Collaborating for Change: A Social Practices Approach to Partnerships for Sustainable Food and Agriculture

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Abstract

Worldwide, partnerships are popular vehicles for addressing (agro-food related) sustainability challenges. Their popularity is reflected in a proliferation of studies on partnerships. Yet, the current body of literature does not sufficiently take into account: (i) the importance of the institutional contexts in which the partnerships are embedded; and (ii) how interactions and tensions between the different partners influence the process of shaping the partnership over time. Therefore, in this paper, we aim to gain in-depth insights on processes of shaping a partnership for sustainable agriculture and food, and the role that the context in which a partnership is embedded plays in these processes. Our findings are based on the single case study of a participatory action research project of a partnership in Belgium. In our analysis, we take a social practices approach and thus conceptualise partnerships as different sets of practices from which a new set of practices is created. The results show that in talking about the sustainability of agriculture and food, it is important to take into account existing practice bundles because: (i) they set the scene in which sustainability innovations are shaped; and (ii) they create the boundaries for possible kinds of change. Participating in a new set of practices requires a move away from 'normal' ways of working. Yet, although there are shared goals and practices, each partner organisation is also constrained by and working towards its own goals. This is likewise the case for how 'sustainability' is shaped, implying that existing practices play an important role in shaping 'sustainable' practices. In turn, these findings highlight the need to not simply assume that partnerships will contribute to sustainability transitions, but also to reflect on: (i) whether and how this might be the case; and (ii) who or what factors have the power in shaping and defining 'sustainability'.

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Introduction

Worldwide, agro-food networks are facing the double challenge of meeting the needs of a growing global population, while facing a range of sustainability challenges, such as climate change, soil erosion (IPCC, 2019), and loss of biodiversity (Tilman, et al., 2017). There seems to be consensus on the need for food system transitions towards sustainability, to meet the needs of future generations (e.g. Spaargaren et al., 2012; Dentoni et al., 2017; Kirwan et al., 2017). It is also widely accepted that no individual organisation or stakeholder can solve sustainability problems unilaterally (Voss & Kemp, 2006; de Wildt-Liesveld et al., 2015). Instead, the inherent uncertainty and complexity of these problems require emergent and adaptive governance approaches, including multiple stakeholders from different sectors, such as agribusiness firms, (local) governments, businesses, knowledge institutions, civil society (organisations) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Bryson et al., 2006; Dentoni & Bizter; 2015; Dentoni et al., 2018). Partnerships in the fields of food and agriculture have increased rapidly in number, ranging from global initiatives, like commodity round tables for sustainable soy, palm oil and seafood (Cheyns & Riisgaard, 2014; Dentoni & Bitzer, 2015; Kirwan et al., 2017), to local food councils (Kirwan et al., 2017).

The increasing popularity of the potential of partnerships is reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, with SDG17 stating that "*[a] successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society*" (United Nations, 2019). Over the last two decades, studies of partnerships have also proliferated (Dentoni et al., 2018), with a tendency to look at partnerships in terms of an antecedent–process–outcome model (Bryson et al., 2006; Thomson & Perry, 2006). As such, partnerships are seen as a space where a set of (rational) actors aim to address a common problem or work towards a shared goal within a specific context (i.e. antecedents), by bringing together complementary skills and resources in a way that would not be possible if they addressed these problems individually (i.e. process), and thus create a win-win situation for all of the partners involved (i.e. outcome) (Dentoni & Bitzer, 2015; Nicholls & Huybrechts, 2016; Spielman & von Grebmer, 2006). Partnerships are thereby associated with collaborative advantage (Huxham, 1993), or the assumption that by collaborating in sustainability goals all partners can benefit. Hence, the increased popularity of the potential of partnerships to solve wicked problems reflects "*a tendency (…) to portray these forms of collaboration as a kind of magic bullet capable of providing solutions to diverse development problems across a variety of settings through win–win situations where all stakeholders benefit*" (Rein & Stott, 2009, p. 80). In the field of food and agriculture, partnerships have also been viewed as a way to integrate the interests of diverse stakeholders and to create buy-in, in food system policies (Clayton et al., 2015), as well as to stimulate diversity and resilience in food provision (Dunning et al., 2015).

However, the role of partnerships in sustainability transitions generally, and food and agriculture studies more specifically, is not unproblematic. For instance, it has been claimed that sharing goals, resources and capabilities between partners is not a guarantee for the success of a partnership (Gray & Purdy, 2018), and that "*[t]he normal expectation ought to be that success will be very difficult to achieve*" (Bryson et al., 2006: 44). The literature on the role of partnerships in food transitions towards sustainability faces several challenges related to understanding how partnerships are shaped and what their role and impact may be. First, the existing body of literature on partnerships does not sufficiently take into account the importance of the institutional contexts in which the partnerships are embedded (Hall, 2006; Spielman & von Grebmer, 2006; Vurro et al., 2010). Vurro et al. (2010) argue that institutional logics influence how partners are selected in a partnership, what role businesses play in the partnership, what leadership style to adopt, and what governance structure is implemented. Second, there is a lack of insight on the way in which interactions and tensions between the different partners influence the process of shaping the partnership over time (Moragues-Faus, 2020; Thomson & Perry, 2006). Third, the terms 'sustainability' or 'sustainable agriculture and food' are contested concepts, which may mean different things and may be shaped in different ways (Galli et al., 2016). Fourth, the social dynamics and partner interactions are complex processes that will have to be taken into account in order to

enhance the transformational potential of partnerships (Van Tulder & Keen, 2018).

