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Achieving sustainability together

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Achieving sustainability together

Stakeholder collaboration for corporate sustainability and the circular economy

Manon Eikelenboom

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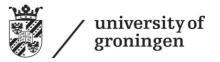
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Achieving sustainability together

Stakeholder collaboration for corporate sustainability and the circular economy

PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the University of Groningen on the authority of the Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga and in accordance with the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on

Thursday 3 February 2022 at 16.15 hours

by

Manon Eikelenboom

born on 8 February 1994 in Renkum

Supervisor

Prof. G. de Jong

Co-supervisor

Dr. T.B. Long

Assessment Committee

Prof. J.M.L. van Engelen Prof. J.C. Brezet Prof. J.M. Cramer

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Acknowlegdements Preface

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Preface

Growing up in the natural area of the Veluwe in the Netherlands increased my appreciation for nature. Experiencing how natural areas around the world are degrading, including issues such as pollution, biodiversity loss and deforestation, has had a great impact on me. For me, it is unacceptable that we, as humans, are depleting and destroying natural areas around the world. Therefore, from a young age I have always wondered how we can better protect and restore the natural world. However, I also realized that not only the natural world is suffering, as citizens around the world are encountering many difficulties such as dealing with poverty, migration and wars. Therefore, I have become increasingly motivated to explore how we can create a balance between environmental and social elements. Social and environmental elements are co-dependent, meaning that if we want to address environmental issues, we also have to take social elements into account, and vice versa.

During my studies, I learned that enterprises can play a key part in restoring the balance between the human and natural world through their interactions with both social and environmental elements. However, I also realized that doing so is an enormous challenge for many enterprises. While the concept of sustainability holds great promise for the future, most enterprises are still far from achieving this promise. Finding a balance between economic, social and environmental goals is not a straightforward task and requires making difficult decisions. What is beneficial for one goal, for example environmental protection, can be detrimental to another goal, for example the income of local fisherman. How can one enterprise make decisions about topics in which many different aspects, actors and consequences are involved? In my opinion, the answer to this question is that this is impossible. One organization cannot decide what is best and address all different aspects of sustainability by itself. Sustainability challenges are complex, involving many actors, including their interrelationships and interdependencies. Therefore, to address the sustainability challenges we face today, enterprises need to increasingly interact and collaborate with different stakeholders including businesses, governmental organizations, NGOs, citizens and knowledge institutions.

I noticed during my studies that shifting to a focus on collaboration is difficult for many enterprises, which are often used to operate in price competitive environments and focussed on capturing individual firm value. Furthermore, when starting my PhD, I discovered that there is not much literature that opens up the 'black box' of collaboration for sustainability. While collaboration among a diverse set of stakeholders is often seen as fundamental for developing sustainable solutions, doing so in practice is not always easy. The following quote, resulting from an interview I did for this thesis, reflects this issue:

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While we all realize we have to collaborate and cooperate to successfully implement circular solutions, doing so remains a very frustrating and challenging process often not resulting in the desired outcomes.

While collaborations are often initiated with the best intentions, many fail due to conflicts such as disagreement and power imbalances. During the early stages of my PhD, I also noticed that there seems to be a reluctance among enterprises to interact and collaborate with diverse stakeholders, especially with local communities, due to a lack of faith in positive outcomes resulting from these collaborations. For me, this is a major concern as I expect that not collaborating with local communities may lead to a situation where sustainability is solely available and interesting for the 'elite' of society. I believe that if we want to make a change towards a society that is sustainable and inclusive, interacting and collaborating with local communities is essential.

This thesis includes my efforts in making steps to address the challenges enterprises face when interacting and collaborating with diverse stakeholders for sustainability. This thesis has also provided me with experience, competencies and knowledge concerning successful collaboration for sustainability. Not only enterprises have to figure out how to collaborate with diverse stakeholders, also academic scholars have to increasingly collaborate with diverse societal actors to assist in addressing sustainability challenges. This thesis provided me with the opportunity to do so, collaborating with fellow academics but also with businesses, governmental institutions and local communities.

I hope that this PhD thesis will offer readers new insights and guidelines regarding the causes and consequences of collaboration among enterprises and diverse stakeholders for sustainability. In the future, I would be open to new collaborations with academics and practitioners alike to further explore these topics and help to achieve sustainability together.

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List of abbreviations

AOM Academy of Management
B2B Business-to-Business
B2C Business-to-Consumer
CFA Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CE Circular Economy
CS Circular Strategy

EURAM European Academy of Management

GDP Gross Domestic Product
OLS Ordinary Least Squares
NBM New Business Models

NGO Non-governmental Organization

RENT Research in Entrepreneurship and Small Business

SD Standard Deviation

SDG Sustainable Development Goal
SEM Structural Equation Modelling
SME Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

VIF Variance Inflation Factor

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