for achieving systemic change [19,38].

5. Using a Relationship Lens to Explore the Partnership Landscape

According to most dictionary definitions, a relationship refers to the way that two or more things or entities are connected, associated or involved. Often used to describe a connection between two people or groups, a relationship also involves how people feel and behave towards each other and may embrace closeness and intimacy through connections such as blood, marriage, civil union or close friendship. Relationships can thus be highly personal and have deep-seated emotional bonds. However, because the focus of most of the literature on partnerships is on organizational relationships, this more personal dimension often goes unacknowledged. We believe that these inter-personal connections are central to partnership arrangements and should be considered in any attempt to classify them.

To explore this premise further, we have sought to map an initial selection of collaborative connections in a schema that includes both inter-personal and organizational contexts or settings that have adopted the language of partnership, partnering and related terms to describe the relationship between two or more entities and/or individuals (see Table 1).

Table 1. Different types of partnership and collaborative relationships.

Type of Relationship	Examples	References
Inter-personal relationships	Lovers, spouses, families, friends, neighbors, colleagues, mentors, etc.	Perel [16,66,67]; Chopra, Arora and Saint [68]; Detsky and Baerlocher [69]; Greenfield and Reyes [70]
Intra-organizational relationships	Partners in a business; cross-functional teams; virtual teams; collaborative leadership; Industrial relations and Human Resource Management, etc.	Wilson [71]; Crosby and Bryson [72]; Cullen et al. [73]; Ibarra and Hansen [74]; Johnstone, Ackers and Wilkinson [75]
Inter-organizational relationships	Business–Business (Strategic alliances, joint ventures, etc.)	Hamel, Doz and Prahalad [76]; Kanter [77]; Swientozielskyi [78]; Todeva and Knoke [79]
	Government–Government (Country alliances/ agreements around particular themes, between public sector agencies)	Lewis [80]; Pearson [43]
	NGO–NGO (International–local partnerships, South–South, North–South; North–North)	Abrahamsen [81]; Ashman [63]; Crawford [82]; Johnson and Wilson [83]
	University–University	Benneworth and Humphrey [84]; Taylor [85]
Cross-sector relationships	Bi sector	
	Business–Government	Reed and Reed [86]; Selsky and Parker [53]
	Business–United Nations	Global Compact LEAD Task Force [87]; Murphy [28]; Nelson [88]; Stott [30]; Utting and Zammit [62,89]
	Business–Community	Coombe [90]; Lee [91]; Loza [92]
	Government–NGO	Brinkerhoff [93]; Brinkerhoff [94]; Gazley [95]; Gazley and Brudney [96]
	NGOs-International donors	Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff [61]
	Business–NGO	Austin [58]; Austin and Seitanidi [41]; Heap [97]; Murphy [27,54]; Murphy and Bendell [26,60]; Seitanidi and Crane [98]
	University–Community	Baker et al. [99]; Benneworth and Humphrey [84]
	Tri-sector	
	Business–Government–NGO	Kolk, Van Tulder and Kostwinder [100]; Nelson [101]; Seitanidi and Ryan [5]; Stadtler [102]; Waddell [103]; Warner and Sullivan [104]
	Business–Community–NGO	Kapelus [105]; Sullivan [106]
Multi-stakeholder (multi-actor, multi-party) relationships	A diverse mix of actors and organizations from different parts of society working together in networks, alliances, coalitions, partnerships, including (among others):	Bäckstrand [107]; Beisheim [108]; Glasbergen [109]; Pattberg and Widerberg [44]; Rein and Stott [31] United Nations [20,21,46–48]; Van den Brande [59]
	Co-creation/Co-production	Stott [110]; Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers [111]
	Collective impact	Hanleybrown, Kania and Kramer [112]; Harwood [113]; Kania and Kramer [114]
	Innovation ecosystems	Granstrand and Holgersson [115]; Mattila et al. [116]
	Multipartite Social Partnerships	Andersen and Mailand [117]
	Public–Private–People Partnerships	itdUPM [118]; Ng, Wong and Wong [119]

The relationship overview in Table 1 provides us with the beginnings of a more inclusive classification of partnership and related collaborative arrangements. These connections have different core objectives, ranging from fulfilment of a concrete task to working towards a longer-term shared goal which may focus on capacity-building, behavioral or policy level change [33,42] which are, in turn, also overlaid by diverse geographical, disciplinary, sectoral and thematic foci. Some examples of the many thematic or disciplinary fields in which we have encountered the promotion of partnerships include: international relations [120,121], international development [63,82,93], humanitarian assistance [19,122,123], disaster risk reduction [124,125], climate change [126–128], sustainable development [26,44,104,107,129], health and social care [130–132], employment [75,133,134] policing [135], medicine and law [136], and access to basic services such as energy, water,

etc. [19,32,137,138]. To these may be added the sector focus of different initiatives (business, government, civil society, etc.) and geographic and administrative levels of operation (local, regional, national, and global/rural and urban).

Clearly then, because of the enormous number of variants outlined above, a 'one-size fits-all' typology will be unable to capture the vast range of collaborative relationships in different contexts. To begin to map these relationships in an inclusive manner we have elected to plot them as a series of concentric rings that embrace both personal and organizational connections (see Figure 1).
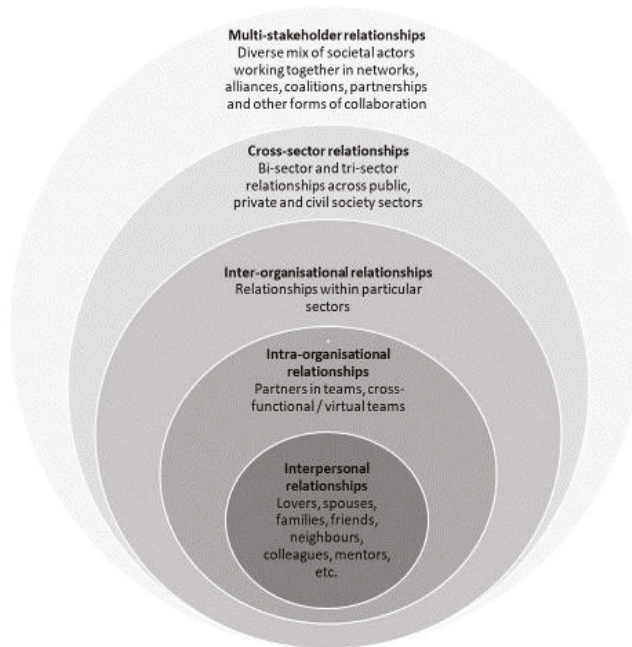
Figure 1. An inclusive map of different types of partnership and collaborative relationships.

Figure 1 positions close individual connections at the center and moves outwards to encompass different organizational connections. By presenting the relationships in this way, we seek to reinforce the point that interpersonal connections are at the heart of all these collaborative arrangements. Such positioning reinforces Battisti's arguments that it is "individuals who work together and engage in partnerships rather than the organizations or the sectors" [11] (p. 96) and that the emotional connections and dynamics that we are likely to encounter in interpersonal relationships are likely to resonate in broader organizational relationships. Awareness of these "underlying emotional and cognitive processes, and articulating and reflecting on them" is thus an important way of understanding the "unconscious mechanisms" that underpin partnership arrangements [11] (p. 105).

Most academics and practitioners interested in personal and/or organizational relationships have tended to look at such relationships separately (e.g., work–life balance). As a result, little consideration is given to how a better understanding of what makes mutually beneficial relationships work at home might inform, influence and enhance relationships at work, between organizations and in the wider world. We believe that this divide is unhelpful and acknowledgement of the interconnections between these spheres is necessary to understand partnership and other collaborative relationships more fully. In this sense, it is our view that 'the personal is organizational' and 'the organizational is personal'. It is also important to highlight that personal and organizational relationships are integrally related to

the wider geographic, socio-historic, cultural political and institutional settings in which they operate, and that there will be a complex and changing interplay between these different contextual layers throughout the lifetime of a partnership or other form of collaboration.

This notion is echoed by Kolk [139] who states that, "how a partnership actually functions – and thus, can have an impact–also depends on individual factors and the process of interactions, as these can yield not only organizational benefits but also more indirect (trickle) effects within and between the micro, meso and macro levels" (p. 13) (see Figure 2). Attention to the close interaction between individual, organizational and wider contextual levels can thus assist us in more deeply understanding the potential that collaborative relationships may play in supporting the achievement of the SDGs.
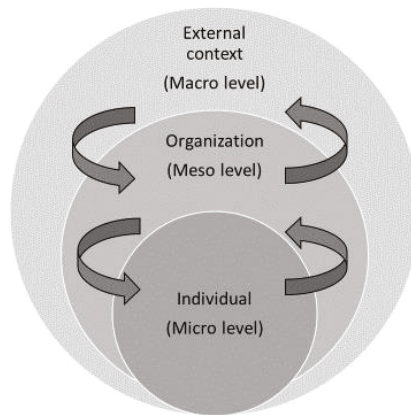
Figure 2. Partnership connections and interactions. Source: Adapted from Kolk [139] and Stott [33].

These ideas also resonate with Organizational Development (OD) theory which focuses on maximizing opportunities for individual and personal development within an organization alongside better alignment of its strategic objectives in the broader operational context [140]. This systems approach endorses linkages between the individual, the organization and the wider environment [141,142] based on a set of guiding values that include:

> Humanism (authenticity, openness, honesty, fairness, justice, equality, diversity, respect); participation (involvement, participation, voice, responsibility, opportunity, collaboration, democratic principles and practices); choice (options, rights, accountability); development (personal growth, reaching potential, learning, self-actualization) [142] (p. 331).

According to Rothwell, Stavros and Sullivan [141], "the field of OD can help an organization anticipate, adapt, and respond to transformation and change at any level: individual, team, department, organization, and even society" (p. 16). Acknowledgement that organizational development and change rest critically upon "human dynamics" and individual values and relationships [142], suggests that the personal dimension in partnership and other collaborative arrangements would benefit from further exploration.

6. The Personal Dimension in Partnerships

Sloan and Oliver [143] note that most scholarship on multi-stakeholder partnerships has overlooked individual characteristics and interpersonal dynamics. This is further endorsed by Battisti [11] who argues that it is important to understand cross-sector partnerships from an individual perspective, not just an organizational one. The "human element" in partnerships and attention to how individual characteristics such as "personal goals, informal group pressures, and professional backgrounds" can

shape collaborative decisions is also highlighted by Gazley [95] (p. 655). Caplan et al. [144] further suggest that particular attention should be paid to the different incentives that individuals may have for working in partnership as this will assist understanding of why certain elements of a partnership are working or not.

In addition to assuming different roles as organizational representatives in partnerships, individuals may also play a catalytic role in promoting and improving this kind of interaction by acting as 'partnership brokers'. Further described as "bridge builders", "conveners" or "orchestrators", these individuals have been specifically singled out for mention in a range of publications due to the work they undertake in supporting and shaping collaborative relationships between organizations [19,40,145,146]. Indeed, some authors have suggested that those exercising the partnership brokering role may be a new kind of "leader" or "difference maker" [147–149].

The importance of ensuring that leaders in a "connected world" have the relational intelligence "to connect with different people and various stakeholders and to act competently on an interpersonal and ethical basis" is highlighted by Pless and Maak [12] (pp. 1–2). Senge, Hamilton and Kania endorse this view in their call for "system leaders" able to catalyze collective leadership by focusing on the larger system rather than parts of it, "fostering reflection and generative conversations" and promoting a move away from "reactive problem-solving to co-creating the future" [148] (pp. 28–29). Sennett [8] also endorses the demand for reflection and generative conversations by noting that stronger and more meaningful cooperation can be encouraged through a willingness by individuals to listen, seek to understand different and conflicting viewpoints and allow differences to surface through debates that provoke, test and challenge assumptions. This is summarized neatly by Gino [150] who suggests that in successful collaborations, "judgement gives way to curiosity and people come to see that other perspectives are as valuable as theirs." (p. 6).

These arguments clearly position values as central to both personal and organizational relationships and resonate with the depiction of relational intelligence as incorporating emotional and ethical capabilities which include, "being aware of and understanding one's own and others' emotions, values, interests and demands, discriminating among them, critically reflecting on them, and using this information to guide one's actions and behavior with respect to people." [12] (p. 2). Authors such as Bregman [10], Eisler [9], Leadbeater [7] and Sennett [8] further believe that humans have an innate capacity for cooperation and partnership and that it is interdependence between people, rather than organizations, and engagement in a dynamic process of cooperation that has value in and of itself.

The views outlined above promote an understanding of partnership that is much more than simply a vehicle by which different organizations work together to achieve stipulated and concrete targets such as those outlined in the SDGs. Instead, emphasis is placed on achieving outcomes via the process of working in partnership (partnering). Furthermore, if this process seeks to enhance the integration, transformation and systems change that are central to the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda, then personal connections that are built around values such as empathy, reciprocity and mutual benefit could be a catalyst for a profound global renewal.

7. Exploring Motivations for Working in Partnerships for the SDGs

We believe that a relationship lens which focuses on the ongoing value that is derived from personal connections can offer important insights into how more effective partnerships can be developed for the achievement of the SDGs and beyond. This will require deeper attention to the core relational values around which partnerships are built and more exhaustive research into personal and organizational motivations, aspirations and ambitions for partnering.

According to Leary and Acosta [151]: "Two essential requirements for successful close relationships are that the partners value their relationships with one another, and each person recognizes that the partner values the relationship". This notion of mutual benefit is reflected in many of the principles that have been put forward for those working in partnership, which also include openness and the ability to communicate feelings or concerns, alongside fairness and the promotion of equity between

partners so that their inputs into the relationship are equally valued [11,152]. To these we may also add the values mentioned by the four 2019 Turner Prize winners who, in their call for a collaborative 'win', placed emphasis on the importance of reciprocity and solidarity. Battisti [11] also endorses the importance of an appreciation of diversity, noting that: "differences can be fruitful. While the partner's values, attitudes, opinions and approaches might be different and might create cognitive and emotional tensions, tolerating or working through them is crucial to engage effectively" (p. 106).

Discussion of collaborative values usually highlights the importance of trust as a central principle for strong relationships. Sloan and Oliver [143] note that trust-building is a dynamic process that is built upon both cognitive and affective elements. They describe cognitive elements as including perceptions of trustworthiness that are based upon expectations of predictable and reliable behavior while affective dimensions include emotional feelings such as care, concern and good will. The authors suggest that "a certain amount of cognitive trust is necessary before affective trust can develop" (p. 1859) and that "interpersonal trust can lay the foundation for the development of interorganizational trust" (p. 1860). Sloan and Oliver [143] further reinforce Perel's emphasis on the importance of continuing to explore, learn and grow in relationships, something that is likely to be enhanced when there is a sense of familiarity, closeness and security between partners [66,153].

Elements of interpersonal relationships will inevitably overlap and find expression in the organizational connections that form the basis of partnerships, particularly as a balance needs to be found between process and the achievement of results so that partner efforts are dedicated towards both a common goal as well as relationship-building [11,154]. However, although relational drivers for organizations are not always straightforward and may embrace a complex array of motivations that can change over time, most organizations appear to espouse an instrumental view of partnering that is largely based on its usefulness as a means to an end. Such a view centers upon a conceptualization of partnership in which organizations commit to a relationship that has the potential to achieve goals and impact that a single partner could not achieve alone (see Section 3 above). It is also worth noting that many organizations (and the individuals within them) are mandated to work in partnership and built-in reward systems are in place for incentivizing engagement or, conversely, imposing sanctions upon those that do not promote this kind of involvement [144]. These understandings of partnership contrast substantially with more personal approaches that focus on interdependence between people through their engagement in a dynamic process of cooperation that has value in and of itself [33].

To bring together and explore different individual and organizational incentives for partnering in more detail, we have drawn upon the literature that discusses motivations for second language learning [155–159]. These categorizations embrace two overlapping dichotomies:

- **Instrumental vs. integrative motivations**—in which instrumental refers to doing something as a means to an end in order to achieve a result or practical goal while integrative pertains to relational connections and a desire to interact with, and become part of, a broader community.
- **Extrinsic vs intrinsic motivations**—in which extrinsic relates to external mandates for doing something, including the promise of reward(s) or, conversely, to avoid some form of sanction, while intrinsic is about doing something because it is rewarding for its own sake.

These motivations have been outlined in Figure 3 to explore some of the key drivers for working in partnerships to achieve the SDGs.

Although there is growing appreciation of the role of individuals and personal qualities and attributes in partnerships and other collaborative relationships, we believe that the predominant reasons for organizations to partner find expression in the two left-hand quadrants of Figure 3. While accepting that partnerships will require equilibrium between different personal and organizational motivations and dynamics for working in this way, our premise is that, in order to enhance the potential of partnerships for transformation, more work needs to be done to move away from purely instrumental and extrinsic reasons for partnering towards recognition of the integrative and intrinsic value that partnering can offer, both of which are likely to be derived from a deeper appreciation of the importance of inter-personal relationships.

Figure 3. Motivations for partnering for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To explore this idea in more detail, Figure 4 sets out some of the assumptions that may be made in relation to the instrumental and extrinsic, and integrative and intrinsic character and values of a partnership. Within the instrumental category, these are likely to revolve around the importance of impact and how it will be achieved. This results-based focus suggests a pragmatic attitude towards other partners, with acknowledgement that each partner is able to contribute different resources and align around the achievement of desired goal(s). An integrative stance, meanwhile, will see value in the process of developing strong relationships and processes as well as achieving results. Attention will be paid to the need for joined-up approaches that involve all the partners working together closely while regularly reviewing their connections. In this way of working there will be acknowledgement that effective partnering processes will support the realization of results and attainment of goal(s).
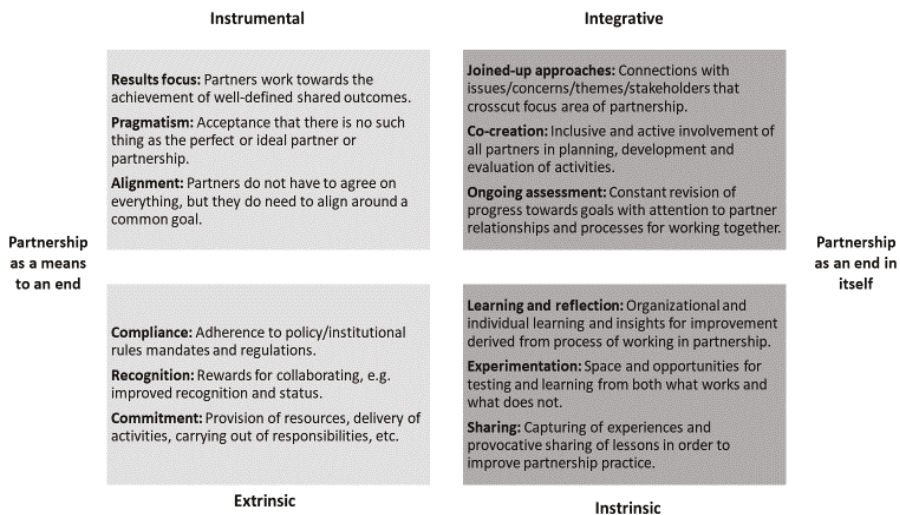

Figure 4. Relational values that motivate participation in partnerships.

Considerations in the extrinsic classification are likely to center around the need for adherence to organizational mandates. Such mandates may promote partnering by offering positive incentives for engaging in collaborative initiatives and/or sanctions for not doing so. Emphasis will thus be placed on commitments to deliver, contribute and allocate resources as well as to carry out agreed tasks in order to achieve partnership goals. Intrinsic dimensions, meanwhile, will focus on the value of partnering in and of itself, with acknowledgement of the satisfaction that may be obtained by working in collaboration, particularly in relation to the learning gained from engaging in collaborative processes which can be tested and shared with others.

The elements outlined in Figure 4 are not exhaustive and are intended to offer an indication of some of the relational values that might be considered in each category. It is also true that partnering and other collaborative relationships must be viewed as dynamic, both relative to their specific and changing operational contexts and to the continual negotiation that takes place between partners at both individual and organizational levels regarding the terms and conditions of their evolving relationship [11,42]. We believe that appreciation of underlying emergent processes is central to an understanding of how relational values in partnerships may be deepened.

8. Deepening Relational Values in Partnerships

The challenging nature of building collaborative relationships across distinct geographical, cultural, sectoral and organizational cultures has been widely commented upon [33,42,44,52,154,160]. Some of the difficulties faced include: " ... environmental constraints; diversity in organizational aims; barriers in communication; and difficulties in developing joint modes of operating, managing perceived power imbalances, building trust, and managing the logistics of working with geographically dispersed partners" [161] (p. 117). It has also been observed that these challenges are more easily addressed as partner relationships become consolidated [11,33,95,154,162]. This suggests that the movement of a partnership away from stances that are instrumental and extrinsic towards those that are more integrative and intrinsic is likely to evolve over time. In this regard, the framework presented in Figure 4 may be of value as a practical discussion or review tool for partners as they work through different phases of relationship-building.

Relational difficulties during the initial stages of a partnership or other collaborative arrangements frequently relate to a lack of trust about different partner motivations or capacity for collaborating which is compounded by differences in partner approaches, cultures and behaviors [33,42,95,160]. Movement towards relationships that are centered around more intrinsic and integrative partnership factors may thus be more easily achieved if individual partner representatives know, or have familiarized themselves, with the mission, values and trajectories of their proposed partners. This is endorsed by Brinkerhoff [154], who notes that, "the more partners know and understand of each other's mission, track record, operations, and constraints in advance of the partnership, the less learning and trust building has to occur in the context of implementation" (p. 224).

Familiarization is likely to further assist relational connections during the initial stages of a partnership's formation when the specific motivations for different partners (both individual and organizational) to work together may be unclear or misunderstood [143,154,163]. By encouraging clarity around the fact that a common goal can be reached even though the aims and approaches of partners may differ, and encouraging partners to make their incentives for working together explicit, the quality of collaborative relationships may be enhanced [144,154,163]. Relationships can also be deepened by generating common understandings and agreement on joint goals, and ensuring acknowledgment of the different skills, competencies and resources that each partner brings to the partnership so that different contributions are valued equitably and their complementary nature reinforced [42].

As a partnership develops, challenges around accountability and the inclusion and engagement of partner organizations and their representatives may emerge [95,154,160,162]. These challenges are often linked to real or perceived power imbalances among partners and to their associated

dynamics [154,160]. To foster the "mutuality" and "reciprocal accountability" required for successful partnership relationships [154], governance structures and procedures that encourage dialogue and communication, are responsive to the needs of partners and wider stakeholders, and promote experimentation, learning and reflection are critical [53,154,162,164].

An environment that is conducive to individual trust-building is central to the integrative and intrinsic factors outlined in Figure 4 and can assist the development of a unique partnership identity that consolidates relationships and binds partners together more firmly [154]. This 'we' rather than 'us' and 'them' mentality strengthens "partnership embeddedness" and the ability of partners to better address challenges [98] (p. 421). Such "embeddedness" also implies a progression away from the purely instrumental and extrinsic notions of partnership depicted in Figure 4 towards the institutionalization of more joined-up, reflective and co-created approaches [165]. Here, as noted by Seitanidi and Crane [98], personal connections play a crucial role: "when individuals develop a personal relationship of trust within the partnership then the level of embeddedness of the relationship becomes more evident" (p. 422).

In response to calls for improved monitoring of partner relationships [11,144,154,164], the framework in Figure 4 may also be used to assist assessments of partner relationships and process issues. This may be achieved by encouraging partners to reflect at regular intervals over the lifetime of a partnership on how they view their work together and in which quadrant(s) they believe their partnership currently 'sits'. If there is consensus that partners are primarily positioned in the instrumental and extrinsic quadrants, the question of how far partners aspire to make lasting and meaningful contributions to the SDGs may be studied by inquiring into the possibilities for embracing the integrative and intrinsic values that could enhance the prospects of achieving transformational change.

Finally, a better understanding of relational problems and possible solutions to address them are likely to be supported when there is a strong culture of learning from, and sharing among, individuals and organizations within and between partnerships and other collaborative arrangements. The need for imaginative and robust mutual learning exchange is highlighted in the intrinsic quadrant of Figure 4 and may be encouraged by active promotion of learning connections across diverse contexts and domains, and among relationships that are inter-personal, intra-organizational, inter organizational, cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder (see Table 1). The creation of 'safe spaces' that allow for critical debate and reflection on both partnership successes and failures, and the nature of the relationships that inform them, may also facilitate the development of transformational partnerships for the SDGs [38,166].

9. Conclusions

If, as the organizational consultant and psychotherapist Esther Perel asserts, "the quality of our relationships determines the quality of our lives" [167], then the quality of both our individual and organizational relationships will also determine the quality of the partnerships that are developed to achieve the SDGs. This paper suggests that if partnerships are to meet the United Nations transformational and inclusive agenda for the SDGs, then the role that interpersonal connections play within them, and how these link to organizational interactions in multi-stakeholder partnerships, must be given greater consideration. This will involve inquiry and dialogue around the links between these two domains, and how the values, motivations and dynamics they encompass influence the development, influence and impact of diverse collaborative arrangements.

Our conceptual article indicates that exploring partnerships for the SDGs would benefit from further consideration of academic fields such as OD and practitioner ideas like relational intelligence, as well as the application of established psychological and psychoanalytical approaches. In a related vein, it is also worth noting that recognition of the value of psychology in building and supporting sustainable development is receiving increased attention [168,169]. According to Di Fabio [169], the "psychology of sustainability and sustainable development" rests upon approaches and leadership

that design and construct organizational development and well-being through "the promotion of relationships and positive narratives in organizational contexts in everyday life." It is our belief that acknowledgement of the importance of personal relationships and narratives in partnership and other collaborative arrangements has the potential to ensure meaningful and lasting contributions to the SDGs that might ultimately "transform our world" [20,21].

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165. This resonates with the recent work of Jon Alexander. 2020. 'It doesn't have to be like this' where he advocates a shift in the relationship between Government and Citizen from the idea of 'us and them' to the notion of 'a larger us': "We need to build . . . the Citizen story, where the role of government is neither all nor nothing, but in between: To equip and enable us, and to partner with us; to share as much information and power as possible, so that we can work together with government and with one another to create a new normal." See, Alexander, J. It doesn't have to be like this. *Medium*. 13 May 2020. Available online: https://medium.com/@jonjalex/it-doesnt-have-to-be-like-this-22f0884fbaf (accessed on 3 July 2020).

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A Literature Review of Inter-Organizational Sustainability Learning

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Abstract: Sustainable development goals (SDGs) have become increasingly important for today's firms as they build sustainability strategies that integrate SDGs into their core activities. Addressing these goals collaboratively, in line with SDG 17—partnerships for the goals, has gained momentum, hence the growing literature on sustainability-oriented partnerships. However, addressing SDGs through partnerships is not straightforward. For firms, contributing to SDGs through alliances and partnerships requires building environmental capabilities and embracing new value frames; in other words, going through the complex process of inter-organizational learning. This paper reviews the literature on sustainability-oriented partnerships with a focus on the inter-organizational learning process. As a result of the review, a model of inter-organizational sustainability learning is presented. This model captures the different levels and types of the inter-organizational learning process; partner and partnership characteristics that impact learning; the environmental conditions that set the conditions for learning to take place; the catalyst and inhibitors of learning; and finally outcomes of learning. This model expands and re-organizes the existing scholarly conversation about inter-organizational learning in the context of sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships and offers a learning-based understanding of sustainability partnerships to practitioners. Based on the review, the paper proposes ideas for future research and contributes to the development of a future research agenda in the area of sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships.

Keywords: inter-organizational learning; sustainability; SDGs; collaboration; capabilities; frames

1. Introduction

Sustainable development goals (SDGs) "aim the combination of economic development, environmental sustainability and social inclusion" and they can only be addressed with the efforts of the private sector [1]. According to some scholars [2], these goals "present both a significant opportunity and a significant challenge [for the private sector]: an opportunity as it brings the benefits of additional finance, technology, skills and innovation from the business sector; and a challenge in that it bestows unprecedented power and expectations on business as a development agent purposely seeking to deliver sustainable development outcomes." Overcoming these challenges requires the development of capabilities that address and integrate sustainable development into the core business and also a deeper engagement with value frames that promote sustainable development [3,4]. Partnerships can facilitate a platform to address complex and systemic issues highlighted in the different SDGs collectively [5,6].

SDG 17—partnerships for the goals, invites the private sector to implement SDG 1–16 through collaboration with other societal actors to create value for nature and society by sharing knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources [7]. In their seminal work, Austin and Seitanidi [8] discuss four different types of value generated as a result of collaborative work: associational value, transferred resource value, interaction value and synergistic value. The authors define associational value as "a derived benefit accruing to another partner simply from having a collaborative relationship

with the other organization"; transferred resource value as a "benefit derived by a partner from the receipt of a resource from the other partner"; synergistic value as "value that arises from the underlying premise of all collaborations that combining partners' resources enables them to accomplish more together than they could have separately" [9]. While partnerships for SDGs are expected to create these four different types of value, this article specifically focuses on the interaction value which is defined as "the intangibles that derive from the processes of partners working together". One of these intangibles is considered as inter-organizational learning, which is the focus of this article [9].

Collaborative partnerships trigger inter-organizational learning processes which lead to the development of new capabilities that would help businesses to address sustainability concerns internally [10]. Furthermore, they enable cognitive changes in the private sector to embed sustainability into the core through frameshifts that take place in such collaborations [11,12]. Indeed, Agarwal, Gneiting and Mhlanga [2] proposed that partnerships with various stakeholders can help firms "shift from using a narrow business case approach to aligning their core activities with broader societal values and interests."

This paper positions itself in this area of inter-organizational sustainability learning that takes place in alliances and partnerships formed to tackle SDG-related challenges. The objective, herein, is to re-organize the pre-existing work on sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships with a focus on the inter-organizational learning process, its antecedents, and its outcomes. The paper, therefore, uses a review of 122 academic articles to provide a comprehensive review of the field.

The review results in a model which includes the following categories: partner and partnership characteristics that impact the learning process; the environmental conditions that set the conditions for learning to take place; the catalyst and inhibitors that impact learning; and finally firm-level, partnership-level, and system-level outcomes of learning and partnerships. This model organizes the existing literature on inter-organizational sustainability learning. Furthermore, the model demonstrates how different theoretical approaches and concepts fit together, as opposed to competing, when it comes to explaining the process of inter-organizational sustainability learning.

This paper contributes to the literature on sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships. This contribution is thanks to the model and the future research agenda built in the paper because of the synthesis of different theoretical approaches and concepts that help us explain the complex phenomenon of inter-organizational sustainability learning. Furthermore, the model also contributes to the work of sustainability practitioners who manage alliances and partnerships by demonstrating factors that help them enhance inter-organizational learning and partnership performance.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The Theory section summarizes the literature on SDGs, partnerships for SDGs and inter-organizational learning in the business context. The following Methods section introduces the stages of the systematic review, as well as the role of the metaphor in re-organizing the existing literature. The Findings section introduces a model that shows the antecedents and outcomes of the inter-organizational learning process in the context of sustainability. The Future Research section outlines research gaps in the field based on the review and provides a path for further research. Finally, the Conclusions section draws on the contributions of this paper to theory and practice.

2. Theory

2.1. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Business Context

Sustainable development goals (SDGs) define 17 global targets for all types of organizations to address sustainability issues ranging from healthcare to fighting inequalities to climate change [13,14]. SDGs are positioned to cover the triple bottom line of sustainability (economic, environmental, social) and address concerns to do with people's well-being, planetary boundaries and an inclusive notion of prosperity [6,14], and equality [15,16].

SDG 17—partnerships for the goals, emphasizes that the first sixteen goals need to be addressed by different constituents of the system [17]. In other words, SDG 17 recommends partnerships as a tool to foster sustainable development, underlining the importance of interactions between different societal actors. Sachs, et al. [18] highlight that achieving SDGs require societal transformations that "engages a different subset of business and civil society, facilitating targeted problem-solving, clear communication and the mobilization of stakeholders." Similarly, Horan [19] recognizes that various stakeholders would be involved in these partnerships with different perceptions, expectations and interests. Indeed, thanks to the cross-sector interaction space in partnerships, actors from across different sectors can generate different types of value. While this article acknowledges the potential of value creation for different societal actors in a partnership context, the article specifically focuses on the 'private sector' and interaction value of 'learning' that private sector actors can gain through partnerships.

The private sector has already played an essential role in determining what SDGs should be [2,20–22]. Moving forward, the private sector has a crucial role in addressing the goals, re-designing business models, developing capabilities, accommodating resources and shifting their mission from profits to the wellbeing of the planet and people [2,20–22]. SDGs already impact the private sector, as we see some firms' innovative products and services address SDGs, while other firms are changing their business models to align their core business with the SDGs [20]. It is important to note that some SDGs are relatively easier for the private sector to address, such as SDG 8—sustainable and inclusive growth, while other SDGs may be too complex to be addressed by a single actor alone [6].

Building sustainability-oriented partnerships, SDG-17, only became a goal in 2015 when the agreement on the SDGs was made. However, research on sustainability-oriented partnerships has been growing since the 1990s, both in the social [23,24] and the environmental sustainability domains [25–28]. Recent studies on SDGs in the business context suggest that a "way to enhance the strategic relevance of the SDGs is to engage in a proper portfolio of cross-sector and intra-sectoral coalitions or partnerships" [6]. These portfolios consist of two distinct types of collaborations: inter-firm alliances and cross-sector partnerships [29,30].

2.2. Inter-Firm Alliances and Cross-Sector Partnerships

Inter-firm alliances are defined as "a form of organizational arrangement for ongoing cooperative relationships among firms" [31]. In other words, alliances are "voluntary arrangements [between firms] involving durable exchange, sharing, or co-development of new products and technologies" [32]. Alliances are viewed as a hybrid form of governance "between markets and hierarchy that occur when transaction costs associated with a specific exchange are too high for an arm's-length market exchange but not high enough to mandate vertical integration" [32,33]. This explanation sets the transaction cost economics motivation for formations of inter-firm alliances [34,35]; however, this is not the only rationale for why alliances exist.

Others explain how alliances help firms access resources [36], acquire knowledge [37], and develop new capabilities [38,39], thanks to inter-firm interactions. Furthermore, alliances help firms comply with institutional norms, values and regulations, and legitimate their actions using alliance arrangements [40]. Inter-firm alliances can occur between suppliers and customers in the firm's value chain [41,42], with competitors [43] or various other innovation partners from different industries [44]. They may take a form whereby the partners share equity, as in the case of joint ventures, or a non-equity form whereby partners have a legal agreement, such as a memorandum of understanding (MoU), which clarifies the roles of partners and the boundaries of the alliance [34,45].

Cross-sector partnerships are "vehicles to mediate the changing roles and perceived responsibilities of what are commonly referred to as the three primary institutional sectors of society: government, business, and the civil sector" [46]. Firms engage in cross-sector partnerships with similar motivations to that of inter-firm alliances. Existing literature also studies cross-sector partnerships through the transaction-cost economics lens [47], resource and knowledge-based views [48], capabilities [49],

and finally, compliance with institutional norms, values and regulations, and legitimation of their actions [50].

This paper reviews the literature on both inter-firm alliances, and cross-sector partnerships in the context of sustainability since research shows that they both play a crucial role in firms addressing SDGs [6]. However, it is crucial to highlight that there are some differences in inter-firm alliances and cross-sector partnerships.

First and foremost, the partner type; in other words, the heterogeneity of partners' organizational forms, resources and capabilities, are different in these two distinct categories of engagement [51]. Due to the embeddedness of both partners in the private sector, inter-firm partners are often conceptualized as constituting lesser diversity in comparison to cross-sector [11,51].

Second, it is often assumed that public, private and civil sectors are dominated by different logics [50,52–56]. The differences in dominant logics lead partners to focus on different value objectives and introduce further challenges for the partnership [57,58].

Third, other than the differences in organizational forms, resources, capabilities, institutional logics and value objectives, some cross-sector partnerships are often identified with altruistic partnership motivations, aiming to impact systemic and societal grand challenges that go beyond self-interest [11]. However, this may not apply to all cross-sector partnerships, as some may not focus on sustainability challenges [59]. Though there are differences between inter-firm and cross-sector partnerships, they both provide a room for learning, development, and change.

2.3. Inter-Organizational Learning in the Business Context

Organizational learning and learning organizations have long been discussed in the domain of organization studies [60–68]. This literature discusses how organizations store knowledge in their memory [69]. Organizations absorb knowledge from external knowledge sources and transfer such knowledge internally [70]. They learn to change their behaviors, develop new capabilities and even alter the embedded collective cognition and, as a result, they shift towards new mental models [71]. Organizations need to learn because they need to fit the external environment [72]; in other words, co-evolve with the institutional environment and settings [73].

The literature on organizational learning could be categorized into two realms depending on the knowledge or value sources [74]. If the learning takes places across different teams and functions within an organization, then this learning or knowledge transfer is often referred to as *intra*-organizational [74]. If the knowledge sources are external to the organization, such as in the case of networks, alliances, consultants, suppliers and customers, then this learning is often referred to as *inter*-organizational learning [74]. The focus of this paper is on the latter, inter-organizational learning, and there are several ways in which it differs from intra-organizational learning [75].

Inter-organizational learning is often described as a paradoxical process due to the competitive tensions between the knowledge partners [76–78]. If two inter-firm partners are engaged in an alliance, scholars observed firms engaging in a competition to outlearn their partner. Indeed, some argue that "creating a successful alliance learning environment is the exception rather than the rule" [79].

Inkpen [79] lists several "explanations for the failure to learn from a partner: the alliance knowledge was undervalued; the necessary knowledge connections' were not put into place; the nature of the knowledge itself made learning difficult; the parent corporate culture did not support learning." Some studies focus on other barriers of inter-organizational learning and highlight that the "fear of loss of ownership, fear of loss of control of knowledge, and fear of loss of competitive edge" negatively affect the creation of a learning environment in an inter-organizational setting [80]. In a similar vein, others highlight that "the dynamics of power, opportunism, suspicion, and asymmetric learning strategies can constitute processual barriers to collective knowledge development" [81]. Generally, explicit knowledge is easier to be acquired from a partner than tacit knowledge [78]. However, "if there is access to, and recombination of, diverse knowledge in a network, it might be difficult to establish barriers to protect the competencies that each network member has in various knowledge fields" [78].

Moreover, the power imbalance between engaged parties may also create difficulties in establishing "inter-firm routines and the sharing of knowledge" [78].

In response to the barrier of partner opportunism and the fear of losing a competitive edge, the literature proposes governance mechanisms to ensure the protection of parties and social capital to improve their relationship. Two distinct forms of governance are relational governance and contractual governance [82]. Scholars highlight that when partners have relational governance based on competence trust which refers to "the confidence in the abilities of the other party to perform its share of the workload in an exchange"; then they are more likely to be engaged in learning [82]. Besides, governance through formal contracting also aims to protect parties and outline the roles and responsibilities of each party involved; hence "formal written contracts accomplish learning objectives by specifying the obligations and expected duties of partners" [82].

Scholars have identified that social capital, defined as "the aggregate of resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or organization" is also an essential factor in catalyzing the learning process [83]. Indeed, some propose that in networks, thanks to the availability of social capital between network members, inter-organizational learning is facilitated further in comparison to that of inter-firm alliances [83]. Scholars propose that trust impacts the commitment between partners positively [84].

Social capital becomes important in inter-organizational transfer, not only because of possible partner opportunism but also because access to knowledge is more difficult outside the firm boundaries. Outside the firm boundaries, there is an additional issue that will affect the learning performance: cognitive distance or proximity [85–88].

Cognition "denotes a broad range of mental activity, including proprioception, perception, sense-making, categorization, inference, value judgments, emotions, and feelings, which all build on each other" [87]. Differences between organizations in terms of cognition lead to cognitive distance amongst partners [87]. Nooteboom shows that there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between cognitive distance and innovation performance [87]. This means that there is an optimal cognitive distance and "the challenge then is to find partners at sufficient cognitive distance to tell something new, but not so distant as to preclude mutual understanding" [87].

Cognitive distance shows that firms learn something new if they already have an existing knowledge and value base that will allow them to learn, which is a concept called 'absorptive capacity' [70,77,89,90]. Absorptive capacity is a dynamic capability that consists of the following processes: recognizing the value of new, external information, assimilating it, and applying it to commercial ends [71]. As a dynamic capability, absorptive capacity helps to create, extend or modify a firm's resource base and develops other organizational capabilities [71,90]. Therefore, there is "a recursive relationship between organizational learning and absorptive capacity, where increased learning in an area can enhance a firm's knowledge base and help to build greater absorptive capacity, which in turn can improve learning" [91].

Absorptive capacity is necessary but not sufficient for inter-organizational learning to take place. For knowledge transfer to take place between partners, partners would also need to have a disseminative capacity, defined as the "ability of knowledge holders to convey knowledge in a way that a recipient can comprehend it and put it into practice" [92]. In other words, disseminative capacity is "a combination of the sender's ability to codify and articulate knowledge, the sender's willingness to share knowledge, and the sender's propensity to create and use opportunities for knowledge acquisition by the receiver" [93].

Above, different conditions for learning to take place in an inter-organizational setting are outlined, and the impact of different factors are briefly summarized. Other than the above-summarized conditions for learning to take place in an inter-organizational setting, it is essential to highlight that not all learning can be conceptualized in the same way. Crucially, learning can be exploratory and exploitative learning [71,94–97], single or double-loop learning [98]; or higher-level and lower-level [66]. These different levels and types of learning are defined in Table 1.

Table 1. Levels and types of learning.

Concepts	Definition
Exploitation vs. Exploration	"Exploration includes things captured by terms such as search, variation, risk-taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, innovation. Exploitation includes such things as refinement, choice, production, efficiency, selection, implementation, execution" [68]. In other words, exploration is "the pursuit of new knowledge, of things that might come to be known", exploitation is "the use and development of things already known" [99].
Single-loop vs. Double-loop	While single-loop learning occurs "whenever an error is detected and corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system", double-loop learning occurs "when mismatches are corrected by first examining and altering the governing variables and then the actions" [100].
Lower-level learning vs. Higher-level learning	"Lower-level learning occurs within a given organizational structure; a given set of rules. It leads to the development of some rudimentary associations of behavior and outcomes, but these usually are of short duration and impact only part of what the organization does. It is a result of repetition and routine and involves association building." "Higher-level learning, on the other hand, aims at adjusting overall rules and norms rather than specific activities or behaviors. The associations that result from higher-level learning have long-term effects and impacts on the organization as a whole. This type of learning occurs through the use of heuristics, skill development, and insights. It, therefore, is a more cognitive process than lower-level learning, which often is the result of repetitive behavior" [66].

Based on the learning levels and types summarized in Table 1, it is possible to conceptualize two distinct categories of learning outcomes: changes in capabilities, routines, and organizational behavior and changes in mental models, values and beliefs [101].

For the first category of outcomes, this paper focuses on the concept of organizational capabilities which can be defined as the "existing repertoire of the possible actions of the groups and organizations" [86]. Otherwise, the "routinized processes that are embedded in the organization" [102]. Depending on the level and type of learning, organizations can refine and leverage existing capabilities or develop new capabilities using the knowledge acquired from partners [103,104].

For the second category of outcomes, this paper focuses on the concept of 'value frames' which refers to perceptions of value that guide different sustainability organizational level interpretations and priorities in terms of economic, environmental and social value creation and preservation [4,12,52,105]. Through higher-level learning, changes or shifts in value frames are also expected [106,107].

The newly developed capabilities or shifted frames are expected to improve a firm's performance in two ways. First, it may help firms develop combinative capabilities that help a firm's general innovativeness and, as a result, its competitiveness [73]. Second, firms would also develop capabilities to manage alliances [38,108,109] and alliance portfolios [110], which would improve their partnership performance or success.

3. Methods

The objective of this study is to re-organize the pre-existing work on sustainability-oriented partnerships and alliances with a focus on the inter-organizational learning process, its antecedents, and outcomes. Therefore, this article takes a systematic approach to review the existing literature in this area.

A systematic literature review research helps to identify, evaluate and synthesize the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by scholars in a systematic way guided by a reproducible method [111]. The review is guided by the PRISMA checklist, which identifies the steps that researchers need to take when conducting systematic literature reviews [112,113]. The introduction section has identified the rationale behind the review, and the theory section developed the theoretical basis of the review. The focus of this section is to explain how the review is conducted.

The review includes the following stages: searching for academic articles in databases, screening the articles found based on an inclusion and exclusion criteria, processing the selected articles through qualitative content analysis and coding, synthesizing, and presenting the review findings. Table 2 summarizes the searching and screening stages followed in the systematic review.

Table 2. Summary of searching and screening.

Stages	Result
Search in the Web of Science	5688 articles
Inclusion Criteria	1655 articles
Exclusion Criteria	75 articles
Snowballing	47 articles
Total	122 articles

In the searching stage, the Web of Science database is selected to gather articles in the field. Web of Science provides access to a wide range of journal articles that are both within business, management and sustainability domains and is commonly used for systematic review purposes [114]. It is necessary to identify keywords that will make up the search string to conduct a thorough and comprehensive review of a field [115,116]. The critical keyword categories for the searching stage are identified as learning, partnerships, and sustainability. The keywords in each category are selected in line with previous studies. For instance, for learning keywords such as knowledge development, knowledge acquisition, knowledge absorption, are also searched in line with prior studies in the field [10,89]. For sustainability, keywords such as green and eco-friendly, or social responsibility are used to cover the broad literature in the field. Even though the terms have slightly different meanings, scholars' use of these terms have been converging, and at times they have been used interchangeably [117]. Finally, for partnerships, keywords such as alliance, cooperation, partnering, and collaboration are also used [118,119]. As a result, the search string below is generated with AND/OR Boolean operators:

("sustainability" OR "sustainable" OR "CSR" OR "corporate social responsibility" OR "green" OR "eco-friendly") AND ("collaboration" OR "collaborative" OR "partnership" OR "partnerships" OR "partners" OR "partnering" OR "partner" OR "cooperation" OR "alliance" OR "alliances" OR "joint venture") AND ("knowledge development" OR "knowledge absorption" OR "absorptive" OR "capability development" OR "frame shift" OR "knowledge transformation" OR "knowledge exploitation" OR "knowledge assimilation" OR "knowledge acquisition" OR "learning" OR "transformation")

This string of keywords used to search the Web of Science database for academic articles included that this content be in the English language and that all years are available. This search yielded 5688 articles.

These articles were screened based on two sub-processes: inclusion of articles only from relevant research fields, and exclusion of articles which contain the search string but in a different context. First, as an inclusion criterion, the following four Science and Social Science Index categories are selected

to provide coverage of journals that are both in the business and management and sustainability fields [10]: Green and Sustainable Science Technology, Environmental Studies, Management and Business. Application of this inclusion criterion yielded a sample of 1655 articles.

Second, as an exclusion criterion, the scope of the current study is used. Within the 1655 articles, some studies referred to 'sustainability of partnerships' or 'financial sustainability of businesses' within business and management studies but were not about environmental or social sustainability issues. Other studies focused on sustainability partnerships but did not consider partnerships whereby a business actor was involved. Instead, they focused on cities, local authorities, communities and NGOs and their sustainability partnerships with each other whereby business actors were not among the partners or the study did not provide learning opportunities for the business context, which is the focus of this paper. As a result of this screening of 1655 articles, 75 articles were identified from the Web of Science.

Furthermore, to further check if any relevant articles were missed in the searching and screening phases, recent reviews on the topic have been used for snowballing. One of these review articles was about capability development in the context of sustainability, which included a subset of articles that studied capability development through collaborations [10]. Another review article was about value frames, which included a subset of articles that studied frameshifts through collaborations [52]. Finally, one study was providing a general overview of environmental collaborations [120], and another was providing an overview of the role of stakeholder engagement for environmental innovations [4]. After cross-checking the references of these previous review papers, 47 other relevant articles were identified.

Overall, 122 articles formed the review database for this study. The review was conducted using qualitative content analysis and coding on NVivo 12 Plus. Inductive two-stage coding is used on NVivo to identify patterns within the review articles. In Figure 1, the coding process is demonstrated with some examples for the development of each category.

In addition to the coding mentioned above, articles are also coded in the following areas: theories and methods, types of partnerships (inter-firm vs. cross-sector) and SDGs, (see Table in the Appendix A). The coding concerning SDGs was conducted using a study which describes the role of businesses in addressing SDGs [6]. The theories and methods were coded based on the relevant sections of the papers. 36% of articles in the review explicitly referred to the resource-based view, 32% to absorptive capacity, 30% to dynamic capabilities, 17% to institutional theory, and 11% to stakeholder theory. Furthermore, more than half of the articles in the review were qualitative, and mostly case-based (64), followed by 43 quantitative studies and 13 studies that are review or theoretical works and only two studies which employed mixed methods.

Finally, the review was dominated by articles that studied cross-sector partnerships (55), followed by studies that studied both forms of partnerships with various stakeholders (36) and finally, inter-firm alliances (31). Studies that focused on inter-firm alliances were mostly from the context of sustainable supply chain relationships [121–124]. Only a few studies discussed inter-firm alliances that were not in the supply chain context [125]. Cross-sector partnership studies focused on engagements between firms and governments [126,127], firms and NGOs or non-profits [25,128,129], or universities and research institutions [130]. Furthermore, a few studies focused on firms' engagement with several societal actors in the same initiative through multi-stakeholder partnerships [131,132]. Besides, recently some authors studied cross-sector partnerships between firms and social or environmental enterprises as cross-sector [133,134].
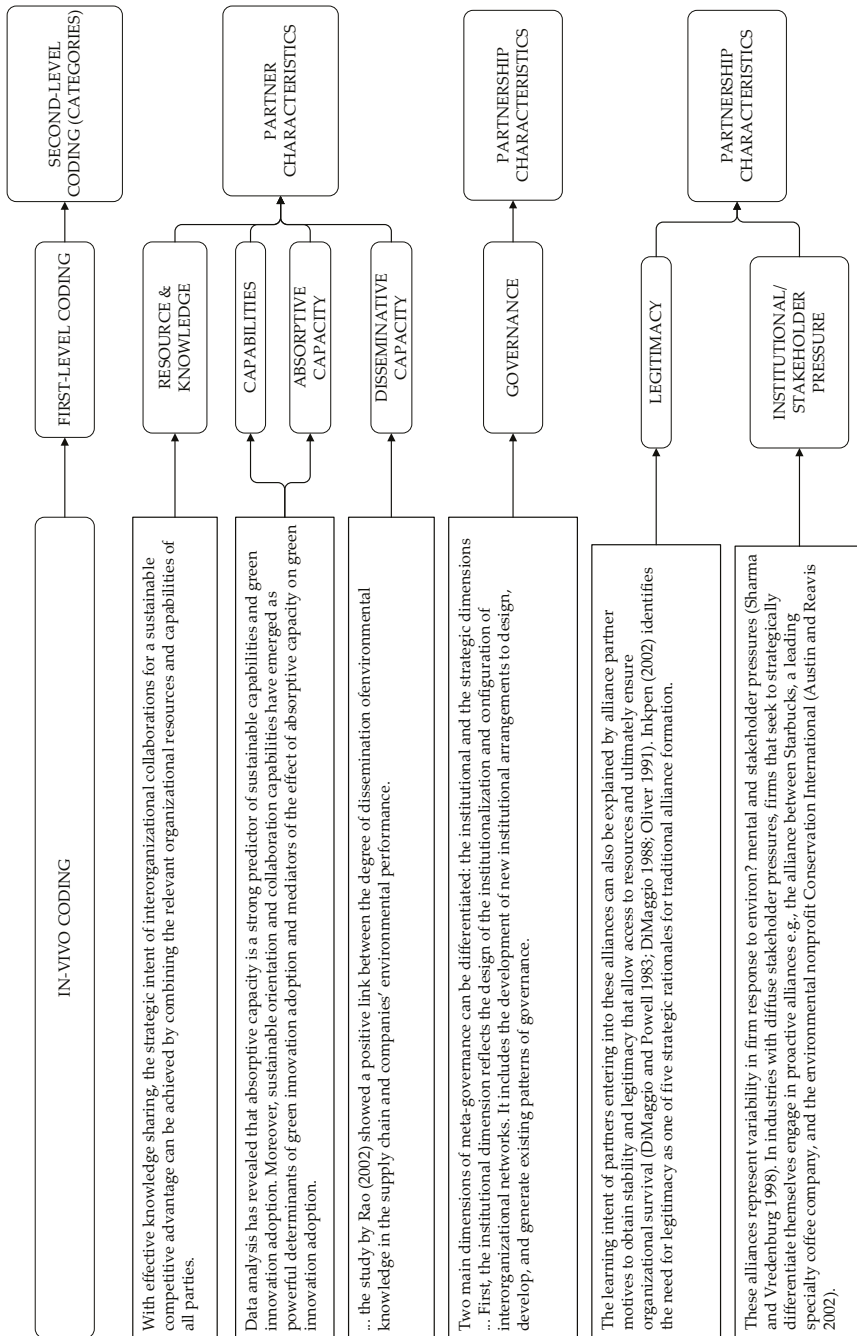
Figure 1. *Cont.*
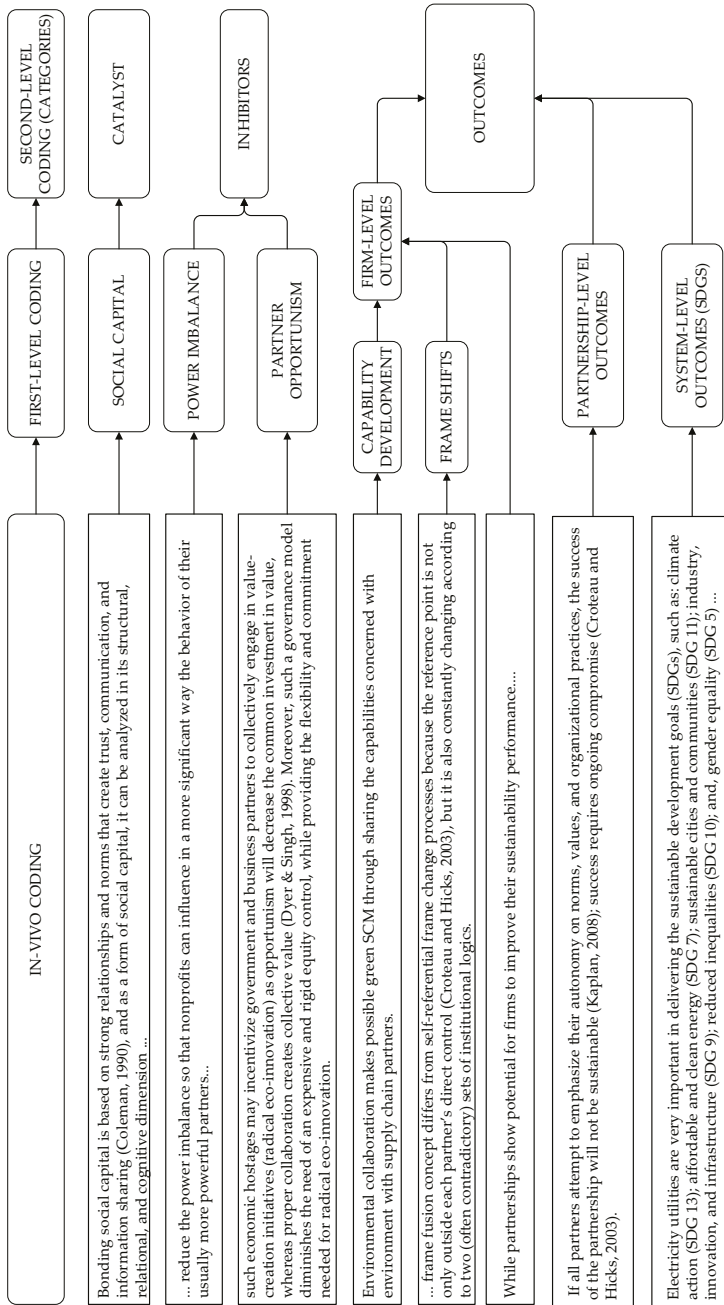
Figure 1. The coding process with some examples.

4. Findings

This section introduces a model based on the review findings as organized in Figure 2. This model includes the following categories: partner characteristics, partnership characteristics, environmental conditions, catalysts and inhibitors, inter-organizational learning process and its outcomes (See Table in the Appendix A to view the articles in the review that contribute to different categories in the model).
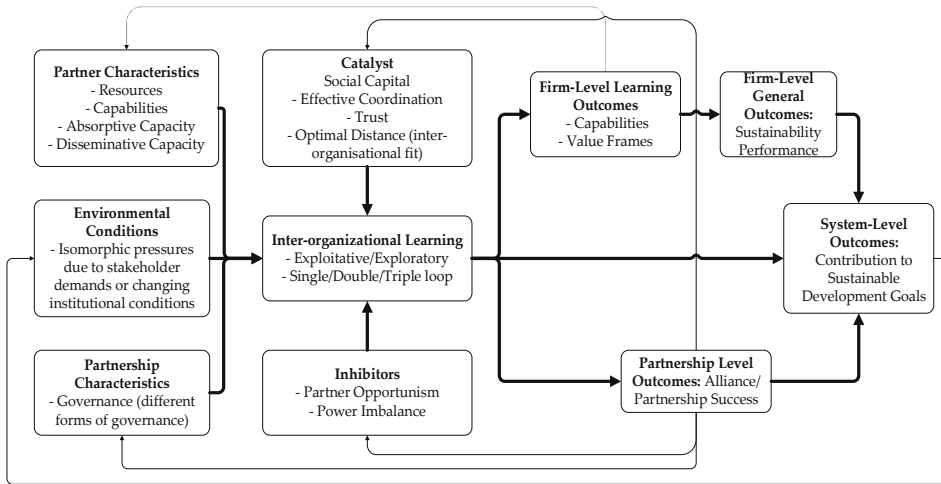
Figure 2. The model of inter-organizational sustainability learning.

This model shows some differences when compared to the inter-organizational learning process that take place in the context of commercial business alliances, which is discussed in the Theory section. First, while the learning literature in the business context discusses both internal and external pressures that motivate actors to learn, in the sustainability context, 'environmental conditions' demonstrated mostly isomorphic pressures set by the external environment. Second, there are several feedback loops identified in this review (represented with a thinner curved line in Figure 2). Third, other than firm-level and partnership-level outcomes, in the context of sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships, system-level outcomes have been identified.

4.1. Partner Characteristics

In his critical review, Wassmer calls partner characteristics as "focal firm-level antecedents" and identifies that existing resources and capabilities, a focal firm's strategy and existing portfolio of partnerships fall under this category [120]. While these factors are focal-firm level antecedents that explain firms' entrance into collaborations, based on the review, two critical partner characteristics appear as antecedents of inter-organizational learning: absorptive capacity and disseminative capacity.

Absorptive capacity is the capacity of learning at an organization; in other words, the ability of a firm to assimilate and apply new knowledge successfully to its goals [122]. In the context of sustainability, these goals are not only commercial but also social and environmental. Hence, a firm's absorptive capacity in the sustainability context is to do with pre-existing alliances and partnerships for sustainability, its sustainability-related management systems and organizational capabilities [135,136].

A recent study expands the notion of absorptive capacity in the area of sustainability from the ability to absorb sustainability-related external knowledge to create economic value to incorporating societal values to create social/environmental value [137]. This study argues that absorptive capacity helps firms to go beyond the acquisition of essential environmental or social sustainability-related knowledge from external sources. At the same time, it explains why some firms are receptive to

a broad understanding of value; they articulate consistently their willingness to engage in value creation with a responsive approach [137]. Studies emphasize that absorptive capacity explains how some firms develop sustainable product and service innovations [136,138–141], proactive sustainability strategies [142], and environmental and CSR practices and capabilities [143].

Absorptive capacity explains why a focal firm would be willing and open to learning in different areas [144,145], and how it can engage in inter-organizational learning using its specific ability to acquire knowledge based on its prior experience [146]. However, inter-organizational learning does not only depend on this focal firm. It also depends on their partner's ability to teach and disseminate knowledge and values [147]. In the context of environmental collaborations with suppliers, "firms that have a high quality of environmental capabilities disseminate green knowledge to supply chain partners by means of diffusing new capabilities to achieve high efficiency in supply chain processes" [146]. Similarly, in multi-stakeholder platforms about climate change, the dissemination of "information about climate change challenges and opportunities to the participants" helped in "motivating them to start innovating new low-carbon products, services, and business models" [132].

Similarly, Lin [148] gives the example of the collaboration between "the Pew Center on Global Climate Change and the World Resource Institute" which "are working closely with firms to promote and disseminate environmental solutions/technologies." Through the knowledge and value dissemination that takes place between the partners, she highlights that a partner may shift their mental models and develop sustainable business models that address complex environmental problems proactively. Others focus on the role broker organizations in disseminating knowledge in public private partnerships (PPPs). They highlight that broker "organizations frequently organize problem-related round tables and disseminate PPP best practice cases with an inspirational purpose" [126].

In sum, in addition to firms' existing knowledge, resources, culture and strategies that motivate them into entering alliances and partnerships for sustainability, firms' absorptive capacity and their partners' disseminative capacity help explaining the extent of their learning from these collaborations. It should be highlighted that absorptive capacity can be enhanced as a result of engaging in collaborations, developing new capabilities, and gaining new perspectives and values, hence the feedback relationship in Figure 2 [145]. In a similar vein to the literature in alliances in the business context [92,93,149,150], the research on sustainability-oriented partnerships also focus much more on focal firm's absorptive capacity, and yet much less attention has been given to partner firm's ability to disseminate knowledge and values.

4.2. Partnership Characteristics

The alliance or partnership characteristics are to do with the bond between the focal firm and its partner. Wassmer refers to this as "partnership-level contingencies" [120]. The review shows that the essential partnership characteristic that impact learning is to do with governance.

Governance, herein, is defined as "the coordination that is characterized by organic or informal social systems" [151]. In other words, it describes "the facilitation and administrative routines" [152]. Governance determines "the structures and processes by which societies share power, shapes individual and collective actions" by introducing "laws, regulations, discursive debates, negotiation, mediation, conflict resolution, elections, public consultations, protests, and other decision-making processes" [153].

Different forms of governance may aim to impact at different levels. For instance, a PPP with local authorities may intend to create a local effect [154,155]. In contrast, initiatives such as the UNGC, the UN Principles for Responsible Investment (UNPRI), and the GRI aim for global impact [151]. Nevertheless, other initiatives such as Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative, Responsible Care, Forest Stewardship Council and Marine Stewardship Council aim impact in specific industrial fields [151,156].

Actors such as governments, firms or NGOs can engage in non-collaborative forms of governance to tackle environmental and social sustainability challenges. A study finds that "firms should first invest in becoming a strongly sustainable firm before investing in external collaboration" since they

"will benefit from co-aligned sustainability collaboration with external partners only if they are leading in sustainability practices within their own practices" [157]. Others, however, highlight that "collaborative forms of governance are best viewed as dynamic, problem-solving processes in which learning about social-ecological change is an essential component" [158].

In the context of sustainability, some studies have referred to polycentric governance, whereby there are many authorities involved that act as centers for decision-making [153]. Polycentric governance "creates possibilities for moderating vertical interplay among institutions" [153]. Such governance is often tripartite; meaning that it includes "representatives from businesses, civil society, and the state; therefore, they can be distinguished from more traditional types of alliances, such as strategic alliances between business organizations, social alliances between business and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and public-private partnerships" [132].

Other than tripartite partnerships, studies show various types of collaborative governance that can be applied to environmental and social sustainability challenges, including joint ventures [159], licensing [27], and social franchising [160,161], to other forms of network governance [151]. Generally, scholars, in a similar fashion to the commercial business context, differentiate between formal and informal governance [162]; in other words, contractual and relational governance [125,163]. Indeed, while parties may collaborate by abiding by the rules and norms and contract sets, parties may also rely on trust to create synergistic relational rents [157]. To discuss relational governance, studies often discuss 'trust'. However, since trust is also a relational dimension of social capital, it will be discussed as a catalyst.

Governance affects how the relationship between different parties are organized and therefore, crucially, it has an impact on how the partners can learn from each other. For instance, some scholars note that the distinct equity and non-equity forms of governance impact inter-organizational learning [164]. They highlight that while equity forms require a tight coupling between the parties, non-equity forms are often associated with loose coupling. These scholars propose that the non-equity forms are likely to be associated with exploratory learning with a diverse set of partners; whereas equity forms are likely to be associated with an exploitative learning homogenous set of partners [164]. Therefore, the way in which the partnership is governed would affect the degree and type of inter-organizational learning.

4.3. Context

Environmental conditions are often used to explain why firms need to engage in inter-organizational learning in the first place [120]. In the words of Liu, Esangbedo and Bai [161], "the purpose of organizational learning is to achieve a new understanding of the external environment of the members and organizations through an effective mechanism of formation, dissemination, and sharing"; hence environmental conditions set a rationale for learning. Indeed, one study finds that "companies adapt their strategies and orient them towards CSR to stakeholder pressures also independently from what they are actually learning from them" [138]. This finding shows the crucial impact of the external environment in shaping firms' organizational behavior when it comes to sustainability issues. For instance, the "environmental catastrophe following the explosion at the Fukushima nuclear plant in March 2011" has led to "growth in anti-nuclear sentiment, a rise in the stock prices of renewable energy companies, and an interest in clean technology and renewable energy firms" [165]. Such external events often motivate companies to engage in various partnerships with stakeholders.

Environmental conditions are often explained using theories such as stakeholder theory [138,166] or institutional theory [133,164,167]. These scholars focus on 'institutional pressures' or 'stakeholder pressures' that create a form of legitimacy crisis on firms, which then motivate them to enter collaborative relationships and engage in inter-organizational learning. Most scholars refer to Suchman's [168] seminal definition of legitimacy which is "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" [137,156,169]. Drawing on the seminal work of DiMaggio and

Powell [170], the review articles discuss three types of isomorphic pressures that lead firms to engage in inter-organizational learning [148,155,167,171,172]: coercive, mimetic and normative.