Hence, there is a need for more nuanced discussions on the role of partnerships in (shaping) sustainability debates (Shove & Walker, 2007; Voss & Kemp, 2006). To facilitate such discussions, there is a lack of approaches providing in-depth insights into the processes of how partnerships are set up and develop over time, including more rich accounts of the influence of the contexts in which partnerships are embedded in these processes. In this paper, we aim to address these concerns by taking a social practices approach to study partnerships. The study is based on a participatory action-research approach of a partnership between five different actors in Belgium that took place over the course of three years. The purpose of the project was to explore ways to feed a growing population by fostering a societal debate about food and sustainability, and by developing and marketing 'sustainable' food supply chains. Hence, the findings of the paper are based on a rich body of data that afford in-depth insights into the processes of shaping a partnership in the agri-food sector.

In the following section we further explain the social practices approach used in this paper. Section 3 consists of an introduction to the case-study and the methodology used. Section 4 presents the key findings from the case study. In the fifth and last section we discuss these findings.

A Social Practices Approach to Collaborations

In the past 10-15 years, Social Practice Theories (SPTs) have become increasingly popular in studying transitions towards sustainability in agro-food systems (El Bilali, 2019), because of the rich, detailed and nuanced accounts that they offer on social change. Social practice theorists have argued that social phenomena (organisations, education systems, corporations, science, power) consist of bundles of practices and material arrangements (Schatzki, 2005; Shove et al., 2012; Watson, 2012). In doing so, they aim to go beyond classic agency-structure debates. Instead of conceptualising social change as a result of individual agency or social structure, SPTs look at change as resulting from and rooted in the ongoing dynamics of social practices (Arts et al., 2016; Shove et al., 2012). Theories of social practices have been widely used to study how (un)sustainability is an outcome of the routinised performances of social practices of consumption (e.g. Shove, 2003, 2010; Spaargaren, 2003; Schelly, 2016; Fyhn & Baron, 2017). Recently, several authors have attempted to apply SPTs to other types of practices such as fertilisation (Huttunen & Oosterveer, 2017), growing urban food (Dobernig et al., 2016) and retailing fair-trade food (Oosterveer et al., 2014). Moreover, several authors have attempted to apply this theoretical lens to more large-scale phenomena, such as the management of organisations (Feldman & Orlikowksi, 2011), markets, governments and educational systems (Schatzki, 2016), global forest governance (Arts et al., 2016), and conservation tourism partnerships (Lamers & van der Duim, 2016).

The choice for a practices approach was based on an iterative process that was influenced by the Participatory Action Approach taken within this study. In a first instance, we studied the partnership based on the more 'traditional' antecedents–process–outcome model that was mentioned in the introduction of this paper. Within this approach, we also conceptualised each of the partners as individual, agentic actors (Welch & Yates, 2018). Yet this approach left little room for appreciating the ways in which the individuals within the partnership, and the different ways of functioning of each of the partnering organisations, influenced how the partnership was shaped and developed over time. This was something that we found to strongly affect the collaboration process. Moreover, such an approach left little room for identifying the factors that played a role in how sustainability was shaped, since it assumed 'sustainability' to be the ultimate goal of the partnership, rather than a highly fluid and negotiated concept that was shaped through the interactions between the partners.

A social practices approach was considered more suitable since, in SPTs, organisations or institutions are not necessarily seen as coherent actors, but instead are constituted from the constant and daily performance of activities (Watson, 2016). In other words, a practices approach allowed us to appreciate how organisations

and partnerships are made and constantly reproduced throught the daily actions of individuals, while these actions are at the same time influenced by the context in which they take place. Moreover, taking a practices approach allowed us to shed light on how 'sustainability' was constructed within and through the performance of practices that shaped the partnership, rather than being a concept that was predefined and consequently implemented in practice. A practices approach thus allowed us to gain nuanced and rich understandings of: (i) how the partnership was shaped and the role of the context in which it was embedded; and (ii) to identify the role that the interactions between the partners played in how sustainability was shaped.

