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Overcoming barriers to ecological transition: a theoretical focus on stakeholder collaboration

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Orcid:

BM: 0009-0001-1441-1762

CC: 0000-0002-8448-2726

AM: 0000-0002-5623-4143

BRIGIDA MORELLI^{1,*}, CHIARA CIVERA¹, ALEX MURDOCK²

¹ Department of Management, University of Turin, Italy

² London South Bank University, Great Britain

E-mail: brigida.morelli@unito.it; chiara.civera@unito.it; murdocaj@lsbu.ac.uk

*Corresponding author.

Abstract. This study examines the crucial role of multi-stakeholder collaborations in advancing the ecological transition, focusing on the relational dynamics that facilitate or hinder these efforts. As key social actors, companies have a responsibility to address environmental and social challenges by integrating functions such as marketing, corporate responsibility, and sustainability to promote stakeholder engagement and the adoption of sustainable practices. Through a conceptual approach, the paper reviews existing literature and theoretical models on stakeholder engagement, ecological transition, and integration of internal business functions. It identifies barriers to effective multi-stakeholder collaboration, including competing interests, communication problems, and trust deficits, and offers strategies to address them. The Multi-Stakeholder Value Map is employed to evidence multi-level stakeholder relationships. It highlights that alignment of internal business functions, particularly marketing and accountability, can improve external stakeholder engagement, promote shared responsibility, and play a significant role in driving the ecological transition. This integration is essential to overcome the barriers of multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Keywords: multi-stakeholder collaborations, ecological transition, cross-functional integration, marketing, CSR, multi-stakeholder value map.

1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing growth of ecological transition studies has emerged as a crucial response to the pressing environmental and social challenges of contemporary society. Ecological transition refers to the shift from traditional economic models focused on growth and resource exploitation to more sustainable, circular, and regenerative approaches (Bennett, 1979; Dimitrova et al., 2013). This shift is now recognized as essential to countering the negative impacts of human activities, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequalities exacerbated by unsustainable practices such as fossil fuel overuse, intensive agriculture, and uncontrolled consumption (Crutzen 2016; Steffen et al., 2008; Kopnina et al., 2018). As governments, businesses, and civil society struggle to navigate this complex transformation, multi-stakeholder collaborations have been widely recognized as crucial mechanisms

for driving systemic change across sectors. As Elkington (2018) notes, “multi-stakeholder initiatives offer a powerful framework for addressing systemic issues that no single entity can solve alone” (p. 123). Furthermore, Zadek (2007) argues that “collaborative governance mechanisms are essential to creating the institutional infrastructure needed to navigate sustainability transitions” (p. 45). These partnerships facilitate the sharing of knowledge and resources between public and private actors, as highlighted by Scherer & Palazzo (2011), who point out that “businesses, governments, and NGOs must work together to co-create solutions to complex global challenges” (p. 923).

Multi-stakeholder collaborations involve partnerships among diverse actors, including businesses, government agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), universities, and communities, each bringing unique resources, knowledge, and perspectives (Civera & Freeman, 2019; Ghelfi & Papadopoulos, 2021). Such collaborations are considered essential in addressing the multifaceted challenges of the ecological transition, as they facilitate the co-creation of innovative, inclusive, and scalable solutions that go beyond what individual actors can achieve alone (Carrigan et al. 2023; Clube & Tennant, 2023). For instance, in the circular economy, multi-stakeholder partnerships enable companies to redesign production and consumption systems to reduce waste, improve resource efficiency, and promote sustainable business models (Jabbour et al., 2019). Similarly, in energy transitions, public-private partnerships mobilize investment in renewable technologies and help develop regulatory frameworks that support clean energy adoption (Korhonen et al., 2018).

Recent studies underscore the importance of these partnerships in promoting systemic change. For instance, Hansen and Coenen (2015) highlight the role of multi-stakeholder networks in accelerating regional transitions to sustainability through knowledge exchange and collective problem solving.

