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Abstract

Context

This paper focuses on partnerships working on inclusive development and food security in agri-food chains and agribusiness clusters that may feature institutional arrangements reinforcing inequality or inducing exclusion.

Research question

The paper develops a theory-driven capacity framework for investigating how intervention strategies related to partnering generate developmental outcomes.

Methods

Building on action research and drawing on complementary literature streams, the framework distinguishes four specific capacities that individually and in configuration contribute to processes of inclusive development triggered by partnering processes. The framework is applied to two case examples targeting inclusive development in agri-food chains and agribusiness clusters in domestic food markets in Benin and Nigeria.

Results

Four capacities that enable partnerships to contribute to inclusive development are distinguished: deliberative, alignment, transformative and fitting capacity. Processes of inclusive development emerge from mobilizing and combining these complementary capacities. Capacities emerging in evolving joint actions, negotiations and deliberations in partnering processes generate developmental outcomes, which are not self-evident results of partnerships. Presence of the four

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capacities propels the partnership's influence on transforming the terms of inclusion for specific groups.

Policy implications

The differentiation of specific capacities embedded in partnering processes contrasts with generic partnership formulas focusing on the formalized and organizational features of partnerships and emphasizing sharing of resources and inputs. For partnerships to make a development impact, new capacities need to be developed and mobilized. This underscores the importance of skilful and experienced facilitators.

Keywords: business models, deliberation, embeddedness, institutional work, partnerships

1 Introduction

For more than two decades, partnerships have been on the rise as attempts to address a variety of sustainability and development challenges (Cashore, 2002; Leroy & Arts, 2006; Seitanidi & Crane, 2014; Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016). From the 1990s onwards, development policies consistently incorporated partnerships as necessary instruments to achieve developmental outcomes (Utting & Zammit, 2009; Van Tulder, Seitanidi; Crane & Brammer., 2016; Brogaard & Petersen, 2018). With partnerships are now included as one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations, the partnership trend seems to proliferate even further. The basic premise of using partnerships for achieving development outcomes is twofold. First, by using the complementary resources and capabilities of actors from different social spheres, social challenges can be addressed that actors could not deal with individually (Kolk, Van Tulder & Kostwinder, 2008). Second, businesses need to have an active role in addressing social challenges as a prerequisite for well-functioning markets and growing economies (Bitzer & Glasbergen, 2015). Accordingly, partnerships have consistently been advocated and assessed as organizational solutions to complex social problems. However, Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff (2011) observe that the lack of conceptual precision limits our understanding of what makes partnership capable of realizing this promise. The premise of this paper is that partnerships are neither essentially good nor necessarily bad. Rather we investigate what make partnerships capable of contributing to development outcomes.

Partnerships are core to many present-day development policies and projects, often through collaborations between actors with a direct commercial stake in the business or value chain with other social actors, including non-government organizations (NGOs) and government actors (Ros-Tonen, Leynseele, Laven & Sunderland, 2015). Advocates of the partnership concept make the claim for improved stakeholder inclusion and democracy, leverage of private-sector resources and capacities, and increased efficiency. However, empirical literature points to a lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of partnerships in achieving development outcomes (Brogaard & Petersen, 2018). Moreover, partnerships are criticized for being part of the privatization and commercialization of politics, for reproducing asymmetric power relations, and for being unable to address the systemic causes underlying the severe social, economic, and environmental sustainability challenges of our times (Utting & Zammit, 2009; Banks & Hulme, 2014). This paper recognizes the conditionality of partnerships' plausible contribution to public goals and searches for capacities mobilized in partnering processes that make this contribution more likely to materialize.

More specifically, this paper focuses on partnerships with the private sector working on inclusive development in the context of food provisioning in sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries. In the context of food and nutrition security, partnerships are frequently used to foster processes of inclusive development by creating more inclusive business models in the agri-food sector (Osei-Amponsah, van Paassen & Klerkx, 2018; Schouten, Vink & Vellema, 2018). Development policy predominantly frames inclusive development as the inclusion of marginalized actors in economic and social processes. Partnerships receive public support because they aim to enhance food and nutrition security in an inclusive manner. The inclusion of vulnerable smallholder producers and base of the pyramid (BoP) consumers is an essential element of the intervention logic. Cross-sector collaborations aimed at economic development (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011) usually set out to combine poverty reduction, profitability and sustainability and focus on equity, inclusion and empowerment. This differentiates them from a range of public–private partnerships (PPPs) organized to provide public infrastructure (Marson & Maggi, 2018; Bayliss & Van Waeyenberge, 2018; Trebilcock & Rosenstock, 2015). Camberlain & Anseeuw (2018, p. 1) conceptualized inclusive business as 'complex *partnerships* between commercial entities and smallholders/low-income communities, to include the latter in commercial agricultural value chains', which offer income opportunities for all partners, but are also regarded as a way of empowering smallholders and communities. While partnerships are increasingly the preferred instrument to ensure inclusive development, their potential to achieve these outcomes is far from self-evident.

