

Partnering for Impact

How Swedish environmental NGOs define the impact of corporate collaborations

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1. Introduction

At COP26, the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties in 2021, one of the four primary goals stated was forming collaborations between governments, businesses, and civil society to tackle the climate crisis together (UKCOP26, 2021). This affirmation as well as transnational initiatives such as Agenda 2030 have, in recent years, propelled partnerships between non-government organisations (NGOs) and businesses in the field of sustainable development.

The impetus for collaboration is accompanied by the increase of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in the environmental sphere, caused by the growing pressure on businesses to conduct their practices in more socially and environmentally responsible ways (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Stafford et al., 2000). CSR refers to the corporate voluntary engagement in initiatives to benefit a societal cause and extend their efforts beyond competitive interests and legal requirements (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). Additionally, the expectations on businesses to adopt a more active role in their sustainability efforts can be ascribed to legal pressures from both national authorities and international constitutions such as the EU requiring companies to report sustainability risks and opportunities (European Commission, 2021). Currently, the EU ban on single-use plastics has taken effect step-by-step since July 2021 (*The reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment*, Directive 2019/904).

The formation of cross-sector collaborations has also been described as a response to societal pressures from stakeholders to solve economic, social and environmental issues (Laasonen et al., 2012; Van Tulder et al., 2016). A commonly raised motivation is that complex social and environmental issues require collaborative solutions (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). From this view, the increase in partnerships follows the necessity to involve a range of actors to find innovative solutions to the global issues at hand. Therefore, climate change, as an urgent complex global challenge, requires collective actions from various sectors, countries, and individuals. The societal expectations to collaborate is also supported by the endorsement of key global institutions such as the United Nations (UN), where the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for collective actions by NGOs and firms to address environmental issues (Bode et al., 2019; United Nations, 2015).

Despite the shift towards collaborative partnerships, there is a research gap concerning the actual *impacts* of collaboration efforts (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Herlin, 2013; Shumate et al., 2018; Shah, 2011; Van Tulder et al., 2016). The consensus in previous research is that

high-engagement collaborations, where the roles and efforts of partners are integrated, can contribute to real societal changes (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Rondinelli & London, 2003; Shumate et al., 2018). The field has largely attempted to complement preceding research by portraying partnerships as a win-win without addressing the varieties of impact (Van Tulder et al., 2016). According to the win-win perspective, collaborations offer financial stability for NGOs, and simultaneously positively effects the reputation of the corporate partner by legitimizing their CSR efforts (Dempsey, 2011; Herlin, 2013).

However, in the literature the corporate benefits to collaborate are clear, while the added value for NGOs is less evident. Indeed, Herlin (2013) has argued that highly integrated partnerships lead to higher legitimacy risks for the NGO partner, thereby presenting a mixed picture on the topic. Also, research by Shumate et al. (2018) revealed that NGO-business collaborations do not systematically contribute to more positive results for NGOs in terms of financial management-, mission orientation-, and/or staff management capacities. The study found that NGOs engaged in collaborations did not have higher capacities compared to NGOs who did not engage in corporate collaborations.

Guided by the research gaps surrounding the ambiguity of *impact*, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: How do Swedish environmental NGOs characterize the impact of collaborations with a corporate partner?

RQ2: How do Swedish environmental NGOs define the conditions that facilitate or constrain the impact of corporate collaborations?

A qualitative exploration of impact in the environmental NGO-sector in Sweden enables a detailed account of the impact assessments of corporate collaborations. Expert interviews with senior managerial and decision-making employees in NGOs will be conducted to obtain in-depth insights concerning the impact as well as the facilitating and impeding conditions to impact from an NGO perspective.

1.1 Societal & Academic Relevance

Increasingly, NGOs are supporting the CSR agenda and shaping business efforts to be more environmentally responsible (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Ahlstrom & Sjostrom, 2005). The UN SDGs, specifically SDG 17, emphasizes the establishment of cross-sector partnerships between all stakeholders, to support the sustainability goals worldwide (United Nations, 2015). In addition, UN entities such as the UN Environment Programme (n.d.) and UN Global Compact (2019) have enabled corporations to commit to responsible business

practices on a national level and lifted the significance of involving the private sector in sustainability efforts (UN Environment Programme, n.d.; United Nations Global Compact, 2019).

In concurrence with the global push for cross-sector partnerships, NGO-business collaborations, as a manifestation of CSR, continue to grow in importance (C&E Advisory, 2021; Rayne et al., 2020). According to recent industry data over 95% of the 240 largest businesses report their sustainability performance (GRI, 2020), over 3000 businesses have set carbon goals to reduce their emissions (Science Based Targets, 2022), and a third of the largest European companies have signed a pledge to reach net-zero by 2050 (Accenture, 2021; Winston, 2021). Thus, the incentive for businesses to advance their environmental CSR agenda through NGO partnerships is evident.

The current study concerns the national context of Sweden. In Sweden, NGO-business collaborations have become increasingly visible during the past 20 years, and thereby studying this national context can provide useful insights (Ahlstrom & Sjostrom, 2005; Fontana, 2018). Sweden is also categorized as outspoken and active in CSR policy-making and environmental politics (Fontana, 2018; Peters et al., 2007). Since March 2018, almost 500 Swedish companies have committed to the UN Global Compact initiative to align their strategies and operations according to the Ten Principles of the initiative and the UN SDGs (UN Global Compact, n.d.). Also, as an EU member state, EU legislations on environmental policy are relevant to the national context of this study.

A contextual perspective is also in line with research which contends that the regional context influences the activities and input metrics of cross-sector partnerships (Gjølborg, 2009; Van Tulder et al., 2016). The regional influence on collaborative efforts could attribute that a qualitative analysis of partnership impact, limited to one regional context, provides a more accurate assessment, and thus more valid results. Moreover, existing scholarship on partnerships do not distinguish on the basis of the issue type, thereby social and environmental issues are treated the same despite their contrasting aims, activities, and impacts. In this way, studying the impact of environmental collaborations specifically is valuable.

2. Theoretical Framework

The following section provides an overview of the existing academic work and relevant theoretical frameworks on the topic of NGO-business partnerships, and the impact of collaborations. First, the definitional variations in the understanding of cross-sector partnerships are presented, thereafter the main drivers to collaborative business-NGO relations are summarized, followed by the different impact assessments in the field, and lastly the key conditions which facilitate and constrain impact.

2.1 Defining NGO-business collaborations

Despite the growing importance of cross-sector collaborations, there is limited agreement concerning the definition of such collaborations and/or partnerships. Understanding the scope of a partnership is a prerequisite to analysing its impact. Thus, the ambiguity concerning what constitutes a collaboration highlights a fundamental challenge when defining the impact of, in this case, an environmental NGO-business partnership. It is also noteworthy that NGOs are variously defined and do not constitute a unitary group. The following definition of NGOs will be the basis of the current study, “private, not-for-profit organizations that aim to serve particular societal interests by focusing advocacy and/ or operational efforts on social, political and economic goals, including equity, education, health, environmental protection and human rights” (Teegen, Doh & Vachani, 2004, p. 466).

Selsky and Parker (2005) define cross-sector social-oriented partnerships as: “... projects formed explicitly to address social issues and causes that actively engage the partners on an ongoing basis” (p.850). According to the authors, partnerships can be short-term transactional projects limited to self-interest, and more long-term integrated projects oriented around the common interests of the partners. On the contrary, Waddock (1988) differentiates cross-sector partnerships from philanthropic efforts, defining social partnerships between corporation and other sectors as, “... a commitment of resources – time and effort – by individuals from all partner organisations. These individuals work co-operatively to solve problems that affect them all... It requires active rather than passive involvement from all parties” (p. 18).

Austin and colleagues (2012) propose a *value creation continuum* that defines different NGO-business collaborations according to the level of engagement between the collaborative partners. The continuum categorizes four collaboration stages: the philanthropic, transactional, integrative, and transformational stage, and as a collaboration migrates along the engagement stages, the type of value created alters. In this view, ‘philanthropic’

collaborations are primarily one-way partnerships in the form of financial donations from the business partner to the NGO (Austin, 2000). Meanwhile, in a ‘transactional’ collaboration, there is an exchange of resources in form of specific activities such as certifications, sponsoring a particular event, or a cause-related marketing strategy including both partners. In the ‘integrative’ stage, the partners’ missions and practices integrate into collective actions and joint ventures which produce results unique to the collaboration. Furthermore, Austin and Seitanidi (2012) describe a final ‘transformational stage’, which is the most advanced stage of engagement, where the partnership results in innovations that can benefit society.

A similar categorization, suggested by Rondinelli and London (2003), focuses on environmental collaboration and three types of strategies according to the level of interaction between partners. The first type is transactional, characterized by low levels of interactions and where NGOs have a low level of influence on corporate practices. The second strategy includes moderately intense interactions between partners, where the NGOs have an effect on the CSR agenda by for example certifying environmental industry practices. In the last type of strategy, which is the most interactive, corporations form alliances with NGOs to work towards tackling both current issues and preventing future environmental issues.

Cross-sector partnerships can also be defined as a combination of a CSR and stakeholder management strategy (Shah, 2011). From the CSR perspective, according to the primary definition by Carroll (1991, 1999) CSR constitutes the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities of firms. Thereby, partnerships are a means for firms to meet these corporate responsibilities. However, the variety of legal, cultural and social contexts of different countries alters the definition of CSR and the social expectations on corporations (Gjølberg, 2009). In the view of stakeholder management, partnerships enable strategic bridging, where the credibility of NGOs results in businesses gaining the support from external stakeholder who otherwise would not support the corporation (Shah, 2011).

2.2 Drivers of NGO-business collaborations

In the academic field of cross-sector partnerships, NGO-business collaborations are commonly framed as a win-win solution for both partners (Den Hond et al., 2015; Laasonen et al., 2012; Van Tulder et al., 2016). NGO-business scholars have attributed a multitude of financial, political and societal pressures to NGOs shifting their strategies from confrontation to collaboration. However, based on the following literature overview it is evident that the corporate motivations for engaging in environmental collaborations are more apparent.

2.2.1 Resource dependency theory

Resource dependency theory (RDT) has been attributed as a theoretical explanation to why NGO-business collaborations have become more common. In this view, companies and NGOs seek to overcome resource deficiencies by partnering up to acquire resources which they cannot gain in isolation (Den Hond et al., 2015; Mironska & Zaborek, 2019). From an NGO perspective, the motivation to collaborate with businesses is attributed to gaining financial resources, improving management competences and influencing the business they partner with from within to improve their practices (Herlin, 2013; Shumate et al., 2018). Moreover, based on the origin and purpose of NGOs, their key objective in obtaining corporate resources should be to further the cause their organization is centred around (Yaziji & Doh, 2009). According to Yaziji and Doh (2009) the primary aim of an NGO is to serve a particular societal interest by focusing their efforts on social, political and economic goals to further this cause. However, recent research reveals that NGOs that collaborate with firms do not systematically increase their capacity compared to NGOs with portfolios that do not include collaboration strategies (Shumate et al., 2018). This finding defies the assumption that collaborations contribute to a competitive advantage for NGOs.

