



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Cleaner Production

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jclepro

The role(s) of universities in dealing with global wicked problems through multi-stakeholder initiatives

Domenico Dentoni ^{a, *}, Verena Bitzer ^b

^a Management Studies Group, School of Social Sciences, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands

^b Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 October 2013

Received in revised form

23 July 2014

Accepted 14 September 2014

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Universities

Multi-stakeholder initiatives

Cross-sector collaboration

Sustainable development

Wicked problems

ABSTRACT

Multi-stakeholder initiatives have emerged as collaborative partnerships to deal with wicked problems, particularly in the global food system. This article analyzes the role that academics play in these initiatives at a global level, and the nature of their participation. Based on a qualitative analysis supported by a database of 41 multi-stakeholder initiatives in the global agriculture and food sector and 51 interviews with their participants, this research identifies five key roles that academics play in multi-stakeholder initiatives and in communities of practice around them. In multi-stakeholder initiatives, academics act as knowledge experts, agenda-setting advisors and facilitators. In communities of practice, academics develop new knowledge on multi-stakeholder initiatives by theorizing from their observation and reflection and they build international bridges between students and multi-stakeholder initiatives. The results imply that academics engaging in multi-stakeholder initiatives that deal with global wicked problems can choose multiple paths to align their societal mission of co-creating sustainability with the broader organizational goals of their universities.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

There is increasing awareness in the academic and societal debate on sustainable development that some of the most urgent global problems such as food insecurity, climate change, biodiversity loss, and persisting poverty are so-called *wicked problems* (Levin et al., 2012; Rittel and Webber, 1973). Wicked problems have three key characteristics: they mutate over time, their causes and effects are scientifically uncertain, and they involve value conflicts among different stakeholders in society (Dentoni and Bitzer, 2013). Given their nature, wicked problems require collective action across societal sectors to generate impactful, transformative change of organizations and systems (Batie, 2008; Conklin, 2006; Weber and Khademan, 2008), based on a profound change of the

knowledge, attitude and competencies of individuals (Waddock, 2013).

The recent emergence of multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) can be seen as a response to the increasing urgency of many wicked problems (Palazzo and Scherer, 2008; Scherer et al., 2013; Waddock, 2013). MSIs are voluntary and self-regulatory agreements between different constellations of stakeholders from different societal sectors, including businesses, civil society, governments, international organizations and sometimes academia (Bäckstrand, 2006). Particularly in the food and agricultural sector MSIs have experienced widespread proliferation over the past decade (Bitzer, 2012; Schouten and Glasbergen, 2012). Although they have different missions, foci and structures, MSIs include the widely studied Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (Fransen and Kolk, 2007; Schouten and Glasbergen, 2011), the UN Global Compact (O'Rourke, 2006; Roloff, 2008) and the Marine Stewardship Council (Cummins, 2004; Gulbrandsen, 2009). Most MSIs engage in rule-making and standard-setting to address social and environmental challenges and therefore form part of an emerging global regulatory order (Mena and Palazzo, 2012) based on non-state market-driven governance (Cashore, 2002; Von Geibler, 2013). This refers to their character as private governance arrangements, which do not rely on the enforcement and monitoring capacities of national governments. Accordingly, most studies have focused on the role of businesses and NGOs in such arrangements,

List of Acronyms: CoP, Community of Practice; GAIN, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition; GCFSI, Global Center for Food Systems Innovation; GOLDEN, Global Organizational Learning and Development Network; IFAMA, International Food and Agribusiness Management Association; IFPRI, International Food Policy Research Institute; MSI, Multi-Stakeholder Initiative; NGO, Non-Governmental Organization; SFL, Sustainable Food Laboratory; SAFL, Southern Africa Food Lab; UN, United Nations.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 646 801736.

E-mail address: domenico.dentoni@wur.nl (D. Dentoni).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2014.09.050>

0959-6526/© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

how their collaboration results in standard-setting and certification (Von Geibler, 2013) and how they seek to develop legitimacy (Schouten and Glasbergen, 2011; Mena and Palazzo, 2012). Whilst businesses and NGOs are indeed the key actors in many MSIs, the literature has so far been virtually silent on the role of academia *in* and *around* MSIs in a global setting, despite the fact that universities or individual academics are important participants in a large number of MSIs. This silence is also surprising inasmuch as the co-creation of knowledge – the core domain of universities – has been identified as a key outcome of MSIs (Selsky and Parker, 2005). As Miller argued, the emergence of global governance spaces comprising a multiplicity of actors warrants a closer examination of the mechanisms by which knowledge is produced and validated, for “the ability to deploy scientific and other forms of expert reasoning” has turned into a significant source of power and authority (Miller, 2007, p. 348).