A growing number of studies indicate that inclusion alone is not enough. Inclusion might not be unambiguously advantageous. Further analysis should scrutinize the actual costs and benefits of participation, as exclusion is not necessarily disadvantageous (Bolwig, Ponte, Du Toit & Riisgaard, 2010). Moreover, Bitzer & Glasbergen (2015) demonstrate that partnerships have difficulties in ensuring equal access and influence in decision-making processes for all stakeholder groups, specifically for smallholder producers in developing countries. Moreover, many studies highlight the potential exploitative practices of business such contexts (Kourula, Pisano and Kolk, 2017) or the domination of corporate interests in decision-making processes of PPPs, with continued marginalization of other partners (Utting, 2000). This suggests that inclusive development is not limited to people benefitting from economic growth, but that they are also able to exercise control over their own income and wellbeing (Gupta, Pouw & Ros-Tonen, 2015; Pouw & de Bruijne, 2015; De Haan, 2015). Hospes & Clancy (2011) criticize the underlying assumptions that inclusion is good, exclusion is bad, and that inclusion is actually wanted by the excluded. Evaluations of development projects and policies reflect this assumption, and consequently primarily measure effectiveness in terms of numbers of beneficiaries included.

So, inclusive development is not an obvious outcome of partnerships involving the private sector. It entails a purposeful mobilization and combination of development capacities. This prompted us to develop a capacities framework for understanding – and possibly anticipating – the development additionality of partnerships embedded in commercial activities that receive public support to achieve development goals. We shift attention from a focus on the formalized and organizational features of partnerships to the evolving ways in which partnerships develop and mobilize capacities from which development outcomes emerge. Our conceptualization of partnering capacities draws on action–research in the 2SCALE programme, which brokers and supports partnering processes situated in agri-food chains and agribusinesses clusters targeting domestic food markets in West and East Africa. This programme offered us the opportunity to document the practice of partnering in-depth and further our understanding of cross-sector collaboration as an instrument for achieving development outcomes.

In the remainder of the paper, we explain our approach to abductive reasoning (Section 2) for developing a theory-driven framework. Drawing on different literature streams, we develop a multi-disciplinary and theoretically pluralistic framework (cf. Ponte & Sturgeon, 2014) organized around four specific capacities that individually and in configuration contribute to processes of inclusive development triggered by partnerships: deliberative, alignment, transformative and fitting capacity (Section 3). We explain each capacity by describing the type of problem it addresses and presenting the theory-informed analytical perspective. Section 4 contextualizes the partnering capacities in two selected case examples. In the final section, we adopt a specific interest in exploring how partnership facilitators are able to make partnerships work for development. This makes it relevant to capture what partnerships can actually influence and what type of capacities are needed for making contributions to development processes.

2 Methodology and methods

The paper uses a capacity lens that is attentive to the collective and configured character of inclusive development as it emerges from continuous problem-solving and incremental navigation of changing conditions of transformative processes of development. This requires a methodological approach attuned to multiple causality and discovery. Selecting an abductive approach, synthesizing induction and deduction, enabled us to connect primarily qualitative basic research to action-oriented research (Awuzie & McDermott, 2017), which we considered vital for discovering emerging capacities explaining the diversity of partnering processes. Thomas (2010, pp. 577) argues that abduction generates ideas, tentative theories that serve as hypothetical explanatory concepts, and, following Melnikovas (2018), comes up with a best guess or conclusion based on available evidence. Abduction is a logic of discovery adopting a practice-based view (Nicolini, 2011; Jones & Murphy, 2011) combining observed facts grounded in contextual conditions with existing theoretical knowledge (Torugsa & O'Donohue, 2016). Continuous interactions with practitioners grounded our exploratory research in everyday practices (Torugsa & O'Donohue, 2016) in an innovative and what Patokorpi & Ahvenainen (2009) term a proactive-creative way.

This take on action research makes it possible to create knowledge with utility value for partnership facilitators acting in dynamic contexts and emphasizes processes rather than effects (Patokorpi & Ahvenainen, 2009). The engagement with practice involved being open to emergent outcomes probably generated by the combination of capacities emerging from a case-based approach to tracing partnering processes (Sarpong & Maclean, 2016). This methodological perspective fits the aim to explain inclusive development not by single isolated activities but as an emergent outcome of a configuration of practices and actor constellations (Torugsa & O'Donohue, 2016). It is unlikely that a single factor or agent generates transformative processes, such as inclusive development. Rather, inclusive development is the result of multiple causal pathways that are traceable over time (Van Tulder & Keen, 2018). To understand the multiple causality of how partnering shapes inclusive development a multi-disciplinary framework requires combining distinct literatures (Pouw & de Bruijne, 2015; De Haan, 2015).

Initially, the action–research team inductively identified capacities based on their engagement with the daily practices of partnership facilitators in the 2SCALE programme, an incubator for inclusive agribusiness in East and West Africa, which is supported by the Dutch government and matching private-sector funding. This initial identification in 2015 was guided by the team's familiarity with multiple theories used to analyse the performance and effectiveness of partnerships (Vellema & Van Wijk, 2015; Vellema, Ton, de Roo, & Van Wijk, 2013; Schouten, Leroy, & Glasbergen, 2012; Van

Tulder, Seitanidi, Crane, & Brammer, 2016; Kolk, Van Tulder, & Kostwinder, 2008). In 2016, the identified capacities were elaborated by composing impact pathways for 32 partnerships supported by the 2SCALE programme in seven countries. This was based on document analysis, multiple conversations with partnership facilitators and key informant interviews. Together with the involved partnership facilitators, the research team validated the initial impact pathways after a year (2016) and refined and adjusted them in the next stage of action research (2017). The validation process and observations through participatory action research exposed different development outcomes of partnering, which can be to some extent attributed to the partnering capacities to realize development outcomes. A subsequent cycle of iteration (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) matched the empirical findings with theories and empirical analysis in the distinct domains associated with the capacities, enabling an elaboration of the four capacities. Next, the capacities framework was validated with practitioners in workshops with 2SCALE partnership facilitators and programme management (Grand Popo, Benin, 28 March 2017; Nairobi, Kenya, 6–7 March 2017). Finally, the capacities were tested in empirical analysis of two case studies of partnerships supported by the 2SCALE programme. Empirical data for case studies was collected through field research combined with document analysis in Nigeria in March 2017 and May–June 2018 and Benin in July 2016 and March–April 2017.

