Organizational learning in a cross-sectoral collaboration towards sustainable development

A case study of a “Partnership for Sustainability”

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Abstract

In this research the empirical case of the “Partnership for Sustainability”, a long-term partnership between a major player in the German grocery retail industry and one of the biggest environmental organizations in Germany, was explored in order to gain an understanding of organizational learning processes within non-profit and business collaborations towards sustainability. Using existing theoretical concepts about organizational learning and sustainability in the field of cross-sectoral collaboration these fields of research are brought together. As a result, organizational learning processes within the non-profit and between the partnering organizations were identified and the associated learning results were pointed out. Therefore, essential changes and adaptations in the Partnership for Sustainability could be explored throughout the years of the collaboration. Furthermore, the contribution of organizational learning processes to a cross-sectoral collaboration has been illuminated.
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1. Introduction: Background

In recent years, collaborative activities have strongly increased (Selsky & Parker, 2005) resulting in different forms of integrated partnership models (Becker & Smith, 2018; van Huijstee, Francken & Leroy, 2007) between companies, governments or civil society organizations (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2016). One reason for the collaboration between the three sectors debated in the academic literature is that society is confronted with rapid technological development as well as major social and environmental issues in a globalized world (McKenzie & van Winkelen, 2006; Yan, Lin & Clarke, 2018). Since the complexity, scale and scope of these challenges are massively increasing (Austin, 2000; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; Becker & Smith, 2018), individual companies and sectors are not able to address these issues by using siloed approaches and individual solutions and they cannot possess all the knowledge it takes for success (Albrechtsen, 2017; McKenzie & van Winkelen, 2006; Nelson, 2017). Therefore, organizations increasingly react to different stakeholder demands by collaborating with cross-sectoral partners to find effective solutions (Jamali & Keshishian, 2008; Spitz & van Geffen, 2016; Yan et al. 2018). Additional motivation connected to different theoretical perspectives range from resource dependence, social exchange theories, legitimization and the need to improve efficiency to a firm’s social performance and collaboration in a strategic way (Austin, 2000; Glasbergen, Biermann & Moll, 2008; Rondinelli & London, 2003).

Cross-sectoral partnerships are characterized by dealing with social issues in regard to achieving a common goal such as economic development or environmental sustainability (Selsky & Parker, 2005) and according to Albrechtsen (2017) they also contribute to the achievement of the United Nations Global Sustainable Development Goals. The importance of cross-sector collaboration has lately also been recognized by the United Nations to drive transformational and systematic change towards sustainable development (Albrechtsen, 2017) and as an essential part for its implementation (van Huijstee et al., 2007).

As boundaries between the different sectors have increasingly blurred, the role of the business sector and non-profit sector has become more and more important (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a), although the collaboration between these two sectors was characterized by confrontations in the past (Spitz & van Geffen, 2016). Especially the business sector has invested a lot of money into corporate social responsibility initiatives and partnerships with the non-profit sector (Berger, Cunnigham & Drumwright, 2004; Rondinelli & London, 2003). Well-known environmental organizations have also recognized the importance of cross-sectoral partnerships and the impact which a collaboration can create (Jamali & Keshishian, 2008). The number of these partnerships, in particular between environmental organizations and businesses, has significantly increased over the last decade (Jamali & Keshishian, 2008), especially due to the implementation of corporate sustainability and “achieving social and economic missions” (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a: 728).

In order to address the complex societal issues effectively, cross-sectoral partnerships between business and non-profits have to overcome multiple challenges due to different fields, expertise and values of partners involved (Rondinelli & London, 2003). Dealing with these occurring differences requires organizational learning including the acquisition and incorporation of new knowledge (London, Rondinelli & O’Neill, 2004). Since both kind of organizations are quite diverse they need to undergo many change processes (e.g. communication or governance struc-
tures) in order to align their working cultures and establish a mutual understanding while collaborating. This requires learning processes. Moreover, organizational learning is a necessary condition for an organization to develop towards social, environmental and economic sustainability as well as for the integration of sustainable practices and sustainability awareness (Jamali & Keshishian, 2008; Siebenhüner & Arnold, 2007).

1.1. A non-profit – business collaboration: The Partnership for Sustainability
To understand learning processes, results and their contribution to a cross-sectoral collaboration towards sustainability, it was crucial for the case selection that both partnering organizations have clearly defined, measurable and strategic goals for their partnership as well as social or environmental objectives. Therefore, the authors selected an on-going, long-term partnership that had been established in 2009, mostly successful in accomplishing its set goals and is in a highly collaborative stage: The strategic “Partnership for Sustainability” (Progress Report, 2017: 3) between one of the most influential environmental organizations in Germany (WWF Germany, 2018f) and one of the major players in the German grocery retail industry. On the one hand, both partners decided early on to use cross-sector collaboration as effective tool for the implementation of sustainable businesses practices and, on the other hand, “achieving [their] social and economic mission” (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a: 728).

1.2. Research gap and problem
Cross-sectoral collaborations include many different forms of arrangements between the three societal sectors (van Huijstee et al., 2007) and some aspects of organizational learning in these collaborations have already been studied (Ameli & Kayes, 2011; Bennett, Mousley & Ali-Choudhury, 2008). However, the importance of establishing more connections between organizational learning and cross-sectoral collaborations has been emphasized (Dahan, Doh, Oetzel & Yaziji, 2010; Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018; Pittz & Intindola, 2015; Rathi, Given & Forcier, 2014; Reast, Lindgreen, Vanhamme & Maon, 2010; Sanzo, Álvarez & Rey, 2017; Selsky & Parker, 2005), in particular in a dyadic relationship between non-profit and business (Austin, 2000; Murphy, Perrot & Rivera-Santos, 2012). Especially in the context of a welfare state there seems to be a lack of research regarding organizational learning processes within these collaborations; and the few studies performed have been carried out mostly from the business perspective (Arya & Salk, 2006; Bennett et al., 2008; Murphy et al., 2012; Rathi et al., 2014). Furthermore, literature linking cross-sectoral collaboration between non-profit and business to the concept of sustainability shows a lack of clear conceptual description and definition of the concept of sustainability (Al-Tabbaa, Leach & March, 2013; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; Jamali & Keshishian, 2008; Rondinelli & London, 2003; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Seitanidi & Crane, 2008).
Links between those three theoretical fields (cross-sectoral collaboration, organizational learning and sustainability) appear to be missing to some extent. Instead, current research focuses on establishing a connection between cross-sectoral collaboration and organizational learning on the one hand, and, on the other hand, cross-sectoral collaboration and sustainability. Given these preconditions the necessity arises to interlink those three fields to understand the connection. In addition, a clear understanding of organizational learning processes within non-profit
and business collaborations towards sustainability is also missing out (on a theoretical and practical level). The practical motivation for this research origins in the significance of organizational learning processes in the context of cross-sectoral collaboration to address complex societal issues effectively. Since most of the studies so far have been undertaken from the business perspective, the authors will contribute to academic literature by addressing the non-profit side. This study expands the understanding of the collaborations from the perspective of a non-profit which is not fully represented in the academic literature.

1.3. Aim
The main emphasis of this research project is on understanding the organizational learning processes within a partnership between non-profit and business. The authors have chosen to study these organizational learning processes from the perspective of a non-profit and how these learning processes contribute to an – according to both parties – effective and successful cross-sectoral collaboration towards sustainability.

To explore this research problem, the authors have chosen the following research questions:

- What organizational learning processes occur within the non-profit and between the partnering organizations?
- What learning has the non-profit organization experienced from their collaboration on the implementation of shared sustainable development objectives?
- What role do organizational learning processes play in the collaboration between partners in reaching shared sustainable development objectives?

1.4. Structure of the thesis
The following thesis will first give an overview in form of a literature review of the various research streams that connect the three different concepts: Literature on cross-sectoral collaboration will be used as a point of departure connecting organizational learning and sustainability with a focus on the relationship between a non-profit and a business. In the second part of the thesis the authors will use the ongoing collaboration partnership between the environmental organization and the grocery retailer, as an example to explore the organizational learning processes and illustrate their contribution to cross-sectoral collaboration.
2. Literature review
The first part of the thesis will connect the three different concepts of cross-sectoral collaboration, organizational learning and sustainability. Since the reviewed literature seemed not to connect the three concepts directly, the literature review is split in two different parts where interlinks are established. First, the academic discourse about cross-sectoral collaboration and organizational learning is examined. Second, an interlink between cross-sectoral collaboration and sustainability is established and a forecast is provided for the connection of the concept sustainability to the field of organizational learning. The connection between cross-sectoral collaboration and organizational learning as well as the connection between cross-sectoral collaboration and sustainability will provide the background for the analysis of the case Partnership for Sustainability.

![Diagram of Literature Review Structure](image)

**Figure 1: Literature Review Structure, Source: the authors**

2.1. Cross-sectoral collaboration
Before interlinks between cross-sectoral collaboration, organizational learning and sustainability can be established, a groundwork for cross-sectoral collaboration studies needs to be laid out. Therefore, the introduction chapter to this literature review section will introduce the basics of cross-sectoral collaboration studies within the academic discourse, give an overview of diverse terminologies, explain the perspective taken in this research and illuminate the role of non-profits in partnerships.

2.1.1. Anchoring cross-sectoral collaboration studies
Previous research in cross-sectoral collaboration combines various disciplines, like corporate social responsibility, collaborative strategy, management and organizational studies (Reast et al., 2010) and has been focusing on diverse typologies of, for example business and non-profit partnerships, motives and drivers for a collaboration, success factors of a collaboration, conditions to collaborate between different sectors, structure and governance, management skills, distribution of power and performance impact (Austin, 2000; Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018; Sanzo et al., 2017). According to Le Pennec and Raufflet (2018) the process of collaboration itself appears to have become the output instead of a mean to create value. However, there
seems to be a lack of research regarding knowledge management processes in the collaboration with the non-profit sector (Rathi et al., 2014). Therefore, some studies have introduced concepts from alliance research on business-to-business to business-to-non-profit alliances and presented similarities and differences (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Murphy et al., 2012; Pittz & Intindola, 2015; Rivera-Santos & Rufín, 2010), but studies mainly consider the business sector and the perspective of the firm (Arya & Salk, 2006). Rathi and colleagues (2014) note that most of the knowledge management research is based on studies from the business perspective even though it is equally important for the non-profit sector.

The terminology for these cross-sector relations is quite diverse and includes self-governing networks (Stoker, 1998), global public policy networks (Reinicke, 1999), public-private partnerships (LaFrance and Lehman, 2005), cross-sectoral collaboration, CSSPs (cross-sector partnerships to address social issues), social partnerships, social alliances, inter-sectoral partnerships, strategic partnerships and issues management alliances (Selsky & Parker, 2005) (see appendix number 1 for definitions of cross-sector relationships).

Researchers have classified partnerships depending on their function (Hartmann & Stafford, 1997), participating actors (Davis, 1999), different forms, like business-, sector- or charter partnerships (Rathi et al., 2014) and stages, from low-intensity to “environmental management alliance” (Rondinelli & London, 2003: 62) or philanthropic (donations from firms), transactional (exchange of specific resources, e.g. cause-related marketing) and integrative (Austin, 2000; Berger et al., 2004; Reast et al., 2010). The latter, which is also called collaboration continuum (Austin, 2000), involves various levels of engagement and certain activities between the partners and recognizes the dynamic nature of a collaboration (Austin, 2000; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; Rondinelli & London, 2003).

### 2.1.3. The Actor Perspective

Due to the concept of cross-sectoral partnerships and its various approaches and terminology, van Huijstee and colleagues (2007) distinguish literature about partnership by providing an institutional or actor perspective on the topic. The institutional perspective looks at society and its previous, current and future institutional arrangements as well as the contribution of new institutional arrangements for environmental governance (van Huijstee et al., 2007). In contrast to this, the actor perspective focuses on the strategic use of partnerships as an instrument to achieve goals of the participating actors (van Huijstee et al., 2007). An important focus of these empirical studies is the examination and improvement of partnership processes concentrating on factors such as motivation for partnering, (dis)advantages or success criteria (van Huijstee et al., 2007). Taking the actor perspective, van Huijstee and colleagues (2007) notice that management literature about cross-sectoral partnerships is mostly based on inter-organizational collaboration. While this literature has particularly focused on intra-sectoral collaboration within the private sector (Arya & Salk, 2006; Austin 2000; Rondinelli & London, 2003; van Huijstee et al., 2007), little seems to be known about inter-sectoral collaborations between businesses and non-profit organizations (Austin, 2000; Rondinelli & London, 2003). However, the significance and strategic importance of these collaborations, especially regarding socioeconomic issues, have significantly increased over the years (Austin, 2000). Austin (2000) states that previous literature exclusively pays attention to dynamics and motivations of partnerships and why
organizations engage in partnerships over the years (Jamali & Keshishian, 2008; Rondinelli & London, 2003). The authors of this thesis decided to follow the actor perspective in their work.

2.1.4. The role of non-profits
Based on the literature on cross-sectoral social partnership, Yan and colleagues (2018) distinguish the roles of non-profits in three categories: enabling roles, coordinating roles and facilitating roles. Regarding the first category, non-profits can act as service provider for citizens who derive benefits from socioeconomic beneficiaries (Lempert & Nguyen, 2008). Furthermore, non-profits support the development of capacities of their participating partner, in particular in the private sector (Austin, 2000). Lastly, non-profits act as consultants by spreading information, sharing expertise and creating new knowledge in social partnerships (Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Wellesley Institute, 2008). Non-profits also have coordinating roles such as bridger for a common understanding of socioeconomic issues between partners (Stadtler & Probst, 2012; Stephan, Patterson, Kelly & Mair, 2016) or (strategic) mediator for partners or dealing with stakeholder groups (Austin, 2000; Stafford, Polansky & Hartmann, 2000; Wade-Benzi, Hoffmann, Thompson, Moore, Gillespie & Bazerman, 2002). Moreover, non-profits play various facilitating roles such as initiator for enhancing sustainability through partnerships (Kong, Salzmann, Steger & Ionescu-Somers, 2002). Furthermore, they act as convener for bringing different stakeholders together or as advocate for inter alia social change in different sectors (Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Najam, 1996). However, non-profits take on the role as leader for promoting collaborative approaches in social partnerships (Clarke & Fuller, 2010) or as innovator for change leading to new solutions for socioeconomic issues (Choup, 2006; Yan et al., 2018).