Also, Carrigan et al. (2023) analyze the transition from disposable to reusable coffee cups through a community-based social marketing intervention. Through this study they emphasize the need for collective efforts by all stakeholders to facilitate this transition. It demonstrates how collaborative communities can create efficient alliances among multiple stakeholders, as noted by Civera & Freeman (2019), leading to significant social impacts. This research highlights the power of community engagement and stakeholder collaboration in driving sustainable stakeholder behavior change, illustrating the potential of localized efforts to contribute to broader environmental sustainability goals.

Furthermore, Beaurain et al. (2023) argue that such collaborations are instrumental in driving the cultural changes needed to integrate sustainability into social norms and business practices. This is particularly important in contexts where ecological transition intersects with complex social and economic dynamics, such as in developing countries or industries that rely heavily on traditional resource extraction (Coenen et al., 2012).

However, despite their potential, multi-stakeholder collaborations face significant obstacles. A key challenge is aligning the different goals and interests of various stakeholders. Businesses may prioritize economic returns, while NGOs focus on environmental or social outcomes, and governments are often driven by regulatory compliance or public accountability (Freeman et al., 2010). These differing priorities can create conflicts and obstacles in decision-making, especially when power imbalances exist, such as when large corporations overshadow smaller community groups or NGOs (Clube & Tennant, 2023). These dynamics can reduce the inclusiveness of collaborations and lead to outcomes that favor dominant interests rather than equitable solutions (Beaurain et al., 2023; Carrigan et al. 2023).

Trust, another critical barrier, is essential to the success of any partnership, but can be fragile in multi-stakeholder contexts, especially when previous collaborations have failed or stakeholders perceive others as acting opportunistically (Ghelfi & Papadopoulos, 2021). Lack of trust can lead to a reluctance to share information, resources, or responsibilities, undermining the collaborative process. Studies show that building trust requires sustained effort, transparency, and consistent communication, elements that are difficult to maintain in complex, multi-actor contexts (Scheepens et al., 2016).

Communication challenges further complicate multi-stakeholder collaborations. Differences in language, terminology, and framing of issues can hinder effective dialogue and lead to misunderstandings, especially when stakeholders come from different sectors with distinct professional languages and cultural backgrounds (Jabbour et al., 2019). For example, technical terms in environmental science may not be easily understood by business leaders, while regulatory jargon may confuse community members. Effective communication is critical for aligning stakeholder expectations, promoting mutual understanding, and facilitating collaborative decision making, but it remains one of the most persistent barriers in multi-stakeholder initiatives (Scheepens et al., 2016).

As social actors, companies have a responsibility to address social and environmental issues, as scholars such as Aksoy et al. (2022), Freeman (2010) and others have pointed out (Elkington, 1994; 2018). Companies are

increasingly viewed not only as economic entities, but also as stakeholders in society with a duty to respond to ecological challenges (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Carroll, 1999). The adoption of corporate social responsibility (CSR) principles suggests that companies must actively engage in solving societal problems, going beyond legal compliance to proactively address environmental and social issues (Matten & Moon, 2008; Visser, 2011). This responsibility includes building power both within the company and externally among stakeholders, promoting a shared commitment to sustainable practices (Dahlsrud, 2008; Aguilera et al., 2007).

The multi-stakeholder value map proposed by Civera and Freeman (2019) provides a useful framework for mapping both the relationships within a company and those outside the company. By observing the dynamics and overlaps of multi-stakeholder relationships, they help us understand the interconnections between different stakeholders and highlight how cross-functional integration within a company can strengthen external collaborations. For example, noteworthy is the alignment of marketing and accountability functions within companies that can help ensure that sustainability efforts are consistent and credible, both internally and externally in society.

Corporate functions, particularly marketing and accountability, play a key role in this process as they promote environmental awareness and stakeholder engagement (Kotler & Lee, 2005; Polonsky, 2011). Effective integration of these functions is critical, as it aligns internal goals with broader social imperatives, enhancing the company's ability to influence stakeholders and contribute to the ecological transition (Hart & Milstein, 2003; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). Recent reports, such as the Global Sustainable Investment Review (2023), further highlight how integrated business functions can significantly improve both financial and sustainability outcomes by supporting long-term value creation (Zadek, 2006; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2006).