3 Conceptualizing contextualized partnership capacities

The practice of partnering unfolds fluidly and reflects an incremental process of navigating interests, tensions, governance dilemmas and risks. For this paper, we draw on Bovaird (2004) and Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff (2011) and define partnering as more or less formalized working arrangements directing on-going processes of deliberation and alignment that induce situated work processes, potentially transforming the ways in which less powerful are included in economic activities and decision-making. This conceptualization emphasizes the generative and active part of collaboration rather than the organizational set-up. It acknowledges the importance of mutual commitment (Bovaird, 2004) and purposeful collaboration (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011) while highlighting the importance of looking into the unfolding and contextualized practices of partnering in which distinct capacities are used and combined. The partnering capacities identified in this paper are situated in systems of food provisioning, unfolding partnering processes and development interventions. Their effects materialize in the evolving relationships between buyers or processors and the suppliers of raw materials, i.e. smallholder farmers.

Table 1: *A framework for analysing capacities of partnerships shaping inclusive development*

Capacity	Deliberative capacity	Alignment capacity	Transformative capacity	Fitting capacity
Focus	Decision-making processes within the partnership	Aligning strategy and organization lead agent with development process	Co-creating intervention repertoire and institutional work of partnership	Touching down of partnership strategies in local networks and public domain
Logic	Governance	Competitiveness	Change	Embedding
Literature	Political analysis of deliberative democracy	Strategic management and value chain analysis	Institutional analysis of organizations	Business systems and state analysis

We distinguish four capacities with distinct pathways to inclusive development. This is informed by political analysis of deliberative democracy, strategic management and value chain analysis, institutional analysis of organizations, and business systems and state analysis. Below, we explain the nature of deliberative, alignment, transformative and fitting capacities (Table 1)

First, partnerships are entities that facilitate deliberation between a diversity of organizational actors with differing backgrounds and interests. Deliberative capacity relates to the governance dimension within partnerships and looks at the ability of partnerships to install and use novel decision-making processes. Second, partnerships often aim to alter relations between different actors in the value chain and moderate power imbalances by changing business models of lead agents. Alignment capacity reveals the capacity of partnerships to connect business models of lead firms with the interest of less powerful actors in a value chain. Third, partnership interventions are designed to invoke institutional transformations to have a lasting impact. Transformative capacity appraises institutional work and co-creation practices that generate newly emerging institutions through the evolving process of inclusive development and partnering. Fourth, partnerships are embedded in a specific institutional context, and actively dovetailing their strategies with this context and searching for institutional fit is assumed to enlarge their effectiveness. Fitting capacity focuses on the capacity of partnerships to create a fit with local production networks, business systems and particularly public networks.

3.1 Deliberative capacity

Partnerships can be considered attempts to democratize politics and to enhance the effectiveness of policies and interventions (Bäckstrand, Khan, Kronsell & Lövbrand, 2010). By including a wide range of stakeholders, it is suggested that they can address democratic deficits (Bexell & Mörth, 2010). However, the democratic potential of partnerships has also been severely criticized. Some authors find that partnerships often lack the inclusion of marginalized interests and of radical discourses

(Cheyns, 2011; Ponte & Cheyns, 2013; Schouten et al., 2012; Bitzer & Glasbergen, 2015). Such a deliberative deficit is likely to diminish the capacity of a partnership to tailor the decisions made to the specific context, and to the interests of marginalized stakeholders. This increases the chance of designing generic intervention types that are implemented top-down to instigate development and economic growth.

Top-down approaches to business-led partnerships run the risk of 'institutional capture', whereby corporate interests come to dominate the decision-making processes, with continued marginalization of other partners (Utting, 2000). Bottom-up approaches, on the other hand, face different types of challenges regarding democratic decision-making processes. Democratizing partnerships can be time-consuming and considered inefficient. Since marginalized groups, such as smallholder farmers, are often not well organized, their representation within a partnership can be complicated. Organizational capacity at the local level might be inadequate to organize meaningful deliberative processes and to take collective decisions. Deliberations and interactions in partnerships reveal how they handle tensions that may arise from including potentially conflicting interests into decision-making processes. The structuration and institutionalization of decision-making processes influence the capacity of partnerships to silence tensions and to concentrate on actions that contribute to development.

To analyse this decision-making in partnerships we use the concept of deliberative capacity. Deliberative capacity is the extent to which a governance arrangement, such as a value-chain partnership, holds structures to host deliberation that is inclusive, authentic, and consequential (Dryzek, 2009). Inclusiveness depicts the extent to which different stakeholders and discourses are included in deliberative processes. Authenticity refers to the extent to which a process shows signs of actual deliberation, including non-coercively induced reflection, and reciprocity (Dryzek, 2000). Consequentiality entails that deliberations have a direct or indirect impact on collective decision-making. Deliberation thus does not necessarily involve actual decision-making itself. The combination of these three elements determines the deliberative capacity of a partnership. Inclusion, authenticity and consequentiality are meaningless on their own. Without inclusiveness there can be deliberation, but it will not be democratic. The authenticity of the process is meaningless if the number of stakeholders is limited or if they have no impact on decision-making. Without inclusiveness and authenticity, consequentiality does not even have to be considered.