2.2. Cross-sectoral collaboration and organizational learning
In the research field of collaboration various topics have been studied in the last years: strategic alliances, partnerships between organizations, cross-sector partnerships, networks or inter-organizational collaboration (Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018). It has been suggested to establish links between cross-sectoral collaboration studies and organizational learning as well as the process of knowledge management (Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018; Reast et al., 2010), especially when it comes to collaborations between businesses and non-profits (Austin, 2000; Murphy et al., 2012). The following chapter of the thesis will give an introduction to the interlink between research on cross-sectoral partnerships and the field of organizational learning.

2.2.1. Organizational learning as reason to collaborate
Considering reasons for a collaboration between different organizations it has been noted in the literature on strategic alliances in the business sector that an explanation for forming those alliances is knowledge-based: the alliance is “a platform for organizational learning” (Inkpen, 2000: 1019). McKenzie and Winkelen (2006) identify three knowledge-based reasons for a collaboration in a partnership context: the acquisition of expertise to improve one’s business, the access to knowledge without incorporating it for the development of the business and third to create new knowledge and learn from each other. Especially the third category, organizational learning (when knowledge from an individual level is incorporated in an organization)
and therefore the incorporation and application of knowledge is critical for obtaining a competitive advantage for a business (Inkpen, 2000). Rondinelli and London (2003) point out a knowledge-based perspective: alliance theory emphasizes on the motive of learning new skills or acquiring knowledge particularly in the context of a business and non-profit collaboration. According to this view a business learns and creates value at the same time (Rondinelli & London, 2003).

2.2.2. Reason for learning in cross-sectoral collaborations
The importance of learning and knowledge sharing has also been recognized by other researchers in the cross-sectoral field (Dahan et al., 2010; Pittz & Intindola, 2015; Rathi et al., 2014; Reast et al. 2010; Sanzo et al., 2017; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Ameli and Kayes (2011) state that a common ground for organizations within the three sectors is that they all have to respond to the expectations of their diverse stakeholders and therefore they all need to learn to be successful in a long-term perspective. Another reason for non-profits in connection with learning is to partner with businesses to generate value for reaching their social and environmental missions (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a) and the same goes the other way around, when businesses have to meet stakeholder demands to address social and environmental concerns and lack capabilities and knowledge to deal with those issues (Dahan et al., 2010; London et al., 2004; Reast et al. 2010). Both parties add supplementing skills to create value and innovations they could not have created by themselves (Dahan et al., 2010). According to London and colleagues a “successful cross-sector alliance can enhance both the corporation’s objective of profit-making and the NPOs’[non-profit’s] goal of environmental protection” (London et al., 2004: 6) due to the sharing of knowledge.

2.2.3. Differences in organizational learning according to collaboration stage
Austin (2000) identifies four drivers that are essential for strengthening a business non-profit collaboration: “alignment of strategy, mission, and values; personal connection and relationships; value generation and sharing visioning; and continual learning” (Austin, 2000: 81). By taking a closer look at the driver continual learning, differences in the various stages of the partnership emerge. In the philanthropic state there is only “[m]inimal or informal learning” (Austin, 2000: 91) since the direction of resources is mainly from the business to the non-profit (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a). Secondly, in the transactional phase “[m]ore active learning about processes and substance” (Austin, 2000: 91) can be found. This can include volunteer programs for employees, sponsorship, a logo licensing agreement, certifications or more combined projects and the needed resources flow in both directions (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a). Finally, in the integrative phase “[s]ystematic learning and innovation” (Austin, 2000: 91) take place. If a collaboration is intense and the partners deal with the question how more value could be generated and learn about their partnership process, there is going to be a learning outcome for both parties in a long-term perspective (Austin, 2000). Due to the on-going collaboration process and the deepening of the partnership the missions, strategies and values of the partnering organizations become more aligned and the “collaboration is seen as integral to strategic success of each organization […] [and] on producing societal betterment” (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a: 742). Therefore, core competencies and key assets are used in a combination (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a). Later, Austin and Seitanidi (2012a) added a fourth phase to Austin’s initial three,
the transformational phase. In a transformational collaboration shared learning takes place about the part both parties can play in addressing social needs (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a). These various stages do not need to be passed by a partnership in a linear way (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a).

A similar approach was taken by London and colleagues (2004) when they showed that in a rational stage of the partnership (before it is formed) the recognition of valuable knowledge of the future partner and the combination with own resources is crucial. The next stage “formation and structural preferences stage” (London et al., 2004: 4) focuses on the establishment of enabling structures and relations for knowledge transfer. A noteworthy difference to Austin and Seitanidi (2012) is that according to their findings the partnership needs to proceed from one stage to another to reach the performance stage where the actual knowledge sharing and implementation creates new value due to the absorptive capacity of the organizations (London et al., 2004).

2.2.4. Organizational learning processes

The transfer and management of knowledge in business-to-business alliances in general is explored by Inkpen (2000) and called alliance knowledge acquisition. The author explains that knowledge is incorporated in the processes and daily routines of a business and ranges from knowledge about suppliers and customer needs to technological competences. Multiple levels, from the individual to the organizational, exist and the “ability to create, transfer, assemble, integrate, and exploit knowledge assets” (Inkpen, 2000: 1020) is essential for a business. This knowledge management itself incorporates multiple procedures, like distributing individual knowledge, using new knowledge in services and produced good, spreading knowledge organization-wide as well as finally creating new knowledge and innovations (Inkpen, 2000). Like McKenzie and Winkelen (2006), Inkpen (2000) also distinguishes between knowledge types in alliances: knowledge for designing and managing alliances, access to knowledge and skills of another business without incorporating it in the own organization, and thirdly, newly generated knowledge that allows to improve operations and strategy of a business. The last type of knowledge could not have been generated by one organization alone (Inkpen, 2000). When it comes to cross-sectoral collaboration, non-profits and businesses possess different kinds of knowledge and resources, like for example capital, global production capabilities, brand value on the business side and on the other side for example legitimacy with governments or civil society players, market knowledge and demands of the future or trust of clients and customers (Arya & Salk, 2006; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; Dahan et al., 2010). Dahan and colleagues (2010) argue in line with Inkpen (2000), that businesses and non-profits often bring complementary capabilities together to strengthen each other’s missions or create new value together. According to Rondinelli and London (2003) an alliance with a non-profit might be “the only option for companies interested in accessing the knowledge held by NPOs, since internal development of such expertise may be too costly, inefficient, and time-consuming for most companies” (Rondinelli & London, 2003: 62).

Inkpen (2000) explains further that the successful outcome of an organizational learning process is the application and use of innovative knowledge as well as the development of the organization’s capabilities. The double-loop learning process, explored by Argyris and Schön (1978), secures that knowledge gets incorporated in an organization and changes and improves
the established models and practices. Ameli and Kayes (2011) build on a combination of the double loop learning process of Argyris and Schön (1978), deutero learning – the process when organizations learn about learning – and Senge’s perspective (2006) that the sum of all single components doesn’t make up the whole. They add another level of complexity and according to the authors the inter-organizational learning process can be divided into four phases: team level of learning, knowledge transfer from team level to the organizational level, the level where knowledge gained from the partner organizations is shared and experienced, and fourth, the level when individuals from the different organizations are contributing to the collaboration and share knowledge (Ameli & Kayes, 2011). In this fourth phase triple-loop learning occurs mainly in three areas, structure, practices and organizational culture (Ameli & Kayes, 2011).

An organizational learning process usually includes the acquisition, spreading and integration of knowledge (Sanzo et al., 2017). In a partnership the learning is seen as a multiple step process: first, the formation on the collaboration and how individuals from the two organizations interact and collaborate. Inkpen refers to this as the creation of the “alliance knowledge” (Inkpen, 2000: 1023). The next step in collaboration learning is the alliance knowledge acquisition step where the newly created knowledge is acquired and integrated in the organization. For this, both organizations need to actively engage in transferring knowledge (Inkpen, 2000). After this, the last step is the knowledge application (Inkpen, 2000). Pittz and Intindola (2015) explore how the newly acquired knowledge can be used within a cross-sectoral partnership. To understand the knowledge exploitation process the authors refer to the part “connectedness” and “formalization” play. Connectedness is explained as social links and relations that enforce the similarity of knowledge and facilitates interaction and communication while formalization refers to the degree of documentation of for example lessons learned through the collaboration, the codification of procedures or the clarification of aims and purposes (Pittz & Intindola, 2015).

2.2.5. Organizational learning and success factors

Researchers have started to explore success factors and environments that enable organizational learning in a cross-sector alliance (Arya & Salk, 2006). Arya and Salk (2006) investigated facilitators for learning in regard to alliance-specific factors by building on previous research especially from London and colleagues (2004) who studied reactive and proactive alliance types and the involved absorptive capacity of an organization: type of alliance, goals, size of the alliance and the role linking-pin organizations (intermediaries) play. Proactivity towards learning of the organizations as well as the attitude to create something together have been identified as essential success factors for learning by Ameli and Kayes (2011). Bennett and colleagues (2008) explored these factors and knowledge transfer methods from a business perspective and stressed the importance of visits, communications through face-to-face and rather informal teamwork. The success factors for learning include the credibility of the source, the specificity of the knowledge, past collaboration experiences and the project’s complexity:

“In particular, differences in base knowledge, levels of absorptive capacity, knowledge specificity and complexity, the financial importance of a project, the transferor’s understanding of the recipient’s knowledge requirements, and the use of inter-organisational teams exerted positive and significant influences on the amount of knowledge transfer and its effectiveness.” (Bennett et al., 2008: 60).

Prior to that London and colleagues (2004) identified that usually domain consensus, trust and a similar way of sensemaking are enablers for learning. It is distinguished between tacit (intangible, hard to grasp and related to culture and habits) and explicit knowledge (can be defined,
communicated and documented) as well as exploratory and exploitative learning (Reast et al., 2010). Exploratory learning takes place if new opportunities are identified and exploitative learning when established competences are improved (Reast et al., 2010).

Another concept that has been transferred to a cross-sectoral collaboration from inter-alliance learning is absorptive capacity (ACAP). The absorptive capacity of a business is the “ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends” (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990: 128) and the concept is well respected in alliance literature (Murphy et al., 2012) (see appendix 4 for an illustration). When a learning model from business-to-business is used to analyze a business-to-non-profit partnership, it must be noted that governance structures, processes for decision making, goals and practices differ further than in organizations from the same sector (Rivera-Santos & Rufín, 2010; Murphy et al., 2012). This is not only related to the knowledge acquisition step but also influences the transformation of the knowledge before it can fully be incorporated in the partner organization (Murphy et al., 2012). Therefore, Pittz and Intindola (2015) identified two important antecedents for ACAP: the inter-dependency of goals and trust.

Learning can also be seen as an outcome and a success factor itself for a cross-sectoral partnership. Reast and colleagues (2010) found that learning processes are based on previous collaboration experience (see appendix 2 for the model): often innovations, that have been the outcome of successful collaboration, lead to a plan for a next alliance project, thereby strengthening the partnership and formalizing the inter-organizational structures and infrastructures (Reast et al., 2010). While studying cross-sectoral partnerships, two more attributes need to be considered: the direction of the transfer of knowledge (uni-, bi- or multidirectional) and the formality (formal, semi-formal or informal) (Rathi et al., 2014). The authors found that many participants of their study perceived the people, particularly the organizational leaders, working in a partnership as special drivers for the success and the learning process (Rathi et al., 2014).

2.2.6. Organizational learning and value creation

Le Pennec and Raufflet (2018) connect Austin and Seitanidi’s value creation framework to Fink’s taxonomy of learning (see appendix 3 for an overview). The authors investigate what specific type of learning process appears at the various stages of value creation (Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018): First, the associational value is created by selecting a collaboration partner on the basis of resources, competencies or reputation. The exchange of skills, tools, methods and financial resources results in a transferred value (tangible and intangible resources) since individuals learn how to use these new tools or methods and become therefore more efficient in their practical, managerial skills. The third stage is the interactional value whereas the collaboration and interaction of the cross-sectoral project team improves the understanding about the partner organization and oneself. According to Le Pennec and Raufflet (2018) the interactional value occurs at diverse levels of the partnership. Last, the creation of the so called synergistic value is a combination of the former:

“Indeed, transferred value (particularly knowledge and skills acquired, funding, and access to networks) combined with interactional value (relationships of trust, transparency, and coordination, among others) allowed partners, as they put it, to ‘enlarge perspectives,’ ‘change paradigms,’ ‘break with stereotypes,’” and “innovate.”” (Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018: 828)

This last learning stage, where interactional value is created, can be seen as a precondition for a development towards sustainability.
2.3. Cross-sectoral collaboration and sustainability

After exploring the theoretical connections between cross-sectoral collaboration and the field of organizational learning regarding a non-profit-business partnership, the following chapter will give an overview of the different streams in research of cross-sectoral collaboration and sustainable development. Most studies in the field of cross-sectoral collaborations are related to the research stream of inter-organizational relationship dealing with a variety of factors concerning the dynamics of partnerships (Murphy, Arenas & Batista, 2014). In the last decades, these cross-sectoral partnerships have developed to an important instrument for problem-solving of complex sustainability issues (van Huijstee et al., 2007). In this context, non-profit organizations have proactively engaged with businesses to solve these problems (Jamali & Keshishian, 2008).

2.3.1. Social issues as reason to collaborate

The rational reason for cross-sectoral collaboration can inter alia be traced back to the theory of resource dependency, stakeholder management and social issues (Glasbergen et al., 2008). Frequently used in the context of non-profit organization research, resource dependency theory emphasizes particularly the self-interest of organization as a motive to collaborate which barely includes the consideration of social issues (Selsky & Parker, 2005). In contrast to this theory, literature on social issues management highlights problem-solving of social issues as main reason for organizations to collaborate (Selsky & Parker, 2005). This perspective is mainly based on considering stakeholder groups and organizations as stakeholders of issues (Waddell, 2005). From this point of view, fast processes of information sharing cause higher levels of awareness towards local and global social issues which can create a growing gap between the organizational performance and public demands (Post, Lawrence & Weber, 2002; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Consequently, this rising pressure of stakeholders can drive businesses or non-profit organizations to address these social issues (Andriof & Waddock, 2002; Greening & Gray, 1994; Oliver, 1991). Based on social issue management literature, collaboration can be defined as “a temporary social arrangement in which two or more social actors work together toward a single common end requiring the transmutation of materials, ideas, and/or social relations to achieve that end” (Roberts & Bradley, 1991: 212). In this empirical context, the theoretical foundation of forming social partnerships is based on addressing social problems of a complex environment which cannot be solved by individual solutions of single organizations (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Especially in business-non-profit collaboration, this perspective gains significance due to the strategic importance of social issues for all participants (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Furthermore, this perspective can also be found in the literature on collaboration and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) which deals with the role of companies contributing to solving bigger social issues (Selsky & Parker, 2005).