A corporate motivation to collaborate according to the RDT perspective is that partnerships enable businesses to access NGO expertise that otherwise would be too expensive and time consuming to obtain independently (Rondinelli & London, 2003). In line with CSR, appearing to be socially responsible is a competitive strategy for corporations to improve their image and reputation (Barnett et al., 2020; Burchell & Cook, 2013; Herlin, 2013) but whether that translates to substantive societal and environmental impact or only to short-term corporate gains is not yet fully known in empirical research (Hansen & Spitzcek, 2011; Herlin, 2013). This thesis aims to bridge the research gap in impact assessment literature from an NGO standpoint.

2.2.2 CSR and the corporate agenda

The reputation of businesses is increasingly dependent on the public perception of their involvement in societal issues, such as environmental protection. Recent findings confirm that consumers would cease purchasing a product or service if they disagree with the company's position on a social or environmental issue (Aflac CSR Survey, 2019; Hunjet et al., 2021, Stobierski, 2021). Moreover, recent industry data shows that 93% of employees believe businesses must lead with a purpose, and 88% agree that it is not acceptable for business to focus on profits at the expense of society (Porter Novelli, 2020). A study by

Hunjet et al. (2021) also confirms that employees would accept a lower wage if the business they worked for was more environmentally responsible. Overall, this indicates a necessity for corporations to engage in CSR initiatives to meet the higher expectations of both consumers and employees concerning the corporate environmental practices. Forming cross-sector collaborations enables businesses to obtain legitimacy through the reputational gains accompanied with being associated with NGOs.

In the literature, the roles and objectives of NGOs and businesses are often presented as intertwined as a form of common CSR (Laasonen et al., 2012). This could imply a potential risk, because if the goals of NGOs are commercialized this contradicts the very purpose of NGOs. The interest to further a societal cause is a defining characteristic of NGOs, and an environmental NGOs should therefore primarily aim to positively impact environmental protection. Thereby, if an NGO is viewed as closely interlinked with business objectives and a CSR agenda, they run a risk of being perceived as serving corporate interests which could contribute to reputational damage. Moreover, from a corporate perspective, NGO partnerships have been attributed to bring about increased public pressure and scrutiny (Baur & Schmitz, 2012). Thus, for a corporation there is a risk that collaborations contribute to a higher standard regarding their corporate responsibility practices.

Based on the overview of motivations, the corporate prospects and the non-profit risks stand out. This could indicate that corporate benefits have arguably driven the shift from confrontation to collaboration and highlights the need to investigate how NGOs characterize the environmental impact of collaborations. Ultimately, in accordance with the issue-orientation of NGOs it is the potential environmental impact that should determine if an environmental NGO collaborates with businesses or not.

2.3 Impact of NGO-collaborations

Despite the growing evidence of cross-sector partnerships, the impact of such partnerships is under-researched. A review of existing scholarship suggests that impact may exist on various levels, that existing frameworks adopt multiple-meaning typologies, varies between short-term and long-term impact, and lacks standardized assessments of environmental impact. Thus, 'impact' is difficult to capture by a single definition and constitutes a multidimensional phenomenon. The variability of partnership definitions and scope further complicates the understanding of impact.

2.3.1 Levels of impact assessment

Impact has been defined on various levels, from community to business-level impacts (Hansen & Spitzneck, 2011), from financial profits to the achieved innovation (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012), from individual to societal and issue-level impact (Van Tulder et al., 2016), from organizational to reputational benefits (Mironiska & Zaborek, 2019), as well as from micro-level to macro-level impact (Bode et al., 2019; Shumate et al., 2018) (See Table 2.1). In this way, impact may exist at different levels which complicates impact understanding, assessment, and measurement.

Table 2.1 Levels in impact assessments

| Levels of impact | Operationalization of impact |
|---|---|
| Community- and business level impact (Hansen & Spitzneck, 2011) | Impacts affecting community members, and impact concerning the partnering organizations |
| Philanthropic, transactional, integrative, and transformational impact (Austin, 2000; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012) | Engagement level between collaborating partners, from low- to high-level integration of efforts and resources |
| Individual, organizational, partnership and societal impact (Van Tulder et al. (2016) | Impact related to employees, partners and partnership mission, and general societal effects |
| Organizational, social and reputational impact (Mironiska & Zaborek, 2019) | Impacts in terms of financial performance, partnership mission, and added reputational value |
| Micro-, meso- and macro impact (Bode et al. 2019; Shumate et al., 2018) | Impacts related to individuals, partnering organizations and general societal impact |

Hansen and Spitzneck (2011) distinguish between community and business benefit level to measure the effects of corporate community involvement. In this view, the impact indicators on a community level are the effects on the community and community members, for example the number of participants in an educational program, while the business impact concerns financial indicators and the effects on customers and employees.

In the *value creation continuum* by Austin and Seitanidi (2012) the potential impact is defined according to the engagement stage of the collaborations whereby ‘philanthropic’ collaborations result in financial profits to NGOs, ‘transactional’ collaborations contribute to NGOs gaining specific resources from businesses such as acquiring impact management competences and ‘integrative’ collaborations result in unique outcomes for both partners. In this view, it is only the last ‘transformational’ stage which results in new innovations which can benefit society and future developments.

Van Tulder et al. (2016) conceptualizes impact according to four levels: individual, organizational, partnership and societal impact. The first level concerns the impact on the individuals in the organizations, which can be assessed by evaluating employee engagement and changed mindsets. The organizational second-level impact is the tactical efficiency of the partnership and the project performance. Partnership value is the third level of impact, which is the mission related performance. Lastly, the fourth-level societal impact concerns the innovation achieved through the partnership. It is the issue related performance measure, the contribution the collaboration has provided to the overall solution to the initially defined issue.

Similarly, Mironiska and Zaborek (2019) assess impact according to organizational, social and reputational value. Organizational value concerns increasing financial capacity, enlisting volunteers, and obtaining new partners. The social impact is the achievement of social objectives of the collaboration, such as increased satisfaction for the targeted beneficiary groups, achievement of partnership goals, increased satisfaction among employees in the NGO and among volunteers. This relates to the individual internal value of collaboration, which are the positive changes for individuals in the organization. The reputational value regards the increased awareness and visibility of the NGO among stakeholders and improvements of the NGOs image among stakeholders.

Lastly, collaboration impact can also be assessed at micro, meso- or macro levels of analysis, whereby micro-level impacts concern the outcomes for individuals such as employee engagement or participant engagement, meso-level impacts concern the organizational effects, and macro-level impacts are the societal impacts (Hansen & Spitzneck, 2011; Shumate et al., 2018; Van Tulder et al., 2016). The transformational stage in the value creation continuum (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012) results in macro-level impacts such as new innovations which can benefit society and future developments, while the other three engagement stages only contribute to micro and meso-level impacts. For an NGO, enhancement of organizational, social, and reputational value are illustrations of positive impact at the meso-level (Mironiska & Zaborek, 2019).

The levels of impact in the literature underlines the difficulty in measuring the effects of a partnership. Depending on the scope and level of analysis, the impact assessment will differ. Different levels of impact have separate performance indicators, for instance, if impact is divided between community and business benefits, the activities and the impact indicators will differ between the two dimensions. Moreover, if assessing the organizational impact

(Mironiska & Zaborek, 2019; Van Tulder et al., 2016), the mission and objectives of the partnership at hand will determine the scope of assessment.

2.3.2 Impact assessment typology

Existing impact assessments in the field use a varied terminology while differentiating among output, outcome and impact metrics (Van Tulder et al., 2016; Vestergaard et al., 2020; Shumate et al., 2018; Stadtler, 2016). Moreover, the research also distinguishes between efficiency and effectiveness, where efficiency is the immediate internal value, and effectiveness as the overall added value of the partnership (Van Tulder et al., 2016). In this way, the question of impact is complicated by a use of related terminology, making impact difficult to distinguish from outcomes and outputs.

Outputs refer to the immediately observable and measurable deliverables of the partnership and may include activities, services, products, volunteers, partners and services, as well as raising funds, increasing productivity and implementing new agreements, norms and guidelines (Vestergaard et al., 2020; Mironiska and Zaborek, 2019). Typically, these are linked to generating internal value to the organization and the partners, in other words the project performance (Van Tulder et al., 2016). Further, outputs are the resulting positive changes and consequences of completing the inputs, the partnership activities (Van Tulder et al., 2016; United Nations, 2011). Thereby, output metrics correspond to micro-level impacts (Shumate et al., 2018), and individual level impacts (Van Tulder et al., 2016) in the literature, which demonstrates the ambiguity concerning the scope of ‘impact’ which the varied terminology causes.

Outcomes concern the institutional and behavioural changes caused by the immediate outputs of the collaboration in relation to the partnership mission (Vestergaard et al., 2020; Van Tulder et al., 2016; United Nations, 2011). They can be both intended or unintended and outcomes can thereby be positive or negative (United Nations, 2011). Outcomes relate to the strategic mission-related performance assessment, how the partnership made a difference in the context and time compared to the original mission of the partnership. The outcome is thereby the added value of the partnership in relation to original objective, this relates to the third level ‘partnership’ impact described by Van Tulder et al. (2016) and the social level of impact highlighted by Mironiska and Zaborek (2019). In this way, the meaning of partnership outputs, outcomes and impacts are used interchangeably in the cross-sector research field which impedes the development of an impact assessment framework.

In frameworks which distinguish between outputs and outcomes, ‘*impacts*’ are referred to as the risks and benefits that the collaboration contributes to society (Vestergaard et al., 2020; Van Tulder et al., 2016). In this view, impact is the issue-related performance and can include both positive and negative changes in relation to economic, socio-cultural, institutional, environmental and technological factors (United Nations, 2011). However, the assessments do not address the complications concerning relationship between the metrics (Vestergaard et al., 2020). For example, it cannot be assumed that positive outcomes transform into a positive impact. This also contributes to a challenge when measuring the impact of a collaboration effort, as well as when determining how to enhance the effects of a collaboration.

Moreover, depending on the scope of the input, outputs, and outcomes, the impact assessment will differ. For example, if impact is divided between community and business benefits, the input level indicators and impact indicators differ between the two different dimensions (Hansen & Spitzneck, 2011). In this way, the nature of the activities in the partnership changes the input indicators, which therefore alters the impact indicators.

2.3.3 Short-term and long-term impact

The time-orientation of the different metrics is evident in the literature, for example, outputs are short-term and immediately observable, whereas impacts require a long-term approach (Vestergaard et al., 2020; United Nations, 2011). Impact in prior research is primarily dominated by the short-term internal changes, the financial efficiency and stakeholder management benefits rather than impacts on the wider society (Barnett et al., 2020; Shumate et al., 2018; Hansen & Spitzneck, 2011). Currently, there is an absence of an agreed set of criteria and indicators for tracking the impact of a collaboration. A possible reason is that measuring impact requires a longer time-period, while outputs can be measured in a shorter time frame and are easily distinguishable. A longer measuring period increases the uncertainty of the cause and effect of impact, it is thereby difficult to determine if long-term impacts are results of the collaboration, or other external factors. Additionally, focusing on short-term profitable changes follows a corporate logic of favouring immediate and measurable results.