Coercive pressures are often associated with government policy and regulations about sustainability challenges [139,164,173,174]. For instance, a study highlights how "legal trends, such as the European Union Directives, significantly influence operation systems, product-markets, and business strategies of firms" as well as their collaboration patterns [121]. Another study, on the other hand, highlights how in multinational corporations, depending on the regulatory environment, the absorptive capacity of a subsidiary changes from that shared absorptive capacity of headquarters [143]. Another study highlights that often cross-sector partnerships and multi-stakeholder platforms are positioned to address government failures [120] and the creation of positive externalities [127,174].

Normative pressures may arise from industrial or societal norms [164]. For instance, Lin and Darnall give the example of the participation of electric utilities in the US Department of Energy's Climate Challenge Program "to collectively improve their public image and reduce the climate emissions for the utility sector as a whole" which helped these firms "to ameliorate normative pressures from their professional networks, and conform to values and social norms exerted by the industrial associations" [164].

Mimetic pressures are to do with the competitive environment of the firms. For instance, one study finds that firms' engagement in CSR is difficult to imitate by other firms even when there exist conditions for mimetic pressures [167]. The authors highlight that this is because the knowledge that is needed for substantive CSR engagement is sticky. However, the study highlights that such substantive engagement may be facilitated by the selected governance structure, culture, or capability development [167].

It is essential to highlight, however, that coercive, normative and mimetic pressures, of course, affect the actors through their cognitive filters or perceptions. Zou, Xie, Meng and Yang [167] highlight that the perceptions of decision-makers about the institutional pressures faced are shaped by their accumulated experience and knowledge. Therefore, the engagement of firms with a proactive or reactive strategy due to isomorphic pressures also come down to firms' perceptions of these pressures. This perception, indeed, would both affect the motivation to engage in a partnership and the intention or willingness to learn [175].

Finally, the institutional environment may also impact the kind of alliances and partnerships that focal firms form. For instance, "in industries with diffuse stakeholder pressures, firms that seek to strategically differentiate themselves engage in proactive alliances, e.g., the alliance between Starbucks, a leading specialty coffee company, and the environmental non-profit Conservation International" [145]. On the contrary, "intense public criticism and impending regulatory pressures in the extractive and energy production industries drive reactive alliances as seen between DuPont and the non-profit World Resources Institute" [149]. In sum, the institutional environment impacts the perception of actors, and shapes their intention to partner, and therefore, affect who they partner with and how much they can learn [145].

4.4. Catalyst

In the context of sustainability-oriented alliances, scholars define social capital as "social cohesion and strength of relationships among partners" [176], or as "a set of resources such as trust, norms, and values that are accessed through a network of social relations and can be mobilized to facilitate action" [126]. These studies discuss how social capital and the idea of investing in social relations can bring about new opportunities for actors [177]. For instance, the social capital of social enterprises offers some benefits to corporations such as access to community and local knowledge when they engage in collaborations [134].

Arya and Salk [145] propose that "firms with greater social capital across hierarchical levels within and between cross-sector alliance partners will positively influence learning that can enhance diffusion

and integration of codes of conduct into corporate culture compared with firms with lower social capital." In a similar vein, others highlight that social capital "instil[s] a shared vision and strategic alignments toward common goals and collective outcomes [151]. At an individual level, boundary spanners can facilitate the accumulation of social capital [145]; at an organizational level, on the other hand, a similar facilitation role is taken by broker organizations who connect otherwise unconnected contacts [126,172].

Scholars identified three dimensions of social capital, in line with the seminal work of Nahapiet and Ghoshal [178]: structural, cognitive and relational. Structural dimension "refers to the overall pattern of connections between actors" [126]. These patterns of connections include the "roles, rules for decision-making and communication, procedures, precedents and networks that facilitate mutually beneficial collective action" [177]. Relational dimension "describes the personal relationships people have developed through a history of interactions" [126]. Finally, the cognitive dimension is described as "shared representation, interpretation, and systems of meaning among partners" [126]. Scholars highlight that social capital "may be produced and/or increased" as a result of inter-organizational learning [158].

4.4.1. Structural Dimension of Social Capital: Effective Coordination

The structural dimension of social capital is to do with coordination patterns, roles and responsibilities of parties involved.

Coordination is to do with "communicating potential solutions, setting priorities for particularly promising ones, and assimilating various solutions" [179]. In a partnership setting, different partners would provide different types of resources, knowledge and values, and effective coordination helps actors integrate these different types of resources, knowledge and values to come up with a solution to a sustainability challenge [179]. In the context of cross-sector partnerships, a study finds that cross-team coordination mechanisms have proved helpful by allowing organizations to "understand each other's unique circumstances" and thanks to these coordination mechanisms, organizations were able to fuse different value frames [12].

Sustainability-related initiatives may require changes in the traditional relationships between some partners. For instance, a firm needs to extend or transform an existing relationship with supply chain partners to align itself with the principles of the circular economy [180,181]. Effective coordination mechanisms and establishment of clear roles and responsibilities improve inter-organizational relationships and, more specifically, inter-organizational learning outcomes [131,157]. Notably, an agreement on how collaboration is coordinated, along with how roles and responsibilities are distributed, require attention in the initial partnership design phase [182].

4.4.2. Relational Dimension of Social Capital: Trust

The relational dimension of social capital that impacts inter-organizational learning is trust. Scholars highlight that trust "facilitates the openness for exchange of tacit knowledge, which is relatively difficult to communicate or trade in markets, and durability of relationships, which otherwise may collapse when problems arise between exchanging partners in pure market relationships" [183]. The literature highlights that the stronger the trust between partners, the stronger their ties and the more they can learn and innovate in a partnership [122,183,184].

Scholars have defined trust in different ways and focused on different types of trust. One definition is "a belief, sentiment or expectation about an exchange partner that results from the partner's expertise, reliability and intentionality, or from the partner's honesty and benevolence" [122]. In other words, trust is identified as "the expectation that the partner will pursue cooperation, fulfil obligations, and try to maintain the relationship between the other parties" [161].

Scholars differentiated between personal trust which is "extended primarily to another human being" and system trust, which "concerns trust in the steering mechanisms of social interaction and the functionality of so-called expert systems (e.g., money, power, companies, and networks)" [156].

Others defined institutional trust, similar to the concept of system trust [185]. They highlighted that trust in institutions specifically play a significant role in the management of relationships between actors from different sectors [185]. Finally, some scholars defined a specific type of trust that makes sustainability collaborations distinct: aspirational trust. Aspirational trust "reflects a vision of the potential that may transcend one's organization, expressing one's personal, "pro-social" ideology and motivation for action" [152].

Having prior relationships with a particular partner is identified as a factor that would help trust formation [152,186]. According to Vinke-de Kruijf, et al. [187], "when actors interact with each other over a longer period of time, they gain additional information about other actors that are rooted in relational experiences." If their experiences are positive, then they will be more inclined to trust others [187]; however, partners may also be engaging for the first time in some sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships. In these cases, their perceived reputation may yield an initial bonding trust [188]. Trust can even enhance relationships and improve learning when there are cognitive differences between partners since it acts as a glue and helps actors empathize with their differences [184].

4.4.3. Cognitive Dimension of Social Capital: Optimal Distance

The review demonstrates that the cognitive dimension of social capital is to do with shared cognition, values, logics, norms, and culture [120]. However, the review shows that in the context of sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships, it may not be straightforward to share cognitive elements due to the complexity and subjectivity of sustainability. Although, based on the review, it is possible to identify two characteristics: the proximity (or distance) of cognition and institutional logics [189]. The degree of similarities in these dimensions is also commonly referred to as compatibility between partners or inter-organizational fit [166].

Scholars define cognitive distance as differences of partner organizations with regards to their organizational frames, which are "interpretations used to make sense of the world." In other words, cognitive distance is to do with the "similarity in actors' frames of reference, and mental modes facilitate effective and efficient communication and transfer of knowledge, although some extent of differentiation is needed for new ideas, creativity, and innovation to emerge" [183]. On the other hand, institutional distance is referred to as field-level differences between organizations with regards to their institutional logics which are "taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that shape the behavior of organizations in specific societal sectors" [189].

Some scholars highlight that these cognitive and institutional distances between partners pose both opportunities and challenges in terms of inter-organizational learning [189]. Some highlight that an optimum level of frame plurality can be achieved in collaborations [11]. Nevertheless, others argue that "different logics, values, interests, and knowledge systems need to converge" [131]. In other words, they argue that "shared mental models of interpretation may improve the firm's capability to perceive focal issues in strategic nets and may empower the firm and the network to better respond to environmental challenges" [165].

Some scholars focus on measuring the impact of distance on the partnerships' and firms' sustainability performance [189]. Others take a longitudinal understanding of distance and argue that "the initial cognitive distance between the parties reduces through interactions and becomes a bidirectional exchange of knowledge" [140]. Indeed, some argue that it is this process of social learning that lead to changes or shifts in value frames [184]; which will be further discussed in Section 4.7.

For example, the following differences between for-profits and social enterprises due to logics are evidenced [134]: the value creation objectives (private value vs. public value), ownership structure (for-profit vs. non-profit), organizational governance (hierarchical vs. participative), accountability (to shareholders vs. to stakeholders). In the context of environmental research partnerships between scientists and for-profits, a study found that the differences in dominant logics can lead to different expectations regarding the outcome of the research [174]. As such, for-profit firms are associated with

a market or commercial logic that drives them to expect "exploitable results through short-term applied research" from such partnerships, while scientists may target generation of publications out of the research partnership as an outcome [174].

Similar tensions are also commonly observed in firm-NGO interactions [12,128,190]. A recent study highlights that the impact of such cognitive and institutional differences on learning may depend on partners' "value empathy" [190]. The "value empathy mechanism involves interventions which not only create an exchange of resources in the context of an individual project but also an ongoing capability to absorb knowledge across sectors" [190].

The review shows the learning from a partnership depends on the cognition and institutional backgrounds of collaborating parties. While the differences are more substantial in the context of cross-sector partnerships, even in the context of inter-firm alliances, partners have varying degrees of corporate environmentalism or corporate sustainability, which means varying value frames about sustainability [186,188]. It is plausible to expect that there would be an optimal distance between the partners whereby they are different enough to learn from each other and, at the same time, close enough to be able to understand each other's language and work together, which would act as a catalyst to inter-organizational learning [11,189].

4.5. Inhibitors

The review shows that partner opportunism and power imbalance may inhibit inter-organizational sustainability learning.

Opportunism is defined as "self-interest seeking with guile, leading to deceit-oriented violation of implicit or explicit promises" [122]. Therefore, an opportunistic partner would manipulate the goals or the outcomes of the partnership towards its interests; which would diminish trust between partners and inhibit inter-organizational learning [122,166,171,180]. It is the various forms of governance that often protects an organization from a potentially opportunistic partner [134]. For instance, through equity-based governance, as in the case of joint ventures, firms can incentivize their partners financially against possible opportunism [127]. Partner opportunism can also be tackled with non-economic mechanisms, including trust and development of social capital [156]. Indeed, the expectation of partner opportunism increases in the existence of another inhibitor: power imbalance; meaning that partners who perceive themselves weak or inferior in the relationship dynamic would expect their partners to act opportunistically, and even engage in opportunism themselves, to shield themselves from potential opportunism and damage the relationship [186].

Scholars note different types of power, including but not limited to operational power, informational power, economic power, or social power [191]. Scholars also highlight that "if the power base of stakeholders is weak or if critical actors use their power to resist, learning is hampered" [191]. Some argue that "where knowledge exchange takes place it is likely to be because power is also being shared—to a greater or lesser extent—helping to provide a more conducive decision environment where the proponent/authority is also willing to receive" [169]. In line with this, others find that power imbalance between partners negatively moderates the relationship between incompatible logics and partnership survival [171]. These scholars highlight that the power imbalance would further amplify the cognitive differences between partners and may lead to situations whereby the more powerful partner imposes their dominant logics and frames to the weaker partner [171]. Relying on resource dependence theory, these scholars argue that one way to combat power imbalance is through the mutual dependence of partners, which are "bilateral dependencies regardless of whether the partners' dependencies are balanced or imbalanced" [171]. These mutual dependencies are also reflected as complementarities between partners and "the extent of which each partner contributes unique strengths and resources to synergize new value" [166].

Finally, like other discussed characteristics, power imbalance and opportunism are not stable during a partnership relationship [174]. One study found that "balance in power and dependence develops over time" and "in the process of balancing the relationship between power and dependence,

the relative absorptive capacity also increased, especially in the knowledge base and dominant logic dimension" [174].

4.6. Inter-Organizational Learning Process

Studies have discussed different types of learning processes, namely single-, double-, and triple-loop or higher-order learning, and exploitative and exploratory learning are discussed. Here, what is meant by learning is 'relationship learning' which is "a joint activity in which two parties strive to create more value together than they would create individually or with other partners" [192].

Single-loop or first-order learning is identified as "fixing errors from routines" [158] without questioning "boundary conditions, frames, assumptions", in other words, "the usually 'tacit' assumptions implicit in the paradigm" [193]. It "contributes to insights and approaches for improving performance and efficiency (e.g., in skills and practices) to meet existing goals" [194]. This type of learning is characterized as the "optimization of existing routines, practices and systems" [184]. One study highlights that actors do not reflect on whether a particular system is sustainable or not during single-loop learning [184].

Double-loop or second-order learning is identified as "correcting errors by examining values and policies" [158], or "reflecting on the assumptions which underlie our actions" [177]. In other words, it is about "reflecting on existing frames and [that] actors have become capable of viewing and adapting these frames, paradigms, and values by a process that has been coined frame reflection" [193].

Triple-loop learning is identified as "designing governance norms and protocols . . . to improve the capacity of an organization to engage in single- or double-loop learning" [158]. This kind of learning "encourages a more open-ended and deep-seated discussion about what the primary challenges are and ways to reshape the values, norms, and social structures to address it" [194].

Exploitative learning focuses on "applying successful practices into large-scale manufacturing, dissemination of existing technology, and standardization of the current routine to enhance efficiency" [148]. In other words, exploitative learning is to do with "the acquisition of new behavioral capacities framed within existing insights" [191]. On the other hand, exploratory learning is associated with "new searches and experimentation" and "risk-taking and variance-increasing activities in learning, experimentation, flexibility, discovering, and distant search" [195].

It is important to note that, to contribute towards SDGs, all types of learning are needed [158]. While single-loop or first-order learning helps firms with building new or enhancing existing sustainability-oriented capabilities, double- and triple-loop learning helps firms reflect on existing values and shift their frames.

4.7. Outcomes

The review demonstrates different types of outcomes: firm-level, partnership-level and system-level [120].

4.7.1. Firm-Level Outcomes

Firm-level outcomes can be described in two categories: firm-level learning and general outcomes. As introduced earlier in the introduction, the value generated from a partnership is not limited to the interaction value of learning. Therefore, herein, the outcomes of learning are recognized as capability development and shifts in value frames, while other outcomes of partnerships are identified as 'general outcomes' in the model presented in Figure 2.

According to Vinke-de Kruijf, Bressers and Augustijn [187] "there are mutual relations between an interaction process and actor characteristics: the characteristics shape the process and are also shaped by the process"; meaning, "learning involves changes in actor characteristics." As highlighted in the Partner Characteristics section, existing resources, capabilities, and absorptive and disseminative capacity are included in these characteristics. In this paper, the focus as an outcome is on capabilities because a large number of studies focus on how firms can develop new capabilities through learning

that takes place in sustainability-oriented partnerships [49,139,141,165,196–198]. Development of new capabilities and shifts towards different frames are often associated with an improved absorptive capacity [192,197,199]. Therefore, partner characteristics improve as a result of the learning process [187].

In the context of sustainable supply chain management, collaborative relationships with suppliers positively impact the development of organizational capabilities, which then positively impact a firm's sustainability performance [200]. Similarly, in alliances between governments and firms that aim to foster radical eco-innovations, close interactions in alliances have yielded a generation of new capabilities that can help firms address sustainability problems [127]. These can be technical or operational capabilities that can help firms reduce their environmental or societal impact [141]; equally, these capabilities may also be dynamic capabilities such as alliance/partnership management or 'external integration' capabilities [4]. This capability is an organization's ability to organize and manage relationships with external partners [201]. Indeed, through partnerships, firms would not only learn 'what to do' and 'how to do it' to become sustainable; but also, would learn how to engage with various partners better.

While these capability-related changes are likely to result from single-loop learning [197], more profound changes can also be observed. Thanks to close interactions with partners that lead to cognitive learning, shifts in value frames can also be observed [127]. Collaborative partnerships may require "reframing, which involves perspective-taking and the possibility of enlarging or revising one's frame to take account of how their counterparts view the situation" [202]. Le Ber and Branzei [12] find evidence of "partners not only updat[ing] their frame concerning each other, but they also do so in reference to, and in conversation with, each other" whereby they go beyond the reframing process to frame fusion in which their frames are continually changing.

At the organizational-level, studies have differentiated between narrow or simple and broad or complex frames [189]. While some studies propose that the engagement of various types of partnerships depend on these simple or complex frames [189,203], others focus on how, within a partnership, these frames shift over time. An optimal frame plurality is achieved whereby various frames evolve within the lifecycle of a partnership; some frames lose traction, yet others are sustained [11]. These kinds of frameshifting, frame fusing, or frame-breaking outcomes are likely to be associated with double- or triple-loop learning [191].

There are also general outcomes of partnerships associated with the creation of associational value, transferred resource value and synergistic value [9], as well as interaction value, which is considered as learning in this article. Thanks to the development of new capabilities and shifts in value frames, as well as the creation of associational, transferred resource and synergistic value, partnerships would help firms improve their environmental performance [136,146,147,189,195,198], social performance [133,167], sustainability performance [200,204], innovation performance [205] and may even improve economic performance [121].

It is important to note that not all studies find evidence that inter-organizational learning, or sustainability collaborations, in general, impact performance positively [173,206]. This study, as shown in Figure 2, expects to see an improvement in the sustainability performance of a focal firm, both due to gained capabilities and shifts in frames, as well as other types of value created within a partnership. However, it may also be methodologically problematic to measure the exact contribution of a partnership on a firm's sustainability performance. Often, firms engage in a portfolio of partnerships [203] and it is this portfolio that allows firms to create synergistic value at the portfolio-level [119,120]. Furthermore, realizing the benefits of partnerships either through the value created thanks to learning, or other value dimensions, may require time and, therefore, observation in longitudinal settings.

4.7.2. Partnership-Level Outcomes: Alliance/Partnership Success

Amongst other performance outcomes in the review, partnership-level outcomes have received the least attention. The definition of partnership success has been somewhat vague: while some took

partnership success as the sustenance of the partnership [171], others provided an organization-level definition focusing on what different organizations take away from the partnership [207]. Partnership success can generally be considered as an accomplishment of goals that are set out by the parties involved within the timeframe agreed upon [176]. One study explicitly focuses on the role of institutional logics and resource dependencies on partnership success [171]. Others refer to 'partnership' or 'alliance' success; however, they do not explicitly measure the impact of various factors on partnership success [186]. Sanzo, Álvarez and Rey [207] proposed that "the existence of a process of learning within the non-profit will probably enhance the firm's perception (and also the non-profit's own appreciation) about the non-profit's capability to contribute to partnership success".

Partnership-level outcomes are expected to be in a dynamic relationship with (shown as a feedback relationship in Figure 2) to the partnership characteristics, catalysts, and inhibitors. Generally, collaboration experience can help to build capabilities to manage such partnerships more effectively in the future and assess what modes of governance are more appropriate under which circumstances, which was also discussed in the previous section [51,127]. Also, within a continuing partnership, partners can reflect on the partnership outcomes collectively, assess whether the chosen mode of governance allowed creating a solution space for a particular problem, and evaluate whether the expected learning outcomes are achieved by all parties involved. Furthermore, within a continuing partnership, partners can also reflect on the inhibitors and catalysts that impact the learning process.

It should be noted that poor learning may also impact partnership performance negatively and may later act as an inhibitor, or a positive learning experience may enhance trust (feedback relationships). These feedback relationships explain why a focal firm would partner with an organization that they had an amicable relationship with before and why it may refrain from partnering an organization that they have lost trust in due to a previous engagement that resulted in poor performance.

4.7.3. System-Level Outcomes: Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

System-level outcomes are macro-level societal or environmental benefits [208]. Several studies identified the system-level outcomes of inter-organizational sustainability learning by discussing how these alliances and partnerships help to address SDGs [5,19,131,176,193,203,209], or previously discussed millennium development goals [210]. For instance, Dzhengiz [203] provided evidence from electric utilities focusing on alliances and partnerships that address SDG 7 and 13. Kolk and Lenfant [211] focus on the role of partnerships for SDG 16, promotion of just, peaceful and inclusive societies, while Le Ber and Branzei [12] focus on the role of partnerships for SDG 3, access to healthcare. Even though the majority of the articles have not explicitly referred to how studied alliances and partnerships have contributed to SDGs, all articles in the review focused on alliances and partnerships that addressed various SDGs implicitly (see Table in the Appendix A).

Among others, only SDG 5 was not addressed by the studies in the review. All articles in the review have contributed to SDG 17, as all articles discussed the role of partnerships and alliances to tackle sustainability challenges. SDG 17 was followed by SDG 8, as expected, highlighted in 40% of the articles with the emphasis on sustainability-oriented innovation that can be generated through partnerships. Finally, around 5% of articles focused on partnerships that aimed to tackle SDG 13, climate action and SDG 12—sustainable cities (3%).

5. Future Research

As a review article, this study identifies some limitations of the extant research and offers paths for future studies, following the categories in Figure 2.

5.1. Partner Characteristics

Articles in the review have frequently focused on partners' characteristics such as partners' capacity to learn or absorb knowledge. However, they have not taken 'learning' as a bi-directional concept, whereby both partners need to absorb and disseminate knowledge. This shows that studies

that focus on inter-organizational sustainability learning can benefit from a more comprehensive bi-directional understanding of learning, hence, an understanding of both parties' absorptive and disseminative capacities. To do so, future studies should integrate the recently growing literature on disseminative capacity [92,93,149,150].

In line with this comment, it should be also noted that this study also provided a limited understanding of the learning phenomenon since it mostly focused on actors from the private sector, their learning needs and outcomes, and their potential contributions to systemic and wicked sustainability challenges. Future studies can empirically study the partner characteristics of other societal actors and how these different characteristics would impact the bi-directional process of learning.

Moreover, studies in this realm can benefit from a paradoxical understanding of inter-organizational sustainability learning by focusing on how embeddedness into existing capabilities may create vicious or virtual cycles, drawing on the literature of organizational paradoxes [212–217]. The review shows that, to some degree, a firm's organizational capabilities and absorptive capacity will determine how much it can learn from a sustainability-oriented alliance or partnership. Focusing on longitudinal studies, future studies can further interrogate how firms overcome this embeddedness paradox in the context of sustainability and provide evidence for firms that were able to turn their vicious cycles into virtuous ones through mindful interventions [213,218].

5.2. Partnership Characteristics

Articles in the review have frequently referred to "governance" as a partnership/alliance characteristic that would impact learning. However, comparative explorations seeking to understand which modes of governance allow more room for learning, and under what conditions, have been somewhat limited [148,158,164]. Future studies can focus on the relationship between different modes of governance (such as equity vs. non-equity alliances, network governance, polycentric governance) and learning types or levels (exploratory, exploitative, single-/double-/triple-loop).

Besides, it is plausible to expect that different SDGs would require different forms of learning, and hence, different forms of governance. However, a holistic approach to how firms address different SDGs through different types of governance that allow a different type of learning is yet to develop. Such an approach can be developed, drawing on the literature on alliance or partnership portfolios [219].

Furthermore, studies also highlight that there would be differences in the contractual governance of partnerships, depending on the partner type (inter-firm vs. cross-sector) [220]. However, there has generally been limited attention to this area in literature, which requires further attention [221,222]. Notably, future research needs to investigate the differences in inter-organizational learning in inter-firm and cross-sector partnerships for various governance forms and examine the how governance affects the learning mode and type and the impact of learning on sustainability performance.

5.3. Context

The review showed that both institutional theory and stakeholder theory highlighted the role of the external environment and legitimacy pressures on firms as a motivator of engaging in inter-organizational sustainability learning. However, articles in the review have not focused on the role of the 'internal context' of firms also setting pressures for such engagement. Meaning, employees', and managers' roles in initiating inter-organizational sustainability learning processes need to be understood further.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to measure the impact of 'legitimacy crisis' on inter-organizational learning using a quantitative method. While existing studies highlight the legitimacy crisis as a factor that explains partnership formation, it is also evidenced, in some studies, that partnerships formed to address a legitimacy crisis may not always yield learning opportunities [223].

5.4. Catalyst

Articles in the review frequently focused on at least one of the dimensions of social capital, social capital's role in improving inter-organizational sustainability learning and partnership outcomes. However, it is essential to highlight that most studies have analyzed different dimensions of social capital in isolation, with a few exceptions [126]. Some solely focused on trust as a relational dimension [122,156,188]; others on cognitive and institutional differences [12,189]; and yet others on structural dimensions and coordination patterns [179]. Future research needs to address the impact of social capital on inter-organizational sustainability learning, especially using longitudinal studies since social capital changes in different phases of a partnership.

Furthermore, the extant literature often studied how social capital may generally catalyze the relationship between the partners and improve partnership outcomes; however, it is most likely that the impact of social capital on partnership performance is mediated by inter-organizational learning [122]. Future studies can take into consideration more sophisticated models to test these webs of relations.

Finally, future studies should also take into consideration to what extent social capital improves inter-organizational learning when there are strong influences of various inhibitors such as power imbalance and partner opportunism. In line with this, recent literature lacks a longitudinal analysis of both inhibitors and catalysts, looking at whether and how these factors change in different phases of an alliance relationship.

5.5. Inhibitors

The impact of partner opportunism on inter-organizational learning and partnership performance is widely discussed in the context of inter-firm alliances [224–226]. Surprisingly, in the context of inter-organizational learning within sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships, partner opportunism has not been studied as much. This is likely to do with the researcher bias in the field and the expectation that sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships are more altruistic [11]. However, this does not mean a firm's relationship with an NGO would involve less opportunism than a firm's relationship with another firm. The review shows that partner opportunism and learning paradoxes must be unpacked further in the context of sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships. Future research can focus on building a comparative analysis of how firms' opportunistic behaviors differ depending on the partner type and partner status.

Another inhibitor, power imbalance or asymmetries, is rarely studied in this literature. Furthermore, when it is studied, it is typically through the lens of resource dependence theory [171]; and rarely combined with theories of learning and knowledge development [174]. Power imbalance or asymmetries also impact what can be learned from whom within a partnership setting. Future studies in this field can benefit from studying inter-organizational learning, capability development and frameshifts through the lens of political processes of power, and draw on recent literature that integrates learning and power [227–229].

5.6. Inter-Organizational Learning Process

There has been growing attention given to triple-loop learning in the context of sustainability in recent years [106,107,158,194]. However, as a construct, triple-loop learning has also received some criticisms in the broader literature of organizational learning [230]. Studies within the context of sustainability have not elaborated these debates regarding 'triple-loop learning', and the concept appears to be misused or gets reified as did other concepts such as absorptive capacity [231], and recent clarifications about the concept can contribute to the work of future scholars [230].

Second, there have been studies that focused on partnership formation motivations that proposed how "resourced-based motivation is more likely to be associated with firms' participation in exploration alliances" [148]. In contrast "institutional motivation is more likely to be associated with firms' participation in exploitation alliances" [148]. However, these studies have not focused on how some

prior exploitation alliances may, in the future, yield exploration alliances with the same partners or vice versa for exploration.

Longitudinal assessments of partnership portfolios can further enhance our understanding by showing how firms engage with various partners, as well as explore and exploit. Furthermore, it is likely that, as in the context of commercial inter-firm alliances [94,95,232], firms would use their alliance and partnership portfolios: (a) to balance the tensions between exploration and exploitation of sustainable products, technologies and processes, (b) to balance the tensions between the triple bottom line of sustainability (environmental, social and economic sustainability), (c) to balance the tensions between short-term and long-term concerns. However, the literature on partnership portfolios has, thus far, been limited in the sustainability context [203,219]. While some studies highlighted how, at the level of the dyad, a single alliance provides a space for learning, portfolios are likely to provide a broader space for resolving tensions mentioned above.

5.7. Outcomes

In the extant literature, there was some focus on frameshifts [11,12] and capability development [49,233], but a limited quantitative assessment of how such learning enhances firm performance (environmental, social, economic). A reason why this has been a barrier is also to do with the dyadic focus of this literature [120]. Future research can, instead, focus on portfolios to measure: (a) what kind of alliances/partnerships improve what kind of performance (environmental, social, economic), and (b) how the impact of partnership type on performance is mediated by various types of learning. Such approaches have been limited [135,234], and often used different measures or different types of collaborations. Therefore, the results have been somewhat conflicting [173], which is why future research should clarify the impact of inter-organizational sustainability learning on various performance outcomes.

Still, in comparison to firm-level outcomes, partnership-level outcomes have been studied even less. In the commercial inter-firm alliance context, partnership effectiveness or success has been frequently discussed [235–237] However, in the context of sustainability, only a few studies have focused on partnership terminations [186] and partnership success [171,207]. Future studies can further explore how inter-organizational learning and firm-level outcomes impact perceived partnership performance and study the impact of catalysts and inhibitors on this relationship.

Even though many studies used system-level arguments to explain partnership formation motivations, the system-level outcomes of partnerships themselves require further research. Most studies discuss why firms enter partnerships to tackle 'systemic' sustainability issues. However, they do not explain whether and how these partnerships effectively solve some societal and environmental sustainability challenges, or which SDGs these partnerships contribute towards and to what extent the impact of these partnerships can be measured. Future research should further focus on the effectiveness of these partnerships and their contribution to tackling sustainability challenges. A way this can be done is by identifying metrics that firms use to measure and communicate their sustainability progress according to different SDG areas, and to measure the improvements or the impact of a partnership using these metrics [238–240]. Another way is to link inter-organizational learning to sustainability transitions literature [241,242] and discuss how the single-, double- and triple-loop learning that takes place in alliances and partnerships may yield changes at the system-level [243,244].

Finally, it should be noted that the model presented in Figure 2 demonstrates potential relationships based on the extant literature. This model can be considered as a conceptual framework that helps us organize the existing literature through the lens of inter-organizational learning. However, this model is not tested empirically in this review article. Therefore, while some relationships and mechanisms are discussed herein, future research should further test this model, and especially investigate how the firm-level learning, firm-level general, partnership-level and system-level outcomes relate to and impact each other.

6. Conclusions: Contributions to Theory and Practice

This study contributed to theory in several ways. First, the study synthesized different theoretical perspectives and concepts and demonstrated how these different concepts build a complex picture of inter-organizational sustainability learning that is represented in Figure 2. Second, the study clarified various outcomes of sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships, and one of these outcomes is at the system-level, which can be understood as a contribution towards SDGs. The paper outlined how such a contribution does not only result directly from the partnership itself but also firm-level outcomes through the development of capabilities and shifts or expansions of firms' value frames. Besides, the paper outlined that these system-level outcomes make sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships distinct, as commercial alliances and partnerships do not focus on societal or public value creation. Finally, drawing on the review findings, the paper identified gaps and proposed areas for future research. Doing so, this study contributed to the literature on sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships of firms.

This study also contributed to the practice of sustainability practitioners. Previous research has already evidenced that sustainability practitioners are increasingly involved in managing alliances and partnerships, and therefore, they need skills to work in an interdisciplinary and collaborative manner. This study further adds that to manage sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships effectively, practitioners need to focus on how best they can learn from their partners, develop capabilities that enhance their sustainability performance and broaden their mental models—their value frames to different interpretations of sustainability. Furthermore, the model presented in the study is intended to guide practitioners in identifying what catalyzes and inhibits their learning relationship with partners and under which environmental conditions. Furthermore, the model helps in interrogating what characteristics a firm and its partners need to enhance the learning outcomes (such as capabilities, resources, absorptive capacity, disseminative capacity). Using such a model can improve the work of practitioners and the impact they can generate from partnerships at the firm-, partnership-, and system-level.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Articles in the Review: Type of partnership, SDGs, theories, methods, contribution to the framework and a short summary.

Ref	IF & CS 1	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[139]	IF	9, 17	Absorptive capacity, Resource-based view, dynamic capabilities	Quant.	Partner characteristics, environmental conditions, outcomes, catalyst	This study shows that absorptive capacity and sustainable collaboration has an essential impact on green innovation adaptation in the context of SMEs.
[183]	CS	2, 3, 17	Proximity (geographical, organizational, institutional, cognitive, social)	Qual.	Catalyst, partnership characteristics, outcomes	This study shows that to understand how collective impact, in other words, system-level outcomes can be generated through multi-stakeholder partnerships, it is necessary to evaluate the partnership using various proximity metrics and their impact on learning and innovation.
[151]	CS	17	Governance, network theory, CSR	Review	Partnership characteristics, catalyst, environmental conditions, inter-organizational learning process	This study reviews the literature on CSR initiatives and finds out how different modes of governance, namely networks as CSR governance, collaborative CSR governance, networked CSR governance, and integrated networked CSR governance, have emerged, and how they differ from each other in terms of their development, structure and form.
[147]	IF & CS	17	Sustainability-oriented partnerships (with various partners) and environmental performance	Quant.	Outcomes, partner characteristics, catalyst, inhibitors	This study shows that sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships positively affect firms' environmental performance, though the impact of different types of partners varies.
[192]	IF	9, 17	Relationship learning, absorptive capacity, green innovation (eco-innovation)	Quant.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process	This study shows that collaborations and absorptive capacity impact firms' green innovation performance positively.
[245]	IF	9, 17	Green innovation, environmental performance, knowledge spill overs	Quant.	Outcomes, partner characteristics, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process	This study shows that external knowledge sources increasingly have more impact on the development of green innovations through spill overs.
[107]	CS	2, 17	Organizational learning	Qual.	Inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, partnership characteristics, outcomes	This study shows how triple-loop learning took place in the setting of a cross-sector partnership that aims to achieve food distribution and improved nutrition in communities while working with a network of volunteers.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS [1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[158]	IF & CS	17	Organizational learning	Review	Inter-organizational learning process, partnership characteristics, catalyst, partner characteristics, inhibitors	This study "examines five dimensions of the learning paradox in the context of adaptive co-management, where the learning and linking functions of governance are stressed: (i) definitions of learning; (ii) learning goals and expectations; (iii) mechanisms by which learning takes place; (iv) questions regarding who is involved in the process of learning; and (v) the risks and ethical ambiguities faced by different actors expected to willingly participate in a learning process, whether formal or informal."
[145]	CS	17	Inter-firm alliances and cross-sector partnerships, inter-organizational learning	Review	Catalyst, partner characteristics, environmental conditions, partnership characteristics, outcomes	This study provides propositions to explain how various partner-level, partnership-level and environmental factors would enable or facilitate inter-organizational learning in cross-sector partnerships.
[162]	CS	4, 8, 17	Inter-firm alliances and cross-sector partnerships	Qual.	Partnership characteristics, catalyst, environmental conditions, inter-organizational learning process, outcomes	This study shows that partnerships between businesses and civil society may be dominated by business interests, and therefore, the setup of governance that set goals beyond business interests would enable the creation of system-level outcomes. This study also proposes that coordination that allows shared decision-making would contribute to the success of the partnership.
[189]	CS	13, 17	Networks, organizational cognition, institutional logics	Quant.	Catalyst, outcomes, inhibitors	This study shows that "the differences in frames and logics between firms and their partners in partnerships for sustainability improve focal firms' sustainability performance, but only up to a turning point after which these differences lead to a decrease in sustainability performance instead." Therefore, the study signals the role of an optimal distance that allow learning and innovation, hence improve performance.
[171]	CS	13, 17	Networks, organizational cognition, institutional logics	Quant.	Catalyst, inhibitors, environmental conditions, outcomes	This study shows that the differences in institutional logics may lead to tensions in partnerships; especially if there is a power imbalance between partners and a lack of mutual resource dependence in the partnerships.
[131]	CS	17	Cross-sector partnerships in the global south	Qual.	Partnership characteristics, catalyst, inhibitors, environmental conditions, outcomes	This study shows that structural conditions, in other words, the environmental context, may be different in the global south and these conditions may have an impact on the inter-organizational learning process in the multi-stakeholder initiatives; however, factors such as setting clear goals and objectives, establishing clear lines of communication through coordination mechanisms, and creating a shared vision also impact the learning process in the multi-stakeholder initiatives in the global south (Mexico).

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS[1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[182]	CS	6, 17	Co-creation and learning	Qual.	Partnership characteristics, catalyst, partner characteristics, environmental conditions, inter-organizational learning process	This study uses lessons learnt from various cases and identifies that there are the following four phases: co-initiation, co-design, co-implementation, and co-evaluation in the context of collaborative, sustainable freshwater management research and practice. The study discusses the different characteristics of each of these four phases.
[146]	IF	8, 17	Organizational culture, organizational learning, environmental collaboration	Quant.	Outcomes, partner characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, inhibitors	This study finds that environmental collaborations within the supply chain have a positive impact on environmental performance, thanks to "a focal firm sharing these learned capabilities about the environment with other supply chain partners."
[233]	IF & CS	13, 17	Stakeholder theory, the resource-based view	Qual.	Outcomes, catalyst, environmental conditions, inter-organizational learning process	This study shows that through engagement and partnerships with various stakeholders, firms can build environmental capabilities which would help them move towards a low-carbon economy.
[157]]	IF	8, 17	Sustainable supply chain, resource-based view, sustainability performance, market performance	Quant.	Outcomes, partner characteristics, catalyst, partnership characteristics	This study evaluates the impact of different sustainable supply chain collaboration profiles on performance outcomes.
[173]	IF	8, 17	Innovation studies, environmental collaborations	Quant.	Partner characteristics, outcomes	This study shows it is less likely to develop environmental process innovations through collaborations and contests the general understanding in the literature that collaborations yield higher environmental innovation performance.
[195]	IF	8, 17	Ambidexterity, dynamic capabilities, inter-firm alliances	Quant.	Outcomes, inter-organizational learning process, partner characteristics	This study shows that engaging in inter-firm alliances positively impact ambidexterity and reinforces the positive impact of alliances on environmental performance.
[152]	CS	8, 17	Inter-organizational learning, trust	Qual.	Catalyst, partnership characteristics, inter-organizational learning process	This study finds that "Relational Space nourishes collaborative contexts—projects, events, and meetings—that help creates sustainability. As business relations are too often defined by economic and technical transactions, a little space remains for relational 'glue' that allows for highly complex, assumption-challenging learning to find new ways to transform competitive relationships into truly sustainable partnerships across multiple stakeholders with tangible benefit for many."
[246]	IF	8, 17	Resource-based view, relational view, sustainable supply chain	Qual.	Outcomes, catalyst, partner characteristics	This study, based on qualitative cases from the German chemical industry, builds a model of inter-organizational practices which would allow the diffusion of sustainability across the supply chain.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS 1	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[175]	IF & CS	8, 17	NRBV, stakeholder theory, environmental management	Quant.	Environmental conditions, outcomes	This study shows that stakeholder engagement, including inter-firm and cross-sector alliances and partnerships, help firms to develop proactive environmental strategies.
[209]	IF & CS	8, 17	Dynamic capabilities, systems thinking	Qual.	Outcomes, inter-organizational learning process, catalyst	This study integrates systems to dynamic capabilities literature and demonstrates a conceptual framework for the development of sustainability-oriented capabilities using an in-depth case study.
[121]	IF	8, 17	Environmental management, environmental collaborations	Quant.	Outcomes, catalyst, environmental conditions, partnership characteristics	This study explores the relationships between environmental management, green product strategy, competitiveness, and environmental collaborations in supply chains.
[122]	IF	8, 17	Inter-organizational knowledge sharing and learning, trust	Quant.	Partner characteristics, catalyst, inhibitor, outcomes	This study shows that partner opportunism negatively impacts trust between partners, while communication and participation have a positive effect. The study also shows that the more trust there is between partners, the higher the knowledge sharing and learning between partners.
[247]	CS	17	Collaborative strategy, process approach	Qual.	Partnership characteristics	This study develops a model of collaborative strategic management using two cases from collaborative regional sustainable development strategies.
[248]	IF & CS	8, 17	Dynamic capabilities, organizational design	Qual.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process	This study shows that for companies to achieve sustainable competitiveness, they need to develop dynamic capabilities which "entails changing their current organizational design by realigning their activities, partnerships, and routines with the changing external environment".
[135]	IF & CS	8, 17	Resource-based view, environmental collaborations	Quant.	Outcomes, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process, inhibitors	This study shows how cross-sector partnerships help firms improve their image performance, while both inter-firm and cross-sector partnerships help them improve their market performance.
[136]	IF & CS	8, 17	Product development, dynamic capabilities, environmental collaborations	Quant.	Outcomes, inter-organizational learning process, partner characteristics, catalyst	This paper shows that external knowledge sources such as "as partners, universities and research centers, policymakers, conferences" help with the integration of environmental issues, while forming partnerships within the supply chain helps firms with green product design.
[249]	IF & CS	17	Learning, social networks	Qual.	Partner characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, inhibitors	This paper demonstrates how social network software can help in developing learning environments for sustainable development.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS [1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[140]	IF	8, 17	Environmental innovation, R&D, environmental collaborations	Quant.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, partnership characteristics, catalyst	This paper demonstrates that environmental innovations develop, thanks to the acquisition of external knowledge, including partnerships within the supply chain, universities, and competitors.
[159]	CS	8, 17	Environmental innovation	Mixed	Partnership characteristics, partner characteristics, catalyst, outcomes	This study finds that a public-private joint venture studied has a positive impact on innovation capacity and "experience sharing; training and education; hiring/transferring qualified personnel to a partner company; and participatory demonstration of new technology with support from technology gatekeepers (technicians)" improve human capital and capability building.
[250]	IF & CS	17	Stakeholder theory, capabilities, environmental management	Quant.	Inhibitor, outcomes, partner characteristics, catalyst, environmental conditions	This study finds that stakeholder integration helps firms to develop proactive environmental strategies and also warns that stakeholder engagement may not always bring about a system-level outcome, or a collective impact, but sometimes only benefit the firm and its managers.
[142]	IF & CS	8, 17	Absorptive capacity, environmental management, environmental collaboration	Quant.	Outcomes, partner characteristics, inter-organizational learning	This study demonstrates how absorptive capacity can trigger organizational and inter-organizational learning and development of organizational capabilities that yield proactive environmental management and shows that amongst others, environmental collaborations are a part of this proactive managements' strategies.
[49]	CS	2, 17	Dynamic capabilities, stakeholder theory, inter-organizational learning	Qual.	Inter-organizational learning process, environmental conditions, partnership characteristics, outcomes, catalyst	This study demonstrates how, through cross-sector partnerships, firms can co-develop dynamic capabilities via inter-organizational learning that takes place.
[134]	CS	17	Social exchange theory, partnerships, dialectical analysis	Qual.	Environmental conditions, inhibitors, catalyst, partnership characteristics, outcomes	This study proposes that dialectical processes take place between corporates and social enterprises within a collaborative setting and as a result, a synthesis stage emerges as partners resolve their differences.
[177]	CS	17	Social learning, social capital	Quant.	Inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, partner characteristics, partnership characteristics	This study analyzes two different sustainability initiatives through social learning and social capital lenses and discusses how effective and efficient platforms can be built that would enhance learning for sustainable development.
[203]	IF & CS	7, 13, 17	Organizational cognition, partnerships	Qual.	Inter-organizational learning process, outcomes	This study finds that to respond to various SDGs, electric utilities develop alliance portfolios with various partners and the configuration of these portfolios in terms of partner diversity has a relationship with firms' value frames.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS 1	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[130]	CS	17	Interdisciplinary collaborative research	Review	Inhibitors, partner characteristics, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process, environmental conditions	This study shows how research partners can learn to collaborate while collaborating by: "(1) creating conditions for learning to take place, which includes paying attention to discomfort as a trigger for learning and (2) engaging in collaborations in ways that strengthen researchers' collaborative capacities by cultivating particular orientations, knowledge and skills."
[137]	IF & CS	17	Absorptive capacity, societal values, and value conflict	Qual.	Partner characteristics, catalyst, inhibitors, environmental conditions, outcomes	This paper expands the notion of absorptive capacity from knowledge absorption capacity to value absorption capacity and shows "how technically savvy, economic value-creating firms diverge in their receptivity, articulation, and reflexivity of societal values."
[156]	CS	17	Network, trust	Qual.	Catalyst, partnership characteristic, partner characteristic, environmental conditions, outcomes	This study analyzes the UN Global Compact (UNGC) through a lens of network theory and trust. The authors highlight that for a collaborative environment to foster at UNGC, trust between different stakeholders need to improve to the extent that it will stimulate social learning.
[160]	CS	1, 3, 17	Inter-organizational collaboration	Qual.	Catalyst, environmental conditions, inhibitors, partnership characteristics, inter-organizational learning process	This study shows that in a collaboration between social enterprises and local councils, there are differences due to the sectors, that these organizations are embedded, and the institutional logics that guide thinking in those sectors. The study finds that while such logic distance creates tensions, creation of shared objectives, synergistic capabilities and relying on known partners can help collaborations work towards a system-level collective impact.
[199]	CS	8, 17	Knowledge management (sharing)	Qual.	Partner characteristic, inter-organizational learning, inhibitors, partnership characteristics	This study discusses the mechanisms of knowledge sharing in an inter-disciplinary collaborative setting and finds that individuals willing to adapt and attempt to translate the disciplinary discourses and modes of communication of researchers and of practitioner specialists enable knowledge sharing.
[202]	CS	15, 17	Inter-organizational collaboration, framing	Qual.	Catalyst, inhibitors, outcomes	This study shows that the frame distance between partners can act as an inhibitor and create resistance to find an agreeable solution between the parties involved.
[251]	IF & CS	8, 17	R&D, knowledge spill overs	Quant.	Partner characteristics, catalyst	This study finds that in the context of chemical companies, research, and development fosters knowledge to spill overs within industrial clusters, and even open innovation settings with competitors can help the development of sustainable solutions.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS¹	SDG	Theoretical Framework/Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[155]	CS	10, 16, 17	Cross-sector collaboration	Qual.	Environmental conditions catalyst, partnership characteristics, outcomes	This study shows how state and market incentives can trigger companies to form transformational partnerships that are beyond corporate philanthropy.
[27]	CS	8, 17	Cross-sector collaboration	Review	Catalyst, inhibitors, outcomes	This study provides an understanding of why firms would partner with NGOs, what they can gain from it, and what factors should firms take into consideration in selecting, managing, and evaluating partnerships with environmental NGOs.
[26]	IF & CS	17	Inter-organizational partnerships	Review	Inhibitors, outcomes, partnership characteristics, catalyst, partner characteristics	This article provides an overview of research on partnerships for environmental sustainability between different kinds of partners and argues how businesses can frame these kinds of environmental partnerships as a source of competitive advantage.
[252]	IF	8, 17	Open innovation, SMEs	Quant.	Partner characteristics	This study shows "the effect of external technology R&D cooperation network diversity (ETRDCND) on the greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction and energy saving of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)" and analyzes "the roles of production time reduction and absorptive capacity in the relationship between SMEs' ETRDCND and their GHG emission reduction and energy-saving."
[132]	CS	13, 17	Stakeholder theory, multi-stakeholder networks, climate change engagement of businesses	Qual.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, environmental conditions	This study shows that multi-stakeholder networks can help to create platforms for inter-organizational learning and innovation that can address complex sustainability challenges through the engagement of various stakeholders.
[198]	IF	8, 17	Environmental management, inter-firm alliances, dynamic capabilities	Quant.	Outcomes, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process	This study shows that collaboration with customers and suppliers in the value chain help firms develop capabilities to address sustainability challenges.
[205]	IF	8, 17	Sustainable supply chains, innovation, and absorptive capacity	Quant.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, catalyst	This paper shows that inter-organizational collaborations positively impact the innovation performance of firms in the context of sustainable supply chains, and absorptive capacity acts positively as a mediator of this impact.
[19]	CS	17	SDGs, partnerships	Review	Outcomes, catalyst, partnership characteristics, environmental conditions	This paper discusses five potential problems in partnerships for SDGs: "compensation for losers; barriers to partnering; short-time horizons, inadequate coordination mechanisms and misaligned incentives."
[138]	IF & CS	8, 17	CSR, stakeholder theory, absorptive capacity	Quant.	Partner characteristics, environmental conditions, inter-organizational learning process	This study finds that absorptive capacity helps to develop sustainable product and organizational innovations, and absorptive capacity is reinforced by stakeholder embeddedness and pressure.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS [1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[174]	CS	8, 17	Environmental policies, innovation, absorptive capacity, R&D collaborations	Qual.	Partner characteristics, catalyst, inhibitors, outcomes	This study finds that the closeness between R&D partners in terms of dominant logics, knowledge bases and organizational structures help them respond coherently to the environmental policies to create environmental innovations.
[253]	IF & CS	8, 17	Knowledge acquisition	Qual.	Partner characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, catalyst	This study shows that external knowledge sources, such as inter-organizational networks and partnerships, help SMEs develop internal capabilities to move towards sustainability.
[254]	CS	11, 17	Social learning, scenarios	Qual.	Inhibitors, catalyst, partner characteristics, environmental conditions	This study shows that participatory scenarios can enhance social learning in a collaborative environment by helping the development of systemic thinking, enhanced relationships, and awareness of new perspectives, all of which are valuable for developing adaptive capacity.
[11]	CS	2, 17	Framing, cross-sector collaborations	Qual.	Outcomes, inhibitor, catalyst, environmental conditions	This study shows that in a collaborative setting between diverse partners, as opposed to converging to a shared frame, partners may maintain an optimal frame plurality, "not excessive frame variety that may prevent agreements from emerging, but the retention of a select few frames and the deletion of others toward achieving a narrowing frame bandwidth."
[255]	IF & CS	12, 17	Product service systems, circular economy, business models	Qual.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, catalyst	This study shows that to achieve system-level outcomes from circular economy business models, the interaction between the business model to the broader ecosystem through partnerships are helpful. In other words, partnerships can help businesses to create environmental and social value.
[12]	CS	3, 17	Frames and framing, relational coordination	Qual.	Outcomes, catalyst, inhibitors	This study shows how within a cross-sector partnership, setting partners' frames may fuse, which the authors define as "partners reach[ing] common ground by coming to appreciate their (complementary) differences rather than espousing and/or enacting a similar frame."
[153]	CS	14, 15, 17	Governance	Qual.	Partnership characteristics, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process	This study focuses on polycentric governance of environmental commons. It explores how trust can help to build a shared understanding, how polycentric governance improves learning and knowledge sharing and how such initiatives need to take account of justice and inclusivity and consider vulnerable groups and societal impacts.
[181]	IF	12, 17	Circular economy, industrial ecology, sustainable innovation, supply chain collaboration	Qual.	Catalyst, inter-organizational learning process, outcomes, partner characteristics	This study shows that for circular economy transition, firms need to engage in new forms of sustainable supply chain collaborations which require cross-functional engagement, trust, and joint learning and problem-solving.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS [1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[164]	IF & CS	8, 17	Inter-firm alliances, resource-based view, institutional theory, organizational learning	Quant.	Environmental conditions, partnership conditions, inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, inhibitors, partner characteristics, outcomes	This study analyzes how some alliances are focusing on capability development, while others are trying to create legitimacy and reputation. The article further discusses how learning and governance would vary depending on whether these alliances are focused on capability development or legitimacy.
[127]	CS	8, 17	Environmental innovations, partnerships, transaction cost economics, resource complementarities	Quant.	Partnership characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, inhibitors, catalyst, partner characteristics	This study shows that transactional cost and complementary logics explain why there are government-business partnerships that aim radical environmental innovations. Furthermore, the study highlights that for these partnerships to work, governance, learning and rulemaking needs to be adequately addressed.
[148]	IF & CS	8, 17	Inter-firm alliances, resource-based view, institutional theory, organizational learning	Quant.	Partnership characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, environmental conditions, inhibitors	This study argues that "competency-oriented alliances (COAs), characterized with exploration learning, diverse partnership, and nonequity structure, tend to engage firms for more proactive environmental strategies." In contrast "conversely, legitimacy-oriented alliances (LOAs), characterized by exploitation learning, homogeneous partners, and equity structure, tend to engage firms for less proactive environmental strategies."
[51]	CS	8, 17	Cross-sector partnerships, environmental innovations, proactive environmental management	Quant.	Outcomes, inter-organizational learning process, partnership characteristics, catalyst	This study shows that more diverse alliance partners contribute more to the development of proactive environmental outcomes. Furthermore, innovative firms that have greater experiences in partnerships and alliances are engaged in more diverse partnerships.
[200]	IF	8, 17	Sustainable supply chain, dynamic capabilities	Quant.	Outcomes, catalyst	This study shows that supplier orientation and innovation orientation improve sustainability performance.
[256]	IF	8, 17	Environmental innovation, sustainable supply chain	Quant.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, environmental conditions, inhibitors, catalyst	This study shows that learning from suppliers and customers has a positive impact on environmental innovations and turbulence moderates these relationships.
[161]	IF	17	Inter-organizational partnerships	Quant.	Partner characteristics, catalyst, outcomes, catalysts, inter-organizational learning process	This study shows that inter-organizational learning which is catalyzed by trust-building and knowledge sharing patterns has a positive effect on identity and adaptability of partnerships.
[257]	IF & CS	17	Sustainability, absorptive capacity, open innovation	Qual.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, inter-organizational learning process	This study shows that through open innovation with partners, organizations can absorb knowledge and improve sustainability outcomes.
[258]	CS	8, 17	Sustainability-oriented innovation, business models, partnerships	Qual.	Catalyst, outcomes	This study shows how Interface, a global carpet manufacturer, has created a sustainable business model that puts partnerships at its core by working in a networked relationship with communities and an NGO whereby they create a safe failure space.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS [1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[259]	CS	17	CSR, knowledge sharing	Qual.	Partner characteristics, environmental conditions, partnership characteristics, catalyst	This study shows how firms can enhance CSR outcomes by engaging in knowledge sharing and seeking collaboration opportunities that will help improve inter-organizational learning from communities, which will then improve the collective outcomes and the legitimacy of the firm.
[176]	CS	17	Multi-stakeholder partnerships, organizational design	Quant.	Catalyst, partner characteristics, partnership characteristics, outcomes	This study focuses on how effective multi-stakeholder partnerships can be designed effectively. Furthermore, the authors find that collaborative decision-making systems help coordination and improve learning.
[172]	IF & CS	17	Networks, learning organizations	Qual.	Inter-organizational learning process, environmental conditions, catalyst, partnership characteristics, inhibitors	This study discusses how inter-organizational networks are increasingly becoming more critical as learning organizations and how learning can take place in such networks through collaborative decision-making, consensus building, diffusion of practices, rules, norms, and values.
[260]	IF & CS	8, 17	Capability development (acquisition)	Qual.	Outcomes, catalyst, inhibitors, inter-organizational learning process	This study discusses how firms can build capabilities both due to the impact of societal logics at the macro-level and the "firm's capacity to search for talent, technology, and ideas and to harmonize what it learns internally" and through cases, the authors discuss how interaction with the external environment through partnerships and networks can help firms develop such capabilities.
[197]	IF	8, 17	Sustainable supply chain, absorptive capacity	Qual.	Partner characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, outcomes, catalyst, partnership characteristics	This study demonstrates various mechanisms that help firms develop capabilities through absorbing knowledge from their collaborative supply chain interactions.
[186]	IF	8, 17	Inter-firm alliances, environmental management	Quant.	Inhibitors, catalyst, outcomes, partner characteristics, partnership characteristics	This study finds that organizational size disparity has a positive effect on alliance terminations, while cultural separation has a negative effect on alliance terminations in the context of environmental alliances.
[163]	IF	8, 17	Sustainable supply chain, resource-based view, sustainability-oriented innovation	Qual.	Partnership characteristics, partner characteristics, outcomes, catalyst	This study shows how supply chain collaboration can allow room for inter-organizational learning, help the development of new capabilities, practices and processes, thanks to knowledge sharing between parties and, as a result, how this learning would lead to sustainability-oriented innovations.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS [1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[261]	IF & CS	17	Technological development, knowledge management (knowledge types)	Qual.	Inter-organizational learning process	This study discusses that in studying knowledge development and diffusion, also in partnership settings, it is essential to pay attention to the type of knowledge that is being transferred. The study shows that knowledge can be domain-specific and procedural, and general knowledge and the nature of the knowledge can have an impact on whether and how it can be transferred.
[188]	IF	8, 17	Inter-firm alliances, trust, strategic cognition	Quant.	Catalyst, outcomes, inhibitors, partnership characteristics	This study demonstrates how the environmental reputation of firms have an impact on trust, and perceived partner attractiveness which affects the partnership formation patterns.
[196]	IF & CS	8, 17	Organizational learning, sustainable supply chain	Qual.	Partner characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, outcomes	This study discusses the role of organizational learning and collaboration for the improvement of supply chain sustainability and argues that training, knowledge acquisition, stakeholder engagement and collaboration between intra-organizational and inter-organizational partners, including suppliers and NGOs, help firms learn and develop capabilities to address sustainability issues in the supply chain.
[262]	CS	2, 17	Networks	Qual.	Catalyst, inter-organizational learning process, partnership characteristics,	This study discusses how, through networks, farmers can engage in the collective learning process and sustainable agricultural development. The authors argue that within such a network environment, to enhance learning, it is vital to create a feeling of "shared responsibility and balanced leadership."
[179]	IF & CS	8, 17	Sustainable innovation, partnerships	Quant.	Catalyst, partner characteristics, outcomes	This study discusses "collaborative search strategies led by firms in general and for solving environmental problems in particular" and finds that "the problem-solving potential of a search strategy increases with the diversity of existing knowledge of the partners in a consortium and with the experience of the partners involved."
[180]	IF	12, 17	Circular economy, business models, innovation ecosystems	Qual.	Catalyst, inhibitors, partnership characteristics, partner characteristics, environmental conditions	This study discusses that the transition to a circular economy requires collaboration between ecosystem partners and an "ecosystem-wide orchestration."
[169]	IF & CS	17	Knowledge brokerage, environmental impact assessment	Qual.	Partner characteristics, partnership characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, environmental conditions	This study demonstrates the role of knowledge brokerage and how it can enable the learning process and knowledge transfer in the context of impact assessment.
[204]	IF	8, 17	Sustainable supply chain, environmental collaboration	Quant.	Outcomes, catalyst, environmental conditions, inter-organizational learning process	This study demonstrates that internal capabilities improve sustainable supply management and sustainability performance and shows that "relational capability" helps firms access resources and capabilities outside the firm and combine capabilities within and outside the boundaries.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS [1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[210]	CS	13, 17	Partnerships, climate change mitigation,	Qual.	Partnership characteristics, partner characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, outcomes, inhibitors, catalyst	This study shows that multi-stakeholder partnerships can be an effective form of governance to address climate change by providing a space of learning and participation of actors from different societal sectors.
[143]	IF & CS	8, 17	Absorptive capacity, international business (MNCs)	Qual.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process	This study demonstrates that in the context of MNCs, absorptive capacity acts on two levels: shared and unit-specific levels of absorptive capacity. The authors highlight that partnerships are a way of building shared absorptive capacity.
[193]	IF & CS	12, 17	Sustainability-oriented innovation, learning, collaboration, sustainability transitions	Review	Partner characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, outcomes, partnership characteristics, catalyst	This study demonstrates that collaborations help in creating inter-organizational learning opportunities and lead to sustainable innovation. This paper highlights that second-order learning leads to incremental sustainability-oriented innovation. The authors highlight that "to bring about a shift towards the kinds of innovations that will contribute to sustainable consumption and production, the various actors and stakeholders involved need to share knowledge and to learn from pilot experiments, practices, users and communities."
[123]	IF	8, 17	Sustainable supply chain, dynamic capabilities	Qual.	Outcomes, inter-organizational learning process, inhibitors, environmental conditions, catalyst	This study argues that "sustainable global supplier management (SGSM) capabilities are a source of competitive advantage" due to the value they create when firms are exposed to stakeholder pressures and those firms that were early movers in developing such skills enter into a virtuous cycle by accumulating more resources and learning processes.
[206]	IF & CS	8, 17	Absorptive capacity, international business (MNCs), strategic purchasing	Quant.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, catalyst	This study suggests that realized absorptive capacity has an impact on social sustainability; however, finding that against the expectations, learning capabilities do not have an impact on the environmental sustainability of purchasing practices. The study also finds that there is no significant impact of sustainable practices on economic performance.
[263]	IF	17	Networks, corporate responsibility	Qual.	Inter-organizational learning process, outcomes, partner characteristics, catalyst	This study discusses that learning can be triggered by interactions between a focal firm and its knowledge network "which provide[s] new concepts for inspiration, and an internal network of ideas and actions, which would help define and shape change."
[191]	CS	17	Stakeholder theory, organizational learning, environmental management	Qual.	Inter-organizational learning process, outcomes, partner characteristics, environmental conditions	This study discusses how stakeholder power affects exploitative and exploratory inter-organizational learning. The study finds that stakeholders may have different sources of power such as "personal skills, knowledge and networks, formal authority and operational capacity; these sources turned out to be different in the two case companies."

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS 1	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[264]	IF & CS	17	Knowledge management (acquisition)	Quant.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, catalyst	This study shows that in the context of SMEs, various external partners, especially trade associations and suppliers, help firms' acquisition of valuable knowledge that help increase environmental commitment.
[265]	IF & CS	17	Organizational capabilities, stakeholder theory, environmental management	Quant.	Inter-organizational learning process, outcomes, environmental conditions	This study finds that external environment impacts the development of firms' stakeholder integration, and uncertainty, positively, with complexity, negatively, impacting firm's environmental strategy.
[165]	IF & CS	17	Networks, organizational change, and learning	Review	Environmental conditions, partner characteristics, catalyst, inhibitors, outcomes	This study discusses how relationships in a network create a platform for organizational learning and change and describe how organizational capabilities built through interaction with network partners improve sustainability.
[133]	CS	17	Collaborations (social alliances), social enterprises	Qual.	Environmental conditions, inter-organizational learning process, outcomes, partner characteristics, partnership characteristics, catalyst	This study shows that businesses may engage in partnerships with social enterprises to create value jointly or for community capacity building. Furthermore, the study discusses how businesses gain appreciation from their stakeholders (concern for legitimacy), while thanks to these partnerships, social enterprises create funds (financial resource dependence).
[207]	CS	17	Business-non-profit partnerships, organizational learning	Quant.	Inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, outcomes, partner characteristics, inhibitors, partnership characteristics, environmental conditions	This study shows that organizational learning in business-non-profit partnerships occur thanks to close relationships between the partners whereby trust and inter-personal relationships play a critical role. Furthermore, the authors argue that non-profits gain resources and capabilities that allow them to "proactively detect, shape, and seize opportunities and threats."
[144]	CS	17	Corporate social responsibility, cross-sector partnerships	Qual.	Catalyst, environmental conditions, partnership characteristics, partner characteristics, inter-organizational learning process	This study discusses three phases of cross-sector partnerships: partner selection, partnership design, institutionalization and (potential) exit. This model also highlights the challenges and risks in each of these phases such as "determining effective criteria for partner selection, designing appropriate risk assessment techniques, experimenting with and adapting agreements, objectives, reporting mechanisms and other systems, managing crises to the benefit of the partnership, and balancing the necessary personal relationships with needs for ongoing organizational institutionalization."

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS [1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[185]	CS	17	Corporate social responsibility, cross-sector partnerships	Qual.	Catalyst, environmental conditions, partnership characteristics, outcomes	This study discusses how firms engage with communities in different forms: corporate philanthropy, benefaction, patronage, sponsorship, and cause-related marketing (CRM) and partnerships. Furthermore, the authors highlight how from one form of engagement that contains less involvement, partners can improve institutional trust and partners can move towards forms of engagement that contain more involvement.
[208]	CS	17	Cross-sector partnerships, sensemaking	Review	Partnership characteristics, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process, outcomes, environmental conditions	This study discusses three platforms that can be used to make sense of cross-sector partnerships that aim to co-create social innovation: resource dependence, social issues, and societal sector platforms.
[266]	CS	17	Cross-sector partnerships, organizational learning	Qual.	Catalyst, outcomes, inter-organizational learning process, partner characteristics	This study highlights that learning from such partnerships that aim systemic changes requires systemic thinking, shared vision and awareness of mental models and effective dialogue. Furthermore, these kinds of cross-sector partnerships need to balance commercial interests and the creation of private value with societal interests and public value.
[128]	CS	17	Organizational paradoxes, cross-sector partnerships	Qual.	Inhibitors, catalyst, outcomes	This study explores the paradoxical tensions between businesses and NGOs and explains how the way actors perceive each other's frames impact the partnership outcomes. Furthermore, the authors found that when partners had a fluid frame, they were able to appreciate the differences of each other, which contributed to the creation of generative outcomes.
[194]	CS	1, 2, 17	Social learning	Qual.	Environmental conditions, inter-organizational learning process, partnership characteristics, catalyst	This study highlights that bi-directional, or two-way learning helps to contribute the system-level outcomes to sustainable development goals. Furthermore, the study provides several examples of which partnerships and networks are channels for knowledge mobilization.
[166]	IF	8, 17	Environmental innovations, inter-organizational fit, sustainable supply chain	Quant.	Partner characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, inhibitors, outcomes	This study measures the impact of complementarity and compatibility between firms and their supply partners on environmental innovation (EI) outcomes. The study finds that "complementarity facilitates incremental EI while inter-organizational compatibility plays a more crucial role in radical EI."