2.3.2. Sustainability: CSR and social value in cross-sectoral collaboration

When cross-sectoral collaboration increasingly became more important over the years, academic research on CSR also recognized the importance of social partnerships (Walters & Anagnostopoulos, 2012). Especially social partnerships between non-profit organizations and businesses gained significance for the implementation of CSR and the achievement of economic and social missions (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a) because of their adjustment of societal and
economic interests (Seitanidi & Crane, 2008). Since the beginning of the 1990s, this form of cross-sectoral social partnership between businesses and non-profit organizations extended its major focus from only addressing environmental issues to broader topics such as economic development, education or poverty alleviation (Arya & Salk, 2006). As a result, it has developed to an opportunity for creating social value (Austin et al., 2004) and an instrument of implementing CSR (Doh & Teegen 2003; Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007; Seitanidi & Crane 2008). Due to various and broad definitions of CSR (Gray & Stites, 2013; Walters & Anagnostopoulos, 2012) and a wide range of different CSR initiatives (Blowfield & Murray, 2008), many organizations struggle with the systematic implementation of CSR practices nowadays (Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007). These conceptual issues bear the risk that stakeholders may misinterpret their partner’s definition of CSR (Walters & Anagnostopoulos, 2012). According to Gray and Stites (2013), a common understanding of this difference and its effects on partnerships play a significant role for participating actors because it defines the working base including each partners’ approach to a problem and partnering motivation for the cross-sectoral collaboration. Thus, both partners have to agree on a shared understanding of the term CSR (Glasbergen et al., 2008). Depending on the level of agreement and the particularities of the collaboration process, the definitions of CSR in partnerships differ from each other in practice and in the literature (Glasbergen et al., 2008): While Rondinelli and London (2003) refer to environmental activities in this context which highly depend on the intensity of the partnership, Arya and Salk (2006) define CSR as the implementation of voluntary codes of CSR. Using their own definition, Jamali and Keshishian describe CSR as one way
“to comprise, the principles, processes, practices and activities adopted by a corporation beyond its pursuit of economic responsibility for its shareholders and beyond compliance with regulations, which contribute to the improvement of the welfare of its stakeholders or specific constituency groups and societal segments.” (Jamali & Keshishian, 2008: 278)
Furthermore, Gray and Stites define the term CSR as “the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (2013: 14). They connect this explicitly with the term sustainability which they define as: “improvements to the total quality of life, both now and in the future, in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends while satisfying the needs of all stakeholders” (Gray & Stites, 2013: 14).
It is important to notice that in the reviewed literature there were only few authors who use the term sustainability in combination with cross-sectoral collaboration.
In the context of cross-sectoral social partnerships between businesses and non-profit organizations, most studies do not particularly define the term CSR. Instead, they refer exclusively to social partnerships as one way to implement it (Seitanidi, Koufopoulos & Palmer, 2010). In this context, the majority of studies refer to Waddock (1988: 18), who defines cross-sectoral social partnerships as:
“commitment by a corporation or a group of corporations to work with an organisation from a different economic sector (public or nonprofit). It involves a commitment of resources – time and effort – by individuals from all partner organizations. These individuals work co-operatively to solve problems that affect them all. The problem can be defined at least in part as a social issue; its solution will benefit all partners. Social partnership addresses issues that extend beyond organizational boundaries and traditional goals and lie within the traditional realm of public policy – that is, in the social arena. It requires active rather than passive involvement from all parties. Participants must make a resource commitment that is more than merely monetary.”
Based on Waddock (1988), other researchers use this definition to refer to social partnership as “cross-sector projects formed explicitly to address social issues and causes that actively engage the partners on an ongoing basis” (Selsky & Parker, 2005: 850). Combining different perspectives on cross-sectoral social partnerships, Barroso-Mendez and colleagues define them “as mechanisms for working together […] in order to address complex social issues […] by combining different rationales […] to generate collaborative value […]” (2013: 16)

Although non-profits have become an important actor for the integration of sustainable development in the private sector (Lempert & Nguyen, 2008), relatively little is known of their role in enhancing sustainability in cross-sectoral social partnerships (Yan, Lin & Clarke, 2018).

2.3.3. Success factors of cross-sectoral collaboration

Taking all the different aspects of partnerships into consideration, cross-sectoral collaborations between businesses and non-profit organizations alone do not guarantee their success but highly depend on a variety of factors (Jamali & Keshishian, 2008). The success factors of cross-sectoral collaborations have been widely examined by the literature on collaboration and social partnerships (Austin, 2000; Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Googins & Rochlin, 2000; Rondinelli & London, 2003; Seitanidi et al., 2010). As a result, there exists a large number of these factors which, however, cannot be generalized (van Huijstee et al., 2007). According to van Huistee and colleagues (2007), these success factors can be categorized into six areas: choice of subjects, partners and goals, trust, a respectful and open way of working, as well as facilitating factors. These factors are described inter alia in Kanter (1994), Ring and van de Ven (1994), Sagawa and Segal (2000), Austin (2000), Googins and Rochlin (2000), The Drucker Foundation (2002), Samii, van Wassenhove and Bhattacharya (2002), Hagen (2002), Husted (2003), Rondinelli and London (2003), Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2006), Arya and Salk (2006), Seitanidi et al. (2010) and Gray and Stites (2013). For a comprehensive overview of these success factors in the context of cross-sectoral collaboration see appendix 5. Despite a lack of a precise definition of partnership success in the actor perspective literature, most researchers refer indirectly to it “as partnership satisfaction, partnership goal achievement, issue resolution or improved partner relations” instead (van Huijstee et al., 2007: 85). This can be traced back to the comprehensive research on the examination of (social) partnership process on the one hand (Austin, 2000; Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Googings & Rochlin, 2000; Jamali & Keshishian, 2008; Seitanidi & Crane, 2008; Seitanidi et al., 2010; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Walters & Anagnostopoulus, 2012). On the other hand, it constitutes the lack of research on partnership outcomes in the context of sustainable development (van Huijstee et al., 2007).

2.3.4. Collaboration outcome and impact

Recognizing the lack of causal linkage for value creation of cross-sectoral partnership success factors in non-profit-business relationship (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a), Austin (2000) developed a Collaboration Value Construct (CVC) which includes the four dimensions: value definition before an alliance begins, value creation, balance and renewal during the collaboration. Based on CSR and non-profit-business collaboration literature, Austin and Seitanidi (2012a; 2012b) extended this approach by developing an analytical and conceptual framework regarding challenges with collaborative value creation in non-profit-business partnerships, arguing that joint value creation increases more value for individuals, organizations and society than
single approaches (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; 2012b). Under the conditions that all types of value and actors and time scales are equally important, Austin and Seitanidi (2012a; 2012b) examined holistically the process of value creation. This two-part framework is based on four components and follows the research question how non-profit-business relationships effectively create environmental, social and economic value for individuals, organizations and society (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; 2012b).

The first component is based on the collaboration literature which divides value into economic, social, environmental value and presents a more detailed analysis of these three dimensions by providing a value creation spectrum (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a). This value spectrum defines four sources of value, namely resource complementarity, resource nature, resource directionality and use as well as linked interests (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a). Combining the different sources of value generate different types of values such as associational value, transferred value, interaction value and synergistic value (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a). The second component of the framework involves collaboration stages that show the variety of value creation at each stage (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a). These stages are oriented towards the above-mentioned Collaboration Continuum of Austin (2000). The third component includes partnering processes which are based on the presented partnership processes of Selsky and Parker (2005) and Seitanidi and Crane (2008) and constitute the change of value creation between the process stages (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b). Finally, the framework refers to collaboration outcomes and its impact at the micro, meso and macro level (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b).

Margolis and Walsh (2003) note that until then partnership outcomes and impacts have barely been discussed in cross-sectoral partnership literature. Therefore, the contributions from Austin and Seitanidi (2012a; 2012b) and Gray & Stites (2013) are especially valuable. As these factors are crucial as criteria for partnership planning and assessment of the effectiveness and efficiency of a partnership, they have become significantly important in research in recent years (van Tulder, Seitanidi, Crane & Brammer, 2015). Especially participating organizations increasingly demand for impact assessment tools in the area of CSR in order to prevent greenwashing, facilitate reporting and justify organizational engagement for the society (van Tulder et al., 2015). Despite the variety of these tools in the private sector (Liket & Maas, 2012) and non-profit sector (Maas, 2009), most of them do not take partnership into account (van Tulder et al., 2015). Main reasons are the high level of complexity and diversity of cross-sector partnerships which causes major conceptual, methodological and measurement challenges in impact assessment (van Tulder et al., 2015). Therefore, research on cross-sectoral partnership and their contribution towards societal goals is very limited (Utting & Zammit, 2009).

Regarding the value creation context in cross-sector collaborations, literature on non-profit-business collaboration starts putting a focus on the role of non-profit organizations (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). Taking this perspective, the authors introduce a conceptual framework for developing an effective strategy and its influencing factors for non-profit-business relationships (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). The framework is mainly based on three elements: context, content and process. Identifying several factors, the context element recognizes the importance of defining a particular purpose for these collaborations to improve organizational sustainability. Another important aspect is the consideration of stakeholder groups and other competitors in the field of non-profit organizations. Especially the latter one is crucial for maintaining the financial sustainability of non-profit organizations. Furthermore, these organizations need to overcome
cultural barriers concerning the adoption of business approaches to enhance organizational sustainability (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). The content element includes the consideration of the collaboration level (Austin, 2000) on the one hand. On the other hand, they underline the distinct strategic position of non-profit organizations towards competitors (Kotler & Andreasen, 1996) which is based on their capability to achieve socioeconomic benefits (Porter & Kramer, 2002) for a successful cross-sectoral collaboration (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). Regarding the process of a business-non-profit collaboration, Al-Tabbaa and colleagues (2013) refer to the factors of power imbalance, communication channels and transaction costs for collaboration success. According to the reviewed literature, these authors are the only ones that mention a financial aspect of sustainability from the perspective of a non-profit.

2.4. Conclusion

Reviewing the cross-sectoral collaboration literature in connection to organizational learning and sustainability, an interlink between the three fields was found. Nevertheless, the reviewed literature still considers these connections among each other separately which is reflected in the structure of this study (see figure 1): Cross-sectoral collaboration connected to organizational learning as well as cross-sectoral collaboration interlinked to sustainability.

The authors will use the above explained theoretical concepts about organizational learning and sustainability in the field of cross-sectoral collaboration to bring them together by means of an empirical case. On the one hand, this includes success factors and preconditions for learning (for example absorptive capacity or previous collaboration experience), collaboration stages and learning processes (creation, acquisition and application of knowledge). On the other hand, it includes value creation and collaboration outcomes, the role of non-profits and success factors for a cross-sectoral partnership that also influence the learning in a collaboration. To get an overview of the applied theoretical contributions, see figure 2 below. It is important to note that most of the literature on organizational learning in a cross-sectoral collaboration is from the perspective of a business or models from alliance research that have been adapted to a cross-sectoral context. Furthermore, in connection to sustainability it is noteworthy that no consistent definition of sustainability seems to exist in cross-sectoral collaboration literature. CSR, value creation, collaboration outcome and impact are used terminologies. An example for this lack of consensus is the different understanding, variety and definition of CSR in general and within a partnership.

Taking a closer look at those three concepts, another link should be established in future research: Sustainability and organizational learning. Organizational learning is a necessary condition if an organization strives towards sustainable development (Benn, Edwards & Angus-Leppan, 2013; Opoku & Fortune, 2010; Siebenhüner & Arnold, 2007). Since regular operations and processes might change drastically the organization will most likely meet various challenges that can only be addressed by attaining new knowledge (Siebenhüner & Arnold, 2007). New processes to implement awareness about sustainability and sustainable practices need to be included in organizational learning (Benn et al., 2013). In the literature connecting these two fields authors refer mainly to the Triple Bottom Line approach (Elkington, 1997) and the Brundtland Definition (UN Documents, 1987) to define sustainability (Benn et al., 2013; Opoku & Fortune, 2010; Siebenhüner & Arnold, 2007). In this study the researchers also follow the
Brundtland definition and the Triple Bottom Line approach, including the ecological, economic and social dimensions.

Figure 2: Overview of theoretical basis for the Partnership for Sustainability case, Source: the authors
3. Method and material
In the following part of the thesis the methods used in this study will be described. By adding this method chapter, the researchers contribute to a more transparent research process and address questions of reliability and validity (Silverman, 2014). Taking an ontological perspective this study follows a constructionism approach which deals with social interactions creating a shared or conflicting understanding as well as practices that build upon these (6 & Bellamy, 2012).

3.1. Research approach and design
In line with the established research questions the authors conducted a qualitative, explorative and inductive case-based study with a focus on a within-case analysis (6 & Bellamy, 2012). A within-case analysis was chosen to go in-depth on the dynamics and processes required to understand the complex organizational learning processes within the cross-sectoral collaboration, to identify learning results as well as their contribution to the achievement of the partnership goals. This is in line with 6 and Bellamy (2012) who state that case-based research is used to explore and understand complex and rich issues of social life. Since the researchers examine these complex relations a qualitative methods approach was chosen (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). The authors included a case description for the within-case analysis to support the development of insights (Eisenhardt, 1989). This study follows the methodology tradition in collaboration research by using a case study (Austin, 2000) to understand the dynamics happening at a single setting and within a real-life context (Eisenhardt, 1998; Yin, 2003). In line with London and colleagues (2004), the rising significance of the private and non-profit sector as well as the scope of this study, a dyadic cross-sectoral alliance relationship was chosen as appropriate for this single case study, consisting of a non-profit and a business. Since this thesis was conducted in a research team of two, the researchers enhanced the potential creativity of their research. By bringing together the authors’ different perspectives data has been enriched and the probability of “capitalizing on any novel insights which may be in the data” (Eisenhardt, 1989: 538) increased as well as the findings’ confidence has been strengthened.

3.2. Data selection and collection
To get a richer understanding of the learning processes inside the non-profit organization and within the partnership the researchers used a variety and combination of data sources in primary data which is typical for case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). The tools used to collect the data were semi structured in-depth interviews and structured email interviews, the progress reports of the partnership, webpage information as well as secondary data. This was used to add depth, complexity and richness to this study, which is in line with Silverman´s propositions (2014).