This paper mainly builds on the theory of practices as formulated by Schatzki (2005, 2012, 2016). Schatzki conceptualises practices as doings and sayings that are situated in time and space. Practices are organised by rules, practical and general understandings, and teleo-affective structures. With practical understandings, the know-how of performing a practice is conveyed. The general understanding is the meaning that is attributed to, and the common idea of, what it means to perform a practice. Rules are the explicit formulations of how a practice should be performed. The teleo-affective structure is the goal or purpose for which the practice is performed. Finally, there is always a strong link between practices and material entities, such as objects, infrastructures, and technologies. Practices and material arrangements therefore form practice-arrangement bundles (Lamers & Van der Duim, 2016; Schatzki, 2005, 2012, 2016). Based on Arts et al. (2016), we view these practice elements as important in understanding how 'sustainability' is translated into real-life practices. Individual practices may affect and be affected by other practices, as they hang together in more or less complicated bundles of practices. The connections between practices in bundles can be loose or tight to varying degrees. Generally, through consistent reproduction, connections between practices become tighter (Schatzki, 2005; Shove et al., 2012; Watson, 2012; Lamers & Van der Duim, 2016). An important consequence of such a view is that organisations or institutions "*take form as distinctive social phenomena through shared, collective, predominantly tacit ways of shaping, enabling, disciplining and aligning a multitude of largely mundane practices*" (Watson, 2016: 7). In other words, organisations consist of autonomous practices (e.g. administration, fundraising, marketing, research and sourcing practices) that are tied together in bundles that may be mutually dependent or else facilitate or compete with one another for time, attention or resources (Feldman & Orlikowksi, 2011; Lamers & Van der Duim, 2016; Schatzki, 2005).

Hence, partnerships are not merely spaces in which different organisations pool their resources to create positive outcomes. Rather, they are social spaces where different 'constituting' practice bundles (i.e. the partner organisations) are brought together and interlinked "*to create distinct nexuses of practices and material arrangements*" (Schatzki, 2016: 20) through 'connecting practices' (i.e. the partnership). These 'connecting practices' are performed in time and space with the aim of tackling societal challenges (Lamers & van der Duim, 2016).

The process of bringing together practice bundles and shaping a 'new' connecting bundle – the partnership – is depicted in Figure 1. In Step I, different bundles of *constituting practices* – i.e. the partner organisations – are shown, each consisting of their own specific configuration of rules, practical and general understandings, and teleo-affective structures. In this paper, the term 'constituting practices' thus refers to the bundles of practices of each of the five partner organisations within the partnership. Each of these organisations pursues its own goals and operates according to specific logics. In Step II, these constituting practices get bundled together through the *connecting practices* that constitute the partnership. In the specific case of this paper, this means that the five different partners come together around shared goals through shared activities, such as meetings, events and discussions. Moreover, this bundle of connecting practices also consists of a specific configuration of practical rules, understandings, teleo-affective structures, and general understandings. Step III shows how the practices constituting the partnership are influenced by the relationships between the constituting practice-arrangement bundles and the connecting practice. The partnership is created as the result of the interactions between the constituting practice bundles, and the facilitating or competing relationships that may exist

among them (Lamers & van der Duim, 2016). In other words, the partners within the partnership pursue a shared goal – in this case coming up with sustainable solutions within the fields of agriculture and food. However, the partnership is not built within a vacuum, but comes forth from, and is constrained by, the different constituting practice bundles (partners), and their specific goals and ways of operating.

Figure 1: Steps in the process of practice bundles becoming bundled through a connecting practice bundle (Based on Lamers & van der Duim, 2016)

Step I: Constituting practice bundles

Step II: Bundled through a connecting practice bundle

Step III: The connecting practice bundle is shaped by the constituting practice bundles
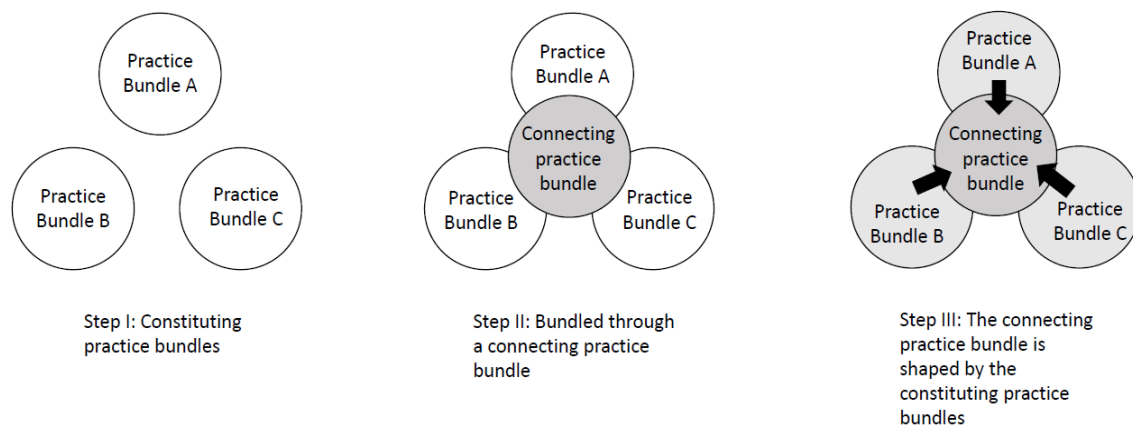
Materials and Methods

The Partnership

To grasp what the connecting practices that shape a partnership look like – and how they connect to the constituting bundles of practices – we study the situated performances of connecting practices. To do so, we examine a single case-study of a partnership between a provincial government agency, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), a retailer, and two institutes of higher education.