The first element of deliberative capacity – inclusiveness – refers to the variety of interests and discourses that are included in a deliberative process (Dryzek, 2009). A partnership does not necessarily have to represent all stakeholder groups, as long as their interests are included in the discourses that are represented. The second element of deliberative capacity – authenticity – refers to the extent to which communicative processes within a partnership actually show characteristics of deliberation as opposed to a situation in which powerful actors coerce other less powerful actors to adopt a certain point of view. Justification, respect, and constructive politics are the main indicators to assess the authenticity of a deliberative process (Schouten et al., 2012). The third element of deliberative capacity – consequentiality – is understood as the degree to which the deliberative processes determine the outputs of a partnership (Schouten et al., 2012). This output consequentiality of deliberation is addressed by analysing two criteria: discourse structuration and discourse institutionalization (Hajer, 2006; Schouten et al., 2012). Discourse structuration takes place when a specific discourse is used by many actors in a specific social setting to conceptualize the world. Discourse institutionalization occurs when a discourse solidifies in particular institutional and organizational practices. This shows whether specific views in the communicative processes are marginalized, and which views become dominant.

3.2 Alignment capacity

The capacity of partnerships to instigate processes of inclusive development also depends on their influence on the business model and strategic management of lead firms in the value chain or lead agents in the agribusiness cluster. The issue is, drawing on Beer, Voelpel, Leibold & Tekie (2005), whether partnerships can avoid employing quick, superficial interventions by increasingly aligning the multi-actor organization to the long-term development strategy. This influence of partnerships can be detected both within the boundaries of the leading economic agent and at the interfaces linking the business models of multiple economic agents. Partnerships express capacities to mediate or reconfigure the arrangements connecting less powerful and resourceful economic actors, e.g. smallholder farmers, to the leading commercial actor via the value chain or cluster. Humphrey and Schmitz (2001) reiterate that adequate governance remains critical for establishing fair gains from inclusion for upstream actors, which are often in a subordinate position compared to leading actors at the downstream end of the chain. Hence, whether and how resourceful and influential leading actors govern and manage business transactions and whether these logics align with the process of inclusive development largely determine the development outcomes of partnerships.

Business and strategic management literature has used the concept of alignment, which refers to the alignment of organizational capabilities with competitive strategies in the constantly changing circumstances in the business environment (Beer et al., 2005). This paper elaborates on this perspective to partnerships that simultaneously work on performance in a competitive environment and contribute to realizing development outcomes. We focus on *internal alignment* – the strategic management within a lead firm or lead agent – and *external alignment* – the interfaces linking the business models and interest of multiple economic agents connected to or dependent on the core business.

Internal alignment signifies to what degree partnership activities modifying the terms of inclusion for marginalized groups (e.g. smallholder famers) influence the business model of the lead company or lead agent. For a business model to change, new practices have to be embedded within the entire organization (Anderson & Skjoet-Larsen, 2009). Based on a systematic literature review, Van Lakerveld and Van Tulder (2017) identify several elements of internal alignment, which include developing internal policies and setting purchasing criteria. Furthermore, internal alignment becomes visible when companies start to apply assurance policies, develop internal responsible (inclusive) purchasing capacities or recruit staff to provide services to other actors included in the partnership. The influence of partnerships on the practice of doing business materializes in such practices.

External alignment refers to the alignment of the lead agent with the interests of less powerful actors in the value chain. An indicator for this type of alignment comes from value-chain literature and relates inclusion to 'upgrading' possibilities for firms and farmers at the bottom of the chain (Van Lakerveld & Van Tulder, 2017). Schmitz & Knorringa (2000, pp. 181) define upgrading as 'enhancing the relative competitive position of a firm'. Lead firms play an important role in determining the upgrading opportunities of local producers (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2002). Generally, five types of 'upgrading' can be identified from the literature (e.g. Ponte & Ewert, 2009; Barrientos, Gereffi & Rossi, 2011; Humphrey & Schmitz, 2002). Process upgrading refers to transforming inputs into outputs more efficiently by reorganizing the production system or introducing superior technology. Product upgrading implies a move into novel or more sophisticated product lines. Functional upgrading entails the acquisition of new functions (or abandoning existing functions) to increase the overall skill content of activities. Inter-sectoral upgrading relates to diversification of firms of clusters into new productive activities. The broader notion of social and ecological upgrading is based on enhancing the capabilities and entitlements of workers as social actors and the quality of their employment and their environment. The type of upgrading triggered by a partnership is indicative for the terms of inclusion of smallholder producers in the value chain.

3.3 Transformative capacity

Partnerships of organizational actors with different interests, logics and powers do not automatically bring about inclusive development, even if powerful actors express inclusive intentions. Making partnerships transformative is a skilful practice. Unfolding partnering practices are the sites where actors use skills, tools, knowledge and techniques to be both transformative and achieve practical ends (cf. Nicolini 2012; cf. Jansen & Vellema, 2011). In the setting of agri-food chains and agribusiness clusters, this translates into an interest in the co-creation of transformative practices and modified rules connected to, for example, aggregating volumes, arranging timely payments, making operational adjustments, or collectively responding to unanticipated risks. In the day-to-day work of partnerships and partners, novel practices, technologies and rules may emerge, which, eventually, have a transformative impact.