To collect the primary data, semi-structured, in-depth “elite interviews” (Berger et al., 2004: 60) with the project leader of the Partnership for Sustainability at the non-profit via Skype have been conducted. This is a way to investigate and draw conclusions on a theoretical level for the social world (Silverman, 2014). The interviews were used to find out about the decision maker’s understanding and to get detailed information about the daily work routine, the non-profit as learning organization and the structures lying behind the project. It is important to note that all
the interviews have been conducted in the researchers and the interviewees mother tongue (German), recorded and transcribed. Additionally, to support divergent perspectives (Eisenhardt, 1989), the in-depth interviews have been conducted in a team by both the authors while one was focusing on the conversation and the second researcher focused on observing. To gain additional information, structured email interviews with open questions in German were conducted with two team members working inside the non-profit with the Partnership for Sustainability. Due to the open questions these interviews provided the chance for the interviewees to explain their personal perception, specifically about the concept of sustainability and their learning success during daily business. The project leader served as main contact person for distributing the email interview guide to the team members and was also responsible for providing the researchers with the answers. The combination of these two different interview types ensures a richer data material (Eisenhardt, 1989). Subsequently, all the findings have been translated into English by the authors. This collected data has been used to explore the existing learning processes and results from the perspective of the project team, to create an understanding for the concept sustainability within the team as well as to gain insight into the business operations and processes of the non-profit organization and the partnership.

Furthermore, the authors examined the progress reports of the collaboration from the years 2013-2017 to find out about the achievements of the partnership collaboration, regarding sustainable development and the accomplishment of the predefined goals by the non-profit and the business in connection to learning.

The environmental organization’s German website with online information about the partnership and additional documents from their global website about formal working processes have been selected next. By analyzing these additional sources, the researchers will find out how the non-profit represents itself (Silverman, 2014) and it will help to create an understanding of how the non-profit works, for example their organizational structure or various types of collaborations the non-profit forms with businesses.

Since the collaboration between the environmental organization and the grocery retailer has already attracted other researchers the authors can also build on already published secondary data for the analysis. Since these publications were made available to the authors by the non-profit and can also be found on their website, this adds to the picture the organization creates about itself.

3.3. Data analysis method

In line with Yin (2003), the authors rely on a variety of sources and let the data collection and analysis be guided by already developed theoretical contributions. By using the theoretical contributions from earlier publications (Silverman, 2014), the research topic organizational learning in a cross-sectoral collaboration towards sustainable development was explored. In the analyzing process theories were used to look at the empirical data and at the same time the data was compared to previous theoretical findings. Because the authors were looking for patterns connecting theoretical aspects with the empirical data a top-down approach was combined with a bottom-up approach as a way to organize the data. To analyze the data further, content analysis was executed and a pattern matching logic used. Pattern matching “compares an empirically based pattern with a predicted one” (Yin, 2003: 116). While analyzing the data the researchers established categories to sort the information, e.g. by ways of communication, role of non-profit
or operational challenges that were based on the content of the data in combination with theoretical knowledge. After the initial analysis only nine categories were included because those provide the baseline for understanding the learning processes, results and their contribution within the cross-sectoral collaboration towards sustainability. To ensure the categories were precise the coding has been done separately by the authors and compared afterwards as well as the count of issues for each category. Furthermore, to not get restricted by an established grid (Silverman, 2014: 118), the authors tried to consider information that is uncategorized and new. This was a continuously evolving comparative process.

3.4. Quality of research: Reliability and validity
In general, reliability is addressing the question if other researchers could replicate the project and have the same outcome as a result (Silverman, 2014). According to Eisenhardt (1989), when it comes to case studies, the constant confrontation between the preconceptions of the researcher and the reality the data portrays, contribute to an unfrozen way of thinking and has therefore “the potential to generate theory with less researcher bias” (Eisenhardt, 1989: 546). Especially within case studies a common prejudice is that it is lacking accuracy since the research has been carried out in a vague way or bias have not been addressed (Yin, 2003). The authors tried to address these concerns in various ways, for example by working as a research team and grounding every outcome in empirical data.
Concerning external validity, it needs to be stated that a case study builds on “analytical generalization” (Yin, 2003: 37) which means that the researcher is generalizing the outcomes to a broader theory (Yin, 2003). Only after the findings have been the outcome in other cases too and the theory has been tested, a generalization process starts (Yin, 2003). Furthermore, the study has been based on literature and existing knowledge from the field of organizational learning, alliance formation and cross-sectoral collaboration and a clear interlink between theory and data is drawn in the next chapter of the thesis (Silverman, 2014).

3.5. Ethics in research
This research has been carried out in a “thoughtful and ethically responsible research practice” (Silverman, 2014: 149). The researchers ensured that the interviewees participated voluntarily by for example providing them with a written statement that they can withdraw from an interview at any time without any disadvantage. The authors explained the thesis project and the role of the informants to their interviewees. By offering anonymization of people or the case as well as providing informants with copies of the final work, if wanted, the authors practice an ethical way of conducting the research according to “the idea of informed consent” (Silverman, 2014: 149).

3.6. Limitations
It needs to be mentioned that due to the scope of this research the authors only explored the perspective of the non-profit organization and in particular the project team responsible for the collaboration. By gaining insight into the partnership process of a non-profit and a business the data helps to illuminate the organizational learning processes inside the non-profit, but the authors do not claim that a complete picture is represented. Also, the chosen research design has its limitations since by selecting a case-based research only a single case could be analyzed.
within its particular context (6 & Bellamy, 2012). According to Eisenhardt it is necessary to treat every case as a “stand-alone entity” (Eisenhardt, 1989: 540) to discover its unique dynamics and patterns. Only after this, generalizations through an across case analysis can be generated. Concerning data collection through interviews, the researchers would like to indicate that, due to the translation process as well as the project leader serving as main contact, information could have been distorted. Our study will function as a starting point for further research projects to build on. Furthermore, the authors are aware that due to the extensive literature review and their assumptions, objectivity establishing the coding categories for the data analysis is not given.

3.7. Case introduction
The collaboration between one of Germany’s biggest and most influential environmental organizations (WWF Germany, 2018f) and one of the major players in the German grocery retail industry, constitutes a unique cross-sectoral partnership between the non-profit sector and the private sector towards sustainable development. The business organization is a cooperative group of companies and works together with the nature conservation organization to reduce its ecological footprint significantly and to implement sustainability along its supply chains (Progress Report, 2017). Furthermore, the partnership is called transformative due to its aim to “promote greater awareness of sustainable economic activity and more sustainable patterns of consumption” (Progress Report, 2017: 3). Customer awareness about environmental friendly choices while shopping is addressed by the non-profit’s logo on products that have already independently been labeled by auditing organizations, like MSC or EU organic logo. It is important to note that the logo of the non-profit itself is not a certification (Progress Report, 2017). Both organizations started their initial collaboration in 2009 on a project regarding the protection of the oceans and sustainable fishing (Progress Report, 2017). This topic area continues until nowadays and is the only subject that goes through the complete product range of all the companies in the cooperative group (Progress Report, 2013). Since this initial collaboration was considered successful and both parties were able to reach their aims (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018), their strategic “Partnership for Sustainability” (Progress Report, 2017: 3) was formed in 2012 to address sustainability in a comprehensive way (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). An integral part of the cross-sectoral collaboration is the conversion and expansion of the private-label products to become more sustainable and using more environmentally consistent methods. Additionally, the partners work on a climate protection concept for the products as well as the companies (Progress Report, 2015).

According to the non-profit’s project leader of the Partnership for Sustainability the temporal development of this cross-sectoral collaboration can be divided into three phases: 2009-2012, 2012-2015 and from 2015 until 2022, the so-called extended phase (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Both partners decided to collaborate long-term at the end of 2014 and also added a discount supermarket, which is a subsidiary company of the grocery retailer to their partnership (Progress Report, 2015). Similar, the variety of topics addressed, and joint projects has increased, and the two partners are currently working with eight different subject areas (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). The non-profit organization has four different ways of collaborating with businesses and each partnership is designed individually: a strategic cooper-
ation, a licensing cooperation, sponsoring and donations (PFG Beileger, 2012). A strategic co-
operation includes setting specific goals together to reduce the ecological footprint and the op-
tion for the business to be consulted in how to reach these goals. Second, a licensing cooperation
entails a business to use the environmental organization’s logo on certain products for aware-
ness campaigns or marketing reasons. These contracts are managed by a marketing service
agency of the environmental organization to finance nature conservation activities (PFG
Beileger, 2017). Third, sponsoring supports the non-profit with money, payment in kind or ser-
vices and the business gets a defined return such as being mentioned in a special project. The
last way of cooperation are purely donations. The organization emphasizes that it’s possible to
combine these ways of cooperating (WWF, 2018g).
The selected case includes at least two of these forms, the strategic cooperation and a licensing
cooperation. Furthermore, it was also mentioned that the two partners collaborate in a diverse
way, for example on a political level the business supported a campaign of the environmental
organization regarding EU fishing (WWF Germany, 2018c) or specific model projects to test
alternative approaches and methods to produce food in a more environmentally and socially
acceptable way (PFG Beileger, 2014).
4. Case analysis and main findings

In the following chapter the analysis of the case Partnership for Sustainability and main findings will be presented. In order to answer the established research questions the data is presented with a specific focus on the occurring learning processes in the partnership project and within the non-profit. Furthermore, findings about the type of learning that occurred as well as the role of the learning processes for the collaboration are introduced. First, the development of the partnership is pointed out, followed by the nine categories of the analysis: Reasons for the collaboration (4.1.), the role of the non-profit (4.2.), sustainability within the partnership (4.3.), the sustainable development objectives (4.4.), communication ways (4.5.), the governance structure (4.6.), shared ways of operations (4.7.), accountability (4.8.) and last, experienced differences (4.9.) between the partnering organizations.

Regarding this cooperation type of a highly collaborative partnership between environmental organization and business, it provides the opportunity to make an essential impact on the environmental performance of the company. Following a common (social) goal with the focus on environmental benefits, it creates a shared value which is only possible with the help of sharing knowledge and core competencies within partnerships (Dahan et al., 2010; London et al., 2004). According to London and colleagues (2004) this is regarded as a successful cross-sectoral collaboration. The Partnership for Sustainability, as mentioned above, is called a transformational partnership by the non-profit and includes various ways of working together. According to Rondinelli and London (2003) this cross-sectoral collaboration would be in the stage of a highly intensive environmental management alliance. Since the non-profit organization emphasizes on combining the different ways of cooperation, this case findings seem to be more in line with Austin’s (2000) proposed integrative stage where learning takes place. Both partnering organizations have learned about their partnership process, established structures to exchange and communicate and by dealing with more topics and projects added more value to their collaboration. This is why the Partnership for Sustainability focuses on a learning outcome in the long-term perspective. In line with Austin andSeitanidi (2012a) the on-going process, the combination of knowledge and the intensification of their collaboration shows that the partnership is deeply rooted in both organizations and decisive for each organizations success on their mission and vision. Due to this strategic importance of the partnership for both organizations it has developed into a topic that gets focused attention of the senior level management which is classified as a success factor for cross-sectoral collaboration (Austin, 2000; Googings & Rochlin, 2000; Kanter, 1994). This case also shows that a collaboration does not need to proceed in a linear way through various stages but continuously moves through various levels of engagement (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a). Additionally, signs of the so-called transactional stage, which includes for example cause-related marketing and more combined projects can also be found in the selected case (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a). Even though the Partnership for Sustainability is called transformational this cannot be mixed up with Austin and Seitanidi’s (2012a) transformational phase since the non-profit refers to the transformational purpose of the partnership regarding market transformation and not a stage. This is shown in the effects on competitors and suppliers inspiring them to follow the same path (Sperfeld, Blanke, Mohaupt & Hobelsberger, 2018).

When it comes to facilitators for a learning environment London and colleagues (2004) and Ameli and Kayes (2011) found that proactivity in an alliance enables organizational learning.
A high level of proactivity can be found in this selected case, as mentioned above. Furthermore, the identified success factors for learning (Bennett et al., 2008), credibility of the source, specificity of knowledge, complexity of a project and past collaboration experience exist in this partnership and have proven to be relevant. Past collaboration experience and trust can be seen in the example that the initial successful start of the collaboration, the sustainable fishing project, led to the strategic partnership (London et al., 2004). More enablers for learning, like domain consensus and a similar way of sensemaking can be found in the shared concern about addressing environmental issues (London et al., 2004).

4.1. Reason to collaborate

Reasons for the collaboration between the selected business and non-profit organization are diverse. In general, the collaboration was mainly triggered by the business organization facing problems with the raw material procurement of fish products (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). One possible reason could be the societal issue of increasing overfishing in the oceans (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Dealing with this issue of raw material procurement, the private sector organization got in contact with the environmental organization during a workshop about sustainable procurement of fish (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). This interest of both parties in solving these major challenges formed a common basis for discussion which led to the joint collaboration later on (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Taking a closer look from the non-profit organization’s perspective, collaborations with companies are an important aspect for the environmental organization to generate value for achieving their conservation objectives (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; WWF Germany, 2018g). With a focus on reducing the ecological footprint, the non-profit works with the private sector on making inter alia production and supply chains more sustainable (WWF Germany, 2018g). Especially bigger companies are of particular interest because of their influence on their large amount of product volume (WWF Germany, 2018g). Recognizing the importance of particular actors for the transformation of markets, the non-profit organization chose to collaborate with one of the major players in the German grocery retail industry (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). Ways to do this is the above-mentioned raising awareness for responsible consumer behavior and the improvement of raw material procurement and production methods (WWF Germany, 2018b). Due to the size of the food retailing company the collaboration provides the major opportunity to influence end users and their consumption behavior on a bigger scale towards sustainable consumption (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Furthermore, the business organization manages global food production and global value chains which include relevant aspects that are highly connected to the (global) conservation objectives of the non-profit (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). These topics include, for example the fields of freshwater and climate (WWF Germany, 2018b) and the strategy also represents the expectations of the non-profit’s various stakeholders (Ameli & Kayes, 2011; Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). This is an influencing factor to maintain social legitimacy for a successful collaboration (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013; Gray & Stites, 2013; Selsky & Parker, 2005).