The partnership was a three-year project that was started and financed by a provincial government agency in Flanders, Belgium, in April 2015. The Province had been involved in development cooperation in the global South. However, a need for renewal of the development programme was identified to increase its legitimacy amongst the citizens under its jurisdiction and to prevent budget cuts for development cooperation. Based on two exploratory meetings, it was decided that collaboration between different societal domains was crucial if societal challenges were to be met. The decision was therefore taken to set up partnerships with other organisations, instead of financing the activities of development organisations. Two multi-actor projects were created around the themes of healthcare and agriculture & food. This paper focuses on the latter.

In September 2015, a steering committee was set up, consisting of what the provincial government agency considered the most relevant players in global agriculture and food, based within their jurisdiction: a university, a large Belgian retailer, and a Belgian NGO that focuses on global food and agricultural issues. Later, a second higher education institution (a university college) joined the partnership. From each organisation, two or more people became members of the project steering committee. The NGO also provided a facilitator to guide the collaboration process. The goal of the partnership was to develop a project in which players in the fields of food and agriculture would search together for ways to sustainably feed a growing global population. The way in which the partnership was shaped and developed over time is further discussed in Section 4.

Data Collection

Several authors have highlighted the importance of the active engagement of universities in societal sustainability debates and collaborations, which implies a shift away from the traditional role of the researcher, and the use of a different set of methods (Dentoni & Bitzer, 2015; Huzzard et al., 2010; Samanta et al., 2019; Trencher et al., 2013; Wittmayer & Schäpke, 2014).

The first and third authors of this paper were present throughout the full stretch of the partnership. From the beginning of the partnership onwards, it was agreed that the researchers would fulfil several roles, such as: observing, documenting and analysing the interactions between the participants during steering group meetings and events; helping to shape the partnership and participating in the practical execution of several of the activities; facilitating the learning process of the participants on the basis of a learning history of the partnership; and supporting the partnership with scientific knowledge (Wittmayer & Schäpke, 2014). This meant that we were engaged in setting up the partnership and carrying out the partnership's activities. Our role thus extended beyond the traditional role of the 'neutral scientist'.

Concretely, our primary role was to capture and document the collaborative process. The data were collected by observing, documenting and evaluating the interactions between partners during steering committee meetings over the three-year period of the partnership (see also Lamers et al., 2010). During the meetings we took notes that we arranged afterwards into a learning history (Roth & Bradbury, 2008). We noted events on the one hand, and our thoughts and interpretations of these events on the other. This information was further summarised into a detailed table with a chronological account of all events and meetings during the project. With this, we aimed not only to more deeply understand how the connecting practices were shaped, but also how the partnership was built, and what we could learn from this.

The learning history was used as the basis for two evaluation workshops that were organised in March 2017 and March 2018. The main goal of these workshops was to reflect with the participants of the steering committee on the project until that point, to draw lessons, and to discuss how these lessons could be used to organise the remainder of the collaboration process more effectively.

The method for the first evaluation workshop was based on the timeline method developed by Van Mierlo et al. (2010). During this workshop, we prepared a timeline of the project until that point in time. We also prepared a more detailed table with an overview of all meetings and events until then. All the partners were asked to prepare themselves for the workshop by reading the timeline and the table, and to reflect on their own experiences. The meeting was facilitated by the first author of this paper. We first discussed the timeline, which was depicted on A0 papers and attached to the wall so that it was visible for all participants. After this, the partners were asked to add the elements they thought were missing. A discussion was then organised around three topics that were decided beforehand in consultation with the participants. The workshop revolved around: (1) the dynamics between the partners; (2) the focus of the project and its activities; and (3) visions for the future. The whole discussion was recorded, and detailed notes were taken by a note-taker.

The second evaluation workshop was organised during a full-day meeting. This day was meant to evaluate the partnership and to think about possible steps after the finalisation of the partnership. An external facilitator was hired to enable all the partners to actively participate. The activities were prepared in close collaboration with the facilitator. During the evaluation, each partner had 15 minutes to share their experiences, the difficulties they had encountered, why this project and this method of collaborating were important for their organisation, and what they had learned from the project as an individual and as an organisation. Detailed notes of these testimonies were taken and analysed afterwards. We had then prepared a document and presentation with our findings, on which this paper is based. These findings were discussed with the project partners whose input was used to fine-tune the findings. Furthermore, documents and annual reports from the partners were used for

triangulation of the findings during the steering group meetings.

Navigating between different roles came with a specific set of challenges (Trencher et al., 2013; Dentoni & Bitzer, 2015). First, each of the partners had to be flexible, as roles in the partnership changed throughout the project. Second, taking up several roles within the partnership could generate ambiguity or bias (Lamers et al., 2010; Dentoni & Bitzer, 2015). For example, we were at times perceived as the partner that could increase the legitimacy of the choices within the partnership, in the public's eyes, by providing research to support the choices that were made. Although it would be impossible not to be influenced by these dynamics, we aimed to minimise this effect and nuance our views by triangulating the data, openly communicating about our role in the partnership, and organising the evaluation workshops (Huzzard et al., 2010; Lamers et al., 2010). Moreover, being part of the steering committee and taking part in all decision-making processes and activities allowed us to gain in-depth insights into the processes of collaboration and the connections and interactions between different partners.