On the one hand, marketing plays a strategic role in shaping the narrative of a company's sustainability commitments, influencing both internal (e.g., employees) and external (e.g., customers, partners) stakeholders. On the other hand, accountability functions (CSR, sustainability departments) ensure that the company's operations are in line with its ecological and social goals. The integration of these functions helps companies take a holistic approach to sustainability that links internal and external efforts, improving their overall impact on the ecological transition (Elkington, 1994; 2018).

This alignment not only improves the consistency of sustainability strategies, but also empowers employees in

all departments to contribute to green initiatives. Marketing teams can design campaigns that engage stakeholders in sustainability, while CSR departments provide the data and insights needed to ensure that messaging is authentic and aligned with corporate values (Elkington, 1994; 2018). Examples such as Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan demonstrate how internal alignment can significantly improve the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder collaborations. Unilever has integrated marketing, product development, and CSR to promote sustainability throughout the value chain, strengthening partnerships with NGOs, suppliers, and consumers (Elkington, 2018). These case studies underscore the power of internal integration in supporting the ecological transition.

Therefore, our study aims to understand how multi-stakeholder collaborations can facilitate the ecological transition in business and society, and what key factors emerge through the analysis of the multi-stakeholder value map for creating effective alliances?

The remainder of the article unfolds as follows. Section 2 outlines the literature review on Theoretical Foundations of Multi-Stakeholder Collaborations, identifies the Barriers to effective multi-stakeholder collaborations, and describes the theoretical basis of the Multi-Stakeholder Value Map. It continues with two sections that discuss the role of cross-functional integration in organizations and Strategies for improving multi-stakeholder collaborations. Section 3 describes the methodology used to answer the research question. Section 4 discusses the application of the multi-stakeholder value map by describing Multi-stakeholder collaborations and their role in the ecological transition. Section 5 Proposed strategies to overcome barriers to collaboration. The paper concludes with concluding remarks, limitations, and future research perspectives.

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The ecological transition represents a paradigm shift from traditional, unsustainable business models toward more sustainable and regenerative practices that aim to balance economic, environmental, and social imperatives. This transition requires systemic changes that cannot be achieved by individual actors working in isolation. As such, the role of multi-stakeholder collaborations has gained prominence, enabling diverse groups to pool resources, share knowledge, and co-create innovative solutions to complex sustainability challenges (Carrigan et al. 2023; Civera, 2022; Dimitrova et al., 2013; Ghelfi & Papadopoulos, 2021). This section reviews the current literature and theoretical models related to mul-

ti-Stakeholder Collaborations, identifies key barriers to effective collaboration and proposes strategies to overcome these challenges, emphasizing the critical role of internal cross-functional alignment in fostering successful multi-stakeholder partnerships and describing the theoretical basis of the Multi-Stakeholder Value Map.

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Multi-stakeholder Collaborations

Multi-stakeholder collaborations are grounded in stakeholder theory, which posits that organizations must consider the interests and influences of all parties affected by their actions, including not only shareholders but also employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and the environment (Freeman et al., 2010). Stakeholder theory challenges the traditional view of profit maximization as the sole purpose of business, advocating for a broader approach that balances the needs of various stakeholders to create shared value (Elkington, 1994; 2018). In the context of ecological transition, this approach is particularly relevant as it highlights the interconnectedness of social, environmental, and economic factors, encouraging organizations to engage with a diverse range of actors to address sustainability challenges (Jabbour et al., 2019). Ecological transition research has evolved to incorporate a multistakeholder perspective, recognizing that collaborative efforts are essential for achieving systemic change. For instance, the transition management framework developed by Loorbach (2010) emphasizes the importance of engaging stakeholders in participatory processes to co-create long-term sustainability visions and pathways. This approach is echoed in the work of Coenen et al. (2012), who advocate for spatial perspectives on sustainability transitions that account for the regional and contextual dynamics of stakeholder interactions. The integration of diverse perspectives allows for more robust and adaptive solutions that are better suited to local conditions and can drive broader systemic change.