2.3.4 Measuring environmental impact

In the field, the immediate positive changes which the collaboration contributes to are often assumed to bring about environmental impacts (Hansen & Spitzneck, 2011; Shumate et al., 2018; Van Tulder et al., 2016; Vestergaard et al., 2020). However, from an NGO-perspective it is essential to assess if the collaboration efforts, such as new activities and

services, promote a positive environmental impact. For example, to evaluate and validate that the collaborations' outputs are generating the expected outcomes which likely contributes to the desired environmental impacts (United Nations, 2011).

In the field of environmental CSR, rating agencies-used by businesses to measure their CSR performance- are increasingly using non-financial criteria such as impact based on responsibility reports and voluntary surveys (Scalet & Kelly, 2010). However, there is a lack of uniform standard among agencies and the regional context also influences the metrics adopted to measure CSR efforts. For example, Gjølborg (2009) studied responsibility performance indexes in different countries and found that initiatives significantly varied depending on the national context of the corporation.

2.4 Facilitators and barriers of impact

A final point in relation to the discussion of impact pertains to the conditions and barriers that are conducive to impact. The facilitators mirror the challenges that constrain the impact of partnerships, and the three frequently referenced conditions to impact in existing scholarship are: trust, strategic fit and engagement level.

2.4.1 *Trust between collaborators*

There is a consensus that a level of trust between partners is required for a collaboration to be possible, and the trust should progress during the collaboration to foster a productive partnership with valuable results (AbouAssi et al., 2016; Jonker & Nijhof, 2006; Mironska & Zaborek, 2019). An initial level of understanding between the business and NGO can be an obstacle if or when the partners have contrasting premises in terms of values, overarching missions and goals. Moreover, the historical origins and conflicting objectives of NGOs and businesses often leads to an initial mistrust (Seitanidi et al., 2010). A key prerequisite to enable understanding and counter mistrust is therefore to exercise transparency by, for example, sharing useful insights or vulnerable information (Bode et al., 2019; Idemudia, 2017). Lack of experience in dealing with each other's processes makes transparency and clear communication between the partners even more vital (Bode et al., 2019; Rondinelli & London, 2003). However, establishing trust through transparency in NGO-business partnerships has been proven difficult. For instance, in Idemudia's (2017) investigation of environmental collaborations between Shell and NGOs in the Niger Delta, NGOs confirmed that limited transparency hindered trust due to the corporate policy of Shell which did not allow full disclosure. From an NGO perspective, this indicates that the corporate agenda and lack of transparency may constrain their trust in the corporate partner.

2.4.2 Strategic fit between collaborators

A second factor cited in literature is the strategic fit and alignment between partners' interests and missions, values and cultures, as well as objectives and resources (Den Hond et al., 2015; Herlin, 2013). Again, the challenge related to this factor concerns the inherently conflicting interests and missions of for-profit and non-profit organizations. However, although the objectives and missions of the partners are different, previous research reveals that there is room for understanding if the partners view themselves as connected to a common issue (Jonker & Nijhof, 2006).

Moreover, if the values and culture of the NGO and businesses are similar, it may reduce the legitimacy risk for the involved NGO (Herlin, 2013). CSR research also demonstrates that firms are more likely to approach and select NGOs based on if their objectives and resources fit those of their business (Den Hond et al., 2015). From both sides it is evident that the strategic fit between the partners is a condition to foster a fruitful partnership, which could indicate the importance of a stringent selection process before entering collaborations. Paradoxically, the more closely interlinked the interests of the partners are, the higher the risk is that NGOs are co-opted by their corporate partner. Baur and Schmitz (2012) define co-opted NGOs as, "gradually absorbed and their organizational identity is compromised" (p. 11). In this way, corporate partnerships can risk that the firm co-opts the NGOs for legitimacy purposes without implementing real changes, which can lead to reputational damages if the NGO is perceived as serving corporate interests (Baur & Schmitz, 2012; Burchell & Cook, 2013; Herlin, 2013). It is a challenge for NGOs to navigate the risks and rewards of entering a collaboration with a business partner.

2.4.3 Engagement level

Lastly, engagement is argued to be a prerequisite for a prosperous collaboration between businesses and NGOs and has been previously explored in the literature (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Mironska & Zaborek, 2019; Rondinelli & London, 2003). According to the definition by Austin (2000) engagement between partners refers to the level of integration of the partners efforts and resources. Transformational partnerships, for instance, are defined by high levels of engagement among partners and potential societal impact (Austin, 2000; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). Accordingly, the potential value creation of collaborations is dependent on engagement, and thus, when a partnership migrates along the continuum the collaboration contributes to more valuable results. Similarly, Rondinelli and London (2003) state that only interactive partnerships have the potential to tackle and prevent environmental

issues. In this view, high engagement leads to more impactful collaborations and benefits outside of the partnership.

The prerequisite of engagement for transformational capacity complicates the management of a collaboration due to the contrasting approaches of NGOs and businesses. Thereby, to foster engagement, partners need to adopt practices such as accepting high levels of influence in decision making, shift organizational cultures, uphold frequent contacts, adjustments of objectives to integrate collaborative initiatives into their core businesses, and co-investing in the collaboration (Bode et al., 2019; Burchell & Cook, 2013; Den Hond et al., 2015).

However, recent evidence contests that highly integrated collaborations translate to positive impacts (Vestergaard et al., 2020). This research reveals that corporate interests, such as their competitive market advantages, is often given priority due to a power asymmetry between the interest of partners. Thereby, the benefits are often limited to the partnership, instead of reaching widespread transformational impact, to protect the commercial interest of the corporate partner. Previous research on the stakeholder perception of partnerships have confirmed that there is a higher legitimacy risk for NGOs when a collaboration is more integrative and that commitment negatively correlates with the perceived societal value of the partnership (Herlin, 2013; Mironiska & Zaborek, 2019). NGO In this view, NGOs should avoid co-branding to prevent compromising their core values. This reveals a paradox for NGOs, because an integrative collaboration has the potential to be more impactful while simultaneously contributing to a higher legitimacy risk for NGOs. The paradox highlights the importance for NGOs to adopt strategic approaches when collaborating with businesses, such as clear terms as well as measurable results to uphold transparency and ensure that the collaboration is beneficial to the NGO.

In summary, the literature overview discussed the multi-dimensional and multi-level nature of impact, the interchangeable terminology, and lack of uniform environmental impact assessments. The existing literature indicates that these factors could be attributing reasons for the research gap due the consequent difficulties in defining and evaluating partnership impact. Previous researchers stress a demand for systematic impact assessments, to ensure that it is advantageous for NGOs to involve a corporate partner in their efforts. Moreover, in the research field the level of trust, alignment and engagement between the NGO and the corporate partner are commonly attributed as the main barriers as well as the primary facilitators of impactful partnerships. Lastly, the overview highlights the risk of co-optation and legitimacy losses for NGOs, which further indicates the necessity to measure and prove the impact of partnerships to uphold transparency and hold corporate partners accountable for

their contributions. The literature review provides the theoretical overview of NGO-business collaboration impact scholarship and existing impact assessments in the field. Additionally, the following section presents the methodology adopted to operationalize and answer the two research questions, namely, how Swedish environmental NGOs characterize the impact of corporate collaborations, and how they define the conditions that facilitate or constrain impact.

3. Method

This chapter presents the methodological approach, sampling method, data collection and data analysis. In this study in-depth semi-structured expert interviews were conducted to explore the impact of cross-sector collaborations between NGOs and businesses in the environmental sector in Sweden.

A qualitative approach was appropriate to the two research questions at hand; how environmental NGOs characterize the impact of corporate collaborations and the conditions which facilitate and constrain the impact of such collaborations. According to Magnusson and Mareck (2015) a qualitative interview method is suitable to investigate the detailed and personal viewpoints and experiences of participants, in this case, the study explored how experts in NGOs defined the impact of environmental partnerships with businesses. The qualitative approach permitted an in-depth perspective, and the study investigated in detail the NGO representatives' views on for example how the NGO assesses the impact of their collaborations and what they perceive as facilitating and constraining conditions to impact according to their previous experiences.

3.1 Sampling and inclusion criteria

Expert interviews were conducted with senior managerial and decision-making employees in environmental NGOs in Sweden. Both large established international NGOs and local smaller NGOs in the environmental sector in Sweden were recruited. Moreover, all participating environmental NGOs in the study were currently engaged in business partnerships. Majority of the interviewees were responsible for the corporate partnership function in the NGO they worked for. This group of participants were purposefully selected since they had the necessary experience and knowledge to elaborate on what constitutes the impact of collaboration efforts from an NGO perspective.

A purposeful sampling methodology was used (Magnusson & Mareck, 2015), therefore, to recruit the specific target group an initial online search of Swedish environmental NGOs was carried out first. Moreover, several additional NGOs and specific contact representatives were sampled by researching NGO employees with the title 'manager for corporate partnerships' on LinkedIn. Following this sampling, all of the environmental NGO professionals that fit the purpose of the study were contacted via e-mail. Also, each NGO expert that confirmed that they could participate in study were asked during the interview to recommend additional environmental NGOs in Sweden that could be interested in participating. In total 38 NGOs were contacted using a combination of purposive and

snowball sampling. In the end, 12 NGOs consented to participate in the research constituting an acceptable sample as per the ESHCC (2021) methodological guidelines (See Table 3.1 for detailed participant profile).