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS [1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[184]	CS	17	Networks, social learning	Qual.	Catalyst, inter-organizational learning process, partner characteristics	This study highlights that innovation networks allow social learning to trigger sustainable development by creating a platform for different stakeholders and their diverse perspectives to share knowledge and values. The authors find that trust, commitment, and reframing catalyze the social learning process.
[267]	CS	4, 17	Cross-sector partnerships, coopetition, tensions/paradoxes	Qual.	Partnership characteristics, partner characteristics, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process, outcomes	This study evaluates the coopetitive tensions in cross-sector partnerships whereby multiple companies are involved. The study finds that the coopetitive tensions are leveraged in the studied partnerships, and authors conclude that coopetitive dynamics can help to enhance the system-level partnership outcomes.
[126]	CS	17	Public-private partnerships, inter-organizational learning, social capital, brokerage	Qual.	Catalyst, environmental conditions, partner characteristics, partnership characteristics, inter-organizational learning process	This study analyzes the different roles of broker organizations in public-private partnerships as "convener, mediator, and learning catalyst" drawing on social capital and inter-organizational learning literature.
[25]	CS	17	Strategic bridging	Qual.	Environmental conditions, inhibitors, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process, outcomes	This study evaluates the role of NGOs as strategic bridges in their engagement with businesses. The case finds that within a partnership setting, partners may prioritize their private benefits and individual goals which may pose a risk. Furthermore, the study proposes that strategic bridging requires setting and articulating a vision, gaining support and commitment, balancing stakeholder needs and addressing issues to create system-level outcomes.
[268]	CS	17	Multi-stakeholder initiatives, communities of practice	Qual.	Inhibitors, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process, partner characteristics, partnership characteristics	This study shows how multi-stakeholder initiatives, which are communities of practitioners, are organized in the first place thanks to "interpersonal relationships among the participants involved [which] are nurtured through discussions and dialogues on common areas of interest." The study highlighted that the informal elements were also crucial in building trust, which enables building a sense of community.
[269]	IF	17	Sustainable supply chain, action research	Review/Qual.	Inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, environmental conditions, partnership characteristics, outcomes	This study proposes a research agenda at the intersection of action research and sustainable supply chain management. Furthermore, the authors highlight that due to the emphasis on relational dynamics and collaboration for building sustainable supply chains, action research can reveal dynamics of "resistance, power and discourse" in building sustainable supply chains.
[201]	IF & CS	8, 17	Sustainability-oriented innovation, collaboration, IT	Review	Partner characteristics, outcomes, partnership characteristics, inter-organizational learning process	This study explores the role of IT in facilitating the sustainability-oriented collaborations and building innovation capabilities for sustainability.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS 1	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[270]	IF	8, 17	Collaboration, sustainable supply chain	Quant.	Outcomes, partner characteristics, catalyst, inter-organizational learning process, partnership characteristics	This study emphasizes that the capability of managing partnerships through building operational, coordinative, and communicative routines improve inter-organizational learning outcomes for cleaner production.
[129]	CS	17	Stakeholder theory, strategic issue management	Qual.	Inter-organizational learning process, catalyst, environmental conditions, partnership characteristics, outcomes	This study evaluates how NGOs and companies engage in dialogue which holds the potential for employees to learn from their NGO partners/stakeholders and create environmental and social value for their companies. The study finds that such engagements are often organized around issues that are perceived risky, and that for the engagement between organizations to create value for the company, the company has to consider the learning from the NGO as strategic and prioritize it as such.
[271]	CS	2, 17	Transformative change, social learning	Qual.	Partnership characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, outcomes, catalyst, inhibitors	This study highlights that in transforming the agricultural system along the lines of sustainable development, it is crucial to understand different perceptions that different societal actors may hold and "identify areas of actionable consensus." This idea of the cognitive distance between the partners can be addressed through the creation of safe experimentation and learning spaces.
[187]	CS	6, 17	Social learning	Qual.	Catalyst, partnership characteristics, inter-organizational learning process, partner characteristics, catalyst	This study highlights that in a collaborative setting, learning takes place as actors exchange "motivations, cognitions and resources" and while some interactions may yield system-level outcomes, others may not. The authors highlight that the "unconstructive" collaborations led to the termination of partnerships or partnerships that did not continue after the set time frame.
[154]	CS	11, 17	Social learning, sustainability-oriented innovation	Qual.	Partner characteristics, outcomes, partnership characteristics, outcomes, inter-organizational learning process, environmental conditions	This study specifically focuses on the role of local authorities in the transition towards sustainable development through networks and partnerships. Furthermore, the study highlights that local authorities may take a tutor or a teacher role in collaborative environments.
[125]	IF	7, 17	Business models, sustainability-oriented innovation, inter-organizational collaboration	Qual.	Partner characteristics, partnership characteristics, inhibitors, inter-organizational learning process, environmental conditions, outcomes	This study focuses explicitly on inter-firm alliances between firms of different sizes, an incumbent energy firm and a renewable energy company. The study finds that such alliances provide a platform for the incumbent to disseminate sustainable technologies using their access to the market. Furthermore, the study highlights that there may be a competition to learn between the partners, whereby the incumbent may gain private benefits "leaving small firms with limited learning outcomes." The study finds that intent, culture, receptivity, transparency, and complementary assets act as factors that impact the inter-organizational learning process.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Ref	IF & CS [1]	SDG	Theoretical Framework/ Main Concepts	Method	Contribution to the Model	Summary
[120]	IF & CS	17	Sustainability-oriented alliances and partnerships (environmental only)	Review	Partner characteristics, partnership characteristics, environmental conditions, outcomes, catalyst, inhibitors	This study reviews the literature on environmental collaborations and identifies partner and partnership characteristics that generally impact inter-organizational collaborations, the environmental conditions that shape partner relationships and engagement, and the factors that facilitate and inhibit the relationships.
[190]	IF & CS	8, 17	Sustainability-oriented innovation, stakeholder engagement	Review	Partner characteristics, outcomes, inter-organizational learning process, environmental conditions, partnership characteristics, catalyst	This study specifically focuses on capabilities that help firms engage with their stakeholders at different levels: "specific operational capabilities; first-order dynamic capabilities to manage the engagement (engagement management capabilities); and second-order dynamic capabilities to make use of contrasting ways of seeing the world to reframe problems, combine competencies in new ways, and co-create innovative solutions (value framing), and to learn from stakeholder engagement activities (systematized learning)."
[4]	CS	8, 17	Sustainability-oriented innovation,	Qual.	Catalyst, partner characteristics, outcomes, inhibitors, environmental conditions, inter-organizational learning process	This study focuses on how businesses engage with non-profits to create environmental, social, and economic value. The authors find that actors involved going after the kind of value they aim to create in the partnership, combine resources and capabilities and empathize each other's value differences.
[167]	IF	17	Institutional theory, inter-organizational learning	Quant.	Outcomes, environmental conditions, catalyst, partnership characteristics	This study finds that firms' engagement in CSR is difficult to imitate by other firms even when there exist conditions for mimetic pressures. The authors highlight that this is because the knowledge that is needed for substantive CSR engagement is sticky. However, the study highlights that such substantive engagement may be facilitated by the selected governance structure, culture, and capability development.

[1] Inter-firm vs. cross-sector.

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Article

Navigating Governance Tensions to Enhance the Impact of Partnerships with the Private Sector for the SDGs

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Abstract: Partnering with the private sector is a key modality in development cooperation to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite their increasing importance, such Public-Private Partnerships for Development (PPPD) experience major challenges in defining, assessing and reporting on their actual impact. This paper explores why, and how this can be improved. We engage in a qualitative synthesis review of academic, gray literature and evaluation reports of public-private programs of development agencies. We identify challenges, tensions and contradictions that affect a proper understanding and assessment of the impacts of such partnerships. The analysis shows that the main challenge in understanding and assessing impacts is the double governance logic that emerges in PPPD monitoring and evaluation (M&E). While M&E functions as an accountability and risk mitigation approach, it should also support collaborative characteristics of PPPDs such as trust and power-sharing, in order to enhance impactful PPPDs. Enhancing the impact of PPPDs for the SDGs requires bridging the divide between (a) result-based, upward accountability monitoring and evaluation approaches and (b) emerging learning, participatory and complexity-based approaches. The paper provides suggestions on how to navigate these governance tensions by using a paradoxical lens.

Keywords: sustainable development goals; public-private partnership for development; governance tension; impact; development cooperation; monitoring and evaluation

1. Introduction

Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are perceived as important governance tools to deliver a twofold impact for development: principle-based and goal-based. Firstly, a principles-based approach was adopted at the launch of the SDGs with the '5P' framework: People, Planet, Profit, Peace and Partnering [1]. These five principles are the guiding foundation for all SDGs. They represent a synthesis of principles as discussed in the global arena for the post-World War-II period: from universal human rights principles and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) guidelines on multinational enterprises, to principles as defined by the United Nations Global Compact. All five principles are equally important and apply basic ethical frames like consequences, duties, rights, virtues and capabilities. 'Partnering' can thereby be interpreted as a means to achieve the other four principles [2].

Secondly, the SDG project is also known as 'governing through goals' [3]. The 17 SDGs (and 169 targets) present an interconnected set of measurable goals designed to address interrelated challenges and achieve global sustainable development [4]. SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals), thereby, specifically encourages multi-stakeholder engagement in general and effective partnerships, particularly with the private sector. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires a massive step-up in resource mobilization and collective efforts for development impact. More than 50 per cent of the financing needed to achieve the SDGs will have to be mobilized through the private sector. Therefore, the 2030

Agenda "calls on business to apply their creativity and innovation to solve sustainable development challenges" [5].

1.1. Problem Statement

In practice, private sector engagement has become a strategic priority across many development agencies. Public-Private Partnership for Development (PPPD) is one modality for actively engaging the private sector in implementing development policy. PPPDs differ in their actor constellation, thematic focus, scope, funding and implementation structures and how development agencies frame them (e.g., public-private development alliances, development partnerships or SDG partnerships). In general, PPPDs—as an approach for private sector engagement in development cooperation—have in common that they create more or less formalized, temporary arrangements between at least a development agency and a private sector actor. Often, PPPDs involve also civil society organizations, knowledge institutions and/or public actors. These actors jointly aim to accomplish long-term social and/or economic development changes, through sharing costs, risks, responsibilities, competencies, and knowledge [6–10]. PPPDs aim to combine complementary logics of each sector: the advantage of private sector such as access to finance, knowledge and technologies, managerial efficiencies and an entrepreneurial spirit with the development concerns, funding and networks of development agencies [11]. PPPDs aim to pro-actively engage the private sector in the implementation of the partnership's activities, and not only contracting out the implementation to other actors such as civil society organizations. The PPPD should develop a collaborative effort at the governance and the project level. PPPDs differ from more well-known infrastructure or service delivery Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in several ways; PPPDs usually work on a short-term program or project basis and aim to identify innovative solutions to longer-term development challenges. PPPDs are not service contracts and often use different governance forms and agreements rather than arrangements that emerge in long-term infrastructure PPPs. To conclude, PPPDs are collaborative governance approaches for addressing development challenges that should ultimately contribute to the SDGs.

Despite the growth of PPPDs, less is known about their actual impact and how to improve this. Participants in partnerships have found it particularly challenging to define, assess and report on their actual impact in a meaningful way [12]. So far, evaluations of development agency partnership programs have found mixed results [13]. The Donor Committee for Enterprise Development summarizes that on the one hand, some programs have not successfully catalyzed wider effects beyond the project. On the other hand, "context analysis to understand market-wide impact and hands-on management have been identified as success factors that are on track to achieve their development targets" [13]. It is in particular the development impact of PPPDs that falls below expectations [14].

Consequently, the discourse on the actual effectiveness of PPPDs as a means to achieve the SDGs and practical improvements is laden with critical accounts [15], often suggesting that the partnership is (a) not adequately—or measurably—addressing the problems for which the partnership was introduced; (b) has engaged an overly dominant private sector partner resulting in excessive or insufficient ambitions that created 'collaborative complexities' [16]; or (c) has overly optimistic or superficial claims, subdued responsibilities, or the governance is inadequate. These critical accounts might also explain why—according to the latest assessment of the status of specific SDG partnerships in 2019 by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs—it was concluded that despite the overwhelming efforts put into partnering around the world, "we are still only scratching the surface in terms of the number, and quality, of partnerships required to deliver the SDGs" [17].

1.2. Research Objectives

We argue that a key factor that explains the impact challenges of PPPDs lies in three types of theoretical and practical difficulties for which this paper aims to provide a contribution.

First, there is a clear need to properly understand and assess the impact of PPPDs. We focus on the critical role that monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches play. Extant research shows that M&E practices regularly suffer from a poor design—particularly due to a lack of a clear theory of change. They are often ad-hoc, and fail to produce the required information [5,18]. Promoting improved monitoring and evaluation systems of PPPDs should arguably be a priority to enhance the impact of PPPDs on the SDGs [13]. This ambition resonates well with previous academic research calling for improved impact studies e.g., see [12,19], evaluation frameworks e.g., see [9,12] and M&E practices of PPPDs [18]. Recent research still reiterates that "little is known about the ability of such partnerships to actually produce beneficial societal impact" [20]. Monitoring and reporting on development results of PPPDs is a critical function for accountability, direction, learning and communication purposes [5]. So, challenging PPPDs in their ability to use the M&E function well might have consequences in assessing their impact and further governing and improving the partnership. We perform a qualitative synthesis review of academic and gray literature, and development agencies' PPPD evaluation reports in order to identify key M&E challenges related to PPPD's impact.

Second, there is a need to explain the underlying cause for various impact measures in the hybrid governance nature of partnerships e.g., see [21,22]. There exists a double-governance logic in PPPD M&E practices in which M&E functions as a control and risk mitigation approach but should also support collaborative characteristics such as trust building and joint learning. The crucial tension between control and collaboration highlights that the two approaches start from different theoretical assumptions about managing relationships. Control approaches—often rooted in agency theory—assume goal divergence between partners and highlight an adverse partner perspective, which emphasizes control mechanisms in order to prevent opportunistic behavior, but which also might entail high transaction costs. In contrast, collaboration approaches emphasize collective behavior in which a higher value is placed on goal convergence than on self-interest [23]. The potential trade-off between control and collaboration underlying partnership M&E, raises significant governance tensions: can partnerships simultaneously be goals and means, can they simultaneously be aimed at control and collaboration, and what are the implications for the impact understanding, assessment and learning? This raises fundamental criticism and doubts about partnerships as effective governance mechanisms for the SDGs.

Third, there is need for a practical approach to deal with governance-related M&E tensions. We propose a paradoxical lens to better navigate PPPD M&E (and overcome basic governance tensions). The contradictions of partnering are often presented as trade-offs [24] and zero-sum games. Seemingly divergent assumptions accentuate dualities between control and collaboration. Both control and collaboration are however required in partnership governance at the same time for effective impact capturing. A control approach helps to ensure efficiency and effectiveness, while a collaboration approach stimulates participation and empowerment. Control and collaboration are contrasting, yet potentially complementary approaches to governance [25]. A paradoxical lens (as a meta-theory) may be supportive in dealing with the governance tensions associated with effectively capturing the impact of PPPDs [26].

In the remainder of the paper, Section 2 presents the exploratory research design in which we synthesize theoretical and practical insights. Section 3 presents the results of this effort, describing five key challenges related to M&E practices that PPPDs face. Section 4 discusses the underlying governance tensions of PPPD M&E that affects the impact understanding and assessment of PPPDs. We introduce a paradoxical lens to formulate theoretical and practical suggestions for navigating these tensions in order to enhance capturing the impact of partnerships. Section 5 concludes and outlines future areas of research.

2. Research Approach

2.1. Qualitative Research Synthesis

Academic insights on PPPDs are sparse; the phenomenon and its results are mainly discussed in studies developed by the partnering organizations themselves or advisory organizations [26]. Given the lack of a consolidated knowledge base on PPPDs, this paper systematically accumulates and synthesizes information available from scientific and practitioner research on PPPDs. A qualitative research synthesis is an explorative research approach aimed at synthesizing qualitative studies on a certain topic for the purpose of making contributions beyond those achieved in the original studies [27]. A qualitative research synthesis largely presents an inductive approach from which new conceptual understandings can emerge.

Unlike traditional literature reviews or systematic reviews and meta-analyses, qualitative synthesis studies can accommodate differences between questions, research design and the contexts of individual studies [28]. In addition, qualitative synthesis can include theoretical contributions as well as gray literature, including contributions in practitioner journals, conference papers, policy documents and reports from public or private sector organizations [28]. From this perspective, qualitative research synthesis can contribute to the development of actionable knowledge on practical phenomena [28].

2.2. Method of Synthesis

The synthesis is based on three data sources: (1) academic literature; (2) gray literature; and (3) evaluation reports.

(1) Key insights on the understanding and assessment of the impact of PPPDs in the academic literature were reviewed. The first search focused on the Scopus database as principal search system due to its multidisciplinary nature and its retrieval qualities [29]. The search was limited to the following subject areas: social sciences, agricultural sciences, environmental sciences, business management and accounting, and economics. Since the first donor-driven PPPD programs emerged in early 2000, the search period was defined as being between 2000 and 2020.
We used the following keyword combinations:
Partnership AND "development cooperation" AND impact (21 hits)
Partnership AND "international development" AND impact (77 hits)
Partnership AND "development policy" AND impact (51 hits)
Cross-sector partnership AND impact (56 hits)
The titles of all hits were scanned and when in doubt, the abstracts were read. We only selected publications that discuss partnerships with business involvement in development cooperation, or publications that discuss the impact of cross-sector partnerships in the broader context of sustainable development. We did not include very specific impact areas (e.g., climate change or gender). Articles that focused on public-private partnerships for infrastructure development and intra-sector partnerships (e.g., international NGOs and their local counterpart or government-government partnerships, or research-policy partnerships) were dismissed. Additional articles were found through snowballing techniques (pursuing the references of references and checking citations of respective articles). In total, the search identified 10 relevant publications discussing partnerships with private sector involvement in development cooperation. In addition, we identified 13 publications providing insights into the impact of cross-sector partnerships for sustainable development.

(2) Knowledge on PPPDs is mainly discussed in 'gray literature', i.e., in "the diverse and heterogeneous body of material available outside, and not subject to, traditional academic peer-review processes" [30]. Including gray literature broadened our research scope to more relevant studies, thereby providing a more complete view of available evidence. We applied the same key-word combinations as in the academic literature search in two databases (google and google scholar). In addition, we searched repositories of organizations that are experts in the field of PPPDs (e.g., the Donor

Committee for Enterprise Development). We selected 10 key documents that explicitly focused on the impact and results of efforts of partnerships and programs with the private sector of bilateral development agencies.

(3)   The third search focused on evaluation reports of partnership programs of various development agencies. We selected reports that focus on PPPD programs and not on other type of collaborations such as business-to-business programs, or other forms of private sector engagement. In addition, our aim was to capture a wide variety of results from diverse agencies instead of zooming into a specific impact area (e.g., inclusive green growth or gender). It is noteworthy how little evidence of significant evaluations of PPPDs exists [31] or is publicly available. We identified the following three reports that fit our criteria (see Table 1).

Table 1. Selected Private Partnerships for Development (PPPD) assessment reports.

PPPD Program	Assessment Type	Evaluator	Date
develoPPP.de program (German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development)	Evaluation	German Institute for Development Evaluation (Deval) [14]	2017
Facility for Sustainable Entrepreneurship and Food Security (FDOV) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands)	Mid-term review	Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) [32]	2016
Public-Private Partnerships & Global Development Alliances (U.S. Agency for International Development)	Evaluation	USAID [33]	2008

PPPD programs differ in terms of size, focus, design and structure. Similarly, the identified assessments of PPPD programs differ in type (e.g., process, impact, result assessments), purposes (e.g., accountability), depth and methodology. Therefore, our aim was not to compare the specific programs and their outcomes but rather focusing on findings regarding M&E practices for capturing impacts of PPPDs as stated in the evaluation and review reports. The selected reports analyze the program level but build their findings based on assessing PPPD projects of the program portfolio.

All data was analyzed by means of a thematic analysis [34]. In a first step, the key challenges of PPPD impact understanding and assessments were identified in each publication by developing first-order codes. We could identify patterns of these codes between the different publications and assigned second order codes (e.g., focus on direct results, goal alignment challenges, financial and development additionality). This interpretative coding means that we 'translated' concepts from one study into another, even if they did not use identical words [35]. In a next step, these second order codes were linked to key characteristics of PPPDs, as discussed in the literature. This allowed us to cluster the second order codes and identify five emerging themes: (1) time-span; (2) ambitions; (3) alignment; (4) added value beyond project results; and (5) relational M&E practices.

3. Findings: Five M&E Challenges for Capturing Impacts of PPPDs

The synthesis analysis identified five interrelated challenges of understanding and assessment of the impact of PPPDs in terms of: (1) time-span; (2) ambitions; (3) alignment; (4) added value beyond project results; and (5) relational M&E practices.

3.1. Time-Span: PPPDs Assess Short-Term Tangible Outputs of Activities Instead of Long-Term Changes

PPPDs are often set up as short-term projects while aiming for long-term relationships and change [8,21]. Developing deeper links and more substantial collaboration then serves as a key factor in enhancing the impact of partnerships. Moreover, collaborative relationships should become longer-term while at the same time remaining flexible. It has been found in practice that some of the best collaborations with business arise from regular and deep engagement between the staff from the development agency and company involved in the partnership [36]. Even though the quality of engagement has become increasingly prioritized over the number of public-private projects as a measure of success,

the current aid system does not always facilitate the development of deeper and longer-term links with business [36].

3.1.1. Focus on Immediate Results

In contrast with infrastructure PPPs that are designed as long-term public-private arrangements, PPPDs are often designed as projects of three to five years that implement a series of activities. Monitoring is than operationalized as an accountability mechanism following efficiency principles e.g., see [14]. The short-time frame of the project feed the perception that time and money are too limited to allow for proper impact measurement [37]. Tewes–Gradl et al. identify that "many private sector and donor project managers did not see the value of measuring changes that were far removed from their own sphere of influence and which might not be observable during a project's lifetime" [37]. Assessments then focus on immediate results; indicators at longer-term outcome level are seldom used; the same applies to indicators at the impact level [14,38]. Consequently, the short-term duration of PPPDs results in unclear development impacts—which in turn can negatively influence mutual engagement and increase transaction costs [33].

3.1.2. Focus on Performance

The emphasis on measurable results and accountability requires monitoring approaches that assess the efficiency of collaborative projects and whether they perform as agreed. These insights help to correct the partnership and ultimately mitigate risks of possible failures. It is therefore observed that in PPPDs, more monitoring (i.e., measurement of activities and baseline performance) is happening than evaluations (measurement of results, effects, outcome or impacts of the PPPD) e.g., see [14,33]. This is similar to other development interventions that are often rooted in performance-based models, which emphasize monitoring at the expense of evaluation [39]. The focus gets therefore easily distracted to short-term indicators of 'success' [33]. Academic literature that mainly investigates the performance and efficiency of partnerships, as highlighted by Vestergaard et al. [20] also reflects this perspective. The point of time at which an assessment is undertaken has implications for the findings [40]. "Short-term changes are, however, not good indicators of long-term change" [41].

3.2. Ambitions: PPPDs Have a Transformative Ambition but They Struggle to Capture Multiple Direct and Indirect Changes

Many PPPDs aim to be transformative; i.e., they use distinctive partner contributions to co-create sustainable societal, organizational and individual value [38,42]. Evaluations showed however that PPPDs often have unrealistic expectations [14,33]. PPPDs may use standardized M&E systems of involved organizations, that may fail to fully capture the complexity of partnerships in various contexts.

3.2.1. Various Impact Levels

Academic studies highlight that partnerships are complex and multi-layered [12]. Impact of partnerships can occur at various and multiple levels, such as the broader system and the target group. Impact is usually defined as the longer-term, direct, and indirect effects on whole issues—including the costs and benefits the partnership brings to the wider society [12]. In practice, various impact levels are studied but they are often not comparable. Mainstream research argues that the impact dynamics and the impact on poverty alleviation need to be measured at the level of the beneficiaries [20]. Others argue that long-term changes are often better observed in changed partner relationships, within partner organizations and in changed attitudes of individual participants in a partnership [9,12]. The latter argues that the partnership might add value by affecting how specific partner organizations conduct their core business as a result of their engagement in the partnership. This may translate into longer-term impact on society and the SDGs—even if a concrete partnership project fails.

3.2.2. Focus on Direct Results

PPPDs show positive unintended effects such as new and different relationships developed, changes in the way how work is done, relevant capacity development for future partnerships or project spill over effects that usually involve that project objectives being surpassed. PPPDs also show negative unintended effects, such as loss of reputation [14,33]. Research shows that partnerships struggle to capture and recognize their multiple direct and indirect changes; the focus on tangible results may overshadow recognition of intangible results and longer-term effects [43].

3.2.3. Unclear and Ambitious Objectives

Buse and Harmer [44] (p. 264) refer to a review of 74 Global Health Partnerships which identified that very few partnerships articulated objectives explicitly and measurably. The ambition may be to use comprehensive impact assessments that would attempt to capture all impact pathways. In practice, PPPD evaluations highlighted that some PPPDs have developed overambitious plans that are challenging to realize and ultimately measure the impact [32]. Consequently, postulated causal links between results are often not verifiable, assumptions are too optimistic for the given context, and packages of measures are too ambitious [14]. PPPDs have often multiple objectives. This increases the complexity and need of information gathering. Expected impacts should be estimated for each category of action, which leads to an overwhelming number of indicators and a significant rise in gathering costs. M&E budgets are often limited. So, a comprehensive impact assessment often focuses on some selected cases of the PPPD program—often comprising a collection of opinions by the actors involved and by experts. A meta study of evaluations of Dutch private sector programs found the following justification for a lack of impact data: (a) impact measurement was beyond the scope and budget of the evaluation effort; (b) there was no impact visible due to delayed implementation of projects and transactions; (c) measurement was impaired by a lack of baseline data and (d) the result indicators were too general to measure impact [45]. These findings also illustrate that not all PPPDs may lend themselves to rigorous impact evaluations [46].

3.3. Alignment of Partner's Accountability Requirements in PPPD M&E System Is a Challenge

PPPDs implement various policy objectives. They must serve both commercial business interests and development objectives. However, public and private actors may have different impact rationales and accountability mechanisms. Private sector actors gain financial returns and access to markets, while development agencies aim to contribute to SDG 17 and mobilize additional resources and capacities [5]. The partners in a PPPD may not be able (or willing) to specify desired development impacts in any meaningful way. As a result, partnerships often lack a theory of change that would underpin the relevance of the objectives of the intervention towards development impact. Monitoring systems, consequently, may instead focus on the inputs and track leveraging effects.

3.3.1. Goal Alignment Challenges

PPPD evaluations show that goal alignment between public development impact and business interests present a considerable challenge. The evaluation of the develoPPP.de program identified a crucial tension between interests of the private partners and the development impact as specified in the programs' requirements. The evaluation found that companies' objectives were achieved in all analyzed cases, whereas development objectives were met only in half of the cases, which seriously reduced the added value of the partnerships [14] (p.58). The review of the Dutch FDOV program found in contrast, that most PPPDs were able to strike a relative balance between poverty reduction and business objectives, partly because they did not focus on the poorest of the poor [32].

3.3.2. Diverse Perspectives on Function of M&E

PPPD partners are usually clear that robust M&E systems are important to demonstrate impact to internal and external stakeholders and to taxpayers [31]. However, partners often differ in their perspective on the function of the evaluation, and what and how to assess [37]. The closer the PPPDs activities are to a core business interest, the more engaged the corporation is in M&E [31]. Utilizing public money as leverage for private investments in development creates a form of tension between public accountability requirements and corporate management rationales [32]. The M&E systems of development agencies are often aimed at control and accountability, which can cause a sense of rigidity in the eyes of involved companies [32]. Being accountable for the correct use of public funding can overshadow the appraisal of PPPD results [14]. An overemphasis on accountability may lead to a view on reporting as a duty or burden and not as a means to an end [14,37].

3.3.3. Financial and Development Additionality

Analyzing and measuring development and financial additionality is a key part of development agencies' accountability requirements. Additionality means that the business would not implement the project without development agency support [47]. Measuring additionality—in particular of partnerships—is complex [5] and "hard to prove and disprove" [32]. Existing evidence and assessment criteria are limited or vague; assessments are often done ex-ante and rely heavily on information provided by applicant business [32,47]. It remains difficult to determine whether PPPDs would not have materialized without development agency (financial) engagement. Development additionality is noted e.g., in terms of gender equality, or improved working conditions [48], or is linked to an increase in scale and speed of project management [32]. Moreover, when adopted, additionality assessment is done for the business involvement only and not for the additionality of the development agency's engagement.

3.4. Added Value: PPPDs Need to Demonstrate Their Value beyond Project Results

PPPDs are a means to an end. But in international development practice, the distinction between means and ends is often unclear [49]. Attributing results is a general challenge of evaluations. But for cross-sector partnerships, it is particularly difficult to attribute the effect of an intervention when several actors are involved who aim to bring about social change over a longer period of time [41], while operating in complex and changing environments. The OECD [5] suggests that "in the absence of an agreed, cost-effective methodology, measuring impact should focus on assessing the contribution of the collective effort to the partnership outcome". The impact of the partnership might largely result from the collaborative process, and the synergies between the activities or other types of 'value added' by the partnership. Collaboration scholars, therefore, call for a better understanding of how partner relationships influence results in order to improve understanding about the usefulness of the partnership approach [38]. Partnerships can develop various institutional designs [50] and therefore it is necessary to understand which approaches are most effective in which context [37]. Evaluations largely describe the activities and some also describe the direct outputs. They are much less analytical towards whether the desired outcomes are being achieved and how these outcomes and impacts can be attributed to the partnership [33]. Most PPPDs still need to proof whether the partnering approach used for achieving the results was useful and of added value from the perspective of those involved and affected by the partnership's intervention. In practice, measurement processes rarely reflect on the partnership as an instrument [37].

3.5. Relational M&E Practices: PPPDs Require M&E Practices that Include Equity, Participatory Methods and Flexibility

PPPDs imply a change of what to assess (partnership), for whom to assess (partners), and with whom to assess (with partners) [51]. Partnerships require different designs and metrics than purely contractual relationships; they should be based on inclusion, equity, transparency and mutual accountability.

3.5.1. Equity

Partnering assumes a relationship built on non-hierarchical structures. This creates challenges, in particular for development agencies partnering with business. Although government agencies require traditional upward accountability from the partnership projects they fund, they are also a partner and mutual accountability becomes relevant. It is argued that in order to harness the private sector's long-term commercial interests for development, the donor-private sector relationship has to become more equal, long-term and strategic [5,31]. Consequently, partnering requires development agencies relinquish some control and predictability and learn how to engage on equal terms with the private sector [13].

3.5.2. Participatory M&E Approaches

The collaborative nature of partnerships challenges how M&E is usually done in development cooperation projects. Integrating participatory approaches into M&E activities is experienced as challenging by PPPDs [33]. Consequently, final evaluations are often not produced as a joint result of the partnership [33]. A vital distinction in their effectiveness depends on the level of trust partners can establish in the partnership. In the Dutch case, the PPPDs experienced M&E frameworks as challenging and complicated and as having high administrative burdens (adding to transaction costs). M&E related communication had to fit into the standardized reporting and monitoring framework of the development agency [32]. The evaluation of the develoPPP.de program, in contrast, highlighted the fact that the monitoring systems were strongly based on trust. The challenge that these projects faced was that they sometimes led to information deficits, which made it difficult to verify the projects' development activities and results [14] (p. 49).

3.5.3. Flexibility

Conventional evaluation approaches to partnership M&E either lack rigor, or are too narrowly focused and are mostly unable to capture the complexity of partnerships for development. Effective partnerships have been dynamic in adapting activities and strategy to changes in the configuration of the partnership or due to changing context requirements [19]. Partnerships thus require flexible M&E systems. During the partnership realization phase, partners may encounter tensions when predefined monitoring indicators are applied because processes change, relationships are fluid and, therefore, flexibility is required in a partnering approach. PPPDs can become stuck in promises made early on in their funding contract, requiring renegotiations between partners—with serious consequences for the partnering relationship. The review of the Dutch PPPDs identified limited flexibility for PPPDs to conduct changes. This reduces their ability to experiment with and adapt underlying business cases and may lead to risk-minimizing behavior of PPPDs [32]. In contrast, the more trust-based approach identified in the German develoPPP.de program led to project criteria that could be flexibly applied and cover the different needs of companies in various partnering phases [14].

4. Discussion and Approach: Dealing with Two Contradictory Logics

The above findings highlight that PPPD M&E processes need to link two governance logics that influence a proper understanding and capturing of impact (see Table 2). Managing these two contradictory logics, however, is also required to enhance the impact of PPPDs. The divide between both logics can be bridged by seeking a compromise between

the two. But this is often the actual practice of present PPPDs, which—as argued—may explain for their impact challenges. Following a discussion of rich tradition of organizational research insights, in this section we explore how a paradoxical lens can enable partners to better navigate the different logics and consequently enhance capturing PPPD impacts. The governance tension between control and collaboration is thereby inherent in the hybrid nature of PPPDs [26]. Can M&E practice include a paradoxical lens and deal with these tensions?

Table 2. Differences between control and collaboration approaches to monitoring and evaluation.

Control Approach		Collaboration Approach
Starts from several assumptions about partnering impact and aims to minimize risks that may hamper the achievement of impact	**Impact logic**	Understands impact as emerging in the process of partnering and dependent on the context
Accountability	**Reason**	Learning
Assessing a project's performance	**Goal/Rationale**	Aims to reflect on whether the 'right' will be achieved. Generating insights for improved action. Facilitating mutual learning between actors. Supporting reflexivity
Feedback to (single) organization (often the funder) on how money was spent and whether objectives were reached	**Outcome/result**	Enhancing a partnership to recognize and respond to change as well as to direct change
Accomplish the needs and requirements of one organization (e.g., funder) Accountability of partners towards this single organization	**Ownership**	Accomplish the requirements of the collective (and towards beneficiaries)
Financial accountability; project output (predefined indicators)	**Focus**	Collaborative capacity and relationship
Single organization-led: Principal-agent	**Decision-making**	Collaboration-led: Stewardship
Single level; result measurement based on predefined indicators; use of established methodologies	**Method**	Holistic approach; multi-level; open and flexible approach; context-specific
Little/no stakeholder participation; external independent consultant	**Involvement**	Multi-actor approach based on stakeholder participation
Timely performance information Less flexibility of monitoring approach	**Timeliness**	Flexible when learning is required
Use information for program improvement and organizational purposes	**Usability of information**	Learning for long-term relationship; transparency; sharing of lessons learned to enhance knowledge around partnering
Partnerships may be stuck in their impact promises and face challenges of changing realities (lack of flexibility)	**Challenges**	Impact assessment may tend to be too loose and unmanageable, resulting in M&E without a clear focus or even learning Resource intensive

(Source: partly based on Regeer et al., 2016 [52]).

4.1. Two (Seemingly) Contradictory Logics and the Emerging Tension

4.1.1. Control Approach

Control approaches assume goal divergence between partners. They highlight an adverse partner perspective which emphasizes control mechanisms in order to prevent opportunistic behavior of partners [25]. M&E in PPPDs following a control logic mainly emphasizes accountability to the development agency. It has a strong focus on collecting timely performance information, measures the result indicators as defined in the planning and design phase of the partnership, focuses on the project activities and outputs, compares results with targets using performance information to make decisions and is often steered by one organization (i.e., the development agency). A control approach requires that impact is defined in the partnership's influence span; it follows measurable indicators and metrics, mainly at an output or immediate outcome level. A control approach is informed by agency theory, which follows the traditional rationales of accountability rooted in neo-classical

economics [53]. Agency theory is premised on the assumption that there is goal divergence between principal and agent, and tight controls and monitoring need to be imposed to eliminate situations of contractors pursuing opportunistic behavior [54]. In summary, control emphasizes contracts and other forms of rules and procedures (e.g., monitoring or penalties) that provide a framework for relationships through which organizations can protect themselves from opportunism and conflict.

4.1.2. Collaboration Approach

At the same time, PPPDs follow a collaborative approach which emphasizes actor diversity and complementarity, a notion of equity and mutuality, a joint goal (and potentially also a joint problem definition, although this might be disputed because of the complex topics that partnerships try to address) [15]. Collaboration approaches emphasize collective behavior, which places a higher value on goal convergence than on self-interest. They are based on the assumption that long-term relationships are developed between actors based on trust, reputation, collective goals and involvement where alignment is an outcome that results from relational reciprocity [23]. In this sense collaboration moves beyond the purely instrumental relationships suggested by classical governance theories (e.g., agency theory or resource dependency theory) [55].

A collaboration approach aiming for transformative impact emphasizes flexibility and learning, is focused on sharing lessons learned and uses tools and measurements that should support relationship-building between partners. From this perspective, M&E comprises complex interactive processes where learning occurs in social relations. Partners monitor their experience, reflecting on this and subsequently analyzing those reflections, and then take action that becomes new experience for further reflection [56]. For an interpretation supported by all parties, a multi-actor assessment team is useful. Flexibility with room for re-interpretation enhances an atmosphere of mutual commitment and cooperation. In this context, from a collaborative perspective, assessment "is understood as learning and becomes a tool for sense-making and probing as much as for finding solutions" [57] (p.37). In conclusion, M&E that follows a collaboration approach emphasizes collaborative learning, aims to involve the target group (i.e., beneficiaries), targets holistic monitoring systems that are multi-level and adaptable if required. This perspective is sensitive to power dynamics, inclusion and exclusion issues, empowerment and disempowerment [41].

From a governance perspective, both approaches follow contrasting logics and reasoning (Table 2), resulting in tensions between learning and accountability which may be considered as incompatible trade-offs [39] and should not be conflated [58]. For example, if the emphasis is (perceived to be) on accountability, assessments may invoke defensive reactions, which may restrict the learning process [59] (p. 202). As our analysis showed, reporting by some PPPDs was experienced as a duty and not as a means to an end [33].

This tension is also highlighted by the fact that assessments following a control function tend to be public—due to transparency criteria imposed upon public agents—and are often performed by external consultants. Partners whose management and implementation activities are monitored are often inclined to defend their actions and achievements. This limits opportunities to learn from evaluations in terms of possible improvements [59]. In a collaborative approach, in contrast, the process of sense-making and interaction should be given room. This may conflict with the accountability function. Another example of how the tension between collaboration and control may manifest itself is how partners appreciate the results. Whether the realized impact and collaboration are perceived as successful may vary depending on expectations. From a control perspective, information from evaluation studies may help in decisions on the continuation of the partnership. Such data is sometimes not intended to be shared with others, and only used for internal improvement. From a collaboration perspective, the information needs to help partners to make sense of the process, and the impact and the lessons learned should also be shared externally to enhance learning from partnerships in general. Partnerships may neglect the fact that there are legitimate differences between partners about findings and may seek

consensual conclusions instead of retaining the tension that is productive for their own learning [60].

4.2. Bridging the Divide between Both Logics for Improved Impact Understanding and Assessment

Despite their contradictory logic, PPPDs need both approaches, and they should be complementary. The development agency requires a control approach due to the involvement of public funding. The partnership between organizations—as distinct from traditional contacting out relationships—requires a collaborative approach for adhering to collaborative fundamentals such as equity, mutual benefit and mutual acceptance or responsibilities [24]. The contradictory requirement of control in the form of accountability and collaboration in the form of learning may create a paradoxical tension for PPPD M&E and ultimately impact understanding and impact assessment.

Linking the two logics of collaboration and control leads to conceptual and practical M&E tensions for PPPDs. While accountability and collaboration are juxtaposed, they are also synergistic and interrelated in partnerships. The tension can be framed as a paradox—"contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" [61] (p. 382). At the core of paradox theory lies the acceptance of dualities of coexisting tensions where no compromise or singular choice between them has to be made [62].

Literature highlights that control and collaboration in partnering can be powerful and beneficial if harnessed. Reporting and monitoring mechanisms are often highlighted as critical formal implementation structures for ensuring the continuation of on-going efforts [43] but are also required for learning purposes. M&E literature increasingly emphasizes the need to think about multiple forms of accountability (upward, downward, mutual). Reeger et al. developed an integrative approach for reconciling both accountability and learning in one unified evaluation approach for collaborations [52]. This offers an engaging strategy attempt to deal with paradoxes on a longer-term basis and acknowledges paradoxes as a natural condition of work [63].

4.3. Practical Application: Navigating the Governance Tension for Impact Understanding and Assessment

Following this paradoxical perspective, we suggest that partnerships for development require navigating techniques that follow more procedural and learning approaches to assessing and upgrading impact over longer periods [15]. Several suggestions for navigating the control and collaboration tension for increased impact of PPPDs are discussed below. They include and combine the five interrelated themes that were identified as key challenges of PPPDs for understanding and assessing their impacts.

First, development agency and business partners need to align their impact understanding for the respective collaboration. For PPPDs this means determining clear business and development goals from the outset [33]. Partnerships in development cooperation usually emerge from or are initiated by tender processes or direct interaction with development agencies. In this first initiation phase, partners define the (added) value of their collaboration and how they link to the development agency's policy objectives. An important foundation for impact understanding is therefore defined in this initial partnership stage; all involved must develop a shared understanding of the aspired impact and drivers for the M&E system [33]. In consequence, guiding (navigating) questions focus on the collective aspired impact and aim to prevent tensions that can emerge if motivations of individual partners do not match the jointly agreed impact objective. A possible tool to align different impact logics is the process of jointly developing a Theory of Change (ToC) and developing clarity and mutual understanding about the assumptions underlying the partnership logic. However, although developing a ToC together can support relationship-building, it may not necessarily help to overcome asymmetries in the power relations among actors [64].

Second, development agency and business partners should together define the purpose and the design of the assessment(s) based on whether they can construct appropriate measurement tools. The partnership M&E framework should be developed based on a

common decided purpose that is relevant for all partners' individual accountability and learning needs and requirements and best fits the partnership. Joint goal setting and a commitment of conducting useful evaluations supports trust building and learning about partners' interests [33]. Such trust-building measures are needed to bring public and private institutional logics closer together [32]. Transparency around needs and willingness to understand the needs and requirements of others are key to aligning the M&E needs and developing an impact assessment that is helpful for the purpose of the partnership and of all partners involved. In addition, it should provide an assessment of the partnership's contribution to the SDGs [65]. Control-oriented needs may require quick results and success of the partnership, whereas the other partners may aim to learn along the way and appreciate the learning more than direct results. Embedding measurements from the start of the PPPD [37] and engaging key stakeholders early in the process of designing assessments of partnerships [66] helps the PPPD to link internal steering with external reporting and exchange.

Third, process and impact are interdependent in partnerships, and organizing connections between the two types of assessment will put both in perspective [59]. Partnerships risk exclusively focusing either on impact or purely on the process or performance, though during a partnership's realization, it becomes apparent whether an approach works and whether all specific aspects of the context have been adequately considered or all necessary stakeholders have been involved. Health checks and monitoring may reveal that the partnership approach requires a change while keeping an eye on the societal issue being addressed. Uncovering relational mechanisms such as risk sharing, power, commitment and trust can help to grasp potential or hidden problems of the partnership [67] and lower transaction costs. Unexpected monitoring findings can affect the relationship, process and activities, as they require changing the course of the partnership or even rethinking the approach, actor configuration or even the relevance of the partnership. Making agreements on how to collaborate on adaptation and unforeseen challenges (instead of deciding beforehand exactly what to do in a situation) can satisfy the control perspective, while the collaboration perspective can be used to exchange and joint reflection and learning as a source for addressing possible emerging issues.

Fourth, external exchange and peer-review can help comparisons with other collaborative and non-collaborative initiatives. Comparing and contrasting results can support both accountability and learning. It allows for making sense of findings, provides insights into which factors contributed to the success of the project or indicates created barriers that prevent contributing to societal issues. Comparing partnering approaches requires consideration of the setting and context in which the comparative case operates. Data on the process of partnering and the achievement of impact needs to be an integral part of any plans for replication and scaling of the partnership project. Such information is vital for funding and planning for future activities, and it also helps partners to reflect on the added value of their partnering approach. In addition, linking self-evaluation to an external visit would make the tension productive and prevent external assessors from drawing conclusions that are not considered justified by the partners, a procedure that may enrich internal sense-making through 'independent' observations. Thus, both functions may be effectively combined [59]. This process could be supported by a learning partner that supports the generation, access and use of knowledge among PPPD partners for a longer period of time, with the aim of improving the outcomes of the collaboration and developing and sharing lessons that are learned [68].

5. Conclusions and Further Research

Public-Private Partnerships for Development (PPPDs) face several challenges related to impact understanding and assessment. PPPD is an increasingly widespread practical phenomenon which has only been modestly researched for its impact—including possible lessons learned. The effectiveness, not the necessity, of PPPDs remains debated, which points to the importance of effective monitoring and evaluation approaches. This study

used a qualitative research synthesis approach for bringing research evidence together from academia and practice to produce an actionable knowledge base [28]. The study synthesized five key emerging themes on M&E challenges related to the impact of PPPDs:

- PPPDs assess short-term tangible outputs of activities instead of long-term changes
- PPPDs have a transformative ambition but they struggle to capture multiple direct and indirect changes
- PPPDs M&E systems are challenged to align individual partners' accountability requirements
- PPPDs need to demonstrate their value beyond project results
- PPPDs require M&E practices that embrace equity, participatory methods and flexibility

These challenges are caused by the double governance logic of PPPDs. This consequently has implications on M&E practice. Although partnership M&E has a control and risk mitigation function, M&E should also support collaborative characteristics such as trust-building and power-sharing. To enhance the impact of PPPDs on reaching development goals, M&E practice needs to bridge the divide between result-based, upward accountability monitoring and evaluation approaches and emerging learning, participatory and complexity-based approaches. This study elaborates on a paradox approach to address related governance and M&E tensions, by delineating processes through which the tension can be navigated. By doing so, the paper responds to calls from partnership research that highlights the need to shift practitioners' thinking away from the search for prescriptions and move towards resolutions which are innovative [69]. In line with Vangen (2016), this paper suggests that the paradox lens can support partnership practitioners to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of both control and collaboration approaches for their M&E system and practices [70]. The paper defines several navigating interventions that support a more complex-sensitive M&E [15] and governance structure: aligning impact understanding; agreeing on a common purpose; consider process and impact as interdependent; and engaging in external exchange and peer-review. A paradox approach considers the partnering process as a continuous improvement process in which M&E serve both control and collaboration ambitions.

Avenues for Future Research

This study has several limitations.

First, this paper engaged in a qualitative synthesis study of partnership evaluation reports and key scientific studies. The findings are not based on primary data of actual partnerships or partnership programs. A further limitation of synthesizing studies in order to identify key themes is that critical contextual information is reduced (with some exceptions). Future research could investigate the impact at the (comparative) partnership or partnership program level in order to draw further lessons on more or less effective (national) PPPD M&E practices adding the broader partnership impact literature.

Second, the paper focused predominantly on one specific type of partnerships for the SDGs: Public-Private Partnerships for Development. This is an increasingly important and relevant type of partnership that operates mainly at the interface of aid and trade. However, further research could investigate whether and how similar governance and impact measurement tensions may emerge in partnerships with different actor constellations (e.g., business—non-profit partnerships; multi-stakeholder partnerships) and with various scopes (e.g., global, regional or national) or different purposes (e.g., policy, service delivery, infrastructure, capacity-building and economic development) [6].

Third, this paper concentrated on the impact of development partnerships. The intention was not to consider insights from studies that evaluate other forms of collaboration or collaborative processes e.g., see [71]. An extended perspective may provide additional insights from other collaborative forms and broaden the impact focus. The five key themes that were distinguished in this paper can thereby serve as benchmark for further testing, validation and benchmarking.

Fourth, by performing a review of the literature, this paper has systematically disentangled the impact challenge of PPPDs and conceptually explained the underlying governance tension in the M&E of PPPDs. In addition, it suggests applying a paradox approach to deal with this tension. Future empirical research could explore how PPPD cases actually deal with the paradox in practice and create an inventory of actual strategies applied by PPPDs when facing governance tensions in their partnership M&E. Due to the 'navigating' approach that was introduced as a way of dealing with the inherent paradoxes of PPPDs, it seems logical that researchers apply a participatory or action oriented research approach, in which the research follows and interacts with the various phases of the partnership. Witnessing the very large number of PPPDs that have been created in support of the SDG agenda, it should not be difficult to find willing candidates for this effort.

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Catalyzing Transformational Partnerships for the SDGs: Effectiveness and Impact of the Multi-Stakeholder Initiative *El día después*

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Abstract: Partnerships are essential to delivering the transformational change demanded by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and essential to achieving Agenda 2030. It is therefore necessary to strengthen the partnering capacity of different types of organizations so they can collaborate in multi-stakeholder partnerships. However, partnership working can be costly in terms of time and other resources and is complex. Given the urgency and importance of sustainable development, illustrated by the recent pandemic and social unrest around inequity, we focused on the creation of a partnership that became effective quickly and was able to deliver societal impact at scale. Using a case study approach, the transformational potential and the early stages of "El día después" (in English, "The day after") were analyzed as it represents a multi-stakeholder partnership forged to frame an SDG-oriented collaborative response to the COVID-19 crisis in Spain. *El día después* is defined as a partnership incubator, a space where public administrations interact under conditions of equivalence with all the other stakeholders, where private companies can link their innovation processes to other SDG-committed actors and social needs and where the academic sector can participate in a sustained dialogue oriented to the action. Our findings reveal that in order to catalyze the co-creation process and achieve systemic change through a set of connected multi-stakeholder initiatives, a very flexible collaborative arrangement is required, with all partners acting as facilitators. In this way, a solid interdisciplinary team is created, united around a shared vision, with trust-based relationships and a common identity fueling impact-oriented projects targeted to advance the SDGs.

Keywords: multi-stakeholder partnerships; transformation; effectiveness; impact; SDGs; COVID-19

1. Introduction

The adoption in 2015 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) revealed the need for strengthen global partnerships. 'Effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships' highlighted in Target 17.1 may result the institutional and organizational structures needed to foster the systemic and transformative approaches required to deliver against the SDG Agenda [? ? ?]. "These transformations seek to exploit synergies between

Goals to achieve multiple SDGs by organizing implementation around SDG interventions that generate significant co-benefits" [**?**] (p. 2). Stronger governance structures may emerge as a result of the exploitation of these synergies [**? ? ?**].

Given the urgency to advance sustainable development, highlighted by the recent pandemic and social unrest around inequity, we need to be more deliberate in creating multi-stakeholder partnerships and pay more attention to the ingredients that promote effectiveness and impact through partnership working. Without this, we shall continue to rely on serendipity and opportunism to bring partners together [**?**]. An essential question to address is "Who starts it?" Partnerships that have a transformative ambition cannot rely on bottom-up approaches alone [**? ?**], which can present problems such as short-time horizons, insufficient coordination mechanisms and misaligned incentives [**?**]. To achieve systemic impact, it is necessary to gain wide agreement on the transition pathway or roadmap and the portfolio of partnerships needed in order to achieve it [**?**]. Facilitators may bring partners together, help with the incentives assessment or assist in any conflict resolution [**? ?**]; however, much enquiry is needed around how to develop a collaborative roadmap and the nature of partnerships needed to create a suitable portfolio [**?**]. It takes energy to both initiate, develop and sustain partnership working, and the return on this investment of time, personnel and other resources needs to be worth the effort [**? ? ?**]. Usually, partners have clear incentives in terms of efficiency, innovation or reputation [**? ? ? ?**]. However, partnership processes can be resource and time demanding and more practical evidence is needed on how to make them more truly effective and impactful [**?**].

Here, we explore the deliberate creation of a large multi-stakeholder partnership from a lifecycle perspective, paying close attention to how the formative stages of relationship building were accelerated, identifying the key ingredients required and how the partnership moved beyond incrementalism to deliver transformative change. We focused on drawing out how the partnership became a solid initiative, with value beyond that of the sum of the partners. The case of "El día después" (EDD; in English, "The day after"), forged to frame an SDG-oriented response to the COVID-19 crisis, represents a unique partnership devoted to building the capacity of relevant stakeholders to tackle the pandemic crisis. EDD was used as a vehicle in which to examine the establishment of a partnership at speed, charged with a higher degree of transformation and focused on delivering more impact.

The article is organized as follows: Section **??** provides a theoretical overview of partnerships, their lifecycle and how they may transition to transformational status. Section **??** presents the research approach, based on a case study methodology. To assist better understanding of the subsequent analysis, a summary of the results and organizational model of EDD is provided in Section **??**. In Section **??**, a detailed analysis of the initial phases of the partnership lifecycle, and an assessment of its transformational character is provided. Key conclusions and lessons are presented in Section **??**, including some recommendations about creating partnering capacity around relevant stakeholders to accelerate the transformations needed to achieve SDGs.

2. Theoretical Overview

Collaboration among different stakeholders in society seeks to assemble diverse and potentially complementary assets, in the form of competencies, skills and resources, around a shared purpose that guides their attention—in this case, transformation related to delivery of the 2030 Agenda [**? ?**]. While the study of the processes necessary for partnerships to generate systemic change has been the subject of academic enquiry, it is necessary to explore specific cases to further theoretical analysis of their lifecycle [**? ? ? ?**]. There is general agreement that three elements are critical to a partnership seeking to achieve systemic change:

- The formation stage of the partnership [**? ? ? ?**] represents a period of intense investment by the partners to define the value-add of the collaboration, to develop trust among them and to set the goals and systems for working together [**? ?**].
- Articulating the aspiration of the partners for transformational change. The collaborative value [**?**] created at the initial stages of a collaboration usually rests upon philanthropic or transactional

approaches, with several critical factors identified for a partnership to evolve to a transformational stage [?].

- The need for orchestration or a facilitation function, with governance processes that assist partners and wider stakeholders to manage and respond to the challenges of collaboration [? ? ?].

A number of researchers have examined partnerships and collaborative arrangements using a chronological approach [? ?]; this can help us understand the processes that enable transformational outcomes [?] across key phases that partnerships normally go through, although, in most cases, progression is non-linear and phases overlap [?]. They proposed a cyclical process that begins with scoping, where the challenge to be tackled is identified and the partners selected. This is followed sequentially by setting the objectives, roles and governance structures. The third phase relates to implementation and is oriented towards action, when partners' engagement and appropriate collaborative management are crucial. After this, the partnership becomes consolidated and moves to either complete its project and/or transitions to tackle new work together. Key attributes of the initial stages [?] are summarized in Table **??**.

Table 1. Initial phases of partnership development [?].

Stage	Key Attributes
Scoping	Purpose and orientation
	Composition
	Articulation
Initiating	Agreements and decision-making
	Partners expansion
Implementing	Launching
	Operation
	Scaling up strategies

Within this lifecycle framework, the importance of the scoping and initiating stages has been widely acknowledged [? ?]. In these early phases, the partnership may be less visible, with resources being consumed and value yet to be created and/or made visible [? ? ?]. The opportunity to pay attention to "value creation dynamics" [?] may help to attenuate or indeed avoid downstream challenges to effective collaboration [? ?].

A framework that can help us understand the purpose of partnerships that reach across business and society is that of shared value [?], developed to illustrate the policies and operating practices that enhance the competitiveness of a company while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates. Some limitations were identified with this concept, drawing attention to the tensions between economic and social objectives and the lack of an overt link to social innovation [? ?]. Proposed set of tools which conceptualize key elements and processes in fostering shared value through cross-sector partnerships, defined the collaborative value creation (CVC) framework [?]. The CVC framework identifies four stages of collaboration that progress one to the next as partners reinforce the generation of meaningful shared value (see Figure **??**). The CVC framework brings two fundamental elements to the conceptualization of partnerships: the transformational aspiration among the partners and the evolutionary nature of the value generated. However, its focus on companies and non-profits poses some limitations in terms of the diversity of actors comprising a partnership; the emerging facilitating or orchestrating role in a partnership was also not considered explicitly.

NATURE OF RELATIONSHIP	StageI: **PHILANTROPIC**	StageII: **TRANSACTIONAL**	StageIII: **INTEGRATIVE**	StageIV: **TRANSFORMATIONAL**
Level of engagement	Low			High
Importance to mission	Peripheral			Central
Magnitude of resources	Small			Big
Type of resources	Money			Core competences
Scope of activities	Narrow			Broad
Interaction level	Infrequent			Intensive
Trust	Modest			Deep
Internal change	Minimal			Great
Managerial complexity	Simple			Complex
Strategic value	Minor			Major
Co-creation of value	Sole			Conjoined
Synergistic value	Occasional			Predominant
Innovation	Seldom			Frequent
External system change	Rare			Common

Figure 1. Variables used to characterize the evolutionary nature of partnerships in the collaborative value creation framework [**?**].

The "partnership broker" [**?**] function reflects interactions across multiple boundaries and seeks to transform uncertain conditions into collaboration opportunities [**?**]. This function may be undertaken by an organization or by an individual (sometimes both) [**? ?**]. "Several studies call for an orchestrator of partnerships[. . .]. Most studies view orchestration as simply initiating and supporting individual partnerships. Proposed orchestrators include international institutions, government departments [**? ? ?**] or professional orchestrators [**?**]" [**?**] (p. 4). Key functions of the facilitating role includes generation of a collaboration context; fostering co-creation; mediation and promotion of key transversal processes such as innovation, learning, gaining wider influence, etc. [**?**]. In essence, this involves creating trust capital among partners [**?**].

The importance of "deep or radical" collaborative arrangements to ensure the transformational agenda of the SDGs [**? ?**] demands that we pay more attention to understanding the processes and barriers relating to partnership formation, evolution and facilitation. The following sections explore the case of EDD, a partnership that, in its first months, influenced public policies in the de-escalation and recovery of the COVID-19 crisis in Spain, through the deep interaction among a number of different organizations working in partnership through a distributed leadership model.

3. Research Approach

3.1. Research Aims and Scope

The present study focuses on the early development of the "El día después" (EDD), a multi-stakeholder partnership that includes public, private and academic parties. It seeks to deepen our understanding of how partnerships contribute to addressing systemic change. In this case, EDD represents a partnership whose purpose was to create an infrastructure within which different stakeholders involved in the response to COVID-19 could come together to address the crisis. Attention is given to how the partnership was formed and rapidly progressed to effective and impactful working at scale and the ingredients that yielded its transformational capacity. Drawing lessons from the lived experience of practice, with some of the authors being members of the partnership, enabled us to extract the critical factors underpinning effectiveness and impact. A key outcome was how the EDD

partnership moved through the lifecycle perspective, covering the early phases in a matter of weeks rather than months or even years. The EDD partnership became transformative, directly omitting the preliminary stages [**?**]. Here, we examine the formation and working model of EDD through the lens of the aforementioned frameworks: the partnership lifecycle phases model [**?**], and the collaborative value creation model [**?**]. This work has both theoretical and practical implications. The combination of grounded self-assessment allowed us to delve into the conceptualization of transformational and SDG-oriented partnerships. From a practical point of view, we provide recommendations to accelerate the formation, effective working and outcomes of a partnership. A key focus of our work was the facilitation of partnership working given that this role was undertaken by each of the partners as opposed to an single organization or individual [**?**].

3.2. Methodology

This investigation uses a case study methodology which is typically adopted to investigate a contemporary phenomenon ("the case") in depth and within its real-world context. Case studies offer rich empirical descriptions of specific instances of a phenomenon based on a variety of data sources [**?**] because they enable insights into complex cause–effect relationships that can provide useful pointers for addressing major substantive themes in a field [**?**]; this methodology is also useful for theory building [**?**]. A wide range of fields have used case studies, particularly education [**? ?**], management, supply chain and operations research [**? ? ? ? ?**] and, most importantly for this work, sustainability [**?** **?**]. Case studies are singularly appropriate for analyzing collaborative initiatives because of their multi-disciplinary and cross-cutting nature [**?**].

We analyzed the formation of EDD through the lifecycle framework [**?**]; the key attributes are summarized in Table **??**. Regarding CVC analysis the different variables proposed by Austin and Seitanidi have been grouped according to four categories [**?**], namely organizational engagement; resources and activities; partnership dynamics, and impact (see Table **??**).

Table 2. Categories used for analysis of collaborative value creation.

Categories	Original CVC Framework Variables
Organizational engagement	Level of engagement Importance to mission
Resources and activities	Type of resources Magnitude of resources Scope of activities Managerial complexity
Partnership dynamics	Interaction Trust Internal change
Impact	Co-creation of value Synergistic value Strategic value Innovation External system change

The case study methodology often uses the triangulation of a set of sources of evidence to substantiate findings robustly[**?**]. In addition, the combination of perspectives from multiple researchers may amplify the creative potential in a case study [**?**]. This investigation has been conducted by six researchers, four of whom participating in EDD working teams and the other two acting as external observers. The case study was conducted from March to July 2020 and used the following sources: key documentation related to several partnership activities (including project proposals, terms of references, working documents, etc.); direct observation in the field (including attendance at EDD team meetings, EDD Communities meetings, virtual workshops and seminars,

etc.) and open interviews with selected stakeholders. The EDD partners' representatives revised and validated the final version of this paper.

4. The Case of "El día después"

Created in March 2020, the EDD partnership was forged to frame an SDG-oriented response to the COVID-19 crisis. EDD was formed by four different organizations, namely Iberdrola, a global company in renewable energy; itdUPM, a public university innovation center; ISGlobal, a global health research center, and SDSN Spain, the Spanish node of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. These four organizations had collaborated before in bilateral and multi-stakeholder projects but had not worked in this particular configuration, and starting a partnership had not been on any of their agendas. The pandemic sparked a call to action for a deeper collaboration among their executives, based on mutual trust and the common willingness to innovate in collaborative arrangements. This was materialized in the multi-stakeholder partnership that became known as EDD.

The partnership started on 17 March 2020, with a first meeting among the four organizations. This first stage was characterized by strong interactions, focused on articulating the objective of the partnership—this being the opportunity to offer a collaborative response to the COVID-19 crises based on the SDGs. This represents the partnership's value proposition for EDD. The first public event presented the initiative on 25 March, when a call for collaboration of organizations to create an EDD Network was released, with the first meeting of the network held on 2 April. Just four days later, on 6 April, four communities had been created: Global Governance and Cooperation for Development; Cities; Health & Environment; Inequalities and New Economic Models. Each community comprised a core team of 10 people drawn from public and private decision-makers with civil society leaders. Communities were coordinated through one cross-community meeting and one community-specific meeting per week. In addition, three virtual spaces were opened to help communities progress and amplify their impact: (i) Agora, a hybrid space for conversations and interpretation among actors with diverse sensibilities; (ii) Workshops, a co-design space for positioning on a topic with experts from a community, and (iii) CoLab, a mass interaction space for activation of collective intelligence through prototypes. Through virtual spaces, each community held its first public event to set the vision of the community and position the initiative in a specific response to the COVID-19 area of work. On 25 May, once the communities had consolidated their direction of work and grown in number to approximately 20 members per community, which incidentally coincided with the start of the COVID-19 de-escalation and reopening process in Spain, the partnership progressed to the second stage of "maturity". A transition process was then held to reorganize the internal team and better support communities in a mid-term scenario with two priorities: to consolidate trust and shared purpose within communities and to launch the first transformative actions. Since then, communities have focused on designing demonstration projects at scale, involving stakeholders and promoting cross-learning among projects. Figure **??** synthesizes the timeline of the different EDD steps.
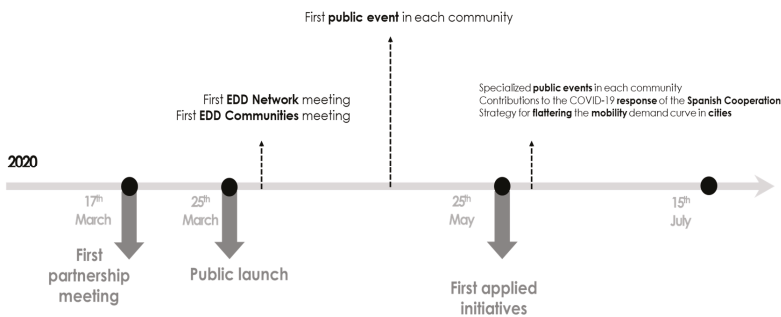

Figure 2. Timeline of "El día después".

Objectives and Preliminary Results

EDD Partnership has mobilized and consolidated a broad ecosystem of people and organizations in a very short space of time, convened around a shared purpose of framing an SDG-oriented response to the COVID-19 crisis in Spain. More than 80 experts and decision-makers with very diverse political sensitivities are attending EDD Community meetings weekly and 50 public and private organizations are now part of the wider EDD Network. In addition, public events have caught the attention of citizens, many of whom are also now participating. Thus far, more than 35,000 views have been reached at 13 public events and 150 experts have participated in three closed workshops. Outputs from the communities have served to introduce the possibilities that the pursuit of the SDGs are relevant as a means to manage the COVID-19 recovery in Spain using a multi-stakeholder perspective. For example, outcomes to date include the development of policy papers on the case for universal basic income, contributions to the Joint Response of the COVID-19 Crisis of the Spanish Cooperation and the creation of a strategy for flattening the transport mobility demand curve in cities. Although, in this paper, we are not intending to assess EDD's impact, details regarding illustrative early outcomes can be found in Appendix **??**. Many international organizations have shown interest in how EDD was framed, seeking to adapt this partnership model to their own context. Examples include national and international institutions such as Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB), Uruguayan International Cooperation Agency (AUCI), the United Nations for Development Program (UNDP) and the Brazilian Institute for Development and Sustainability (IABS), among others. A summary of the EDD organizational model can be found in Figure **??**.
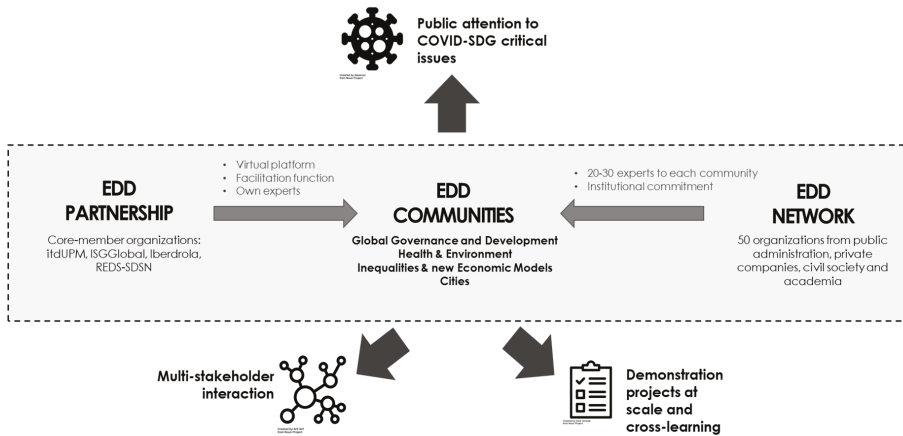

Figure 3. EDD organizational model.