Results

Identifying the constituting bundles of practices of the partnership

The partnership emerged out of five constituting practice bundles. Each of these bundles was organised according to a specific set of general and practical understandings, rules and teleologies, and bundled with specific material arrangements. We discuss below the most important characteristics of each of the constituting practice bundles.

The provincial government department that initiated the project was responsible for development cooperation. In the past, this mainly meant that the department granted funding to development organisations. However, in the new format, funding was granted to collaborative projects in which the department participated. Communication about the activities within the partnership, to the provincial council and to the citizens in the jurisdiction, was seen as crucial to increase the legitimacy of such an approach. Moreover, all the department's activities were generally structured according to predefined frameworks and rules that were approved by the provincial council. Lastly, the provincial government operated on the basis of four-year governing cycles. After the governing cycle 2014-2018, elections were held and a new council was chosen. Securing re-election was therefore an important teleology for provincial representatives in the partnership.

The retailer was one of the three largest retailers in Belgium. Its core business was to set up supply chains and market products to a wide audience. The economic performance of these supply chains and products was a key teleology for the retailer. Procedures were strictly defined to ensure the coherence and efficiency of all activities. The protection of sensitive corporate information was considered of utmost importance to obtain and retain its strong market position, *and* to maintain its legitimacy in its customers' eyes. However, the non-profit pillar of the retailer that focused on increasing the economic, ecological and social sustainability of its practices also played an important role in the partnership. Finally, the practices bundle that constituted the retailer was large and stretched out over the globe, consisting of many stores and employees, and different types of activities. The partnership formed only a very small part of the retailer's activities.

The NGO was an international network organisation whose main goal was to contribute to ensuring healthy, sustainable and affordable food for all. Some of the core activities of the organisation were to support farmers, connect farmers with retailers and food businesses, work together with retailers, and ensure food education in schools. Moreover, an important goal for the organisation was to secure legitimacy among its followers, donors and funding institutions. Communicating about (the impact of) its activities was therefore considered important.

The university's main activities were researching, writing, publishing and teaching. The participating research group's work focused on agriculture, food and sustainability transitions in food systems. While neutrality was seen as an important aspect of the academic work, in this particular department researchers were encouraged to explore opportunities for action research. One major goal of the individuals working in the research group was to publish their results in peer-reviewed journals. Moreover, the practices that shaped the university were generally organised in longer term cycles, in which the publication of results can potentially take years.

Finally, the main practices of the university college were connected to educating students in a multidisciplinary way as well as teaching professional skills. Specifically, the departments of marketing studies and of food and dietetics were involved. For both departments an important goal was to attract new students by making the college an attractive place to study. The time available to the college teachers for research activities was limited.

Understanding the connecting practices that shape the partnership

From these constituting practice-bundles, the partners engaged in a bundle of connecting practices consisting predominantly of face-to-face meetings between the members of the steering group. During these meetings, common rules, understandings, material arrangements and teleologies were formed and (re)produced.

Concretely, the initial teleology was to bring together important partners in the fields of food and agriculture within the jurisdiction of the provincial government, to jointly seek ways to sustainably feed a growing global population. The goal was to do so in two ways. First, the idea was to develop (or improve) at least three 'sustainable' supply chains in collaboration with a range of global actors that had their main seat within the jurisdiction of the provincial government. These supply chains were supposed to provide an answer to different sustainability challenges and to make these challenges and solutions visible. The products – labelled 'foods for the future' – would be commercialised and offered to consumers within the jurisdiction through the outlets of the retailer. Second, the goal was to use the commercialised products as catalysts to inspire the societal debate on how to supply a growing global population with sustainable and healthy food.

Criteria were set for choosing the products. The products needed to be nutritious, ecologically sustainable, economically viable, and high in non-animal proteins. Some criteria were more specific to the project, for example the products needed to create visibility and be relevant for consumers in Belgium. It was also deemed important that these supply chains be realised through a collaborative process, in which value would be created for all participants. Furthermore, the product had to be sourced in the global South and create added value there, since the funding was meant for International Development projects. The commercialised products also needed to be used as a catalyst to inspire a societal debate around the future of our food. Lastly, a desire was expressed to involve young people as "consumers of the future".

At the start of the partnership, there was a search for products that might fit the criteria. The search ranged from highly innovative products (such as 3D printed pineapples), to 'taboo' foods (such as insects), and more well-known products (such as quinoa). The decision was made to further work around pulses, algae and quinoa as these products were thought to be feasible, given the retailer's infrastructures, while matching the eleven criteria.