Table 3.1 Participant Profile

| | Participant | Organization | Role | Mission/Purpose | Focus area(s) |
|----|--------------------|---|--|--|---|
| P1 | Anonymous | Anonymous | Donations and Engagement Manager | Promoting a circular society, conscious consumption and sustainable solutions to consumers. | Sharing research that leads to insight and behavioral changes around consuming more consciously. |
| P2 | Sara Larsson | WIN WIN Gothenburg Sustainability Award | Executive Director | Stimulating creativity and achieve lasting synergies as we strive to strike the right balance between ecological, environmental and social needs. | Recognizing and supporting outstanding contributions through the world's leading sustainability award. |
| P3 | Thomas Rebermark | WaterAid Sweden | Head of Corporate Partnerships | Transforming lives by improving access to safe water, hygiene and sanitation in the world's poorest communities. | Increasing access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) aids economic development, poverty reduction, education, health and more. |
| P4 | Anonymous | Anonymous | Strategic Relations & Major Grants Coordinator | Promoting a sustainable and just world, free from poverty. | Sustainable rural development and adequate housing with a strong emphasis on gender equality. |
| P4 | Anonymous | Anonymous | Strategic Relations & Major Grants Coordinator | To empower smallholder farmer families to reduce poverty, hunger, and deforestation, and increase biodiversity. | Focusing on sustainable agriculture, economic security, strong farmers organisations and equality through collaborations with farmer's organisations. |
| P5 | Anonymous | World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF Sweden) | Anonymous | Conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption. | Biodiversity and aquatic environment, biodiversity and sustainable landscapes and ecological footprint. |

| | | | | | |
|-----|-----------------|--|--|--|---|
| P6 | Mats Wesslén | Städa Sverige (Clean Sweden) | CEO | Reducing waste and littering in Sweden by promoting clean up assignments by local youth sports organizations. | Providing environmental training and organizing clean up assignments conducted by youth sports associations and teams in their local environment. |
| P7 | Anton Hedlund | Städa Sverige (Clean Sweden) | Project Manager | Reducing waste and littering in Sweden by promoting clean up assignments by local youth sports organizations. | Providing environmental training and organizing clean up assignments conducted by youth sports associations and teams in their local environment. |
| P8 | Torbjörn Lahti | Sustainable Sweden Association (SSA) | President of SSA | Working for economical, ecological and social sustainable development all over the world. | Conducting educational tours, spread the concept of eco-municipality and develop projects in order to build capacities and networks in sustainability on both national and international level. |
| P9 | Anonymous | Anonymous | Research Associate in corporate partnership projects | Supporting decision-making and inducing change towards sustainable development around the world. | Providing integrative knowledge that bridges science, policy and practice in the field of environment and development. |
| P10 | Ayesha Nagahage | Sustainability Concepts | Founder, Board Member | Ensuring that the delicate ecosystems of our planet are kept in their balance in the impact of current or future development activities. | Environmental issues, food safety, and rural development; promoting sustainable integration of the natural environment and its natural resources towards sustainable living. |
| P11 | Joakim Brodahl | Håll Sverige Rent (The Keep Sweden Tidy Association) | Head of Operations | Changing attitudes and behavior regarding waste. Promoting recycling and combating litter. | Public awareness campaign, campaigns, litter-picking days, litter-measuring statistics and environmental educational programs. |
| P12 | Anonymous | CSR VästSverige | Project Manager | Promoting strategic sustainable development initiatives in both the private and public sector. | Sector wide sustainability network; public and private social responsibility initiative. |

3.2 Data collection and Research instrument

In line with the methodological guidelines, informed consent was obtained from each participant before participation in the interviews (ESHCC, 2021). The form included detailed information concerning the purpose and scope of the study, informed participants that their answers will be anonymized, that withdrawal from the study or not answering questions was always possible, and that the findings would only be used for the purpose of the thesis. The interviews were conducted online via Teams on Zoom, dependent on the preference of the participant. Moreover, all interviews were recorded on the Teams or Zoom platform, after first obtaining consent from the participants to record the interview. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Swedish, and the remaining two were conducted in English. A semi-structured interview guide (See Appendix A) was designed based on the research questions as well as previous research in the NGO-business field. The interview guide operationalized the research questions to answer how NGO representatives characterize the impact of collaborations and the conditions for an impactful NGO-business relationship. A pilot test was conducted beforehand to ensure that the interview guide covered all essential topics to the research at hand, and several changes were made after the pilot test to ensure that the interview operationalized the research questions and simultaneously was not longer than 60 minutes. In the interview, participants were asked to describe what they believe constitutes a positive impact of a collaboration and what they have perceived to facilitate and constrain the impact of a partnership that they currently or previously had worked with. Moreover, although the interview guide was structured to elicit responses to the two research questions at hand, it also provided room for additional comments and topics that the participants considered relevant to discuss in the context of partnership impact. The average interview time was 51 minutes and the interviews resulted in 182 pages of transcripts.

3.3 Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the transcriptions from the twelve online interviews. The research was exploratory and thereby the coding and analysis of the interviews were primarily inductive (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The inductive approach implies that the analysis was flexible and driven by the data, thus the identified codes and themes were derived from the answers in the interview and not from previous research or theory. According to Braun and Clarke (2012) the inductive analysis ensures that the results derived from the analysis matches the content of the data. Furthermore, a thematic analysis was suitable for this analysis of a large amount of data from the interviews.

An online tool, Sonix, was used to facilitate generating an initial draft of transcriptions from all the interviews. Thereafter, the initial transcripts were reviewed and edited manually on Word, based on the recorded interviews. The raw data collected from the English interviews was transcribed verbatim, with the exception of removing necessary information to ensure participants' anonymity. The Swedish interviews were transcribed verbatim too, however, only the relevant parts of the interview were translated to English.

In the first step of the thematic analysis the transcripts of the interviews were read twice, and any items of potential interest was highlighted electronically on Sonix (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the second phase, the initial codes were generated by identifying any excerpts of the data that could be relevant to answer the two research questions. The process of identifying initial codes continued until the entire dataset was coded and all of the relevant features of the transcript were covered by a code. In the third phase, themes were constructed by identifying patterns and similarities in the coded data. In this phase it was important to ensure that the distinctive identified themes came together as a whole that connected to the research questions. Following this step, the themes were reviewed in relation to the dataset, and were modified by splitting or fusing themes together. In the fifth phase, themes were defined and named according to their specific focus and scope. Lastly, the report of the analysis was produced. However, it is important to note that although this was the last step of the thematic analysis presented by Braun and Clarke (2012), the analysis process was iterative. Thus, the formal writing of the report was connected to the rest of the process, for example the informal notes in the first phase of the analysis.

Reliability in qualitative research concerns the soundness of the methods used and if future research would bring about the same results if the same steps were conducted again (Silverman, 2011). Reliability was ensured by exercising transparency regarding the research process, and carefully documenting the process. A potential disadvantage of the flexibility of the thematic analysis was that it could have contributed to the results becoming more unreliable. Thereby, it was important to uphold reflexivity and to demonstrate a clear analysis process. Moreover, theoretical transparency in the literature overview was upheld to ensure reliability (Silverman, 2011). For example, the established frameworks that were used as a reference point when developing the interview guide was clearly stated in the guide, by stating "Based on previous literature [...]". The internal validity concerns the soundness of the results. Thereby, the interview guide was clear and thorough, to ensure that interviewees understood the questions and provided responses that could be used to answer the research questions. Moreover, a very accurate transcription of the results was made possible because

the interview sessions were recorded online on Teams or Zoom. External validity concerns the generalizability of the results, and thus it is significant to note that the findings in this study are only applicable to the sample of the Swedish environmental NGOs studied.

4. Results

This study aimed to explore NGO the impact of corporate partnerships and facilitators and barriers to achieve impact in environmental NGO-business collaborations in Sweden. Impact was characterized according to the goals of the partnership, ranging from spreading awareness, improving corporate practices, partner processes and stakeholder behaviour, and contributing to fulfilling global sustainability goals set up by both partners, legal entities, global institutes and the public. Additionally, the interviews reaffirmed exiting research that the facilitating and constraining conditions to impact concerned trust, independence from corporate interests, and assessing long-term impact.

Among the 12 participating environmental NGOs, the majority of the experts had previous experience in the private sector. Also, three of the organizations were originally founded by a group of corporations, which contributed to a long history between the NGOs and the corporate partners. Thus, there was an appreciation for the corporate challenges and trade-offs in terms of impact.

4.1 The impact of NGO-business collaborations

In this section, the results regarding how the NGOs characterized the impact of their corporate collaboration are presented. Previously, the multi- dimensional and multi-level nature of impact, interchangeable terminology, and lack of uniform environmental impact assessments has been referred to as a hinderance to capturing collaboration impact. To facilitate an overview of the following impact assessment, the three overarching impacts will be reported separately: awareness of collaborations and the issue, process and behavioural improvements, and lastly, meeting higher expectations set up by partners, legal entities, and consumers.

4.1.1 *Increasing awareness of collaborators and the issue*

The NGOs in this study defined the awareness and visibility resulting from collaborations as having a decisive impact on the collaborators as well as the issue at stake. For example, three of the NGOs described that the collaborations facilitated physical or digital platforms for companies to network with other firms to help further collective environmental practices. In this way, corporations pitched their progress, exchanged knowledge and accelerated efforts together with firms from similar industries, particular regions, or across sectors. As recounted by one participant, “We offer them the opportunity to meet other businesses from other industries, then you do not gather people from one industry but rather you gather companies around one question regarding sustainability” (P12). Several NGOs also underlined that the

collaboration bridges the efforts of firms that have come further in their sustainability agenda with corporations that have not come as far, who need a push in the right direction. By giving exposure to more knowledgeable corporate partners, the NGO facilitates that other companies are inspired and follow suit.

Moreover, the CSR agenda of corporations was evident to the NGOs, they understood that business partners valued their ability to use the collaboration in their communication as a competitive advantage. Collaborations was described to have a positive impact on the business partner's image and legitimacy through NGO affiliation in the collaboration. Many expressed an understanding for that corporations need to stay profitable and generate cash-flow, as one participant said, "They have profit as their goal, right. So yeah, in the end they have trade-offs and we don't" (P9). Additionally, several participants mentioned that they reported positive results back to their business partner to enable them to use the results of the collaboration in their communication efforts:

The participants [volunteers in campaign] send us a report with lots of valuable information, and this information we distribute to our financiers [business partner] which really creates a congruence in our efforts. The companies can then say that we collected 173 bags of litter this weekend with the help of 240 volunteers. (P6)

The partnership was also attributed to increase the visibility of the NGO, in the form of their programs, campaigns and activities through the corporate partners' network. The networking was also explained as a means to recruit new business partners. Particularly in smaller NGOs, new corporate partnerships were facilitated through word-of-mouth of current corporate partners, thus their current corporate network provided a platform to reach new contacts. The beneficial impacts of increasing the visibility of both partners mirrors the notion that partnerships can be used as a stakeholder management strategy and enable strategic bridging with new stakeholders (Shah, 2011). Bridging connections between various actors and organizations was referred to as vital because environmental issues are multifaceted and effect all industries and sectors.