Taking another perspective, the non-profit organization provides organization specific knowledge in form of extensive ecological expertise and know-how which offers the grocery retailer added value (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). One example is the evaluation of fisheries’ performance (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Another advantage is that
the environmental organization is a global network which operates in over 100 countries. It can also provide on-site ecological knowledge, which is of particular importance regarding businesses’ global value chains and production (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Furthermore, as one of the biggest environmental organizations in the world, the non-profit also provides generic value for the collaboration in form of a high credibility and name recognition (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Summarizing all the information, reasons for collaboration can be traced back to a high level of resource dependence between the participating actors (Glasbergen et al., 2008). Besides, stakeholder demands and the social issue of overfishing also play a major role for the formation of this collaboration (Glasbergen et al., 2008). Furthermore, reasons for the collaboration are also knowledge-based (Inkpen, 2000; McKenzie & Winkelen, 2006). Especially from the perspective of the business organization, the company strives for the acquisition and access of ecological expertise from the environmental organization. However, the environmental organization has also great interest of getting access and creating knowledge about the collaboration with private sector organizations for achieving their conservation objectives. Therefore, the cross-sectoral collaboration can also be seen as “platform for organizational learning” (Inkpen, 2000: 1019). Furthermore, these organizational motives contribute significantly to the process of value creation in cross-sectoral collaboration (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a): First of all, the partnership generates an associational value for the environmental organization because it supports the achievement of its organizational goals. Second, both parties bring complementary resources to the collaboration. Additionally, the environmental organization provides generic resources (e.g. reputation) and organization specific resources (e.g. knowledge or a global network which are of great interest for the business organization). This generates a transferred value. Third, the access, creation and exchange of knowledge as well as the opportunity for learning also generate an interaction value for both parties in the cross-sectoral partnership. Last, this knowledge exchange leads to inter alia process-based improvements and ability for changing organizational behavior but also consumer behavior which generates a synergistic value. (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a)

4.2. Role of the non-profit organization
The role of the non-profit organization is strongly oriented towards the defined and shared sustainable development objectives and its addressed subject areas (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). Depending on the different subjects the requirements vary for achieving each of these goals (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Basically, the environmental organization takes on the role of an ecological consultant in the cross-sectoral collaboration (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). In this role the non-profit sets challenging targets for the partnership and is also responsible for enabling the private sector organization to achieve these objectives (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Therefore, the organization supports with extensive ecological expertise which promotes the development and implementation of sustainable company processes (Progress Report, 2017). In practice, this advice includes a wide spectrum of different tasks such as working with existing certification systems or conducting basic research on new topics (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). This consulting role requires knowledge exchange and fundamental understanding of the business model of the private sector organization in order to identify opportunities and challenges and find compatible solutions.
This role of the non-profit organization as a consultant is also mentioned by Yan and colleagues (2018) as enabling role. In this context the researchers highlight the aspect of spreading knowledge (Yan et al., 2018). Furthermore, the non-profit organization is responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of the defined partnership objectives, to review the level of achievement once a year (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018; Progress Report, 2013).

During the partnership, the environmental organization and the business also started to participate in specific model projects in order to test different approaches for sustainable food production, for example the banana project (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018; PFG Beileger, 2014). This project deals with turning the conventional cultivation of bananas into more socially and environmentally responsible (Progress Report, 2017). This opens up new roles for the non-profit organization. As an example, the local office of the environmental organization in Columbia acts as a mediator between project partners and local stakeholders in the banana project. According to Yan and colleagues (2018) this role supports a better communication and coordination with stakeholders to prevent for example mistrust and logistical problems. In this context, the local office also takes on a facilitating role (Progress Report, 2015) as initiator which is in line with theoretical contributions from Yan and colleagues (2018).

4.3. Sustainability within the partnership

The selected non-profit is an environmental and nature conservation organization which deals with the protection of resources and has a clear focus on ecological problems (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). At the same time it was explained that the non-profit is aware that, in order to address these ecological problems, the human factor and the social aspect play an important role (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). An example of this can be seen in one of the model projects of the collaboration about more environmentally and socially responsible banana farming where social aspects are considered but are not the focus of the organization’s work and expertise (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). The mission of the environmental protection organization is “to stop environmental destruction and instead create a future in which humankind and nature can live in harmony” (Progress Report, 2017: 3). It is described on the organization’s website that the aim of the non-profit is to preserve a lively planet for us and our children as well as to reduce the threat to biodiversity (WWF Germany, 2018b; 2018f). This builds on the Brundtland Definition of sustainable development (UN Documents, 1987). Therefore, the non-profit defines the term “sustainability” as the use of a regenerative system in a way that ensures its long-term preservation and its continual renewal in a natural way (WWF Germany, 2018h). Furthermore, it is emphasized that sustainability contains three elements: ecological, economic and social (WWF Germany, 2018h) which aligns with the concept of the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997). The non-profit’s perspective on sustainability is reflected in the shared vision of the cross-sectoral collaboration, stating the importance of nature and resource conservation towards a sustainable development. This vision is based on the common desire of both parties “to protect nature and conserve resources and preserve them for future generations” (Progress Report, 2017: 3). Therefore, a shared understanding of sustainability has been created in the Partnership for Sustainability. The creation of a shared common vision for a cross-sectoral collaboration has also been identified as a success factor for a cross-sectoral collaboration (Gray & Stites, 2013; Selsky & Parker, 2005).
In the daily operations sustainability includes many different aspects for the team members of the environmental organization. For example, one employee emphasized on qualitative economic activities which results in a new understanding for products and production processes involving recyclable materials (Personal Communication, May 15, 2018). Another voice mentioned sustainability as a continuing process: This was explained by making the topic sustainability tangible for customers and raising their awareness for responsible consumption with the help of the non-profit’s logo on products (Personal Communication, May 22, 2018).

4.4. Defined and shared sustainable development objectives
The Partnership for Sustainability has over 150 shared and clearly defined sustainable development objectives which have been negotiated and agreed on by contract (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018; May 4, 2018). Both organizations work together on priority topics: Fish and seafood; wood, paper and tissue paper; palm oil; soy; climate; fresh water; packaging; procurement management of more critical agricultural raw materials (WWF Germany, 2018h). In the written contract each of the priority topics has precise objectives that include what the partners would like to achieve, until when and how (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). In order to make measurement of the progress possible, the parties try to set hard goals for their collaboration and every new project they work on together is put down in a written contract form (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). The literature also recognizes the importance of a formal agreement (Arya & Salk, 2006; Bryson et al., 2006; van Huijstee et al., 2007) and clearly defined partnership goals as success factor for cross-sectoral collaboration (Arya & Salk, 2006; Googins & Rochlin, 2000; Rondinelli & London, 2003; Samii et al., 2002; van Huijstee et al., 2007).

Since the start of the collaboration, these sustainable development objectives were redefined many times and new topics and projects had been added. The formal development of the partnership, new contract negotiations before entering a new collaboration phase (as mentioned above in chapter 3.2. Case Introduction) as well as the addition of new topics and projects to work on together, illustrate the change process of the whole partnership. By collaborating with this particular business organization, the non-profit experiences a learning outcome. Since the sustainable development objectives are clearly defined in a contract, the progress achieved in each individual objective can be traced back and reflected upon. Therefore, the environmental organization learns from each evaluation of the partnership’s goals and can, while entering a new collaboration phase in new contract negotiations, redefine objectives and add projects that will support the non-profit’s and partnership’s mission. This can be seen, for example in the development of the topic area fish and seafood (which started the whole collaboration process) and in the development of the topic area packaging (which was added to the current phase of the collaboration):

The Progress Report 2013 shows that in some areas (regarding the work on the product range) products have already been replaced by more sustainable alternatives (Progress Report, 2013). However, goals in other topic areas could not be reached or are still in the initial phase of target definition (Progress Report, 2013). Even though both organizations experienced challenges while working with the topic fish and seafood, additional projects got added to this area. It is one of the topics that is addressed by all companies in the cooperative on the complete product range (as mentioned above usually the focus is on the private-label products) (Progress Report,
Therefore, the partnership is successful in achieving newly set objectives or keeping already achieved standards from previous collaboration. The topic packaging was not a separate area back in 2013 but rather part of the area wood, paper, tissue papers. Initial steps like “baseline in process” with a set date for June 2015 for product packing and “no objective defined” in June 2013 for transport and shipping cartons can be found in the report. The lack of information and knowledge in the area packaging led to a delay in achieving and defining a clear objective (Progress Report, 2013). This shows that the achievement or non-achievement of specific sustainable development objectives leads to learning. The knowledge created through this learning process can be seen as newly generated knowledge by both parties together that allows to improve the operations and strategy of the partnership. A parallel can be drawn towards Inkpen’s (2000) third type of knowledge in a business context.

Almost the same status of the topics can be observed in the progress report from 2014. New projects, such as the certification of the fish and seafood in the business’ headquarter employee canteen, were accomplished or a list of relevant products and their packaging to be tackled, has been compiled. Furthermore, various challenges with recycling packaging and their testing as well as defining a clear objective for transport and shipping cartons turned out harder than expected, given the project timeframe. Especially the mention of the project timeline points out the upcoming contract negotiations and the next phase of the partnership. The challenges experienced with packaging and the non-profit’s knowledge regarding this shows that learning must take place if the collaboration wants to successfully tackle this issue. This was also mentioned in a personal communication (May 4, 2018) and shows that it is a continuous learning process until today. Inkpen (2000) calls the first step of organizational learning creation of alliance knowledge which takes place in this topic area.

In 2015, the Partnership for Sustainability entered a new phase and, for example packaging became a separate topic area with own shared and defined sustainable development objectives (Progress Report, 2015). The organizations moved on to a next step where this knowledge was incorporated in both organizations and hence in the collaboration. According to Inkpen (2000) this has been identified as knowledge acquisition step.

One year later, the long-term perspective of the collaboration and the redefinition of existing objectives as well as the addition of new ones were stated in the progress report. It is important to notice that it is clearly mentioned in the progress report that experiences from the first phase, regarding the formulation of goals and system boundaries, have been included (Progress Report, 2016). Using the example of the packaging again, it was possible to gain new knowledge in collaboration with the business organization and other environmental experts, recycling industry experts, packing technology experts and packaging industry experts. Based on this a scientifically substantiated assessment system for the private-label products was developed that includes various environmental parameters (Progress Report, 2016). In line with Inkpen (2000) this example can be seen as a successful outcome of an organizational learning process since the use of this newly created knowledge developed the capabilities of the non-profit.

The current progress report (2017) stresses the intense period of contract negotiation that led to the renewal and affirmation of the Partnership for Sustainability. Previous experience and knowledge gained from the past years of the common collaboration were included in the con-
tract, the shared and defined sustainable development objectives and “have led to the introduction of structural changes at both [organizations]” (Progress Report, 2017). This shows clearly that the non-profit is aware of the learning taking place during the collaboration and interlinks new organizational knowledge and experience to, for example organizational structures (see chapter 4.6). Since knowledge gained through the collaboration gets incorporated in the non-profit, this could indicate a double-loop learning process (Argyris & Schön, 1978). According to Ameli & Kayes (2011) this can even be seen as triple-loop learning since individuals from both organizations contribute to the knowledge sharing process. In the Partnership for Sustainability learning can be found in structure, practices and organizational culture. According to Inkpen (2000) this last step of organizational learning is called knowledge application.

The extensive contract and the shared, defined sustainable development objectives show the interdependency of goals. Interdependency of goals has been identified by Pittz and Intindola (2015) as antecedent for the absorptive capacity of an organization. Therefore, the willingness of the organizations to learn and create something together, being aware of knowledge gaps within the non-profit or the recognition of the partnering organizations knowledge as valuable are important preconditions for a learning process to be successful (Ameli & Kayes, 2011; Dahan et al., 2010; Inkpen, 2000; London et al. 2004; Rondinelli & London, 2003). The incorporation of previously gained experience by both organizations (in the newly defined objectives) is another success factor for learning and influences the effectiveness and volume of transferred knowledge (Bennett et al., 2008). In line with the findings of Reast and colleagues (2010) this previously gained collaboration experience led to more common projects, strengthened the Partnership for Sustainability and further formalized organizational structures. The knowledge and skills of the business and newly generated knowledge (that is transferred through the collaboration) can be classified as explicit knowledge (Reast et al., 2010). On the one hand exploratory learning takes place in the collaboration, because of the identification of new opportunities and the start of new projects and collaboration phases. On the other hand exploitative learning takes place, due to improving existing knowledge and competences (Reast et al., 2010).

4.5. Communication

Multiple researchers state the importance of clear and open communication through different channels for the success of cross-sectoral partnerships (Austin, 2000; Googings & Rochlin, 2000; Jamali & Keshishian, 2008; Kanter, 1994; Samii et al., 2002; Selsky & Parker, 2005). The Partnership for Sustainability is characterized by various numbers of coordination processes (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). As a consequence, the strategic partnership has many different communication paths which are also reflected in the organizational structure of the environmental organization. First, this chapter deals with the communication processes within the non-profit’s project team followed by the processes between the partnering organizations and last, communication processes between the Partnership for Sustainability and the non-profit organization. An overview is presented below in figure 3.
The non-profit’s project team consists of several members, including a project leader and team members for each subject area of the partnership (so-called ecological consultants) as well as members from different departments such as marketing and communication (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). These team members constantly share their information with each other on an informal level which is also complemented by regular meetings where each team member shares knowledge about the status quo of their work (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Furthermore, the team has developed a reporting tool in which each member reports a monthly status of their work. This status report is available for the project leader, executive managers and management board (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). These various communication processes ensure inter alia the dissemination and integration of knowledge within the non-profit’s project team and responsible management levels. This demonstrates important organizational learning processes (Sanzo et al., 2017).

These processes of organizational learning also occur between the partnering organizations. The project team works in close cooperation with the business’ project team (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). All members within the non-profit have a counterpart on the business organization’s side. They act as direct contact persons for their particular subject area which they are responsible for (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). In the operating day-to-day business, the communication between the team members of both parties take place on a formal level such as regular meetings; if possible on-site via face-to-face interaction. Next to regular meetings, there is also an additional monthly meeting at which both parties come together and work on broader common partnership issues (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Additionally, team events take place which involve the participation of all team members (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Furthermore, the process of knowledge exchange between the partnering organizations also takes place on all relevant management levels including project leader level, executive management level and management board level. On each level the responsible leader and his/her counterpart meet every two months which constitutes
the significance of the partnership for sustainability and increases its transparency for both parties. Summarizing these information, many communication processes of the Partnership for Sustainability take place through face-to-face interaction or visits. This is important for successful organizational learning according to Ameli and Kayes (2011).

Communication also occurs on an informal level using information technologies such as e-mails or phone calls (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018; May 4, 2018). In addition, a comprehensive reporting system between both parties supports the regular exchange of knowledge with the aim of informing all actors about the objective achievement of all 150 goals (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018).

Using various communication channels to transfer knowledge between both parties while interacting and collaborating, the hereby occurring learning processes support and facilitate the creation of so-called “alliance knowledge” (Inkpen, 2000: 1023). Furthermore, these multiple ways of transferring knowledge through social communication (e.g. meetings) and formalization (e.g. status reports, reporting system) within the partnership ensures that this newly created knowledge is acquired and exploited later on (Pittz & Intindola, 2015).