The individuals in the steering committee agreed that a linear approach would be neither sufficient nor effective in dealing with sustainability problems. Consequently, flexibility was an important shared understanding. This translated into a constant negotiation of the boundaries and the focus of the project and the corresponding activities, especially during the first half of the project. It was illustrated by a continuous search for activities within the scope of the project and alliances between the project and other organisations working on similar topics or product groups. Hence, there was a constant back and forth between the setting of goals and aiming

to implement them, then re-opening the goals of the project, (re)defining pathways of implementation, and thus redefining the roles and responsibilities of the different partners. The project was thus characterised by cycles of defining and implementing goals, rather than by pre-defining the path of the project at the start. This also meant that some of the activities developed out of serendipity, rather than because of pre-set goals and predefined activities.

The flexibility of the project was illustrated by the fact that halfway through the project, the goal changed due to difficulties in the creation of the three food supply chains. From an early stage it was acknowledged that some of the supply chains would be more complex to put in place than others. As a result, the focus of the project shifted to a *search* for solutions to sustainability issues in the agro-food system. It was thus turned into a platform for debates on the future of food, by organising a wide range of activities such as movie nights, workshops, and thematic days. In this, the three products were used as illustrations. The renewed focus required most partners to step outside of their traditional roles. This was possible partly because no formal agreement between the partners had been signed in which the roles of the participants were clearly determined. Instead, trust that each of the partners would fulfil their role and not share sensitive information was built through regular face-to-face meetings between the members of the steering group committee. However, as the project became more concrete, the stakes for each of the partners became larger and the need for such an agreement grew.

Analysing how the constituting practices influence the outcomes of a partnership

The constituting bundles of practices that shaped the partner organisations played an important role in the shaping of the connecting practices. They functioned in a complementary way, with each of the partners bringing in their strengths to establish more than they could have done alone. However, the specific configurations of the constituting practice bundles also set the boundaries for what was possible within the project, and in some cases, the constituting practice bundles conflicted with one another, impacting how the connecting practices were shaped. In this section, we first discuss examples that illustrate how the constituting practices were complementary. We then discuss the tensions between the constituting practice bundles, and the way in which the constituting practices determined how the connecting practice bundle was shaped.

Complementarity

The partners all brought different but complementary competences and resources into the partnership. The provincial government brought in the funding for the project and had access to a network of contacts in the fields of food and agriculture. It also owned the facilities, connections and expertise to organise and host events. The retailer had knowledge on how to create food supply chains and market new products. It also had access to a wide client base, and was thus able to convey the partnership's story across to many consumers. Furthermore, the retailer played an important role in many of the side-tracks of the project. For example, it had the facilities and expertise to organise product development workshops for youngsters, and and to produce marketing videos of these activities. The NGO had specific expertise on development cooperation, setting up sustainable supply chains in the Global South, and a global network of connections in the fields of food and agriculture. It also had previous experience in collaboration mechanisms and was therefore responsible for coordinating the partnership. Finally, the NGO played an important role in organising workshops for young entrepreneurs in the Global South. Its worldwide network of offices facilitated this process. The university supported the project scientifically with its knowledge on agro-food systems and sustainability. Through Bachelor's and Master's theses, knowledge was obtained on the three product groups. The university additionally documented the collaboration process and distilled lessons learned. Its employees, in collaboration with the NGO, produced an educational package for children to stimulate thinking about the future of our food system. Lastly, the university college brought in expertise on marketing techniques and the development of new products. For example, students from the department of marketing developed a 'food truck for the future'

with which they attended festivals and public events, to foster debate on the topic of the future of food.

A specific example in which the complementarity of the different constituting practice bundles was shown, was the creation of a quinoa supply chain. The retailer and the NGO, for example, had expertise in creating supply chains and the needed connections in the Global South. The university was able to work from its expertise in impact studies, to explore the environmental, social, nutritional and economic impact of the supply chain. The university college contributed by developing innovative recipes based on quinoa, and marketed this product among young people, for example during festivals. Lastly, the Province had many contacts and facilities in the jurisdiction to make the product known. It was able to link the lessons learned from setting up the quinoa supply chain from Peru with experiences in cultivating quinoa within the region.

Tensions and Differences

Differences and tensions between the constituting bundles had a strong impact on how the partnership was shaped. We illustrate this by elaborating on the geographical orientation, the choice of products, the flexible nature of the partnership, the way in which success or failure was defined, and the way in which some constituting bundles had a stronger influence on how the partnership was shaped than others.

First, the leading role of the provincial government as funder of the partnership had important geographical implications. Although the project was aimed at addressing global problems, it was deemed important that all partners have their main seat within the jurisdiction of the provincial government, and most activities were supposed to be organised within that jurisdiction. There was also a strong focus on the sourcing of products from the global South because the project was funded by the development cooperation pillar of the provincial government. Moreover, for the retailer, the feasibility and marketability of the products were deemed to be crucial factors in choosing the 'products for the future'. Thus, despite the initial 'wide focus', the boundaries of the constituting bundles of practices – especially those of the retailer and the provincial government agency – restricted the discussion on the choice of products and narrowed down the scope of possible discussions on sustainability.

