A balancing act
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Summary

Set in the context of sustainable development, this dissertation examines collaborative efforts that span the boundaries of businesses, nonprofits, and governments. Such collaborations, here referred to as cross-sector partnerships (CSPs), have reached an almost paradigmatic status in the arena of policy makers and are believed by practitioners and scientists alike to have the potential to effectively address some of the modern world’s more complex sustainability challenges, such as deforestation, poverty, and climate change. Considering the urgency and relevance of such issues, it is important to better understand how CSPs are initiated and convened. Accordingly, in this dissertation I seek to answer the research question: How do mission-driven conveners initiate and convene cross-sector partnerships to strengthen sustainable development in global supply chains? As internationally operating businesses are increasingly called upon to take responsibility for their own social and environmental impact – be it in the production, trade, or procurement of their products – the context in which I answer this question is both societally relevant and timely.

Empirically, my research is built on a qualitative, multiple-case study that explores three cases in the (1) coffee, (2) timber, and (3) tea supply chains. Using a variety of qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, I was able to gather large datasets for each case. The three cases comprise four empirical chapters, two of which pertain to the tea case as each chapter highlights different aspects of the case: its strategic orientation (Chapter 2) and its formation process (Chapter 5). Together, the four empirical chapters explore and explain the three focal concepts implicated in the research question, i.e.: CSPs, mission-driven conveners, and convening. Starting with the broader picture, I gradually zoom in on the matter of interest.

To begin, I start by studying the complexities involved in organizing CSPs that aim to effectuate a sustainability transformation in global supply chains. Such CSPs, I conclude, must both – and simultaneously – include and balance social, economic, and environmental considerations in order to achieve their transformative potential (Chapter 2). Moving on, I elaborate on the use of a
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CSP strategy vis-à-vis a certification strategy in strengthening supply chain sustainability, and introduce the concept of “mission-driven conveners” – proactive organizations that organize CSPs in order to achieve their sustainability mission – before discussing their strategy in detail (Chapter 3). Then, zooming in on mission-driven conveners, I elaborate on the two main tensions they face in their positions within and relations to the partnership: their being both neutral facilitators and leaders who not only lack formal authority, but also have a stake in the CSP’s objectives (Chapter 4). Lastly, I study the convening process itself and how it works in depth when undertaken by more than one organization, shifting from an actor-perspective to a process-perspective in my analysis of “collective convening” (Chapter 5).

My research shows that mission-driven conveners face a balancing act. On the one hand, they proactively convene and, from their normative motivation as advocates of sustainable development, initiate transformative CSPs as a strategy to realize their own supply chain objectives. Consequently, because they do have a clear stake and objective within the CSP, which influences their convening behavior, they are not neutral. On the other hand, however, their nonprofit capacity allows them to simultaneously play the neutral role of “honest broker,” as they do not have a commercial interest in the supply chains in which they work. Building on paradox literature, I suggest an alternative perspective on the role of tensions in CSPs and convening. Tensions, I argue, are not temporary hurdles to overcome. Instead, the existence of tensions is perpetual and, as such, they must be navigated in order to realize success through CSPs. Likewise, tensions manifest on different levels, i.e., in terms of: the CSP’s objectives (content), the position of the conveners themselves vis-à-vis the CSP, and on the inter-organizational level in the relationships between the different CSP partners and – in the case of collective convening – conveners. From this perspective, convening CSPs comprises a navigation process that is both complex and messy – one in which CSPs do not always progress in a neat and linear fashion toward their envisioned outcomes. Overall, I found that active responses to these tensions, such as balancing, offer a more promising way forward. Furthermore, effective mission-driven conveners display flexibility, pragmatism, and creativity in response to the multilevel, perpetual tensions they encounter as they work to realize their
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objective of sustainable development in global supply chains. Finally, I found that conveners can also use the tensions they encounter productively to drive progress and realize transformative change in a complex context.

On a theoretical level, my dissertation contributes to CSP research by proposing an alternative perspective to the dominant, phase model approach of studying CSPs. This approach conceptualizes the CSP process as a life cycle process, which discerns different phases of CSP development that follow a logical and linear progression from inception to maturity. Often linked to these phases, the role of conveners in CSPs is then described as the job of identifying which convening actions are required in which phase in order to drive progress from one phase to the next. Although these phase models satisfy our desire to display social reality in a clear and comprehensible manner, they do not explain the “messiness” encountered in my cases. Therefore, and by building on the paradox literature used in Chapters 4 and 5 and borrowing insights from dialectical process theory, I propose a tension-based perspective as an alternative paradigm to study convening and CSPs. This perspective changes two core assumptions in CSP research: (1) it recasts tensions and contradictions as being perpetual and ubiquitous in CSPs, instead of considering them “hurdles to overcome”, and (2) it alters our perspective on the role of conveners, who no longer have to resolve tension and contradiction, but instead must facilitate progress toward their sustainability objectives “despite” the tense and complex nature of the CSP.

In addition, I identify several implications of a tension-based perspective for the concepts mission-driven conveners and convening. Convening, from this perspective, is essentially about recognizing and acknowledging tensions, both latent and salient. It requires a level of awareness and understanding on multiple levels: on the strategic level (in determining the “best” means to address the issue), the organizational level (by recognizing tensions as they occur at the level of each organization, including within the mission-driven convener’s own organization), and the inter-organizational level (in the relations and tensions between organizations and/or conveners). Moreover, mission-driven conveners must be skilled in navigating tensions and in productively using them to assist progress toward the sustainability objectives that led these conveners to initiate their CSPs in the first place.
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To conclude, I derive three implications for practice from my research. First, the adoption of a tension-based perspective on convening CSPs requires conveners to – at least partly – let go of “step-by-step” CSP phase models and, instead, adopt a more flexible and pragmatic approach to initiating and convening CSPs. Second, the tension-based perspective can provide practitioners (i.e., mission-driven conveners) with an alternative way of articulating their role in the CSPs they convene: they must navigate tensions, not resolve conflicts. Third, conveners face a challenging and delicate balancing act as they must, on the one hand, harness successful CSP processes and, on the other hand, realize effective sustainability outcomes through CSPs. Both should be accounted for, as both are indispensable in realizing the transformative aspirations set forth in the sustainable development agenda.