Decision-making processes in the Partnership for Sustainability are embedded in diverse hierarchical levels of the nature conservation organization because of the popular brand appeal. Therefore, organizational learning processes have to take place between the strategic partnership and the non-profit organization. Although the project leader on the site of the environmental organization is responsible for decisions in daily business within the project, many decisions outside the responsibility of the project team have to be taken in consultation with other departments and/or management levels (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). These knowledge transfer processes ensure that the non-profit’s project team represents a position towards the private sector organization which is consistent with the organizational vision and mission (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). This prevents the creation of discrepancy within the non-profit organization. Furthermore, these processes play a major role in transferring created knowledge from the Partnership for Sustainability within the nature conservation organization. Therefore, the non-profit’s project team offers, for example lectures on certain subject areas of this non-profit-business collaboration (once a month) to inform and update interested employees in the environmental organization Germany (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). In addition, the environmental organization also uses different forms of communication within their global network. One example is that the non-profit project leader has to report regularly to a committee which consists of actors from different countries who deal with cooperations with private sector companies. This Global Partnership Committee is responsible for approving these cross-sectoral collaborations and their continuation on the one hand. On the other hand, it provides an overview and necessary comparability between all private sector collaborations in different countries. This documented comparability provides important insights on the project processes and shares learning effects among these projects. Therefore, this communication process also promotes organizational learning within the environmental organization through creating, acquiring and sharing knowledge between the global network and the Partnership for Sustainability.
4.6. Governance structure

As mentioned in the chapter before, communication plays a significant role for organizational learning processes and the achievement of the partnership objectives. However, effective communication requires appropriate governance structures which enable the exchange of knowledge within the Partnership for Sustainability (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Therefore, the governance structure can have positive effects on organizational learning processes. These governance structures include the careful choice of capacities, project staff, assigning rights and obligations, decision-making processes as well as compatible structures and tools which ensure an effective cooperation between both parties (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018).

As part of a global network, the German office of the environmental organization works independently and is run by the executive bodies of the organization: foundation council and management board (WWF Germany, 2018f). Furthermore, the management board is supported by the executive management which consists of five members who are responsible for different departments in the organization (WWF Germany, 2018f). Within the environmental organization, the Partnership for Sustainability is settled in the department “Ecological Footprint”. On the business side, the project is managed by the department “Sustainable Purchasing/CSR” (Progress Report, 2017; Sperfeld et al., 2018). A steering body includes top-management members from both organizations which decide upon the strategic orientation of the project (Sperfeld et al., 2018).

Before a cooperation with private sector organizations takes place, certain requirements must be fulfilled for the environmental organization. This includes inter alia a comprehensive evaluation of the business companies (PFG Beileger, 2012). Furthermore, project plans are subject to quality and risk analysis which help to ensure the quality of projects (WWF Germany, 2018f). Additionally, the cross-sectoral collaborations have to be approved by the Global Partnership Committee which decides on the formation and continuation of them under specific requirements (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). This decision-making process can also be seen as learning process which is based on previous collaboration experience. This is in line with previous research (Bryson et al., 2006; Gray & Stites, 2013; Reast et al., 2010). The Committee includes people from different local offices who also deal with business corporations within the environmental organization’s global network (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). In addition, cross-sectoral collaborations have to be aligned with the conservation objectives of the environmental organization and include defined objectives which have to be approved by the board of both parties (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018; May 4, 2018). Next to internal evaluation, larger collaborations are also subject to additional external evaluation by independent auditors which is used as an essential tool for organizational learning and the improvement of the project (WWF Germany, 2018f). All these aspects ensure that a compatible governance structure is formed that is oriented towards the environmental organization’s vision, mission and strategy but also towards the partnership’s vision and mission.

Regarding the achievement of these defined objectives, a team of 17 members has been formed in the environmental organization over the years (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). This team consists of ecological experts, members from the department of communication and marketing as well as a project leader and is responsible for advising the business organization...
in selected subject areas to achieve the defined partnership objectives (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). Each team member has a counterpart on the business side with regard to their responsible subject area (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Based on the defined collaboration goals all counterparts organize and manage their work by themselves (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Therefore, they work closely together which is reflected in the various ways they communicate with each other (see chapter 4.5). At the same time, all project team members of the environmental organization have to report to upper management levels including project leader, executive management and management board (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). In addition, the project team is also responsible for informing and updating the rest of the organization about the subject areas of the project because of the project’s interfaces with other departments (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Summarizing this information, a high degree of formalization and a strong hierarchical structure can be observed. The project leader Partnership for Sustainability is responsible for the achievement of the shared and defined sustainable development goals with the project team (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). Therefore, the project leader makes all decisions in regard to the operational implementation of these goals (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Regarding decisions that affect the whole organization, the leader has to coordinate with other departments or top-management, depending on the decision (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Furthermore, the project leader serves as main contact person for the business organization and is also responsible for a variety of administrative tasks (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Next to the constant exchange of information between the project team and the upper management of the environmental organization, the executive management and board level of both parties also meet regularly (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). Receiving information about the project process from the project team level, the top-management makes decisions about necessary changes for achieving the set sustainable development objectives (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018).

Another aspect of the contractual agreement of the Partnership for Sustainability is the co-branding of the business’ private-label products that is managed by an external service provider (PFG Beileger, 2017). These governance structures of the non-profit have been essential for the success of the partnership until today. They contribute to an effective exchange of knowledge and consequently promote and facilitate the learning processes in the environmental organization. During the collaboration process, these structures have been developed and adjusted to the increasing scope of the Partnership for Sustainability (e.g. the project team was enlarged). Taking a closer look, these structures guide coordination processes which are essential for the non-profit to represent its perspective on topics within the partnership and is in line with the organizational mission. Furthermore, they also direct the choice of project staff that has to meet challenges by dealing with complex issues in a cross-sectoral context. On the other side, the staff has to carry out different roles such as ecological consultant but also being a member of a political and environmental organization (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). This importance of governance structures for a successful cross-sectoral collaboration is also recognized in the literature (Austin, 2000; Bryson et al., 2006; Googings & Rochlin, 2000; Jamali & Keshishian, 2008; Kanter, 1994; Rondinelli & London, 2003; Selsky & Parker, 2005) and contributes to inter alia building legitimacy of the partnership (Bryson et al., 2006; Kanter, 1994; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Based on experience from the past years, governance structures are
still undergoing significant changes in the partnership (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018; Progress Report, 2017).

4.7. Shared ways of operations

During the partnership a common collaboration process has been developed and is reflected in shared operational ways. Experiences about collaboration structures and preconditions for working together in an efficient and successful way needed to be established. Furthermore, this affects various levels of the collaboration: The organizational, team and individual level. In line with Kanter’s (1994) identified success factor “Integration” for a cross-sectoral collaboration, the selected case has confirmed this factor as a necessary condition for an effective collaboration and learning result. Other literature also discusses a shared operational way as success factor for cross-sectoral collaboration (Gray & Stites, 2013; Kanter, 1994).

This includes that various questions are addressed, for example what type of individuals need to work together from both organizations in the project team, what kind of resources and capacities are needed as well as what permissions and responsibilities does everyone need (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). Everyday operational work in the project team influences decision-making processes and governance structures within the non-profit organization and the other way around. Both organizations had to understand the way the other one works since a non-profit and a business function in different ways (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). The awareness of the partner’s differences developed over the collaboration process in both parties when expectations and ideas about each other changed due to gaining knowledge while collaborating. Systemic borders and new arising opportunities and how to use them were explored within the partnership. By working together, a shared understanding has been created in an inter-organizational learning process. This knowledge got incorporated in the non-profit.

According to Le Pennec and Raufflet (2018) who connected Austin and Seitanidi’s value creation framework (2012a) to Fink’s taxonomy of learning, the creation of an understanding of the partnering organizations (through working together) complies with creating an interactional value on various levels of the partnership. Therefore, structures and operational ways changed in an intra-organizational learning process. Since the environmental organization is structured in a hierarchical way and has quite a high degree of formalization, this learning and change process took time to be incorporated throughout the organization (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). Moreover, consulting businesses while being part of a political and an environmental conservation organization requires a self-conception that also needed to grow from individual and team level through the organization (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018).

When it comes to the daily business operations it was emphasized that tools, structures and instruments for the collaboration developed over time too while acquiring and creating new knowledge in the partnership. These also got incorporated in the knowledge and skills of the non-profit’s global network (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018; WWF Germany, 2018g). One example is a water risk filter – a scientifically based tool that has been developed within the collaboration for product assessment – which is now automated and standardized. In addition, this tool as well as the whole process are now made available for the public and other interested parties (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018; Progress Report, 2016). Furthermore, as mentioned above each team-member of the non-profit’s partnership project team has a counterpart in the business organization (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018). In line
with theory individuals also learn in this process how to use the newly developed tools and methods and become more efficient in their daily work (Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018); this corresponds to Austin and Seitaniidi’s (2012a) transferred value.

One example for a result of a shared way of operation process is the joint development of a business- and product-related communication strategy that makes the topic sustainability more comprehensible to the business’s customers (Personal Communication, May 22, 2018). Another example for developing shared operations can be found in one of the model projects of the grocery retailer and the environmental organization about more sustainable banana farming. In this project, improvement measures have been jointly developed that need to be implemented by the participating farms (Progress Report, 2015). These transparent procedures to assess a joint project can also be found in Rondinelli’s & London’s (2003) success factors for a cross-sectoral collaboration.

In order to include previous experience in both organizations and learn from the collaboration process, an extensive reporting system within the partnering organizations exists. The status in achieving or tracking all the sustainable development objectives is reported in a regular way throughout the organization’s hierarchy in order to inform about the status and challenges and identify points for readjustment (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018).

4.8. Accountability

The environmental organization manages the cross-sectoral collaboration with the help of review processes (WWF Germany, 2018b). This is reflected, for example in an annual monitoring and evaluation of the defined sustainable development goals (Personal Communication, April 2, 2018; Progress Report, 2017) including results from on-site audits of products of the business organization (Sperfeld et al., 2018). Next to this process, information about the project progress is indicated quarterly in a central database (WWF Germany, 2018f). The results of the review process are presented in annual progress reports (Sperfeld et al., 2018) that are compared with the results from last year in order to evaluate the progress of the partnership (Progress Report, 2017). Therefore, the progress of each individually set target for each subject area (for example the amount of offered products that have been changed to a more sustainable alternative) is evaluated in the report (Progress Report, 2017). Additionally, these results are reviewed externally by an independent auditing firm afterwards (Progress Report, 2017). Regarding the Partnership for Sustainability, these evaluation processes constitute an essential basis for the environmental organization and its internal organizational learning processes (WWF Germany, 2018f). Due to the hard, defined sustainable development goals in the collaboration contract, the progress of the Partnership for Sustainability becomes evaluable. This results in improved organizational processes for the partnership since the outcome of each collaboration year can be compared to previous achievements and lessons learned can be drawn and reflected upon. Moreover, it also applies to the environmental organization’s processes. The importance of the evaluation of project progress is also recognized by Austin (2000), Bryson and colleagues (2006), Googings and Rochlin (2000), Gray and Stites (2013), Jamali and Keshishian (2008) as well as Rondinelli and London (2003) as success factor for cross-sectoral collaboration.

In general, the review process is oriented towards the shared sustainable development objectives and selected measures for monitoring their achievement. Next to the evaluation process,
these selected measurements provide another important basis for a various number of organizational learning processes within the Partnership for Sustainability (Sperfeld et al., 2018). As an example, objectives in some particular subject areas constitute a convenient data set which facilitates the development of measurement approaches (Progress Report, 2013). In contrast to this, other objectives lack data or data security which complicates the creation of measurement approaches and require basic research (Progress Report, 2013). These arising challenges can be traced back to an unclear formulation of goals or lack of knowledge about system boundaries (Progress Report, 2014). As a consequence, this leads to, for example a new formulation of collaboration objectives or even newly agreed upon targets which are based on the experience gained in previous collaboration years.

4.9. Exploring differences
During the on-going collaboration for the Partnership for Sustainability both organizations experience differences in organizational work processes and structures. While converging their working cultures within the partnership project, learning processes occurred on both sides. This has also been identified by previous research as a success factor for cross-sectoral collaboration (Samii et al., 2002). Moreover, the whole collaboration process can be seen as a learning process, since both partners learn constantly from and about each other and their working processes. Therefore, a mutual understanding is created, and the collaboration process improves. This is in line with theoretical contributions from Reast and colleagues (2010).

On the business side new challenges, for example costs (raw materials are more expensive or more employees need to work with the new topic), emerge since the implementation of sustainability requires often change processes (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). In order to successfully manage these change processes towards sustainability and align the working cultures in the Partnership for Sustainability, organizational learning needs to take place (Benn et al., 2013; Opoku & Fortune, 2010; Siebenhüner & Arnold, 2007). One example for a content related conflicting objective that led to the creation of new knowledge is the already above-mentioned topic area packaging (see chapter 4.4). Some aspects of this topic cannot be addressed by the business directly or reasons exist why certain packages cannot be reduced (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). In this case a learning process within the non-profit takes place, due to the renegotiation process of sustainable development objectives while newly gained knowledge in this topic area is incorporated.

Learning also occurred during the evaluation of the collaboration process (see chapter 4.8). On the one hand, both organizations learned while working together on the partnership project how different they are from what they initially expected. On the other hand, due to the holistic approach of the partnership, both organizations also learned which conditions are necessary to address sustainability in such a comprehensive way.

According to one of the project team members, a major learning result constitutes the understanding of the complex business model of the grocery retailer and the communication with diverse actors. This includes understanding and analyzing their perspectives in order to create integrative solutions (Personal Communication, May 15, 2018). The project leader from the non-profit stated that knowledge and understanding for the other organization is necessary to reach a level of effectively working together and generate value (Personal Communication, May 4, 2018). To illustrate this: The non-profit had to learn that the grocery retailer works in a
cooperative kind of way and due to this experienced limitations. The contract is based on nego-
tiations with the headquarter which cannot influence the independent merchants in every as-
pect. The other way around, the business organization needed to understand the international
network of the non-profit and what it means to collaborate with an environmental and politically
active organization. This can be seen as a knowledge outcome that both of the organizations
did not expect. Inkpen (2000) classified knowledge types in alliances into three different types
and a parallel could be drawn to his category for the design and management of alliances. The
environmental organization gained knowledge about collaborating with a business partner and
therefore this category can also be found in this cross-sectoral collaboration. Since this was not
expected initially the authors would call this unintended learning.