Second, the constituting practices were generally organised according to more strict procedures and linear methods. The flexible way of working that characterised the partnership was thus new to most partners. Most partner organisations viewed the partnership as a space in which they could experiment with such a new way of working. Yet the continuous revisiting of the goals and activities also created friction with the explicit efforts that had to be made to legitimise the project in relation to the constituting bundles. For example, feedback (as a group) towards the home organisations, public events, and evaluations were organised to retain the mandate to work in such a way. During the final phase of the project, it won a prestigious award which provided it with a lot of extra publicity, This also enhanced the partnership's legitimacy within the home organisations.

Third, the goals of each of the partners were different, which affected how the success or failure of the partnership was perceived. The more concrete the partnership's activities became, the clearer these differences appeared. The issue of external communication illustrates the tensions between the different constituting practice bundles. For some of the partners – for example the NGO and the provincial government, for which the project was of great importance – external communication was seen as an important way of making the project and its activities known to their followers. For other partners, for example the retailer, the project was just one small project out of many. Communicating about activities externally was a sensitive issue, and a coherent and careful external communication policy was deemed important to keep the legitimacy it enjoyed amongst its customers. In other words, for some of the partners it was important to communicate as much as possible about the activities within the project, to gain legitimacy, while for others, external messages had to be carefully scrutinised to maintain coherence. To deal with these differences, a specific 'communication group' was created, in which members from the steering group, as well as communication professionals from each of the partner organisations, got together on a regular basis to discuss a strategy for communication on the project. Moreover, it was agreed that nothing would be communicated before each of the members of the communica-

tion team had received approval from their home organisation.

Fourth, some of the constituting practice bundles had a stronger effect on shaping the partnership than did others. The operationalisation and marketing of quinoa illustrates this. The packaging of the quinoa was developed by the retailer. However, once the design was finalised and the product was ready to be launched, neither the partners nor the project were mentioned on it. For some of the partners, especially for the provincial government, this came unexpectedly. Being on the packaging was seen as an important element to create visibility for the concrete outputs of the project and the province's role in it, which generated feelings of frustration. During several meetings, the steering and communication groups discussed the issue in an effort to resolve it.

The retailer explained how the development of the packaging had been organised, and the strict rules that the packaging needed to comply with. This situation was followed by discussions on a field trip to Peru to visit some of the quinoa farmers and the production facilities. Various members of the project consortium were supposed to go, as well as buyers from the retailer and representatives from an NGO representing quinoa farmers in Peru. The main goal of the trip was to check whether the production was ready to deliver to the retailer. Next to these participants, the NGO invited a journalist along, to document the process of setting up the supply chain. However, the retailer did not want the journalist there, as the outcomes of the trip were too unsure. This again triggered a discussion, after which it was decided that the journalist would not join the field trip. Both issues were resolved through extensive communication by the individuals working for the retailer. They explained the strict procedures and methods of setting up supply chains and marketing products, both within the steering group and to the home organisations, so that understanding about their way of working was created. The relationships of trust that were previously built throughout recurrent face-to-face meetings between the individuals that participated in the steering group proved crucial in this regard.

Fifth and last, during the final phase of the project ample time was devoted to discussing possible future steps and the continuation of the project's activities. The first steps for this were made during the second evaluation event. Discussions around this topic also arose during steering group meetings. However, due to the different working cycles of the organisations and the different mandates of the steering group members, it turned out to be difficult to plan for, or even think about, activities happening after the closing event of the partnership. For example, for the province, the upcoming election made it impossible to think about continuation. This also meant that funding for a potential follow-up project had to be found elsewhere, as the funding was crucial for the survival and continuation of the project.

Discussion

This paper has provided an in-depth account of the process of shaping a partnership and the interactions between the partners, from a SPT perspective. The in-depth single case study and use of SPT to examine the partnership provides a nuanced and insightful perspective on the ways in which partnerships are shaped, and the role they may play in (shaping) sustainability debates and transitions.

By taking a social practices approach, our study analyses how different sets of practices came together in a partnership. Through recurrent face-to-face meetings between representatives, a new set of connecting practices (i.e. the partnership) was developed from the partners' different constituting practice-bundles. The connecting practices took many shapes, such as steering committee meetings, events, workshops and activities to set up the supply chains.

In the starting phase of the collaboration there was a strong focus on finding a common goal, to which each of the partners could contribute, based on their own strengths. Participation in the partnership did nevertheless generally require each of the partners to move away from their main goals and 'normal' ways of working. As such, participating in the partnership required each of them to develop new skills and perform new roles out-

side of their traditional roles. The partnership was seen as a 'bubble' or 'safe space' to try out such new ways of working and build the skills necessary to do so. This potential role of the partnership was further explored particularly in the second phase of the partnership, where the explicit goal became to collaboratively search for ways to contribute to sustainability transitions. A partnership can thus be seen as a co-created "*inter-organizational space in which logics can be rendered more fluid and flexible than in their core ideal-types*" (Nicholls & Huybrechts, 2016: 710).