However, in most instances, the collaboration efforts were centered around spreading awareness of the environmental issue the collaboration was set out to tackle, for example reducing waste, minimizing consumption, or developing sustainable energy solutions. Content regarding the issue was distributed on a variety of channels. For instance, through social media campaigns, blog posts, research papers, and publishing posts on their websites. One participant stated in referral to sharing posts on social media about the initiatives, "We make a short video about it [the initiative] to post on our social media channels. It makes it easier and more interesting, to understand that we all are a part of the change, to have a more

sustainable diet” (P2). The same participant described that the collaboration entailed spreading awareness of one particular environmental issue every year by organizing an award ceremony for an international sustainability award:

We have two juries, both juries include very competent experts from different sectors to help us decide on a theme each year and to select a prize winner in an open nomination process [...] we have meetings and events to spread awareness of the theme, during which we collaborate with different organizations. And then we have the big ceremony week at the end of October, with lots of activities, where the week ends with a gala and prize ceremony. (P2)

However, the main consensus was that the visibility of the NGO partner and the issue were not mutually exclusive, due to the NGO identity being rooted in the issue. The visibility of the NGO and the awareness of the issue were framed as interconnected:

The visibility which a corporate collaboration can give us is essential. To be visible makes it easier, to maybe increase the knowledge about us among other actors. That is important. But even more important is the visibility of the actual issue at hand. (P11)

4.1.2 Process and behavioural improvements

All participants mentioned ‘financing’ or ‘funding’ as a desired impact in terms of *NGO processes*. Many indicated that without the improved capacity through the corporate partner, the NGO would not survive financially. A recurring topic was that businesses fill a financial gap which the public sector previously accounted for in Sweden. Although larger NGOs still obtained a large portion of their income stream through government funding and/or individual fundraising (e.g., P5), funding via the business sector was referred to as “faster” and more “flexible” than the public sector. There was also a difference the dependency on corporate funding among NGOs of varying size and capacity, whereby larger NGOs had an established an awareness among the public and obtained more private donations and government funding. Relying on traditional fundraising as their main income source was described to contribute to more “support from the public” (P5) and reputational advantages. Although, some larger NGOs also acknowledged that corporate funding enhanced their means to improve their practices and enabled them to employ full-team researchers or to expand their operations, for smaller NGOs, funding was described as “the Achilles heel” (P8).

Moreover, by gaining access to the internal workings of the business, such as customer behavior, industry practices or business insights from the management, NGOs could influence *corporate practices*. For example, “We turn to big global actors such as [businesses name] to look into their plastic production, which they then report back to us” (P11). Thus, the NGO tracks plastic production with the aim to improve business practices. In several

collaborations worked to improve corporate practices through in-house expertise. For example, by providing solutions on how to reduce food waste or use sustainable materials in their production. The following statement exemplifies when the NGOs expertise contributed to improved practices:

They [the company] were suggesting that we should remove the soil from the swamp area and reconstruct using these concrete bricks which have permeable properties. [...] I said to them, ‘these swamp areas act as a buffer, because it has a high risk of flooding if we do the development or construction near the swamp area.’ (P10)

Moreover, many NGOs emphasized the importance of providing concrete tools to push businesses to implement changes and ultimately alter their practices. For example, providing a basic level of knowledge within the corporation through tailored seminars to educate corporations on relevant topics:

One part of the workshop includes clearly defining sustainability, to understand sustainable development. The concept we used we call ‘back casting for sustainable principles’ which means that from the very first workshop we conduct, they [business partner] starts building up a program for how they will work with sustainability. (P8)

Other collaborations were more integrated with a symbiosis of theoretical and industry insights, for example performing in-store experiments with the business to study consumer behaviour, conducting market research or developing innovations together. From this perspective, complex issues should be addressed by diversified experts. One interviewee demonstrates the positive impacts of the symbiosis of efforts by stating, “The value of our research is that it’s grounded [...] sometimes academic researchers only work within themselves [...] but here there’s a connection to the reality of it, to society. I think that’s really good” (P9). The symbiosis of knowledge in partnerships mirrors the RDT perspective on collaborations, namely that firms and NGOs overcome resource deficiencies by collaborating with each other to gain resources, such as financing and competences, which they could not obtain in isolation (Den Hond et al., 2015; Mironska & Zaborek, 2019). For example, several larger NGOs described the exchange of their expertise and the firms’ industry insights when certifying industry practices to become more sustainable. As participant 5 described, in relation to the hectares of forest which had been FSC¹ certified,

That is the surface area of Germany [hectare of forests] and no one would have been able to do this in isolation, they would not have been able to fix it by themselves and we would have not been able to do this with our own resources. (P5)

¹ Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is a forest certification system, a voluntary means to promote better forest management (WWF, 2005).

Collaborations also impacted *consumer behavior*, and the ability of corporations to influence consumer behavior was highlighted as a primary reason to collaborate with the private sector. One interviewee confirmed, “Companies influence the consumer behavior, which products come out and what they buy. It has an enormous impact, we can’t put the whole burden on the consumers, that’s why we work with companies” (P1). In turn, working with businesses to influence consumers leads to larger societal impacts.

The accumulated societal impact of changing consumer behavior was brought up by several NGOs. A spiral of behavioral impact was emphasized, for example, “The participants learn and understand that they can make a difference, and with the help the education we provide they can take the next step, for example to stop purchasing new clothes” (P6). Moreover, in some larger collaborations, the NGOs could track changes behavioral changes on a national level. For example, one manager described the impact of one partnership which entailed a recycling competition:

They [company] had a 23% recycling rate and then after doing the competition for two years then they had increased the recycling rate in Sweden to almost 40%, which is absolutely outstanding. The whole point was that the kids acted as agents, bringing the message home to their parents to tell them to start doing the right thing. (P5)

The end-goal of changing the consumer behavior was described as ultimately leading to societal impacts such as reducing emissions. Therefore, altering consumer behaviors were viewed as a small step that in the end could contribute to a larger environmental shift.

4.1.3 Meeting partner-, legal- and public expectation: The win-win

Finally, impact was defined in terms of a win-win whereby collaborations enabled corporations to comply with expectations set up by legal entities and/or to accomplish sustainability goals guided by the belief that neither party (NGO nor business) “can’t do this by ourselves” (P4). This notion is in line with previous research framing NGO-business collaborations as a win-win solution (Den Hond et al., 2015; Laasonen et al., 2012; Van Tulder et al., 2016). Many NGOs also described that the mutual benefit was necessary to convince firms to collaborate in the first place, “It’s important to have a clear link to agree on the outcomes from the beginning and that there's an interest for both. So that there's win-win” (P9). In this way, partnerships were attributed to assist both collaborating partners and their stakeholders in meeting their goals:

They win because of it, their consumers and their guests win, and society too. And for us it is also a win. It helps us in achieving our goals. We work with the UN global goal number twelve, so it helps us [NGO] reach that goal. (P1)

Working together on different UN SDGs (e.g., SDG 6 to minimize water contamination, or SDG 14 to develop and produce sustainable sea food, to conserve the resources in the

oceans) not only was perceived as mutually beneficial, it also encouraged NGOs to view business in a different light (“We have a different attitude towards businesses now, and the global goals become more and more relevant”; P4).

Moreover, the EU directive *The reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment* (Directive 2019/904) was brought up by several NGOs to have fuelled businesses to improve their practices. One NGO said:

Companies have an expanded responsibility in regard to their packaging [utökat producentansvar] in connection to the single use plastic directive, which will come into effect in Europe, including Sweden, then companies have get involved. Not necessarily because they want to, but because they have to due to their legal obligation to mitigate waste. (P11)

Supporting businesses to become sustainable was stated as a valuable impact by NGOs. Furthermore, obtaining business insights in the collaboration was described to enable realistic and applicable recommendations to businesses and policy makers. This also aids corporations to meet the expectations of modern consumers, and consumers were described as more conscious, with higher expectations on organizations.

The win-win attitude was also described as the symbiosis of efforts in collaborations to have innovative potential. For example, by developing solutions and models that can be adopted in other projects to accelerate future efforts. One participant described, “The model-development has taken time. But now when we do the same type of thing with for example the pharmaceutical sector, it goes a lot faster” (P5). In another project, the interviewee described that the collaboration could serve as an inspiration, “I create a proposal for them to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions in one city [...] So, it is kind of global demonstration about how the future cities should be” (P10). This relates the transformational stage of collaborations described by Austin and Seitanidi (2012) where the most integrated NGO-business relationships can contribute new innovations valuable to society and future developments.

Several participants also described the social impacts of collaborations, improving life quality of communities by providing new energy solutions, or bettering working conditions for factory workers. For instance, by improving water conditions, when asked what the long-term impact of corporate collaboration one NGO stated:

On a daily basis we have contributed to providing 18,6 million people on our planet with clean water since 1981. And of course this has made a difference, and we have evidence-based reports showcasing the benefits we have contributed to in the communities we collaborate with [...] We focus a lot of our efforts on women rights, to expand and strengthen their role in the societies they live in, so they do not miss out on their education, and the possibility to work, income and strengthen their

position. Instead of having to walk long distances to retrieve water, for their families and communities. (P3)

In summary, the collaboration impact was framed as part a bigger environmental movement. By influencing the behaviors of businesses, stakeholders and the public, joining forces to reach global sustainability goals and EU legislations, collaborations could contribute to societal impacts.

4.2 Barriers and facilitators of impactful collaborations

The barriers and constraining conditions to impact constitute dualistic dimensions, and as disclosed in the literature review, the facilitators also mirror the challenges and risks to achieving impact in collaborations. Previous scholars have highlighted that the challenges primarily relate to the inherently contrasting origins and objectives of NGOs and businesses (Den Hond et al., 2015; Herlin, 2013; Seitanidi et al., 2010), and thus this barrier mirrors the challenge in achieving conditions such as strategic fit and trust which previously has proven to enhance the impact of collaborations (AbouAssi et al., 2016; Jonker & Nijhof, 2006; Mironska & Zaborek, 2019). The interviews confirmed this paradox, and the recurring themes concerning the barriers and facilitators concerned trust, independence and demonstrating long-term impact.

4.2.1 Trust between collaborating partners

Trust was referred to as a basic precondition to a fruitful collaboration, “We can create all the processes, structures, and formal agreements in the world, but at the end of the day the question is: Do I trust you and do you trust me?” (P2). This finding confirms the notion in the cross-sector field that an initial level of trust that progresses during the partnership is necessary to stimulate a productive collaboration (AbouAssi et al., 2016; Jonker & Nijhof, 2006; Mironska & Zaborek, 2019). Previous literature highlights the challenges with respect to establishing trust due to the contrasting values of NGOs and the corporate agenda, thus scholars emphasize the value of exercising transparency to counter misunderstandings and mistrust (Bode et al., 2019; Idemudia, 2017; Seitanidi et al., 2010). In the current study, the recurrently mentioned conditions to facilitate trust according to the NGOs were: the demonstrated initiative of the firm, the interpersonal relations between collaborators and maintaining only a few corporate collaborations.