Institutions reinforcing poverty, vulnerability and marginalization may prove to be persistent and less susceptible to the transformative capacity expressed in the interventions of partnerships. There may also be unintended consequences of the interventions by partnerships, such as crowding-out of public service providers, shifting power relations in local communities or self-exclusion by marginal groups. Hence, the question is whether brokered and arranged partnerships are able to acquire and use an intervention repertoire that enables them to create, maintain or disrupt institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), which in market settings or business conduct may feature arrangements that reinforce inequality or induce exclusion (Mair, Marti & Ventresca, 2012). Rigid institutions, for example reflected in dominant business conduct, community politics or a gendered division of labour, might reverse the transformation set in motion by partnerships.

The concept of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009, 2011) captures the practices, actions and interventions situated in partnerships and specifies the agency of partnerships. It exposes how both powerful and less powerful actors create institutions in conscious actions supposedly conducive to inclusive development. Following the work of Powell & DiMaggio (2012), this perspective highlights the institutions underlying the practical work of organizational actors, and shifts attention to mundane and not always visible actions. Rather than concentrating on institutional ideotypes, the analytical focus of institutional work is on the provisional institutions (Mair & Marti, 2009) that are created or maintained in hands-on problem-solving actions, and are therefore relatively instrumental (Zietsma & McKnight, 2009). Transformative capacity emerges in practices within the boundaries of the collaboration.

The focus on institutional work sees partnering as an evolving process wherein organizational actors assembled in the partnership navigate different logics (Mair & Marti, 2009) of, for example, a lead firm, a group of farmers, local communities, traders and transporters operating in the areas, or professionals associated with the transformation process. Mair et al. (2012) emphasize the skills to respond to the contextual assembly of institutions that may disturb the intended process of making markets, agri-food chains or agribusiness clusters inclusive places. New modes of working and governing that result from the actions of multiple collaborating actors are labelled as 'proto-institutions' (Lawrence, Leca & Zilber, 2013, Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Proto-institutions emerging in the performance of an ensemble of practices, in the wording of Mair and Marti (2009, p. 19), can be of a temporary or intermediate nature, but still be there for long enough to influence the institutional structures underlying the nature of doing of business or trade.

Transformative capacity goes beyond the boundaries of the partnership and relates to how partnerships navigate and make use of 'opportunity spaces' between the co-created modes of working in partnerships and the prevalent institutional arrangements in the business or market environment (Mair & Marti, 2009; Doh, Rodrigues, Saka-Helmhout & Makhija, 2017). New practices and rules created within the boundaries of the partnership underlying inclusive development need to transcend these boundaries to enable their adoption by other organizations and may become new institutions if they diffuse sufficiently (Lawrence, Hardy & Phillips, 2002). Co-creators can make the institutional bridge between the proto-institution developed within the multi-stakeholder collaborative process and the value systems of their own networks, which facilitates wider diffusion of the institution (Zietsma & McKnight, 2009). Proto-institutions developed in a collaborative, co-creating process seem to be less vulnerable to change when co-creators seek to embed novel practices and rules in prevailing regulative, normative and cognitive frameworks. Partnerships recognizing this may be able to provide some degree of legitimacy to the variety of new organizational forms and institutional arrangements emerging in a continuous process of trial and error and concerted actions tailored to solving day-to-day problems and settling risks and tensions in doing business.

3.4 Fitting capacity

A process of inclusive development co-created and induced by partnerships entails both a modification of the nature of doing business, partly reflected in the business models and strategies of lead actors, and the embedding of the transformation process touching down in a historically developed business system where local institutional arrangements already exist (Whitley, 1999; Helmsing & Vellema 2011a). Policy frameworks often refer to this as enabling environment (e.g. FAO, 2013; UNIDO/GTZ, 2008). We adopt a specific interest in exploring whether partnerships reconfigure connections between different social domains (Dubbink, 2013), in particular private and public, and how connections between private and public domains shape conditions conducive to inclusive development (Helmsing & Vellema, 2011b). An important element of the influence of partnering processes on inclusive development is whether, and how, processes of inclusion are co-created by both private and public realms (Vellema & Van Wijk, 2015). It remains to be seen whether the practices induced by partnerships resonate in the wider networks or whether these generate resistance and obstruction. Consequently, it is relevant to assess whether and how the context-specific connections between the private and public sectors matter for making inclusive development work and scalable.

Fitting capacity makes the outcomes of partnering contingent on the interactions with the specific public–private interactions in the business system in which partnership actions touch down. To unpack this relationship, we use of the concept of institutional fit (Schouten, Vellema & Van Wijk, 2016). This concept originates in institutional theorization in the management and organization literature (Ansari, Fiss & Zajac, 2010; Lawrence, Hardy & Phillips, 2002; Zietsma & Mcknight, 2009), and draws on the theoretical idea that successful diffusion requires institutional translation (cf. Bartley, 2010). Institutional fit helps to assess whether and how the configured technical, cultural and political characteristics intrinsic to partnerships connect to local projects and blend with dynamic local processes of institutional change (Ansari et al., 2010). Technical (and managerial) fit indicates the compatibility of characteristics of existing and new (technical) practices and locally embedded ways to solve and manage problems. Cultural fit indicates the compatibility of new practices with existing ways to collaborate, to form groups, and to handle tensions and resolve potential conflicts. Political fit indicates the compatibility of the implicit or explicit normative characteristics of the new practice with embedded forms of enforcement, compliance and compromise and with the political agendas of potential adopters. Whether new practices and rules fit the ways of doing business or the prevalent state–business relations in a regionally bounded business systems (Whitley, 1999) is an open question. Fitting capacity then refers to making this connection in order to diffuse the development impact of partnerships more widely.