2.2. Barriers to Effective Multi-stakeholder Collaborations

Despite the recognized benefits, multi-stakeholder collaborations often encounter significant barriers that impede their effectiveness. One of the primary challenges is the alignment of stakeholder interests and values. Collaborations bring together actors with diverse goals, ranging from profit maximization in businesses to social advocacy in NGOs and regulatory compliance in government bodies. These differing priorities can create con-

flicts that hinder decision-making and stall collaborative efforts (Freeman et al., 2010). Research by Beaurain et al. (2023) indicates that power imbalances among stakeholders exacerbate these conflicts, as dominant actors, such as large corporations, may impose their agendas, marginalizing smaller or less powerful voices and reducing the inclusiveness and equity of the collaboration.

Trust deficits also represent a major barrier to effective collaboration. Trust is a critical component of any partnership, yet it is often fragile in multi-stakeholder settings, particularly when stakeholders have had negative past experiences or perceive a lack of transparency in the collaborative process (Scheepens et al., 2016). A study by Ghelfi and Papadopoulos (2021) found that trust-building requires consistent, open communication and shared decision-making, which can be difficult to achieve when stakeholders operate under different institutional logics or organizational cultures. The absence of trust can lead to a reluctance to share information, resources, or responsibilities, undermining the collaborative potential of the partnership.

Communication challenges further complicate multi-stakeholder collaborations. Stakeholders often come from different sectors, each with its own language, terminology, and communication styles, which can lead to misunderstandings and misalignment of expectations. For example, technical language used by environmental scientists may be incomprehensible to business executives, while corporate jargon may alienate community representatives or NGOs (Jabbour et al., 2019). Effective communication is essential for fostering mutual understanding and aligning stakeholder goals, yet it remains one of the most persistent challenges in managing multi-stakeholder initiatives.

2.3. Multi-stakeholder value map

The multi-stakeholder value map developed by Civera and Freeman (2019) is based on the principles of stakeholder theory and seeks to give it a practical application, highlighting how, for some pressing issues, it is essential to go beyond the pure firm-centric view and address these problems through a participatory and cooperative perspective involving jointly designed management practices among competitors, institutional stakeholders, public and private entities, and customers.

This approach is based on the premise that both firms and stakeholders exist in an ecosystem formed by networks of relationships that should foster collaboration, co-creation of value, and an integrated approach to solving complex, shared problems (Freeman, 1984). The multi-stakeholder value map is based on key concepts

such as mutual interdependence, transparency and trust, which emphasize the moral and strategic importance of each stakeholder.

The map illustrates how the corporate environment can be seen as an interconnected ecosystem, in which relationships between a company and its stakeholders (including suppliers, customers, NGOs, governments, and even competitors) are dynamic and fluid, and overlap in different contexts and purposes (McVea & Freeman, 2005). This contrasts with traditional models in which the company dominates decision-making, thus limiting stakeholder input. Civera and Freeman (2019) argue that viewing stakeholders through the lens of power sharing and collaboration enhances the company's ability to respond to complex challenges, such as climate change or social inequality, through collective action.

Specifically in the context of our research, businesses, as social actors (Aksoy) and not just business entities, contribute vitally to the social and environmental health of the local ecosystem (Whysall, 2000) and, therefore, are fertile actors for the application of multi-stakeholder value dynamics (Candelo et al., 2021).

The multi-stakeholder value map is applicable to ecological transitions, where integrated stakeholder efforts can help facilitate sustainability goals. For example, by integrating marketing and corporate social responsibility (CSR) functions, companies can empower themselves and society by using stakeholder engagement to promote sustainability practices throughout the value chain. This process fosters cross-functional collaboration and ensures the creation of shared value not only for the company but also for the broader stakeholder ecosystem by aligning business practices with social and environmental needs.

Civera and Freeman's work emphasizes that through continuous stakeholder engagement, companies are able to redefine power structures, improve knowledge-sharing mechanisms and increase transparency. These elements are key to achieving superior value co-creation outcomes and addressing the most pressing social and environmental challenges. The multi-stakeholder value map shifts the focus from the corporate domain to a holistic approach, recognizing the contributions of each stakeholder and promoting a culture of shared responsibility and sustainability (Freeman et al., 2010).