The majority of interviewees stated that the NGOs selection criteria included some form of requirement that the firm must *demonstrate initiative*, for example, “we have a policy that is pretty simple, that the company should have a real ambition to minimize their littering and waste” (P11). Two NGO specifically required the corporations to be committed to certain

SDGs, for example one NGO was primarily focused on improving water conditions, therefore they required companies to be committed to SDG 6 concerning water and sanitation. In some instances, to confirm the company's initiative, NGOs required their corporate partner to assess their own efforts before collaborating. For example, WaterAid required potential partners to complete a self-assessment and evaluate their efforts from a water impact, emissions and human rights perspective, "We ask all potential partner companies to do a self-assessment, where we ask them if they understand, if they have certification, if they take into account the effects of their production and their value chain." (P3). Furthermore, observing that the business has started improving their own practices was stated by many as a demonstration of the firms' interest in environmental initiatives and was perceived to demonstrate a genuine interest in accelerating their efforts:

If a big company comes in and says they want to give us half a million (SEK) to do good things with. Then we say, no we won't take the money from you, since you are so big then you can have a huge impact. You need to work on yourselves first, that is the important part. You can always contribute with a donation, but you should still contribute to other initiatives and make a difference internally. (P5)

However, a majority did not require corporations to have come far in their efforts, instead they wanted the business to demonstrate a willingness to change. Participant 3 confirmed that a strategic fit between partners primarily revolved around a shared interest, "If we don't find that there's a fundamental interest in working together to create a change, then we don't collaborate with the company at subject" (P3). Demonstrating initiative and showing "genuine" interest could for example be to appoint a sustainability manager or implement a sustainability policy. One participant stated, "A collaboration will come about more naturally if a sustainability policy has been worked on...then you understand each other faster" (P6). This indicates that if the business has started their efforts, the NGO partner is more confident that there is a goodwill to incorporate changes. Several NGOs disagreed with the notion that the partner should have started environmental efforts. Instead, educating the business partner was viewed as the NGOs responsibility, "If they have not initiated any strategic sustainability work yet, then it is our job to help them" (P12). In this view, demonstrating initiative mirrors the partners willingness to change, not their current knowledge or already implemented sustainability efforts.

Moreover, many emphasized the value of upholding an *interpersonal relationship* with the corporate partner, and the significance that 'people' and 'individuals' in collaboration worked well together. Thus, establishing an interpersonal relationship was stated as a condition to trust the business partner. The terms trust and interpersonal relationship were

also used interchangeably with one another, “a basic precondition to any collaboration I think is the interpersonal part and to trust one another” (P2). Building an interpersonal relationship was referred to as essential, both inside and outside of the collaboration: “It’s about the individual, you have to work together, and it has to be reciprocated” (P8); and establishing a personal relationship outside of the collaboration: “You should want to hang out with each other, do fun things together” (P11). Establishing this relationship required treating each other like colleagues and both partners reciprocating contact and initiating activities. Thus, meeting regularly in person, upholding frequent contact via phone and email, and engaging the business partner continuously in the collaboration were frequently mentioned as enablers for a good working relationship. However, this required time and resources, especially from the NGO side:

It isn’t a short sprint, it is about reminding them and keep talking about the same things over and over again so that you really get the entire business involved in the issue...it’s important not to underestimate how little the other partner thinks about you, we think that our members always have us top of mind, but they don’t, unless we keep mailing, calling and contacting them about the same things. (P12)

Many participants referenced the limited financial capacity of their organization as a barrier to maintaining an interpersonal relationship, stating that they do not have the time and resources to continuously monitor the partnership and follow up with their contact in the firm. Moreover, establishing an interpersonal relationship with the firm was also related to upholding transparency, which was attributed to minimize the negative preconceptions between the non-profit and for-profit sector. For example, “If you are an NGO that would immediately expose your corporate partner when a conflict arises, by saying ‘look at what they are doing wrong’, then you have sabotaged the collaboration” (P5). In this way, exercising honesty beyond what was required by contract, was referred to enhance the interpersonal relation and colleague-status of the NGO-business relationship. This finding confirms the views of previous scholars, confirming that clear communication is a key condition to trust because it provides insights into the partners’ processes and motives (Bode et al., 2019; Rondinelli & London, 2003).

Several NGOs also pointed to corporate reorganizations including change in staff, management or contact representative for the collaboration as constraining long-term interpersonal relationships. “A change of contact shakes the relationship” (P4), one noted. On the flip side, the emphasis on personal relationships could potentially induce a dependence culture such that a contact person’s exit could jeopardize the collaboration. For example, one participant recounted that a new point of contact in the collaborating firm was unaware of the

partnership, thus the NGO representative had to explain to them that the firm and the NGO had a six-year long relationship working with strategic sustainability. This clearly slowed down the progress of the collaboration, because the NGO had to spell out what the partnership entailed, the value of the partnership, and build up an interpersonal relationship again. This highlights the significance of that the collaboration involves regular contact with several employees and obtains management endorsement to ensure that the partnership permeates the entire business: “It should not only be something [the collaboration] that is maintained by a small unit or department, but that it is anchored all the way up to the CEO” (P4). Thus, the management needs to be involved and understand the value of the collaboration in order to ensure longevity and that a reorganization does not destabilize the partnership.

Furthermore, another affordance to trust was to establish only *a few partnerships*, which was attested to facilitate longevity and a closer more in-depth relationship with the corporate counterpart. This notion closely relates to the limited NGO capacity, because selecting fewer collaboration ensures maximum impact with restricted resources: “The challenge is the internal capacity of a small organization like ours, to give time, love and tenderness, to really give them what they need” (P11). Moreover, maintaining a few bigger partnerships was described to enable more funding from larger corporations:

We try to establish global corporate partnerships with big companies. That is where we get the best return of our efforts. It always an administrative cost, no matter how big the corporation is, and so we try to avoid many small business partners because it requires more administration. (P5)

Thus, a few in-depth collaborations with influential businesses enhanced impact.

However, several NGOs highlighted the risk of stagnancy in long-term collaborations. In this view, there is a risk that if the partners become too comfortable, and assume that what used to work still works, this comfort limits what can be achieved. Thus, it is necessary to continuously assess collaboration efforts, and put forwards new activities and goals to ensure impact in long-term partnerships.

4.2.2 Independence, interest and (un)shared values

A barrier to achieving impact related to corporations entering partnerships purely as a communication strategy and/or prioritizing short-term profit. Through this lens, the positive impact for businesses to be associated with the NGO was highlighted as a potential risk. Many participants emphasized that they understood the value of being associated with NGOs, but that the priority should be the environmental impact. One participant stressed this issue

by stating, “And of course we have to be on our guard at all times, there is always the appeal of simply being associated with our brand of course” (P5).

Many attested that the corporate interest and short-term goals was described to be given precedence in the partnership. Thereby, the need for businesses to maintain a profitable business was described as a potential barrier to impact, for example leading to compromising the long-term goals or altering the approach to account for corporate trade-offs. For example, several participants were concerned that the focus on profitable outcomes encroached the long-term environmental goals and undermined NGO interests in the partnership. The tension was explained as such:

Our interest is to do research [...] it's already known in research that just showing the carbon footprint doesn't work and that the best thing is to have colors like red, yellow, green. But they didn't want to have red because they didn't want to sell anything with red [...] then they were like, ‘No, actually we don't want to like put the judgment on it, we don't want to say, this is good, this is bad’ [...] So in the end we have experiments where we only show the carbon footprint and it's not working and we know that it wasn't going to work because in the end we didn't use previous research to design the experiments. (P9)

This reveals that the conflicting interests between partners combined with a dependence on the corporate partner can risk research bias. In another instance, a manager in an NGO described the issue of prioritizing the corporate interest in collaborations with banks, regarding the confidentiality of the banks' corporate customers. As a result of corporate policy, it was not possible for the banks to make demands on their corporate customers concerning their practices. Thus, the banks focused on establishing green bonds as part of their sustainability efforts, which contributes less impact than setting up requirements when lending money to corporations. This correlates to the difficulty described by Idemudia (2017) concerning corporate policies hindering firms from sharing vulnerable information, which in turn impedes transparency and trust.

Involving the NGO too late in the sustainability efforts of firms and only as an implementor or an external communicator was attributed as a primary barrier to impact. The NGOs expressed an aspiration to be involved as a more strategic partner, to be involved earlier, and integrate changes within the business to improve corporate practices before they cause damage. The following statement reflects this view:

I'd want them to steer away from primarily communication efforts, so we can let each other into our organizations, businesses, factories. [...] To ensure what we can make changes from the start regarding for example the design of their packaging, so that it doesn't have to become an issue at the end-of-life phase of products. It is better if they should let us into their operations as experts early so that we can work together from the beginning. (P11)

Thus, the results confirmed that NGO-business relationships are often transactional where resources are exchanged between partners, and not integrated (Austin, 2000; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Rondinelli & London, 2003). Another mentioned risk was the potential reputational damage the NGO may suffer as a result of corporate misconduct in the form of environmental or social matters. As one interviewee stated regarding the NGO brand, “there are definitely risks, for example if it turns out the company has been involved in child labour through a partner” (P4). Several participants also mentioned the negative consequences corporate malpractice can have on their ability to recruit new business partners:

If a company mismanages something or it turns out they don't have control over their own processes or value chain. [...]. Let's say: if there are emissions of some kind that they have not accounted for, it could affect us as NGO on a reputational level. With the effect that we risk less trust and therefore have a more difficult situation convincing other businesses to engage in our cause. (P3)

Moreover, selecting the right partner was viewed as a facilitator to minimize the reputational risks of collaborating with a corporate partner. The selection process could include an ethical screening, to evaluate potential risks and benefits. For example, assessing the business in relation to the market, consumers, the local government and their global image. Evaluating the risks could also involve analysing the business structure, interest of business owners, industries they are involved in and previous publicity. Larger NGOs in emphasized the value of sufficient due diligence and a detailed selection process, and to only select partners where there is “a clear synergy” (P4). Several ‘red zones’ were described by all participants, such as if the corporation is involved in pornography, gambling, weapons or illegal industries.

Some had a stricter sustainability policy which stated that they were not involved with businesses in oil, mining, pharmaceuticals, alcohol and tobacco. Other NGOs described that it was vital to collaborate with environmentally detrimental businesses to facilitate real changes. For example, by collaborating with the companies that produce the most waste, a partnership can contribute to the most impact by improving their practices. Accordingly, the best partners also contribute to the most risk. One participant stated, “Even if you have an environmentally detrimental business in some way, then we cannot exclude them. Instead, we see it as a huge opportunity to influence them and create a big change” (P12).

Several smaller NGOs attributed previous experiences when the corporate interests was prioritized as a result of vague common goals and contracts. In line with this, the majority emphasized the importance of establishing clear contracts with the corporate partner where common goals, partnership scope, and the ability for the NGO to step away from the

collaboration in the case of a conflict of interest. In this way, the risk of prioritizing corporate interests and consequently suffering reputational damages are minimized. Furthermore, despite the majority mentioning the risk of reputational damage, none of the NGOs had experienced that a business partners' behaviour had negatively affected the NGO's image. Reputational damage in relation to corporate partnerships was rare, "It is talked a lot about within the non-profit sector, but it rarely happens" (P4). This result counters the findings of previous literature, whereby scholars emphasize the reputational risks related to businesses co-opting the NGOs to obtain legitimacy through the collaboration (Baur & Schmitz, 2012; Burchell & Cook, 2013; Herlin, 2013). Several NGOs remarked that the emphasis of the reputational risks regarding the involvement of corporations in NGO efforts was an exaggerated topic in the non-profit sector. When asked to elaborate on how corporate malpractice could affect the NGOs reputation, the majority did not expect that it would damage the NGO, "even if the business experiences a crisis, we could get drawn in, but what is there to say? We tried to help them become more sustainable" (P1). The consensus was that the collaboration was viewed as separate from business operations, thus corporate reputational damages outside of the partnership was not damaging to the NGOs reputation.