5. Results: Lifecycle and Collaborative Value Creation Analysis of the EDD

This section presents the analysis of the EDD in relation to the lifecycle [**?**] and CVC frameworks [**?**], describing the differential elements that have catalyzed the EDD partnership and its maturation to transformational impact.

5.1. Lifecycle Analysis of the EDD

5.1.1. Scoping

The preliminary steps of a partnership are usually focused on defining its purpose. Typically, this type of collaborative arrangement seeks to tackle complex problems and define concrete challenges, breaking them down to achieve discrete and measurable results [**? ?**].

EDD's purpose of "offering an infrastructure within which different stakeholders involved in the response to COVID-19 can deploy their potential to collaborate" can be framed as a complex problem. However, a preliminary outcome was not defined. EDD was structured through four different but complementary communities. Its driving groups, made up of around 20 renowned professionals from academia, private companies, public administration and civil society, identified issues of shared interest and tangible opportunities for action from a multi-stakeholder and evolutionary perspective. For example, the community of "Cities" identified sustainable mobility as one of its main themes and, within it, promoted various initiatives to flatten the transport demand curve in the reopening of several Spanish cities (Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, Valencia, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and Palma de Mallorca).

EDD's main objective was to accelerate systemic changes by bringing policymakers closer to scientists, industry and civil society. To do this, instead of following a linear logic supported by project planning aimed at achieving pre-established results, EDD used an evolutionary logic with a series of fundamental elements explored here: connecting strategic initiatives and people, sharing learnings incorporating "problem owners" from the start and having ambition for scale.

Once the main pupose of a partnership has been set, the potential partners usually evaluate whether an appropiate combination of their complementary assets (competencies, skills and resources) can address the identified challenge in an original manner [? ? ? ?]. Generally, a facilitation function is assigned to a designated organization or an individual to translate ambiguous conditions into collaborative opportunities [? ? ?].

EDD started with a complementary combination of organizations with some previous experience of working together, but not in the arrangement described here. Bringing in some trustful relationships among some of its members, together with some common experiences of working in collaborative environments, were foundational assets. All had exposure to the SDGs in some capacity; for example, ISGlobal is a research institute focused on global health, Iberdrola is a multinational energy company that is world leading in renewable production, and itdUPM is the innovation center at a technological university focused on partnerships for the SDGs, with a network of Spanish professionals from mainly academia and public administration commited to the 2030 Agenda.

The collaborative environment of the EDD makes the facilitation function essential. However, this function was not undertaken by a single unit, person or organization but was held by all EDD partners. Each partner contributed its added value in facilitation; some had more direct contact with a certain sector (such as private companies or science) or more developed communication skills; others had specialized knowledge in organizational innovations and multi-stakeholder work. However, all of the partners took on the role of facilitators and this distributed facilitation function has allowed EDD to create and sustain a distributed leadership culture [? ? ?]. This was deemed to be an essential element of EDD in enabling it to consolidate relationships among a wide number of diverse stakeholders with all due speed.

5.1.2. Initiating

When a partnership begins its activities, it is common to draw up an agreement among its members that includes the differential contributions, the governance and accountability mechanisms and the joint working structures. In this process, there is usually a tension between flexibility and formalization, and the resulting agreements are typically explicit [? ? ? ?]. A consideration of whether to increase the number of organizations that form or are related to a partnership, how best to manage the tension between maintaining control and increasing diversity, results in most cases in a formal process that can represent a drag factor on creativity and innovation. This tension will normally be present throughout all the partnership activities, but what happens during the formation stage may condition the control–flexibility balance during the lifecycle [? ? ?].

At EDD, there has been no trend towards formalization. In the five months of intense work among the partners, it has not been necessary to regulate their relationships or contributions with

any formal agreement. From the point of view of working structures, a common culture has been consolidated, but no committees or permanent structures have been formalized; people from different organizations have been mixed into diverse work teams that have evolved according to the needs of the partnership. A special emphasis has been placed on creating a shared vision among partners' representatives and across the entire EDD team. This has been developed by agile, dynamic and frequent debriefing meetings with people from all the teams involved (daily in the first two months) and through collaborative workshops when it has been necessary to define priorities or make strategic decisions. EDD needed to build relationships with a broad set of organizations to achieve impacts at scale. To facilitate their incorporation, the EDD Network was formed, which more than 50 organizations from academia, the private sector, public administration and civil society have joined through a letter of commitment (a "soft" agreement in which their alignment with the EDD vision was made).

5.1.3. Implementing

Some argue that the first operating actions of a partnership should be conceived as a continuous design process in which experimentation and learning allow the initial objectives to be refined [?]. Others complement this approach, pointing out the importance of a scaling up process (usually starting with a pilot project or a set of pilot actions) to remove forces that hinder collaboration [?] and to test new practices to strengthen partners' relationships and common decision-making procesess to achieve meaningful results [?].

These observations are partially reflected in the early stages of EDD's formation. Regarding the scaling-up process, EDD was not envisaged as a "quick win" pilot and opted to start its activities with demonstrator projects at scale. For example, to keep the use of public transport constant but safe in the reopening of cities, the community of "Cities" promoted an agreement to flatten the mobility demand curve in the city of Madrid, involving the main stakeholders of Madrid City Council and the Regional Government, universities, business associations and green growth companies and the main trade unions. The city released a letter that encouraged organizations to adopt a number of commitments including cutting the number of movements by their workforce by at least 30 per cent over pre-lockdown levels; introducing flexible working hours and promoting the use of public transport and cycling among their employees. The EDD team is now supporting this initiative to create a virtual platform to assist flattening the mobility demand curve and is considering expansion to other cities involved in the EDD community.

It has been essential to integrate what was already emerging in the context of the communities instead of generating actions from within the partnership's members. The active participation of the private sector and policymakers combined with academia and civil society has been crucial to frame the various transformative initiatives and to improve their chances of success. EDD promoted a culture focused on building interpersonal and organizational trust and cross-learning among the different communities.

5.1.4. Assessing

A key finding of the global assessment of EDD in relation to the lifecycle approach was that it has only partially followed the stages described in the theory [?]. EDD fits with those patterns described by previous literature regarding the complexity of the challenge it sought to address [? ?], the complementary combination of partners' assets [? ? ? ?], the need of a facilitation function [? ? ?], the conception of its activities as a continuous learning process [?] and the importance of action-oriented processes as a way to overcome practical barriers [?]. However, EDD has several singularities, particularly in regard to its evolutionary perspective on goal setting, the facilitation role being distributed among all the partners, the flexibility and trust-based approach to framing governance and the approach of initiating with scale projects instead of prototypes. These differential elements, summarized in Table **??**, point to some key insights into how to catalyze transformative partnerships to increase effectiveness and impact; these are analyzed in the next section.

Table 3. EDD differential elements in relation to lifecycle assessment.

Stages	EDD Differential Elements
Scoping	Evolutionary logic and distributed facilitation function among all partners.
Initiating	No trend towards formalization: governance or contributions based on trust, common culture but non-permanent working structures, flexible and agile new organizations' interaction.
Implementing	Starting with demonstration projects at scale: integrating what was already emerging in the context; active participation of private sector and policymakers, combined with academia and civil society; culture focused on building interpersonal and organizational trust and cross-learning.

5.2. Collaborative Value Creation Analysis of the EDD

Throughout this section, the initial "position" of EDD will be described with respect to the key pointers defined in the CVC framework [?], grouped into four categories, namely organizational engagement; resources and activities; partnership dynamics and impact.

5.2.1. Organizational Engagement

The EDD partnership was forged in a crisis, reflecting the mission of its promoters. The 2030 Agenda has since become a central element for many organizations and is fundamental for EDD's partners. Iberdrola has incorporated the SDGs into its business strategy and corporate governance system [?]. The university vehicle of itdUPM has contributed to the development of a new SDG-aligned research strategy for Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM) [?] and its governing council's commitment to decarbonizing the campus by 2030 [?]. Multi-stakeholder partnerships such as EDD are a way which itdUPM employs to reach these commitments. For ISGlobal, the SDGs are a core element of its mission, "contributing through education, research and advocacy to the challenges of global health" [?]. In addition, SDSN-Spain's mission is centered directly around the SDGs to "mobilize and sensitize Spanish society, public institutions and private [. . .] around the SDGs, as well as favor their incorporation into public policies, the business environment and behavior of society in general" [?]. As such, the founding partners had the SDGs as a shared narrative which supported effective communication among them.

The level of organizational engagement of EDD partners was very high from the start. The managers of staff involved and their teams were aware from the first days of the COVID-19 confinement in Spain that it could have a dramatic effect on society and understood the necessity to react quickly. This created a shared purpose among partners together with a sense of urgency. The main objective for EDD was to influence the de-escalation and recovery process, leaning on the pillars of the 2030 Agenda of collaboration and transformation. All partners had strong prior experience in partnerships and other collaborative arrangements. However, EDD emerged as a unique partnership, connected with the social priorities of the moment as well as the longer-term SDGs, with a strong capacity for and interest in attracting other organizations. This has contributed significantly to maintaining a very high level of commitment for partners compared to the previous experiences of EDD members in other collaborative ventures.

5.2.2. Resources and Activities

The dedication of resources to EDD by its founders was significant from the beginning. Given the ambition of the initiative, from the first day, a team of more than 30 people from all the partners came together. EDD was a priority action for the individuals concerned and the organizations they represented. Once communities were established and consolidated, 80 experts from industry, academia, public administration and civil society joined EDD. This ecosystem of people and organizations was complex, but EDD opted for agile, evolutionary management, with no intent to formalize governance.

This was supported by flexible and frequent meetings, workshops for joint decision-making and fostering a shared work culture around the values of commitment, agility, flexibility, attention to incentives and details, generosity and distributed leadership. As aforementioned, EDD has a broad scope for its activities, centered around public policy contributions, demonstration projects at scale and mass public broadcasting activities. To carry out these activities, EDD partners combined their core competencies in facilitation, providing interdisciplinary strengths to the EDD team and to the communities' work, connecting partners' specialists to each community.

5.2.3. Partnership Dynamics

The level of interaction among EDD partners has been intensive from the very first days. There was a daily coordination and debriefing meeting of EDD teams (three times a week from the third EDD month), a weekly coordination meeting across all communities and another in each community, with 10 public events organized in the first two months. This level of interaction could not have been maintained without the strong organizational purpose and, above all, without high levels of trust among the organizations and the people who are part of EDD. In a simplified way, trust can be expressed as the sum of credibility, reliability and intimacy—divided by self-orientation or ego [**?**]. The prestige of the partner organizations reinforced the credibility of their teams and the previous relationships among them, the reliability and intimacy. Moreover, the shared purpose that was created around the EDD has led to the emergence of a strong shared identity with EDD, regardless of the partner to which each person is affiliated. As a result, deep trustful relationships among its EDD partners are a key asset of the partnership.

5.2.4. Impact

Co-creation and the aspiration of generating value through a collaborative process have always been essential objectives of the EDD. Delving into the generation of synergistic and strategic value, EDD sustains an innovation process highly valued by the different stakeholders. For the public administrations, the possibility of interacting in a diverse ecosystem under conditions of equivalence with all the stakeholders, and the dynamism and generosity favored by the EDD team, allowed them to advance faster and more boldly than in classic innovation networks or spaces. For private companies, the commitment of other actors to transformation represented an opportunity for more effective innovation processes was linked to the real needs of society. For the academic sector, EDD represented an opportunity for sustained dialogue with other stakeholders and the possibility of participating in multi-stakeholder projects at scale to advance knowledge sharing. Thus, having the problem owners at the center of the design (usually the public sector), and the sustained co-creation with the rest of the stakeholders, significantly increased the possibilities of systemic change in the EDD initiatives.

5.2.5. Assessment of the CVC Analysis of the EDD

An essential finding of the global assessment of the EDD in relation to the CVC framework was that the beginning of its activity could be characterized as transformational without the need to have gone through the previous stages. Table **??** summarizes the analysis, highlighting those EDD characteristics that have contributed differentially to the transformational nature of this partnership.

Table 4. Analysis of EDD using the CVC framework.

Nature of Relationship (CVC Framework)		Status at the Beginning of the EDD	EDD Transformational Characteristics
Organizational engagement	Level of engagement	High	2030 Agenda as a central element for the mission of many organizations; COVID-19 urgency of reacting; EDD as a referential space.
	Importance to mission	Central	
Resources and activities	Type of resources	Core competences	Agile management based on shared values: commitment, agility, flexibility, attention to incentives and details, generosity and distributed leadership.
	Magnitude of resources	Big	
	Scope of activities Managerial complexity	Broad Complex	
Partnership dynamics	Interaction level	Intensive	Previous interpersonal relationships among partners' teams and shared purpose that lead to shared identity.
	Trust	Deep	
	Internal change	Medium	
Impact	Co-creation of value	High	Problem owners at the center of a sustained co-creation process.
	Synergistic value	Predominant	
	Strategic value	Major	
	Innovation	Frequent	
	External system change	Common	

6. Discussion

From a theoretical point of view, this study shows the relevance of the combined use of well-grounded frameworks to the assessment of a partnership and the practical utility of them. The lifecycle approach [?] provides a series of valuable pointers to analyze the stages and steps necessary in the formation of a partnership. The CVC framework [?] gives a complementary vision of design elements and partner relationships to increase the transformation potential of a partnership. The comparison of the EDD analysis with both frameworks validates their fundamental approaches but also highlights some important particularities, offering insights into how to increase the efficiency and impact of working in partnerships.

Catalyzing is not only a question of speed. Critical steps that must be followed include problem framing, incentives assessment, facilitation function, joint working mechanisms, practical actions to encourage collaboration, etc. However, according to the EDD experience to date, effectiveness and efficacy can be strongly driven by following a non-linear logic, flexibility and adopting a portfolio approach, integrating what is emerging in context.

Flexibility regarding formal agreements or evolutionary management may provide agility to a partnership and a wider space for innovation but also carries certain risks, such as lack of coordination and/or misalignment [?]. At EDD, this has been compensated for by a set of actions seeking to promote a strong shared identity and directionality. Distributed leadership can also benefit from the lack of a formal agreement, since this normally also establishes a certain hierarchy. In the case of EDD, leadership has passed from one person to another dependent upon the requirement in the moment. Navigating in such conditions may be challenging for those who are not used to collaborative work with other organizations. The fact that all the partners had deep (positive) experiences in previous collaborative arrangements encouraged atypical partnership decisions, such as that of all partners choosing to act as

facilitators. Thus, the possibilities of working in an organizational context outside the partnership greatly increased, enabling EDD partners to share stakeholders and assets and connect their networks. Designing from the shared priorities of the partners and their stakeholders may reinforce effectiveness as the efforts can be concentrated on what has the most potential for systemic change. In addition, in the case of undertaking new actions, they considered what was already in progress and, based on previous learning, could respond to the interests of a wide group of organizations or orientations. However, this also poses two challenges. At first, the possible reluctance of the stakeholders to join something that has not yet shown results and, how to maintain their engagement in the medium term. To overcome the first barrier at EDD, the following attributes were considered fundamental:

- The prestige and experience of the partnering organizations.
- The digital component as an amplifier of incentives, which has allowed relevant stakeholders to be connected easily, reaching a wider audience and systematizing work in an open way.
- Identifying windows of opportunity to connect with highly relevant topics related to the emergent COVID-19 crisis and its forecast downstream impacts.

For the second challenge, the EDD support and the facilitation function were essential, allowing it to respond in an agile way to the demands posed at the EDD Communities, creating a dynamic environment, balancing reflection and action. A solid, innovative and interdisciplinary facilitating team has been essential for this mission.

From the point of view of impact and the generation of systemic change, an adequate portfolio of partnerships and the design of a common roadmap are the two main challenges highlighted around the "identification problem" [**?**], a missing intermediary space between bottom-up and top-down partnership approaches, needed to achieve transformation. EDD seeks to fulfill this space by reinforcing partnering capacity to its relevant stakeholders comprising policymakers, industry, civil society and academia. Making a comparison with start-up incubators, we define EDD as a partnership incubator offering its stakeholders a value proposition that can be summarized as:

- Multi-stakeholder networking, connecting spaces where relevant stakeholders interact in a context of trust and symmetry.
- Cross-learning among a myriad of people and ongoing initiatives.
- Strategic communication and advocacy, including the ability to introduce critical issues into public debate.

Through this partnership incubator approach, it is possible to create directionality and shared purpose in the work of a wide ecosystem of relevant stakeholders and a connected set of partnerships, where public policies and social priorities are at the center of the design and implementation processes.

Creating an ambitious multi-stakeholder partnership is complex and consumes resources in the forming stage. However, we assert that trustful collaborative working is necessary to address the collective systemic challenges posed by the 2030 Agenda. Based on our experiences to date, some lessons learned, or recommendations for future working, include the following:

- At the level of the individual, curiosity, humility and generosity are required behavioral attributes for people to engage in the co-creation of a shared vision and a common work culture with others; this allowed all the people involved in EDD to enjoy great autonomy and, at the same time, a strong sense of belonging and shared purpose.
- At the level of the team, the work of facilitation is essential but, as we have demonstrated, it can be undertaken by all of the partners. The role of facilitators has been decisive in creating a mutually respectful and reinforcing interdisciplinary team, with team members possessing a double organizational identity, namely identifying with both their host organization and with EDD. This fact, together with the aforementioned shared purpose, allowed knowledge transfer among the partners in terms of collaborative practices and approaches, framed as organizational innovations through EDD that could be adopted by each partner organization where appropriate.

- At the level of the community, to effect actions from the collective endeavors, it was important that committed policymakers were included in the collaboration vehicle—in this case, EDD. These translators working in innovative, dynamic, flexible and diverse multi-stakeholder co-creation processes can support the scaling of innovation to effect changes in public policy. Policymakers may also act as the commissioner and/or problem owner to help a partnership become established. In our case, EDD supported and accelerated existing or emerging policies and inspired new ones, fostering innovation in the policy making process.

An explicit limitation of this research was the fact that the conclusions are derived from a single case study. EDD provides rich and ongoing insights into how to reinforce the partnering capacity of a wide set of stakeholders, drawn together through the COVID-19 crisis and committed to accelerating the achievement of the SDGs. Regarding the theoretical frameworks used in this study, the lifecycle and CVC approach both have multiple nuances that may merit further attention. Relationships between trust building among partners and the creation of synergistic value or a portfolio approach versus pilot-scaling strategies in partnership implementation are examples of possible future areas of research.

This study shows how a crisis mobilized a commitment to the SDGs among organizations to come together in a multi-stakeholder partnership focused on long-term systemic transformation as COVID-19 served to reveal the fissures and inequities in our world. Crisis aside, these dynamics will be essential for SDG 17 to unleash its full potential to enable fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda. While there is a consensus about the importance of partnerships to deliver against shared goals, there are few practical cases of multi-stakeholder partnerships aimed at reinforcing the partnering capacity of a wide range of relevant stakeholders. For this reason, gaining insights from the practice of partnerships is essential to advance their efficiency and capacity to achieve systemic impacts.

Appendix A

This appendix contains additional information on some of the early results reached at EDD's communities.

Table A1. EDD Communities' early results.

Element	EDD Community	Description	Link
Communities' participants testimonies	All	Statements by 9 protagonists of the EDD Communities (from the public administration, business, academia and civil society) summarizing their experience and the added value of the initiative.	Video
Agora: "The transformation of cities"	Cities	Conversation with 14 mayors of Spanish cities to contrast their Covid-19 recovery strategies with public administration, business, academia and civil society.	Summary and video
Flattening of the mobility curve	Cities	Bases of the EDD proposal to reduce the mobility demand (in English).	Article
Madrid's main mobility stakeholder's commitment	Cities	Letter of commitment by Madrid City Council and the Regional Government, universities, business associations, green growth companies and the main trade unions.	Summary of the public event
Acuerdos de la Villa	Cities	Agreements by all the political forces of the Madrid City Council on the post-COVID-19 recovery strategy, which includes the EDD proposal to flatten the mobility curve (measure 232).	Agreements document
Agora: "Rethinking global cooperation and governance against COVID-19"	Global Governance and Development	Conversation with the Spanish Foreign Minister and representatives of multilateral organizations, private companies, NGOs and academia on multilateralism and international cooperation in the fight against COVID-19.	Summary and video
Joint Response of the COVID-19 Crisis of the Spanish Cooperation	Global Governance and Development	Results of the multi-stakeholder workshop (with the participation of 80 leading experts from the public administration, NGOs, academia and private sector) to make contributions to the COVID-19 response strategy of the Spanish Cooperation.	Contributions document
Science and humanitarian action	Global Governance and Development	Virtual meeting to strengthen links between key people in the Spanish scientific and humanitarian field and lay the foundations for future multi-stakeholder initiatives.	Summary and video
Agora: "A new company social contract for the day after"	Inequalities and new Economic Models	Multi-stakeholder conversation to frame the need and opportunities for the Spanish private sector for a response to COVID-19 in which companies create more social value.	Summary and video
Minimum vital income and basic income	Inequalities and new Economic Models	Insights for the adoption of minimum vital income and universal basic income in Spain.	Article
Specialized seminar about "Planetary health"	Health & Environment	Discussion about how we can create the same sense of urgency and levels of coordinated action to address the climate crisis and sustainable development.	Summary report
Analysis and proposals to the Draft Law on Climate Change	Health & Environment	Community's suggestions to the Draft Law on Climate Change and Energy Transition in Spain.	Summary report
Spanish Strategy of Circular Economy	Health & Environment	Results of the multi-stakeholder workshop (with the participation of 80 leading experts from the public administration, NGOs, academia and private sector) to make contributions to the Spanish Strategy of Circular Economy.	Summary report

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Corporate Foundations as Partnership Brokers in Supporting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract: Rather than limiting themselves to acting as mere financial intermediaries of corporate philanthropic funds, corporate foundations (CFs) may contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as partnership brokers. Based on the literature on the SDGs, cross-sector partnerships, the influence of the private sector on the SDGs, and institutional philanthropic involvement in the SDGs, this paper shows how the unique characteristics of CFs and their position between the business sector and civil society make them ideal partnership brokers in cross-sector collaborations. Furthermore, this study examines how CFs approach the Agenda 2030 with respect to their activities and strategies. Following an explorative research approach, data were collected through an online survey among CF managers in Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Germany. The findings suggest that, in order to contribute more effectively to the SDGs, CFs should make more and better use of their capacities in bridging institutional logics, pooling resources, and initiating partnerships between different sectors.

Keywords: corporate foundations; cross-sector partnerships; collaboration; partnership brokers; SDGs; sustainability; sustainable development

1. Introduction

To meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, significant global investments of at least USD 90–100 trillion are needed over the next 15 years [1]. On an annual basis, a financial gap of USD 2.5 trillion across ten sectors encompassing all 17 SDGs has been estimated [1]. Although progress in investment has been seen in at least six of the ten SDG-relevant sectors, the overall growth nevertheless remains far behind the requirements [2]. Channeling and scaling available finances toward priority areas requires a combined effort from public actors such as governments, or development banks, private investors, and institutional philanthropic actors [3]. As such, charitable foundations are considered important partners to contribute to this gap.

However, the impact of charitable foundations on the SDGs may be limited by both the foundation's capability to steer funds directly to a cause within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the comparatively low amount of such potential funds, which is subject to different estimates. On the one hand, evaluations have found that charitable foundations manage over USD 1 trillion in assets globally, accounting for 0.5% of the total global assets under management [4], while on the other hand, estimates have indicated that the global assets of charitable foundations in 24 countries (including Hong Kong) already exceed USD 1.5 trillion and that foundation expenditures account for USD 150 billion per year, with an average spend rate of 10%, which indicates the actual amount spent for charitable purposes in relation to the foundation's assets [5]. Therefore, even if the funds from corporate philanthropy (CP) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the U.S., estimated at USD

20 billion in 2018, were entirely directed to the SDGs, they would represent a negligible fraction of the necessary resources [6].

In light of the scale of these funding requirements and given the limited resources available in the foundation sector, the core contribution of charitable foundations may not be in the role of philanthropic donors in the form of singular grants only but, rather, in the conscious investment of the foundation's endowment to reach SDG-aligned programmatic goals, the mobilization of other foundations to pool resources to achieve greater impact, campaigns and political advocacy for specific SDGs, and the promotion of citizen participation or implementation of the SDGs in their own organizations (e.g., ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women) [4,7]. One additional function that is of particular interest and which entails the greatest possible opportunity for contribution, as argued in this paper, is as partnership brokers facilitating cross-sector partnerships.

Cross-sector partnerships among governmental bodies, the private sector, civil society, and philanthropic actors are critical for the creation of systemic change, in order to achieve the SDGs and solve the most pressing challenges of our time [8]. They have become of growing importance around the world and are considered "one of the most exciting and dynamic areas of research and practice within business and society relations" [9]. Sustainable Development Goal 17, itself, emphasizes the importance of strong collaboration by demanding to "strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development" [8] (p. 32).

According to the Partnership Brokers Association [10], understanding partnering and operating as a partner in cross-sector collaborations, rather than hindering this process unintentionally, is a challenge for many philanthropic donors (e.g., charitable foundations). Yet, it is in this context that the role of donors is critical when it comes to the promotion and support of partnerships, not as a means to an end, but as a value in themselves in achieving the SDGs. Likewise, initiatives such as the SDG Philanthropy Platform [11] have raised awareness within the philanthropic sector of the SDGs and promoted networks between multiple philanthropic stakeholders and other sectors to address the need for collective action. Given the extensive debate on the importance of cross-sector partnerships for sustainable development, there exists a need to understand whether philanthropic donors actually agree on their potential to act not only as direct financiers but also as partnership brokers and whether they are effectively making use of it.

This study focuses on a specific group of philanthropic donors—corporate foundations (CFs)—and argues that, given their roots in and links to corporations and civil society, they are ideal non-profit organizations that could initiate such cross-sector collaborative arrangements. A CF is attributed unique qualities, as it is "an independent legal entity for a public benefit purpose without any direct commercial benefits that is set up, funded, and controlled by a for-profit entity" [12]. In the last ten to fifteen years, CFs have grown in number and size [13,14]. In France and Spain, 20–25% and 16% of all charitable foundations, respectively, are considered to be CFs [15,16]. In contrast, about 3% of American foundations were CFs in 2015 (2468 out of 86,203), which accounted for 9% of total foundation giving (USD 5.5 billion out of USD 63 billion) and 3% of the total assets (USD 27.8 billion out of USD 868 billion) [17]. These figures are only rough approximations for some countries, as a lack of data and transparency has left the actual figures vague.

Although CFs, as an institutionalized form of CP, have become increasingly set up and visible in practice [12], their potential for achieving the SDGs has not been widely addressed in academic research. Previous studies on CFs have mainly focused on different types [18,19], their governance structure [20,21], their reputational benefit for the founding firm [22,23], their influence on corporate financial performance [24,25], or their institutional context in different regions and countries such as Europe [26], the U.S. [27], China [28], Russia [29], and Latin America [30].

Two notable contributions in the literature have shown why CFs and their role in a global (political) agenda is a highly interesting phenomenon to examine in more detail. Herlin et al. [14] have analyzed the potential of CFs as boundary organizations between their founding company and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the realm of the company's CSR agenda. By convening,

translation, collaboration, and mediation between the two actors, CFs are able to actively facilitate collaborative cross-sector partnerships. Westhues et al. [31] have further proved the positive effects of closer ties and knowledge transfer between a CF and its founding company on stakeholder dialogue, CSR performance, and the reputation of the corporation.

Thus, research on the roles of CFs in sustainable development from their own perspective is of vital importance, as their unique characteristics might enable them to take on the role of a broker organization, facilitating collaboration for the SDGs in a significantly different way than other non-profit organizations. Consequently, this article seeks to explore to what extent CFs actually understand themselves as broker organizations facilitating the partnering process of cross-sector collaborative arrangements, and whether and how they incorporate such a global political agenda into their strategic processes and activities. Therefore, the research questions are: *to what extent do corporate foundations consider the Sustainable Development Goals in their processes and activities?* Additionally, *to what extent do corporate foundations perceive themselves as initiators of cross-sector collaborative arrangements to support the SDGs?* Overall, the objective of this article is to gain insights into the essential role of CFs in the achievement of the SDGs which, so far, has been centered on their role as philanthropic donors. The originality of the paper at a theoretical level rests on the combination of previously unconnected strands of literature for the specific research area of CFs. The results of the exploratory survey lay the groundwork for future research on a highly topical issue. In terms of data, this study is the first to conduct a systematic and comprehensive search for CFs in Switzerland. Together with data from Germany and Liechtenstein, the study was able to achieve a sample size that was only partially reached by previous studies on CFs.

The paper is organized as follows: First, Section 2.1 briefly introduces the four relevant thematic strands—the SDGs, cross-sector partnerships, private sector influence on the SDGs, and institutional philanthropic involvement in the SDGs—relevant to this paper. Section 2.2 moves on to discuss why CFs may be qualified as partnership brokers for cross-sector collaboration. The subsequent Sections (Sections 3.1 and 3.2) present the methodology applied and the characteristics of data collected from CFs in Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Germany. Next, the main findings of the empirical analysis are presented. Section 5 discusses the implications and limitations of these findings. The paper concludes with Section 6, highlighting the main avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

The following two sections critically review the relevant literature combining four thematic strands (2.1) and the current partnership broker status perception of CFs (2.2).

2.1. Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The four thematic strands relevant to this study are (1) the SDGs as a broader thematic context, (2) cross-sector partnerships as a tool for achieving them, (3) the influence of the private sector on the SDGs, and (4) institutional philanthropic involvement in the SDGs. The latter two strands provide insights from the business and non-profit literature, which are necessary to consider as CFs "are positioned between the business sector and the civil society and have commonalities with both sectors" [12] (p. 2). Each strand is described in more detail and the missing connections to the others, to which the present study seeks to contribute, are highlighted.

The first strand concerns the 'what'. Studies and reports in this area focus on development aid, sustainable development, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the SDGs, whereby the long-standing thematic discourse in the literature has developed over time, in this broad order. Today, most of the literature refers to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda as the most relevant high-level policy framework for addressing a diverse and comprehensive set of actors to guide their actions toward a sustainable future.

Important to the context of this paper is the paradigm shift from the MDGs to the SDGs, which puts cross-sector partnerships between public actors, business, and civil society in the spotlight [8].

This is exemplified by both the five basic principles of the SDGs—People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership—and in SDG 17, which is entirely dedicated to the promotion of global partnership as a means of implementation of the goals [8]. Its sub-goals 17.16 and 17.17 make a call to "enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in all countries, in particular developing countries" and include a request to "encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships" [8] (p. 32). In particular, active partnership with the private sector is considered essential to reach "even greater innovation, efficiency, and scale of impact" [6] (p. 3). Regarding the need and added value of a more prominent role of the private sector, the main arguments concern the provision of additional financial resources to the development budgets, specific know-how and skills, innovativeness, leadership, and capabilities [32], which is discussed here in a third strand. Scholars concerned with the SDGs in the corporate context have suggested distinguishing between the SDGs that can be addressed internally and externally by companies [33]. Internally actionable targets lie within a company's immediate sphere of influence or within its value chain activities and can, thus, be directly contributed to. In contrast, some SDGs are considered highly complex and outside the direct sphere of the key capabilities and responsibilities of companies, which is why companies can only generate significant contributions in partnership with civil society and/or government actors. CP activities, van Zanten and van Tulder [33] have argued, embrace the opportunity for companies to contribute to externally actionable SDGs at arm's length.

The second strand relates to the 'how'. Cross-sector partnerships have been seen as an inevitable tool to solve highly complex sustainability challenges that are beyond the problem-solving capacity of individual actors [34–37]. These partnerships differ from other collaborative arrangements, as they are formed across multiple organizational, geographical, and sectoral boundaries while engaging partners on a long-term basis [37,38].

Part of the literature investigating such partnerships has applied a process perspective, which examines collaborative arrangements on a broader level; that is, the various practices of forming and partnering occurring in different phases of collaboration and the realized outcome and impact for society to achieve systemic change (see, e.g., [9,35]). Drivers for success and failure of partnerships (e.g., different institutional logics) are of particular interest for scholars [39–41]. Austin and Seitanidi [34], for instance, showed that partnerships move along a collaboration continuum from lower to higher levels of intensity from the philanthropic, transactional, and integrative to the transformational stage. In doing so, they recognize that partnerships are dynamic phenomena, in which development and movement from one level to another require conscious decisions and actions by the partners involved. Arenas et al. [42] also showed that different paths to collaboration between civil society and business exist. Cross-sector relationships may move between two modes of interaction, from conflicting to more collaborative interactions or vice versa.

The other part of the literature adopts an actor-centered perspective. Scholars have analyzed the behaviors, specific attributes, and tactics of intermediary organizations or bodies in dealing with partnership challenges based on their role in collaborative arrangements. Common names for these actors are bridging organizations, bridging agents, partnership brokers, broker organizations, or simply brokers [38,39,42,43]. The terms 'bridging' and 'broker' indicate the unique know-how, opportunity, and position of an independent actor to initiate a connection between otherwise unconnected actors [44].

Other studies have favored the terms 'interveners' or 'conveners', in order to emphasize the practice by such actors of convening throughout the entire partnership [45–48]. For instance, recent research considering conveners in global supply chains has defined them as an "actor or organization that brings together heterogeneous actors in a CSP [cross-sector partnership] and plays a crucial bridging role in balancing different partners' interests in order to drive the CSP process forward throughout its implementation" [45] (p. 4).

The literature has suggested distinguishing between *internal* and *external* brokers [38,49]: While internal brokers are representatives (e.g., managers or staff) within a partner organization, external brokers (e.g., consultants) are independent third parties that take the lead on behalf of one partner or are legitimated by mandate [49]. Manning and Roessler [38] showed that collective practices of brokerage by different constellations of internal and external bridging agents enable partnerships to achieve even greater social innovation. Furthermore, collaborative arrangements may be created by *individuals* or *organizations*; thus, studies tend to either focus on specific (see, e.g., [38]) or general (see, e.g., [44]) aspects of partnership structures. This paper adopts a general perspective, analyzing the potential role of CFs in promoting and facilitating cross-sector partnerships.

Scholars have identified different partnership broker roles, ranging from *proactive* to *reactive* [34,44,47]. Arenas et al. [42], for instance, showed that third parties may play the role of facilitating allies, participating allies, mediators, or solution seekers in relationships between business and civil society organizations moving from confrontation to collaboration. Third parties can act as allies of civil society (in the case of the first two roles) or as neutral actors (in the case of the latter two), whereby they might or might not become part of the solution of a societal problem. Similarly, Stadtler and Probst [44] have indicated that broker organizations can adopt three roles—convener, mediator, or learning catalyst—to promote public–private partnerships for development. More specifically, brokers play these roles during the entire life cycle of a partnership, which comprises (1) a problem-setting phase, (2) a direction-setting phase, (3) an implementation phase, and (4) a review phase, in order to "help partners overcome common partnering challenges that jeopardize the successful partnering process" [44] (p. 42). More recently, Stadtler and Karakulak [39] have indicated that the roles of brokers can also drift and may unintentionally weaken, rather than strengthen, a partnership. Their findings provide a starting point to understand that positive outcomes of cross-sector partnerships should not be taken for granted.

While most previous studies have adopted one of these two broad perspectives, little research so far has focused on the preconditions prior to the establishment of partnership which enable third parties to make the partnership process possible [48]. It is of vital importance that the third party is aware from the beginning of its role as an initiator of cross-sector collaborative arrangements and is willing to activate this potential. Especially in the case where one or several of the partners are donors, Serafin and Tennyson [41] (p. 3) have argued that they may not realize "how critical their role is in shaping partnership as a paradigm". While CFs are undoubtedly involved in a variety of partnerships, especially with their founding company, a nuanced understanding is missing as to the extent to which proactive brokers initiate tri-part collaborative arrangements for sustainability, beyond being a potential donor.

The influence of the private sector on the SDGs, the third strand of interest for this paper, has a long tradition in development co-operation research. While some scholars have addressed the business case for sustainable development, a substantial body of literature has taken a critical stance and questions the role, the progress, and the obstacles for substantial contributions from core business activities [32]. For example, one empirical study on the 100 largest global companies showed that, in contrast to their proclaimed commitment to SDGs, their actual business activities have hardly changed and, in many cases, the changes are primarily cosmetic and even contradictory to the SDGs [6]. This observation has found support in other empirical studies with views from within the sector. While 79% of CEOs themselves believe that companies are not currently playing a decisive role in achieving the SDGs, but could do so in the future if they would raise awareness, commitment, and impact more actively [50], only 16% of the world's 240 largest companies have indicated that they strategically link the SDGs to the core issues of their companies [51]. Scholars have voiced similar critiques on missing proactive engagements of companies regarding the SDGs. This has been explained as the lack of an ability to hold companies accountable for their claimed commitment, which has been a long-standing concern of scholars (see, e.g., [52,53]). Before and at the time of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, organizations concerned with corporate accountability were particularly critical of co-operation

between the United Nations (UN) and the private sector. For instance, they argued that the UN Global Compact—the highest UN framework for co-operation with businesses—allows corporate partners to potentially misuse the UN Global Compact as a marketing tool to positively enhance their corporate reputation and increase their corporate influence in the UN while, at the same time, violating basic UN values and the Global Compact principles [54,55].

Recently, more pro-active involvement of businesses, especially large multinational enterprises (MNEs), in sustainable development has been viewed as a necessary and desired means to accelerate progress toward the SDGs. Van Zanten and van Tulder [33] (p. 228), for instance, have argued that companies thus far have a "fairly narrow/passive role in contributing to the SDGs" and emphasized that "partnerships are critical for the broader and more active involvement of MNEs in achieving the SDGs". They argued for more research and policy measures to support companies in their transition from an 'avoiding-harm' attitude to a proactive 'doing-good' approach and, as a result, embrace hitherto neglected opportunities of corporate commitment to the global goals. Similarly, a representative survey among UN leaders showed that 100% believe that cross-sector collaboration, in particular with business, is essential for achievement of the 2030 Agenda [56]. Several barriers on the side of the UN institutions have been identified that hinder such collaborations and the development of new corporate partnerships. Among these are missing skills to initiate and manage partnerships, a limited availability of free resources to seek and support new partnerships, persistent suspicion of the private sector, and practical challenges in mediating between different cultures to work out collective solutions [56].

The brief historical background on how private sector influence has been perceived by scholars and other stakeholders from the international development sector is of relevance to this paper, as it might explain similar contrary tendencies in the philanthropic literature. Scholars have viewed the influence of CP in the non-profit world either critically [57] or supportively [12,58]. Although CP, like CSR, is a corporate activity and an expression of corporate responsibility, scholars have argued that they follow distinct logics and should, therefore, be conceptualized separately from each other [59]. Such a clear delineation is important, as what we know about the impact of core business activities on the SDGs may not be applicable to the context of CP activities which may need a more nuanced understanding. However, while the involvement of core business activities in the SDGs has been studied in depth, scholars have given only limited attention to the involvement of CP in the 2030 Agenda. This is particularly the case for CFs which are, beside direct corporate giving and corporate volunteering, one of three common forms of CP, through which companies formalize and channel their philanthropic activities [12,60]. Given the urgency to remove the above-mentioned barriers to cross-sector partnerships, scientific insight on the role of CFs as intermediary organizations in the UN Sustainable Development Agenda is becoming a pressing need.

Institutional philanthropic involvement in the SDGs is of substantial interest in policy discussions and, thus, represents a fourth relevant strand for the purpose of this study. Institutional philanthropists include foundations, corporate donors, and independently governed funders using their own financial resources in a strategic way for the common good [61]. During the last decade, membership associations for foundations and international development organizations in particular have considerably contributed to the pool of data and practical resources for these actors. For instance, philanthropy's long standing role in development co-operation has been re-discussed in light of the SDGs and strategies have been worked out regarding how to unlock potential funds, how to align existing programs with the 17 goals [62], and how different actors—from community foundations [63] to charitable foundations [64]—can contribute most efficiently in different contexts. Evaluations and monitoring reports make up a large part of the available publications which are of great relevance. They often provide good quality and comparable data on the level of commitment or existing gaps among certain actors, in certain regions or on certain topics [65–68]. The most comprehensive data set of funds from philanthropic organizations for the implementation of the SDGs has been provided through the SDG Philanthropy Platform. It has recorded, as of July 2020, USD 206.6 billion in funding provided worldwide by foundations since 2016 [69]. Foundations have allocated, by far, the largest

share to SDG 4 (Quality Education, USD 83.9 billion), closely followed by SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being, USD 66.4 billion). Far behind come SDG 14 (Life below Water, USD 1.1 billion) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals, under USD 0.57 billion). Philanthropic foundations seem to favor investing in stable, middle-income economies (e.g., India, Nigeria, Mexico, and China) through large, established international actors, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) or the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) [67]. It is important to note that only about 55% of 544 charitable foundations from 11 countries surveyed in a recently published study sought to align their foundation priorities with the SDGs [5]. Among the survey participants, the goals of highest interest were again SDG 4 (57%), SDG 3 (42%), SDG 1 (No Poverty, 35%), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth, 34%) [5]. Of interest in this strand are data from the donor-advised fund CAF America (Charities Aid Foundation of America), which examined the philanthropic giving of its donors to the SDGs between 2016 and 2019 by donor type. Corporate giving, including funding from corporations, corporate foundations, and corporate matching gifts, was directed to 11 of the 17 goals, of which the five most supported were SDG 3 (22%), SDG 4 (21%), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities, 14%), SDG 8 (11%), and SDG 1 (7%) [66]. The highest average grants originated from the healthcare industry (USD 34,112.20), followed by food and accommodation services (USD 26,390.05), agriculture (USD 18,403.80), manufacturing and retail (USD 15,622.57), and the financial industry (USD 12,528.52), whereby 72% of corporate donors were multinational and 28% were domestic firms [66].

What is missing in this strand from a CF-centered perspective is a more scientific analysis and publicly available data at aggregated global and regional (e.g., Europe), national (e.g., Germany, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein), and local levels on the priorities of CFs within the 2030 Agenda, the scale of CFs investing in the SDGs, different strategic approaches, and CFs' current and potential impact on one or several goals. Furthermore, knowledge is lacking concerning the extent to which CFs align their SDGs to those addressed by their corporate founder's core business and its other corporate philanthropic activities, bearing in mind that CFs are separate legal entities having an ongoing relationship with their founding company [12].

In summary, while scholars have expanded our knowledge on sustainable development, cross-sector partnerships, the influence of the private sector on the SDGs, and institutional philanthropic involvement in the 2030 Agenda over the last few decades, we still know little about how CFs may proactively incorporate the SDGs and whether they are aware of their potential as partnership brokers. This study seeks to address these missing connections.

2.2. Toward a 'Partnership Brokers' Perception of Corporate Foundations

In the literature, a few references can be identified that point to the potential of CFs as partnership brokers for cross-sector collaboration in the context of the SDGs. First, Herlin and Thusgaard Pedersen [14] used the case of a Danish shareholder foundation to show how convening, translation, collaboration, and mediation led to cross-sector collaboration between their founding company and the NGO community for advancing their CSR activities. Given their natural linkages to the private sector and civil society, they argue that the potential of shareholder foundations as boundary organizations is currently underrated and overlooked. Contrary to Arenas et al. [42], the authors did not position shareholder foundations on a continuum between conflict and co-operation but, rather, as developing "from beneficiary or collaborator to strategic partner, i.e., a movement from arm's length to more advanced stages of partnership" [14]. However, in contrast to charitable CFs, shareholder foundations are an alternate model of company-related foundations, as they are (fully or by majority) the owner of their founding company [70]. Their findings might be transferable to CFs and the context of the SDGs, but caution and further investigation are required to acknowledge the differences between these two foundation types.

Second, the literature has shown that intermediary organizations facilitating corporate giving can support partners of business–non-profit collaboration to overcome three major organizational barriers and thus bridge some gaps [71]. Solutions to overcoming such barriers include (1) social capital,

in the case of an insufficient network; (2) human capital, in the case of missing awareness; and (3) knowledge on how to initiate and form partnerships and to lower transaction costs. Third parties, Maas and Meijs have argued, match supply and demand in partnerships while providing the enabling infrastructure for cross-sector collaborations. Furthermore, third parties can function as an entry point for collaborative arrangements across sectors. Instead of a CF, the authors examined the co-operation of nonprofit intermediaries which facilitate corporate giving (e.g., financial and in-kind donations) between businesses and other non-profit organizations in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, their findings provided empirical evidence on the role of an external broker in the context of corporate giving, which may be applicable to other types of external brokers such as CFs.

Third, while Aakhus and Bzdak [72] (p. 243) have argued that "many NGOs would be reluctant to work directly with business units seeking financial returns but have comfortably worked with CP departments and professionals", Whymer and Samu [73] (p. 16) have stressed that "businesses would prefer to deal with nonprofit organizations that they view favorably and want to support". CFs are a particularly suitable vehicle among the many possible forms of corporate–non-profit relationships, such as "licensing agreements, sponsorships, transaction based promotions, joint issue promotions, and joint ventures" [73] (p. 3), that can adequately meet both expectations. Scholars base this assumption on the inherent characteristics of CFs. For example, as hybrid entities, CFs combine elements of multiple institutional logics; more specifically, the market and civil society sector logics [12,20]. Through translating and merging the divergent "set[s] of assumptions and values, usually implicit, about how to interpret organizational reality, what constitutes appropriate behavior, and how to succeed" of partners [74] (p. 804), CFs create a shared cultural frame, which other intermediary organizations have to create from scratch [14]. Additionally, CFs often maintain close ties to their founding company beyond their establishment, be it through corporate executives on the foundation board or annual financial and non-financial contributions (e.g., through their network, knowledge, or joint communication) [75,76]. These connections enable CFs to access and leverage a broad set of different resources of their founding company to strengthen cross-sector partnerships [12,77], which other non-profit brokers may not be able to provide. Nonetheless, CFs are separate legal entities and, thus, remain autonomous from their founding company [78] while, at the same time, belonging to civil society and being able to meet other non-profit organizations on an equal footing. Finally, CFs are set up with a long-term perspective, which is essential for the highly complex sustainability challenges where longer-term oriented partnerships beyond single projects are needed to achieve systemic change [31,38]. In summary, the literature has pointed to certain characteristics of CFs that make them particularly suitable for the role of partnership broker in the context of the SDGs.

3. Materials and Methods

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, no pre-defined hypotheses were tested. Rather, the study attempts to provide the groundwork for a nuanced understanding of the potential role of CFs in contributing to the SDGs in three European countries through a survey answered by the managing directors of CFs. Key aspects of data collection, the survey instrument, and sample are described in the following.

3.1. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Germany. These countries were chosen because of their vital foundation landscape in comparison to other European countries, and their long philanthropic history [79,80]. In Switzerland, a total of 13,293 foundations were registered by the end of 2019, with the third highest foundation density of 15.6 foundations per 10,000 inhabitants among 11 European countries [81]. Although the small state of Liechtenstein had a comparatively small number of charitable foundations (namely, 1379) [82], it had a density of 331.3 foundations per 10,000 inhabitants, more than 20 times higher than that of Switzerland [79]. In contrast, Germany had the highest total number of registered foundations, amounting to 23,230, at the end of 2019 [83], but had

a relatively low density of 2.8 foundations per 10,000 inhabitants [84]. Foundation assets in Germany and Switzerland were estimated to be the third and fourth highest (after the U.S. and the Netherlands), with USD 92.9 billion and USD 87.8 billion, respectively [5]. Comparison of the foundation assets of 24 countries (incl. Hong Kong) revealed that Switzerland's philanthropic assets were the second highest, after the Netherlands, accounting for 13.3% of its gross domestic product (GDP), whereas the percentage of assets to GDP in Germany accounted for 2.7%. However, these positions are mirrored in terms of foundation expenditure, where the German foundation sector was in second place, exceeding USD 22.6 billion, while Switzerland accounted for USD 2.4 billion [5]. The enabling environment for CFs in these three countries is considered particularly favorable, as tax incentives for companies that donate money are in place, the legal status of CFs is the same as for charitable foundations, and the public perception of charitable foundations is generally positive. CFs are perceived, in these countries, as an important element of the foundation sector, which is particularly true for large foundations that are well-known by the public, such as the Vodafone foundations [26].

In the first step of data collection, purposive non-probability sampling was applied in order to identify, as comprehensively as possible, the CFs that met certain criteria, as applied in previous studies [85]. In order to qualify, CFs required one or several corporate founding bodies (1), providing most of the continuing income or initial endowment (2), and the CF and the corporate founding bodies had to be separate legal entities (3) [78].

There is no public register for charitable foundations in Switzerland, apart from the commercial register zefix, which only provides basic data and does not allow a search by foundation type. Specifically identifying CFs thus required other means, involving extensive and creative investigations. A list consisting of the 500 companies with the highest turnover in Switzerland [86] and 15 top-selling banks [87] served this purpose. As CFs often share the name of their founding company, either partially or completely, and are often located at the company's headquarters [88], organizations using variations of a firm's name or those registered under a firm's address were scanned. Presumed CFs were subjected to an online desktop review, which resulted in a set of 200 CFs, further supplemented with the contact details of the managing directors. Other company-related foundations, such as direct support foundations, company holding foundations, employee benefit foundations, and retirement fund foundations, were found but not included in the sample, due to their non-charitable status [89]. The sample for Liechtenstein was provided by the Association of Liechtenstein Charitable Foundations and Trusts e.V., the national umbrella organization for charitable foundations and trusts. A total of 11 foundations were identified as CFs, although the actual number is presumably higher. Similar to Switzerland, this number is not publicly available due to the lack of a comprehensive foundation register. The sample for Germany was provided by the Association of German Foundations, which is the national umbrella organization for German charitable foundations, with more than 4500 member organizations. Part of the association's work is the documentation and preparation of relevant data and information on the German foundation sector [83]. Its own database of German foundations currently contains more than 30,000 foundations of all legal forms, with detailed data such as foundation purpose, activities, and finances [90]. According to the association's database, there exist 1617 active CFs in Germany. As the survey period coincided with the lockdown measures of the German Government due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the questionnaire was not sent by post in order to avoid delays in delivery and long absences from offices. Due to this, the number of eligible CFs with an e-mail address and active membership of the association, thus being legally contactable under the German Data Protection Law [91], was significantly reduced to 197.

Foundations (and, thus, also CFs) are not legally defined in Germany, but are usually described as an endowment that is permanently dedicated to a charitable purpose. The two most popular foundation forms are (1) a charitable foundation with legal personality, which comes into existence through an endowment transaction and foundation charter that needs to be recognized by the foundation oversight authority; and (2) a trust foundation, which is generally established without a legal personality, through a contract between a founder and a trustee who manages the endowment fund [92].

The final sample consisted of 408 CFs—200 from Switzerland, 11 from Liechtenstein, and 197 from Germany—which was significantly more than previous studies carrying out surveys of CFs in these countries (e.g., [85]). Table 1 compares the sample with the total population of charitable foundations in the respective foundation sectors.

Table 1. Total number of charitable foundations and corporate foundations.

	Switzerland	Liechtenstein	Germany
Total number of charitable foundations	(2019) 13,293	(2014) 1392	(2019) 23,230
Corporate foundations	200	11	197

The managing directors of the foundations received a personalized e-mail with a link to a web questionnaire accessible from February to May 2020 [93,94]. One reminder was issued. Due to data protection reasons, the Association of German Foundations is not allowed to pass on contact data to third parties. Mailing to the German CFs was, thus, carried out by the association itself. In the case of Switzerland and Liechtenstein, the e-mail was sent through the institutional account of the Center for Philanthropy Studies (CEPS). The message explicitly asked managing directors for the completion of the questionnaire, as their functional status within the organization makes them experts with both access to internal information and in-depth knowledge of the strategic and operational activities of the foundation [95]. This approach was in line with previous studies that explicitly researched the perception of non-profit organization leaders, as "external stakeholders speak *about* organizations, leaders speak *for* organizations" [96] (p. 327).

During the data collection process, 41 questionnaires were received, 38 of which were considered complete, with more than 80% of all questions answered. Three were considered partial, with 50–80% of questions answered. A further 18 questionnaires were considered break-offs and excluded from the analysis as, while these respondents answered several questions, the answers remained highly fragmented. The 41 questionnaires, 22 from the Swiss/Liechtenstein sample and 19 from the German sample, represent a 10% participation rate, "defined as the number of respondents who have provided a usable response divided by the total number of initial personal invitations requesting participation" [97] (p. 49). Two foundations from Switzerland replied that they could not participate due to internal policies on interviews and surveys. Although the participation rate of this study seems low, it was in fact comparable to previous studies on CFs (see, e.g., [85,98,99]). It should be noted that it is very difficult to obtain information on CFs, partly due to a lack of transparency. For example, as the publication of annual reports is not a legal obligation in Switzerland, it is not a widespread practice among the 13,293 charitable foundations and, thus, has been the subject of recurring public criticism [100]. This persistent weakness of foundation transparency has also been addressed by scholars, as it makes them "notoriously difficult to research" [101] (p. 1). Jung has explained further that foundations "largely continue to be black boxes: their internal workings are often opaque and academic research access is difficult to obtain."

3.2. Survey Instrument

The final survey included four sections: The first section gathered information on the general approach of CFs to the SDGs, the second specifically addressed SDG 17 and the potential of the CF to act as broker organization, the third collected general characteristics of the CFs, and the final section collected information on the founding company (see Supplementary Material). In the following, the variables of the sections are described in detail.

Given the lack of existing criteria for evaluating the approach of a CF to the SDGs and their commitment as partnership brokers, new multi-item scales were developed. First, the CFs indicated which critical global challenges they intend to positively contribute towards with their activities, taking into account the fact that foundations may eventually make a contribution to SDG-relevant areas (without officially referring to them in the following question). They might omit these answers

due to a deliberate decision or due to a lack of time or understanding. Participants had to select from ten themes defined by the World Economic Forum [102]: (1) Climate change/destruction of nature; (2) Large-scale conflicts, wars; (3) Inequality (income, discrimination); (4) Poverty; (5) Religious conflicts; (6) Government accountability and transparency, corruption; (7) Food and water security; (8) Education; (9) Safety, security, and well-being; and (10) Economic opportunity and employment. In the second step, the respondents had to indicate whether the SDGs function as a point of reference for (1) the activities of the CF, (2) the founding company's business activities, and (3) the company's other charitable activities outside the foundation. The latter two were included here and in the following to examine the alignment between the foundation, business, and corporate philanthropic activities which, in this case, could lead to desirable synergies. On the other hand, as described earlier in the paper, the prior literature has argued that CSR and CP follow different logics [59]. Therefore, it is interesting to examine to what extent the approach of a CF to the SDGs differs from that of the core business activities and corporate philanthropic activities. Subsequently, respondents were asked to rate, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *completely*), to what extent the selected SDGs were taken into account in the following aspects and activities of the CF: (1) Mission statement, (2) Funding strategy, (3) Grant-making activities, (4) Public relations/Communication, (5) Financial management, (6) Human Resources Management, (7) Monitoring/Evaluation, (8) Selection of partners, and (9) Selection of beneficiaries. This question addresses existing prejudices that CFs might "simply conduct a 'tick-box' exercise, superficially mapping existing activity against the 17 Goals" [51] (p. 3), without getting fully involved with them. The selection of SDGs to which the CF contributes may be guided by contrary intentions from the CF and its founding company which, in turn, may suggest either independence or coordinated collaborative action. Therefore, respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *completely*) the extent to which the selection of the SDGs by the CFs was influenced by (1) their prioritization of the global political agenda, (2) their relevance to the foundation and its stakeholders, (3) their consistency with the foundation's previous areas of activity, (4) their strategic fit with the corporate founder's engagement, or (5) other reasons.

To assess the potential role of the CF as a partnership broker—referring to SDG 17—respondents rated, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *completely*), the extent to which they saw themselves as an initiator of cross-sector partnerships. As described earlier in the theoretical section of the paper, donors may lack awareness of this specific role in cross-sector partnerships, although this is a major pre-condition to establishing a partnership in the first place [41]. To control whether this perception leads to the establishment or strengthening of collaboration, respondents selected those actors to whom this applied; these were (1) the founding company, (2) other companies, (3) other corporate foundations, (4) other charitable organizations, (5) governmental bodies, and (6) other stakeholders.

Regarding the main characteristics of the CFs, the study followed established measures from previous research [21,76,85,103–105]. Age was operationalized in terms of the year of constitution of the CF. Internationalization was measured in terms of their geographic scope of activities and it was assigned a value of 1 if the CF was active in at least one country outside its country of origin, and 0 otherwise. The number of full-time equivalent employees and annual budget paid out in grants or spent for own projects was used as a measure for the size of a CF. In terms of governance, CFs had to indicate the board size (number of members in the board) and whether they complied with the recommendations of a governance code. A model of activity was included using three basic categories: (1) grant-making, (2) operating own programs, and (3) mixed. To assess the thematic area of activity a foundation was considered active if it had at least one project in an area and the 12-item scale of the International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (ICNPO) was applied [106]. Finally, the two variables of industry and size of the founding firm were used as indicators to understand the possible differences in the level of financial resources and thematic focus of the work of the CF. Industry was evaluated on a 10-item scale and size was examined through annual turnover.

The survey was designed in German and English, with country-specific variations with regard to governance codes and currency (In the analysis, CHF was converted to EUR at a rate of 0.94 and

USD at a rate of 0.88). The questionnaire was tested with a pilot sample of eight researchers and was revised and finalized based on their feedback. In the subsequent invitation e-mail and the introductory text to the study, the recipients were informed about the organization behind the study, the details of participant selection, the research objective, and the aim of the study. Participants were also assured of the confidentiality of the data and the possibility of accessing the results of the study.

The data were analyzed using the software IBM SPSS Statistics 26. To answer the research questions, descriptive statistics were generated from the final sample of all CFs, but also disaggregated by (1) Switzerland/Liechtenstein and (2) Germany.

3.3. Sample Description

The characteristics of the sample that participated in the study are shown in Table 2. The CFs had an average age of 21.63 years since foundation. The oldest foundation had been in operation since 1962 while the youngest foundation was established in 2017. A total of 36% of the CFs had operations in at least one country outside their country of origin. On average, the CFs in the final sample had 6.15 members on the foundation board, with a maximum of 11 and minimum of 2. Concerning good governance, 78% of the CFs were guided by the principles and recommendations of a code: 59% of the Swiss/Liechtenstein sample applied the Swiss Foundation Code defined by SwissFoundations and 100% of the German CFs followed the Guiding Principles of Good Practice for Foundations formulated by the Association of German Foundations. The CFs had, on average, 2.36 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees. The average total amount paid out in grants or spent for own projects in 2019 was EUR 2.84 Mio.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Age	21.63	13.74	17.50	3.00	58.00
Internationalization	0.36	0.48	-	-	-
Board size	6.15	2.49	6.00	2.00	11.00
FTE employees	2.36	3.72	1.00	0.10	20.00
Governance code	0.78	0.41	-	-	-
Grants paid out (Mio. EUR)	2.84	5.80	654,000	6500	26.70

Note. $n = 41$.

The model of activity of 39.0% of CFs was grant-making, whereas 22.0% operated their own programs and 39.0% followed a mixed model (i.e., grant-making activities and operating own programs; see Table 3). Regarding the major fields in which the foundations were active with at least one project, a considerable diversification across the 12 groups of the International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (ICNPO) can be noticed. The CFs focused mostly on education and research (87.8%), culture and recreation (46.3%), and health-related issues (39%).

Two further descriptive characteristics indicated the industry and annual turnover of the founding firm (Table 4). The CFs in the sample were founded by companies from a variety of different sectors: 31.6% of companies were related to money, banks, and insurance; 13.2% were related to manufacturing; and 10.5% are related to chemicals and pharmaceuticals. Significant differences at the country level were notable with regard to the energy sector and chemicals/pharmaceuticals. On average, the founding firms had EUR 18,664.84 Mio. of annual turnover in 2019. This figure should be read with caution, as data were available for only 71% of respondents; 5% said the data were confidential and 29% gave no information.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics: Model and Area of activity.

Variables	Total Sample
Model of activity (%)	
Grant-making	39.0
Operating own programs	22.0
Mixed	39.0
Area of activity (%)	
Culture and Recreation	46.3
Education and Research	87.8
Health	39.0
Social services	24.4
Environment	29.3
Development/Housing	12.2
Law/Advocacy/Politics	9.8
Phil. Intermediaries/Voluntarism Promotion	4.9
International	24.4
Religion	2.4
Professional Associations/Unions	9.8

Note. $n = 41$.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics: Industry and Annual turnover.

Variables	Total Sample
Industry (%)	
Agriculture	5.3
Energy	7.9
Chemicals/Pharmaceuticals	10.5
Manufacturing	13.2
Construction/Housing	7.9
Tourism	0.0
Information/Communications	7.9
Money/Banks/Insurance	31.6
Media	2.6
Other	26.3
Annual turnover (Mio. EUR)	18,664.84 (M) 37,503.30 (SD)

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, $n = 41$.

4. Results

4.1. The Approach of CFs to the SDGs

CF funding activities intend to have a positive impact in a wide range of thematic areas, with clear differences in priority. The CFs in the final sample most often had activities in the areas of education (76%), inequality (46%), economic opportunity and employment (39%), and poverty (37%). The CFs were least active, in ascending order, in the topics of religious conflicts (5%), large-scale conflict/wars (7%), food and water security (20%), safety/security/well-being (29%), and climate change/destruction of nature (32%).

Although many of these topics relate to one or more of the 17 SDGs, only 51% of respondents confirmed the use of the SDGs as a point of reference for their activities while 58% confirmed their relevance to core business activities and 55% for other forms of corporate philanthropic activities (Table 5).

Table 5. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a point of reference.

	Yes	No	Don't Know
CF's activities (%)	51.3	48.7	0.0
Founding company's business activities (%)	57.9	34.2	7.9
Founding company's other CP activities (%)	55.3	34.2	10.5

Note. $n = 41$.

The CFs referring to the SDGs differed significantly in internationalization, size (number of FTE employees), and model of activity, but not in age, board size, governance code, and amount of grants paid out (Table 6). In terms of internationalization, CFs referring to the SDGs had a much wider geographic scope (60.0% had activities in at least one country outside their country of origin) than those which did not (15.8%), and appeared to be on average twice as large as the remaining ones (3.87 vs. 1.53 FTE employees). Regarding the model of activity, CFs that referred to the SDGs differed significantly from CFs without SDG reference when grant-making or operating their own programs, while CFs with mixed activities showed no significant difference. The transformation of the 'grants paid out' variable into logarithmic (log) form helped to test for significance, despite the positive skew of the probability distribution.

Table 6. Difference between reference to the SDGs by the considered corporate foundations (CFs).

	CFs Referring to the SDGs [a]	CFs Not Referring to the SDGs [b]	Significance of Difference
Age	19.84 (M) 14.29 (SD)	22.26 (M) 12.04 (SD)	-
Internationalization (%)	60.0	15.8	**
Board size	6.45 (M) 2.73 (SD)	5.95 (M) 2.33 (SD)	-
FTE employees	3.87 (M) 5.00 (SD)	1.53 (M) 2.07 (SD)	*
Governance code (%)	85.0	78.9	-
Model of activity (%)			
Grant-making	20.0	52.6	*
Operating own programs	45.0	0.0	**
Mixed	35.0	47.4	-
Grants paid out (log)	6.02 (M) 0.85 (SD)	5.48 (M) 0.74 (SD)	-

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, - = not significant, $* p < 0.05$, $** p < 0.01$, [a] $n = 20$, [b] $n = 19$.

The chi-square tests in Table 7 show a relationship between the relevance of SDGs to the CP activities and to the business activities of the founding company (chi-square (1) = 14.519, $p < 0.001$, $n = 32$). There also was a relationship between the relevance of SDGs to the activities of the CFs and to the firm's other CP activities (chi-square (1) = 5.384, $p = 0.020$, $n = 34$), providing some initial evidence for the alignment of corporate philanthropic activities organized in-house and formalized in a CF. However, there was no significant relationship between the relevance of SDGs to the activities of the CFs and to the founding company's business activities (chi-square (1) = 1.392, $p = 0.238$, $n = 35$).

Table 7. Pearson's chi-square tests.

	Founding Company's Business Activities	Founding Company's Other CP Activities
CF activities	1.392	5.384 *
Founding company's other CP activities	14.519 **	

Note. $* p < 0.05$, $** p < 0.01$.

The SDGs to which the CFs contributed most were SDG 4 (Quality Education, 46%), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities, 32%), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being, 27%), and SDG 1 (No Poverty, 24%), thus largely excluding goals concerning environmental issues. The SDGs least covered by

the CF activities were SDG 14 (Life below Water, 2%), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy, 5%), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production, 7%), and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation, 10%). Of great interest for this study are the findings regarding SDG 17—partnerships for the goals—to which only 15% of CFs directed their activities towards.