The effects and added value of such a collaborative space for fostering sustainability transitions might be hard to point out directly. Yet wicked problems are unlikely to be solved by linear methods and ways of working; they require more reflexive and flexible approaches (Dentoni et al., 2018). In addition, given the fact that in wicked problems a final common ground is inherently impossible, a space needs to be created for their management in which diverse viewpoints can come together and common challenges can be faced. Creating such a 'safe space' where new ways of working together can be tested might thus well be one of the main added benefits of partnerships within sustainability transitions. In other words, although in the traditional partnerships literature there is a strong focus on the outcomes of the collaboration process, our research suggests that the main added value of the partnership might actually be in the process of collaborating itself.

It is important to realise that although the partnership provided a safe place to test out new ways of working, there was no *unlimited* space to do so. While flexibility was considered an important guiding principle in the partnership's activities, the constituting practices were generally organised according to more linear and pre-defined working methods. The partners were limited in the extent to which they were able to move outside of these boundaries. Some partners were moreover more limited than others in this regard. This was mainly because the importance ascribed to the project differed for each of the partners, and differing levels of flexibility allowed partners to move away from 'normal' ways of working. Especially towards the end of the partnership, the partners deemed it more important that the actions within the partnership be aligned with their constituting practice bundles. In other words, although the partners shared the goal of finding solutions for a more sustainable future for food and agriculture, the practices that constituted each of the partner organisations and the context in which they acted created boundaries for what was possible in reality.

In talking about sustainability of agriculture and food it is thus important to take into account existing practice bundles because: (i) they set the scene in which sustainability innovations are shaped; and (ii) they create the boundaries for what kind of change is possible. This was illustrated by the way in which 'sustainability' was defined and shaped within the partnership. During the first phase of the partnership, the participants put a lot of time and effort into finding a common definition of what exactly was meant by 'sustainable' food and agriculture. The resulting definition was heavily negotiated and ended up being unique within the context of this particular partnership. While scientific studies on sustainability played a role, the boundaries of the constituting bundles of practices limited the discussion on the choice of products and narrowed down the scope of sustainability options. The focus on the global South and the need for feasibility and marketability of the products are two examples that show that the provincial government agency and the retailer strongly determined how the partnership was shaped. This also excluded the possibility of an open discussion on local and global food supply chains and the way in which these concepts are connected to sustainability.

The findings thus show that existing practices play an important role in how 'sustainability' is shaped. This implies that it is important not simply to assume that partnerships will contribute to sustainability transitions, but also to reflect on: (i) whether and how this might be the case; and (ii) who or what factors have the power in shaping and defining 'sustainability'. The issue of power has not been addressed much by theorists of practices. Yet it is important to be aware of the relationships of power that exist between different bundles of practices, and to consider the ways in which some (bundles of) practices have the capacity to shape others (Watson, 2016). This becomes especially important within the context of partnerships since "*power-free*

spaces do not exist" (Wittmayer & Schäpke, 2014: 486). Researchers and facilitators involved in partnerships need to consider these differences in power and the way in which they influence the collaboration process (Wittmayer & Schäpke, 2014).

Most of the partners had a 'dual identity', in the sense that they wanted to serve the goals of the project while answering to the needs of the home organisations at the same time (Thomson & Perry, 2006). The extent to which the partners had to move outside of their own identity and learn new skills was different for each of them, since they differed from one another in terms of speed of working, visions and values. Thus, although every partner organisation aimed to work towards the same goals, they were also constrained by, and working towards, the goals of their own organisations. This had an impact on the process itself and the partners needed to learn to respect and accept one another's differences for the partnership to be successful. Being able to answer to and work with the tensions between these different needs and rhythms turned out to be of the utmost importance to bring the project itself to a successful end. This is illustrated by the issues around external communication. In our case study it was shown that it is crucial to recognise and communicate about the differences in the constituting practice bundles (e.g. through the monitoring and evaluation of the cooperation process, and conscious communication and feedback loops in which the different ways of working were discussed) and to adapt roles, expectations and activities accordingly (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010).

While studies on partnerships tend to focus on interactions between organisations, the case study in this paper illustrates that within a multi-actor cooperation, individuals do have agency in shaping the partnership, although they are at the same time constrained by the practices they are accustomed to and the context in which they act. As such, the paper highlights the importance of not looking at organisations or partnerships as individual actors, but rather thinking of them as consisting of the recurrent performances of social practices by individuals as performers of these practices (Shove et al. 2012). The individuals played a crucial role in shaping the partnership, by representing the partner organisations and being intermediaries between the constituting and connecting practice bundles, building links and generating understanding (e.g. about the flexible way of working) between them (Lamers & van der Duim, 2016).

This relates to the perpetuation of the partnership. Our case study shows that without the recurrent involvement and performance of the constituting practices, the partnership perishes. For partnerships to have a real effect and to contribute to a transition towards sustainability, it is important that they be perpetuated beyond the demarcated timeline of the partnership agreement. The study thus highlights the importance of giving individual employees the mandate, time and resources to participate in and perpetuate such partnerships, for them to have a lasting effect. Or as Thomson & Perry (2006: 28) put it: *"The most costly resources of collaboration are not money but time and energy, neither of which can be induced. Public managers must take this time element seriously if the benefits of collaboration are to be realized"*.

Conflict of interest statement
The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.
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