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Boundary work in sustainability partnerships: An exploration of the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability partnerships have the potential to function as boundary organizations that intertwine stakeholders from different domains of society to jointly produce knowledge linked to action. However, little is known about the practice of knowledge production in such arrangements. In this paper we develop an analytical framework, based on attributes of the *nature* of knowledge, the *process* of knowledge production, and the *organization* of that process, to analyze the extent to which knowledge processes in partnerships can be understood as joint knowledge production (JKP). The application of the framework to the exemplary case of the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) shows that science and scientific knowledge do not necessarily play a dominant role in such a boundary organization. The analysis also shows that an abstract concept like JKP can be operationalized and used to assess characteristic of knowledge production in partnerships. This may provide leverage points to the actors involved to improve their boundary work. The framework can also be used as a dialogue instrument to open-up discussions about, and to reflect upon JKP in boundary organizations.

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1. Introduction

Scientists and policy makers increasingly acknowledge that sustainability challenges cannot be solved through traditional, linear ways of knowledge production (Cornell et al., 2013). The complexity and interconnectedness of sustainability problems encourage the inclusion of a diversity of stakeholders in problem-solving processes (McNie, 2007) to cover different values and backgrounds in knowledge. With the involvement of stakeholders the traditional prominence

of scientific knowledge is increasingly faced with competition from other knowledge providers (Edelenbos et al., 2011), including representatives of the private sector and actors from civil society. Although knowledge from these actors differs in nature, an integration of different knowledge types is believed to create unique benefits for decision making, including an improved identification of problems, the development of socially robust decisions and a better linking of knowledge to action (Lee et al., 2014). This process of knowledge integration is commonly termed “joint knowledge production”.

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Multi-stakeholder standard-setting and certifying partnerships, for example in the field of agricultural commodities, have the potential to intertwine stakeholders from different domains in a joint knowledge production process. Examples of such partnerships are the Stewardship Councils (Auld, 2010; Kalfagianni and Pattberg, 2013; Pattberg, 2005) and Round Tables (Ponte and Cheyns, 2013; Schouten, 2013; Schouten et al., 2012; Cheyns, 2011). Hundreds of partnerships have been developed for sustainable agricultural products like coffee, cocoa and cotton (Ecolabel-Index, 2014). Most of them are business-NGO collaborations; although partnerships keep relationships with governments and scientists, those actors are no official partnership-members.

Up to now, research on these partnerships mainly focuses on achieving or enhancing agreement between different members and the role of trust, collaborative advantage and leadership (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012; Glasbergen, 2011). Although the learning potential of partnerships, and their potential to gain and accumulate knowledge for sustainable development is acknowledged (Van Huijstee et al., 2007; Schouten et al., 2012; Von Geibler, 2012; Pedroso and Nakano, 2009; Tennyson, 2005; Juhola and Westerhoff, 2011), little is known about knowledge production processes in partnerships (Grant and Baden-Fuller, 2004; Phelps et al., 2012). Empirical information about knowledge production in partnerships is extremely general in nature or focused on who produces knowledge instead of the type of knowledge that is produced (see for example Ponte and Cheyns, 2013). It also hardly looks beyond the end-product resulting from knowledge production (e.g. reports that have a value in both the academic- and policy domain) and does not analyze the production process itself. Studies that operationalize joint knowledge production are very scarce, and often do not go beyond measuring the intensity of interactions between different stakeholders (see for example Edelenbos et al., 2011).

The focus on knowledge production processes in sustainability partnerships introduces a new perspective on their functioning as it highlights their role as boundary organizations. Boundary organizations are variably described as platforms on which independent groups interact, the interaction is meant to result in collaborative actions, the actions are problem-focused, co-production of knowledge takes place, and knowledge is linked to action (Boezeman et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2014; Schut et al., 2013; Hoppe, 2005; Hoppe and Wesselink, 2014). Actors in boundary organizations originate from different parts of society and represent specific interpretations of reality, worldviews, and types of knowledge. Boundary work, therefore, acknowledges that the role of research in decision-making is negotiated and just one of the different types of knowledge that influences the course and outcome of collaborative action (Upham and Smith, 2013).

In this paper we suggest an analytical framework to operationalize and analyze joint knowledge production in sustainability partnerships as boundary organizations. This perspective is not only new in partnership research, but also broadens the scope of research on boundary organizations, as most research in this field covers the more restricted science-policy interfaces. Knowledge in the context of our paper is defined as a conglomeration of data, interpretations, ideas, experiences and preferences that can be developed,

exchanged and evaluated. Based on the conceptualization of partnerships as boundary organizations our objective is to develop an analytical framework to operationalize knowledge production in sustainability partnerships and to analyze the extent to which knowledge production in partnerships can be understood as joint knowledge production.

First we will argue that new ways of, and demands regarding, knowledge production influence the characteristics of the boundary work in sustainability partnerships. We observe implications for the nature of the produced knowledge, the process of knowledge production and the organization of knowledge production in partnerships. In the next section we explore these characteristics in more detail. Thereafter, we present our analytical framework. This framework will be applied to an exemplary case, the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), to explore its potential use and lessons resulting from the application to partnerships. Ultimately, by using the framework we expect to gain insight in how the process of joint knowledge production in partnerships can be improved.

2. Expectations about boundary work in partnerships

We expect that boundary work in partnerships has specific characteristics. First, while independent scientific research may still play a fundamental role in knowledge production, the engagement of multiple actors indicates that science is just one of the different types of knowledge that are handled in the arrangements. Second, the multi-actor character of the arrangements and the work on the interface of different sources of knowledge suggests that knowledge processes are not linear but inherently integrative. Third, we acknowledge that knowledge production is not a spontaneous process, but must be managed. In other words: we expect that knowledge production in sustainability partnerships can largely be understood as JKP if these expectations are fulfilled.

2.1. On the nature of knowledge in partnerships

A common (however not exhaustive) distinction in the scientific literature embraces four different knowledge types that are expected to be part of JKP processes: scientific knowledge, local practical knowledge, general practical knowledge and tacit knowledge. *Scientific knowledge* builds upon existing theories and literature; empirical research should be reproducible and verified by others, and it targets at knowledge that has a large applicability beyond local case-studies (Hegger et al., 2013; Regeer and Bunders, 2007; Edelenbos et al., 2011). *Local practical knowledge* is implicit knowledge gained by experience and only applicable to a specific area, company or target group (Hegger et al., 2013; Regeer and Bunders, 2007). *General practical knowledge* is also implicit but applicable to more than one situation only; it has a high external validity although the internal validity may be low (observations are not systematically collected, analyzed and controlled by others) (Hegger et al., 2013; Regeer and Bunders, 2007). *Tacit knowledge* refers to explicit knowledge like unwritten rules, skills and know-how. People are often not

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