Figure 1 relates the 17 SDGs to the 10 broad thematic issues, which respondents had to choose from at the beginning of the survey, related to which their CF intended to have a positive impact.
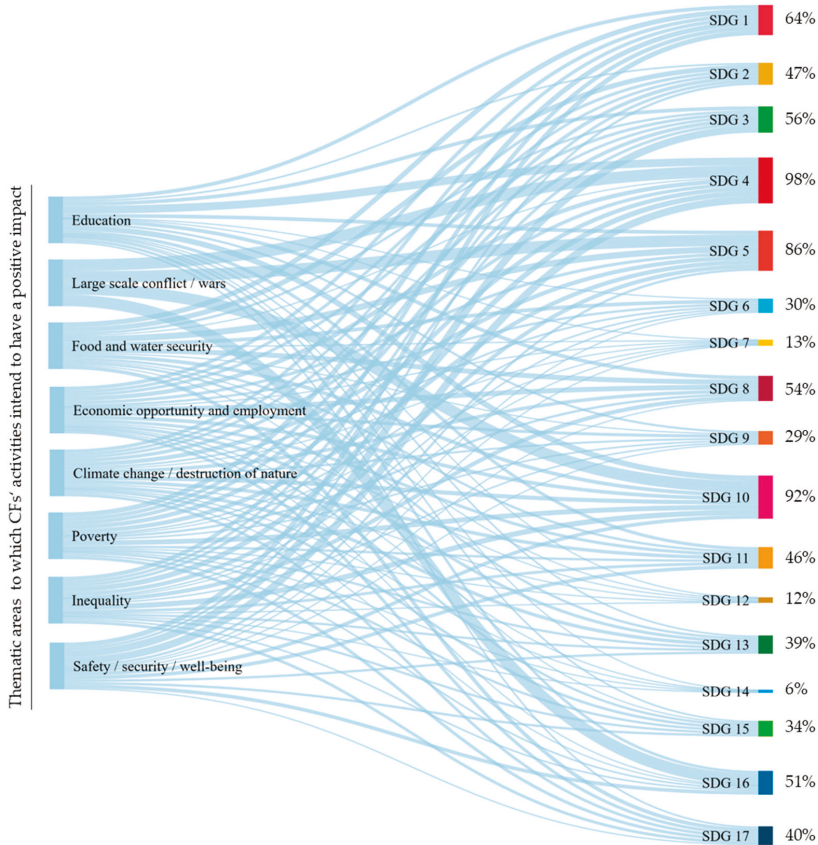
Figure 1. Relationships between thematic areas and SDGs.

The mapping shows which SDGs the CFs considered relevant to their thematic areas and which SDGs were covered most (the percentages next to the SDGs indicate how many of the mentions from the thematic areas were related to the goal). The activities of the CFs touched on all 17 SDGs, while the thematic areas were linked to several SDGs simultaneously, thus acknowledging the interconnectivity among the goals. However, it is interesting to note that the CFs in the sample seemed unable to reflect two of the initial ten thematic areas—namely, religious conflicts and government accountability and transparency/corruption—in the SDGs, although 5% and 7% of them stated that they sought to address these through their activities earlier in the survey. By linking these two variables, it can be shown that some SDGs strongly resonated with the previous activities of the CFs, such as SDG 4 (98%) and SDG 10 (92%), while other SDGs were hardly reflected at all. For example, only 6% of all respondents mentioned the eight thematic areas accounted for in SDG 14.

The extent to which CFs incorporated the SDGs at the organizational level into different processes was related to their model of activity. In general, a foundation's model of activity, either grant-making, operating, or mixed, is regarded as leading to considerable differences in the ways a foundation functions [107]. Therefore, one might assume differences between the activity models in how far CFs take the SDGs into account in their processes. Significant differences were found when comparing grant-making to operative CFs and operative to mixed CFs, but not in the comparison of grant-making and mixed CFs. Operative CFs included the SDGs significantly more in monitoring and evaluation (Mann–Whitney U test: $U = 11.500$, $p = 0.031$), and human resource management (Mann–Whitney U test: $U = 5.500$, $p = 0.006$) than grant-making CFs (as shown in Table 8). In contrast to mixed CFs, CFs operating their own programs included the SDGs significantly more in public relations and communication processes (Mann–Whitney U test: $U = 5.500$, $p = 0.001$). Except for these three processes, the SDGs did not seem to have a major influence on the foundations.

Table 8. Comparison of mean and Mann–Whitney U tests according to the model of activity of CFs.

	Mean			Significance of Difference	
Processes	Grant-Making	Operative	Mixed	Gr./Op.	Op./Mix.
Selection of beneficiaries	2.38	2.67	2.64	-	-
Selection of partners	2.89	2.67	2.45	-	-
Monitoring/Evaluation	1.89	3.14	2.09	*	-
Human resource management	1.38	2.86	2.09	**	-
Financial management	2.00	3.00	2.09	-	-
Public relations/Communication	2.56	3.57	1.73	-	**
Grant making activities	3.33	3.14	2.91	-	-
Funding strategy	2.67	2.71	2.45	-	-
Mission statement	2.33	3.13	2.09	-	-

Note. - = not significant, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

4.2. SDG 17 and the Potential of CFs to Act as Broker Organizations

The perception of CFs as initiators of cross-sector partnerships was twofold, with more respondents rejecting (59.5%) this role for their CF than agreeing (40.5%) to it. The latter was made up of those who completely (13.5%) or partially (27%) agreed. The opposing 59.5% were made up of those CFs that were indifferent about this role (5.4%), rather disagreed (21.6%), and completely disagreed (32.4%) about the perception of their CF as an active partnership broker.

The perception of CFs as partnership brokers did not differ significantly between CFs that applied the SDGs as a frame of reference for their activities or not; in other words, even those CFs which had not yet aligned their activities with the SDGs took on partnership roles to deal with urgent societal issues. The perceptions of CFs may differ, depending on the SDGs to which they refer. However, respective analyses showed no significant difference between the 17 SDGs. This implies that, for the CFs in the sample surveyed, the selection of SDGs is not decisive for their perception as a partnership broker. The same observation was valid when comparing both positions with regard to the ten thematic areas in which the funding activities of the CFs intended to have a positive impact, as indicated by respondents at the very beginning of the survey. There were no thematic areas in which significantly more CFs saw themselves as partnership brokers.

Nevertheless, there was a significant difference between the two positions of perception regarding the internationalization of CFs (Table 9). CFs that perceived themselves as initiators of collaborative arrangements tended to have more international activities (73%); however, no significant variation

was found in terms of age, board size, FTE employees, governance code, model of activity, and grants paid out.

Table 9. Difference between perception of CFs as partnership brokers.

	Perception of CF as Partnership Broker		
	Agreeing [a]	Rejecting [b]	Significance of Difference
Age [c]	15.93 (M) 10.70 (SD)	25.36 (M) 15.37 (SD)	-
Internationalization (%)	73.3	13.6	**
Board size [c]	5.73 (M) 2.21 (SD)	6.59 (M) 2.82 (SD)	-
FTE employees [c]	2.10 (M) 1.67 (SD)	1.79 (M) 2.31 (SD)	-
Governance code (%)	80.0	81.8	-
Model of activity (%)			
Grant-making	46.7	36.4	-
Operating own programs	6.7	22.7	-
Mixed	46.7	40.9	-
Grants paid out (log)	6.08 (M) 0.66 (SD)	5.57 (M) 0.88 (SD)	-

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, - = not significant, ** $p < 0.01$, [a] $n = 15$ (40.5%), [b] $n = 22$ (59.5%), [c] Mann–Whitney U tests, otherwise Pearson's chi-square tests.

5. Discussion

The aim of this paper is to address to what extent CFs incorporate the SDGs into their activities and organizational processes and to what extent CFs perceive themselves as initiators of cross-sector collaborative arrangements (i.e., addressing SDG 17).

First, the findings showed that coverage of the goals by the CFs was largely comparable with that of other institutional philanthropic actors and, thus, showed no unusual attempts. This was supported by a comparison of the most supported SDGs by the CFs in the sample and those of other charitable foundations [5] and corporate donors [66]. It appears that the most prioritized goals among these actors were SDG 4 (sample: 46%, foundations: 57%, corporate donors: 21%), SDG 3 (sample: 27%, foundations: 42%, corporate donors: 22%), and SDG 1 (sample: 24%, foundations: 35%, corporate donors: 7%). A similar consistency has been shown in terms of funding, as reported by the SDG Philanthropy Platform [11]. The smallest share of funds, as of July 2020, was directed towards SDGs 14 and 17, which were among the least-mentioned goals by the CFs in the sample; which were SDG 14 (2%), SDG 15 (7%), and SDG 17 (15%). Another pattern in the data provided evidence for this finding: 51% of the CFs in the sample indicated that they aligned their activities with the SDGs, which is comparable to the findings of the Global Philanthropy Report [5], in which it was reported that only 55% of charitable foundations surveyed sought to align their foundation priorities. This figure reveals that there is still much room for improvement and possibly a false perception about the potential impact of small locally or nationally active CFs with mainly grant-making activities, such as those 49% indicated in the survey who did not align their foundation activities with the goals. However, the 2030 Agenda emphasizes the responsibility of all individual countries to implement the SDGs at both national and regional level [8]. Small actors in particular should be called upon to contribute, no matter how small they are in terms of staff and budget or their focus in their geographical sphere of action. The shift from a donor-centered to a partnership-centered role of CFs for the SDGs offers promising and, so far, unseen opportunities of commitment for all types of CFs.

Second, the results of the analysis showed that the SDGs had little impact beyond the direct foundation activities of the CFs. Both alignment of SDG-relevant foundation activities to the company's core business activities and adjustment of organizational processes seemed to be less pronounced. The top SDGs addressed by core business activities generally belonged to internally actionable targets within a company's immediate sphere of influence or within its value chain activities, which is in line with previous research findings [33]. Such a lack of thematic alignment could be seen as a missed opportunity to pool resources for mutually agreed goals in order to achieve even greater impact. On the other hand, CFs could use these circumstances to increase trust among their stakeholders

and to emphasize their often suspiciously viewed independence. This is further supported by the result according to 76% of the respondents that the selection of SDGs was not influenced by their strategic fit with the corporate founder's engagement. An additional pattern in the data confirmed the low internal transformational impact of the SDGs. Apart from public relations and communications, human resource management, and monitoring and evaluation, SDGs were of relatively little relevance to other foundation processes when comparing the model of activity of CFs. Previous studies have made similar observations on mere mapping and reporting of the SDGs and proposed that the strategic elements of an organization should be reformulated to realize more substantial change [108].

Finally, the perception of CF managers concerning the partnership broker role of CFs showed clear yet different positions. The CFs which perceived themselves as partnership brokers differed significantly from those which did not, in terms of internationalization. Beyond that, the role as a broker seemed to be open to all kinds of CFs. Actors who seek to promote cross-sector partnership can start with these parameters and improve the enabling infrastructure for CFs as partnership brokers, where necessary. In contrast to the prior literature, this study did not examine the various roles CFs might take on during a partnership, but whether they had performed the role of a partnership broker beforehand. In particular, there is a need for greater awareness among CFs on how to move from simple collaboration to strategic partnership [14], how to overcome organizational barriers [71], and how to effectively use their unique position (i.e., between the business sector and civil society) to advance the SDGs.

The findings presented in this paper have certain limitations. First, the geographic context of the study was restricted to Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Germany, thus limiting broad generalization and the transfer of findings to other European foundation sectors and beyond. Different societal contexts and institutional settings (e.g., differences in national law, traditions, and norms) are known to influence CF governance and operations [12]. Second, the final sample of 408 CFs may not have been fully representative of all existing CFs, especially in the case of Switzerland and Liechtenstein. Due to the lack of a public register for charitable foundations, various search methods and selection criteria were applied, which could not cover all existing CFs; for example, CFs from small- and medium-sized companies, which are less visible to the public, might not have been included. Third, a higher response rate is necessary to strengthen the validity of these highly explorative findings. Future studies could achieve this through paper-and-pencil surveys, as they allow for contacting all CFs, regardless of data protection regulations and/or missing e-mail addresses. On the other hand, qualitative interviews could provide a suitable instrument to obtain even more in-depth knowledge on reasons for specific perceptions and behaviors. They could also help to reveal inconsistencies (e.g., when CFs indicate they contribute to urgent societal challenges but later deny the use of SDGs as a reference framework). Fourth, due to the limited literature on CFs and the lack of established measures to examine the approach of CFs to the SDGs and their perception of being a partnership broker, new measures had to be generated. These provide a first step towards analyzing the contribution of CFs to the 2030 Agenda, which must be tested by future research to increase validity and reliability. Finally, more reliable and accurate data on financial figures and additional information about the founders, as suggested previously by Rey-Garcia et al. [76], could help to explain the differences in commitment to the SDGs.

6. Conclusions

This paper argues that the essential role of CFs in the 2030 Agenda is less that of a financial intermediary of corporate philanthropic funds but, rather, that of a partnership broker initiating cross-sector collaboration between the business sector and civil society. However, a shift in perception toward this role was not observable for all CFs in the sample surveyed. In fact, the findings of the survey showed that, although they stated their contribution to important societal issues, half of the interviewed CFs did not even use the SDGs as a reference for their activities. Furthermore, those CFs that used the SDGs as a framework were only partially translating them into core foundation processes. Hence, these CFs face the loss of an immense opportunity to align their own activities and to engage

the business sector and civil society in a meaningful way for the development of goals toward systemic change. The demand for partnership brokers has been increasingly realized and articulated in high policy frameworks, as status reports have indicated that the progress toward the SDGs thus far remains insufficient. While CFs undoubtedly make up a small share of philanthropic actors and do not have the financial resources and capabilities to solve long-standing development problems on their own, they may be better equipped than other intermediary organizations to initiate effective and innovative partnerships across different institutional logics, sectors, and geographic boundaries. The results of this study, although highly explorative, provide some evidence that CFs do not fully grasp or have an awareness of their role as partnership brokers and their potential to leverage corporate resources. Yet, given the unique characteristics and position of CFs between the private and non-profit sectors, the true value that CFs can add to the 2030 Agenda is still far from being reached.

This study contributes to the current body of literature concerned with CP in several ways. First, CFs are a specific type of foundation that lacks a thorough understanding of their role in the 2030 Agenda and the foundation sector in general, although they are growing in number and size and have received increasing attention. This paper contributes to a better and more nuanced understanding of these actors in the landscape of charitable foundations. Second, this study is the first to survey CFs in Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Germany comprehensively and includes an inventory of CFs in these three foundation sectors. Based on a small sample, this study has indicated the kinds of CFs (in terms of age, size, model, and area of activity) that the overall inventory is composed of, thus allowing a more accurate specification of the already known figures from previous studies [26]. Third, as not all companies that voluntarily donate funds, in-kind resources, or time formalize their corporate giving into a CF, the findings of this paper may also be valuable for research into other non-institutionalized corporate philanthropic activities (e.g., corporate volunteering and donations). Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature on cross-sector partnerships in development cooperation by showing how CF managers envisage both the proactive role of their respective foundation as partnership brokers and their overall approach to the SDGs. Previously rather unconnected theoretical strands relating to the SDGs, cross-sector partnerships, the influence of the private sector on the SDGs, and institutional philanthropic involvement in the SDGs have been combined to discuss how CFs—apart from their mere role as donors—can effectively contribute as brokers.

Future research could complement the findings of this study by making valuable contributions in at least three areas: It would be fruitful to identify the factors and processes that help CFs to successfully shift from being primarily funders to initiators of such collaborative arrangements. This enabling environment is of crucial importance to support peer-to-peer learning on one hand (e.g., to share experiences of CFs at different stages of transition) while, on the other hand, allowing for the development of specific skills relevant to broker activities. While UN-related actors and organizations should welcome an increase in CFs as partnership brokers in an attempt to adhere to SDG 17, other development NGOs, advocacy groups, or community-based organizations may be rather critical of efforts by CFs to take the lead in cross-sector partnerships for sustainable development. Given their roots in, and ongoing links to, their corporate founders, further research from these perspectives is required in order to examine under which conditions CFs are perceived as trustworthy and responsible brokers in these arrangements. Furthermore, in order to advance the understanding of CFs as partnership brokers, scholars could examine the long-term effects of CF activities in more detail. The main question here is whether CFs make a difference in their role as brokers and, more specifically, whether cross-sector partnerships initiated by CFs can actually bring transformational change to the sustainability agenda.

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Article

Cross-Sector Partnerships for Sustainability: How Mission-Driven Conveners Drive Change in National Coffee Platforms

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Abstract: Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have deployed various strategies in motivating businesses to source sustainably, such as the co-development and promotion of sustainability certification and direct collaboration in cross-sector partnerships (CSPs). This is an important current-day priority, given the ambitions set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and SDG 17 in particular. Increasingly, NPOs have taken up a role as conveners of such CSPs. Research on CSPs has, to date, often considered conveners as a 'resource' to the CSP, contributing to its effectiveness. In this study, we shift the focus towards the convener by considering a case of a 'mission-driven convener', an NPO that initiates CSPs as a strategy to realize its own sustainability objectives. Our explorative case study—comparing the NPO's efforts across six countries in setting up national coffee platforms—reviews the concept of a mission-driven convener vis-à-vis established notions on convening and identifies which strategies it applies to realize a CSP. These strategies comprise productively combining certification-driven efforts with CSPs, combining process and outcomes of CSPs, and drawing on cross-level dynamics derived from outsourcing of convening work to local actors. With our study, we contribute to research on CSP conveners by offering an alternative interpretation to the relation between the CSP and the convener, attributing more agency to the convener as a mission-driven organization. Strengthening our understanding of CSPs and conveners is an important means to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: cross-sector partnerships; convening; coffee; strategy; mission-driven organization; SDGs; sustainability; sustainable supply chains; certification; convener

1. Introduction

The global sustainable development agenda—as formulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—makes explicit reference to the importance of cross-sector collaboration in addressing the SDGs in SDG 17, 'partnerships for the goals'. Cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) have emerged as a promising means for addressing complex sustainability challenges—or "grand challenges" [1,2]—that fall between the capability and responsibility of different societal sectors of business, government, and/or civil society [3,4]. Despite their promise and potential, the last two decades of research on CSPs have also emphasized the manifold challenges associated with such collaborations, for example, the difficulty to align different interests [4,5], inequality between organizations related to an unequal share of resources or misallocation of costs and benefits, which can lead to struggles over power and influence [6–8], or cultural differences involving communication problems and/or lack of trust [4,8].

To facilitate collaboration between heterogeneous actors, CSPs can benefit from the involvement of 'third-party actors' to mitigate the challenges mentioned above and to ensure an effective formation and implementation of the CSP.

Research on these third-party actors uses a range of terms to explain what we call conveners [9], [10]. These include 'brokers' or 'broker organizations' [11–14], 'bridging agents' [15], 'interveners' [16], or 'orchestrators' [17]. We adopt the term 'convener' to describe the third party actor and consequently deploy this term throughout the remainder of our paper as it emphasizes how these actors convene, or bring together, heterogeneous actors. Despite the conceptual ambiguity, the common assumption we identify behind much research on conveners is that these actors can be considered a 'resource' to the partnership in the sense that their involvement enhances the likelihood of the CSP's success. For example, conveners can play an important role in the formation and implementation of a CSP. With various levels of involvement, the convener is claimed to support the CSP in achieving its objectives [10,13,16].

In this study, we take another point of departure: Rather than focusing on the success (or lack thereof) of CSPs, we focus on the convener as our unit of analysis. This is important, because the organizations that convene CSPs may also have their own ambition and mission that may reach beyond those of the various CSPs in which they are involved. Initiating and supporting CSPs then may be one strategy to realize their own ambitions. Thus, rather than studying how a CSP benefits from the involvement of a convener, we study how such a convener—which we call a "mission-driven convener"—operates to reach its own objectives. We examine how this convener initiates and participates in CSPs as a *strategy* to realize its own ambitions: In our case, these ambitions are to advance the sustainable development agenda, and SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 15, and 17 in particular. In this manner, we consider the CSP as instrumental—i.e., as 'a convening strategy'—in achieving the mission-driven convener's desired sustainability outcomes instead of perceiving the convener as instrumental in facilitating a CSP. We, thereby, scrutinize less-examined elements of convening work, which are important to understand how these crucial intermediary actors operate and addressing the research question: How do mission-driven conveners strategically organize cross-sector collaboration?

To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative, explorative study on a mission-driven convener in the context of supply chain sustainability. Sustainability in global supply chains is one of the contexts in which the 'partnership promise' has burgeoned over the past years [18–20]. CSPs in supply chains have some distinct features that make them particularly interesting for our research. First, CSPs in this domain often include multiple companies that operate at different levels in the supply chain (i.e., producers, traders, exporters), which introduces cross-level dynamics that render the CSP more complex [16]. Second, these CSPs can also include multiple businesses from the same supply chain 'level', such as direct competitors trying to work together 'pre-competitively' on issues of sustainable development. This leads to 'coopetition', the co-occurrence of competition and collaboration, which can lead to friction within and between organizations [21,22]. Third, supply chain sustainability touches upon the competitive elements of 'doing business', potentially leading to situations where business and social logics collide [23]. Together, these features can potentially inhibit successful collaboration. Simultaneously, the challenges that are commonly associated with CSPs are expected to co-occur and may even be more pronounced in these complex settings—especially if the CSPs aim to address SDGs. Mission-driven conveners, hence, have to face these 'additional' challenges when they choose CSPs as their strategy to realize sustainable supply chains and have to convene collaboration among multiple, and sometimes competing, businesses.

Our purpose in this paper is to understand how mission-driven conveners initiate and facilitate CSPs to advance their own objectives towards sustainable supply chains, how these activities relate to alternative efforts such as certification-driven initiatives, and how they deal with the distinct features of various CSPs in this domain. Furthermore, we seek to understand whether and how this 'mission-driven convening' differs from common notions of the convening concept, which among others, emphasizes the importance of conveners to be unbiased, neutral actors, with a certain level of

authority [24–27]. However, if we view them as 'mission-driven', their neutrality could be questioned. We develop a more fine-grained understanding of the skills, characteristics, and roles that are required to effectively perform a mission-driven role and to effectively navigate this tension.

The organization we study is a government-funded nonprofit organization (NPO), with a mission to strengthen sustainable trade in global supply chains, thereby contributing to the realization of the sustainable development agenda This organization, founded in 2008, initially aimed to contribute to the Millennium Development Goals 1, 7, and 8. After 2015, it reformulated its objectives in line with the SDGs, and specified for each of its programs the relevant SDGs. To achieve its objectives, it builds CSPs with business, other nonprofit organizations, and governments, in order to jointly tackle the bottlenecks that prevent a sustainability transition in the commodity sectors they work in. We focus here on its work in the coffee sector, where the organization seeks to contribute to several of the SDGs (in particular 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 15, and 17). In this sector, traditionally, sustainability efforts focused on increasing the uptake of certification as a means to guarantee sustainable production and consumption [28]. Only recently, increased attention has been granted to the formation of pre-competitive collaboration between multiple business actors, joining forces with NPOs and/or government(s) in CSPs, which are expected to be more effective in solving the complex sustainability challenges preventing a sustainability transition in the global coffee trade [28–30].

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. Section 2 (Theoretical background) positions our research in the scholarly debate on sustainable trade—and the coffee sector, in particular (Section 2.1). Moreover, we offer a short synthesis of research on the role of conveners, as discussed in the literature on CSPs (Section 2.2). By doing so, we emphasize the gaps in our understanding of what convening entails if we approach the phenomenon from an actor-perspective, that is, viewing the convener as a mission-driven change-maker initiating and orchestrating CSPs to achieve its sustainable development objectives. Section 3 (Research context and case description) introduces our field of research and focal organization. Section 4 (Materials and methods) is divided into two sub-sections, addressing the data-collection (Section 4.1) and our approach to data analysis (Section 4.2). Section 5 (Findings) presents the results of our study in four sub-sections, including the strategy (Section 5.1), implementation (Section 5.2), and outcomes (Section 5.3) of the CSP approach, and a final sub-section in which we scrutinize mission-driven convening (Section 5.4). Section 6 (Discussion) reviews our main findings and interprets the study's results in light of existing research, outlining our contribution as well as listing some of the limitations of our study that can provide stepping-stones for future research on this topic. Lastly, Section 7 presents a brief overview of our conclusions.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. NPOs' Shifting Role(s) in Stimulating Sustainability in Global Supply Chains: From Certification to CSPs

NPOs have played an important role in establishing voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) together with business actors as a means to realize organizational accountability for sustainability issues in supply chains. They have also been instrumental in promoting the uptake of certification through these VSS among businesses in global supply chains [31–33]. However, across multiple disciplines, the debate continues on VSS's impact on sustainability in the supply chain, including business ethics and CSR literature [34–36], and supply chain management literature [37–40]. Such critical research evokes questions of whether certification through VSS can adequately address more complex issues such as soil degradation, poverty, or deforestation—and whether transformation requires more than certification alone. This critique is worrisome since VSS were originally developed to tackle such complex sustainability issues and to fill the void of insufficient governmental action to address them [41,42].

Meanwhile, CSPs have emerged as a promising means to address complex sustainability issues, with a corresponding prominent place in the UN SDGs (whereby SDG 17 concerns partnerships). This indicates that, in practice, partnerships have almost reached a paradigmatic status in the work

of governments and NPOs in addressing sustainability issues. In academia, research on cross-sector collaboration also has burgeoned [6,16,43]. CSPs are believed to be well suited to address complex sustainability challenges that are the shared responsibility of different societal sectors [4] and involving a variety of actors. Moreover, CSPs are considered to have transformative potential towards the SDGs [17,44]. In the practice of supply chain sustainability, the focus of NPOs has also broadened, from promoting certification to stimulating organizations to collaborate with them in CSPs, including multiple actors from business, nonprofit and/or government sectors to address common sustainability issues in their supply chains [37,40,45].

As such, the role of NPOs has changed, and increasingly, these organizations are initiating CSPs together with business actors, in which they can play a variety of important roles, such as convener or facilitator [46]. Working in CSPs implies that businesses have to develop a broader perspective of a more inclusive supply chain that also includes competitors and 'non-traditional' supply chain actors such as NPOs [40], inevitably leading to multi-actor CSPs and 'cross-level dynamics' among its stakeholders [16]. These dynamics can also involve 'coopetition', when businesses need to collaborate with competitors [21,22]. The facilitating role that NPOs play in such CSPs is intended toward enabling business partners to look beyond their individual competitive agendas and work together in 'pre-competitive' partnerships, i.e., working with their competitors on non-competitive issues, such as sustainability challenges they (collectively) face in their supply chain [47]. NPOs, hence, take up an important role as initiators of, and conveners in CSPs, as a means to realize their own sustainability objectives to work towards large-scale sustainable and inclusive growth, realizing transformation in terms of the SDGs. This characterizes them as mission-driven. As the initiative lies among the NPOs, and because of the distinct challenges involved in such pre-competitive CSPs, this type of mission-driven convening differs from common concepts of convening, as we now explain.

2.2. Conveners: Definition, Skills, and Role

Over the past decades, research on (cross-sector) collaboration has studied the role of 'convener' using a broad range of terminology, such as brokers or broker organizations [11,13,14,48], bridging agents [15], interveners [16], or orchestrators [17]. The broadest term applied to this type of actor is 'intervener' [16]. An intervener draws on a variety of influencing strategies, of which 'convening' is one—primarily required in the initial phases of partnership formation by bringing relevant parties together and scoping the interest of joint action. Stadtler and Probst [13] consider convening as one of three roles taken up by what they call 'broker organizations', while recently, Yan et al. [46] identified convening as one of the potential roles that NPOs can play in CSPs. In this study, we adopt the term 'convener', building on prior conceptualization [9,10,24,26,49]. This choice is also motivated by its centrality in our empirical domain—where the NPO we study explicitly refers to its strategy and activities as 'convening CSPs'. Research often defines convening as sub-activity of a larger, overarching concept, taking place in the earlier stages of partnership formation, i.e., bringing together the relevant parties and scoping the interest of collaboration [10,26,50]. In line with Stadtler and Probst [13], however, we consider the relevance of convening as extending well beyond the early phases of the CSP and as an ongoing activity throughout the partnership's life cycle. Hence, we define a convener as an actor or organization that brings together heterogeneous actors in a CSP and plays a crucial bridging role in balancing different partners' interests in order to drive the CSP process forward throughout its implementation.

Prior literature has discussed a wide variety of skills and characteristics required to effectively play the role of a convener. For example, conveners need to have a certain level of authority, either formal or informal [24]. Attributes that can be used as a means of authority are legitimation, facilitation, mandate, and persuasion [24]. Another frequently mentioned attribute is neutrality or being "a balanced or unbiased party" [26]. Finally, conveners' familiarity with the situation or context of the partnership is seen as highly relevant [26]. These attributes are considered to enable conveners to effectively play their role in the formation and implementation of CSPs.

Conveners' roles in a CSP can differ. In a proactive approach, they can be initiators of a CSP, in a responsive approach, they can be asked by other stakeholders to fulfill their convening role [13,16]. Their role and circumstances influence which attributes are relevant means of authority. For example, responsive conveners' authority is primarily based upon legitimation and facilitation, while proactive conveners need persuasion or mandate [13,24]. Furthermore, conveners can be participants in the partnership, or the convening role can be outsourced to a neutral third party without a direct stake in the CSP [16]. The activities and/or responsibilities of the convener can also be shared among different actors. That is, the organization bringing the relevant parties to the table is not necessarily the same organization that subsequently negotiates the partnership agreement or mediates potential conflicts between partners during implementation [16].

In sum, research on convening has emphasized the different elements of their role, applying a variety of terms, discussing the skills required for convening, and the role of the convener in the CSP. In our empirical domain, we encounter an NPO that positions itself as convener that initiates CSPs as a strategy towards achieving its sustainability objectives, namely sustainable production and consumption in global supply chains. Following the shifting role of NPOs in stimulating sustainability in global supply chains from certification to CSPs and with a growing emphasis on coopetition, we consider this NPO to be a "mission-driven convener" because it strategically uses CSPs to achieve its own sustainability objectives across different global supply chains. As an initiator, the NPO takes on a proactive convening role [13], but how it performs that role, and whether the skills, authority requirements, and roles commonly associated with conveners are equally relevant for mission-driven conveners, remains unclear. Moreover, how mission-driven conveners balance their ambiguous role—i.e., facilitating a complex set of stakeholders while having their own objectives and agendas as well—has not been adequately explained in the literature on 'regular' convening discussed above. Nonetheless, understanding such questions is of significance given the important role mission-driven conveners can play in the realization of the SDGs, and SDG 17, in particular [17,44]. In response to this need, we examine this mission-driven convener, set in the context of sustainable coffee.

3. Research Context and Case Description

The coffee sector has been a popular context for organizational scholars for some time, with research mostly focused on certification as a means to strengthen sustainability in the sector. Most of these studies mirror the general (scientific) debate on (the shortcomings of) certification, for example, elaborating on the emergence of certification in the coffee industry [28,51], zooming in on the roll-out of certification in specific coffee-producing regions through case studies [52–54], or scrutinizing the impact and effectiveness of certification [55,56] and the poor connection between the 'Northern' voluntary sustainability standards with the 'Southern' reality of smallholder farmers [57]. Recently, Glasbergen [57] argued that by focusing on the effectiveness of certification, researchers fail to acknowledge the 'real' question of whether certification is the most appropriate means to increase sustainable production of coffee (and other sectors).

This emphasis on certification is understandable, given the fact that certification comprised the start of the coffee sector's sustainability journey. This journey began in the late 1980s with the establishment of the 'Max Havelaar' concept, which developed into the certification system presently becoming common practice in ensuring sustainable production in most (agro-food) supply chains. The coffee sustainability journey is eloquently presented by Millard [28], who differentiates between two phases of coffee sustainability: First, (international) roasters and traders stimulated the increase of third-party certification as an assurance of sustainable production and consumption. Since 2004, the second phase signifies a shift in focus, whereby on the one hand industry is developing its own company standards to compete with previously established multi-stakeholder standards, while on the other hand multi-company initiatives are emerging—often supported by donor agencies and/or civil society organizations. Our empirical focus fits with this second phase, namely the emergence of multi-stakeholder initiatives, or 'sectoral sustainability platforms' [29,30] that are set up to directly

target sustainability issues in supply chains by working together with multiple (business) organizations in CSPs.

We studied the work of one Europe-based international NPO ("the Convener"). The Convener aims to strengthen sustainability in global supply chains in multiple commodity sectors—among which is the coffee sector. Funded by several European governments, its strategy is threefold: It convenes cross-sector collaborations, co-funds business investments in sustainable production and trade, and collects and disseminates lessons learned from its programs. The Convener's coffee program aims to address the SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 15, and 17, and focuses on six (coffee-producing) countries: Two in Africa, two in Asia, and two in Latin America. In one of the African countries initially selected by the Convener the national platform structure did not materialize. Instead, government representatives of another African country initiated a collaboration with the Convener. It is this second country that is part of our analysis in this paper (labeled Africa 1).

Although the coffee program was (strategically) managed from the Netherlands, the Convener outsourced several coordinating activities to so-called 'Country Coordinators' (CC) installed in each of the six focus countries: In two countries these CCs were employed by the Convener, in the four other countries the role of the CC was taken up by other organizations. We studied the Convener's efforts in developing national cross-sector collaboration platforms in these six countries between 2012 and 2016 and report on these cases to shed light on the strategies of a mission-driven convener. It should be noted that our collected data informs on convening efforts that preceded the formulation of the SDGs: At the time, the Convener explicitly aimed to contribute to MDGs 1, 7, and 8. Therefore, the strategy of the Convener did not directly refer to any specific SDGs at the time of data collection. In our Discussion-section, we discuss the implications of our findings in light of the current SDGs.

4. Materials and Methods

The present explorative study has the objective of increasing our understanding of how mission-driven conveners strategically organize CSPs. We used a qualitative research design and purposefully sampled the coffee sector as a relevant context for this study, as it is considered the front-running industry for sustainability initiatives [30,57,58]. We used a case study research methodology [59,60], building on six cases (six national coffee platforms/CSPs) that were embedded within one larger case (the Convener's coffee program). Having six cases in different institutional conditions allowed us to examine the core elements of the strategic convening process.

4.1. Data Collection

We collected our data between March and August 2016 through a combination of interviews and document analysis. Some additional (secondary) data were collected in 2018. Data were collected in four steps, summarized in Table 1. First, we analyzed a variety of documents, including strategic plans, previous studies on the Convener's coffee sector work, its annual plans and reports, and communication materials (e.g., websites). We also engaged in informal conversations with Convener employees and conducted an in-depth interview with the (then) Program Director to gain in-depth insight into the Convener's work and strategy since its coffee program's inception in 2012. Our second step consisted of a questionnaire, in which the six CCs were asked to provide (1) general information about their platform's geographical scope, date of inception, etc., (2) information on the platform's legal status, mandate and funding, (3) their platform's vision, objectives and results to date, (4) information on their platform meetings, i.e., frequency, agenda, attendance rates, and (5) the governance structure. CCs were also asked to share with us any available supporting documentation on their national platform. This enabled us to better understand the commonalities and differences in the platforms' structure and organization and the connection between the Convener in the Netherlands and the CCs in each country. Following the questionnaires, we scheduled interviews with the CCs to better understand the country context and their platform, from their own perspectives. The third step of data-collection consisted of a series of interviews with platform members in each country (see Appendix A for the topic-list for

the interviews), identified by CCs and conducted by phone or Skype, as a means to include multiple stakeholder perspectives. These 15 additional stakeholder interviews provided in-depth insights into the differences between the six country contexts in terms of the implementation of the Convener's strategy, as well as sensitizing us to variety in the local context, appreciation, and experience with CSPs in general. We deliberately sought to include a wide variety of perspectives on the Convener's work to complement the Convener's own perspective with that of the 'convened' organizations: In each country, we aimed to include (besides the CC) at least one private sector, and one nonprofit interviewee. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in over 400 pages of interview transcript. The final step of data collection took place in 2018 when we collected additional secondary data from the Convener's website and read (consultancy) reports to update us on the developments in its coffee program between 2016 and 2018. This step served to trace developments in the six national platforms, following a merger that occurred in 2016 between the Convener's coffee program and another sustainability program in the coffee sector.

Table 1. Overview of the (process of) data-collection, data-sources, and use in analysis.

Data-Collection Steps	1 Convener Perspective	2 Country Coordinators' Perspective	3 Platform Stakeholders' Perspective	4 Context and Sector Development Beyond the Case Studies
Objectives	To understand the Convener's role, rationale, and way of working in order to gain an in-depth understanding of its strategy.	To collect factual information on key platform characteristics toward a cross-case comparison of six cases (documents), and to understand the perspectives and roles of the CCs convening the platforms at the national level (interviews).	To add the viewpoints and experiences of stakeholders participating in the six country platforms.	To reconnect with the developments in the coffee sector, to gain updates on trends and progress of the sector since the initial period of data collection.
Interviews	Program Director Convener (1) and multiple informal conversations with the Program Director and other Convener employees	Country Coordinators (6)	Platform members (15)	n/a
Documents	Strategic plans, (impact) studies, annual plans, and reports on strategy	Questionnaires on national coffee platforms (6) and supporting documentation	n/a	Websites and (publicly available) reports on progress of the coffee platforms and general sector developments
Outcomes	In-depth insight gained into the (history of) the Convener's coffee program and its strategic considerations.	In-depth insight gained into the perspectives of the CCs as local conveners of the platforms, insight in platform's status, differences, and similarities.	Various perspectives collected, including evaluations on the platforms' achievements.	Findings contextualized through understanding of the current sector's status on an aggregate level.

4.2. Data Analysis

We adopted an abductive approach in the analysis of our data. In practice, this implies a creative, back-and-forth process of discovery, alternating between the collected data, emerging ideas, and existing literature [61]. We were, thus, informed by our prior knowledge of the relevant literature, but also open to the richness of our data [62], and utilizing the richness of our qualitative data to develop a 'new way of seeing' [63] concerning convening.

Our analysis started hands-on with the development of a practitioner report for our focal organization (the Convener), summarizing the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned from

the six country platforms to showcase their and facilitate cross-country learning. Writing this report turned out to be very instrumental in our own further analysis, as it sensitized us to the cross-level dynamics at play in the program: The interaction between the international level at which the Convener operated, and the national level—where the CCs were expected to roll-out the national platform strategy. Furthermore, it showed very clearly the variety in implementation (and challenges) across each of the six countries, whilst the strategy of the Convener for each of these countries, and the results achieved, were very similar.

We proceeded along this line of discovery when we continued our data analysis, comprising a thorough round of coding using the qualitative data analysis software package MaxQDA. Because of our interest in the role of the Convener in the CSPs, we started by coding the interviews with the Convener's Program Director and the six CCs, as these interviews provided the most information on the Convener's strategy, as well as the relationship between the Convener and the CCs in the developmental phase of the (international) coffee program and the national platforms. The interviews with other stakeholders involved in the platforms, which we coded in the next phase, were instrumental in contextualizing the results found in this first coding round and complemented the Convener and CCs' perspectives on how the mission-driven convener had strategically organized the CSPs. Moreover, this iterative analysis allowed us to better understand the differences in CSP formation across the six countries and the diversity in challenges faced throughout the implementation. Finally, we verified our analysis with our host organization, which provided additional insights and sharpened our analysis.

Throughout the data analysis process, we attempted to make sense of our findings in light of a broad spectrum of the existing literature and possible explanations—as is common in the abductive mode of inquiry [61]. Among several possible ways of telling the story [64], we chose to report our findings as a case of mission-driven convening, emphasizing the cross-level dynamics at play. Because of the explorative nature of our research (i.e., studying the underexplored phenomenon of mission-driven convening), we chose a narrative strategy in presenting our results. In doing so, we provide a rich description of our case to detail how the mission-driven convener strategically organized the CSPs in our case. From this rich description, we derive three thematic implications for research on (mission-driven) conveners, which we present in Section 6 (Discussion).

5. Findings

Our findings are presented in four sub-sections. The first three sections present the strategy development, implementation, and first achievements of the work of the Convener. These sections illustrate three important themes related to mission-driven convening: First, the productive combination of field-level projects with a CSP approach in the strategy development, second, the pragmatic handling of cross-level dynamics in contextualizing the implementation of the strategy, third, the connection between process and outcomes to realize first achievements. We connect these three themes in the fourth sub-section and relate them to our concept of 'mission-driven conveners', thereby responding to our research question of how mission-driven conveners strategically organize cross-sector partnerships.

5.1. Strategy Development: A Productive Combination of Field-Level Projects with a CSP Approach

Upon request of four large, international coffee roasters and three other coffee sector stakeholders (an industry association, donor, and an NGO), the Convener launched its coffee program in 2012. It focused its vision on smallholder farmers, aiming "to address the sustainability issues faced by smallholder coffee producers, to organize production in ways that truly benefit the farmer and, by benefiting the farmer, increase the quality and reliability of production for roasters and traders" (internal document). The Convener had a clear vision, supported by a twofold strategy.

On the one hand, it co-financed 'field-level projects' with individual (international) businesses, investing in training these businesses' suppliers in 'good agricultural practices'. The aim of these projects was to support suppliers in implementing more sustainable production practices that could enable them to potentially become sustainably certified in the future. This part of their strategy

was, thus, largely focused on increasing the percentage of sustainably produced (and/or sustainably certified) coffee. Implemented in individual companies' supply chains, they were, in the vocabulary of the Convener, considered more 'competitive'. The Convener deliberately did not co-finance the cost for the audits to obtain sustainability certification here. This was considered a commercial issue under the responsibility of individual coffee producers and/or traders: Once trained in good agricultural practices, for some producers, it would make commercial sense to obtain certification and sell their sustainably produced coffee as sustainably certified coffee. Simultaneously, the Convener wanted to "facilitate 'precompetitive' and public-private cooperation in major coffee-producing countries" (Convener website). This part of their strategy was, thus, aimed at developing collaborative structures (CSPs), including multiple stakeholders from different societal sectors, to jointly address so-called 'systemic issues' that prevented the coffee sector's transition towards sustainable production and trade. Its objective here was to "move beyond the earlier competitive and certification driven efforts, and towards a much more systemic and institutionalized, pre-competitive collaborative, impact-oriented approach, to make the coffee sectors in key producing countries more sustainable" (Convener's Annual Report, 2013). The fact that the Convener had "the [financial] means to support these field-level projects" was key in convincing businesses to participate in these innovative, collaborative structures, as the Program Director shared in the interview: In fact, while the Convener's co-funding of more competitive 'field-level projects' was restricted to maximum 30% of the total project budget (in Africa this was later adjusted to a maximum of 40% of the budget), pre-competitive collaborative structures could receive up to 70% co-funding from the Convener. The different co-funding ratios were in line with the Convener's mandate as a government-funded organization, aiming to advance the public good.

The Convener focused its two-fold strategy on six coffee-producing countries. These countries were identified through an initial scoping study (conducted in 2012): Two African, two Asian, and two Latin American countries were selected. Following the scoping study, the directorate of the Convener visited these countries to meet with relevant stakeholders, aiming to better understand each country's particular 'systemic issues'. These visits further strengthened the Convener's conviction that stimulating public-private dialogue was required toward enabling a sector-wide transformation of the coffee sector, by way of stakeholder engagement and commitment:

> "During many of these visits, we had stakeholder sessions where these people were sitting together at the same table for the first time: Exporters, government, etc. So, we concluded: We should not organize this from the Netherlands! We should create structures here in the [local] country that can pull the work, and we can finance these structures to enable them to work on climate change issues, beyond certification agenda's, farmer training. [...] That is why we suggested developing a new, pre-competitive agenda, a new structure for talking and working with each other. So that should be established, institutionalized, and would become the vehicle for change." (Program Director, the Convener)

In the first years of its coffee program, the Convener referred to 'strengthening public-private dialogue' quite loosely, without the term 'platform' being used to refer to the initiatives per se. Not until the 2014 Annual Report first reference was made to a platform: "Establish well-functioning public-private dialogue platforms [...] that bring coffee sector stakeholders together and drive a common national sustainability agenda [...]". In its ambition to make the coffee sector more sustainable, the Convener, thus, deliberately chose a CSP strategy to achieve its overall objective and aimed to organize six national coffee platforms in the six focal countries.

Key to our findings was first, the Convener's positioning as 'mission-driven' with the objective of strengthening sustainability in the coffee sector, by initiating a CSP to strengthen coordination and pre-competitive collaboration in production countries. Second, the Convener's two-fold strategy signifies a productive combination of more competitive field-level projects (potentially leading to certification depending on the priorities of producers and/or traders) and pre-competitive collaborations for systemic change in an overall strategy. Third, its emphasis on the production side of the supply chain demarcates a clear shift from earlier certification-driven approaches, often pushed from the

buyer-end of the supply chain. Instead, the Convener attempted to organize the sector in a 'bottom-up' manner, before knowing which exact issues each country struggled with most. Finally, the contextual differences between production countries required a regular strategic adaptation to the local context, which evoked a need for the Convener to organize cross-level dynamics, as we now illustrate.

5.2. Implementation: Pragmatically Dealing with Cross-Level Dynamics

An important component of implementation was the contextualization of the international strategy, which required the Convener to strategically organize cross-level dynamics among different stakeholders. With cross-level dynamics, we refer to the connection between convening at the international level by the Convener and its Steering Committee (SC), and at the national-level primarily by the Country Coordinators (CCs).

To facilitate its work at the international level, an SC was installed, meeting every six weeks to guide the international agenda and the pre-competitive national platform work (rather than the more competitive field-level projects). Initially, the members of the SC were the organizations that had requested the Convener to initiate the coffee program, comprising international roasters and coffee sector stakeholders, although the composition of the SC changed over time as members came and went. SC members joined the Convener during several scoping visits to the focal countries, which—in the words of the Program Director of the Convener—"has been hugely instrumental in supporting the Convener's role and in creating a joint focus and framing of the global program". The SC was charged with the disbursement of the available funds, comprising the Convener's own public funding sources and private sector contributions (from international roasters). These funds were assigned by the SC to strategic proposals submitted by the Convener with CCs of each national platform. The Convener managed the Secretariat of the SC.

To facilitate its work in the different local contexts, the Convener sought organizations or individuals in each of the six countries to serve as advisors in scoping the key sustainability issues and stakeholders in their respective countries. In all but one country in Asia, these advisors were later on installed as CCs, to support the local roll-out of the Convener's (international) strategy. For the Convener, one of the reasons to work with local advisors in the scoping of their program was to show their willingness to integrate into the existing stakeholder community and build on existing structures and efforts of other (local) organizations, as opposed to starting new initiatives. In five of the six countries, these CCs became responsible for the project management of all in-country field-level projects co-financed by the Convener. The Convener sought out individuals or organizations that would "not [be] implementing any projects themselves to avoid any conflict of interest. [. . .]. So, they must be neutral in the sense that they are not connected to a certain certification standard, private sector company, or government. They had to be able to work for us without constraints. So, they had to be neutral, with a certain level of authority, and of course, know the coffee sector" (Representative, Convener). Eligible organizations were selected as CCs depending upon the Convener's existing network and their position in the respective country. For example, in the two Asian countries, the Convener was (at the time) already setting up national offices, so selected CCs were effectively employed by the Convener. In the other four countries, the CCs were external organizations. All CCs were firmly grounded in the local contexts.

Moving towards implementation, in each country, the Convener mapped the existing structures and initiatives already in place together with their CCs, scoping if and how a national platform strategy could contribute to overcoming systemic issues standing in the way of a sustainability transition for the country's coffee sector. Not surprisingly, the countries varied greatly, for example, regarding stakeholders' prior experience with working in multi-stakeholder settings, the extent to which the sector was organized and/or other local institutions were already in place, or government involvement and participation, to name a few. This led to a very diverse implementation process in terms of the Convener's strategy, and CCs faced different challenges depending on their specific country context. Examples of implementation challenges mentioned by interviewees include geographical

challenges, challenging interactions with government, securing sufficient funding, maintaining a results-oriented approach and creating real accountability in a voluntary platform, maintaining member- and government engagement, reaching farmers, and connecting sectors with a different work pace. In three of its focal countries, the Convener found that there were already some structures in place that enabled public-private dialogue, while in the other three countries, public-private dialogue was largely non-existent. To avoid duplication of efforts, in the countries where platforms already existed, the Convener initially focused through its CCs on co-financing field-level projects, while connecting with the existing platforms, aimed at strengthening or accelerating their work on sustainability (some of these existing platforms had a wider, coordinating function in the country's coffee sector). Acknowledging existing initiatives was recognized as an important step in this phase: "Respect them and acknowledge their achievements and current initiatives. If you break trust in this process, it is very hard to win it back" (CC, Latin America). In the three countries where public-private dialogue was less developed, the CCs were an important link toward setting up a national platform and involving relevant stakeholders. Table 2 provides a brief overview of the key characteristics of each platform.

Table 2. Six coffee platforms—overview of key organizational characteristics.

	Africa 1 [1]	Africa 2 [1]	Asia 1	Asia 2	Latin America 1	Latin America 2 [1]
Start date platform	2009	2007	2015	2013	2013	2012
Commodity in scope	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Multiple
Legal status	Undefined	No legal status	Association under country's law	No legal status	No legal status	No legal status
Chair of platform	Government representative	Government representative	Director of roaster/trading company	Government representative	None appointed	Ambassador of the Netherlands
Secretariat	Private sector association	Country Coordinator	Executive Director of platform	Research Institute	Country Coordinator	Country Coordinator
Frequency of meetings	Monthly	Monthly	Differs per committee	Bi-annually	Three times a year	Yearly
Attendance rate of meetings	50–60%	Inconsistent	Close to 100%	Over 70%	Close to 100%	Unknown
Members	Public sector (4); private sector (7); farmer cooperatives (4), NGOs or donors (3), (research) institutions (2)	Public sector (5); private sector (4); NGOs or donors (7)	Public sector (1); private sector (14); farmer cooperatives (5); NGOs or donors (14); (research) institutions (1)	Public sector (7); private sector (5); farmer cooperatives (2); (research) institutions (1)	Public sector (7); private sector (9); NGOs or donors (# unknown)	Public sector (1); private sector (13); NGOs or donors (11)

[1] These platforms already existed prior to the Convener's involvement.

Our data revealed that a crucial role in the platforms' development and the mitigation of each of their country-specific challenges was played by the CCs, primarily because of the contextual variation described above. The Convener coordinated a generic strategy, providing the platforms with direction and financial resources, and connecting them to international-level ambitions. The CCs, meanwhile, drove the 'local convening' in their countries, bringing relevant partners together, driven by their favorable positioning in their country to play this role. We found that platform stakeholders acknowledged the convening role played by the CCs in the platforms because they were (1) well-connected with a valuable network in the country's coffee sector, (2) knowledgeable on the coffee sector, and (3) able to speak multiple 'languages'. In other words, CCs understood the perspectives of the private sector, government, and other stakeholders, and were able to translate

between them, as exemplified by the following quote: "The Director of [CC] has more than 33 years of experience in the field, so s/he knows everyone. And the people that work with them, they are agronomists. [. . .] So, they have a good knowledge of the field so they can transit. They can go to a meeting with the Ministry and be effective. And at the same time, they can go and do a workshop with farmers on a very basic level and they can speak their language" (stakeholder, Latin America 1). Other interviews confirmed this acknowledgment, for instance: "[CC] has a lot of experience in working with farmer cooperatives and with the big companies" (stakeholder, Asia 1).

Our analysis showed how the Convener deliberately 'outsourced' a large part of the convening work to these CCs as local facilitators. From our interviews with stakeholders, we also found that CCs were often recognized in their capacity as conveners, more so than the Convener itself—who was more distant to platform members and was primarily perceived as an important donor. However, this evaluation on the Convener's role in the platform differed, depending on whether the CC in the country was employed by the Convener, and whether the country's platform existed prior to the Convener's and/or CC's involvement. Furthermore, the Convener emphasized how their financial backing, agenda, and authority enabled the CC's convening role in each of the countries and how, in some cases, their visits to the country "were essential to raise existing initiatives and platforms to the required level of visibility and authority. [. . .] Of course, over time, this role decreased" (Program Director, Convener).

In sum, the implementation of the Convener's strategy shows a contextualization of the international strategy to ensure a fit within the national context. While the SC played a guiding role, the CCs, as 'local conveners', were essential for the implementation of the Convener's overall CSP strategy in each of the production countries. Who was most fit to perform the role of CC was determined in part by a pragmatic approach of the Convener, who installed either their own (local) staff or reached out to other organizations in their network. The cross-level dynamics in our case, therefore, relate to the different convening levels at which the Convener and their CCs operated both internationally and locally. Section 5.3 reports on the outcomes of this process.

5.3. First Achievements: Connecting Process and Outcomes to Realize Sustainability Objectives

The three achievements mentioned most often when asking about the first results of the national platform strategy of the Convener include one primarily related to the outcomes of the platform work, and two primarily related to the process, although the Convener actively sought to connect these two elements in its work—as we will now explain.

An important part of the Convener's strategy was to collect and disseminate the lessons learned from the field-level projects that they co-funded with private sector partners. In this manner, it strategically drew on the field-level projects to show sector stakeholders the value of pre-competitive collaboration in the national platforms. The field-level projects that the Convener co-financed were more 'competitive' in the sense that they focused on one supply chain only (i.e., they could include a producer and/or trader within one supply chain), although project implementation was often supported by an NPO. Private sector stakeholders submitted proposals to the Convener for project co-funding. The CCs were charged with managing the national project portfolio, which included collecting and sharing lessons learned from their country projects. The aim here was to prevent duplication of efforts and to align instructions on 'good agricultural practices', taught to farmers and farmer cooperatives. Building on these shared lessons, the CCs and Convener stimulated the joint development of harmonized farmer training materials, collecting good practices from earlier projects. These materials were developed in multi-stakeholder sessions, including among others, the CCs and (competing) private sector companies, agricultural authorities (i.e., Ministries), and other coffee stakeholders in the country. These harmonized training curricula became the first concrete deliverable for most of the national platforms:

"It provides the multi-stakeholder coalition something to dig their teeth into, as they actually cannot disagree on its the relevance: It leads to a 'booklet', a concrete result, a training

program, a train-the-trainer program, a roll-out . . . something of which all partners can say: Look! That is a great accomplishment!" (Program Director, the Convener)

Indeed, the development of these curricula is one of the three achievements most often mentioned in our interviews when asking CCs and platform stakeholders about the results and achievements of their platform, as it clearly shows the value of collaborating: "We have involved the best people from nine organizations. No single organization can have a team like this involved in a task or project" (CC, Latin America 2). The result was more than the harmonized approach to farmer training (the 'outcome') itself: Sector stakeholders also came to recognize the relevance of collaborating pre-competitively on certain issues and realizing that they were facing similar challenges, they built mutual trust as they met with peers from other (competing) organizations in person: "The platform has managed to put together actors from industries that have never sat together in the past. We have managed to discuss, to find out we have issues to tackle that . . . we are all facing, and that maybe, if we would together face them, we would be stronger" (Stakeholder, Latin America 2). This result then provided a stepping stone for the Convener and the CCs to discuss—in later stages of the CSP—other, more complex platform-related issues, as had been their intention from the start:

"It [the sustainability curriculum] was very logical because it was a 'harmless' first deliverable of a platform. For us, the platform was an enabler to address all sorts of issues. For example, the use of forbidden pesticides, a public-private subject [. . .], or managing water licenses [. . .]. But a lot of these issues are difficult, political, require adjustments in regulations, so, more long-term issues. But those [platform] structures are going to help you get a grip on these issues, once trust is established. So, we asked ourselves, what is a 'harmless', and relevant theme with which you can build the trust between different stakeholders? The sustainability curriculum!" (Program Director, the Convener)

However, interviews with the Program Director and other stakeholders revealed that the sustainability curriculum was more than just 'harmless': It also deliberately provided a useful, neutral catalyst for the platforms. Thus, the incremental strategy worked. For instance, in one of the Latin American countries, a joint response was formulated by the national platform to an NGO-campaign critiquing the (lack of) sustainability of 'their' coffee sector. Because the structure for a pre-competitive public-private dialogue was already being developed (i.e., the national platform), the sector was able to coordinate a "non-defensive" response and mitigate its reputational risk, while also showing the efforts it had already undertaken to address the issue raised by the NGO. As the country's CC explained:

"They organized a special meeting to discuss the issue and how they would reply to the report of [. . .]. I guess the [platform] helped in this process because the entities are already participating, already discussing sustainability [. . .] So, when [NGO] comes they're not starting to discuss sustainability or problems on the field, it is already part of the process and it was much easier to have the meeting organized because things are already on the table, you know?" (CC, Latin America 1)

Besides the national curricula—the first tangible 'outcome' of the Convener's CSP strategy—the achievements most often mentioned by interviewees included (1) the coming together of all stakeholders in the country's platform, and (2) the increased coordination in the country's coffee sector thanks to the platform. Both of these 'process'-achievements mirror the objectives that the Convener had envisioned for the platforms, namely to "facilitate better coordination in the sector, improvements in government policy with feedback from the (private) sector, and international credibility for local sustainability initiatives" (Convener's Annual Report, 2014). Thus, the platforms were essentially set up as an instrument to facilitate coordination and policy influencing, while the sustainability agenda was not yet clearly defined for each country. This was reflected in early achievements, which once more highlight the initial focus on establishing a well-functioning CSP, as opposed to focusing on

results achieved through the CSP from the start: "It is a huge success just to get it started and get it off the ground because there is so much work in getting people together. To come up with bylaws, the initial funding commitment, to secure the initial team. So just the fact that [the platform] has already survived a year is a great achievement" (Stakeholder, Asia 1). The fact that the platform's establishment is considered an achievement in itself shows how stakeholders had faith in this way of working. This was also recognized by the Convener:

> "There is a lot of enthusiasm in the sector about this model [. . .]. At the moment, it is the promise of the effect [. . .] and a visible amount of energy around it. And the actual results are still quite difficult to determine. But for sure, several things would not have happened without these platforms". (Program Director, the Convener)

Despite the limited results beyond the various sustainability curricula at the time of our research, several national platforms were institutionalized quite early on in the process. That is, they were formalized as a (mandated) entity in their country of focus and recognized in the country's sector by its coffee stakeholders (including the public and private sector). The early, positive responses to the training curricula strengthened stakeholders' faith in and enthusiasm for the platform and accelerated the multi-stakeholder dialogue, which then led to more formalized agreements on the stakeholders' joint ambitions, objectives, targets, deliverables, and structure. Platform 'rules' were established, including frequency of meetings or the development of sub-committees, and Chairs and Secretariats were appointed. In one of the Asian countries, the platform was quickly established as an independent association, employing staff. This development was in line with the Convener's long-term strategy to be only temporarily involved in the national platforms.

The platforms' initial results show the strong connection between the process of organizing the platforms and the platforms' sustainability outcomes. In the case of the sustainability curricula, the Convener capitalized on their (earlier) work in the field-level projects to show stakeholders the value in collaborating pre-competitively, which supported the establishment of the platforms. During the platform formation, emphasis was initially placed on the process of establishing well-functioning CSPs, more so than on the realization of tangible sustainability outcomes. The platforms, once firmly established and recognized, were expected to become vehicles for change. With these results, we show how a CSP-strategy requires a long lead-time in its development, which supports our proposition that mission-driven convening calls for a different type of convening.

5.4. Implications for the Notion of 'Mission-Driven Convener'

Having presented the strategy development, implementation, and initial achievements in detail, we have shown how a mission-driven convener strategically organized cross-sector collaboration. To better understand this process, we now examine the role of the mission-driven convener, by highlighting the cross-level dynamics that emerged from our data during our analysis, that is, the connection between convening at the international level by the Convener, and at the national-level primarily by the CCs. We consider these dynamics from three perspectives: The Convener, the CCs, and other platform stakeholders.

The Convener specifically aimed at connecting the international-level coffee roasting companies and the coffee-producing countries, by creating "international credibility for local sustainability initiatives" (Convener's Annual Report, 2014). It realized, from the start, that it was uniquely positioned to connect the national and the international level in the coffee sector:

> "The fact that we can organize pre-competitive structures, that only have the farmer benefit in mind, and where we can organize a dialogue between the international and national private sector and local governments on systemic improvements. This is what everybody, including myself, finds fantastic—it is where we, as an organization, have our sweet spot. This is what we can do." (Representative, the Convener)

Meanwhile, the Convener realized that in most of their focus countries, it was not well-positioned to connect the relevant organizations within these countries. Instead, the CCs, many of whom it had already installed as advisors in the scoping phase of their program, were much better positioned to do so. Moreover, this aligned with the Convener's strategy to develop 'independent' structures:

"It was a kick-start model. We pay for the Secretariat for a few years, and at a certain moment, the members need to take over. It absolutely is [an exit strategy]. And now, with the merger with [another sustainability program], it moves really fast. From the start, it has been the intention that it would be a structure independent from us as an organization". (Program Director, the Convener)

To achieve their mission of addressing systemic issues in the coffee supply chain, the Convener quickly recognized the importance of 'outsourcing' their convening role at the national level to the CCs as local conveners. This cross-level convening dynamic was apparent in all six countries.

The strength of the connection between the two levels—and consequently the strategic influence the Convener could exert at the national level—differed between the countries where the platforms had existed prior to the Convener's coffee program and those where the Convener had initiated the platforms through their CCs. For example, in one Latin American country, the platform was already set-up and led by an international NPO with significant expertise. Their relationship with the Convener was initially centered around the coordination of the field-level projects: "they said: There is already a platform working on sustainability issues, so it makes sense for us not to create a new one [. . .]. So, in the beginning, the idea was that we will be the local coordinators for the field-level projects that they have" (CC, Latin America 2). Meanwhile, in the other Latin American country, the CC relied heavily upon the Convener's expertise, asking them for input and feedback on stakeholder meeting agendas and at times even having the Convener physically present: "We set the date for the meetings, we send the invitations, we suggest the agenda but also ask for suggestions and we discuss this with the Convener, so what are the goals? What are the main issues?" (CC—Latin America 1). In the two Asian countries, the Convener had local staff employed, which facilitated close involvement as these employees served as CCs for these countries. The Convener later embraced this practice in more countries (and other programs). In Africa, the relationship was more distant, as the CCs in these countries came from the same Africa-based NPO already involved in the national platforms prior to the Convener's involvement. Overall, however, the Convener instigated the process of developing harmonized training materials in all but one country, and also funded the roll-out of already existing materials in the sixth country, which was considered an important achievement for all platforms and provided important recognition of the Convener's involvement.

Interestingly, platform members generally tended to associate the convening role to the CCs rather than to the Convener itself. In fact, members often ascribed to the CC the skills and roles commonly associated with conveners, such as their familiarity with, or expertise in the (national) coffee sector and relevant networks, their negotiation skills, facilitation and trust-building, their ability to 'bridge between', or speak the languages of both private and public sectors, and their neutral or unbiased position between different stakeholders' interests. Meanwhile, the Convener was in some countries and by some stakeholders merely perceived as a donor to the platform, or more specifically to the field-level projects: "I do not know very much about [the Convener]. I know they are working with some cooperation in specific projects" (stakeholder, Latin America 2). In some cases, specifically, when platforms existed prior to their involvement, this perception was correct. However, this perception also related to the Convener's efforts and its influence on the platforms largely taking place behind the scenes and on a bilateral basis. Nonetheless, the Convener maintained frequent contact with the CCs, organizing calls on a weekly basis to discuss ongoing business. Indeed, to the CCs, it was clear that the Convener did more than just fund the platforms. This was particularly the case in the two countries were the Convener engaged its local staff as CCs: "The Convener, through my own active role in the platform, provides support and direction." (CC, Asia 1). However, in other countries, a more active, strategic Convener role was also recognized by the CCs: "The more strategically-focused support has

really come into play this year. We have an objective now in our strategic plan with [the Convener], to provide that technical support to the platform" (CC, Africa 2).

In sum, the convening role of the Convener was most apparent at the international level, while at a local level, it was mostly outsourced to the CCs. For platform stakeholders in most countries, the Convener's level of influence remained largely 'unseen' and they were often merely perceived as a donor to the platform. Nonetheless, in most countries, the Convener had a close connection with the CCs and wielded significant influence in the development of the platforms' strategies. Fundamentally, the Convener's authority vis-à-vis the CCs came primarily from two sources: The mandate of the international coffee roasters who backed the program financially and through their involvement in the SC, and the financial contributions the Convener itself made to the program. Thus, depending on the strength of its connection with the CC in each country, the Convener's influence ranged from advising or guiding, to leading local platform-related efforts. This led to a similar strategy in each country in terms of developing a platform and working on national sustainability curricula, but also to very different implementation processes, appropriate to the contextual variety.

6. Discussion

With this explorative research, we aimed to answer the question: How do mission-driven conveners strategically organize cross-sector collaboration? In this section, we further interpret three main themes that emerged from our findings, namely the productive combination of field-level and CSP strategies, the pragmatic approach to cross-level dynamics, and the strategic combination of process and outcomes to realize first achievements. We position these themes in the context of existing literature on CSPs and conveners, and present the implications for the focal concept of the mission-driven convener. In doing so, we advance our understanding of what convening entails when undertaken by mission-driven organizations, who seek to realize their sustainable development objectives and contribute to the SDGs through the initiation and implementation of CSPs as strategic vehicles for change.

First, our findings show how the mission-driven convener studied here productively combined two elements in its strategy: The co-financing of more *competitive* field-level projects and the establishment of *pre-competitive* CSPs in production countries. Our case showed how field-level projects facilitated the development of cross-sector collaboration platforms, leveraged by the mission-driven convener, to demonstrate to partners the value of collaborating pre-competitively. Moreover, the Convener presented its convening work as a holistic program to the international coffee roasters: Its contribution to more *competitive* field-level projects was linked to the (cash and in-kind) investment of coffee roasters in the *pre-competitive* cross-sector collaboration platforms. To this end, the co-funding ratios stressed the importance of the systemic versus the individual company-level sustainability initiatives. The emphasis placed on "systemic change" in our case study also is in line with the SDGs' overarching focus on systems change and transformation. Hence, our findings show the relevance of a CSP strategy to realize such transformation and underline the importance of partnerships (SDG 17) in achieving the SDG objectives.

We build on prior critiques of the (limited) impact of voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) on field-level, supply chain sustainability [34–40], and the high expectations of collaboration through cross-sector partnerships as being a relevant means to address sustainability issues [18–20,40], detailed in our theory section above. Our findings do not so much represent a shift from certification to CSPs but introduce an alternative strategy toward interconnecting and combining field-level and CSP-level efforts. Indeed, the cross-sector collaboration platforms we studied were not set-up to address potential shortcomings of the certification approach to sustainability aims. Rather, the mission-driven convener aimed to address sustainability challenges at field-level and enable farmers to implement the 'good agricultural practices' they required before they could engage in certification schemes: Farmers could opt for certification if they deemed it an attractive commercial option. Once the platforms were more firmly established, the mission-driven convener encouraged these to address more complex issues

besides good agricultural practices (and/or certification). Thus, where critical researchers urge us to look at solutions beyond certification to solve more complex sustainability challenges in global supply chains [56,57], and CSP researchers position CSPs as relevant instruments to address more complex sustainability challenges [18–20], we find that certification-driven efforts and CSP-driven efforts at field level can also move in tandem and that CSP-driven efforts can have value before, besides, and beyond certification.