2.4. Overcoming barriers: the role of cross-functional integration within organizations

To address these barriers, the literature increasingly emphasizes the importance of internal cross-functional integration within organizations, particularly between

marketing and responsibility functions. Cross-functional integration involves breaking down silos and fostering collaboration between departments such as marketing, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and sustainability, aligning their efforts with other key functions like operations, finance, and R&D (Elkington, 2018). This internal alignment is critical for developing coherent and effective sustainability strategies that resonate with both internal and external stakeholders.

Marketing functions play a strategic role in shaping how companies communicate their sustainability commitments and engage with stakeholders. They are responsible for crafting messages that resonate with consumers, partners, and other stakeholders, influencing perceptions and behaviors (Korhonen et al., 2018). However, if marketing efforts are not aligned with the company's broader sustainability goals, there is a risk of greenwashing – where companies are perceived as promoting a misleading image of environmental responsibility without substantive actions to back it up (Elkington, 1994). Responsibility functions, including CSR and sustainability teams, act as internal stewards of ecological integrity, ensuring that corporate actions align with stated commitments and that sustainability is embedded into the organization's core operations (Freeman et al., 2010).

Integrating these functions enhances the organization's ability to engage stakeholders effectively and foster trust. By working together, marketing and responsibility functions can create authentic narratives that reflect the company's genuine commitment to sustainability. For instance, marketing can leverage CSR data to communicate the impact of the company's sustainability initiatives, while CSR teams can provide guidance on ensuring that marketing messages are accurate and aligned with ecological values (Korhonen et al., 2018). This synergy not only strengthens stakeholder engagement but also reinforces the organization's credibility and trustworthiness, which are essential for overcoming barriers to collaboration.

2.5. Strategies for enhancing multi-stakeholder collaborations

The integration of marketing and responsibility functions provides a platform for developing strategies that enhance multi-stakeholder collaborations. One such strategy is the co-creation of sustainability initiatives, where companies actively involve stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of sustainability projects. This approach not only leverages the diverse expertise of different stakeholders but also fosters a sense of shared ownership and accountability, which is crucial for overcoming trust deficits (Beaurain et al., 2023).