Lastly, the relevancy of the issue to the corporate partner was also attributed as a facilitator to establish a strategic fit between the partners. In this view, more focused efforts are more likely to achieve changes. For example, involving local corporations to tackle a local issue was described as an advantage by several of the NGOs, "The key to our business is that it is extremely local, this leads to more engagement" (P6). Additionally, NGOs stressed that understanding the needs of the corporations, and tailor the collaboration accordingly was vital to ensure that the NGOs expertise is implemented. For example, by tailoring a workshop, providing material relevant to a particular industry or community, or offering solutions which are easily implemented into their business model.

4.2.3 Measurable long-term impact

"You have to make sure that the activities in the collaboration leads to the overarching goal" (P5). This statement concurs with the views of all participants, that the intermediate goals of the collaboration should contribute to ultimately achieving a positive environmental impact. For example, improving biodiversity, promoting positive behavioral trends amongst the public, accelerating sustainable development, or reducing emissions. A described facilitator to ensure that the initiatives contribute to environmental impact, was to measure the impacts and ensure that the partnership progress is not stagnant.

Measurable impacts included more quantifiable short-term results, such as tons of produced plastic, hectares of certified forests, or tons collected waste in a specific campaign. These immediate impacts are within the scope of the collaboration, “This is very concrete, 7 tons of plastic or 82 bags of waste, it is easy to communicate” (P7). In this way, NGOs assess if the inputs contribute to the goals. Measuring visibility was also described as straightforward, for example by observing the number of attendees, new members or by using key performance indicators (KPIs) to evaluate the visibility of a social media post.

A tension in terms of measuring impact was the challenge in maintaining long-term collaborations because long-term collaborations facilitate long-term impacts. As attested by one respondent, “We aim to only enter collaborations that has got the prerequisites to last ten years, because we know that it takes approximately ten years to enable lasting behavioral changes” (P3). A long-term view was also echoed by others for its potential to generate positive spillover: “when we keep our partners for a longer time, they become more satisfied with the collaboration, and we will we find more things to do together which generated donations to our organization and efforts” (P11). Moreover, the costs of entering short-term collaborations were also emphasized as reason for why long-term collaboration were favored. One participant stated, “If they only want to collaborate with us for a year, then we normally don’t enter the collaboration, that’s just money down the drain” (P5).

Despite their preference for longer-term collaborations, measuring long-term changes in societal discourse, behavior, and/or complex concepts such as biodiversity were cited as a key constraint to overall impact assessment. Furthermore, “existing statistics” were seen as limiting (P8) to establishing causal relationships, “It’s difficult to know how many birds of fish we save by reducing waste” (P7). The conundrum was summarized aptly by one participant:

We can see an effect, that our business partner engaged more people, more employees, more consumers in our campaigns and so on. But determining how much this contributed to less waste, or how this influenced attitudes or behavioral changes is difficult [...] was it the campaign with the company that contributed to this, or were there other factors that contributed to consumers behaving more responsibly? (P11)

Finally, several interviewees described their advancements in systematically measuring collaboration impact. For example, through market research they could observe attitude changes, or by involving scientists to assess the impact of reducing waste, minimizing consumption, or certifying industry practices. Some NGOs developed their own KPIs to evaluate the partnership. One respondent stated, “We assess a few simple measurable things, for example if they initially could not define what they meant by ‘sustainability’, then we can

see the following year that they have incorporated a definition” (P12). Moreover, using previous research to support claims was also attributed as a way to justify their efforts and prove that a particular practice leads to impact. Thus, many NGOs emphasized the increased credibility and legitimacy associated with having established connections to universities, scholars, or research facilities, “We work beside scientists, simply in order to provide evidence-based information, we want people to clearly know that what we present is based on research” (P1).

5. Conclusion

This exploratory study aimed to provide novel insights concerning the impact of NGO-business collaborations in the environmental sector in Sweden. Thus, the expert interviews aimed to obtain detailed accounts from decision-makers in the environmental NGOs concerning their experiences with corporate partnerships. The study explored the twelve interviewees' understanding of collaboration impact as well as the possible constraints and facilitators of impactful partnerships. The research provides insights to NGOs, and offers guidance to NGO practitioners on how to assess, facilitate and enhance the impact of partnerships. The following section presents the theoretical implications, practical implications, limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

5.1 Theoretical implications

As emphasized in the theoretical chapter, the works by previous scholars indicate that 'impact' is a multidimensional ambiguous construct (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Bode et al. 2019; Hansen & Spitzneck, 2011; Van Tulder et al., 2016). The findings in the current study show that impact is a multidimensional concept that can be distinguished and defined in terms of short-term direct impact and long-term accumulated impact. Particularly short-term quantifiable impacts were clearly defined by the participants, such as hectares of certified forest, tons of waste collected, or visitors attending a sustainability seminar. However, long-term impacts, for example behavioural or structural changes, or contributions to biodiversity, as an effect of, but outside the scope of the collaboration, were defined by participants but referred to as difficult to measure. Hence, although impact was not viewed as an ambiguous concept, *proving* long-term impact was referred to as a challenge. Moreover, the impacts of collaborating were characterized variously among the participants, depending on the nature and goals of the collaboration. For example, if the goal of the partnership was to reduce waste, then the impact differed from collaborations aimed to spread awareness among consumer or improve the corporate partners' internal operations.

Improving corporate practices was deemed to have a cumulative effect, where the corporations through the collaboration can influence consumer and other stakeholders. In this way, partnerships could contribute to a win-win impact to partners, stakeholders and society by accelerating sustainable behavioural trends. Collaboration strategies were defined as part of a larger global movement, where corporations meet their environmental goals and contribute to global sustainability goals such as the SDGs and environmental directives by

the EU. Thereby, the findings suggests that collaboration can have transformational societal impacts (Austin, 2012; Van Tulder et al., 2016).

Participants expressed that proving the accumulative impacts beyond the scope of the collaboration was challenging. For example, the difficulty in determining if the “cause and effect” of changed consumer behaviour was due to the collaboration campaign or as a result of other external factors. On the contrary, immediate results were described feasible to measure, such as counting participants or using KPIs to determine awareness on social media. These impacts within the scope of the collaboration relate to the ‘output’ metrics described in the literature, the immediately observable deliverables of the partnership (Mironska & Zaborek, 2019; United Nations, 2011). This confirms the risk described by previous scholars, that the measurability of short-term results and a lack of long-term assessment contributes to prioritizing a commercial logic in collaborations (Barnett et al., 2020; Shumate et al., 2018; Hansen & Spitzeck, 2011).

However, the attributed reasons to the current lack of standardized long-term impact assessments differed in the results compared to previous research. The study showed that resource scarcity and limited scientific tools were the main barriers, not the differing scopes, definitions and contexts of collaborations as stated by previous scholars (Gjøllberg, 2009; Scalet & Kelly, 2010). There was also a consensus that global goals such as the SDGs were the aspirational impact, thus the end-goal was not an ambiguous target. The similarities in the desired long-term impact can be attributed to the national context of the study as many Swedish companies have committed to the SDGs and the UN Global Compact (2019).

Furthermore, many collaborations appeared to mimic a customer-service relationship, where the NGO provided a service in the form of education, external communication or networking and in return obtained a financial compensation from their corporate partner. The only impact which was brought up by *every* NGO was the improved financial capacity through corporate partnerships. This finding relates to the financial resource deficiency of NGOs, consistent with RDT, whereby NGOs engage in partnerships to obtain corporate funding and overcome financial constraints (Den Hond et al., 2015; Mironska & Zaborek, 2019). However, in most collaborations, the business partner also shared knowledge through their industry insights, thus the collaborations were not purely philanthropic. Moreover, in several collaborations the partnership mirrored a stakeholder management strategy, whereby NGOs connected firms to other firms and likewise the corporations’ network enabled NGOs to connect with new business partners.

In relation to the transactional nature of many collaborations, NGOs expressed a desire to be involved as more of a strategic partner to the corporations i.e., to not be limited to providing a service which corporations can buy to improve their image or to be used as a stakeholder management strategy. It was also noted that trust is a key factor in building strategic partnerships and that forming interpersonal relationships with regular contacts enhanced trust and the ability to truly make an impact. The findings showed that integrated partnerships with high-engagement partnerships and a symbiosis of their efforts had transformational potential, for example enabling the development of sustainable solutions and models. This viewpoint among participants confirms the notion that engagement correlates with impact (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Rondinelli & London, 2003). However, a challenge in terms of interpersonal relations in collaborations concerned staying independent from the business interest in short-term profits. The risk was that the corporations prioritized immediate results of being associated with the NGO, as a PR strategy, rather than prioritizing change that could have a tangible environmental impact.

5.2 Practical Implications

In many collaborations it was evident that the corporate partner was still in the driver's seat of the partnership, and that the corporate interest to be profitable took precedence. Participants also stated that the dependency on the business partner could risk that a conflict of interest between partners impedes achieving the desired environmental impact. Including common goals in the selection criteria to identify suitable corporate partners was noted as beneficial, which is consistent with the previous literature in the cross-sector field which highlights the value of alignment in partner interests, missions, values and cultures, objectives, resources (Den Hond et al., 2015; Herlin, 2013; Jonker & Nijhof, 2006). Several participants recommended selecting local business partners where the relevancy of the issue was prominent to the business, which allowed for a more focused collaboration effort. Nevertheless, an argument against this assumption was that many environmental issues are broad common problems which involve all sectors and regions. Participants primarily defined alignment in terms of the 'intention' and 'objectives' of the partners, and not the current state of the corporations' operations or knowledge.

However, many participants emphasised that collaborating with businesses with a large carbon footprint contributes to more potential impact. It was also described as more profitable to select a few bigger partnerships. Thus, forming partnerships with large influential clients was attributed as more beneficial than the partners align from the beginning. This highlights a

paradox NGOs face in terms of partner selection, that the biggest risk has the biggest potential. This result challenges the assumption in previous studies that a strategic fit in the partners' values enhances impact (Den Hond et al., 2015; Herlin, 2013). The findings confirm the paradox NGOs face, whereby the facilitators and barriers of impact are dualistic dimensions which mirror each other. For instance, the facilitator of selecting large influential partners, are also the partners where there is a higher risk that the corporate interest takes precedence. The challenge for NGOs is to clearly address these challenges in defining the scope and structure of the partnership to be able to realize the benefits of this kind of partnership while managing the associated risks. A means to minimize the risk of prioritizing the corporate interests in such collaborations was to establish a clear selection-criteria, ethical screening, and define detailed common goals and partnership scope in the agreement that regulates the partnership. Additionally, several participants emphasized the value of tailoring the collaboration efforts to the corporate partner, to ensure relevancy and applicability.