Second, our findings show how a mission-driven convener dealt with the cross-level dynamics in their strategic ambitions for the sector in a pragmatic way: They outsourced a significant part of the local convening to CCs, who were better positioned for this role given their stakeholder networks and local knowledge. The Convener's pragmatic approach was also reflected in its selection of the CCs: They engaged their own local staff when possible and connected to existing initiatives and well-positioned others when necessary. This approach also proved fruitful in the Convener's efforts to meet the needs and requirements of each individual country: They were now able to contextualize the overall strategy to fit the local context. This contextualization strategy is important, as it relates to a common critique of NPO strategies in general, that is homogenization and the neglect of contextual variety in problem domains and regions [65,66]. This tendency is strengthened where agencies exert top-down pressure on NPOs to develop strategic plans and account for these plans toward their donors [66], which calls for measurable, quantifiable, and comparable approaches across contexts and borders. We find that in our case this "loss of sensitization" did not occur thanks to the CCs' involvement, who were able to adapt the overall strategy to local needs, to identify which structures were already in place, which stakeholders were important to include early on and to understand political sensitivities around their work. Hence, the cross-level dynamics between the Convener and its locally convening CCs were an essential element in the successful implementation of the Convener's broader international strategy. Working towards its mission required the Convener to carefully balance local and international requirements, working with an SC at the international level and with CCs at the national level allowed them to do so.

Third, our findings show how the mission-driven convener in our case deliberately connected CSP *process* and CSP *outcomes* in order to strategically advance the platforms' objectives: Based on the experiences and lessons learned in the field-level projects, the first 'task' of the newly established national platforms was to develop a national sustainability curriculum to harmonize farmer training across each country. This first, very tangible outcome of cross-sector dialogue (directly contributing to SDG 12) sparked interest in the model of pre-competitive collaboration, facilitating the work of the Convener and the CCs in the formation, implementation, and institutionalization of national coffee platforms. These early outcomes observed in our case, sometimes achieved prior to the actual formation of the platforms, are at odds with regular life cycle models of CSPs, where the establishment of the CSP and the definition of a common agenda normally precedes the implementation and results [16,50]. Moreover, CSPs usually are established with a specific objective in mind, as partners come together over an issue of mutual concern [4,67]. In our case there was a broadly defined objective (i.e., "to facilitate better coordination in the sector, improvements in government policy with feedback from the (private) sector, and international credibility for local sustainability initiatives"), but the concrete objectives per country platform were not yet defined, as the sustainability challenges were expected to differ per country. We found that, besides the harmonized farmer training materials as concrete output, much time and effort of both the CCs and the Convener went into establishing the platform structures to foster public-private dialogue—which was also often mentioned as an important achievement by platform stakeholders. The establishment of the platforms' structure, thus, went in parallel with defining the actual objectives that these platforms were expected to achieve: Indeed, to convince stakeholders to participate, issues had to be clearly defined. By pragmatically connecting process and outcomes in its efforts to kickstart the CSPs, the establishment of a CSP driven by a mission-driven convener appears to be a more 'messy' and flexible process compared to CSP life cycle processes commonly addressed in the literature. The importance of the interconnection between process and

outcomes has been acknowledged by communication scholars studying collaboration [68–70]. We build on these insights and confirm their relevance to CSPs, a specific type of collaboration. In doing so we advance research on the distinction between process and outcomes of CSPs, and show how these two elements interact in the context of sustainable development: An initial emphasis on process can be justified where this supports efforts to promote sustainability—even when this might make it difficult to ultimately measure the actual outcomes of the CSP.

By answering the question of how mission-driven conveners strategically organize CSPs, our research contributes to our understanding of conveners in the domain of CSPs. First, we contribute to CSP literature by developing an alternative approach to conveners. From an actor-perspective, conveners can be considered mission-driven organizations, which are not instrumental to a CSP but instead develop CSPs as instruments to realize their own sustainability objectives: We define these actors as 'mission-driven conveners'. Mission-driven conveners have a stronger, guiding, or leading role in the partnership design and implementation, and therefore they have to ensure that they are considered legitimate actors to take up this role. Second, we have shown how mission-driven conveners develop legitimacy by productively making connections between (a) process and outcomes of CSPs, and (b) international and national-level activities. By alternating between concrete activities leading to early results and the convening process itself, they drive CSP formation and institutionalization. Moreover, they productively shape the cross-level dynamics in their work, by recognizing that they occupy an international strategic position to convene and that at a national level they require others (CCs) to convene on their behalf.

Our research also has implications for practice, first, by emphasizing a need for flexibility and pragmatism for mission-driven conveners to succeed, which extends beyond the application of common techniques and requirements commonly associated with CSP- or convening success (i.e., ensure equal representation, upfront clarity on goals and expectations). For instance, our case study showed how a mission-driven convener initially took an inclusive approach during the scoping phase, inviting all stakeholders that were deemed essential to enable the success of the CSP in each particular country, but then kick-started their CSP efforts with 'coalitions of the willing'. Meanwhile, throughout the process, it kept the door open for additional stakeholders who wanted to participate in the process and contribute (financially) to the program. We also showed how a mission-driven convener created value in collaboration by realizing early results, and how it outsourced their convening work where this stood to benefit the CSP. This pragmatic approach enables a mission-driven convener to realize quick wins and creates 'momentum' in the sector when stakeholders become enthusiastic about the process, thereby laying the groundwork for addressing the more complex sustainability issues in each country. Second, our findings have implications for the sustainable development agenda as set forth in the SDGs, as they (a) illustrate the important role mission-driven conveners can play in establishing and implementing CSPs (SDG 17) to advance other SDGs (notably 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, and 15), and (b) elaborate on the how of realizing the SDG agenda's overarching focus on systems change and transformation through a CSP approach.

Despite our best efforts, our study has certain limitations, particularly concerning the limited data per country. We deliberately focused our research on the level of the mission-driven convener rather than attempting a cross-case comparison of the different country platforms, with the aim to generate a comprehensive understanding of how mission-driven conveners strategically organize CSPs. We did not include direct observations or participation in our chosen methodology, and therefore we were unable to witness the work of the Convener first-hand, for example, during meetings with stakeholders in the national platforms. By including interviews with many different stakeholders (CCs and platform stakeholders from each of the six countries), we sought to arrive at a complete picture of the strategy of the Convener, also adding the experiences and perspectives of others and not only the Convener's own evaluation of its work. Moreover, the ultimate result of the Convener's strategy is not included in our study, as at the time of our research, most platforms were newly established, or the Convener had only recently become involved. This limits our understanding of the long-term outcomes of the

Convener's strategy. However, such limitations also point out relevant directions for future research, for example, studying longitudinally the work of mission-driven conveners, examining across different sectors whether similar cases of mission-driven conveners exist in other supply chains, or looking beyond the domain of sustainable trade towards other pressing issues of sustainability.

With this paper, we aimed to establish the concept of "mission-driven conveners", which we consider a relevant phenomenon in the current "partnership society" [71] and in view of the emphasis placed on collaboration toward the realization of the SDGs. Our analysis identified some distinct features of mission-driven conveners, such as the strong enabling role they play compared to conventional conveners, as well as their flexible approach to CSP development: Productively connecting field-level and CSP activities, pragmatically dealing with cross-level dynamics and seeking connections between process and outcomes. CSP and sustainability studies would benefit from further analysis as to whether these distinct features of mission-driven convening reappear in different contexts, toward furthering our understanding of how conveners can successfully advance the important mission of realizing the SDGs.

7. Conclusions

This paper studies an important enabling feature of SDGs implementation, namely how a mission-driven convener strategically organizes cross-sector partnerships. We have shown how a mission-driven convener productively makes connections between the different elements involved in its work: (a) Combining field-level, certification-driven efforts with CSP formation, (b) making use of cross-level dynamics by taking up part of the convening itself at the international level, while outsourcing this work to better-positioned others at the national level, and (c) combining the process of establishing CSPs with the realization of early outcomes of the CSP. Together, these insights show how mission-driven conveners differ from conventional notions of the concept, in the sense that these actors have a more dominant role in the CSP, legitimized by their pragmatic and flexible approach to CSP formation. The CSPs in this context are strategically organized as a means to realize sustainability outcomes and systemic change in supply chains. Knowing more about different forms of organizing sustainability in supply chains is highly relevant given the importance adhered to collaboration in CSPs for the advancement of the sustainable development and transformative ambitions as set out in the SDGs, and through this study, we contribute to such knowledge.

Appendix A

Topic list for the interviews with platform's CCs and stakeholders (including potential probes): Introduction

- How long have you been involved with the platform, and how long in this role?
- How would you explain the work you do in the national platform (NP)?

Narrative on how platform started/developed over the past few years

- Can you briefly describe the development of the NP?
- Are there any other public-private collaborations existing in your sector/country?

  Effectiveness of the platform (follow-up on NP questionnaire)

- Do you think the NP is a useful tool to solve the sustainability issues in the sector (+ why)?
- Do you think the appropriate stakeholders are included? Do stakeholders have specific roles?
- How are the dynamics in the group, is there trust and mutual understanding?
- Are partners committed to the goals/objectives, and is the NP on track in reaching its goals?
- Are there sufficient financial resources to achieve the goals?
- Overall, do you think the NP is effective, what would you improve?

  Key achievements

- How do you define success in terms of the NP?
- Can you share with me the most important achievements/successes of the NP?
- What do you still hope to achieve in the coming years?

  Key challenges faced

- What are the most important challenges faced by the platform?
- Can you give an example of how you faced (one of) these challenges?
- What are the biggest platform challenges for you in your role?

  Learning points

- What is the most important thing you learned in your role?
- What advice would you share with anyone trying to organize a country platform?
- What do you think are the skills that are needed to fulfill a coordinating role in the NP?

  Local ownership

- Why is there a platform needed, according to you?
- Do you feel there is sufficient local commitment/ownership of the NP?
- Do you think the platform would continue if international funders (for example, the Convener and/or CC) would (partly) pull out? Please explain.
- Who has the most influence on the agenda/work of the NP?

  Role/support of the Convener

- What is the role of the Convener in the NP?
- According to you, what role should the Convener play?
- What is the Convener's level of involvement?
- Would the process continue without the Convener (+ their funding)?

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Perceptions of Multistakeholder Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals: A Case Study of Irish Non-State Actors

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Abstract: The United Nations 2030 Agenda emphasizes the importance of multistakeholder partnerships for achieving the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Indeed, Goal 17 includes a target for national governments to promote multistakeholder partnerships between state and non-state actors. In this paper, we explore how members of civil society organizations and the private sector perceive both the possibilities and challenges of multistakeholder partnerships evolving in Ireland for achieving the SDGs. The research uses data gathered during 2018 and includes documentary research, participant observations of stakeholder forums in Ireland and the United Nations, and semi-structured interviews to address related questions. The results demonstrate that numerous challenges exist for forming multistakeholder partnerships for the SDGs, including a fragmented understanding of the Goals. They also note previous examples of successful multistakeholder partnership models, the need for more leadership from government, and an overly goal-based focus on SDG implementation by organizations as major impediments to following a multistakeholder partnership approach in the country. These findings suggest that although Goal 17 identifies multistakeholder partnerships as essential for the SDGs, they are challenging to form and require concerted actions from all state and non-state actors for SDG implementation.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; Goal 17; multistakeholder partnerships; challenges of multistakeholder partnerships; stakeholders' perceptions

1. Introduction

The interconnected nature of the 17 SDGs outlined in the UN Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for a 'whole-of-society' and a 'whole-of-government' approach to implement plans, projects, and policies within member states [1]. In other words, Agenda 2030 stresses the idea that state and non-state actors should work together to achieve the 169 targets of the SDGs [2,3]. Goal 17 of the SDGs has indicators that point towards partnerships between these state and non-state actors, indicating that "a successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society" [1]. One of Goal 17's quantifiable indicators is "the amount of United States dollars committed to public—private and civil society partnerships". Another indicator specifies that member states report "progress in multistakeholder development effectiveness monitoring frameworks that support the achievement of the SDGs" [1].

However, achieving these targets and indicators warrants multiple intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral entities to work collaboratively with other actors, co-sharing resources, expertise, and responsibilities

to address complex and multifaceted social, economic, and environmental problems that are of mutual interest. There are plenty of critical debates on pursuing such an approach, including questions around how partnerships evolve and operate. However, these debates continue without clear pathways of what works or otherwise. Despite this, Agenda 2030 places critical importance on partnership for achieving the SDGs with the UN designating it as one of the "5Ps of sustainable development" (along with people, planet, prosperity, and peace).

Given the importance placed on the need for different groups of stakeholders to work together in implementing the SDGs, the research question explored in this paper is how non-state actors, including civil society groups, environmental organizations, youth groups, trade unions, and business associations in Ireland perceive the feasibility, opportunities, and challenges of forming multistakeholder partnerships? Little is known about how non-state actors envisage working with each other and with partners from other societal sectors for achieving the SDGs; similarly, there is a lack of understanding about the core obstacles and challenges faced by these groups. The objective of this paper is to contribute to filling the knowledge gaps in these areas.

2. Background and Literature Review

This section begins with defining multistakeholder partnerships and is followed by a literature review of what scholars have identified as the different benefits and challenges of partnerships for achieving the SDGs. A host of search terms such as 'partnerships', 'multistakeholder partnerships', 'partnerships for the SDGs' was used to explore scholarly articles in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. However, the different benefits and challenges of multistakeholder partnerships discussed in this section is not an exhaustive list and focuses on literature that is germane to our research.

2.1. Multistakeholder Partnerships: Definitions and Benefits

United Nations General Assembly Res. 60/214 defines partnerships as 'voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both state and non-state, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and to share risks and responsibilities, resources and benefits' [4]. Similarly, academic scholars define partnerships as 'a voluntary cooperative arrangement between organizations from the public, private and/or civil society sectors ... that have common, non-hierarchical decision-making procedures and share risks and responsibilities ... to address a public policy issue' [5] (pp. 6–7). Common to both foregoing definitions is a collaborative relationship between the different societal actors intending to address a mutually beneficial public good challenge. As multiple state and non-state actors are involved, these partnerships are defined as multistakeholder partnerships. Given the representation of different sectors, these partnerships can lead to what Severino refers to as 'hypercollective action' [6] (p. 11) which is more inclusive in terms of membership and better suited to solving complex problems [7–9] targeted by the SDGs [10].

Multiple authors have pointed towards a plethora of benefits of partnerships between different societal sectors. Partnerships fill a void created by the government's inability to reach specific societal segments due to either unwillingness or a lack of resources [11]. When different sectors collaborate, scholars have found evidence that partnerships can lead to improved efficiency, cost reduction, and innovation [12–14], and that accessing knowledge, networks, resources, and opportunities can become easier [9,15–17]. Furthermore, co-learning is possible as actors learn from each other [15,18], and the benefits and risks are shared by different partners [19]. New relationships based on trust, reputation, and legitimacy can emerge [15,18], reducing conflicts due to the shared benefits from achieving goals [20].

Given the various potential benefits of forming partnerships, it is unsurprising that the UN espouses them as critical for implementing the 17 SDGs as achieving many of the targets is beyond the scope, resources, and ability of the government of each member state. As Kanie et al. [3] rightly note, "the theory of change is that once stakeholders sign up, they set priorities, aggregate resources, create

the necessary institutions or adapt existing ones, and galvanize people and institutions to pursue the goals" (p. 3).

2.2. Multistakeholder Partnerships: Limitations and Challenges

Despite the benefits mentioned above, some scholars have found that partnerships are not easy to form and maintain in the long run; day-to-day operations are challenging to monitor and can be limited in achieving significant results over time [21]. As multiple types of actors form multistakeholder partnerships, day-to-day operations need to be handled to avoid conflicts [22]. This requires skillful orchestration or what Fowler and Biekart [2] refer to as 'interlocutors' who can guide the partners to achieve the purpose of the multistakeholder partnerships and make them accountable [23]. The spatial scale (e.g., local, regional, national) also affects the success of multistakeholder partnerships as local level actors may lack the collaborative capacity to engage with other local actors [24]. As a result, more resourceful organizations can capture multistakeholder partnership processes, delimiting the scope of participation and entry points for smaller-scale organizations, especially those working at the grassroots level. Hence, multistakeholder partnerships may not necessarily result in more inclusive processes as some groups may dominate more than others [25]. Besides, working in a partnership may demand changes in how individual actors operate to achieve their own organizational goals. Therefore, it requires actors to balance both partnership goals and their own goals as an organization [26,27].

The positive connotations of the word 'partnerships' can make these arrangements automatically palatable or attractive [28]. Different groups of actors are expected to work with each other to pull together resources and skills to solve public policy problems as "a more effective way of delivering policy interventions than state-led or 'top-down' approaches" [29] (p. 149). Others suggest that their positioning as a panacea for societal problems often makes their critical examination or challenging the approach taken within partnerships quite problematic [30–32]. Therefore, the 'enthusiasm for partnerships' [30] (p. 307) and presenting or interpreting partnerships solely from a positive angle often limit objective analysis of the implications of partnership [30,32].

There is a considerable amount of research on what works and does not work in partnerships. One strand of research concentrates on the internal arrangements within a partnership that creates conditions for success, whereas other studies have investigated the external or socio-economic conditions under which partnerships operate that influence their success [9,24,27,33,34]. Other research has found that specific public policy issues can bring different relevant and interested stakeholders together [35]. Moreover, partnership success can depend on the inclusion and participation of multiple stakeholder groups [36]. However, at times in such significant partnerships, individual partners may prioritize partnership goals over organizational goals, thus offending the critical players invested in the partnership [24]. Participating in partnerships also requires financial resources and human capacities within each stakeholder group that focuses primarily on the reporting and monitoring related work [37]. Other research has discussed the power dynamics within partnership arrangements whereby more powerful stakeholders tend to exert too much control over processes [38]. Overall, while multistakeholder partnerships are very well suited to the concept of sustainability [34], the general trend in scholarship is to advise caution in assuming that partnerships are panaceas and that rigorous empirical research is required to explore the actual effectiveness of partnerships rather than adopting a normative understanding of the term [31,32].

2.3. Multistakeholder Partnerships for the SDGs: Complexities and Review of Existing Literature

The scale, scope, interconnections, and interdependencies of the SDGs require a 'whole-of-society' and 'whole-of-government' approach as governments alone cannot achieve them. It is clear from the above discussion that although partnerships may fit well in many of the execution plans for achieving the SDGs, they are far from being the solution for all implementation-related problems. Therefore, stakeholders who can form partnerships to implement the SDGs require an understanding of their complex nature.

Several authors have identified the critical importance of aligning the work done in different sectors to achieve the SDGs [39–49]. For example, Rosati and Faria [44] studied how different companies aligned their corporate social responsibility-related activities with the SDGs and found that companies operating in countries with a high level of climate vulnerability are more SDG-aligned. Another study focusing on the private sector's role in developing socially relevant business models points to the importance of social impact bonds (SIB) to achieve such goals. SIBs are a hybrid arrangement between social and financial institutions that creates a unique platform to support public–private partnerships between different sectoral actors working collaboratively to achieve the SDGs [45]. Several other studies take a similar sectoral focus making cases for the SDGs in education [42,43,48], in addressing the needs of women [46], for rehabilitating vulnerable communities [47], across value chains [49,50], and in the banking sector [51].

Though existing research draws attention to what needs to be done, there is also a critical need to understand how different actors can work collaboratively in doing what needs to be done. There needs to be strong and inspiring leadership for bringing diverse groups of actors to align their organizational goals and objectives with the SDGs. Fowler and Beikart [2] propose that interlocutors, meaning 'secretariats, focal points, platforms, hosts and other labels for a critical player' (p. 81), can play the role of an orchestrator setting rules and overseeing the operations of the initiatives undertaken by the partnerships. However, more research is still required to understand how these processes can evolve and how state and non-state actors can provide the most efficient and effective support. In this paper, we explore some of the critical components discussed above in the context of multistakeholder partnerships as a tool for implementing the SDGs in the Irish context.

3. Materials and Methods

As the research aimed to understand how various non-state actors in Ireland envisaged the formation of multistakeholder partnerships working collaboratively to achieve the SDGs, qualitative research methods were used to contextualize, interpret and understand the various background perspectives. Purposive document sampling was used to select documents containing rich information [52] on multistakeholder partnerships and why and how the United Nations identified multistakeholder partnerships as important for implementing the SDGs. Documents such as Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals, and the 2030 Agenda were useful. Other UN documents such as Voluntary National Reviews of SDG implementation progress were used to acquire preliminary information about how different countries envisage the multistakeholder partnership processes. Participant observation at both the 2018 and 2019 UN High-Level Political Forum also helped identify the types of actors who participate in reviewing the SDG implementation progress globally and from Ireland. Journal articles, reports, and news clippings were explored and provided an in-depth understanding of what kind of non-state actors and sectors can play a critical role in implementing the SDGs, and a list was prepared for such actors in Ireland.

The document research was followed up with semi-structured interviews with 14 key experts and senior members of different civil society umbrella organizations, environmental groups, trade unions, and organizations that promote business interests in local communities in Ireland (Table 1). Most of the organizational representatives interviewed were regular attendees of the national SDG Stakeholder Forum's organized every quarter since 2018 by the Irish Department of Communication, Climate Action, and the Environment (DCCAE) as a platform for non-state actors to interact with the government and to be aware of government initiatives for the SDGs. Representatives of many of these organizations also regularly participated in the UN High-Level Political Forum on the SDGs. We chose interviewees from people who attended the National Stakeholder Forums to identify critical experts aware of plans and progress on the SDGs in Ireland. However, not all interviewees and not all types of non-state actors interviewed were attendees of the National Stakeholder Forums such as representatives of business organizations and trade unions. A couple of our interviewees were unaware of the SDGs and their scope and scale, even though their organization worked on multiple

issues covered by the Goals. For ethical reasons, we will not divulge the names of the organizations whose members were interviewed.

Table 1. Interviewee List.

Non-State Actor Type	No. of Interviewees	Interviewee Number
Youth organization	1	ENGO 001
Civil Society Organization	3	ENGO 002, ENGO 003, ENGO 004
Environmental NGO	3	ENGO 006, ENGO 007, ENGO 008
Community organizations	2	ENGO 005, ENGO 009
Business organizations	2	BIZ 001, BIZ 002
Trade unions	3	ENGO 010, ENGO 011, ENGO 012

Non-probability purposive 'snowball' sampling methods were adopted to generate respondents from each of the sectors outlined in Table 1. One issue that we considered in the sample generation is that respondents suggest other potential interviewees who share similar characteristics and outlooks. In such a case, it is essential to ensure that the respondents meet established screening criteria to reduce the possibility of bias developing in the sample [53]. This was particularly important when respondents suggested other people 'who might be worth talking to' [54]. As a result, a core qualifying criterion was established, irrespective of interviewees' referrals, to enter our sample, respondents had to be a senior member of their organization and currently be in a leadership role. Bearing this in mind, a quota of 3 respondents was sought from each sector shown in Table 1, equating to 18 respondents in total. However, while 23 interviewees were targeted, only 14 agreed to participate in the study. Despite this, Mason's [55] survey of 2533 studies that employed qualitative approaches found that small sample sizes are standard in studies using qualitative methods, and therefore, we consider the current sample adequate for meeting the study objectives.

A single protocol pre-approved by the university research ethics board was used for conducting all semi-structured interviews. However, follow-up questions were also asked of interviewees that were specific to their sector or work area. For example, many of the follow-up questions asked of business organizations were different from that of civil society organizations. After initial warm-up questions, the protocol consisted of questions to understand how interviewees perceived the concept of sustainability, their knowledge of the SDGs, how their work aligns with SDGs if at all, whether or not other members of their organization were aware of the SDGs, their views on multistakeholder partnerships, the opportunities and challenges they envisaged in forming multistakeholder partnerships, what role they felt the government should play in building partnerships, and how they perceived Ireland's progress in achieving the SDGs.

We acknowledge that undertaking qualitative interviews can present methodological limitations. In this regard, we were cognizant, in particular, of the gaps between what was said in the interview setting and what occurred in reality [54]. Dunn [56] warned of the dangers of the 'pufferfish' phenomenon, where respondents (particularly those in positions of authority) attempt to portray themselves or others in a particular light, and this was regarded as a real issue for our research. Several steps were taken to help ensure that the respondents offered transparent and frank responses. First, the interviews were anonymous to encourage the respondents to be as open and transparent about their experiences as possible. Second, considerable attention was taken to ensure that the respondents felt comfortable with the interviewer. Professionally formulated emails were issued to prospective respondents, which set out how the interview information would be gathered and used. Respondents were also informed that the interviews would be recorded digitally and transcribed and that their organization's anonymity would be protected. They were also assured that the data generated would be used solely for independent academic research purposes.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a systematic in-depth review of the interview transcripts was then carried out on a line-by-line basis to develop codes that were used to sort the data. Given that the questions were mainly organized around themes, the coding was straightforward,

and common themes were easily identifiable. To understand the most common themes emerging from the data, and their prevalence among the sample, the number of respondents who raised particular themes/codes were documented and quantified. This meant we could get a clearer picture of the pervasiveness of dominant issues relating to SDG awareness for multistakeholder partnerships, the history of partnerships, intersectoral relationships between non-state actors, and the government's potential role. NVivo 12 software was used for coding the data.

4. Results

Though multiple other themes emerged from the research on the progress of the SDGs in Ireland and the different opportunities and challenges, the results presented in the section were focused on the key objectives of the paper, consisting of (1) understanding the role of SDG awareness or otherwise for facilitating multistakeholder partnership formations; (2) exploring the role of past/existing institutional knowledge and memory in multistakeholder partnerships formation; and (3) understanding the role of government for multistakeholder partnership formation for the SDGs.

4.1. SDG Awareness and of Importance of Partnerships

The first theme that emerged from the interviews was that SDG awareness in general in Ireland is low among non-state actors across different spatial scales (local, regional, national). Because we interviewed non-state actors operating at the national level, they provided insights on the awareness of organizations under their umbrella (i.e., local and regional levels). Apart from intra-organizational awareness, interviewees also pointed out that the community-level knowledge of the SDGs was low. Even when interviewees were aware of the Goals, they had little knowledge of the 169 targets and 231 indicators. Therefore, it was not surprising that they also had little awareness of the focus on partnerships as a means of SDG implementation identified in Goal 17. A total of 11 of 14 interviews referred to SDG awareness as a challenge in multistakeholder partnership formation. Even when the awareness of the SDGs and the role of partnerships for their implementation was evident, it was confined to the national-level umbrella organizations. According to the interviewees, regional and local level non-state actors were mostly unaware of the SDGs. Where awareness did exist, an in-depth understanding of the complex interconnections of the goals, their targets, and their indicators was lacking. Apart from institutional-level awareness, individual awareness was also low. Indeed, some interviewees were critical of the SDGs' broad scope and complexities and were unaware of how their organization's work aligned with the Goals. As one interviewee asserted:

"I mean they are there in the popular opinion, lots of marketing, lights up social media, fine, [sic] *... on the ground, the awareness of SDGs is very poor in Ireland; communities do not know what they are ... and they're quite complex to explain to somebody, 17 SDGs. I come into a community, and you have to explain like 17 things. What do they take home? Which one? Which SDG?"* (Interviewee ENGO 001)

Given the lack of awareness and the broad scope and scale of the Goals, some interviewees pointed out that they had found ways and means to navigate them by choosing the goal that aligned well with their organization's aims and interests. For example, business organizations and trade unions identified with Goal 8—Decent Jobs and Economic Growth and Goal 12—Sustainable Production and Consumption. Environmental groups identified with Goals 13–15 because those were most directly related to their scope of action. This was evident in the following responses:

"We looked at the 17 goals, and we chose one primary goal and four secondary goals ... A lot of other ones we still identified with [sic], but you can't be a champion [on those]. If you do not do a filtering exercise, the messages get lost" (Interviewee BIZ 002)

"We would work with the Climate Action one. I think it's [sic] SDG 13; we would work with the education one, which would be SDG 4. We would work with life on land, life at sea,

sustainable production and consumption. We would also link in a bit with the sustainable cities side"
(Interviewee ENGO 001)

Several interviewees also found cherry-picking the goals problematic, given the strong interconnections and interdependencies among the Goals. For them, the overall Goals were more significant than the sum of their individual parts. As one interviewee described:

"Things are going to change when it starts to affect people directly; if climate change is affecting people, action will be taken if water [sic], is polluted action will be taken; however, there is no one with the vision to see the whole picture" (Interviewee ENGO 004)

4.2. Historical Lack of Multistakeholder Partnerships

The results from interviews also highlighted the distinct lack of knowledge among respondents of multistakeholder partnerships in operation in Ireland—the types of partnerships that the UN recommends for the effective implementation of the SDGs. Interviewees were unable to provide specific partnership examples where they had worked together with multiple entities from civil society organizations, environmental groups, academia, business entities, and other stakeholders to solve a critical public policy problem. Most interviewees identified dyad types of partnerships comprising only two sectors [57] such as government and the private sector or government and civil society working together. As a result, the interviewees demonstrated a distinct lack experience of working in multistakeholder partnerships and what it entails.

However, interviewees who were deeply engaged with the SDGs found value in multistakeholder partnerships as areas where the work of organizations often overlapped or complemented each other. As one interviewee pointed out: *"The SDGs created possibilities for linkages between organizations in different sectors where maybe we wouldn't have thought about those linkages before ... it has created real opportunities for us to kind of maybe come together"*(Interviewee ENGO 002). For them, the SDGs provided a reason to come together and to collaborate. Some interviewees also pointed out that the complexities in the SDG targets and indicators made it necessary to collaborate, a rallying point for creating multistakeholder partnerships.

Along similar lines, most interviewees noted the potential benefits of more wide-ranging partnerships, including bringing different skills and resources to deliver common goals. Partnerships would be beneficial for small and medium-sized organizations whose resources are limited but work in similar critical social, economic, or environmental areas. As one interviewee pointed out:

"You should be looking at something where you have more of a symbiotic kind of relationship; that you're bringing something that they don't have and they're bringing something that you don't have and, actually, together you're actually doing something bigger" (Interviewee ENGO 001)

However, although interviewees generally identified the benefits of multistakeholder partnerships for achieving the multiple complex SDG targets, most interviewees believed it could be challenging and a *"long and messy process"* (ENGO 008). They mostly identified trust, communication, and the partnerships' day-to-day operations as the main challenges for successful multistakeholder partnerships to emerge.

In terms of trust, interviewees believed multistakeholder partnerships should have a clear purpose of what is to be achieved and a plan of how it can be achieved. They also believed that transparency was required regarding who the partners were, why the partnership was being formed, the benefits for individual partners, and their roles and obligations. Trust between all the stakeholders in a partnership was considered crucial given that different stakeholder groups operated under different sets of rules, and as one interviewee pointed out, "[our] *styles of understanding of the world is different"* (ENGO 003). For example, an interviewee from a civil society organization was apprehensive about partnering with businesses that operated on a mindset of pursuing *'indefinite growth'* (ENGO 008) when they felt such models might not be feasible for achieving the SDGs. On the other hand, another

interviewee representing business organizations was apprehensive about collaborating with civil society organizations given that it was *"very difficult to have a proper conversation with them"* (BIZ 002). Interviewees from civil society organizations were also concerned that businesses with more resources could capture multistakeholder partnerships and operate them to suit their purposes.

Some interviewees also pointed out the need for excellent communication for multistakeholder partnerships to flourish. They considered communication as crucial both between partners and within partnerships and that a clear memorandum of understanding should be in place to define the partner roles and expectations in the partnership.

Members of civil society and environmental organizations operated on limited budgets, mostly donor-funded for specific projects, and found it challenging to have resources to concentrate on forming, maintaining, and delivering on partnerships. Additionally, most interviewees believed that the organization's culture sometimes made it impossible to participate in partnerships that would require tweaking or realigning their organizational goals and values. These factors inhibited organizations from experimenting with partnerships.

4.3. The Role of Government

Given that interviewees lacked the experience working in multistakeholder partnership-type arrangements, they generally believed that the government should initiate and play a critical role in encouraging and promoting partnerships in the country. Most interviewees believed that as the government is answerable to the UN to fulfil the Irish SDG commitments, it should steer the process of achieving the Goals and should involve creating opportunities for non-state actors when and where required. Government institutions and policies could set conditions that would facilitate *"the trade-offs and the sacrifices people have to make to be in a partnership"* [ENGO 002].

Interviewees representing the private sector felt that the SDGs provided new entry points in public governance, where further public–private partnerships could be organized to deliver socially impactful projects. As a result, they perceived that it was the government's role to encourage increased public–private partnerships in SDG-related projects. They felt that such projects could also create new types of jobs for a more sustainable economy. However, they were also of the view that the right opportunities and processes were not yet in place in Ireland for the private sector to create innovative solutions that would drive sustainable processes like a circular economy, improved waste management, and other green initiatives. They felt that to stimulate such processes, government business development agencies could provide funding for projects aligned with SDG targets and simultaneously create opportunities for the business sector.

Additionally, business sector representatives pointed out that the business sector's role in meeting SDG targets is limited to their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. However, according to them, SDGs' scope was too large to be dealt with via corporate social projects alone. The SDGs covered wide-ranging goals like climate action, poverty alleviation, and biodiversity loss, which required systemic changes within industries and that government intervention would transform. To signal industries to move towards sustainable business practices, the interviewees from the business sector suggested that the government initiate green procurement programs as supplying goods and services to the government constitutes a significant part of private sector business activities.

Interviewees representing civil society and environmental organizations were also of the view that the government needed to play an active leadership role in SDG implementation. Most interviewees suggested that implementing the SDGs should become the head of the state's priority in Ireland. Most civil society and environmental groups did not perceive any shrinking of the space for civil society in Ireland like in some other parts of the world, and that scope for collaborative work with the government and others on implementing the SDGs could be developed. However, most interviewees were concerned that the government is dominated by the private sector that has packaged social and environmental commitments covered under the SDGs into small and neat CSR packages that do not do justice to the complex issues at the root of sustainability problems.

Interviewees with extensive experience working in grassroots and community-level organizations pointed out that there were significant challenges for the government to engage with organizations that worked with those furthest behind. Many of these organizations may work in remote locations and, as a result, find it impossible to enter into regular dialogue with the government, including participating in the quarterly held National SDG Stakeholder Forums. Because of this, they felt that SDG implementation planning should also be focused on the regional and local levels so that more social groups can participate and co-share responsibilities for achieving the SDGs.

Although all interviewees believed that the government has a major role in implementing the SDGs, most of them felt that there is currently a lack of political will in the national government to pursue the SDGs. As one interviewee said, a *'re-ignition'* (ENGO 004) is required. The SDGs' scope and scale require the leadership of the national government given that the systemic changes needed to implement the SDGs are beyond the scope of local government. One interviewee from the private sector said, " … *I don't think that the Government's* [sic] *doing enough to put the right tools in place to facilitate businesses"* (Interviewee BIZ 001). Another civil society interviewee pointed out:

> *"there is a lot of tokenism going on in the name of SDGs; there must be more meaningful engagement where figures need to be robustly proved through validation and verification, and the government should stand up on their heels and absolutely honour the SDGs"* (Interviewee ENGO 005)

However, although interviewees were critical of what they viewed as a lackadaisical attitude of the government towards the SDGs, most interviewees pointed out that although issues like climate action, watershed management, biodiversity loss, and ocean health are essential to the sustainability of Ireland, political leadership is now compelled to concentrate on broader geopolitical issues such as Brexit.

5. Discussion

Our research uncovered some critical insights from the stakeholders on the SDGs, multistakeholder partnerships, and the government's role that may be unique to Ireland. However, many of these findings resonate with existing research on multistakeholder partnerships and problems identified by other scholars in implementing the SDGs. We also found empirical evidence of how non-state actors envision real-life challenges and obstacles in forming multistakeholder partnerships for the SDGs. These are now discussed.

5.1. Fragmented Understanding of the SDGs and Cherry-Picking of the Goals

The general view from the results suggests that there are too many goals and too little awareness of the goals. The results highlight that the broad scope of the Goals, the complexity of their interconnectedness, and the various scales at which actions must be taken is yet to be fully grasped by non-state actors in general. Such a lack of awareness of the detail of the Goals can act as an impediment for non-state actors who may be the future agents of change. Not surprisingly, they cherry-pick from the Goals aligning with those best suited to their organizational goals and tend to pursue the goals separately, within siloes, even though the SDGs are inherently interlinked. We also argue that this lack of awareness can also act as inertia for non-state actors to better align their work with the SDGs. This issue is not specific to the Irish context and has been outlined in previous research [58].

Cherry-picking Goals that fit with organizational narratives tend to promote the continuation of silo-thinking. Other researchers have also identified the cherry-picking of the Goals at larger scales, for example, within nation-states where some nations prioritize poverty alleviation and economic growth over other Goals [59]. We argue that such fragmentation of the Goals may create challenges for organizations to take a holistic view of the SDGs and their core principles of universality and indivisibility. Moreover, some Goals are at risk of being ignored, especially the environmental goals when economic and social goals are prioritized.

The lack of awareness of the Goals within non-state actors operating at different levels with a low level of awareness at local and regional levels is also critical. With change agents working in communities unaware of the Goals, the whole-of-society approach required for the Goals can be limited. This finding is not unique to our research and has been outlined by other scholars who point out that SDGs' awareness continues to be low in different sectors [60–62]. A lack of awareness among citizens and citizen groups is problematic as awareness acts as a prerequisite for policy acceptance creates pressure on policymakers to implement specific policies over others [63]. However, awareness campaigns and training programs can solve this problem to a large extent. The future generation of policymakers, corporate workers, social actors, innovators, and citizens educated on the Goals and their ideals can solve this problem if the right measures are put in place.

5.2. Challenges of Multistakeholder Partnerships

Our results suggest that well-functioning multistakeholder partnerships that effectively deal with different challenges covered under the Goals and their targets have a long way to go. Again, this is not specifically a problem in Ireland. The existing literature suggests that there is still much to be understood about creating an ideal model or template of multistakeholder partnerships [7–12].

Although empirical research on how stakeholders perceive participating in multistakeholder partnerships for the SDGs is uncommon, our findings are similar to other studies that have found that multistakeholder partnerships are challenging to form and maintain [21], require skilful facilitation to show results [7,23] and that smaller organizations that work at the local level or with minority interest groups may lack the resources needed to participate in multi-sectoral partnerships [24]. We also found that, like other studies, different non-state actors are apprehensive of power capture within multistakeholder partnerships [25], especially when dealing with the private sector. This portends trust deficits between stakeholders in multistakeholder partnerships that require accurate multi-sectoral representation. At times, organizational legitimacy is more critical to stakeholder groups than that of the partnership goals, affecting the balance required between partnership goals and organizational goals for multistakeholder partnerships [13,21,27].

Nonetheless, interviewees were unable to point towards successful multistakeholder partnerships in Ireland working on public issues; what currently exists in Ireland in terms of partnerships are dyad types of partnerships like public–private partnerships, long championed in Irish national development plans [64]. Although they have achieved significant progress, these dyad-type public–private partnerships have also been highly problematic [64–68]. However, many things can be learned from them to inform how multistakeholder partnerships can be designed and what to avoid in the future. Many of the concerns with public–private partnerships are reflected interviewees' apprehension on multistakeholder partnerships. They raised concerns about the effectiveness of partnerships, how they can be made more accountable, and how to maintain a high level of trust and accountability within the partnership. Similar concerns have been expressed by other researchers studying multistakeholder partnerships [7–12].

A study of a decade of public–private partnership projects in Ireland has shown that such arrangements may not be an effective way to use taxpayers' money [69]. Public–private partnerships also have high requirements for monitoring, accountability, supervision, performance management, and relationship management during the tenure of a contract [69]. Our interviewees also raised such apprehensions when they expressed opinions related to trust, communication, division of roles, accountability, and compliance. Maintaining and delivering on standards set on these criteria also requires time and resources. Moreover, there is also a temporal element. Many of the complex challenges required to be addressed to fulfil the SDGs cannot be unpacked in small packages and require years of projects and continuity. This also means that partnerships need to be pursued over the long term—years, if not decades—to deliver success. A high level of trust and reciprocity is required to sustain such arrangements, which is difficult to build or predict at the early stage of partnership formation when agreements are put in place [70].

What emerges from these findings is that perhaps multistakeholder partnerships should not be pursued for the sake of it; they need to grow organically based on relationships of trust and accountability. However, for that to happen, perhaps the foremost requirement is how non-state actors are invested in the visions of the SDGs and what are opportunities for cross-sectoral engagements.

5.3. Role of Government

What became apparent from the interviews is that the non-state actors felt that the national government must play a vital role in encouraging and promoting partnerships, similar to what is reflected in the targets on partnerships under Goal 17. Other scholars have also identified this and suggested that governments should play the orchestrator's critical role (the 'interlocuter'), of the Goals [7]. Governments need strategies to design policies and plans in an integrated manner, aligning with the SDGs, and overhauling the status quo [71,72]. This would also require coordination between government departments and levels, both horizontally and vertically managed over time so that any spillovers and trade-offs are handled effectively [71].

However, according to an interviewee, what was missing was a clear indication of how different non-state actors could identify themselves as change agents, enter collaborative arrangements within and across sectors, arrange for resources, and deliver priorities. Though this is not entirely missing, it is mostly within a particular sector or corporate social responsibility type project where the private sector works with civil society organizations on small, limited-time projects. Though the government needs to play a more significant role to signal that the SDGs are priorities that need to be honoured, non-state actors also need to become agents of change [73]. Businesses can co-fund projects while civil society organizations can support governance [71]. However, it remains to be seen how both state and non-state actors galvanize into more significant action or when and how the "re-ignition" (ENGO 004) happens.

6. Conclusions

The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals focus on improving human well-being and prosperity. However, for that to happen, a whole-of-society approach is required where non-state actors participate and play an effective role in delivering transformative change. This expectation is enshrined in the Goals, with Goal 17 having targets for national governments to encourage multistakeholder partnerships where different non-state actors can participate in collaborative work to achieve the SDGs. In this paper, we took the case of Ireland and explored how non-state actors perceived the idea of multistakeholder partnerships and their associated challenges and obstacles.

This research has three broad conclusions. First, there is still a significant lack of awareness of the SDGs in Ireland and among non-state actors. Although non-state actors operating at the national-level or based in the country's capital were more aware of the SDGs, their counterparts at local and regional levels had far less awareness of the Goals. Furthermore, community-level awareness was also reported to be low. This negatively affects the whole-of-society approach that is required to achieve the SDGs. A low level of awareness about the Goals' indivisibility and universality also affected how non-state actors envisioned the Goals, often identifying and championing those Goals that fit well with their organizational objectives. Second, there was also a lack of examples of how multistakeholder partnerships have worked in governance. Third, the Irish government must play a more significant role in implementing the SDGs and galvanizing different non-state actors to co-share the responsibility of achieving the SDGs. Indeed, there is a widespread expectation that the government should facilitate multistakeholder partnerships and act as an interlocutor or an orchestrator [7] in their implementation.

Based on our study in Ireland and how some civil society, environmental groups, trade unions, and business organizations are organized in the country, we recommend some solutions. Given that most regional and local social and environmental organizations, as well as small and medium businesses are affiliated to some form of national organization, these national-level organizations can find solutions on how to participate in multistakeholder partnerships and collaborate from their

networks in different partnerships. They can also address resource capacity problems by employing central resources to oversee the day-to-day engagement of multistakeholder partnerships and protect the interests of the organizations participating in their network. As these national organizations are membership-based, the operational cost of these new resources could be funded through very marginal increases in membership fees. Therefore, local organizations having memberships in the national umbrella organizations can also participate in multistakeholder partnerships at different scales that align with their goals and purposes. Additionally, the national government that currently engages with stakeholders via the publicly held National Stakeholder Forums can use these forums to deliberate on issues where partnerships can be formed and involve non-state actors acting in the role of an orchestrator. The Irish government has begun to address some of the problems associated with a lack of communication between non-state actors by forming working groups within the National Stakeholder Forums. However, time will tell whether or not these groups are successful in helping form effective multistakeholder partnerships. Future studies could further explore the feasibility and challenges of such an approach.

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Article

The Effects of Organizational Traits on NGO–Business Engagement in Mexico

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Abstract: This paper explores the organizational traits that increase the likelihood of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to engage with businesses in order to enhance their mutual economic, environmental and social goals, consistent with UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, Targets 17.16 and 17.17. The research is based on a survey of 364 randomly selected environmental and social NGOs in Mexico. A probit model is used to analyze the data and generate insights whereby an NGO's proclivity to engage with the private sector is associated with a number of fundamental organizational characteristics that make them distinct from other NGOs active in their field. The main findings show that likelihood of NGO engagement with firms is correlated with making corporate donations deductible for businesses, NGO size and scope, activities and level of professionalization, sustaining broader stakeholder relations, and showing transparency about the mission and goals of the NGO. The paper includes an analysis of the determinants of specific forms of engagement and discusses some implications for NGO–business engagement and its support of the SDG targets.

Keywords: NGO–business collaboration; Mexico; organizational traits; UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

1. Introduction

In the early 1990s, examples of collaboration between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and businesses to support social and especially environmental goals were scant in the U.S., but as the tenets of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) took hold in the mid-90s, such partnerships became more common [1,2]. By the mid-2000s both companies and NGOs had become very active in establishing partnerships, in recognition of the fact that NGOs had certain expertise, especially in the environmental area, that could help companies achieve their CSR objectives. This stage was set, so-to-speak, by global initiatives such as the UN Global Compact, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and many other UN entities which emphasize private sector collaboration. Both now support the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established in 2015, a collection of 17 goals covering a broad range of social and economic development issues, including poverty, hunger, health, education, climate change, gender equality, water supply, sanitation, energy, urbanization, environment and social justice [3,4]. Goal 17 includes target 17.16, which emphasizes the establishment of multi-sector partnerships to support the SDGs in all countries but especially in developing countries, and 17.17, which encourages effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships.

Just as the U.S. was somewhat behind Europe in the evolution of cross-sector partnerships, so have Mexico and other developing countries lagged behind the U.S. [5]. Similarly, the structure of the NGO community in Mexico is different at this point in time, as we shall see. One important similarity is the portfolio of environmental laws in Mexico, which are patterned after U.S. laws., but the amount of

expenditure on enforcing them is orders of magnitude less, so there is considerable room for NGOs and other parts of civil society to assist in improving the environmental (and social) performance of firms.

Because many of the largest Mexican companies sell products into the U.S. and Europe, they are forced to demonstrate certain aspects of CSR, in particular, green production processes (e.g., through ISO 14001 certification), and green supply chain management. In a recent study based on a survey of the largest Mexican firms, Aigner and Lloret [6] found that such firms were well along the path to sustainability both in the sense of improved environmental performance and its contribution to business strategy and financial performance. Asked about their interactions with NGOs, these firms regarded them as both opportunities and challenges, in equal measure. It is within this context that the present study falls, being an analysis of the characteristics of Mexican NGOs that engage with the private sector in order to further their environmental and/or social goals.

NGOs come in different shapes and sizes, with diverse architectures and a wide range of objectives. Even if they share some common traits, there are characteristics that set them apart from one another [7]. One salient aspect in this regard is their orientation towards the private sector: NGOs can have a more or less adversarial or cooperative attitude towards businesses [8–11]. Whether NGOs decide to cooperate or not with firms has important implications in terms of reputation, access to resources, and relationship management.

Generally speaking, in the sustainability arena, NGO–business partnerships are conceptualized as interactions that seek to go beyond philanthropy by pooling expertise and resources. They are a specific manifestation of cross-sectoral collaboration that have been widely invoked as a mechanism to address complex social and environmental problems which no one party can solve individually [12–15]. These types of arrangements have increased in nature and number in recent years as social and environmental problems have grown in magnitude and complexity [16–18]. Interactions between firms and NGOs are seen as having the potential to bring social change by adopting integrated and innovative approaches to create synergies and overcome the inability of governments to solve societal problems [19,20].

To date, empirical studies on NGO–business collaboration for sustainability have been performed primarily in developed countries and from the perspective of the firm [21–23]. However, interest in NGO engagement strategies continues to grow, especially in developing countries. In particular, previous research has explored the types of relationships NGOs cultivate with other stakeholders or networks, the specific activities undertaken by NGOs in collaboration with the private sector, and how partnerships are initiated and managed [24–28].

With this article we hope to broaden our knowledge about the factors that result in successful NGO–business collaborations in developing countries, where trust, conscious partner selection, effective communications, accountability, transparency, power balances, personal relations, flexibility, good planning, and clear expectations have been considered important [29–31]. We use survey data to show that NGOs develop a certain attitude in the corporate institutional environment as a function of specific organizational characteristics and that NGO–business engagement can be best explained through the lens of organizational form and behavior.

The paper aims to contribute to the NGO–business engagement literature in three interrelated ways. First, we discuss the likelihood of NGOs engaging with firms as a function of a number of specific organizational traits. Second, we look more closely into NGOs that do sustain engagement with firms to uncover the main forms of engagement and their relation to these organizational traits. Last, we provide quantitative evidence of NGO–business dynamics in an advanced developing country to complement previous qualitative findings [5,32,33].

We use the term "advanced developing country" because Mexico is on the cusp between a developed country and a developing one. Mexico's latest (2019) Human Development Index (HDI) score of 0.767 puts it just below several other Central and South American countries, and on par with other such countries like Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Ecuador. It is a member of OECD, which is often used as an indicator for "developed" but falls just short of the HDI threshold of 0.80, which is

also commonly used. (By this measure, among the Central and South American countries, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay are "developed"). By the narrower classification based on 2019 per capita income used by the World Bank, Mexico and most of the Latin America countries are in the third of four tiers, called "upper-middle-income," just below "high-income," and thus referring to Mexico as an "advanced developing country" remains an appropriate descriptor. (In the World Bank classification system, Chile, Panama and Uruguay are in the "high-income" category.)

In terms of structure, the next section conceptualizes the likelihood of NGO–business engagement as a function of the organizational characteristics of NGOs. The one following provides a description of the research design, the data, and methods used in the project. The next section presents the findings of our statistical analysis. Finally, we discuss a number of practical implications of our findings for NGO–business engagement and conclude with some reflections on the SDG targets in light of our work.

2. Likelihood of NGO–Business Engagement as a Function of NGO Traits

Since the 1990s, relations between NGOs and firms began to shift, giving way to novel partnerships that, in many cases, have shaped the organizational behavior and identity of both sectors [34,35]. Early forms of interaction between NGOs and businesses were mostly confrontational or based on corporate sponsorship of NGO projects, but eventually new forms of relationships emerged based on a range of collaborative strategies and tactics [36].

With the popularization of the UN SDGs, collaboration between sectors has become an increasingly popular mechanism to combat many complex and persistent socio-environmental problems in developing countries. Such has been the case regarding armed conflicts [32,37], poverty and inequality [38–40], violence and insecurity [41,42], and sustainable agro-commodity production [43–45].

NGOs across geographies adopt particular forms and functions in accordance with the goals they pursue and the contexts in which they operate. Evidence in this regard has suggested that regional variations among NGO structures, levels of activity, and formalization relate to unique geo-historical conditions that, when tied to the cultural context and grassroots movements of the region, yield their particular organizational characteristics and ways of relating to other social actors [29,30,46].

Knowing what types of NGOs decide to collaborate with other actors and how they do it has important implications for understanding NGO behavior and strategies, motivations, partner selection, and the outcomes of such collaborations. In this regard, various authors have previously examined the relationship between some NGO traits and their impact on collaboration with the private sector. In Table 1 we present, grouped under five main categories, 17 organizational traits previously identified as relevant in the partnership literature and discuss how they might impact NGO–business engagement.

What previous studies have shown in this regard is that NGOs are more likely to create social ties with other organizations displaying similar traits or capabilities, as compatibility helps to reduce risk of failure by granting predictability and certainty to interactions. However, such compatibility might be assessed differently across contexts as particular traits are regarded as more or less important. Accordingly, we used this framework as a starting point to design a survey to inquire about the characteristics of NGOs in Mexico and their engagement with the private sector.

Table 1. Organizational traits that affect collaboration between Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and businesses.

NGO Characteristics
When organizations share certain key attributes (similar dates of creation, mission, interests, culture, operating systems), this similarity provides inducement and opportunities to form collaborative ties. This is captured in the idea of interorganizational homophily. While larger, more established and professional NGOs might be more likely to engage with firms, they also risk blurring their altruistic mission and adopting a client-oriented service delivery approach. Similarly, NGOs that possess the skills and tactics to perform different functions or roles might be better situated to access diverse sources of funding and enjoy a higher degree of autonomy. However, this requires managing multiple revenue sources simultaneously and donors' requirements.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Traits	Previous Studies
• *Size and scope:* More mainstream, professionalized, and larger NGOs with a broader mission, political commitment, and social networks may be more attractive partners as they resemble business culture and are less tied to the interests of a particular constituency. On the contrary, small, focused NGOs might be perceived to be more responsive to pressure from their supporters and peers. • *Professionalization:* Describes the growing of specialized expertise rather than the use of volunteers in organizational staffing and operations. It is expressed in the use of strategic planning, independent financial audits, quantitative program evaluation, and consultants. • *Functions/roles:* When engaging with businesses, NGOs can play various roles including mutual support, advocacy to improve rules and standards, partnering and brokering relationships, and service provision. • *Attitudetowards companies:* Refers to the active or passive role of NGOs, where an active role implies becoming increasingly integrated into the institutional environment and influencing formal institutions.	[10,15,22,28,47–52]

Transparency

NGOs that are committed to making information public about their employees, board members, projects, beneficiaries, results, impacts and funders through their website, annual reports or other media, can expand their visibility and reach more potential business partners. Even if NGOs have to make investments to achieve effective communication with stakeholders, disclosure levels are positively related to the amount of future donations received by an organization.

Traits	Previous Studies
• *Communications*: Providing stakeholders with information about the NGO's mission, activities, funding, and governance helps businesses identify NGOs with similar, desirable attributes and to build a positive perception. • *Learning and impact*: Practicing transparency about a program's methods and results encourages learning within the NGO and across NGO networks. • *Accountability*: Publishing information about the NGO's values, the impact of their projects and their beneficiaries, helps to ensure prioritization of downward accountability to their constituencies rather than upward accountability towards funders or global networks.	[12,53–57]

Stakeholder Relations

NGOs that have relations with other stakeholder groups are better positioned to partner with businesses because they have access to more information and opportunities, greater capacity to influence policy agendas or implement interventions in localized contexts, as well as increasing their capacity to acquire resources through consortiums or partnerships.
NGOs need to dedicate time and resources to manage these relationships, often having to make important compromises about their own goals and vision in order to sustain relations with groups with diverging or conflicting interests.

Traits	Previous Studies
• *Visibility*: Having strong ties to actors in other sectors increases the probability of an NGO fostering relationships with businesses as NGOs participate in different initiatives and events. • *Reputation and credibility*: Businesses are more likely to select as partners NGOs with a strong track record, good reputation, and that are well known in the community. NGOs that already receive funds from bilateral institutions and international donors, or that collaborate with universities or other firms, are more likely to formalize new collaboration engagements. • *Contextualization*: Partnering with NGOs that have strong community relations with local groups allows other stakeholder groups to design and implement contextualized interventions. This helps secure a greater chance for impact and collective legitimacy.	[29,48,58–64]

Trust and Reputation

Trust plays a particular role in NGO–business collaboration in developing countries since often trust among people and institutions has been eroded. Pervious personal relations and connections are often the basis for engagement and the formation of reciprocal relations. This means that collaborations will likely be formed among people and organizations that have previously worked together, risking the exclusion of other actors that might be more competent or innovative, but that are new to a particular environment. In high corruption contexts, larger and better-known NGOs might be more attractive partners than small grassroot NGOs that not always comply with disclosure and accountability standards. In this regard, the involvement of senior NGO officials in the development of relations and projects is key.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Traits	Previous Studies
• *Legitimacy*: In many contexts, neither businesses nor NGOs are expected or desired providers of collective goods, a task often bestowed upon the state. NGOs and business should confirm the extent of support and range of action in order to render their involvement in social and environmental challenges both effective and legitimate. • *Organizational leadership*: NGOs that are perceived to be leaders in their field, as well as those that show commitment from the NGO leadership team to forge successful collaborations with business actors, are more likely to enter partnerships with firms. • *Personal commitment*: Since trust between organizations will ultimately be built upon trust between individuals, the people involved in the collaboration will need to be ready to risk personal and organizational reputations, as well as to relinquish a measure of stability and control over their work. Trust will be reinforced as partners demonstrate technical competence and show a sense of shared responsibility. • *Reciprocity*: Bonds of trust and consequent reciprocal behaviors will help the collaboration survive changes in law, funding, approaches, or personnel and help sustain commitment to this social exchange over the long term.	[21,23,65–75]

Motivations for Engagement
While many NGOs engage with businesses as a result of opportunities that emerge unexpectedly, increasingly, more and more NGOs are beginning to address corporate relations in a more strategic fashion. Working closer to businesses to attract more resources and achieve greater impact also implies that NGOs need to spend more time and resources vetting companies and putting systems of checks and balances in place to protect their reputation. Communicating about this multi-faceted approach effectively to other stakeholders also demands increased effort and resources.

Traits	Previous Studies
• *Access*: Partnering with NGOs provides access to geographies or groups of people that might otherwise be difficult to reach. In particular, NGOs in developing countries help companies approach communities, develop bottom-of-the-pyramid business solutions, and to better understand local conditions, power relations, and the political environment. • *Capacity*: NGOs and businesses pool their resources, skills, and expertise to execute projects and boost their reputation. Increasingly limited government funds available for NGOs push NGOs to explore other sources of funding and ways of working. Traditional donor-recipient relations are evolving into true joint ventures. • *Goals*: NGOs engage with businesses to address escalating social and environmental threats by means of transforming current business practices related to responsible sourcing, emissions reductions, human rights protection, etc. They see businesses as part of the solution to particular problems.	[20,31,32,76–81]

3. Survey Design and Research Data

To conduct our analysis, we relied on data collected via a telephone survey of our design with representatives from NGOs in Mexico in 2016. Respondents were identified using a Mexican NGO directory created by *Alternativas y Capacidades A.C.*, a Mexican NGO whose mission is to strengthen the capabilities of civil organizations, who provided us a list of over 28,000 NGOs, identified by whether they are authorized to receive donations or not, and with or without a registration key that allows NGOs to acquire grants and incentives from the Federal Public Administration and other public institutions. The database uses the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) codes produced by the National Center for Charitable Statistics in the U.S. to categorize NGOs in terms of their focus.

We identified 6758 NGOs that pursued activities related to poverty relief, economic development, environmental protection, provision of basic social services, and community development, covering almost all NGO work in Mexico. Only neighborhood and professional associations, as well as religious groups, were excluded from the sample. From this population, a stratified random sample of 364 NGOs was drawn using proportional allocation based on year of creation (prior to 2000 and thereafter), region (North, North-Center, Center, South), tax status (authorized to receive donations or not), and type of NGO (environmental or social).

Seventeen hundred and four NGOs were contacted in order to acquire the target sample size, with a response rate of 21.4%. The target sample size was determined to yield a margin of error of no more than +/−5% using a 95% level of confidence. The survey lasted between 30 and 60 min and

was administered by a specialized market research and public opinion firm based in Mexico City (*Data Opinion Pública y Mercados*), during the summer of 2016. Respondents included CEOs, people in charge of handling relationships with businesses, and project managers. Which person to interview largely depended on their availability and NGO structure. Questions were also asked of those NGOs that chose not to answer the survey in order to analyze the possibility of non-response bias. The vast majority of non-responses were for logistical reasons, like "incorrect number," "no answer," "line out of service," etc. Twenty-six of the selected NGOs (2%) were no longer in existence. Only 17 (1.4%) were successfully contacted but chose not to complete the survey or terminated the interview once it had begun (for whatever reason). Another 21 (1.6%) declined to participate for benign reasons like "no time for answering surveys", "only answer surveys via email", or "requests an invitation via email". Thus, at most 1.4% of the 1340 NGOs sampled but did not complete the survey could possibly have other, non-biasing reasons for not participating.

Based on the literature review summarized in Table 1, we designed questions that would provide insight about the organizational traits that might serve as predictors of NGO engagement with the private sector. Table 2 summarizes the six main categories of inquiry covered in the questionnaire, keyed to the actual survey questions presented to the survey respondents (e.g., "Q1"). These become the variables used in our empirical analysis. For those variables whose measurement is not obvious from Table 2, this will be explained further in the next section.

Table 2. Categories of inquiry included in the survey *.

(1) Engagement with the private sector	Questions covered the following issues: - Whether the NGO had engaged with a company in the last five years and reasons for not having done so in case of negative answers (Q1, Q2) - Number of companies with which the NGO had engaged in this period (Q3) - Frequency with which it initiated a new engagement (Q4) - Specific forms of the engagements (e.g., philanthropic donations, volunteering, campaigning, participation in consultations with other stakeholders, joint participation with businesses in events and dialogues, public policy design, implementation of CSR programs, and consulting) (Q5) - Whether such engagement with businesses was the result of strategic considerations or opportunistic behavior (Q6)
(2) Perception of risks and opportunities brought by engaging with businesses	We provided the respondents with eight statements and asked them to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each (Q7). We tested their perceptions about whether collaboration with businesses is a: - A viable strategy to achieve NGO goals - Feasible despite the different visions and goals - A trend that offers new opportunities for stakeholder engagement and innovation - An alternative that allows to access additional resources - A tool to engage the NGO's public reputation and legitimacy - Difficult in terms of reaching agreements that are beneficial to all parties - Complicated due to the limited efforts that businesses make to engage with NGOs - A risky option since not many people in the business world are aware of what NGOs do and how they operate - Complicated because businesses have more power than NGOs
(3) Relationship management and resources dedicated to private sector engagement	In this section, NGOs provided information about: - Whether the NGO has a specific budget for managing corporate engagement and what percentage of the total budget it was (Q8) - How much time and staff is dedicated to managing relationships with companies (Q9, Q10) - Percentage of engagements with Mexican companies versus the engagement with multinational companies (Q11)

Table 2. *Cont.*

(4) Trust, transparency, and stakeholder interactions	We asked respondents to evaluate which aspects related to trust were most important when engaging with companies (Q12), including: • Frequent communication • Publishing results and sharing information • Displaying honesty and respect • Having a good track record and professional attitude • Fulfilling agreements • Acknowledging limitations and speaking openly about failure • Getting involved in the project and being aware of what is going on • Making decisions based on objective criteria and not prejudices and preferences, managing resources in an efficient and transparent way • Being genuinely committed to solving the social or environmental problem at hand We also evaluated the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the following statements (Q13): • The private sector is a reliable partner • Companies have more integrity than the government • NGOs prefer to work with the private sector than the government • Corruption in Mexico is so pervasive that it affects all sectors of society • The NGO has encountered corruption in their engagement with businesses
(5) General NGO information	Here we gathered information about the organization, including: • Number of employees (Q14) • Number of active volunteers (Q15) • Geographic areas where it implements projects (Q16) • Field of focus (environment, water, energy and climate, education, socioeconomic development, health, human rights, and others) (Q17) • Main activities (program management, public and corporate policy design, research and training, social mobilization and campaigning, and capacity building and supporting other NGOs) (Q18) • Main sources of funding of the NGO (individual donors, international organizations, federal government, estate government, private sector, other NGOs) (Q19) • Channels used by the NGO to publish information about its work (website, annual report, newsletters, printed media, mass media, social media, and word of mouth) (Q20) In terms of transparency (Q21, Q22), we asked whether the NGO made public information about: • Mission • Names and profiles of employees and board members • Donors • Agreements and partnerships with companies and other NGOs • Financial statements • Projects (including their beneficiaries, location, employees involved, evaluation criteria, social and environmental impacts) • Annual activities report
(6) Stakeholder Interactions	We evaluated the degree of interaction (limited, moderate, strong) of the NGO with other stakeholder groups (Q23), including: • General public • Volunteers and individual donors • Local communities • Media • Other NGOs • Banks and financial institutions • Government agencies • International donors • Universities and academia

* A copy of the complete questionnaire in Spanish or English is available on request from the corresponding author.

To analyze the data, we employed a probit regression model to measure the influence of each of these traits on the likelihood of engagement of NGOs with businesses. Probit regression is one of the two most common approaches (the other being logistic regression) for dealing with the case of a dependent variable whose range is limited to (0, 1), as is the situation here. In effect, the dependent variable is transformed into a value that ranges from $-\infty$ to $+\infty$ and has a linear relationship with the independent variables. Once the coefficients of this regression equation are estimated, the resulting predicted values are transformed back onto (0, 1). As a practical matter, the two approaches yield similar if not identical results [82].

4. Analysis: Identifying Significant Organizational Traits for NGO–Business Engagement

4.1. Main Results

The results are presented in Table 3, whereby the variables characterizing the main activities of NGOs (Q18), aspects of transparency such as the publication of information about projects and financials of the organization (Q21 and Q22), and the intensity of relations with other stakeholders (Q23) are allowed to enter the model as groups. The reported coefficients are marginal effects and the standard errors are robust to heteroskedasticity. The four stratifying variables, including region where the NGO is located, issue-area (environmental, social), year of creation (range), and authorization to receive donations, plus size, appear in all models. The last column, upon which we base our analysis, contains all the independent variables.

As to the stratifying variables, several are statistically significant. For example, Region 3, which contains Mexico City, is significant at the $p < 0.10$ level, with a marginal effect of -0.168. The interpretation is, NGOs in Region 3 are 16.8 percentage points less likely to engage with the private sector than NGOs located in Region 1 (the left-out category), which contains Monterrey. The raw data suggest approximately the same difference: 48.9% for Region 1 versus 31.9% for Region 3. While many more NGOs are headquartered in Region 3, their propensity for business engagement is less but, as the data show, they are more expansive as to where they operate. For example, NGOs located in Region 3 carry out 23.7% of their activities elsewhere, while those located in Region 1 carry out 86.7% of all their activities locally. Even more concentrated are the activities of NGOs located in Region 4, where 33.7% of our sample NGOs reside. Approximately 92% of their activities are local. Their propensity for private sector engagement is also less than in Region 1, 34.2% compared to 48.9%.