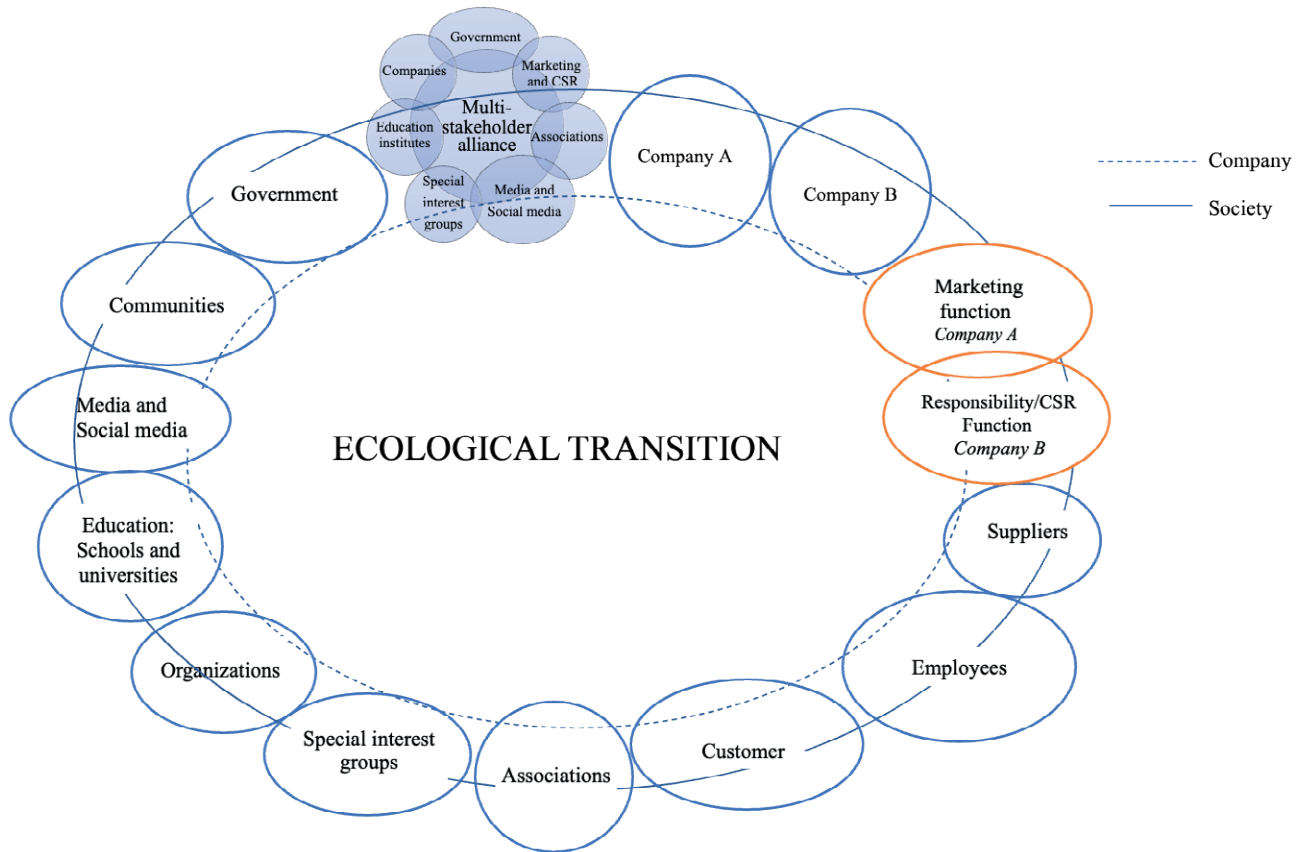


Figure 1. Multi-stakeholder value map: stakeholder collaboration to faster ecological transition (Reworked from Civera and Freeman, 2019).

Another strategy is the establishment of transparent communication channels that facilitate continuous dialogue and feedback among stakeholders. This includes creating forums for stakeholders to voice their concerns, share insights, and participate in decision-making processes. Transparent communication helps to align expectations, build trust, and reduce the potential for conflicts (Scheepens et al., 2016). Additionally, regular reporting on collaborative progress and outcomes enhances accountability and demonstrates the tangible impacts of the partnership, further strengthening stakeholder commitment.

Capacity-building initiatives also play a critical role in enhancing multi-stakeholder collaborations. By providing stakeholders with the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources to participate effectively, companies can empower all parties involved, including marginalized groups that may otherwise be excluded from decision-making processes. Capacity building fosters inclusivity, enhances the quality of collaboration, and ensures that all stakeholders can contribute meaningfully to the ecological transition (Clube & Tennant, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a conceptual research approach, drawing on a comprehensive review of existing literature and theoretical models related to stakeholder collaboration, ecological transition, and the integration of corporate functions. Conceptual research is particularly suited for exploring emerging phenomena where empirical data may be limited or fragmented, and it allows for the synthesis of diverse academic perspectives to develop a theoretical understanding of complex issues (Meredith, 1993; MacInnis, 2011). The methodology involves three key steps: (i) literature selection and review, (ii) analysis of barriers to multi-stakeholder collaboration, and (iii) we adopted a schematic view (Lau & Woodman, 1995; Ranson et al., 1980) to apply the multi-stakeholder value map (Civera & Freeman, 2019) to lead to the development of strategies to overcome these barriers, with an emphasis on internal cross-functional alignment.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Multi-stakeholder collaborations and their role in ecological transition

Multi-stakeholder collaborations are increasingly recognized as critical to achieving the ecological transition, which requires systemic changes that cannot be addressed by single entities working in isolation (Carrigan et al. 2023; Clube & Tennant, 2023; Beaurain et al., 2023). As also argued by Porter and Kramer (2011), only through collaborations can shared value be created and business success aligned with social progress, benefiting the environment and society. These collaborations bring together different actors in an ecosystem—businesses, governments, NGOs, universities, and communities—to co-create innovative, inclusive, and scalable solutions.