Analyzing the progress reports from the year 2013-2017 various challenges are emphasized in
the early years of the collaboration, such as the influence of the business’s headquarter or the
extent of the partnership across organizational boundaries including suppliers (Progress Report,
2013; 2014; 2015; 2016). In the Progress Report 2017 arising challenges can especially be
found in newly started collaboration projects, for example the more sustainable banana farming
project in Colombia and Ecuador. Apart from cultivation challenges, a high fluctuation among
team members and farmers as well as the intercultural environment and the interdisciplinary
setting are mentioned. From these two observations it could be concluded that in the early stages
of a project or collaboration more unintended learning occurs while working towards achieving
a successful collaboration outcome.

4.10. Main findings
The following paragraph will summarize the findings from the case study Partnership for Sus-
tainability: Since the start of the collaboration between the non-profit and the business organi-
ization, it has turned into a highly collaborative partnership which addresses sustainability in a
holistic way. During this time both parties developed a common understanding by constantly
learning from each other, following shared sustainable development objectives which result in
creating shared and social value.

Major reasons for the creation of the Partnership for Sustainability are rooted in rising stake-
holder demands, a high level of resource interdependence and the social issue of overfishing.
However, these reasons can be traced back to a knowledge-based common ground. For the
environmental organization a cross-sectoral collaboration is of great importance in order to
achieve their conservation objectives. This collaboration is based on knowledge transfer and
the creation of new knowledge. Therefore, both partnering organizations strive for the creation,
acquisition and transfer of knowledge. As a result, the partnership can primarily be seen as
“platform for organizational learning” (Inkpen, 2000: 1019). At the same time, these reasons
contribute significantly to the creation of value within the cross-sectoral partnership in various
ways.

In the Partnership for Sustainability, the non-profit organization particularly takes on the role
as ecological consultant who provides extensive expertise for the business to achieve the nego-
tiated sustainable development objectives. With the further development of the strategic part-
nership, new tasks and roles for the non-profit have been created, such as (strategic) mediator
or initiator. In order to fulfil these roles as a non-profit organization, an on-going exchange of
knowledge and developing an understanding of the business model of the private sector organization, is required.

Regarding the concept of sustainability, the non-profit organization follows the Brundtland Definition of sustainable development (UN Documents, 1987) and the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997) concept. Building upon these perspectives, the environmental organization defines sustainability including the three dimensions social, economic and ecological. A clear focus for the organization lies hereby on the ecological aspect. Together with the business organization a shared view of sustainability was agreed upon. This understanding of sustainability with a focus on environmental aspects and nature conservation is also reflected in the shared vision of the partnership.

The above-mentioned development of the Partnership for Sustainability is closely related to the redefinition and change of the sustainable development objectives. The redefinition of the sustainable development objectives and the related change processes are a sign for experiencing learning. As these change processes can be traced back to particular objectives, they can be reflected upon. Therefore, new knowledge is generated, and the non-profit is able to use these learning results for following collaboration stages. This includes, for example contract negotiations (re-)definitions of sustainable development objectives and the addition of new projects. In general, various communication processes take place on the formal and informal level in the non-profit organization as well as in the Partnership for Sustainability. Within the non-profit’s project team these processes are mainly used to transfer and integrate knowledge (intra-project learning). In the Partnership for Sustainability, the various number of (formal and informal) communication paths ensure that inter-organizational learning processes take place and generated knowledge is acquired and applied later in the collaboration. Taking a closer look at the different communication channels between the non-profit organization and the partnership project, they especially secure a consistent organizational position externally and internally (towards the business and inside the non-profit). Within the environmental organization, communication between the non-profit’s project team and the global network also supports organizational learning so that the acquired knowledge and experiences can also be used in later collaborations.

The appropriate governance structures of the non-profit organization support the effective communication within the organization and between the partnership. Thus, they positively affect occurring learning processes. These governance structures are oriented towards the organization’s strategy as well as towards the partnership’s mission and strategy. With the development and increasing scope of the Partnership for Sustainability, the structures have also developed and adjusted to the higher demands of the collaboration. Due to the on-going progress of the partnership, governance structures are still undergoing constant change.

During the development of the Partnership for Sustainability, important experiences have been gathered which led to shared ways of operation between the partnering organizations on various levels (individual, team, organizational). First, to align the operational ways, a mutual understanding of the partner was developed which reveals the learning results of an on-going knowledge transfer and inter-organizational learning between both parties. This newly generated knowledge in form of a comprehensive understanding of the fundamentally different organizations is integrated through intra-organizational learning processes in the environmental organization. Second, the development of a shared way of operating required change processes
within structures and communication. This is another learning process that occurred within the non-profit. Third, in daily business operations tools, structures and instruments for the collaboration had been developed jointly over time too. These are used by both organizations together and also individually and furthermore, they have been incorporated in the non-profit´s global network.

In order to manage the Partnership for Sustainability, the environmental organization uses various review processes which include monitoring and evaluation of the project progress. Regarding this cross-sectoral context, these evaluation processes play a fundamental role for the organizational learning processes of the environmental organization because they allow the measurement of the contractually defined sustainable development objectives. This measurability enables comparability to previous target achievements and provides the possibility to drawn and reflect upon lessons learned and learning results. Furthermore, the selected measurements for these objectives are an important part for the organizational learning processes within the partnership. Challenges arising in this area can often be traced back to a lack of experience and knowledge about system boundaries. In order to fill this lack new insights need to be created. These learning results lead to the formulation of partnership objectives for the following collaboration stages.

Both partnering organizations experience major differences in various fields of the Partnership for Sustainability (e.g. work processes and structures). During the collaboration process, organizational learning processes constantly take place and result in learning results for both parties. These learning processes are required in order to manage the on-going change processes in the collaboration context and to enable both parties to move towards sustainability. Due to this, different types of learning occur, for example about the management and design of a cross-sectoral collaboration. Especially in the early stages of a cross-sectoral collaboration or while starting new joint projects together, learning, that is connected to the cross-sectoral collaboration process itself, seems to take place more often.

Summarizing the analysis and main findings of the Partnership for Sustainability case it can be observed that in all established categories major changes occurred. These changes show organizational learning processes. The gained knowledge on the non-profit´s side can be divided into unintended and intended learning outcomes. By intended learning outcome the authors refer to knowledge that is the result of content related issues where the non-profit might be aware of its thematical knowledge gaps. This means, learning that is based on the formal collaboration process of achieving the shared and defined sustainable development objectives. The authors classify unintended learning outcome as learning that is based on the informal collaboration process. This includes developing an understanding about the other organization, the non-profit’s own role and knowledge about systematic boundaries of the partnership.
5. Discussion

Addressing the established research questions, the findings revealed that multiple organizational learning processes occurred in connection with the Partnership for Sustainability. A variety of knowledge exchange processes, between the non-profit and the business in the partnership project (inter-organizational and intra-project learning), between the project team and the rest of the non-profit organization (intra-organizational learning) as well as between the non-profit organization and its global network (intra-organizational learning), indicate this. These identified learning processes contribute to the creation, transfer and acquisition as well as application of knowledge which leads to the experience of different learning results. The learning results for the non-profit, while collaborating towards the implementation of the shared sustainable development objectives, can be divided into intended and unintended learning. As a consequence of these learning processes and their results, significant changes and adaptations in the partnership take place which play a major role for the achievement of the shared sustainable development objectives. Nevertheless, a critical reflection of a non-profit-business collaboration is necessary.

The following chapter connects the case findings and builds on theoretical contributions from the three different fields cross-sectoral collaboration, organizational learning and sustainability. By looking at a non-profit-business partnership, this study has revealed that many theoretical findings from intra-sectoral collaboration within the private sector had been transferred and adapted to this cross-sectoral context. This is reflected, for example in the use of the Triple Bottom Line concept which is applied by the non-profit to define sustainability. The adaption of theoretical concepts from research on strategic alliances could indicate a lack of academic studies on the non-profit perspective. This lack of perspective is also shown in the non-profit’s perceived learning results. Due to the theoretically established grid and the dominating view from business studies it becomes complex for individuals in the non-profit organization to consider learning results as advantages for their own organization.

Nevertheless, the close collaboration of mutual nature offers great learning potential and is an opportunity for knowledge creation for both parties. This is in line with findings from London and colleagues (2004). Arya and Salk (2006) point out the facilitating role of cross-sectoral collaborations for creating new knowledge instead of simply transferring existing knowledge. However, cross-sectoral collaboration is not a solution in itself and contains various risks that should especially be addressed by the non-profit.

First, critical voices about cross-sectoral collaboration mention that sometimes a solution to a particular challenge creates other challenges that were not intended (Bryson et al., 2006). The organizations collaborating in this study seem to address sustainability in a holistic way and pay attention to the interconnectedness of systems (Senge, 2006). Second, through the close collaboration and the accompanying knowledge transfer and learning, there is a risk that the non-profit might identify itself more and more with the business (Sanzo et al., 2017). That is the case since ways of communication improved and relations between the team members from both organizations got closer during the partnership. According to research this can lead to a “loss of personnel identification with the social mission” (Sanzo et al., 2017: 13) and therefore the role of the non-profit might change from advocates and certifiers to consultants and service providers. This risk of affecting the independent role of a non-profit is also mentioned by Austin and Seitanidi (2012a). As a consequence of a lack of independence, the non-profit could lose
its legitimacy and reputation which is a risk factor in this highly collaborative stage of the partnership. At the same time, the depth of the partnership and the size of the business provide the opportunity for the non-profit to draw further attention to their brand. This helps them to sharpen their profile and become more popular as environmental organization in contrast to other non-profit organizations. Al-Tabbaa and colleagues (2013) also pointed out this competition between non-profits. Next, understanding the business’s side of the collaboration and learning about the collaboration process itself, might lead to a higher degree of formalization within the non-profit. Moreover, it is also noted in the literature that even if a partnership has agreed upon shared commitment and values, the fundamental differences between a non-profit and a business (e.g. common experiences or structures) can still lead to potential conflicts (Dahan et al., 2010). Besides, collaboration success has not been linked to collaboration outcome in academic literature. But in this research, both collaborating organizations define the Partnership for Sustainability as successful. This success is evaluated by the achievement of the measurable sustainable development objectives. However, due to the lack of an established impact assessment tool the generated value of each partnership objective cannot be evaluated. Last but not least, according to Austin (2000) every collaboration also needs to consider costs that are associated with it: Resources that are needed to maintain a partnership and make learning possible. These costs associated with learning in an alliance context are also mentioned by Inkpen (2000).

This study also has limitations: While studying a non-profit-business alliance only the non-profit’s perspective has been considered. In order to get a comprehensive view on the partnership the business’s perspective needs to be included. Furthermore, this research relies on a single in-depth case study in a welfare country context and more studies need to be done to be able to compare results. Another limitation is that most literature used in this study originates in alliance research from the private sector.
6. Conclusion
In a continually changing environment organizations are more and more confronted with highly complex challenges. In order to effectively address them the development of joint approaches between different sectors is required. In this context cross-sectoral collaborations constitute an important tool. Due to the fundamental differences between these partnering organizations, both parties experience major difficulties in the practical implementation of the collaboration process. Facing these challenges, organizational learning (processes) play(s) an increasingly important role.

Reviewing the current literature on this topic, a comprehensive understanding of organizational learning processes within non-profit and business collaborations towards sustainability is missing. Using existing theoretical concepts about organizational learning and sustainability in the field of cross-sectoral collaboration, the empirical case of a long-term partnership between a major player in the German grocery retail industry and one of the biggest environmental organizations in Germany was investigated. As organizational learning processes were identified within the non-profit and between the partnering organizations, significant changes and adaptations could be explored in the Partnership for Sustainability over the years. These changes and adaptations can be traced back to intended and unintended learning results.

As a result, the investigated cross-sectoral collaboration has developed into a highly collaborative partnership using a holistic approach to address sustainability which creates shared and social value. Furthermore, the role of the non-profit has been significantly extended within the partnership. This includes the role of an ecological consultant but also as (strategic) mediator and initiator. During the partnership the achieved learning results, have led to the on-going (re-)definition and change of the defined sustainable development objectives. This also applies to the governance structures which developed and adjusted to the higher demands of the collaboration and significantly affected communication paths. Furthermore, learning results led to multiple shared ways of operation between the parties on individual, team and organizational level. Moreover, the use of review processes in the collaboration helped to initiate learning processes by making the sustainable development objectives measurable. As a result, the overall collaboration can be seen as a learning process due to on-going organizational learning. Due to that, these identified learning processes and their results build an essential foundation for an effective cross-sectoral collaboration towards sustainability.

The main contribution of this study is the analysis of the learning processes that occur within a non-profit-business collaboration from the viewpoint of the non-profit. Although the three different fields of cross-sectoral collaboration, organizational learning and sustainability have mainly been studied separately, this study shows the necessity to combine these fields. Most research so far has taken the business’s perspective while establishing connections between them. By addressing a cross-sectoral collaboration and its learning processes from the perspective of a non-profit the understanding of collaboration processes is expanded.