Of the other stratifying variables, only "not authorized" is consistently significant across a variety of model specifications. In our final model, this effect is negative and quite large (-0.358). Controlling for all other factors, NGOs that are not authorized to receive donations are less likely to engage with firms by 35.8 percentage points compared to those that are authorized. Being authorized to receive donations means that companies which make a financial contributions to such NGOs can deduct the donations on their taxes. Those NGOs are precluded from political activity and lobbying, which also makes them a safer bet for engagement from a company's viewpoint. Year of creation is negative and often statistically significant, but not in our final model. This result is consistent with the idea that the older NGOs have longer track records, more public recognition, and credibility, and thus are more attractive partners for private sector engagement. Importantly, once all factors are controlled for, there is no significant difference between environmental and social NGOs as regards their likelihood of engagement.

Moving to an analysis of the other independent variables that constitute an NGOs organizational identity, as defined in this paper, we found that an NGO's size, whether measured by number of employees or number of volunteers, has a positive impact on the likelihood of engagement. Each additional increment of number of employees adds 8.45 percentage points to the likelihood of engagement. The intervals for both Q14 and Q15 are: none, between 1 and 5, between 5 and 10, between 10 and 20, and more than 20. A very large NGO by this measure, one with more than 20 employees, has a probability of engagement of 0.744 as predicted by our model, holding all other variables at their sample mean values. Similarly, moving to a larger interval of size defined by number of volunteers adds 5.48 percentage points to the probability of engagement, somewhat less than for employees. An interaction term between number of employees and number of volunteers showed a small degree of substitutability between these two aspects of "size," but since it was not statistically significant, we excluded it from our final model.

Table 3. Probit regression results.

| Independent Variables | Model Variant | | | | | |
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Region 2	−0.0576	−0.0549	−0.00473	−0.0644	−0.0487	−0.0101
Region 3	−0.144	−0.128	−0.120	−0.152 *	−0.166 *	−0.168 *
Region 4	−0.0908	−0.105	−0.106	−0.103	−0.118	−0.137
Year = 2000–2014	−0.142 *	−0.200 **	−0.105	−0.186 **	−0.0814	−0.134
Not Authorized	−0.408 ***	−0.428 ***	−0.361 ***	−0.436 ***	−0.340 ***	−0.358 ***
Social NGO	0.0570	0.0664	−0.0323	0.0739	0.0826	0.0454
Size #employees	0.131 ***	0.126 ***	0.105 ***	0.118 ***	0.109 ***	0.0845 ***
Size #volunteers	0.0641 ***	0.0601 ***	0.0463 *	0.0581 **	0.0495 **	0.0548 *
Activity: Program and project management		−0.165 *				−0.332 ***
Activity: Design of public/business polices		0.109 *				0.0681
Activity: Research and training		0.0363				−0.0129
Activity: Mobilizations and public campaigns		0.0965				0.0529
Activity: Organizational strengthening		0.0865				−0.0275
Activity: Other		−0.0661				−0.0267
Type of interaction: General Public					0.0303	0.0378
Type of interaction: Volunteers and donors					0.0329	0.0559 *
Type of interaction: Local communities					−0.0513	−0.0570
Type of interaction: Media					0.0777 **	0.0211
Type of interaction: Other NGOs					0.0483	0.0400
Type of interaction: Financial institutions and banks					0.0992 ***	0.115 ***
Type of interaction: Government agencies					−0.0236	−0.00380
Type of interaction: International donors					0.0699*	0.0695 *
Type of interaction: Academic community					−0.00729	0.00293
Transparency 1: Public mission of NGO			0.256 ***			0.227 ***
Transparency 1 Public members of the board			−0.0258			−0.0394
Transparency 1: Public contributions and donations			−0.0285			−0.0466
Transparency 1: Public agreements with Private Sector			0.381 ***			0.393***
Transparency 2: Public financial statements				0.00615		−0.0649
Transparency 2: Public information about projects				−0.0115		−0.0985
Transparency 2: Public impacts of projects				0.236 ***		0.0494
Transparency 2: Public annual report of activities				−0.0924		−0.0126
Observations	363	361	339	357	352	324
Pseudo R2	0.213	0.239	0.316	0.246	0.297	0.409

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

With regard to the main activities of the NGO (Q18) and their relationship to private sector engagement, we found that only one is consistently significant, that being program and project management and entering with a large negative sign (−0.332). This is a puzzling result as one would think a priori that NGOs with such expertise would be more inclined to connect with the private sector. This unexpected result can be explained in part by the data since 87.4% of the sample NGOs are involved in this activity, with only 37.1% of them engaging with firms. This percentage is approximately the same for those NGOs that are not involved with program and project management, so there is no discriminatory power in this particular activity.

Isolating Q18 from the other independent variables shows that NGO activity program and project management (Q18a) alone is statistically insignificant (though still negative). When the variables public/business policy design (Q18b) or mobilization and public campaigns (Q18d) are added, Q18a remains the same but each of these activities—design of public/business policies and mobilizations and public campaigns—is statistically significant and positive, with an effect size that offsets the negative magnitude of Q18(a). In the raw data, 45.5% of the NGOs that are involved in the design of public/business policies and 41.1% of NGOs that are involved in mobilizations and public campaigns engage with the private sector, both higher than for NGOs carrying out programs and projects. An analysis of Q5, which explores the ways in which NGOs that have engaged with the private sector do so, sheds some light on this matter as well. That analysis is presented in the next section.

Moreover, we found that the interactions NGOs maintain with other stakeholders such as the public, volunteers and individual donors, the media, local communities, other NGOs, financial institutions, international donors, government agencies, and academia play an important role in determining the likelihood of engagement with businesses (Q23). This can be seen by the three statistically significant and positive effects that emerge in our final probit model. Note that each of these options is calibrated by 0 (no interaction), 1 (limited interaction), 2 (moderate interaction), and 3 (strong interaction). The first of these concerns volunteers and people who donate to the NGO,

with a marginal effect of +0.0559, meaning that each subsequent level of intensity of interaction adds 5.59 percentage points to the probability of private sector engagement. The other two significant types of interaction include financial institutions and banks (+0.115) and international donors (+0.0695), with analogous interpretations of their estimated marginal effects. Arguably, interaction with volunteers and individual donors impacts the likelihood of engagement as NGOs draw most of their credibility and reputation from the support of individuals who believe in their cause. For the other two stakeholder groups, we suggest that NGOs which garner support from (interact with) international donors, banks, and financial institutions are viewed as effective and professional. In short, companies feel more inclined to engage with NGOs that can show credibility, effectiveness, and professionalism as reflected by the support of specific constituencies and donors.

Next, we come to the analysis of various components of transparency (Q21 and Q22) that may impact the likelihood of private sector engagement. Because there is some overlap between the response options in Q21 and Q22, we have selected the ones we feel are unambiguous and non-duplicative to include. These include making information available about the mission of the organization (Q21a), names and profiles of the NGO's board (Q21c), donations (Q21d), collaboration with companies (Q21e), financial statements (Q22a), projects and activities (Q22b), results and impacts achieved (Q22g), and an annual report (Q22h).

In our final model, only Q21a and Q21e are statistically significant. Publishing information about the mission of the organization carries a positive effect of +0.234, increasing the probability of private sector engagement by 23.4 percentage points. In a related way, whether an NGO publicizes its agreements with companies adds 39.3 percentage points to the probability of engagement. What becomes obvious here is that communicating previous work with firms can encourage other companies to pursue collaboration with the NGO.

Lastly, Q17 asks the NGOs to indicate their main issue area of work. Four of the (mutually exclusive) choices are social themes and three are environmental themes. The social themes are Education, Socioeconomic Development, Health and Human Rights. The environmental themes are Environment, Water, and Energy and Climate Change. An eighth option was included, "Other", which was selected by 4.67% of the sample NGOs.

One might consider using Q17 as a substitute for the stratifying variable that classifies NGOs as being either "social" or "environmental" based on their NTEE codes. We would expect this to result in very similar quantitative outcomes if indeed the NTEE codes reflect current NGO thematic classifications based on interviewee answers to Q17. We might also expect that the additional detail in Q17 would add something to the explanatory power of the probit model. Indeed, this is the case. When Q17 is substituted for SOC_ONG = yes, the social vs. environmental indicator variable, in all but two instances are the pattern of statistical significance and/or the magnitude of the marginal effect different, those being for Region 3 and Type of Interaction: International Donors. For Region 3, the marginal effect is smaller in absolute terms and becomes statistically insignificant. In the other case, while the marginal effect just misses the $p < 0.10$ significance cutoff, the corresponding magnitude is almost identical. The explanatory power of the model using Q17 is somewhat higher, as expected. Corresponding to the *t*-test on the marginal effect for SOC_ONG = yes, an F-test contrasting the four themes of "Social" in Q17 to the three themes of "Environmental" still results in acceptance of the null hypothesis of no difference, as before.

Finally, it is important to point out that there are quite a few instances where the answers to Q17 are at odds with the NTEE classification. In 49 cases, NGOs that were classified as "social" identified themselves as working primarily in either environmental areas or "other," while in 19 cases, NGOs that were classified as "environmental" identified themselves as working primarily in either social areas or "other." The correlation between them is only +0.63, not accounting for misclassification due to "other." While our model results are quite robust to this classification problem, it does raise the question of whether an NGO might have originally registered its activities under one category and later switched its work focus to another issue area.

4.2. Impact of Organizational Traits on Specific Forms of NGO–Business Engagement

Question five in the survey explored in more detail the ways in which the sample NGOs that have engaged with the private sector have done so. A total of eight options are analyzed. Of particular interest are options 5a–5e, which include receiving donations, volunteering, joint projects, participation in initiatives or work groups dealing with private sector issues, and participation with businesses in government programs, all of which garnered a majority of responses. Exploring these relationships in more detail, Table 4 summarizes the results of probit regression models that attempt to explain the choice of engagement as a function of the four stratifying variables and engagement with the private sector as a result of strategic considerations or opportunistic behavior (Q6), perceptions of risks and opportunities of engaging with businesses (Q7), having a dedicated budget to manage activities with the private sector (Q8), having personnel dedicated to managing activities with the private sector (Q10), number of employees (Q14) and number of volunteers (Q15). Only the statistically significant effects are reported.

Option 5c, carrying out joint projects, is perhaps the most interesting to us in this study. As it turns out, over 70% of the sample NGOs that indicated they engage with businesses did so in this way, highest among the options. The percentage is slightly higher for environmental NGOs (80%), and slightly lower for social NGOs (66%). Among the stratifying variables, only whether the NGO is authorized to receive donations or not is significant, and in this case its impact is +0.280 for not authorized compared to authorized, the implication being that firms are willing to provide funds for specific projects, perhaps as part of the their CSR activities, regardless of whether they will be able to make the donation tax deductible.

The size of the NGO in terms of number of employees (Q14) is a significant and positive determinant of the probability of this sort of engagement, with a coefficient of +0.0764. This means, for example, that an increase in the number of employees from fewer than 5 to between 5 and 10 is associated with an increase in the probability of engagement of 7.64 percentage points. Interestingly, the coefficient on size as measured by the number of volunteers (Q15) is negative and of a similar magnitude (−0.0696). This suggests that NGOs which rely heavily on unpaid volunteers are less likely to engage in joint projects with firms, presumably because of the need for staff dedicated to carry out such projects, but that specific effect (Q10) is not statistically significant in these results. A related factor, however, is whether the NGO assigns budgetary resources to private sector engagement, and here the effect is quite large (+0.297). An interaction effect between numbers of employees and volunteers was not only insignificant, its inclusion neutralized the significance of the two main effects, and so was discarded.

In Q6, the NGOs are asked to indicate whether their interaction with companies was strategic or opportunistic. Both the "strategic" and "both" options are significant and positive relative to "opportunistic," the left-out category. In the questionnaire this choice is designated "other," but the preponderance of NGOs that selected it indicated it was because they viewed their interactions with the private sector as being both strategic and opportunistic. Being strategic in its decision to work with the private sector in this way adds 16.6 percentage points to the probability of doing joint projects. Being both strategic and opportunistic is even more impactful.

In terms of the opportunities and risks of collaborating with businesses perceived by NGOs, Q7 asked the NGOs that have engaged with the private sector to evaluate a series of statements from "totally disagree" to "totally agree." Four of these effects are statistically significant at $p < 0.10$ or better: Working with the private sector (a) is a viable strategy to advance the NGO's goals (−0.151), (b) is feasible despite differing views and goals (+0.147), (e) is a way to obtain additional resources (+0.064), and (j) is complicated because the private sector has more power (−0.116). The signs of these marginal effects all make intuitive sense except for (a), whereby every unit increase in agreement with the statement is associated with a decrease of 15.1 percentage points in the probability that an NGO will take on joint projects with firms. This is almost completely offset by the positive coefficient on (b), but nevertheless is counterintuitive.

Table 4. Dimensions that determine specific forms of NGO–business engagement.

	Independent Variables	5a	5b	5c	5d	5e	5f	5g	5h
					Question 5 Variant				
Stratifiers	Region 2				+0.311 **		+0.680 ***	+0.275 *	
	Region 3						+0.495 ***		
	Region 4						+0.712 ***		
	Yr. 2000-14								
	Not Authorized	−0.508 ***		+0.280 ***					+0.277 ***
	Social NGO				−0.336 ***	−0.228 ***	−0.353 ***		
Q14	# Employees		−0.103 ***	+0.0764 **					
Q15	# Volunteers	+0.0955 **	+0.117 ***	−0.0696 *					
Q10	Dedicated Staff					+0.187 **			
Q8	Dedicated Budget			+0.297 ***					
Q6	Strategic		+0.183 **	+0.166 **					
Q6	Both			+0.212 ***			+0.573 ***	+0.357 **	+0.286 *
	Q7a			−0.151 **					
	Q7b	−0.128 **		+0.147 ***					
	Q7c								
	Q7d						+0.139 **	+0.121 **	
	Q7e	+0.114 **		+0.0641 *		−0.0690 *			
	Q7f					+0.0701 **			
	Q7g								
	Q7h		−0.0886 *						
	Q7i								
	Q7j	+0.0909 **		−0.116 ***				−0.0971 **	
	Obs.	133	133	132	133	133	133	132	133
	Psuedo R2	0.385	0.220	0.298	0.135	0.190	0.295	0.164	0.100

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Option Q5a considers engagement with businesses in terms of fundraising. Sixty percent of the sample NGOs that engage with the private sector do so in this way, 55% of social NGOs and 70% of environmental NGOs. Among the stratifying variables, only whether the NGO is authorized to receive donations or not is statistically significant but, as contrasted to Q5c, that an NGO is not authorized to receive donations dramatically reduces (by 50.8 percentage points) its probability of this sort of engagement. Of the other independent variables, the size of the NGO in terms of number of unpaid volunteers is significant and positive. Each interval increase in the number of volunteers increases the probability of this sort of engagement by 9.6 percentage points.

Finally, three options within Q7 about risks and opportunities of private sector collaboration are significant at $p < 0.05$ or better: Working with firms (b) is feasible despite differing views and goals (+0.128), (e) is a way to obtain additional resources (+0.114), and (j) is complicated because the private sector has more power (+0.091). Given this last result, apparently the power imbalance between NGOs and the private sector poses no impediment when it comes to raising money, in contrast to the result for 5c. Note that all three of these options were also significant in 5c.

Option 5b relates to initiatives of the NGO that can provide volunteering opportunities for the employees of a company in the activities of the NGO, with approximately 68% of our sample NGOs engaging in this way, and not much difference between social and environmental NGOs.

As seen in the table of results, for this option none of the stratifying variables are statistically significant. However, both size variables are, with number of employees having a negative sign (−0.103) and number of volunteers having a positive sign and of a similar magnitude (+0.117). These signs make perfect sense, as this option is actually aimed at increasing the number of volunteers involved in the activities of the NGO (thus a positive association, though a different causal path), and suggest that volunteers can be substituted for permanent employees in carrying out the mission of these NGOs.

The only option within Q7 that is significant in this case is (h), whereby private sector engagement is complicated by the limited efforts companies make to interact with NGOs. This effect is negative (−0.089), as expected. An interaction effect between numbers of employees and volunteers was not only insignificant, its inclusion neutralized the significance of the two main effects, and so was discarded.

Option 5d involves participation in conferences and meetings sponsored by business organizations, universities or specialized agencies working on topics related to the private sector. While only a slight majority of NGOs overall (53.7%) responded to this option, many more (72.5%) of environmental NGOs did so, relatively speaking. This is borne out in the probit model results whereby social NGOs are much less inclined to engage with businesses in this way (−0.336). The only other statistically significant effect for this option is for Region 2 (relative to Region 1, the left-out category), which includes Guadalajara. In this case, NGOs from Region 2 are much more inclined to engage with the private sector in this way (by 31.1 percentage points).

The next option within Q5 we analyze is 5e, joint participation with companies in government forums. In this case, while 67.7% of our sample NGOs engaged in this way overall, 77.5% of environmental NGOs did so. This difference is borne out in the probit results, whereby social NGOs are much less inclined to engage in this way (by 22.8 percentage points).

For this option, we see that having staff dedicated to managing interaction with companies is a positive factor (+0.187). Regarding Q7, both (e), obtaining additional financial resources, and (f), a way to improve the NGO's public reputation, are statistically significant at $p < 0.10$ or better. Apparently, this sort of engagement is not associated with garnering additional financial resources (−0.069) but it is a way to improve visibility (+0.070).

Option 5f involves joint participation with companies in designing public policies. Overall, only 36.8% of the sample NGOs engaged in this way, slightly more environmental NGOs (50%) and slightly fewer social NGOs (31.3%), relatively. In this case, all the regional effects are statistically significant and quite large (positively) relative to Region 1, the left-out category, which contains Monterrey. Moreover, social NGOs are much less likely to engage in this way (−0.353).

Of the remaining independent variables, only two are significant, those being the use of both strategic and opportunistic approaches to engagement relative to "opportunistic" alone (+0.573), and Q7(d), whereby engagement offers a networking opportunity to develop organizational skills and new ideas for the NGO (+0.139). In this latter instance, one can imagine that the process of working together in the formulation of new public policy does indeed provide opportunities for organizational learning and skill development for both the NGO and the firm.

With regard to option 5g, whereby the NGO participates in designing CSR programs for companies, 45.9% of the sample NGOs engaged in this way, with no perceptible difference between environmental and social NGOs. In this case, among the stratifying variables, only Region 2 is significant (+0.275). As with the previous option (5f), the use of both strategic and opportunistic approaches to private sector engagement is significant and positive (+0.347), as is Q7(d), at +0.121. The final significant effect for this option is Q7(j), the perception that businesses have more power, which reduces the likelihood of engagement of this sort by 9.71 percentage points, an enigmatic result.

The final option is 5h, consulting services, whereby 47.1% of all NGOs engage in this way, with little or no difference between environmental and social NGOs. Only two effects are significant, those being not authorized with a positive effect (+0.277) and incorporating both strategic and opportunistic approaches to private sector engagement (+0.286). These signs make sense, since consulting services offer means to garner financial support for those NGOs not authorized to receive donations, and the pursuit of consulting opportunities can be both strategic and opportunistic. We note that this option and 5d, which have the fewest significant effects, also have the poorest goodness-of-fit of any of the options.

5. Study Implications

Looking at the organizational traits identified in the literature, the results of our study confirm the relevance of some traits as determinants for engagement, namely: size and scope, professionalization, function and roles, communication, accountability, contextualization, visibility, reputation and credibility, legitimacy, as well as drawing on the possibilities for access and impact as motivations for engagement. In this section, we discuss some insights and implications related to each of them.

5.1. NGO Characteristics

Mexican NGOs are relatively small, with an average of 5.1 employees for environmental NGOs and 4.3 employees for social NGOs, with frequency distributions that are positively skewed, based on our sample. Thus, for most of them, sustaining an on-going relationship with the private sector is hampered by their small size. Larger NGOs, which have more employees and more volunteers, are better equipped and more likely to sustain engagement with firms because they have more capacity to manage multiple relationships and fulfill requirements. This is borne out in our results by the positive and statistically significant coefficients on "size," measured both by number of employees and number of volunteers, but an interaction effect between these two variables was insignificant, indicating no substitution of one for the other. In this regard, employees are more effective than volunteers, as this latter group often lacks the mandate and experience to make decisions and move projects forward. This is a rather obvious but important point, since the Mexican NGOs in our sample have roughly three times as many volunteers as paid employees on average. It should also be noted that there is probably some bi-directional causality here that is not picked up by the probit (regression) approach: NGOs don't necessarily get "large" first and then attract private sector involvement. Instead, such growth may come as a result of accommodating such involvement and being supported by private sector project funding.

Additionally, engaging with a company and dealing with firm managers might require a different skillset than traditional NGO activities like managing projects, conducting fieldwork, organizing campaigns, and fundraising. Finding the right person for the job and compensating him or her accordingly, results in more fluid negotiations and implementation of programs. Similarly, while the last stratifying variable, "year of creation, 2000–2014," is not significant in our final model, it is in several intermediate models and with a negative sign, indicating that NGOs with longer track records, hence more public recognition and credibility, are more attractive partners for possible private sector engagement, as one would expect.

Regarding NGO functions or roles, we found that only "program and project management" was statistically significant and with a large negative effect, which was unexpected, as one would think that demonstrating such capacity on the part of an NGO would be an attraction to the private sector. A deeper analysis shows that whether NGOs are or are not involved with program and project management, their engagement with the private sector is approximately the same, hence there is no discriminatory power in this particular activity. Adding in "public/business policy design" or "mobilization and public campaigns" as activities essentially offsets the negative effect of program and project management, which points towards a more strategic approach in which NGOs engage firms to transform their practices, improve public policy, and mobilize consumers around particular issues. In a similar vein, businesses might be more interested in partnering with NGOs that offer access to a new skillset, allowing them to engage in a novel set of tactics and activities.

5.2. Transparency

Disclosing information about the NGO's mission, projects undertaken, impacts, and results is a significant determinant of business engagement. Communicating clearly and regularly about board members and employees, donations, and interactions with companies and other relevant stakeholders is of particular importance in high corruption contexts, such as Mexico. In our results, we found

large positive and statistically significant effects for those NGOs that had a publicly available mission statement which highlighted the goal of private sector engagement and for those that publicized successful private sector engagement. Publicizing the public impact of projects was positive and highly significant in an intermediate version of our model, but that significance did not carry over into the final model. Publicizing members of the board, contributions and donations, financial statements, information about projects, and annual report of activities, were insignificant at all stages of model development. One can make a prima facie case for each of these, which is why they were included, but from the viewpoint of successful private sector engagement, in particular, we might expect an NGO with a strong financial statement to be an attractive partner, something we did not explore. Just publicizing a financial statement is not the same thing. In any case, having an effective communications and outreach plan will be key to instill confidence in potential partners.

In the case of Mexico, another statistically significant effect comes from whether the NGO is authorized to receive private sector donations. In our final model results, an NGO that is not so authorized is 35.8 percentage points less likely to engage with the private sector. Having the authorization to receive such donations requires that the NGO is properly registered and in compliance with a number of requirements from the government. This helps to promote good accountability practices from NGOs, incentivizing firms to partner with them instead of those NGOs less exposed to government scrutiny.

5.3. Stakeholder Relations

Organizations that are well-positioned within their networks and that convey clear messages about their mission and core values are better able to forge alliances with other stakeholders, as this collectivistic orientation is associated with a concern for the welfare of the greater group. In particular, interaction of NGOs in developing countries with volunteers and individual donors can demonstrate a strong constituent base from which to draw confirmation of social acceptance grounded on a good reputation and credibility, while relations with financial institutions and international donors reflect a sense of accountability and trustworthiness. These were the three stakeholder interactions that emerged as significant in our final model, with positive marginal effects ranging from 5.6 to 11.5 percentage points.

In terms of contextualization, we see that geographical location matters as shown in the main model results, where NGOs in Region 3 (which contains Mexico City) are 16.8 percentage points less likely to engage with the private sector than those in Region 1 (which contains Monterrey), ceteris paribus. While there are many more NGOs headquartered in Mexico City than in Monterrey, they operate more broadly. Monterrey-based NGOs carry out 86.7% of their activities locally, which can help explain their higher propensity for private sector engagement.

5.4. Trust and Reputation

For NGOs in the U.S. and Europe, partnering with businesses to help improve their environmental performance has been an evolutionary process, since some of these NGOs began as adversarial groups with the sole purpose of litigating claims against polluting businesses and even the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for lax regulation. For instance, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has added considerable scientific and technical expertise since its founding in 1970. NRDC has since established business outreach programs, like its Green Finance Center and Center for Market Innovation, and there are other examples.

In Mexico, this process is at a much earlier stage but, perhaps surprisingly, of the 22% of NGOs with an environmental focus in our study, 33% have had some sort of engagement with the private sector during the five years preceding our survey. For the 78% of socially oriented NGOs, 31% have. Thus, the relative proportions of NGOs that engaged with the private sector in our sample are quite similar no matter their orientation, as is the likelihood of private sector engagement when other factors are controlled for, which is embodied in the main probit model.

This goes to show that in the Mexican context, both NGOs and firms are seen as legitimate stewards and providers of social and environmental goods. The fact that a third of NGOs have engaged previously with the private sector also confirms that NGOs perceive this form of working as a legitimate one, with a certain degree of commitment from people and organizations to achieve these collaborations.

5.5. Motivations for Engagement

Regarding those NGOs that have sustained relations with the private sector in the past five years, our results confirm that NGOs are motivated to engage with firms because of the possibilities of acquiring additional resources, thus increasing the capacity to fulfill their mission and achieve their goals. For most NGOs this was clear, even in the face of some collaborative challenges, such as the diverging goals of each sector and the potential power imbalances between organizations. Our evaluation of perceptions among respondents confirmed a broad understanding of the tradeoffs that come with engagement, pointing toward the importance of evaluating the estimated risks and benefits before entering a collaboration. Having the expectations and responsibilities of each party laid out clearly from the beginning will deliver a strong basis for collaboration, helping to consolidate trust between people and organizations and creating the space to openly discuss any challenges or conflicts that might emerge in the course of the project. Additionally, early conversations about possible exit strategies for both parties has also been highlighted as an important factor for a successful collaboration.

5.6. Resulting Forms of Engagement

Lastly, we found that even if NGOs are more likely to engage with businesses because of their ability to influence public policy and mobilize consumers, in reality the majority of engagements take the form of joint projects, followed by volunteering opportunities. Participation with companies in government forums and fundraising appeared in third and fourth place, respectively, followed by providing consulting services, designing CSR programs for companies, and collaborating with firms in the design of public policies. This shows that the majority of NGOs in countries like Mexico might prefer to concentrate in time-bound and activity-specific formats involving bilateral relationships, rather than engaging in more complex policy and campaigning processes that could position firms negatively in the eyes of the government or other stakeholders.

6. Conclusions

In Mexico, many new NGOs were created after 2000, when they became regarded as vehicles for democratization and as a counterweight to government, by opening up channels of communication and participation, providing a training ground for activists, and promoting pluralism. Because our results are based on a designed random sample of Mexican NGOs, they are generalizable to the target population of environmentally and socially oriented NGOs listed as operating in Mexico as of 2016. Yet they also shed light on the general conditions that might serve to predict the likelihood of engagement within the NGO base of similar countries. To our knowledge, this is the first study of its kind in Latin America and we hope it provides a point of departure for evaluating the potential for engagement in other countries in the region.

With regard to the academic literature on NGO–business partnerships, it has largely focused on the phases of partnering and types of partnerships [36], the issues that are important to create a successful NGO–business partnership [21,25], and how these partnerships serve as vehicles to implement CSR and other sustainability practices within firms and their value chains [12,65]. Our research adds to the growing number of studies that offer useful and nuanced considerations for those involved in developing effective NGO business for the SDGs, particularly around the need to understand the incentives and motivations for organizations in these different sectors to partner.

Reflecting on the SDG targets cited at the outset, while our results are descriptive in nature and not normative, others have taken on the task of producing guides for NGOs who wish to engage

with the private sector. For example, Accenture Development Partnerships, in conjunction with the international NGO World Vison, developed a taxonomy of twenty engagement opportunities and present case studies illustrating their characteristics [83]. They also evaluate the NGO–business landscape in eleven different countries, including Brazil, which has a similar HDI score and World Bank classification as Mexico. Critical success factors include equity between partners regarding the value of their respective contributions, transparency in all facets of the relationship, and mutual benefit, factors that emerged as important in our study as well. Individual companies have also developed statements of purpose and guidelines for engagement with NGOs and other sectors that likewise emphasize aspects of the partnership that can lead to creating shared value, including, in the case of NGOs, their financial "capacity," something akin to the variable "size" in our study. Likewise, influential books oriented toward sustainability in business practice now emphasize the historical role of NGOs within civil society, their growing influence and the necessity for businesses to engage in a meaningful way with them [84].

These specific efforts (taxonomies, case studies and guidelines) developed by practitioners, in addition to the insights generated by the scientific community, serve as building blocks to continue to design and implement effective partnerships in order to address complex social and environmental challenges, thus contributing to the achievement of SDG target 17.17. For this purpose, it has become vital to understand the partnering process as a whole, including the organizational capacities needed, the selection of partners, the definition of goals, the managing of resources and activities, and the evaluation of outcomes, among other key aspects. Our work contributes to the knowledge base about NGO capacities necessary to produce engagement with businesses in the first place and highlights the most relevant organizational traits to the partnering approach. But there still is a need to explore existing and past NGO–business partnerships in order to assess their efficacy and the reasons for success or failure in order to design better partnerships going forward.

For the purposes of the SDGs, what may still be missing in countries like Mexico is a central repository of information on partnership opportunities and strategies for NGOs. While there are a growing number of NGOs in Latin America whose purpose is to bring the private sector and civil society together around issues like CSR in Brazil [85] and biodiversity in Mexico [86], to mention just two examples, these are focused on large companies. Yet the vast majority of firms in Latin American countries are small- and medium-size enterprises (SMEs). Because SMEs lack the resources to develop CSR capabilities on their own, the NGO community has a critical role to play in bringing pertinent information and expertise to bear.

Better understanding of the mechanisms behind partnership design and implementation, as well as their outcomes and impacts, is central to ensuring that engagements of all forms and sizes—bilateral, trilateral, multi-stakeholder, and covering the full spectrum of business activity—are effectively serving to change or improve current conditions. Of particular importance in this regard would be to look more closely at what partnerships "do" in terms of sharing knowledge and expertise and mobilizing resources in order to achieve the SDGs. While information about this in Mexico is still limited, our research offers some preliminary insights about the types of NGOs that are engaging with businesses and the organizational traits that equip them to do so. Our study's findings reinforce the importance of strategic engagement between NGOs and the private sector, which is central to the more ambitious and transformational partnership arrangements that are required to achieve the SDGs in Mexico and around the world. The scale, scope, and aspiration of the SDGs requires more purposive, better planned, and longer-term cooperation between and contributions by businesses and NGOs via cross-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Mapping and Analysis of Sustainability-Oriented Partnerships in Non-Profit Organizations: The Case of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: The growing alignment between Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs) and cooperation development actors has contributed to creating new partnerships to be harnessed in addressing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., SDG 17). This study aimed to map the key characteristics of engagements between NPOs and other actors. An analytical framework was designed to map the partnerships in terms of four main areas, namely, drivers, motivations, the partnership's characteristics, and outcomes. Charitable associations were selected as a representative type of NPO. The study analyzed 459 partnerships established by charities in the Riyadh region during 2016–2018. The findings showed that the associations engaged in partnerships mainly to enhance their financial stability. Cross-sector partnerships were observed in 63.4% of the cases, principally with the private sector. The results also indicated that 89.7% of the partnerships could be called "transactional partnerships" in cases of both philanthropic and social investment partnerships. It could be concluded that the mapping framework provides useful information for policy-makers concerned with how charitable associations engaged with the other actors, as well as the existing policy gaps to be implemented for sustainability.

1. Introduction

The concept of Sustainable Development gained enormous attention worldwide after the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 [1]. There are 17 SDGs, which address the economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainability issues [2]. Because of the scale and complexity of these issues, the global sustainable development agenda—as formulated in SDGs—emphasizes that the first 16 goals need to be covered by diverse cross-sector partners to explore innovative solutions that effectively address these problems [3]. In other words, SDG 17, 'Partnerships for the Goals', underlines the importance of interactions between actors to foster sustainable development [4]. The 2030 Agenda refers to two main types of partnerships for implementing the SDGs. First, there is the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, to be led by governments, which aims to bring together the public sector, the private sector, civil society, the UN system, and other actors to facilitate an intensive global engagement around implementation and mobilizing all available resources [5]. Second, multi-stakeholder partnerships are a complement to the Global Partnership. Multi-stakeholder partnerships "involve organisations from different societal sectors working together,

sharing risks and combining their unique resources and competencies in ways that can generate and maximize value towards shared partnership and individual partner objectives, often through more innovative, more sustainable, more efficient and/ or more systemic approaches" [6] (p. 1). The aim of these partnerships is to mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources to support the implementation of the SDGs [7].

The United Nations and other international organizations have acknowledged the contribution of Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs) in achieving the SDGs, through specific social, institutional, and technological innovations and practices [8]. NPOs consist of commercial and noncommercial organizations whose end goals are to improve a community's wellbeing by providing goods and services rather than maximizing the profits they make [9]. The core ideology of most NPOs is economic philanthropy—to improve democratic citizenship, social cohesion, and fair trade and to establish a better economy for all [10]. Nowadays, NPOs play a vital role at both the national and international level in addressing social, economic, and environmental problems, and these organizations also facilitate integration of sustainable development concerns into the decision-making process within both the public and private sectors [11]. To tackle such problems, NPOs have deployed different strategies by relying on multiple resource providers to pursue other activities furthering the common good and to enable genuine progress in a community [3,10].

Since the 1980s, NPOs have undergone remarkable changes in promoting the adoption of business-like approaches [12]. In this context, Dart [13] made a first step toward developing the area of NPOs becoming more business-like. He proposes that NPOs can become business-like in any dimension of the following: business-like organization of NPOs' core, business-like goals, and business-like rhetoric. The first dimension focuses on the concept of business-like at the core, with support processes in NPOs reflecting the belief that organizations can and should be built on corporate management knowledge and practice [14]. A number of different concepts highlight particular aspects of business-like organizations. Firstly, corporatization refers to changes in the NPO's governance structure [15,16]. Secondly, marketization focuses on NPOs' market-type relationships with stakeholders or market-type relationships gradually penetrating a country's welfare system from a macro perspective [17,18]. Thirdly, social enterprises focus on undertaking the commercial activities and entrepreneurial behaviors of NPOs that involve high degrees of pro-activeness, risk-taking, and innovation [19,20]. Fourthly, the concept of professionalization is also used to describe business-like organizations. This term is generally describing the selection method of personnel [21]. In other words, more staff with a business management background may be antithetical to business-like practices [22]. Finally, philanthropy can also be organized in more business-like ways. Venture philanthropy applies venture capitalist methods to philanthropic funding, not just by investing money but also by providing business expertise [23]. In return, NPOs have high expectations regarding results and accountability [24]. The second dimension deals with NPOs adopting business-like goals. This most directly refers to the concepts of conversion and commercialization. The term conversion refers to changing of legal status from non-profit to for-profit and shifting control of assets or responsibility for liabilities [25], whereas commercialization captures NPOs' increasing reliance on revenue from sales of goods and services [18]. The third dimension encompasses a set of key concepts that deal with business-like rhetoric, emphasizing some theoretical ideas such as communication, organizational identity, and value frames [26–29].

Collaboration in partnerships is one of the effective strategies in motivating businesses to source sustainably so as to improve the community's social or environmental conditions [30,31]. Partnerships have become one of the main issues within business–society relations to achieve sustainability governance [32,33]. Therefore, research on sustainability-oriented partnerships has received a considerable amount of attention since the 1990s, both in the social [34,35] and the environmental sustainability domains [36–39]. Partnerships between private, public, and NPOs are defined in multiple ways. Nevidjon [40] defines partnerships as "pooling of joint resources (financial, natural, and human), knowledge, skills to create added value". However, a more holistic definition of partnerships is "collaborative arrangements of joint resources and competencies in which two or

more actors are involved in a non-hierarchical process through which these actors pursue common goals" [41]. According to Ferraro et al. [42] and George et al. [43], partnerships have emerged as a new paradigm for strategy across the different sectors to solve complex sustainability challenges through collaboration. The five clusters of partnership characteristics are as follows: producing outcomes that contribute to the creation of public value; sharing resources, practical knowledge, and cultural values between partners; enhanced access to funding; attainment of common goals for mutual benefits; contractual, structured binding agreements; organizational mission fulfillment [40,44]. Understanding such characteristics in practice requires analyzing the framework of the partnership in terms of (1) form and focus, (2) nature and types of partnerships involved, (3) organizing and acting, (4) governance structure, and (5) sustaining outcomes [45].

In Saudi Arabia, NPOs were represented in four kinds of leading organizations: charities, cooperatives, foundations, and endowments [46]. According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Development [47], the number of NPOs rose by 131% from 2011 (1125) to 2018 (2598), including their revenues (7.8%), expenses (8.3%), and assets (10.2%). Despite the increased number of NPOs, their performance has been inadequate, and they tend to be weak and governed by traditional management practices. This weakness results in the following: a less than 1% share of GDP; a lower rate of outreach (1:43,000); a decline of volunteer involvement in their activities; a limited scale of professionalism and effectiveness; focusing on "charity" instead of social development; and a lower rate of employment contribution [48]. According to Altuwaijri [49], the majority of NPOs had been faced with different challenges, including an aligning mission, methods, and resources; earning public trust and creating awareness of the significance of NPOs; balancing individual interest and the common good; moving beyond charity to systemic change; lack of funding; networking with the private sector; institutionalizing the internal functions and structures. From 2010 to 2018, NPOs have adopted a large number of partnerships with other sectors to promote economic growth, developing their internal capabilities, capitalizing on new opportunities or addressing complex problems, and fostering local ownership for sustainability [50].

Despite several studies examining different areas of partnerships between NPOs and other actors, most research has focused on the company's perspective and university–business partnerships. Limited research has attempted to map and analyze the nature and impact of the partnerships implemented and the various roles in collaborative settings, in particular, within a Saudi context. In the present paper, we aim to provide a holistic understanding of this topic to try to cover this gap by mapping and analyzing the partnerships implemented between charitable associations and other sectors. The results gained from this study will support the fourth theme of the Saudi National Transformation Program 2020 as part of its Vision 2030 (Social Empowerment and Non-Profit Sector Development) and its strategic objectives: support NPOs growth, enable NPOs to achieve a more profound impact, and empower social development work [51]. Furthermore, this study makes a unique contribution to the literature by presenting the internal and external factors that create conditions for collaboration, clarifying how public and private actors seek to engage with NPOs for sustainability, results gained, and where policy gaps remain.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Drivers of Partnerships

Drivers are external factors that create the conditions for the partnership to occur [52]. They are part of the broader context that promotes the formation of a partnership [53]. Partnerships are essential to accelerating progress in the SDGs [54]. Generally, there are two main reasons partnerships are critical for sustainable development. First, the complex character of sustainability problems demands the active involvement of all partners to resolve them. Second, sustainable development stresses the need for mutual attainment of environmental health, social equity, and economic wealth, for which the responsibilities and resources are allocated to different partners [55]. The literature has identified a

variety of sociopolitical factors that affect sustainability-oriented partnerships, including individual, ecological, and organizational contexts [56]. In this sense, meeting the expectations of the stakeholders and the urgent need to raise the societal perception of corporate responsibilities are among the drivers that contribute to the formation of partnerships for sustainability [57]. Furthermore, the rise of information communication technologies (ICTs) also encourages actors to engage in partnerships [58]. ICTs facilitate cooperative relationships to address stakeholder needs, share information, and mobilize their demands beyond their traditional interactions [52]. Additionally, ICTs play a crucial role in the transformation of organizations in today's highly international business environment [59]. In the same vein, increasing pressure to compete in global markets has led the private sector to work with NPOs. This engagement creates business partnerships with lower costs and fewer regulations, particularly in developing countries [60]. Another critical driver of collaborative engagements is the regulatory environment [61]. As noted by Kapelus [62], the absence of environmental regulations drives partnership formation to influence or avert pending or imminent regulations. However, private entities are now taking a role in meeting forms of regulation, including management standards, certification schemes, codes of conduct, and eco-labels, by creating partnerships with NPOs and other organizations [52,63]. Unsurprisingly, the almost universal decline in governmental efficacy is another essential contextual driver of partnership [64]. Governments' failure to meet sustainable development challenges drives NPOs to gain the opportunity to replace the government and engage with other actors collaboratively [65].

2.2. Motivations

Motivations are the specific conditions that stimulated the partners collectively to address an issue or set of issues [53]. According to Gray and Stites [52], there are four types of motivation for forming partnerships: competence-oriented, resource-oriented, legitimacy-oriented, and society-oriented motivations. By "competencies", we refer to the knowledge and skills shared during collective action between partners [66]. These acquired competencies are an essential motivator because of the differences in knowledge, skills, and capabilities between partners [67]. For businesses and other organizations, motivators such as gaining expertise, leveraging unmatched knowledge, identifying issues and trends, and growing awareness of complex social problems are incentives for partnerships [68,69], whereas acquiring complementary capabilities, such as technical and managerial skills, is very important for NPOs [70]. In terms of resource-oriented motivations, the term "resources" refers to an organization's assets, including social and financial capital [67]. Leveraging resources such as gaining access to networks and to business and political leaders; capacity building; creating innovative products and markets; securing monetary funds; and gaining goods, services, and volunteers motivate NPOs and other sectors to collaborate [71,72]. Both partners can benefit from these complementary resources to reduce the costs and share the risks of garnering these resources separately [52].

Regarding legitimacy, partners need to meet societal norms and expectations for obtaining social acceptance [67]. Without legitimacy, partners will have difficulty in acquiring the resources needed for partnership sustainability [73]. For NPOs, legitimacy is critical for different motivations, including building a reputation, image, and branding; maximizing sphere of impact; garnering broader support; becoming a more prominent actor; and responding to demands for accountability [74–76]. On the other hand, reasons such as saving face, building the social license to operate, avoiding confrontation, and attracting and retaining employees are the most frequent justifications offered by businesses and other organizations for partnership [67,77,78]. Finally, partners may also have broader society-oriented motivations for collaboration. In this context, Kolk et al. [66] and Byiers et al. [78] argued that the importance of partnerships for society represent the following motivations: risk sharing, influencing policy development, responding to stakeholder problems, building public awareness of issues, and influencing social and environmental change. These motivations promote the needed changes to raise society's capacity to deal with sustainability issues [52].

2.3. Characteristics of Partnerships

The relationship between the partners should be properly managed in order to understand the set of continuous interactions that take place within the collaboration [79]. In short, it is about knowing those elements that characterize the relationship between the partners, this being essential to analyze such relationship attributes as the commitment, the trust, or the mutual exchange of information [80]. Therefore, finding the right partner is a critical determinant for partnership sustainability [81]. This step is essential to combine complementary skills and resources successfully to achieve the partners' objectives [82]. Partner-selection criteria varied according to the types of partners that were best suited to implement a partnership, the objectives of a partnership, partnership type, and nature of activities [78]. However, Menden et al. [82] argued that finding a suitable partner is not an easy process for both partners because of ideological differences. Therefore, many NPOs and private companies struggle to identify the right counterpart and build trust-based collaboration [52].

There is a wide diversity of partnership types between NPOs and other organizations [83]. These are classified in the present study into three dimensions to enable discussion: number and types of organizations engaged in a partnership, institutional agreement, and degree of business versus social orientation. Partnership forms include intra-sector and cross-sector partnerships [78]. Intra-sector partnerships represent the collaboration between organizations within the same sector [84], while cross-sector partnerships refer to collaborations between organizations that operate in different sectors—in other words, universities, governments, businesses, and civil society [85].

Regarding institutional agreement, partnerships can be classified into three types: informal partnerships, partnerships involving minimal work between two organizations, and formal contractual arrangements with the exchange of funds [78,86]. However, the legal form of a partnership is the only form of governance structure to provide direction, manage the evolution of the partnership, and resolve internal conflicts [87]. In this regard, Afansa et al. [88] listed four formal arrangements between parties, including Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), written agreements between parties to clearly establish expectations, goals, and roles and responsibilities; Letters of Association, written documents defining the terms of a partnership; Terms of Reference (TOR); and contracts, agreements by two or more parties, usually enforceable by law.

The continuum of partnership according to the size of investments and degree of business versus social orientation includes two types: transactional partnerships and strategic partnerships [67,76,89]. In transactional partnerships, organizations only donate funds to NPOs but do not engage further [78,90]. Weihe [90] identified two forms of such partnerships: (1) philanthropic partnerships that involve the one-way transfer of donated financial assets, services, products, workforce, or other resources from a partner to other partners; and (2) partnerships of reciprocal exchange (social investments) that involve more organizational resources and can be used more strategically by engaging in mutual or reciprocal marketing and campaigning activities. In strategic partnerships, partners combine complementary strengths to generate a more significant developmental effect [91]. Tennyson et al. [81] distinguish two forms of strategic partnership: (1) partnerships of independent value creation (new commercial initiatives), in which all partners collectively attempt to match each of their individual goals—the partnership creates value for both partners but in different ways—and (2) integrative partnerships (core-business partnerships), in which all partners work together strategically to develop a new service or address a common problem in which they all achieve a mutual benefit.

2.4. Outcomes of Partnerships

The term "outcomes" refers to changes or effects resulting from the partnership [84]. Measuring partnership outcomes is an essential step in the successful management of a partnership for different reasons, including monitoring resources, concluding lessons learned, and supporting the public accountability of a partnership [52,78,92]. A key outcome of a partnership for NPOs is the acquisition of resources (including goods, services, volunteers, technical and managerial expertise, and investments) to achieve organizational goals [52]. Other outcomes may include the development

of human capital, environmental protection, organizational innovation, access to decision-makers, better access to information, more effective services, and attention to sustainability [52,53,66,93]. Austin and Seitanidi [94] noted that partnership outcomes significantly differ according to each level of analysis. At the meso level (organizational NPO), associational value is considered as highly important in terms of credibility and visibility, increased public awareness, and increase in support for organizational mission. At the micro level (individuals), the most important outcomes are represented in instrumental value such as new managerial skills and associational value in terms of brand reputation, legitimacy, increased stakeholder loyalty, and stakeholder communication. At the macro level (society), some issues, intended and unintended, have high priority such as improved well-being, improved social inclusion, awareness and disease prevention, and increased life expectancy. Despite the multiplicity of potential benefits for partnering between organizations, the most significant risk for NPOs, as noted by Sterne et al. [53], is a tarnished reputation should these organizations align with other partners who fail to meet the level of commitment needed to achieve the desired social and environmental impact.

For the present study, as shown in Figure 1, four components were descriptively tested to illustrate the current situation of sustainability-oriented partnerships in the study area. These components are extrinsic drivers, intrinsic motivations, characteristics of the partnerships, and outcomes of the partnerships.
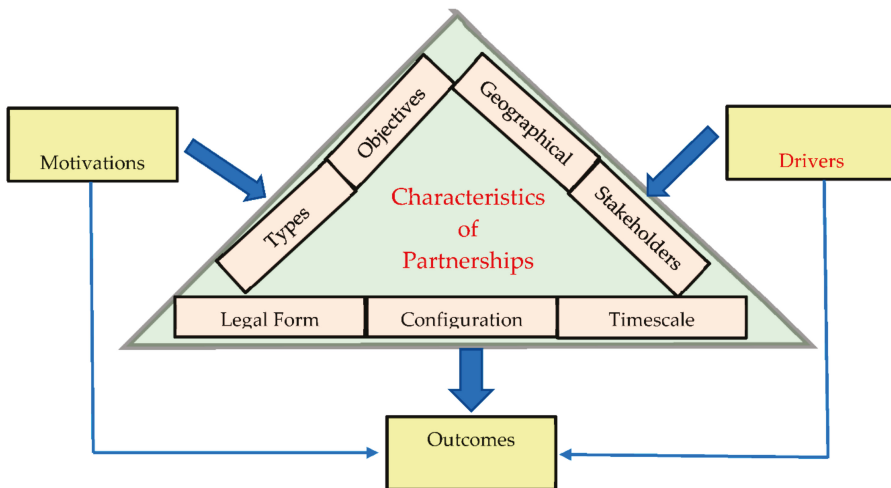
Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Area

The present study was carried out in the Riyadh region, located in the center of Saudi Arabia. It is the second-largest Saudi region, with an area of 404,420 km^2. It also ranked second in terms of population, with 8,216,284 inhabitants. Administratively, the region is divided into 19 governorates [95].

3.2. Survey Design

A qualitative survey was designed to map the partnerships established between NPOs and other actors. According to Jansen [96], a qualitative survey is a systematic method for determining the diversity of a specific phenomenon within a given population. In the context of this study, the phenomenon is the way in which different actors engage with NPOs. The unit analysis in this survey is a partnership. The present study highlights how the partnerships established differ across NPOs in terms of

numbers, types of actors engaged, and characteristics of the partnerships. To conduct this study, we selected charitable associations as representative organizations for NPOs. Furthermore, the selection of partnerships was identified by two criteria: whether the partnerships were signed during 2016–2018 and the formality of the partnerships.

3.3. Sample

Given the focus of the present study on partnerships, the population of the present study included all charities that are working in the study area. We focused only on organizations that have a common interest or activity (charitable association), while organizations established by donations of funds for future causes and that give grants to other organizations (foundation) were not included in the population. For this purpose, the database of the Ministry of Labor and Social Development was used [27]. All charities working in the different domains of sustainable social development were selected. This resulted in a total of 192 associations. Each association was approached to collect data on its engagement in partnerships with the other actors. It was observed that some associations did not engage in formal partnerships during the period identified. Thus, in mapping the partnerships, we were guided by a set of criteria: (a) whether at least one partnership was signed by the association, (b) whether official documents of a partnership were provided, and (c) whether the partnership cooperated with the study's team and answered questions accurately. On this basis, we selected a random sample of 81 associations. The number of partnerships signed during 2016–2018 is illustrated in Table 1. In total, 459 partnerships were included in the sample, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of the partnerships signed between charitable associations and other actors during 2016–2018.

Year	Number *	%
2016	105	22.9
2017	136	29.6
2018	218	47.5
Total	459	

* This number included the partnerships that signed before 2016 and were still established during the investigation period.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

According to the conceptual framework of this study, four main dimensions were analyzed in each partnership: drivers, motivations, characteristics, and outcomes. The data were collected and organized through a framework analysis approach (Table 2). Framework analysis is often used in policy research when issues have been identified a priori and/or the sample is predesigned [97]. This framework shows how the specific and main questions relate to each other and to the four main dimensions. This study used the content analysis method for analysis of the official documents of the partnership, partnership agreements and annexes, and the association's website to obtain the needed information according to the analytical framework. In case of missing data, we arranged telephone calls with some employees of the associations. The research was conducted between September and December 2019. The information was then indexed, tabulated, and charted by using frequencies and percentages.

<div align="center">**Table 2.** Framework for examining actors' engagement with the charitable associations.</div>

Dimensions	Data Options			
1. Extrinsic drivers *	Copied from official documents and/or actors' website			
2. Intrinsic motivations *	Copied from official documents and/or actors' website			
3. Characteristics of a partnership				
3.1 Configuration				
3.1.1 Partner-selection criteria *	Alignment with the partner's mission and strategy Partner's commitment (dedicated to performing tasks) Partner's financial stability or size of financial resources acquired Partner's competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) Contributed complementary resources Personal relations Previous experience with the partner Quality of services offered (added value for stakeholders) Partner's reputation Legal structure (roles, responsibilities, and legal form) Organizational structure (governance model) Strategic value for the future			
3.1.2 Nationality of partners *	Domestic	National	International	All
3.1.3 Actor type *	University	Private sector	Banks	Foundations
	Endowments	Government	UN organizations	Other
3.1.4 Institutional form	Intra-sector		Cross-sector	
3.1.5 Legal form	Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs)	Letter of Association	Terms of Reference (TOR)	Contract
3.1.6 Timescale	Number of months		Undetermined	
3.1.7 Geographical coverage	District	City	Governorate	Region
	National	International		
3.2 Stakeholders *	Copied from official documents and/or actors' website			
3.3 Objectives *	Copied from official documents and/or actors' website			
3.4 Types	Philanthropic		Social investments	
	New commercial initiatives		Core-business	
4. Outcomes				
4.1 Benefits *	Copied from official documents and/or actors' website			
4.2 Evaluation				
4.2.1 Implementation	Yes		No	
4.2.2 Evaluative party	Association	Partner		Third-party
4.2.3 Methodology	Copied from official documents and/or actors' website			
4.3 Maintenance of a partnership	Completed and renewed annually		Completed and all objectives accomplished	
	Completed and objectives partially accomplished		Completed and objectives not accomplished	
	Termination of contract			

<div align="center">* Each partnership could be included in more than one item.</div>

4. Results

4.1. Extrinsic Drivers

The results of the sociopolitical factors that influence collaborations between the partners are presented in Figure 2. The results show that the most crucial external factor that explains why associations decided to engage in partnerships was that growth opportunities for collaboration were provided by Saudi Vision 2030 (76.5%). This finding reflects the government's encouragement of cross-sector partnerships to overcome the challenges facing the Saudi sustainable development plan for 2030. The results also revealed that increasing awareness of the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was another important driver, mentioned in 60.6% of the partnerships established. This result shows the strong belief among companies that partnerships with associations would be an opportunity to create value-added and a positive image about their role in society's problem-solving. The higher need for social innovation was another driver for partnerships, at 50.8%. This need is

understandable because one partner is not able to solve complex issues alone. Hence, the partnerships offer a greater opportunity to suggest and implement innovative solutions for intervention.
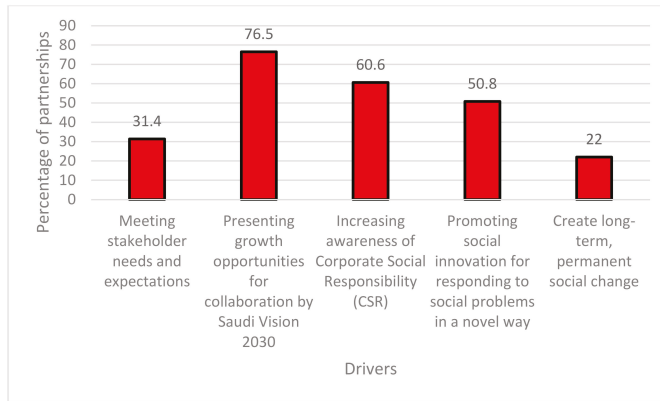

Figure 2. Extrinsic drivers of the partnerships.

4.2. Intrinsic Motivations

The distribution of the partnerships according to the reasons that motivate the associations to partner is presented in Figure 3, where it can be observed that the associations mentioned various reasons for each partnership. The findings showed that enhancing financial stability was the most important motive in the vast majority of the partnerships (84.7%). This result indicates that financial need is considered by the associations surveyed as their overarching motivation. The results also highlighted the importance of leveraging resources as one of the main motivations in more than two-thirds of the partnerships analyzed (66.9%). This finding reflects the fact that associations used partnerships to better achieve their mission through maximizing the use of resources from other partners. Furthermore, enhancing access to knowledge and expertise ranked third at 62.7%. This result supports the previous results, in which financial and non-financial resources are among the most important motivations for a partnership's engagement.
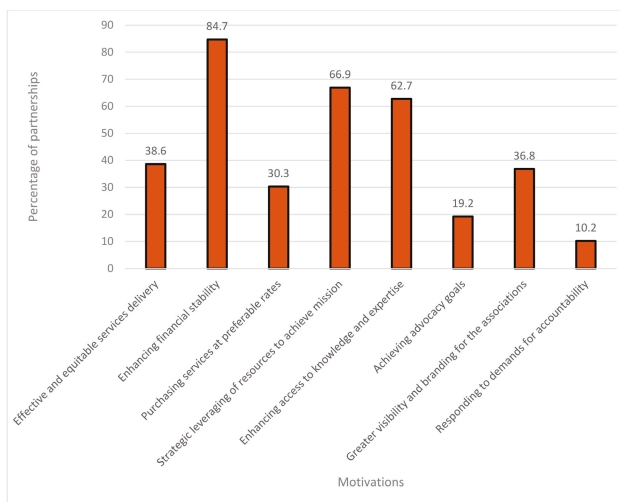
Figure 3. Intrinsic motivations of the partnerships.

4.3. Characteristics of the Partnerships

4.3.1. Configuration

The partner-selection criteria are presented in Table 3. The results reported that a partner's financial stability was the most frequent selection criterion in more than half of the partnerships analyzed (58.4%). This supports the earlier findings obtained in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 and confirms that associations considered financial resources as an important issue for achieving their mission. Approximately 50% of the partnerships studied also indicated that a partner's commitment was another reason for selecting partners. This result shows that partners' dedication to performing tasks as planned in the partnerships has greater influence on the partner-selection process from the associations' perspective. However, one noteworthy finding was that selecting a partner is based on personal relations, as observed in 45.9% of the partnerships investigated. This finding shows that selecting or attracting partners for collaboration with charities is not an easy process. Thus, the headquarters-based members of associations use their relations with the private sector and other actors to illustrate the strategic programs of the associations to meet the real needs of their stakeholders.

Table 3. The partner-selection criteria applied by the associations.

Criteria (n = 459)	Frequency	Percentage
Alignment with the association's mission and strategy	146	31.8
Partner's commitment	231	50.3
Partner's financial stability or amount of financial resources acquired	268	58.4
Partner's competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities)	85	18.5
Contributed complementary resources	31	6.8
Personal relations	211	45.9
Previous experience with the partner	133	29.0
Quality of services offered (added value for stakeholders)	192	41.8
Partner's reputation	189	41.2
Legal structure (roles, responsibilities, and legal form)	177	38.6
Organizational structure (governance model)	63	13.7
Strategic value for the future	56	12.2

As part of the analytical framework, partnerships were examined to identify areas of institutional form as shown in Table 4. The results indicated that collaboration between organizations within the same sector is observed in 36.6% of the total partnerships analyzed, while the remaining partnerships (63.4%) are characterized as cross-sector partnerships. The results showed that the nationality of the partners varied across partnerships, including domestic, national, and international partners at 71%, 57.3%, and 4.8%, respectively. Moreover, the multiplicity and diversity of actors engaged in the partnerships are also observed in our analysis. However, among the associations surveyed, the private sector and foundations were involved in the majority of corporations.

Our analysis of the formal arrangements between partners showed that MoUs were the most popular form in the majority of partnerships analyzed (Table 5). This result reflects the fact that partners, in particular, private sector partners, often choose to use an MoU because it is a friendlier, bipartisan expression of a working relationship than a formal contract. Obviously, the findings indicate that the partners do not prefer to imply a legally enforceable agreement. The results also indicated that the second legal form applied was a letter of association, as seen in 22.2% of the partnerships. Furthermore, TOR and contracts were regarded as the least important forms considered in the legal arrangements between the associations surveyed and other actors.

Table 4. Type and nationality of actors engaged in the partnerships.

Number (n = 459)	Number	Percentage
Institutional form		
Intra-sector	168	36.6
Cross-sector	291	63.4
Nationality of partners *		
Domestic	326	71.0
National	263	57.3
International	22	4.8
Actor type *		
University	48	10.5
Private sector	309	67.3
Banks	8	1.7
Foundations	205	44.7
Endowments	28	6.1
Government	19	4.1
UN organizations	6	1.3
Other	27	5.9

* Some partnerships included more than one actor.

Table 5. Distribution of the partnerships according to their legal form.

Variable (n = 459)	Number	Percentage
Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)	338	73.6
Letter of Association	102	22.2
Terms of Reference (TOR)	6	1.3
Contract	13	2.8

In terms of the timescale of the partnerships, as shown in Table 6, the findings indicated that the duration of the cooperation varied across the partnerships investigated. It was observed that among the timescales, one year was the most popular choice for the duration of the partnerships. Fewer than half of the partnerships (44.2%) had continued for one year. The next most popular period for the partnerships was less than one year. This duration was observed in 17.9% of the partnerships. Besides that, the timescales of one-and-a-half years and two years were also observed in 13.1% and 8.1% of the partnerships studied, respectively.

Table 6. Distribution of the partnerships according to their timescales.

Variable (n = 459) *	Number	Percentage
<One year	82	17.9
One year	203	44.2
One-and-a-half years	60	13.1
Two years	37	8.1

* Because of the extension of some partnerships to a certain period, the duration of a partnership presented in this table is only calculated as mentioned in the partnership's annex at the beginning of the collaboration.

As part of the partnership configuration analysis, partnerships were examined to identify their geographical coverage, as shown in Table 7. Approximately 40% of the partnerships cover a geographically localized community within a larger city or town. This may be attributed to the fact that the multiplicity of associations in the city and the limited financial resources make each association focus on a specific area with the target people to show the added value of the partnership. Furthermore, almost one-quarter of the partnerships cover various areas within a city. On the other

hand, the percentage of partnerships that included activities conducted at the national level reached only 8.7% of the total partnerships implemented.

Table 7. Distribution of the partnerships according to their geographical coverage.

Variable (n = 459)	Number	Percentage
A neighborhood or city block	184	40.1
City	115	25.1
Governorate	99	21.6
Region	21	4.6
National	40	8.7

4.3.2. Stakeholders

The distribution of the partnerships, according to their stakeholders, is presented in Figure 4, where it can be concluded that some partnerships involved various targets. The results showed that the most frequent beneficiaries were poor or low-income people and people with health problems—physical, mental, and addiction-related. These categories were observed in more than half of the corporations, at 55.6% and 50.3%, respectively. Moreover, the cases of women—widows, divorcees, and victims of domestic violence—were addressed in 38.1% of the partnerships. In addition, the youth were also targeted by more than one-third (36.2%) of the corporations. Finally, other stakeholders targeted by the partnerships included those with disabilities, orphans, homeless persons, children, employees of the associations, those with poor literacy, the elderly, and smokers.
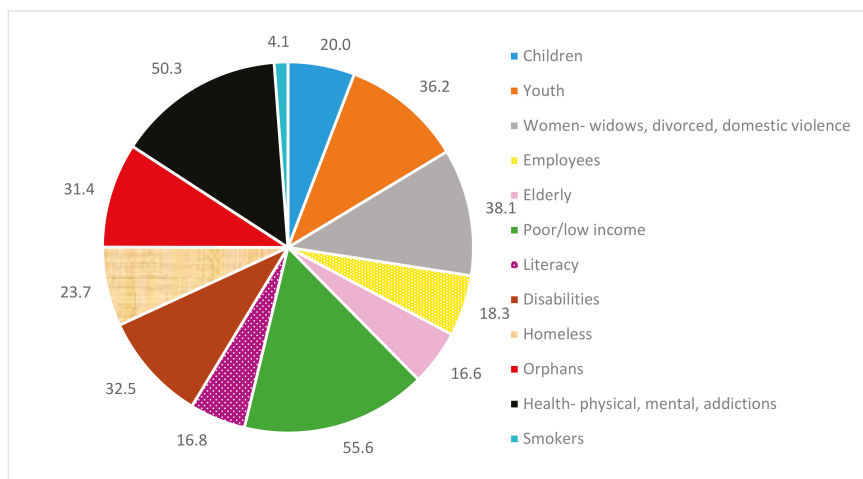
Figure 4. Stakeholders of the partnerships.

4.3.3. Objectives

Figure 5 shows the purpose of the partnerships between charities and other actors. Among the three most frequent objectives for corporations, direct funding and indirect funding ranked first and third at 43.1% and 29%, respectively, whereas the need of sponsors for various events ranked second at around 32% of the partnerships investigated. It was also observed that cultural and regional services, entrepreneurship, and capacity building and training were among the issues that attracted actors to engage in associations with the corporations.
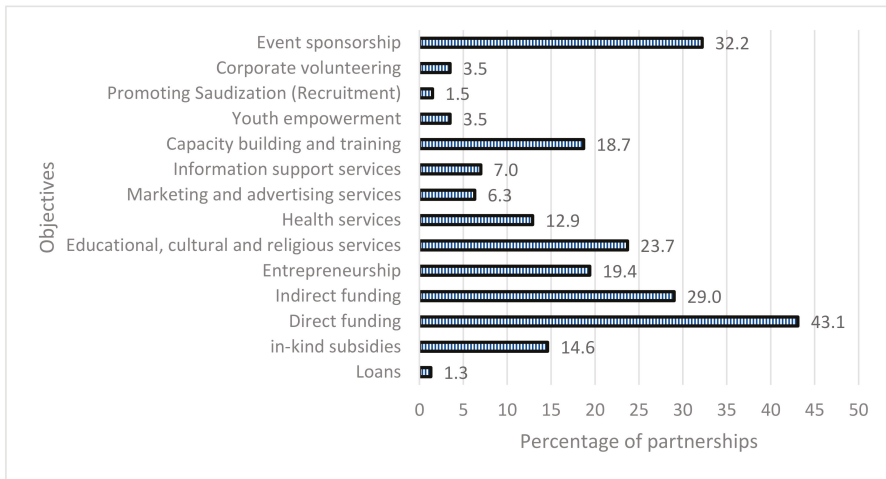
Figure 5. Objectives of the partnerships.