This study used the lens of the multi-stakeholder value map to understand how approaching a multi-stakeholder collaboration can facilitate the ecological transition as a complex problem (Civera, 2022; Coenen et al., 2012; Korhonen et al., 2018). The results, as in Fig.1 illustrating an application of the multi-stakeholder value map (Civera and Freeman, 2019), show that ecological transitions could benefit greatly from the integration and collaboration of different stakeholder groups into a cohesive value-creating network. The map reflects a cooperative environment in which organizations, including companies, government agencies, associations, suppliers, and customers, dynamically interact.

In fact, as a first step, it is noticeable how the map integrates two dimensions: that of corporate and that of society at large. From here it is clear how the overlapping stakeholder groups are interconnected on multiple levels. For example, suppliers, media, government, and communities are integral to the dynamics inside the company as well as those outside the company as major players in both dimensions. These interactions transcend traditional boundaries, linking business functions—particularly marketing and CSR—to broader social and environmental goals. Key stakeholders, such as the media, schools, universities, employees and communities, play a key role in promoting sustainability, as their involvement ensures a comprehensive approach to decision-making, community empowerment and resource allocation. As drawn above, the map highlights the importance of creating multi-stakeholder alliances that enable companies to leverage collective expertise and resources to address environmental issues more effectively.

One noteworthy observation is the overlap of corporate marketing and CSR functions that are integrated with each other in a broader strategy that supports shared sustainability goals. This overlap indicates that

responsibility extends beyond individual corporate entities, requiring collaboration across industries and sectors. This structure demonstrates the potential for cross-functional synergy to empower companies to implement sustainable practices that must be recognized, shared, and most importantly communicated and supported by society as a whole.

The alignment of business practices with ecological goals, facilitated by these integrated efforts, enables organizations to implement meaningful, long-term environmental changes. This multi-stakeholder approach reinforces the idea that sustainability is not the preserve of a single actor, but a shared responsibility that is based on cooperation and collective action. Multi-stakeholder collaborations are increasingly recognized as critical to achieving the ecological transition, which requires systemic changes that cannot be addressed by single entities working in isolation (Clube & Tennant, 2023; Beaurain et al., 2023).

However, although multi-stakeholder collaborations are promising, they also face challenges that can hinder their effectiveness. These include competing interests, power asymmetries, and communication difficulties, which must be managed strategically, through effective relationship management as drawn in the map, to ensure that collaborative efforts contribute meaningfully to the ecological transition (Ghelfi & Papadopoulos, 2021).

4.2. Barriers to effective multi-stakeholder collaborations

The literature identifies several barriers that often impede multi-stakeholder collaborations. Conflicting interests between stakeholders are a primary challenge; businesses typically prioritize financial returns, while NGOs and community groups may focus on social or environmental outcomes (Freeman et al., 2010). These differing priorities can lead to misaligned goals and hinder decision-making processes. For instance, research by Beaurain et al. (2023) found that power imbalances, where larger corporations dominate the agenda, often result in decisions that favor economic interests over environmental sustainability.

Trust deficits are another significant barrier. Trust is essential for collaboration, yet it is often fragile in multi-stakeholder settings due to past conflicts, lack of transparency, and perceived opportunism (Ghelfi & Papadopoulos, 2021). Studies show that building trust requires ongoing commitment, clear communication, and shared decision-making processes (Scheepens et al., 2016). For example, the lack of trust in extractive industries has frequently undermined partnerships with local communities, leading to project delays and social unrest (Zadek, 2004).