Detecting fit provides an indication of how widely diffused the induced process of inclusive development is in established interactions between private and public actors. Analytically, this involves being attentive to subtle interactions between social groups linked through partnerships and bounded groups within the state bureaucracy. The work of Evans (1995) provides guidance for exploring whether the state engages with the transformative process underlying inclusive development. Evans makes the transformative role of the state dependent on two dimensions. First, its transformative role depends on the degree of autonomy of the state vis-à-vis private interests, which is reflected in the coherence and autonomy of the bureaucracy. Second, the engagement with a transformative process is embedded in the connectedness of certain groups of entrepreneurial bureaucrats who operate flexibly in a concrete web of dense public–private ties. Translating this to our interest in partnerships working on inclusive development, this perspective points towards discovering signals of actions through which particular groups within the state connect intimately and proactively to the project of sectoral transformation. Tracing interactions between entrepreneurial bureaucrats and particular social groups constituting a partnership gives a hint of distinct organizational actors sharing a project of transformation. Like Evans, other literature (Bierschenk & de Sardan, 2014; Roll, 2014) also makes this dependent on the existence of pockets of effectiveness creating both a certain degree of autonomy and robustness and a level of connectedness supportive to the change process.

4 Contextualizing partnering capacities

4.1 Case example 1: partnering in agri-food chains

We illuminate the framework with two distinct examples of major intervention strategies underlying the 2SCALE programme: a lead-firm-driven value chain in Nigeria and an agribusiness cluster in Benin. The first intervention approach tries to trigger a process of inclusive development by forging partnerships including lead firms, the companies in a value chain that are powerful in determining 'what is to be produced, how, and by whom' (Gereffi, Humphrey, Kaplinsky, & Sturgeon, 2001, p. 1). This includes determining and specifying the price, volume, production, quality, and distribution (Gibbon, Bair & Ponte, 2008). The power of the lead firm in the value chain in the top-down approach is considered to drive a process of inclusive development, for example by investing in and sourcing raw materials commodities from smallholder farmers rather than from large-scale producers.

We use the case example of a partnership including a lead firm: Friesland Campina Wamco (FCW). FCW, a Dutch-owned company and Nigeria's largest producer of dairy products, used only imported milk powder. FCW and the federal Nigerian government agreed to source 10% of the milk requirement locally by 2016. Traditional nomadic pastoralists from the Fulani community produce about 95 per cent of Nigeria's milk, but rarely participate in formal dairy markets. To achieve the 10% local sourcing, 2SCALE, the Nigerian government and FCW formed a partnership that aims to include Fulani herders in the dairy business. Milk-collection centres have been an important means for creating this connection.

The partnership that links FCW with Fulani communities gradually developed its deliberative capacity. At first, activities of the partnership focused primarily on solving technical issues to ensure a consistent supply of good-quality milk. However, partnering with Fulani milk producers proved to be less straightforward. Decision-making structures within the Fulani communities are very strong and the decisions of community leaders are binding. Connecting the lead company with the traditional governance structures of the Fulani shaped deliberative capacity. The partnership worked with relatively new leaders who envisaged a transformation of the lifestyles and economic livelihoods of their communities. A steady process of trust-building resulted in negotiations between FCW and the Fulani leaders that were not limited to the prime interests of the lead firm, such as milk supply, price and quality. For example, the partnership was attentive to using the dynamics of milk-collection centres to create conditions conducive for women's collective enterprises. This also involved a degree of flexibility on the part of the company and recognition of the importance of alternative market outlets: traditional (cheese) markets remained important for the Fulani. Diversification allowed them to supply to FCW and also connect to other markets. FCW therefore was an additional outlet for the Fulani, where they can sell the extra quantities they produce. The interests and discourses of different stakeholders were included in the deliberations, and each party has been able to influence the deliberations, which have been consequential for decision-making in the partnership. Achieving this situation required the creativity and perseverance of the partnership facilitators.

Initially, the alignment capacity of the dairy partnership was strongly oriented towards meeting business standards of the lead company and ensuring the quality of milk supplied by the Fulani producers. Negotiations with the newly established transport association and local Fulani leaders helped in resolving tensions and challenges regarding milk quality. The lead company had a strong preference to bring the practices of Fulani cattle owners into line with its preferred model of the intensification of livestock management proven in other circumstances, in particular Vietnam, and the consequent increase of quality and volume of milk produced per cow. The internal alignment of activities in the lead company was largely driven by efficiency and quality considerations. The mechanisms of knowledge exchange left little space for exploring possible alternative solutions and for jointly selecting practices and solutions tailored to the specific circumstances of the Fulani cattle herders. Building on how the Fulani milk producers began to modify and adjust herd management was one of the emerging options detected during field research. Apparently, internal and external alignment were expressed differently. The intensification trajectory directing livestock management seems to contrast with the emerging openness and flexibility towards women's side activities in Fulani communities. The alignment capacity of this partnership has been quite dynamic and generated a range of pathways with different outcomes for groups within the Fulani communities.