4.3.4. Types

The results that described the types of partnerships in terms of the degree of business versus social orientation are illustrated in Figure 6. The findings reported that the overwhelming majority of the partnerships (89.7%) could be called transactional partnerships in the cases of both philanthropic and social investment partnerships. As philanthropy was the most common type between actors, this reflects the fact that partnerships are motivated by the need for financial resources (grants or gifts-in-kind) and the improvement of the partner's image by doing something socially beneficial. On the other hand, strategic partnerships that were believed to create mutual benefit for the strategic activities of both parties were only occasionally observed in corporations. These corporations involved the category of new commercial initiatives (7.2%) and core-business activities (3.1%).
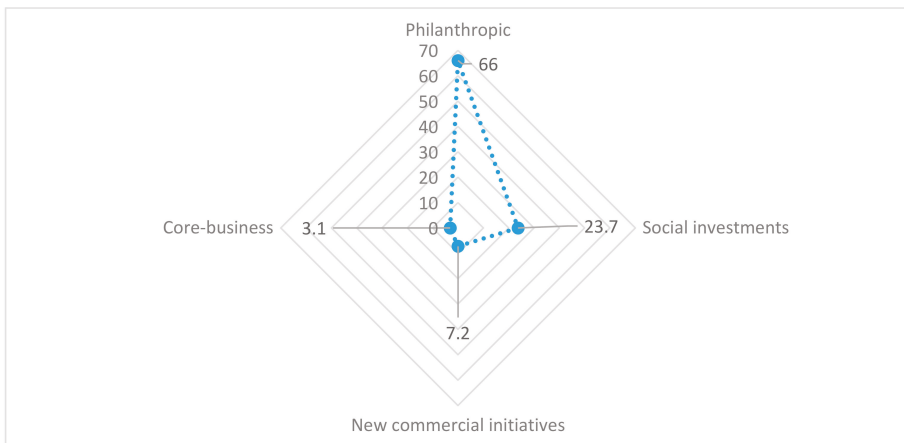
Figure 6. Types of partnerships.

4.4. Outcomes

4.4.1. Benefits

Figure 7 gives an overview of what both the associations and the partners gained. The results indicated that increased access to financial capital was the most frequent benefit from the associations' point of view. Furthermore, providing effective services was observed as an important benefit in fewer than two-thirds of the partnerships (65.8%) examined. On the partners' side, it was observed that increased recognition of their role in social responsibility was the most beneficial in 45.1% of the corporations. One of the interesting results in terms of benefits gained by the partners was reduced tax rates, seen in 39% of the partnerships.
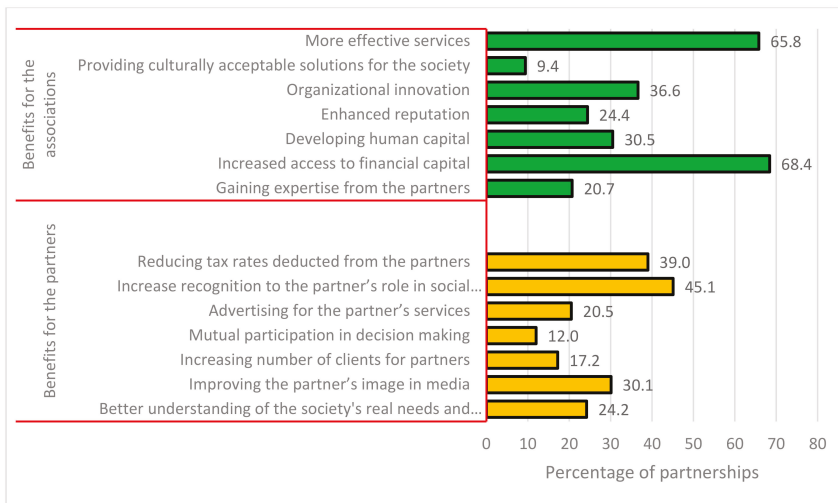
Figure 7. Benefits for both associations and partners (The benefits for the partners were determined from the associations' perspective in light of content analysis and telephone calls with the associations' employees).

4.4.2. Evaluation

As part of measuring the outcomes, the mapping framework showed that only 20.3% of the partnerships analyzed were assessed (Figure 8) using the evaluation tools and frameworks identified in Figure 9. Of these, 50.5% of the partnerships were evaluated by the partners, whereas 38.7% of them were assessed by a third party (Figure 10). The findings indicated that the evaluation methodologies varied across the partnerships, as shown in Figure 9. Out of seven methodologies used for evaluation, the most frequently used tool was the stakeholder satisfaction survey. This tool included closed quantitative questions and open-ended questions for determining the partnership's performance from the stakeholder's perspective [98]. In the same vein, the partnership self-assessment tool was used in the case of 24.7% of the partnerships. This methodology focuses on different aspects of the partnership. It was used by the members of a partnership who voluntarily participated in self-evaluation to express their perceptions and opinions about partnership experiences. It was designed to be used by members of a partnership [99]. Additionally, the tool of the logic model is also observed as an important methodology for the evaluation of the partnerships, at 19.4%. A logic model is a useful tool to describe the main elements of the partnership, including inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes (short-term, intermediate, and long-term). This tool can be used to guide the development of evaluation questions and demonstrate a link between the efforts of members of a partnership, a partnership's goals, and priorities of the stakeholders' needs [100]. The other methodologies, including Partnership

Effectiveness Continuum, Social Return on Investment (SROI), Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA), and Social Network Analysis, were also used for evaluation of the partnerships.
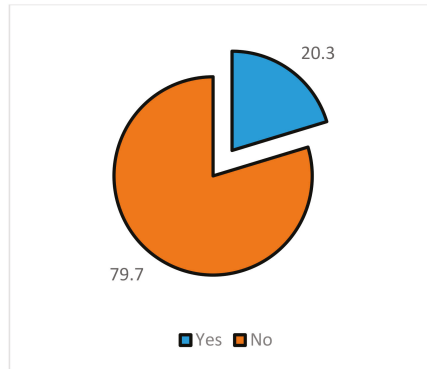
Figure 8. Use of a methodology for evaluating the partnerships.
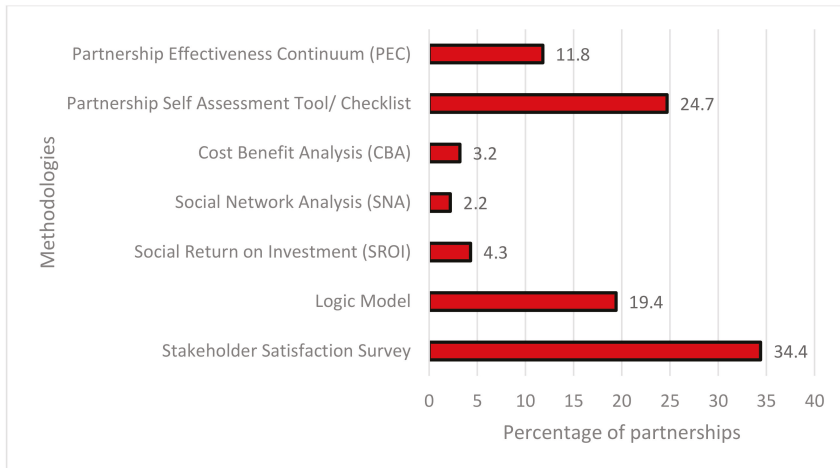
Figure 9. Types of methodologies used for the partnership evaluation.
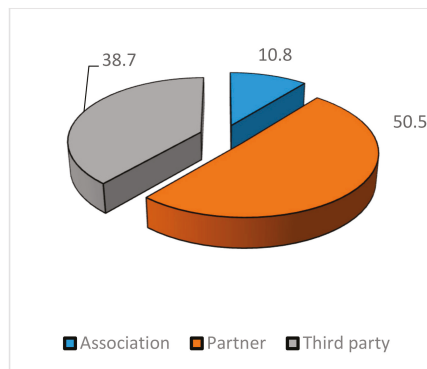
Figure 10. Distribution of the partnerships according to the evaluative party.

4.4.3. Continuum of the Partnership's Maintenance

The situation of the partnerships analyzed after completion is highlighted in Figure 11. The results confirmed that more than one-third of the corporations (38.3%) were successful in achieving their objectives. Nevertheless, 27.7% of the partnerships failed to obtain the confidence of the partners. Such partnerships did not accomplish the planned objectives or were terminated. In terms of the sustainability of a partnership, it is noteworthy that around 8% of the partnerships were renewed annually.
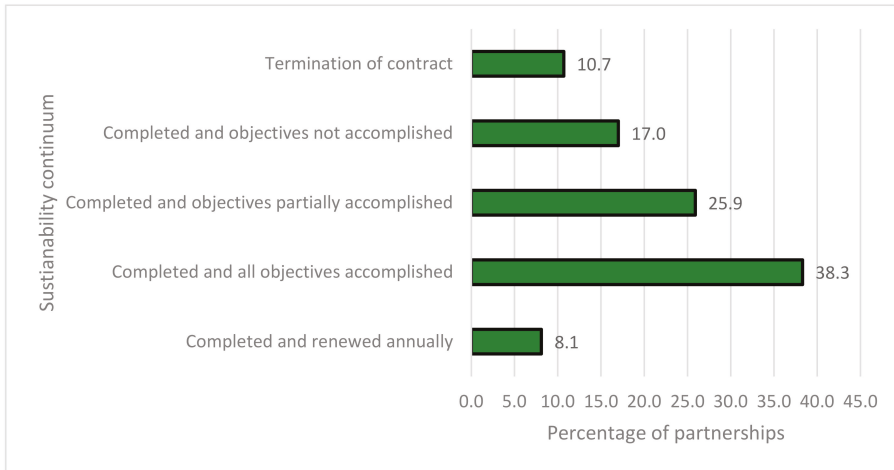
Figure 11. Sustainability continuum of the partnerships.

5. Discussion

The literature on the role of NPOs in sustainable development points to the increasing linkages between development cooperation actors and NPOs. However, very few studies have systematically examined how the roles of NPOs differ across various actors. Thus, our picture of NPOs involvement in development is incomplete. The present study makes a unique contribution to the literature by mapping engagement between NPOs and other actors for sustainable development. It builds on the existing literature and analytical framework in order to conduct a systematic examination of 459 partnerships established between the charitable associations and the other actors in the study area.

Our results confirmed the role of the Saudi government through Vision 2030 in supporting partnerships between NPOs and other actors. Developing a conducive environment for partnerships can help in the implementation of policies and contribute toward the achievement of the sustainable development agenda [101]. In the light of Saudi Vision 2030 and the objectives set by the National Transformation Program 2020 [50], the government aims to empower NPOs in providing social services through implementing development initiatives and to improve the contribution of NPOs in GDP from less than 1% to 5%, by 2030. International success stories around this issue confirm that building partnerships play a significant role in solving many constraints faced by NPOs. In other words, the sum is greater than the individual parts [102].

The study's findings showed that partnerships in the Saudi Arabian context aimed to target various stakeholders, which, in turn, demonstrates the linkages between SDG 17—Partnerships for the Goals and some of the other more specific SDGs. In this context, the results suggest that partnerships between NPOs and other actors facilitate the design and implementation of programs that eradicate poverty in rural and urban areas (SDG 1). Partnerships also facilitate access to markets, natural resources, credit, information, and social protection by providing food for smallholders and ensuring sustainable

livelihoods for all, including women, youth, and children (SDG 2). It was also noticed from the results that health services attract the attention of potential partners to engage in collaborations. Full access to affordable, quality health services and psychosocial support for all vulnerable populations have high potential to accelerate progress for SDG 3—Good Health and Well-being. As mentioned in our findings, the cases of women—widows, divorcees, and victims of domestic violence—were addressed in 38.1% of the partnerships, and such collaborations have the potential to enable the mainstreaming of gender equality and empowering of all women and girls (SDG 5). The successful implementation of SDG 5 is also key to the 2030 Agenda, which aims to eradicate poverty and enhance prosperity, as well as promote healthy ecosystems and peaceful societies [4]. The study's findings also highlighted the importance of improving the financial stability of NPOs, with leveraging resources being the most important motives in most of the partnerships. Attracting private sector finance for infrastructure development is critical for economic and social development, improving environmental sustainability, reducing poverty and inequality, and ensuring decent work for all (SDG 9) [31]. Generally, it was concluded that SDG 17—Partnerships for the Goals, should empower NPOs to implement the other SDGs through collaboration with other actors, in order to create value for nature and society by sharing knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources [103].

A relevant framework for identifying value creation in partnerships is offered by Austin and Seitanidi [90]. Collaborative work between the actors is expected to create four different types of value: associational value, transferred resource value, interaction value, and synergistic value. Associational value is defined as "a derived benefit accruing to another partner simply from having a collaborative relationship with the other organization" [90] (p. 730); transferred resource value as a "benefit derived by a partner from the receipt of a resource from the other partner [90] (p. 731); interaction value as "the intangibles that derive from the processes of partners working together" [90] (p. 731); and synergistic value as "value that arises from the underlying premise of all collaborations that combining partners' resources enables them to accomplish more together than they could have separately" [90] (p. 731).

The findings on the drivers of the partnerships confirmed that most associations recognized the importance of CSR for corporation actors as a tool to enhance their reputation and legitimacy. Smart organizations nowadays understand that CSR activities are oriented toward building and renewing natural, social, and human capital as value-creation opportunities for sustainability [104]. As indicated by Poret [105], increasing the engagement of corporations with NPOs in CSR activities is not only an altruistic strategy. These organizations have networks along with knowledge, experience, skills, and resources in the societal issues that firms and other actors face. Therefore, for a more practical purpose, selecting the right partner and establishing a coordination committee between partners before a partnership engagement are absolutely critical steps to the success of a CSR strategy [31]. In this context, Fontana [106] identified the urgent need for an informed view of charitable organizations' expectations before initiating collaboration. This view included determining whether charities' resources allow the partner to improve its CSR efforts at present and in the future, as well as whether collaboration by charities has the potential to become long-term [105]. Undoubtedly, the extent to which charities and other actors find compromise should be based on the balance between mission integrity and CSR outcomes, which may require performing forecasting metrics [107].

The results reported that acquiring financial resources is one of the most crucial motives for charitable associations to engage in partnering. Moreover, obtaining funds is considered as an exclusion criterion for potential partners. In the literature, the charities are pro-socially motivated. In other words, they are concentrated on their activities to produce a public good [108,109]. This orientation forces these organizations to find new sources of funding to achieve their mission [110]. However, focusing only on obtaining funds may produce a mismatch within the partnership and may lead to difficulties in working together [32]. In fact, most actors, in particular, private sector actors, are mainly concerned with strategic partnerships that could maximize long-term mutual benefit [78]. Hence, the charitable

association should change its strategy from being donation-oriented toward leveraging complementary resources in order to use a partnership as a source of competitive advantage [31].

The study's findings also revealed significant private sector engagement in the majority of the partnerships investigated. In recent years, governments worldwide have given special attention to expanding the involvement of the private sector to achieve SDGs [111]. Such a trend goes beyond the traditional impacts of the private sector in development, such as the provision of goods and services, job creation, and economic growth [112]. This important shift changes the role of the private sector into that of a key partner for using market-based approaches to generate sustainable change [30]. Nevertheless, the engagement between NPOs and private actors may have the potential to facilitate joint problem solving and turn divergent interests into new sources of innovation [113].

Our results also showed that philanthropic partnerships are more common in the majority of the partnerships. This conclusion is supported by our findings that higher numbers of engagements involve transfers of financial resources rather than technical cooperation, capacity development, and entrepreneurship. This result may explain why only 8% of the partnerships examined are renewed after completion. Furthermore, not all partnerships are designed to be 'sustained' forever. Many partnerships are purposefully designed to be short-term projects. Just because they are terminated, it may not mean they were not successful, and the termination does not necessarily signal that "they did not accomplish the planned objectives". Therefore, determining the size and type of partnership is an issue. As suggested by KPMG [91], it is important to analyze the partner's motivation and to identify the "sweet spot" between development goals and business opportunities. Understanding such balance enables NPOs to combine both philanthropic and strategic approaches [78]; in other words, implement some marketing-oriented activities to improve businesses' public image and plan to conduct core-business activities [113]. This transformation empowers NPOs to achieve their objectives effectively and benefit from such investments as sustainable finance for their activities [52].

The results demonstrated that systematic evaluation is rarely conducted to measure the impacts of the partnerships implemented. Moreover, among the evaluation tools used, a small number of partnerships used tools for measuring the impacts such as logic model and SROI. On the basis of the official documents analyzed, it was observed that associations only provide general information on the number of partnerships or the expected results of their partnership initiatives, but it seems that relatively little has been done to monitor and evaluate partnership processes and outcomes. This may be attributed to a lack of employee skills and experience required to professionally conduct such frameworks and to the weak awareness of the importance of conducting an evaluation for the partnerships or how partners can benefit from the results of the assessment in the future. According to Rieker [100], application of evaluation methodologies allows individuals and organizations to access consolidated information that indicates a partnership's progress, increased experience, and knowledge; reveals mistakes; contributes to transparency and accountability; and offers paths for learning and improvement. This information gap allows an assessment of whether cross-sector partnerships are effective. However, the application of evaluation tools and frameworks would help generate systematized evidence on the relationships between engagement of NPOs and improved outcomes [113].

Some limitations should be acknowledged. First, we collected data from the Riyadh region in the center of Saudi Arabia, so we could not generalize the results to other regions or other countries. In other words, these results are from the Saudi context only, and in other contexts, the results would differ. Second, our analysis focuses only on charitable associations. This may lead to an inability to present a full picture of the sustainability-oriented partnerships across different kinds of NPOs. Third, the research was designed to collect data about organizations from only the association perspective, without considering the view of other partners. Thus, this approach could bias the results of the current situation of the partnerships investigated. Although our analytical framework covers various areas regarding a partnership's description, one critical point, such as the area of governance structure, was not addressed. This could affect our understanding of how

the governance model supports a partnership's operation, including decision-making, accountability, and regulatory compliance.

6. Conclusions

The present study investigated the partnerships established between charitable associations and development cooperation actors in Saudi Arabia. As there has been limited literature on this topic in the context of Saudi Arabia, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in the field of sustainability-oriented partnerships, by highlighting four main areas: drivers, motivations, characteristics of the partnerships, and outcomes achieved. The results suggest that partnerships established by NPOs have the potential to play a key role in achieving the SDGs by optimizing the use of mutual resources in ways that can, together, achieve more impact, greater sustainability, and increased value to all partners. We found that, despite the impressive number of partnership agreements signed during 2016–2018, only 10.3% of the engagements are characterized as strategic partnerships. Moreover, only 8.1% of these partnerships were renewed after completion. The findings also showed that financial stability was the key motivator for corporations. It was also found that leveraging non-financial resources, and awareness of cultural issues, knowledge, and skills, attracted actors to engage with charitable associations in partnerships. Limited evidence about the social impacts of the partnerships was recognized because the evaluation tools and frameworks did not apply to the majority of the partnerships. The findings provide useful directions and implications for policy-makers. Private sector actors should establish organizational strategies for NPOs' engagement, informed by their needs and activities, to leverage resources and support in a more complementary fashion. Furthermore, it is important to clearly articulate policy frameworks that guide development cooperation actors with NPOs, including objectives, institutional and legal forms, and expected outcomes. Such actions will help with demonstrating transparency in actors' engagements, as well as with ensuring accountability for outcomes. Additionally, entrepreneurship activities should be included as important modalities for engaging NPOs in sustainable development. Therefore, strategic efforts to encourage such activities might present new opportunities for maximizing outcomes. Finally, there is an urgent need to improve the availability of monitoring and evaluation results on engagements with NPOs. Efforts are needed to develop and implement more rigorous methodologies that systematically assess the value of engagements. Implementing such methodologies can improve the accuracy of information, build confidence that these partnerships can support positive development outcomes, and encourage future collaborative efforts. A number of essential areas for future research arise from this study. Further research could look at different types of NPOs. There is a need for detailed review of actual partnerships to assess which NPOs are benefiting from engagement with other actors. In a related vein, research on the effectiveness of the governance model adopted in cases of engagement between NPOs and other actors is critical. Such studies generate a better understanding of the relationship dynamics between actors and what constitutes successful engagement. Furthermore, investigating context-specific obstacles for NPOs engagements should also be highlighted.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Can Differing Opinions Hinder Partnerships for the Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals? Evidence from Marginalized Urban Areas in Andalusia

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Abstract: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were set up under the idea that no one—and no place—be left behind. Today, the tendency for population growth concentrates in cities, causing social segregation and the proliferation of marginalized urban areas. In this global context, SDG 11, which addresses the urban dimension of the 2030 Agenda, is becoming crucial. To achieve inclusive and sustainable development, especially in disadvantaged urban areas, collaborative partnerships have been suggested as essential to building habitable spaces where life is worth living. However, the literature reveals how the commitment to multistakeholder partnerships depends on many factors, such as the perceptions the participants have about their reality and the problems they face. In this study, we rely on the information collected from 118 surveys conducted among the leaders of private, public, and civil society organizations already collaborating in six disadvantaged neighborhoods in Andalusia. The results show how and where their perceptions about their own neighborhoods differ and the intersectional reasons behind these differing opinions. This is a critical starting point to elucidate how to enable and sustain local collective actions to start the process of fighting for human dignity.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Global Trends in Urban Growth and Social Segregation: A Challenge to Social Justice

In recent decades, there has been a clear tendency for population growth to increasingly concentrate in cities. Today, approximately 56% of the world's population is currently considered to be living in cities, and this figure should increase to 66% before 2050 [1]. This is not only a reality for developing countries. In Europe, almost 75% of the population lives in urban areas, and this figure is likely to edge past the 80% mark by 2050 [2].

A derived consequence for this unprecedented growth of cities has been residential polarization and the social segregation derived from it. The concentration experienced in many cities worldwide has led to the proliferation of marginalized urban areas. Only a couple of years ago, approximately 900 million urban residents were estimated to live in slum-level conditions [3]. Specifically, in Europe, 32% of the urban population live in disadvantaged urban areas [4]. These figures highlight why urban segregation and social exclusion are depicted today as one of the most chronic challenges for social justice and global development [5].

As a consequence of these global trends, in recent years, there has been an emerging interest at the international level to address the situation of these marginalized neighborhoods [6] that, despite the potential levels of development reached by the cities they are located in, seem ignored by this process and remain stuck in a deprived socioeconomic situation. Their situation not only hinders the possibility of access to a decent life for their inhabitants but also hampers the natural and mutually beneficial coexistence with other realities within the urban area they are located in. Finally, international agreements on development and social justice have responded accordingly.

1.2. The Incorporation of the New Urban Agenda into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [7] is considered a remarkable milestone in the history of humanity, as it represents the most ambitious, comprehensive, and far-reaching international political agenda approved to date. The 2030 Agenda embraces its willingness to address most of the societal challenges that the world is currently facing, not only globally but also at the national, regional, and local levels.

This broad vision was promoted thanks to a convergence of actors from both the sphere of development and the sphere of environmental sustainability, who shared their scopes and approaches from the initial stages of the discussion [1]. During subsequent rounds of negotiation, this vision ended up acquiring a holistic character when other actors joined the debate, such as those focused on the New Urban Agenda [8].

In the years prior to the official establishment of the 2030 Agenda, a campaign led by international organizations such as UN-Habitat, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), strongly advocated for the incorporation of a separate objective for urban areas and human settlements [8,9]. Their argument was that such an objective would help increase the political attention given to and the awareness of urban challenges, thereby giving cities a greater advocacy capacity to mobilize their financing [3]. Their demands were met when the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were approved, particularly when SDG 11 on "sustainable cities and communities" was officially adopted as one of the goals.

Since cities produce more than three-quarters of the air pollution and for decades have been considered a privileged area for addressing issues such as recycling or the use of renewables [10], the initial fear was that SDG 11 could be limited to the mere technological and environmental aspects of urban development. However, this fear was soon dissolved. Not only is SDG 11 not limited to these objectives due to its explicit incorporation of social issues, but other SDGs clearly mention urban goals from a social point of view, e.g., SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 16, and 17.

A substantial part of these urban development goals refers to the residential polarization and social segregation that is spreading in most cities across the world. This tendency is generating huge slums and marginalized urban areas, whose challenges must be locally addressed to effectively accomplish the 2030 Agenda.

1.3. Addressing Social Exclusion in Urban Areas under the Light of the 2030 Agenda: The Importance of Collaborative Partnerships

Despite the growth experienced in recent decades, marginalized urban areas are no new reality either in northern or southern countries. Their existence is not only an issue for countries; marginalized urban areas cross borders and have implications in the international arena. In fact, for more than four decades now, UN-Habitat has been the United Nations agency dedicated to promoting transformative change in cities and human settlements through international guidance and support [3,11].

However, the evolution of data shows how the social policies implemented in these urban areas have proven generally ineffective in reversing the deep and multidimensional situation of exclusion experienced by their inhabitants [12]. The solutions proposed to date have generally suffered from the same deficits studied for decades in the field of international development

interventions, i.e., fragmentation and a deficit of alignment and harmonization [13,14]. The reasons are multiple, including the distribution of competences between local, regional, and national public administrations [15]; the certain inertia to work in silos, even within the same administration level [16]; or the one we are exploring in this paper, namely, the difficulties in reaching collaborative partnerships to set up a local collective action [17,18].

For future urban policies and strategies to be effective, the logic of the entire public policy process must be reexamined. First, the literature has already identified how critical effective locations will be to the success of the 2030 Agenda [19]. There is a common agreement that, in many of its aspects, the local level can better address the implementation of the 2030 Agenda [20]. Especially in regard to social aspects, among which are the proliferation of marginalized urban areas and the appearance of realities of social exclusion, local approaches are privileged because the processes of social inclusion are always localized and dependent on history [19].

Second, the identification, design, implementation, and evaluation of social policies should be addressed under the all-encompassing umbrella of the 2030 Agenda [19,21]. The 2030 Agenda establishes in targets 17.16 and 17.17 the need for effective public, public–private, and civil society partnerships to be encouraged and promoted, thereby building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships [17,22]. This framework will require a whole new institutional and social architecture to inform the different phases of the public policy process.

Regarding the implementation of social policies under the 2030 Agenda, the settlement of participatory mechanisms that facilitate multistakeholder governance will be especially crucial [23]. The nomination of representatives of the different stakeholders and their gathering within participatory partnerships will be a key success factor in the implementation of localized solutions, especially in urban initiatives [24]. However, this kind of collaborative partnership suffers from many challenges, as already identified by the literature.

1.4. Factors That May Promote or Hinder Collaborative Partnerships: The Role of Differing Perceptions

In recent decades, the literature on partnerships has received renewed interest from scholars and academic journals. A first proxy for this interest can be the multiple bibliometric analyses and systematic reviews performed in later years, either about partnerships, in general [25,26], or specific sectors [27,28] or contexts [29]. In this paper, we focus on the academic knowledge generated about the factors that have been deemed as hindering or enhancing to the constitution and maintenance of collaborative multistakeholder partnerships, from the pioneering works in the late 1990s [18,30] to the most current findings [31,32].

Among the factors generally recognized as contributing to partnership success, we can find partners' commitment to shared goals and values [17]; efficient communication and collaboration among partners [33]; recognition and respect for each partner's perspectives and experience [32,34]; and the inclusion of community members' expertise in local partnerships [35], which are especially critical in vulnerable environments [36,37]. Despite the growing body of literature, it remains controversial how the antecedents of stakeholder collaboration can influence a partnership by either facilitating or discouraging the commitment [38]. The participation of partnership facilitators or brokers is also deemed crucial to the success or such partnerships [39]. In the case study we introduce in this paper, there is a university playing the role of partnership facilitator, since an entity considered to be trusted actor is preferred to perform this role [40,41].

Regarding factors that hinder partnerships, scholars have recently systematized them in diverse classifications. On the one hand, Horan [23] identified five main causes that threaten the successful reach of partnerships: partnering capacity, compensation for losers, inadequate coordination mechanisms, short-time horizons, and misaligned incentives. On the other hand, Xion et al. [42] distinguished four main reasons: institutional issues such as a poor social environment; organizational issues such as trust, communication, and transparency; contractual issues such as inadequate risk allocation and distribution mechanisms; and managerial issues such as inefficient partnering capacity.

Regardless of those or other previous systematizations, the lack of clear aims and shared goals is often cited as a major cause of the failure of partnerships [43]. When partners fail to prioritize their common interest over the interest of the particular organizations, power struggles between partners emerge [32]. These dynamics disrupt the trust among partners, thereby hindering their ability to preserve a harmonious relationship [44].

The literature proves how an agreement on broad aims is not enough. If detailed goals remain unclear, or if the partners have different understandings of what the goals mean, this can lead to misunderstanding, lack of coordination, and possible conflict between the partners [18,45]. Unclear goals and unshared expectations of a partnership can also hinder the partners' ability to understand their role and ways to contribute to the project [32].

Differing opinions and perceptions play a crucial role in the determination of shared goals [43,46], especially when the links between the problems and their solutions are uncertain [47]. Social representation theory has been used as a theoretical framework to assess how particular psychological mechanisms underlay the understanding of socioeconomic phenomena [48]. For example, Gangl et al. [49] proved how people who occupy different positions do not interpret economic phenomena in the same way. Identifying these differing perceptions and the intersectional reasons behind them is a key step in anticipating and resolving stakeholder controversies [50], as a lack of clarity regarding goals may increase the perception of other partners who have a hidden agenda [18].

Although the positive outcomes of partnerships are well established by the literature, strategies for successfully developing collaborative partnerships are less clear [32]. Collaborative partnerships are still poorly documented; thus, scholars have called for the development of in-depth case studies to further explore the transformational potential of such partnerships [51]. The literature asks for the generation of more evidence about how partnerships actually work to persuade more actors to invest in partnering [52].

To enlighten potential partnerships and to provide information about their feasibility, in this paper, we propose a case study about six collaborative partnerships currently being developed in Andalusia (Spain). Their experiences could enrich the debate about how differing perceptions can coexist in active partnerships and to understand the intersectional reasons behind those conflicting opinions.

1.5. Our Case Study: Six Marginalized Urban Neighborhoods in Andalusia (Spain)

Urban segregation is a social reality that has been especially visible in middle-income countries such as China, India, or Brazil, as increasingly urban concentration within a short period of time has caused the coexistence of slums, where poor housing and hygiene conditions are the norm, while prosperous residential areas are highly securitized.

This image of social segregation is increasingly visible within most developed countries, with an endogenous adaptation to the reality of each urban configuration. In Europe, large cities are seeing a boom in the number of disadvantaged urban areas, whose development indicators are very distant from what the data show when they are aggregated into national averages [3,6].

A clear case is found in Spain. Relevant regions, such as Extremadura or Andalusia, show development indicators that are closer to those of the eastern countries that have recently joined the European Union. By delving deeper into the inequalities and segregation found in these regions, in some cities, we can find urban areas where social exclusion is extremely relevant. For example, highlighting only one of the most objective indicators that is less given to interpretation, the average income per capita in some of these urban areas barely reaches €5000 a year. They do not suppose a marginal representation of the population; in some cases, the dimension of these neighborhoods is close to 50,000 people.

In this study, we provide evidence on six marginal urban areas of Andalusia (Spain). These neighborhoods belong to four different cities, and they gather a total of more than 110,000 inhabitants, which is approximately 10% of the population of these four cities.

Despite their struggling situation, each neighborhood is experiencing its own collaborative process to combat social exclusion. In recent years, collaborative partnerships have been established in each neighborhood, to promote the multistakeholder governance of the New Urban Agenda. One of the first steps taken to understand the complexity of their collaborative projects and to guarantee their governance was to perform a self-diagnosis of the social situation in their neighborhoods as perceived by each member of the partnerships.

The current analysis does not concentrate on highlighting the most relevant aspects of the social exclusion experienced in these neighborhoods; rather, it emphasizes the differing opinions that the actors have on said realities based on various intersectional characteristics, including sociodemographic attributes such as gender, age, or living conditions, and the nature of the organizations they represent. This analysis provides evidence about how collaborative partnerships can be encouraged despite confronting differing opinions among the participants. Furthermore, this analysis also provides the baseline evidence that would contribute to the explanation of the diverse efficacy and sustainability reached by such multistakeholder partnerships.

2. Materials, Data Collection, and Methods

The results presented in this study were collected from 118 participants who joined a survey carried out in the months of November and December 2019. The surveys were conducted among the representatives and leaders of institutional public actors, private organizations, and civil society organizations located in six neighborhoods in the region of Andalusia (Spain). As all of the individuals take part directly in the multistakeholder partnerships being recently developed, the questionnaires were collected one by one through a face-to-face interview.

According to the preferences of the participants, we respect not only their anonymity but also the identification of their neighborhoods. Therefore, a double-codification process was performed.

- To preserve the anonymity of the participants and the possible identification of their answers, the information is presented only in an aggregated way.
- To prevent the identification of their neighborhoods, we note the areas with a code composed of a letter and a number; the number refers to the city, and the letter refers to the neighborhood. In this study, three of the six neighborhoods studied are noted as 1A, 1B, and 1C, as they are located in the same city, with a population of approximately 8000, 12,000, and 3000, respectively. The remaining neighborhoods are noted as 2A, 3A, and 4A to reflect that they belong to the other three cities. These last neighborhoods (2A, 3A, and 4A) have approximately 45,000, 10,000, and 32,000 residents, respectively.

The questionnaire was composed of 11 sociodemographic questions and 36 topics about their perceptions of the situation in their neighborhoods (the questionnaire can be viewed in the Appendix A, Table A1). Each topic was evaluated as a response to a series of statements following a Likert scale, where 0 means total disagreement and 5 means total agreement with the statement. We used an even number of categories for the rating scale, as we wanted to force participants to make a choice rather than offer them a midpoint [53]. The 36 topics were then grouped into 10 dimensions that referred to the different facets of social exclusion (health, education, economy, presence of illegal activities, security, coexistence, and urbanism) and the departure conditions in the neighborhoods (social cohesion, public trust, and diversity). The chart diagram of this research process is introduced as Figure 1 [54,55].
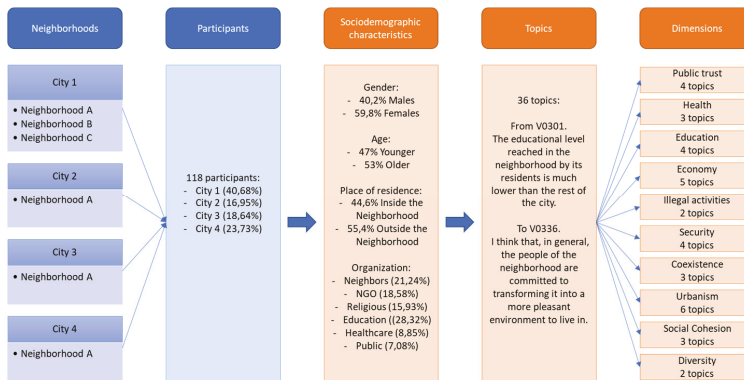
Figure 1. Chart diagram of the research design.

To present the results, we first introduce the distribution of the database according to the characteristics of the participants. After that, we offer a descriptive analysis of the situation in the six neighborhoods in an aggregated way, showing a brief description of the results by neighborhood to understand their diversity. As the key analysis is the identification of the differing perceptions the actors have about the territory in which they operate, a cross-sectional analysis is presented to highlight their conflicting opinions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Identification of a Multidimensional Problem: A Descriptive Analysis

The analysis of the situations within the six neighborhoods is treated in an aggregated manner. Nevertheless, the outcome is proof of the diversity of the sample. It is interesting to begin by describing the number of surveys collected in each neighborhood out of the total of 118. Figure 2 introduces this information.
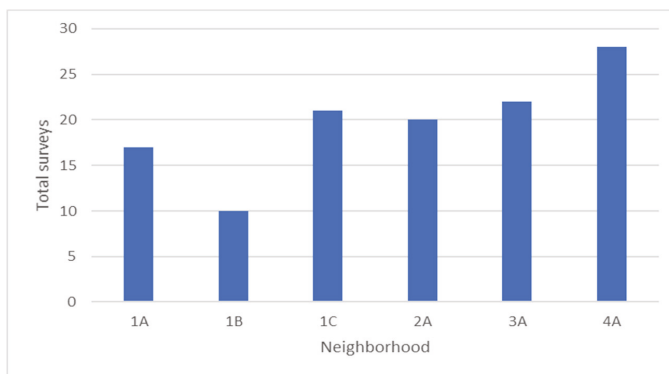
Figure 2. Distribution of the sample by neighborhood.

As stated before, the survey requested the participants' opinions about 36 topics related to their neighborhoods. From first to last, the respondents characterized their opinion about their situation in the context of many social aspects. The topics ranged from the educational level of their inhabitants (V0301) to their commitment with the social transformation of their neighborhood (V0336) (the questionnaire can be viewed in the Appendix A, Table A1).

The questions were redacted indistinctly as either positive or negative. However, to facilitate the presentation and interpretation of the results, the score of the answers was inverted when necessary. Therefore, the results must always be interpreted as follows: The higher the score reached by a topic, the better participants perceive the situation in the neighborhood for that issue. Relatedly, the lower the score achieved by a topic, the greater the situation of social exclusion or deprivation suffered in the neighborhood is in that topic. A first approach to the results is summarized in Figure 3, which shows the average result of each of the 36 topics.
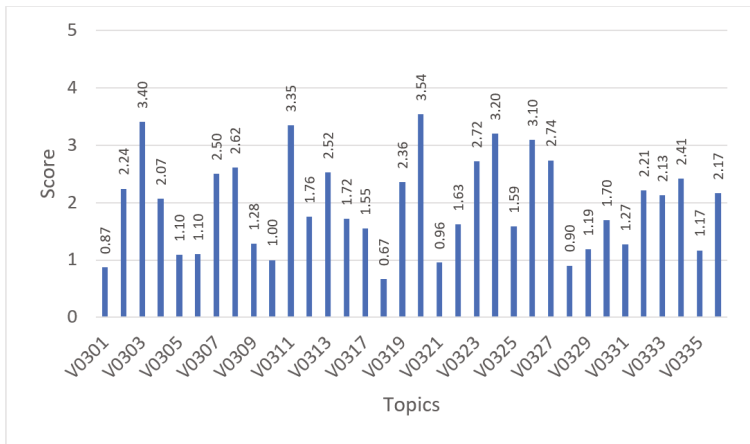
Figure 3. Average scores by topic.

As Figure 3 shows, deprivation is the norm in most of the social dimensions investigated. None of the scores exceeds two-thirds of the scale, and only 25% of them surpass what could be defined as acceptable: 2.5 out of 5. In Figure 4, we reassume both the best (score higher than 3) and the worst (score lower than 1) social aspects as seen or experienced by the participants in the partnerships.
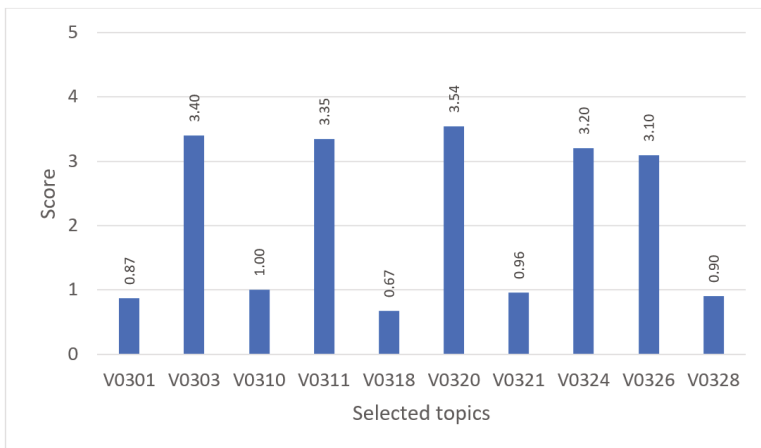
Figure 4. Average score of most positive and negative topics.

The five topics that received a better evaluation are as follows:

- V0303: The quality of education received by children in the neighborhood is relatively similar to that of the rest of the city.
- V0311: The presence of illegal activities related to prostitution is not one of the main problems of the neighborhood.
- V0320: Either there are no adequate health centers in the neighborhood, or the existing centers are very low quality.
- V0324: The neighborhood is well connected with the rest of the city.
- V0326: The distribution of the buildings in the neighborhood greatly facilitates the coexistence between neighbors.

On the other hand, the five topics that received a worse valuation are as follows:

- V0301: The educational level reached in the neighborhood by its residents is much lower than the rest of the city.
- V0310: One of the main problems of the neighborhood is the presence of illegal activities related to drugs.
- V0318: People have an image of the neighborhood as a dangerous place to be avoided.
- V0321: There are too many people in the neighborhood who suffer psychological problems (depression, anxiety, stress, etc.).
- V0328: One of the main problems of the neighborhood is housing (illegal sale, occupation, etc.).

The information derived from the opinions of the participants about each of the 36 topics provides an image of the specific challenges to be addressed, which could set up an agenda of prioritization. However, the underlying problem is complex and multidimensional. To make an accurate diagnosis, it is pertinent to group individual topics regarding dimensions or social challenges. In this study, we identify ten challenges whose scores are the result of the linear combination of included topics. In Table 1, we systematize and define these dimensions as the combination of topics that contribute to each one of them.

Table 1. Dimensions of social exclusion and topics included.

Dimension	Definition	Topics
Public Trust	Confidence in public powers on the actors of the neighborhood	V0329, V0330, V0331, V0332
Health	Physical and mental health of inhabitants and infrastructures	V0319, V0320, V0321
Education	Educational level of inhabitants and infrastructures	V0301, V0302, V0303, V0304
Economy	Wealth, employment, and financial capabilities of inhabitants	V0305, V0306, V0307, V0308, V0309
Illegal activities	Presence of illegal activities, such as drugs and prostitution	V0310, V0311
Security	Perceived and experienced sense of security by neighbors and visitors	V0312, V0313, V0317, V0318
Coexistence	Mutual and beneficiary exchanges between neighbors	V0316, V0322, V0333
Urbanism	Quality of the infrastructures and social exchanges they facilitate	V0323, V0324, V0325, V0326, V0327, V0328
Social Cohesion	Mutual trust and confidence, level of social capital in the neighborhood	V0334, V0335, V0336
Diversity	Presence of people from different ethnics, cultures, or origins	V0314, V0315

Source: Author's own elaboration.

It is interesting to first take a look at diversity. The literature identifies the level of diversity in a given context as a controversial factor that either enhances or hinders the consolidation of partnerships [32,33]. As a consequence, in this study, we use this dimension only to highlight the different nature of each neighborhood. Nevertheless, in general, diversity is prominent, mainly given to the presence of the Roma people, but also, in some contexts, due to the location of migrants, who are mostly from North Africa and Latin America. Figure 5 shows the diversity picture of the sample of neighborhoods.
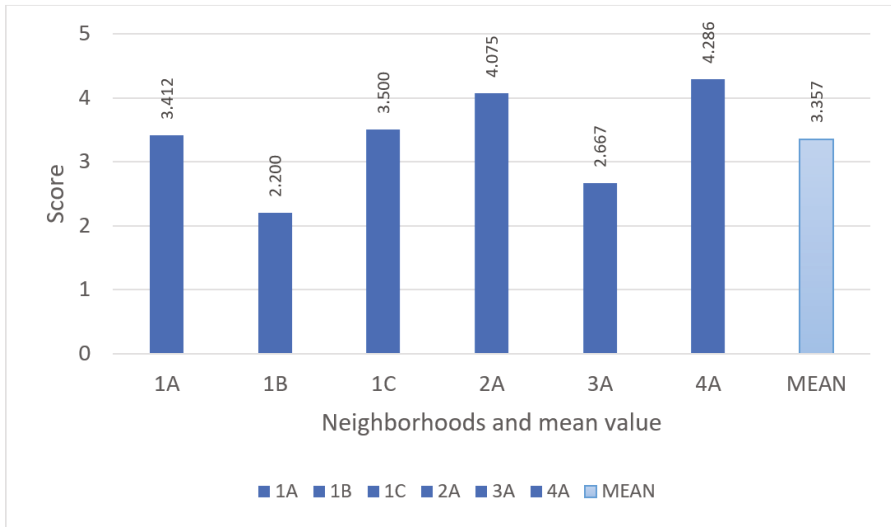
Figure 5. Level of ethnic and cultural diversity by neighborhood.

The nine remaining dimensions can be grouped into two types; seven of them refer to different aspects of social exclusion and deprivation, namely health, education, employment and income, presence of illegal activities, security, coexistence, and urban exclusion, while the other two are considered essential conditions or prerequisites to facilitate development and inclusiveness processes in the neighborhoods—public trust and social cohesion. Figure 6 presents the average scores by dimension.
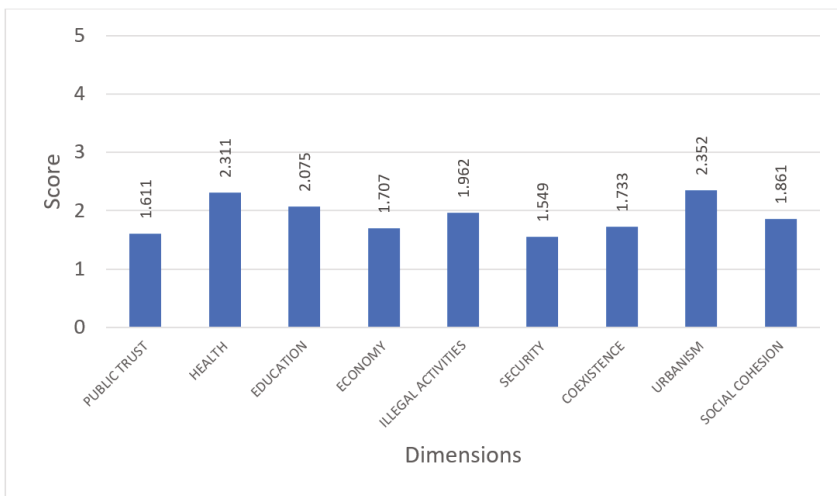
Figure 6. Average score by dimension.

Out of the nine dimensions considered, not one was assessed as positive (score higher than 2.5). It shows how profound and multidimensional the situation of exclusion and vulnerability experienced in these contexts is and how low the commitment by public and private actors to reverse this situation remains. In fact, only three of the dimensions received a score higher than 2 out of 5. Moreover, their better score is motivated rather by the presence of infrastructures than by social aspects, as derived

from the relatively good evaluation obtained by health facilities (V0320 scores 3.52), educational infrastructures (V0302 scores 2.24), or the urban configuration of the neighborhood (V0326 on the distribution of buildings and V0327 on the existence of green areas score 3.1 and 2.74, respectively).

Although the object of this study is to address an aggregated analysis, a last descriptive result can be provided. The disaggregation of the results by neighborhood can provide sensitive information for readers about the reality of each context. Therefore, Figure 7 highlights the scores received by each dimension in each of the six neighborhoods analyzed, while also introducing the presentation of the results in a radial diagram, which is the preferred presentation.
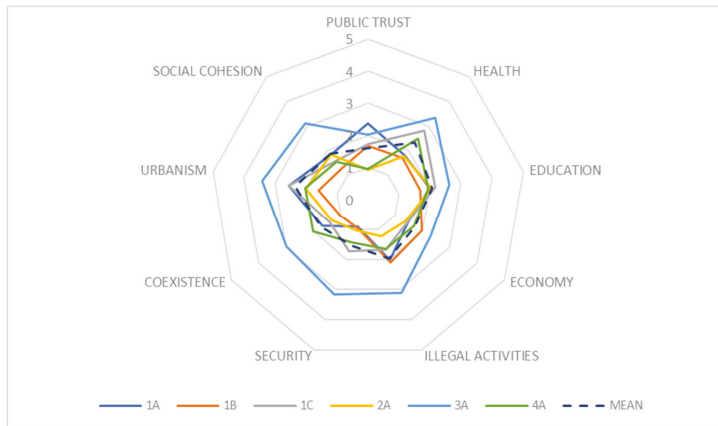
Figure 7. Average score by dimension in each neighborhood. Radial presentation.

3.2. The Recognition of Differing Opinions among the Participants in the Partnerships: Bivariant Analyses

As stated in the theoretical framework, collaborative and horizontal partnerships are essential for establishing a local collective action aimed at promoting cohesion and social inclusion in the most disadvantaged urban environments. To promote such partnerships, it is crucial to reach high degrees of coordination and harmonization by the different actors with competences in the territory. Therefore, having a shared vision of the neighborhood challenges is essential to articulating transformative processes.

In this epigraph, we introduce a series of figures to show, in a comparative manner, the differing visions that the participants in the partnerships have about the challenges their neighborhoods face. This analysis of differing perceptions will be realized according to the intersectional characteristics that the literature has identified as being relevant. We can group them by sociodemographic characteristics, which include gender, age, and place of residence (within or outside the neighborhood), and by characteristics of the organization they represent, such as type of entity (neighborhood entity, NGO, or others) and their degree of representativeness.

3.2.1. Sociodemographic Characteristics

First, we introduce a gender-based analysis. Males and females are generally deemed to have different perceptions about social problems and their intensity [56–58]. However, in our database, no significant differences are observed between men and women with regard to their judgment on the challenges they face. As shown in Figure 8, there is a slightly more negative opinion by women about the situation of coexistence, security, and the presence of illegal activities in the neighborhood, which could be linked to the greater amount of time they spend in it. The literature has also proven how females usually demonstrate a better confidence in the healthcare system [59] and empathy with healthcare workers [60], which is again consistent with our results.
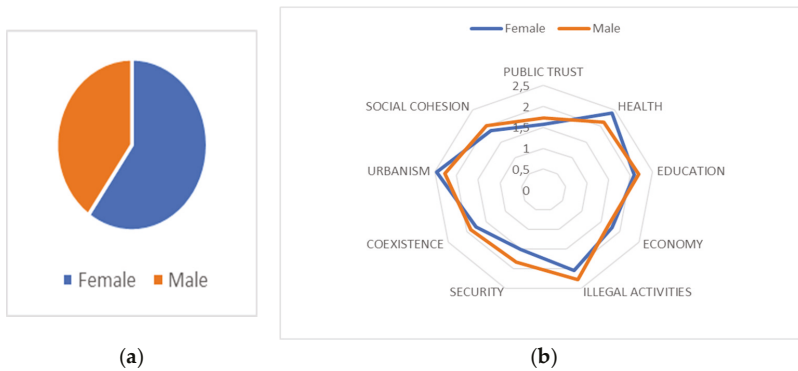
Figure 8. (**a**) Distribution of the sample by gender. (**b**) Comparison of average scores by dimension.

From a more qualitative point of view, in the configuration of the agenda of the partnerships, there are no significant differences between the male and female proposals. Other sociodemographic characteristics have a higher influence on their opinions, such as age.

Actually, age is another intersectionality that the literature has identified as explaining differing perceptions about the social reality [61–64]. Age is also widely deemed to be a predictor of social participation and volunteering [65]. Consistent with that evidence, in our database, older people are more critical when evaluating commitment with the transformation of the neighborhood, both from their own neighbors and from public administrations (see Figure 9). It is important to highlight this difference, since most associative movements in marginalized urban areas are composed of older people [66]. Their vision may suppose a certain confrontation with the public administration or even a disincentive for younger people to join the partnership.
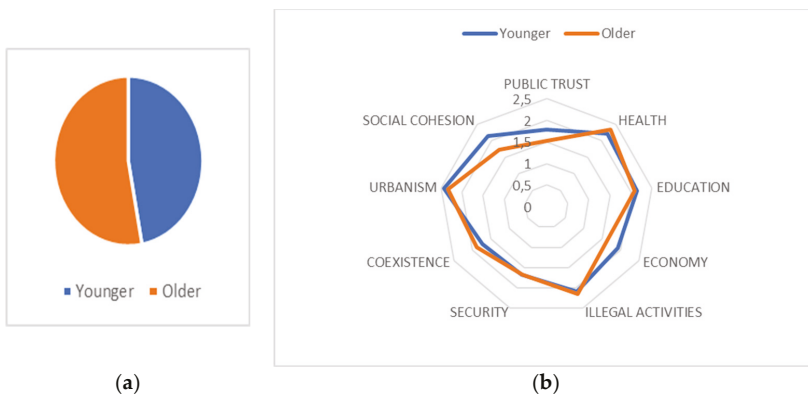
Figure 9. (**a**) Distribution of the sample by age. (**b**) Comparison of average scores by dimension.

A third analysis can be offered to distinguish those who are residents of the neighborhood from those who work in it. Differences in perceptions between residents and nonresidents have been deeply proven by the literature, mainly in fields such as tourism [67,68] and in perceptions about neighborhoods [69]. It is interesting to note, in our database, how the people who spend their daily lives in the neighborhoods have a much better perception of their contexts than do the people who work but do not live in them (see Figure 10). This difference is highly significant in the dimensions of coexistence and security, which are considered more negatively by nonresidents, and it is also observed in the distrust of the public administrations that residents feel. In a similar vein, even

though the difference is not significant, social cohesion and commitment to the social transformation of their neighborhoods seem to be overestimated by residents. As collaborative partnerships are composed of residents and nonresidents, it is interesting to track how these divergencies could affect the sustainability of the partnerships.
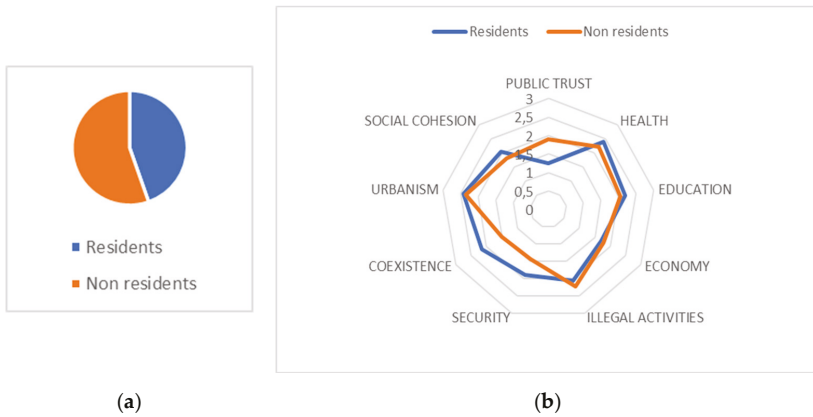

(a)   (b)

Figure 10. (**a**) Distribution by place of residence. (**b**) Comparison of average scores by dimension.

In general, the influence of sociodemographic characteristics on perceptions and opinions about neighborhoods is consistent with the literature. These results seem to ratify, at least to some extent, one of the most extended criticisms among residents participating in partnerships. They share an opinion about how people actually living in neighborhoods have a more realistic vision of the problems they face. Our analysis cannot confirm or refute this idea, but it reinforces that they do have differing opinions. In fact, in a counterintuitive way, the results show how the perception of residents is slightly more benevolent in general. It could be interesting to address to what extent the opinion of those who do not reside in the neighborhood can be mediated by this criticism of the disaffection with the deep reality of exclusion suffered in the neighborhoods.

3.2.2. Characteristics of the Organizations

In our case study, partnerships are wide open and diverse since they are composed of public, public–private, private actors, and civil society organizations. Out of the 118 partners working in the six neighborhoods, 63 are identified as private and 50 as public entities. To introduce a general overview of the nature of the organizations, we introduce a classification in Figure 11. Neighborhood entities comprise neighbors' associations and grassroots civil society organizations. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are civil society organizations that work, but not exclusively, in neighborhoods. We classify entities as religious when they have such a nature and are based in a church. Educational entities comprise educational bodies, including both primary and secondary schools and universities. Healthcare entities include health centers and private actors such as pharmacies. Finally, we classify community or civic centers or delegations of the municipality as other public entities.
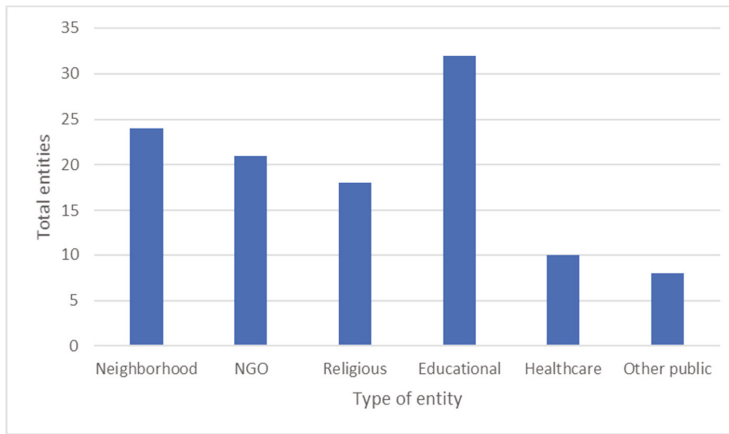
Figure 11. Distribution by type or organization participating in the partnerships.

As in international cooperation processes, in recent decades, NGOs have operated as brokers and intermediaries in many marginalized urban areas [70,71]. As communities and local organizations are empowered, many times thanks to NGOs' interventions, they reclaim a leading role in their own development process [72], which many times drives competition between both kinds of entities [73].

In the disfavored neighborhoods that we are analyzing, this reality has emerged. Today, there is a relevant amount of support regarding this issue. One aspect is related to the opinion of neighborhood entities that the rest of the entities working in their field do not know their reality with the same degree of depth. To check this, in Figure 12, we offer an analysis to contrast the opinion of neighborhood entities against NGOs and all the other entities. The differentiated analysis of NGOs is due to the similar nature of these organizations with some neighboring entities, with whom they sometimes come into confrontation, both due to funding and representation in institutionalized spaces.
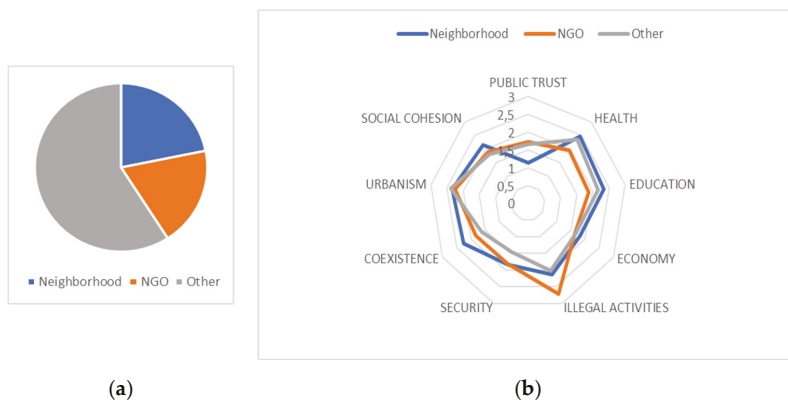

(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 12. (**a**) Distribution by organization nature. (**b**) Comparison of average scores by dimension.

The results show an interesting and different image from that of the previous analyses. This is the first time that differences emerge in perceptions about basic social needs. Interestingly, NGOs grade the situation on economy, health, and education significantly worse than all other entities. On the other hand, NGOs have a better perception of the presence of illegal activities in these urban areas. An interesting line of research could question to what extent those perceptions might be conditioned by the activity sector in which they operate.

There is still another interesting outcome that emerges from the results shown in Figure 12 regarding how actors consider that the public powers trust them to contribute to the development of their neighborhoods. Grassroot entities have a significantly different perception, as they consider that there is much more social cohesion among the local entities and that the public trusts in their competencies. All other actors, including NGOs, think in the opposite direction, i.e., there is no such social cohesion, which might explain why public trust is not as low as neighborhood entities estimate.

The last analysis offered in this study focuses on the differing opinions between organizations according to the degree of representativeness of the neighborhood they consider holding (see Figure 13). On the one hand, organizations that consider that the residents of the neighborhood trust them to raise their interests in the decision-making spaces are labeled as having high representativeness. On the other hand, those that consider their degree of representativeness to be low are labeled as having low representativeness.

It is interesting how the entities that feel more representative of the neighborhood have a much better perception of the situation of the neighborhood, especially with regard to its social aspect. All the dimensions that referred to the social situation are present in these areas, such as the presence of illegal activities, the situation regarding security, and coexistence, and even less obvious questions of urban planning, such as connectivity, are better valued by these entities. If this vision is expressed in public forums in front of decision-makers, they could perceive a better situation of neighborhoods compared to the actual one. One might even wonder whether this biased impression might be limiting investments and actions in the arena of social cohesion, while giving priority to basic needs such as educational, health, and employment issues.
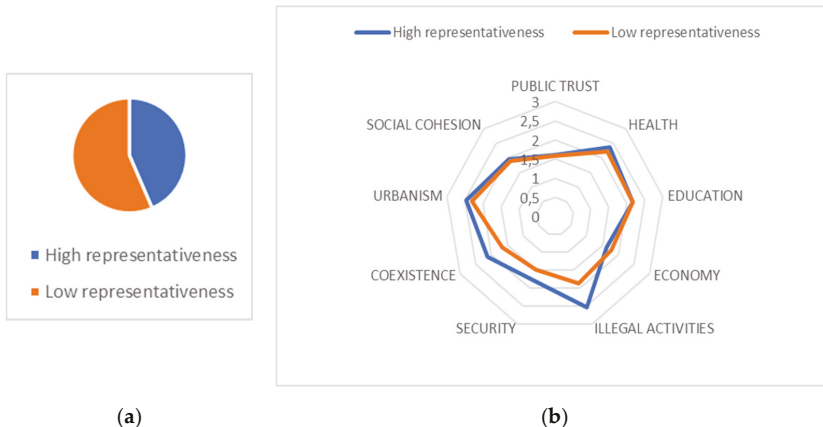

(a) (b)

Figure 13. (**a**) Distribution by representativeness. (**b**) Comparison of average scores by dimension.

4. Conclusions

In this study, we have provided information about the context of six disadvantaged neighborhoods located in four cities of the poorest region in Spain, namely, Andalusia. These contexts have been the destiny of many European economic resources and local interventions for many years. However, social conflicts persist, and endogenic problems seem to be more active than ever, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic has punished them harder.

The study of the social situation experienced in marginalized urban areas is, at the same time, a field of study with persistent results and a constant source of novelties. Thus, in an era where the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and other international strategies call for a rethinking of urban challenges, renewed evidence is needed. Notably, these strategies call for another logic of intervention

based on stronger collaboration between actors in multistakeholder partnerships, which are of critical importance in building habitable urban spaces.

As actors have to work together to overcome these social challenges, the elucidation of differing opinions is capital. We have proven how intersectionality and the sociodemographic characteristics of individuals and organizations are key to the ways in which they remarkably perceive reality as their grassroots and direct connections with reality intensify. It is an interesting source of news, as, many times, representativeness in decision-making forums and direct links to reality do not go hand in hand.

Our case study reinforces the idea that the participation of brokers in such partnerships is a key element. The processes of social inclusion need to be at the local, grassroots level because they are strongly dependent on history. Even though a certain controversy about how the antecedents can influence commitment persists, our experience shows how the intermediary role played by institutions such as universities can be key in healing the wounds from previous experiences of coordination.

Also consistent with previous studies, the inclusion of community members' expertise in local partnerships seems to be a factor that strongly promotes their viability. In a related vein, our study suggests that a certain amount of environmental and public support is also needed. A characteristic that could be contributing to the success of the analyzed partnerships, despite their differing opinions about many topics, is the openness to promote participatory mechanisms that facilitate multistakeholder governance. However, to confirm this conclusion, more evidence is needed, so it should be addressed as a future line of research.

Despite the contributions of this study, it still has certain methodological limitations. As in any case study, the sample contains only organizations within a very specific context. The generalization of our conclusions must be made with reservations. Future research should expand the sample to other cities and countries. Additionally, the current study allowed many interesting questions to be answered. Thus far, we have proven how differing opinions have not hindered the appearance or the constitution of local collaborative partnerships, but their efficacy and sustainability remain unclear. Nonetheless, this study could function as a baseline for such future avenues of research.

Appendix A

Table A1. Topics included in the survey.

Topics Included in the Survey, Rated from 0 (i.e., Totally Disagree) to 5 (i.e, Totally Agree).
V0301. The educational level reached in the neighborhood by its residents is much lower than the rest of the city.
V0302. The quality of the educational facilities in the neighborhood is much lower than in the rest of the city
V0303. The quality of education received by children in the neighborhood is relatively similar to that of the rest of the city.
V0304. In general, families are very committed to the education of their children.
V0305. The low educational level of the residents of the neighborhood is what most hinders their access to employment.
V0306. When my neighbors look for a job, they are discriminated against by the neighborhood they come from.
V0307. In the neighborhood there are a sufficient number of socio-labor integration programs.
V0308. The socio-labor integration programs that exist are very useful for the residents.
V0309. Regardless of their work situation or where they get their income, families in the neighborhood generally do not have great difficulty making ends meet.
V0310. One of the main problems of the neighborhood is the presence of illegal activities related to drugs.
V0311. The presence of illegal activities related to prostitution is not one of the main problems of the neighborhood.
V0312. I would say that my neighborhood is a much more insecure place than the rest of the city, especially for its neighbors.
V0313. I would say that my neighborhood is a much more insecure place than the rest of the city, but only for people from outside.
V0314. In my neighborhood there is a lot of cultural and ethnic diversity, especially due to the presence of immigrants.
V0315. In my neighborhood there is a lot of cultural and ethnic diversity, especially due to the presence of *payos* and Roma people.
V0316. The coexistence between neighbors is calm and cordial, it is very rare that conflicts occur in the neighborhood.
V0317. When conflicts do occur, they are usually serious, with possible injuries or deaths.
V0318. People have an image of the neighborhood as a dangerous place that is better to avoid.
V0319. In general, there are no serious health problems in the neighborhood, most people are healthy as anywhere.
V0320. Either there are no adequate health centers in the neighborhood, or the existing centers are very low quality.
V0321. There are too many people in the neighborhood who suffer psychological problems (depression, anxiety, stress, etc.).
V0322. In general, the situation of families is calm, there are not many conflicts, neither with a partner nor with parents and children.
V0323. The residents of the neighborhood, in general, feel comfortable leaving the neighborhood and making life outside it.
V0324. The neighborhood is well connected with the rest of the city.
V0325. It is common to see people from outside doing normal life in the neighborhood.
V0326. The distribution of the buildings in the neighborhood greatly facilitates the coexistence between neighbors.
V0327. In the neighborhood there are enough green areas and open spaces to be together with family and friends.
V0328. One of the main problems of the neighborhood is housing (illegal sale, occupation, etc.).
V0329. The administrations (City Council, Andalusian Government, and Central Government) are very concerned about the neighborhood and do their best to solve the problems we have.
V0330. The actions of the administrations in the neighborhood have managed to improve it.
V0331. Administrations do everything to avoid illegal behaviors in the neighborhood.
V0332. Administrations support and trust neighborhood entities to solve problems together.
V0333. The residents of the neighborhood tend to trust each other, there is a climate of trust.
V0334. I think that, in general, my neighbors are very proud to belong to the neighborhood.
V0335. I think that, if they could, an overwhelming majority of neighbors would leave the neighborhood to go to another.
V0336. I think that, in general, the people of the neighborhood are committed to transforming it into a more pleasant environment to live in.

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