Largely disconnected from the literature on MSIs and wicked problems, a parallel strand of literature discusses the different roles that academia can play in larger transitions towards sustainability through collaboration within and outside academia (Lozano et al., 2013a; Zilahy et al., 2009; Trencher et al., 2013a). It is generally recognized that if universities wish to actively contribute to sustainability they need to go beyond their traditional functions of education, research and community outreach (Ciliz et al., 2012; Lozano et al., 2013a). Significant changes need to occur within universities, i.e. changes in values, attitudes, motivations, and curricula (Ferrer-Balas et al., 2010). Two key elements of such a structural change in universities are frequently mentioned. Firstly, universities are called upon to embrace trans- and inter-disciplinarity. Particularly wicked problems in their dynamic complexity require a research approach that is action-oriented, cross-scale and cross-domain, which also needs to reflect in the universities' education curricula (Manring, 2014; Zihaly et al., 2009). Secondly, universities need to “practice what they preach” and actively engage with different stakeholders (Lozano et al., 2013b; Zihaly and Huisingh, 2009). Indeed, Trencher et al. (2013a) observe that many universities are starting to collaborate with diverse stakeholders to create sustainable societal transformations. Within such collaborative arrangements, universities do not merely perform traditional functions of scientific advisors and ‘innovators’, but also assume roles of collaboration developers, linkage builders and facilitators (Trencher et al., 2013a; Waddell et al., 2013). However, research on university-society collaborations is thus far at an early stage. While this may have to do with the fact that universities are lagging behind in their stakeholder engagement as compared to other sectors (Lozano et al., 2013a), it also opens up a promising line of research to (1) improve our understanding of MSIs more generally and (2) enhance knowledge on the role of universities in sustainable development, thereby engendering fruitful cross-referencing between the different strands of literature dealing with wicked problems, MSIs and universities in sustainable development.

In particular, this paper seeks to investigate the involvement of universities and research institutes in and around MSIs to understand how academics can collaboratively contribute to addressing wicked problems. Of particular interest are the specific roles that academics play in and around MSIs. To achieve these objectives, the paper presents evidence from 41 MSIs in the global agriculture and food sector to study the engagement of universities in the context of wicked problems. The study is based mainly on data collected, interpreted and analyzed using an inductive, qualitative research approach (Eisenhardt, 1989) with elements of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The method is based on comparing and contrasting insights from interviews with academics engaging in MSIs, agribusiness, NGOs and multi-stakeholder initiative

coordinators. The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the theoretical background of this study, providing further insights into the literatures on wicked problems, MSIs and universities in sustainability. Section 3 describes the methods upon which the study is based and section 4 presents the main results. Section 5 critically discusses these results and picks up the debate on the compatibility between practical sustainability efforts and the organizational goals of universities. Section 6 concludes the study and offers recommendations for further research.

2. Theoretical background

Three theoretical pillars are discussed in this section. First, wicked problems theory highlights the importance of cross-sector collaboration to deal with global sustainability issues. Second, theories on multi-stakeholder initiatives advance knowledge on why companies and other societal actors seek new organizational forms to address global sustainability issues. Third, theories on university roles for sustainable development discuss the academic challenges of engaging in forms of cross-sector collaboration.

2.1. Wicked problems

‘Wicked problems’ have come to take a prominent place in current debates about sustainability problems that are so complex that there is not even agreement on how to define the problem, let alone on how to solve it (Batie, 2008; Van Bueren et al., 2003). Examples of wicked problems abound, particularly related to the food and agriculture sector, including climate change (Levin et al., 2012), poverty and food insecurity (Dentoni et al., 2012a), and biodiversity loss (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2009). The term was coined in the 1970s by Rittel and Webber (1973) who pointed out the limitations of the leading public planning approach in dealing with highly intractable problems characterized by various dimensions of ‘wickedness’. Three characteristics stand out in particular (Dentoni and Bitzer, 2013). Firstly, the complexity of wicked problems is such that scientific uncertainty and causal indeterminacy are prevalent (Lazarus, 2009). Secondly, wicked problems are also socially complex in that they affect and are affected by multiple stakeholders with conflicting values and interests (Conklin, 2006). Finally, wicked problems are dynamic and evolve over time, giving them a ‘relentless’ character (Weber and Khademian, 2008).

These three characteristics have significant implications on how to address wicked problems. Authors from different disciplines have emphasized that the interdependency among stakeholders requires collaborative governance mechanisms, such MSIs, since individual action against wicked problems has limited or no impact if uncoordinated from the action of others (Batie, 2008; Conklin, 2006; Weber and Khademian, 2008). However, as Jentoft and Chuenpagdee remarked, “creating such mechanisms and making them work is in itself a wicked problem” (2009, p. 555). Stakeholders often have opposing frames on the issue at stake, engendering value conflicts and struggles over the definition of and approach to the problem (Andonova et al., 2009). Gaps in scientific knowledge further aggravate decision-making. Even for the information that is available, actors face cognitive limits to make sense of it and adequately put it into use (Batie, 2008). Short time horizons of public decision-makers also give rise to situations where imprudent decisions are taken regardless of the information that is or is not available (Levin et al., 2012). As Rittel and Webber (1973) argued, there are no ‘solutions’ in the sense of definite and objective answers to the problem over time, rendering any attempts for one-off solutions futile. Collaborative governance must therefore be a continuous process that relies on the collective judgment of the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/8103148>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/8103148>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)