Securing consistent volumes and guaranteeing the quality of milk were the starting points for the incrementally unfolding process transforming the arrangements under which dairy farmers operated. Through phases of conflict and cooperation, the partnership created proto-institutions. Installing milk-collection points confronted Fulani communities with novel commercial arrangements for selling milk. An interesting practice was to make price-setting transparent by comparing the price for fresh milk offered by the company with the price for *wara*, a homemade cheese sold in local markets or roadsides. Groups of milk collectors, travelling to remote villages and sourcing milk from women, played an important role in diffusing novel practices and rules. They were responsible for the timely collection of milk, and interacted with its owners, i.e. women. They established their own regulations and enabled young men to borrow or invest in motor bikes. Collectors brought milk to the collecting centres, arranged payments, and also communicated why the company rejected milk. Interventions made by the partnership reinforced the role of women as owners of the milk, which also resulted in the partnership supporting cooperative structures through which women could further develop economic activities. Local political leaders expressed their support for these endeavours and framed it in terms of a modernization agenda that would lighten women's daily workload. The partnership developed capacity to capture the space between its initial logic and the related practices and wider changes in the Fulani communities. Involving representatives of selected Fulani communities in hands-on decision-making, such as identifying locations of milk-collection centres, has been conducive for the emerging transformative process reshaping the terms of inclusion of cattle owners, milk producers, transporters and service providers.

The embedding of this partnership was initially a response to the local content regulation of the Nigerian government, which required the lead firm to use a minimum share of locally sourced milk in its products. Deliberations focused on mobilizing resources for installing milk-collection centres in rural communities. The involved communities have been influential in decision-making about the sites for milk-collection centres and co-created conditions conducive for community-based business development. Opposition to sites proposed by government was part of this process. Emerging tensions between communities intensifying milk production, and thus using land in the area more frequently, and communities intensifying land use, for example for meeting the growing demand for cassava, created tensions in the areas. Joint strategizing with outcomes beyond the direct interests of the business partner and the selected communities proved difficult. The partnership has not yet made a visible contribution to coordinated strategizing in the dairy sector or production areas, which may be crucial for addressing risks and tensions outside its boundaries and for influencing the conditions for scaling or replicating the business models central to the partnership.

4.2 Case example 2: partnering in agribusiness clusters

The second intervention approach in the programme tries to trigger a process of inclusive development by forging partnerships among small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and smallholder farmers clustered in a spatially bounded area. Proximity and inter-firm cooperation is assumed to enhance competiveness in local, national, regional and international markets (cf. Geldes, Felzensztein, Turkina & Durand, 2015). In the case of agri-business clusters, this implies linkages between smallholder farmers and SMEs, usually involved in processing and marketing. We use the case example of an agribusiness cluster sourcing, processing and marketing soy-based food products in Benin (Van den Brink & Vellema, 2018). Central to this cluster is the *Coopérative de Transformation, d'Approvisionnement et d'Écoulement de Soja* (CTAE), a processing cooperative in which ownership is shared by 25 members of whom 19 are working at the cooperative. CTAE works with around 25 famers' cooperative unions (that altogether connect with in total 273 small-scale farmers) and 25 large-scale farms (with around 2 hectares of land, producing around 8000 kg per year). The partnership aims to strengthen the relationships between producer organizations and the cooperative as local processors. The cooperative is also the link with street vendors and local restaurants bringing soy-products to low-income consumers.

The long history of organizing and representing farmers in Benin is an important contextual condition for the deliberative capacity surfacing in this partnership. Beninese farmers are organized on different levels – national, regional, and community and grassroots. At each level there is a farmer organization dealing with overarching agricultural issues and an organization for a specific crop. The soy partnership organized two reflection meetings per year, in which CTAE board members, microfinance representatives, public extension service providers, representatives of women's processor organization and the regional producer organization are included. A representative of the regional producer organization, who takes part in the decision-making processes within the partnership, represented producers. When a conflict occurred in the partnership this representative played an important role in tempering tensions between the processing company and the farmers. For example, there was an issue when CTAE found stones in the bags with soybeans. CTAE took this up with the regional producer organization. Through the layered structure of the farmers' organizations, the regional producer organization was able to quickly communicate this issue with farmers at grassroots and was therefore able to play an important role in defusing tensions.

Aligning different business models and interests was key in the soy partnership. The cooperative adjusted its processing activities and endeavoured to accommodate the logics and business operation of farmers' groups. The expanding networks embedded in this agribusiness cluster encouraged a kind of co-ownership of product upgrading and the intensified interdependency stimulated process upgrading by making transactions and business practices more efficient. Moreover, the cooperative considered connectivity to the downstream side as essential for the cluster and invested in building networks with more remote vendors and retailers in the consumer market. The focus on novel food products fostered a strong commitment of the partnership and cluster to sectoral upgrading, which led to the facilitated development of a business plan for the entire soy sector in Atlantique. The partnership hired an independent consultant to develop this in interaction with all involved parties (including CTAE, the women processors and the farmers). This jointly developed business plan ALIDE, one of the local microfinance institutes, gave positive feedback on this plan and provided a loan to CTAE to enable them to buy soybeans in bulk.