The authors recommend future research to emphasize more on the non-profit perspective within cross-sectoral collaborations. However, in order to gain a complete picture both perspectives need to be combined. Furthermore, organizational learning concepts have mainly been transferred from a business-to-business context. More research is needed to fully adapt these theories to a cross-sectoral context. Next, the role of learning processes as enabler for an efficient partnership is not fully explored, especially from a non-profit perspective. Since the Partnership for
Sustainability is seen and treated like a project by the non-profit (WWF, 2018f) and research has also interlinked this collaboration to projects in terms of its form and structure (Sperfeld et al., 2018), the authors would like to recommend further research to look into insights from organizational learning and project management as well as sustainability and project management and explore the connection to cross-sectoral collaborations. Finally, the authors suggest that more research should be conducted on the contribution of cross-sectoral collaboration towards wider societal goals.
References


Appendix

Appendix number 1: Definitions for cross-sector relationships between a business and a non-profit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ameli and Kayes (2011: 186)</td>
<td>“Cross-sector partnership is a process of mutual influencing, where the assets of each organization are developed into the future when both economic growth and social development are pursued.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arya and Salk (2006: 214)</td>
<td>“[…] cross-sector alliances are defined as partnerships between for-profit organizations and not-for-profit organizations such as local and international NGOs.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Berger et al. (2004: 59)</td>
<td>“When similar partnerships between businesses involve the sharing of resources, knowledge, and capabilities, they are called “strategic alliances.” When they span the for-profit/nonprofit boundary, we call them “social alliances.”.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bryson et al. (2006: 44)</td>
<td>“We thus define cross-sector collaboration as the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jamali and Keshishian (2009:279)</td>
<td>“(…) sort of collaboration to pursue common goals, while leveraging joint resources and capitalizing on the respective competences and strengths of both partners.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Murphy et al. (2012: 1701)</td>
<td>Cross-sector alliances: “[…] alliances in which partners combine competencies and resources in a process of systematic learning with the goal of creating social value.”</td>
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<td>Murphy et al. (2014 : 145)</td>
<td>Cross-sector collaboration “[…] exist for the purpose of creating social value and have been an instrumental mechanism for implementing CSR in recent years”</td>
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<td>Rathi et al. (2014: 868)</td>
<td>“[…] we adopt the definition of a partnership as “an action of sharing ‘goods’ and ‘knowledge’ between partners, coupled with a concerted process where the methods of execution and the objectives are known and accepted by all”.”</td>
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<td>Reference</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<td>Reast et al. (2010: 198)</td>
<td>“[…] faced with no single unified definition of CSSPs, we define them as the deliberate and ongoing collaboration of partners from two or more societal sectors working to tackle mutually important social and economic issues.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rondinelli and London (2003: 62)</td>
<td>“[…] partnerships between two or more organizations with fundamentally different governance structures and missions—include collaborations between a corporation and a noncorporate entity such as a nonprofit organization, government agency, or quasi-governmental organization.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seitanidi and Crane (2008: 413)</td>
<td>“A commitment by a corporation or a group of corporations to work with an organisation from a different economic sector (public or nonprofit). It involves 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. The problem can be defined at least in part as a social issue; its solution will benefit all partners. Social partnership addresses issues that extend beyond organisational boundaries and traditional goals and lie within the traditional realm of public policy – that is, in the social arena. It requires active rather than passive involvement from all parties. Participants must make a resource commitment that is more than merely monetary.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seitanidi et al. (2010:139)</td>
<td>“[…] consist of ‘social problem solving mechanisms’ which aim to address social issues by building on the capabilities, resources and expertise of each partner organization”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selsky and Parker (2005: 850)</td>
<td>“[…] cross-sector projects formed explicitly to address social issues and causes that actively engage the partners on an ongoing basis.” (CSSPs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Huijstee et al. (2007:77)</td>
<td>“Collaborative arrangements in which actors from two or more spheres of society (state, market and civil society) are involved in a”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
nonhierarchical process, and through which these actors strive for a sustainability goal.”

**Walters and Anagnostopoulos (2012:418)**

“[…] a form of collaboration between organisations from different economic sectors that is created to address social issues and within which there is a shared understanding of responsibilities and a commitment of resources.”

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**Appendix number 2: “CSSP planning model” (Source: Reast et al., 2010: 214)**

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**Appendix number 3: “Forms of value and learning generated in an inter-organizational process” (Source: Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018: 831).**
Appendix number 4: “A refined model of absorptive capacity. Adapted from Todorova & Durisin, 2007” (Source: Murphy et al., 2012: 1701).

Appendix number 5: Main Identified Success Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared partner commit-</td>
<td>“Collaborations characterized by shared partner commitment to social value generation with clarity in problem definition and solution identification can significantly increase both alliance viability and assimilation of socially responsible behavior. “ (2006: 220)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ment</td>
<td>- “[…] opportunities for learning in the novice field of CSR. “ (Jamali &amp; Kesheshian, 2008: 279)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austin (2000)</td>
<td>Strategy, Mission and Values Alignment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Connection and Relationships</td>
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<td>Value Generation and Shared Visioning</td>
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<td>Continual Learning</td>
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<td>Focused Attention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizational System</td>
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</table>

- “The more centrally aligned the partnership purpose is to each organization’s strategy and mission, the more important and vigorous the relationship appears to be. The greater the mission mesh, the richer the collaboration. Similarly, the more congruent the partners’ values, the stronger the alliance’s cohesion.” (2000: 81)

- “Institutional partnerships are created, nurtured, and extended by people. Social purpose partnerships appear to be motivationally fueled by the emotional connection that individuals make both with the social mission and with their counterparts in the other organization.” (2000: 82)

- “[…] the fundamental viability of an alliance depends on its ability to generate value for each of its partners. “(2000: 84)

- “In the stronger collaborations, the partners are engaged in continual learning about the partnering process and how it can generate more value.” (2000: 85)

- “A strategic alliance is seen as a priority relationship, has high internal visibility, and receives concentrated engagement by key decision makers. The partnership occupies a significant ongoing share of mind of the organizations’ leadership beyond the initial personal connection […]”(2000: 85)

- “[…] partners need to have means of communicating effectively, efficiently, and frequently. Multiple communications channels, formal and informal, are used. Partners stressed the importance of forthrightness and constructive criticism. Openness seems particularly powerful in social purpose collaborations, especially in the integrative-stage relationships. Good communication appears to foster trust and vice versa.” (2000: 86)

- “Clearly delineating responsibility for the management of the relationship in both partners’ organizations contributes to alliance vitality. Incentives for collaboration that are built into the managers’ performance evaluation process ensure attention to the alliance.” (2000: 87)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mutual Expectations and Accountability</th>
<th>-“Clarity of expectations about the deliverables from each partner appears to be important. In addition to providing programmatic guidance, this fosters mutual accountability and motivates execution responsibility. Mutually high expectations promote both rising performance standards and greater value creation.” (2000: 87)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linking mechanism</td>
<td>-“Agreement can help clarify the stake or interest that an organization has in resolving the social problem and how much the organization needs others to solve the problem.” (2006: 46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement on problem</td>
<td>-“[…] through these networks that partners judge the trustworthiness of other partners and the legitimacy of key stakeholders.” (2006: 46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of prior relationships</td>
<td>-“Informal agreements about the collaboration’s composition, mission and process can work, but formal agreements have the advantage of supporting accountability.” (2006: 47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forging initial agreement</td>
<td>-“To be effective, these people need formal and informal authority, vision, long-term commitment to the collaboration, integrity, and relational and political skills.” (2006: 47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building leadership</td>
<td>-“[…] organization that seeks to acquire the resources necessary for survival must build legitimacy by making use of structures, processes, and strategies that are appropriate for the institutional environment.” (2006: 47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building legitimacy</td>
<td>-“Collaboration partners build trust by sharing information and knowledge and demonstrating competency, good intentions […]” (2006: 48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building trust</td>
<td>-“Conflict in a collaboration emerges from the differing aims and expectations that partners bring to a collaboration, from differing views about strategies and tactics, and from attempts to protect or magnify a partner’s control over the collaboration’s work or outcomes.” (2006: 48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing conflict</td>
<td>-“Deliberate planning: Careful articulation of mission, goals, and objectives, roles and responsibilities and phases or steps, including implementation […]”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural configuration</td>
<td>Emergent planning: clear understanding of mission, goals, roles, and action steps is more likely to emerge over time as conversations involving individuals, groups, and organizations grow to encompass a broader network of involved or affected parties.” (2006: 48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>“[…] networks centralized around a lead organization were more effective than dense, strongly tied networks[…]” (2006: 49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration type</td>
<td>“[…] the choice among types of governance structure is likely to influence network effectiveness.” (2006: 49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power imbalances</td>
<td>“Important differences exist among partnerships formed for system-level planning (identifying and defining system problems and solutions), administrative activities (involving resource transactions, such as staff sharing), or service delivery. “ (2006: 50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competing institutional logics</td>
<td>“[…] power imbalances among collaborating partners as a source of mistrust and therefore a threat to effective collaboration. “ (2006: 50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountabilities</td>
<td>“Institutional logics are macro-level historical patterns, both symbolic and material, that establish the formal and informal rules of the game and provide interpretations of action. “ (2006: 50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability may pertain to inputs, process, or outcomes. “(2006: 51)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Googings &amp; Rochlin (2000)</td>
<td>Defining clear goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obtaining senior level commitment</td>
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<td>Engaging in frequent communication</td>
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<td>Assigning professionals to lead the work</td>
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<td>Sharing the commitment of resources</td>
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<td>Evaluating progress/results</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gray &amp; Stites (2013)</td>
<td>Resource Profile</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO Type</td>
<td>Cultural Fit</td>
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<td>Representation</td>
<td>Power Dynamics</td>
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<td>Cultural Fit</td>
<td>Previous Partnership Experience</td>
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<td>Time Horizons</td>
<td>Power Dynamics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>Previous Partnership Experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exploring Differences</td>
<td>Time Horizons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agreeing on explicit norms and management processes</td>
<td>Reputation</td>
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<td>Exploring Differ-</td>
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<td>Creating a shared vision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building Trust</td>
<td>-“The need to establish trust among partners […]” (2013: 43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling Conflict</td>
<td>-“Conflict over values, goals, procedures, roles and relationships is part of working in partnerships that bridge sectors.” (2013: 43)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consensus-based decision making</td>
<td>-“[…] importance of consensus-building as an important process for decision-making among partners.” (2013: 45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devising accountability criteria</td>
<td>-“[…] importance of developing accountability criteria for assessing progress against joint goals […].” (2013: 45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Power</td>
<td>- “[…] collaborative governance requires a commitment to a positive strategy of empowerment and representation of weaker or disadvantaged stakeholders.” (2013: 46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivating effective leadership</td>
<td>-“Leadership is often referred to as informal or formal facilitation or mediation. A brokering or mediating organization is a key factor in facilitating collective action.“ (2013: 48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Husted (2003) | Revolving around centrality | -the closeness of fit between the firm’s CSR activity and its mission and objectives (Jamali & Keshishian, 2008) |
| Specificity | -extent to which the firm is able to capture a share of the profit stream generated by its investments in CSR (Jamali & Keshishian, 2008: 279) |

<p>| Jamali &amp; Keshishian (2008) | Self assessment in the initiation stage |
| Mission connect |
| Alignment of values |
| Clear assignment of management responsibilities |
| Respective areas of competence |
| Open Communication |
| Inter-personal relationship between the CEOs |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appreciation and inclination to learning</th>
<th>Kanter (1994)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular tracking of progress and Performance along dimensions or criteria</td>
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<td>Commitment of resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Excellence</td>
<td>- Both partners are strong and have something of value to contribute to the relationship. Their motives for entering into the relationship are positive (to pursue future opportunities), not negative (to mask weaknesses or escape a difficult situation). (Jamali &amp; Keshishian, 2008: 280)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>- The relationship fits major strategic objectives of partners so they want to make it work. Partners have long-term goals in which the relationship plays a key role (Jamali &amp; Keshishian, 2008: 280).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interdependence</td>
<td>- The partners need each other. They have complementary assets and skills. Neither can accomplish alone what they both can together (Jamali &amp; Keshishian, 2008: 280).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>- The partners invest in each other (e.g., equity swaps or mutual board service) to demonstrate their respective stakes in the relationship and each other (Jamali &amp; Keshishian, 2008: 280).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>- Communication is reasonably open. Partners share information required to make the relationship work, including their objectives/goals, technical data/knowledge of conflicts, trouble spots or changing situations (Jamali &amp; Keshishian, 2008: 280).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>- The partners develop linkages and shared ways of operation so they can work together smoothly (Jamali &amp; Keshishian, 2008: 280).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>- The relationship is given a formal status, with clear responsibilities and decision-making processes (Jamali &amp; Keshishian, 2008: 280).</td>
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<td>Integrity</td>
<td>- Partners behave toward each other in honorable ways that enhance mutual trust without abusing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rondinelli &amp; London (2003)</td>
<td>Identify specific projects for collaboration and require internal resources</td>
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<td>Formulated criteria for partner selection</td>
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<td>Develop mutually acceptable procedures for collaboration</td>
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<td>Define problems clearly and explore feasible and measurable solutions</td>
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<td>Focus on manageable sets of tasks that can be implemented quickly</td>
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<td>Maintain confidentiality</td>
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<td>(2003: 68)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Samii et al. (2002)</td>
<td>Resource dependency</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commitment symmetry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Common goal symmetry</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Seitanidi, Koufopoulos, Palmer (2010)** | **Organizational characteristics** | -“[…] different NPOs’ characteristics can be advantageous, offering greater opportunities for BUS employees to get involved, a greater or lesser possibility for innovation, higher or lower ‘brand equity’, opportunities or constraints for additional revenue[…]” (2010: 142)  
-“[…] analysing each organisation’s motives and comparing them across the partner organisations will offer an early indication of the transformative intention and its reciprocal nature.” (2010: 143)  
- Placing the interactions within their historical context can assist in understanding the interplay of the factors and dynamics that inform the decision to form a partnership. (2010: 143) |
| **Selsky & Parker (2005)** | **Common Cause** | - Metagoals (2005: 855)  
- “[…] typically means developing a common culture held together by shared values, common interests, and clear communication. (2005: 855)  
- “[…] trust in business traditionally is based on constrained contractual exchanges, whereas trust in the nonprofit sector is traditionally based on solidarity with the mission or on shared values.” (2005: 856)  
- “Crucial to developing a common partnership culture is clear communications, which can be complicated by sectoral differences. “(2005: 856)  
- “[…] presence of an “enabling structure” such as a brokering or mediating organization is seen
Maintaining legitimacy with external stakeholders

"[...] demonstrate that stakeholder interests are not being co-opted. “(2005: 857)

"[...] can resist or encourage negotiated agreements" (2005: 857)

Discussion of Power

- Resource disparities (2005: 857)
- "Large power imbalances are viewed as problematic because they may lead partners into political or opportunistic behavior that can serve one or both partners' interests at the expense of partnership performance. “ (2005: 857)

Learning as outcome

- "[...] interpersonal and administrative skills, technical skills in the issue area (e.g., how to combat environmental deterioration), reflective skills that can modify mindsets and habits, and social learning that can lead to needed innovations. “ (2005: 858)

van Huijstee et al. (2007)

Choice of subjects

- "[...] the formation of partnerships is its very topic and the scoping thereof. Partnerships can be best formulated on a topic that fits well with the core business of the partners. “ (2007: 84)

Choice of goals

- "[...] being realistic in setting goals and investing adequate time in defining goals, management processes and evaluative metrics. “ (2007: 84)

Choice of partners

- "Authors advise to identify key stakeholders and to avoid assembling the same people for every new partnership initiative. “ (2007: 84)

Respectful, open way of working

- "Good communication, openness, listening to each other and building a shared understanding“ (2007: 84)

Trust

- "[...] building trust and taking time to do so is considered to be very important. “ (2007: 84)
- "[...] support or even participation of the media, and from relevant political institutions.” (2007: 84)