Another described facilitator to both trust and impact assessment, was to maintain long-term partnerships. This mirrors previous literature that societal impacts and effectiveness require a long-term approach (Vestergaard et al., 2020; Van Tulder et al., 2016; United Nations, 2011). The findings confirm Hansen and Spitzneck (2011) study that achieving impactful results requires several years. However, assessing long-term impact was also regarded as a challenge. A possible solution was to use evidence-based scientific methods to show cause and effect, i.e. adopt strategies grounded in previous research to ensure that the partnership initiatives deliver short-term results that have been scientifically shown to contribute to long-term impacts. As mentioned in the conceptual implications, establishing interpersonal relationships is a facilitator to build trust and ensure impact. However, the risk of maintaining interpersonal relationships was that the partners become co-dependent. In relation to this, participants confirmed the risk of reorganization within the business. In a more integrated collaboration this risk is amplified if the collaboration does not permeate the business. As stated by several participants, involving several business employees in the collaboration, and gaining management endorsement ensure that the partnership is not dependent on a particular individual.

The potential reputational damage of collaborating was brought up in many interviews but was referred to as exaggerated. None of the NGOs reported experiencing reputational damage as a result of the corporate partners actions diverges from the risks emphasized in previous scholarship and is likely attributable to the study sample. In their view, the NGO practices remained legitimate even if their corporate partner made mistakes, because the

collaboration efforts were viewed as separate from the firms' operations. Therefore, a more integrated relationship could contribute to more reputational risks for NGOs, i.e., if NGOs adopt a more strategic role where they are involved earlier and in a more integrated manner, this could lead to more potential risks in terms of their legitimacy and reputation.

Overall, this study identified several conditions that effect the effectiveness of a corporate collaborations and confirmed that NGO can show measurable direct impact but that long term environmental benefits are hard to quantify. Regarding the Swedish context of the study, the results confirm that environmental issues are legitimized in Sweden and do not appear to be in direct competition with other societal concerns. Instead, environmental issues appear to hold an institutionalized status in both the for-profit and non-profit sector. The findings also indicate that NGO participation in the private sectors' sustainability efforts is common practice and is embedded in the CSR strategies of many Swedish companies. Thus, Swedish environmental NGOs do not have allocate extensive resources to selecting a 'perfect' corporate partner in relation to the strategic fit of their environmental mission and vision. Instead, the results indicate that engaging in environmental issues is mainstream in the private sector in Sweden. Thereby, selecting large influential companies and establishing long-term interpersonal relationships with the people inside the partnering firms was regarded as the main facilitator.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This research provides insights regarding the impacts of environmental NGO-business collaborations from an NGO perspective. The NGO perspective on this topic (filled the research gap), as previous literature primarily highlights the competitive advantages for businesses to gain reputational benefits, legitimacy, and expertise by NGO collaboration (Jonker & Nijhof, 2006; Yaziji & Doh, 2009). Meanwhile, NGOs are portrayed to engage in collaborations both voluntarily *and* in response to societal pressure (Laasonen et al., 2012). Moreover, previous scholars have also highlighted the absence of an agreed criteria and the demand of impact assessments to track progress and legitimize NGO involvement in collaborations (Barnett et al., 2020; Idemudia, 2017; Van Tulder et al., 2016; Shumate et al., 2018). The findings in this paper suggest that the principal impacts of collaborations concerns the improved financial capacity, which allows NGOs to further and improve their efforts, as well as the benefits related to gaining industry insights and expertise to enable the NGOs to nudge their corporate partner to improve their operations internally, influence consumer behaviour and develop innovative sustainable solutions through a symbiosis of theoretical

and practical knowledge with their corporate partner. Additionally, the conditions to ensure impact also mirrored the challenges, namely, to develop and maintaining a few trusting interpersonal long-term collaborations with clear common measurable goals.

While being a small sample, future research could explore whether these results are transferable to other contexts to further bridge the research gap in the field. Also, the majority of experts in the study had previous private-sector experience, this enabled a deeper understanding for corporate partnerships, however, it is also possible that it brings about certain biases in favour of corporate involvement. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in Swedish and English, thus the relevant parts of the Swedish transcripts were translated. Translating certain words or phrases could alter their meaning, and thus impact the validity of the results. Therefore, in instances where there was no corresponding English word or phrase, the original formulation is retained to uphold transparency and validity.

The sample, expert interviews with environmental NGOs operating in Sweden and engaged in corporate partnerships is a distinct group, and the specificity ensures validity in relation of the particular sample studied. However, the results also discovered divergent descriptions of collaboration impacts among the NGOs, depending on the size of the NGO as well as the sector the NGO was working for example certification, research, or networking. Thus, comparing different sectors or NGO sizes to identify how the impact differs would be valuable in future studies. Moreover, the regional context also influences the legal and societal contexts in which the NGOs operate. In other countries, the perceptions on impact, and the conditions which facilitate and impede impact could differ. In future research, it could be valuable to study the impacts in other national contexts, to facilitate a comparison or explore the similarities and differences among environmental NGOs globally. Moreover, the current study and the majority of the previous research in the cross-sector collaboration field, concerns a Western perspective. Therefore, it would be valuable to explore collaboration in other regional contexts in future research.

Lastly, a positive attitude towards collaborations permeated the interviews, and the wording 'win-win' was mentioned by the majority of participants. From their perspective, collaboration efforts improved industry practices, helped the reputation of businesses, aided NGOs to achieve their missions and supported the global environmental goals set up by international institutes such as the UN and the EU. However, the study only included NGOs working with firms and specifically the employees in charge of partnerships. Thus, a possible direction in future research could include a sample of various NGOs with different portfolios

without partnerships to facilitate a comparison between their perceptions of the environmental impact of their efforts.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

My name is Annie Engström and I am studying the Master programme in Media and Business at Erasmus University Rotterdam. My Master Thesis explores the impact of environmental non-profit-business collaborations in Sweden, which is why I would like to find out more about your experience with corporate partnerships. I aim to interview approximately 12 non-profits and my research paper will be finished by July this year, when you of course will get access to the results of the paper.

Before we start the interview, I will bring up the most important points of the consent form that I sent to you earlier:

- Do I have your permission to audio record this interview and transcribe your answers for the analysis? (Start recording if consent is given)
- The interview will be anonymized, and the results will only be used for the purpose of this thesis.
- I am going to ask you open questions about your and [NGO name] experience working with corporate partnerships, the impact of corporate partnerships and what you perceive as the most important conditions that determine impact.

Also, if you feel uncomfortable answering a question, please feel free to deny to answer at any time during the interview.

Do you have any questions about the process before we start the interview?

Introductory questions

- 1) Could we start by you introducing yourself and your role in Sustainability Concepts?
 - a. How long have you worked for [NGO name]?
 - b. How would you describe your role within the [NGO name]?
 - c. What made you join [NGO's name] in the first place? Did you work in the NGO sector beforehand?
- 2) What is [NGO name] position on collaborations?
 - a. Can you say something about the approach to collaborations etc. was there a turning point when your org started to focus on partnerships?
 - b. Could you explain the main reason for why [NGO name] engage in partnerships
- 3) Have you observed that NGO/nonprofit-business collaborations have become more common in Sweden?
 - a. (ex is it easier to know how to enter collaborations now, do companies have easily accessible contact representatives?)
 - b. Since when? What have prompted these shifts?
 - c. How do you see the benefits and challenges of this development?
 - d. Have you/[NGO name] experienced an increased interest among Swedish corporations to pursue partnerships with NGOs/nonprofits? Why (not)?
- 4) How do you think corporate partnerships, compare to other non-profit-strategies?
 - a. Can other strategies lead to the same impact or is the impacts/results of NGO-business strategies "Unique"?
 - b. Why/Why not?

- c. What other strategies to change business practices does [NGO name] engage in? Do the results differ, and in which way?

Nature of collaboration questions

- 5) In what capacity have you worked with corporate partnerships?
 - a. What does the work entail for you? What do you spend time on?
 - b. Could you explain your role in the partnership(s)?
 - c. Do you work with many different companies?
 - d. (What partnership(s) do you have today?)
 - e. What do you hope to achieve by entering corporate partnerships?
- 6) Who initiated the partnership(s)? (business/NGO)
 - a. If NGO: what are the selection criteria of [NGO name]?
 - b. If business: what were the motivations for [NGO name] deciding to partner with [business name]?
 - c. What are the factors you consider when entering into a collaboration?
 - d. Are there 'red zones' that you will not cross?
- 7) What do your partnerships normally entail?
 - a. What type of resources are normally exchanged between the partners (funding, advice, skills, competencies etc.)?
 - b. Could you give an example?
- 8) How long are [NGO name] partnerships with businesses in general?
 - a. What are the determining factors of the length of a partnership?
- 9) Is there normally a specific point of contact within the corporation?
 - a. If yes, which area of the business (marketing, CSR, environmental, executive management etc.)
 - b. How frequently are you normally in touch with the corporations?

Defining impact questions

- 10) How do you decide on the overall goal(s) of a partnership(s)?
 - a. Could you give an example; what are they?
 - b. Are there specific measurable goals of a partnership that you decide on together with your corporate partner?
 - c. How are the goal(s) deemed fulfilled or unfulfilled?
 - d. Are there any short-term goals during the partnership?
 - e. Were/Are there any short-term deliverables during the partnership(s)? What were they?
- 11) A concern raised in the field is that it is difficult to determine and prove if a positive result, or fulfilled goals in the partnerships actually contributes/leads to/translates to a positive environmental *impact* in the long run, have you/[NGO name] also experienced this challenge?
 - a. If yes, in which way?
 - b. Could you illustrate this with an example?
 - c. Are there different kinds/levels of partnerships that lead to different outcomes?

Conditions to impact questions

- 12) What factors/conditions do you consider most crucial for a good result/impactful collaboration?

- a. (The literature describes 1. trust, 2. the strategic fit between partners (alignment in values, mission etc.) and 3. engagement between partners (frequency of contact, transparency) as crucial factors to facilitate an impactful collaboration, do you consider any of these factors as more important?)
 - b. Are there any other factors/conditions that you consider crucial to creating impact (facilitating a positive result of a partnership)?
- 13) What are the challenges or barriers that can hinder a positive result?
- a. (If mirrors 12A: Are there any further challenges which you have experienced hinder a positive impact?)
- 14) Are there any particular activities that you consider the most impactful in a collaboration(s)?
- a. If yes, could you give an example from your own experience.
- 15) What was the most important lesson you have learned from (past or ongoing) nonprofit- business partnership(s)?
- 16) What are the main risks associated with partnerships?
- a. How do you manage/minimize these risks?
- 17) Lastly, from your experience, what do you consider the most important aspects for a non-profit to consider *before* entering a partnership with a business to ensure that there is a positive impact?

Concluding question

- 18) Is there anything else you would like to add? Any issue that you deem critical for my study but that didn't come up during the interview?
Thank you for your time!

After interview questions

- 19) Can you recommend one or two people of a similar profile to you that I can reach out to?
- 20) Do you have any informative material relating to the partnership (could be internal, or to members or potential partners) that you are willing to share? This could be valuable to me when analyzing the nature of the partnership(s).