The transformative actions of the partnership linked measures to coordinate and regulate commercial transactions to the existing multi-level structure of farmers' organizations in Benin. This was most visible in how CTAE organized sourcing of soybeans. CTAE sourced its raw material directly from various soybean village groups. CTAE interacted directly with these groups to negotiate prices and set up contracts. Moreover, the regional body, *Union Régionale des Producteurs de L'Atlantique et du Littoral* (URP-AL), played a coordinating role. At the beginning of a soybean campaign, technical agents from URP-AL calculated how much soybean each group should be able to produce. Subsequently, production targets for each village were set. Halfway through the season, CTAE and a representative of the village group met (often at CTAE's factory) to negotiate and agree on prices. A URP-AL representative facilitated these negotiations. To prevent producers from selling to other companies, CTAE gave producers an incentive to supply to them exclusively. Therefore, they used the price for soy on the market in a nearby city as a reference price and added an amount, provided quality of soy was good. While these practices and arrangements worked well for CTAE and organized producers, the partnership realized that it was crowding out small-scale processors within the market. To correct this issue, CTAE decided to buy more soy than needed, and subsequently sold the surplus to small-scale processors for the same price. At the end of each season, CTAE, the local advisors, and farmers evaluated that year's soybean campaign. The above exemplifies how partners created proto-institutions that altered the terms of inclusion for both soy producers and small-scale processors.

Fitting capacity of this partnership relied strongly on how it moved vertically across multiple levels, while sustaining strong horizontal linkages with public actors at the local, regional and national level. In 2006, CTAE became a member of URP-AL, which is a regional body of the national farmers' union (*Fédération des Unions des Producteurs du Bénin* – FUPRO-Bénin). This organizational set-up enabled coordinating responses vertically and exercising influence of farmers' organization through interactions with government bodies at the same level. At local level, this became visible when certain farmers' groups were unable to amortize their loans due to unanticipated low prices and accessed public guarantee funds in order not to ruin their business. At regional level, trainers and business coaches connected to the partnership interacted with government officials and found ways to represent the interests and priorities of the farmers' groups they work with. At the national level, the federation of farmers' unions negotiated both general farmers' interests, such as access to finance or measure to enhance soil quality, and sector-specific interests, such as research concentrating on soybean diseases or post-harvest handling.

5 Conclusions

The framework developed in this paper highlights capacities of publicly supported partnerships to shape or modify the usually rigid terms on which people are included in agri-food chains and agribusiness. These terms are not necessarily favourable from a development perspective because of businesses or markets featuring power differences, prevailing lead companies, unequal distribution of value or information asymmetries. For partnerships to make a development impact in such circumstances, new capacities need to be developed and mobilized. The framework distinguishes four capacities, which enable partnerships to work and navigate in the context of inclusive development affecting smallholder agricultural producers as well as low-income consumers in low- and middle-income countries. Each capacity identified in the framework represents a distinct influence on the transformative process of inclusive development, and in combination demonstrate the ability to bring about system changes, particularly at the production level in a development context (cf. Glasbergen & Schouten, 2015). This entails the balancing of distinct capacities through continuous reflection and flexibility (cf. Termeer, Dewulf, Breeman, & Stiller, 2015). The framework underlines the complementarity of the capacities, which may run in parallel or evolve sequentially. Hence, from both a practitioners and evaluation perspective, all four capacities need to be taken into account.

The shift from a strong focus on roles and responsibilities of actors assembled in partnerships to capacities emerging in the evolving joint actions, negotiations and deliberations in partnering processes demonstrates that development outcomes are not self-evident. Inclusive development is then the emergent outcome of configured capacities propelling the partnership's influence on transforming the terms of inclusion for specific groups. This contrasts with generic partnership formulas, which are largely driven by the wish to mobilize and distribute resources and inputs and seem to deviate from the question of why and how partnering induces or catalyzes transformative processes. The framework emphasizes the connectivity of partnerships to dynamics of the wider social, economic and political context (cf. Bolwig et al., 2010; Helmsing & Vellema, 2011a; Brogaard & Petersen, 2018). Inclusive development implies that partnerships transcend their boundaries and seek ways to engage with specific groups within the state. This may result in compromising the specific private interests and agendas that led to the partnership.

The two case examples signify that orienting partnering to situated problem-solving actions in specific institutional contexts requires tailor-made approaches rather than generic organizational fixes. Situated partnering has the potential to generate context and market-sensitive solutions; this makes the navigating part more central than the formal and organizational features of a partnership. The framework is therefore interesting to practitioners, as it specifically highlights the sphere of influence of partnerships on the transformative processes underlying inclusive development. The capacities framework offers guidance to facilitators of partnerships concerned about their effectiveness to achieve development goals.

Enhancing deliberative capacity by designing governance structures can take very different forms and can be tailored to the specific contexts in which partnerships are embedded. Dovetailing locally embedded governance structures with those of the partnership might ensure the involvement of marginalized stakeholders, such as smallholders and local communities. Influencing or redirecting strategic management of lead agents in agri-food chains and agribusiness clusters may create opportunities for more marginalized actors to fit their capacities and resources in the core business of the lead actor and benefit from emerging upgrading processes. The intervention repertoire of partnerships working on inclusive development reveals the experimental and iterative nature of institutional work central to daily activities of partnership facilitators. These organizational activities may generate organizational forms and institutional arrangements that can be temporary and represent a modest step in a process of transformation. The transformative influence of institutional work importantly depends on how partnerships manoeuvre in the institutional interfaces and bridge spaces between partnership practices and institutional weaknesses in fluid contexts that enable or constrain inclusive development. Adopting an interest in fit encourages partnerships to articulate their prioritized concerns to business associations and the public domain. Fit emphasises continuous assemblage of practices within the boundaries of partnerships and private and public actions situated in spatially bounded business systems. These implications of the capacities framework show the importance of skilful and experienced facilitators of partnering with the aim of triggering processes of inclusive development. Inclusive development requires hard work and clever strategizing in specific conditions.

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