Communication challenges further complicate multi-stakeholder initiatives. Differences in language, framing, and professional jargon can hinder dialogue, leading to misunderstandings and reduced collaboration efficacy (Jabbour et al., 2019). The complexity of translating technical environmental information into actionable business strategies or community-level initiatives is often underestimated (Scheepens et al., 2016). Empowerment through interconnectedness and multi-stakeholder collaboration could be key to overcoming these barriers in the context of the ecological transition. By fostering a more inclusive and participatory approach, where all stakeholders – ranging from large corporations to local communities – are empowered to contribute equally, these collaborations can become more effective in achieving environmental sustainability. As Gaventa and Barrett (2012) suggest, “empowerment is about enhancing the capacities of marginalized groups to participate in and influence decision-making processes” (p. 38). In the case of the ecological transition, this means ensuring that community organizations, environmental NGOs, and smaller entities are not sidelined by the economic interests of dominant corporate actors.

Moreover, digital platforms and technologies that enable real-time data sharing and transparent communication have become vital tools in managing complex environmental information. According to van der Heijden et al. (2019), “interconnected digital platforms can bridge communication gaps by providing access to environmental data in real time, fostering more informed and transparent decision-making processes” (p. 172). This interconnectedness helps stakeholders navigate the complexities of translating technical environmental data into actionable strategies, facilitating greater collaboration and minimizing misunderstandings that typically undermine environmental initiatives. Lastly, creating a shared vision focused on ecological sustainability can align the diverse interests of stakeholders, promoting trust and long-term commitment. As Freeman et al. (2010) argue, “the alignment of stakeholder values can transform conflicting interests into complementary strengths” (p. 112). When multi-stakeholder collaborations co-create goals rooted in environmental responsibility, they are better equipped to tackle the structural and operational challenges of the ecological transition, ensuring that decisions not only favor economic progress but also prioritize environmental integrity.

4.3. *Cross-functional integration: marketing and responsibility as levers for change*

Cross-functional integration, particularly between marketing and responsibility functions, is increasingly

viewed as a strategic lever for enhancing the effectiveness of multistakeholder collaborations. Marketing functions shape how a company communicates its sustainability commitments, influencing and involving both internal and external stakeholders. Meanwhile, responsibility functions, such as CSR and sustainability departments, ensure that these commitments are translated into concrete actions (Kotler & Lee, 2005).

Research indicates that aligning these functions fosters a holistic approach to sustainability, bridging internal efforts with external stakeholder engagement (Hart & Milstein, 2003). For instance, Polonsky (2011) argues that marketing can be used to promote environmental awareness among consumers and partners, while responsibility functions provide the necessary data and frameworks to ensure these narratives are credible and impactful.

Integrated efforts between marketing and responsibility can address key barriers identified earlier, such as trust deficits and communication challenges. By creating consistent, transparent, and authentic communications, companies can build stronger relationships with stakeholders, enhance trust, and improve collaborative outcomes (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Successful examples, such as Unilever’s Sustainable Living Plan, demonstrate how integrated functions can drive sustainability initiatives across the entire value chain, enhancing both environmental performance and stakeholder engagement (Elkington, 2018).

5. PROPOSED STRATEGIES TO OVERCOMING COLLABORATION BARRIERS

5.1. *Enhancing internal alignment and building trust*

One key strategy for overcoming collaboration barriers is to enhance internal alignment between marketing and responsibility functions, fostering a unified approach to stakeholder engagement (Freeman et al., 2010). Trust-building initiatives, such as transparent reporting and shared value creation workshops, can help align internal objectives with external expectations, thereby enhancing the credibility of collaborative efforts (Zadek, 2004).

For instance, Matten and Moon (2008) highlight that companies that integrate CSR into core business strategies, rather than treating it as an isolated function, are more successful in building trust with stakeholders. Regular communication and feedback loops between internal functions also ensure that all departments are aligned with the company’s sustainability goals, reducing the risk of conflicting messages that can undermine stakeholder trust (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001).

5.2. *Fostering inclusive decision-making and stakeholder collaboration*

Inclusive decision-making processes are crucial for effective multi-stakeholder collaborations. Strategies such as co-creation workshops, stakeholder advisory panels, and participatory design methods can help ensure that all voices are heard, fostering a sense of shared ownership and accountability (Beaurain et al., 2023). Aguilera et al. (2007) suggest that inclusive engagement not only enhances the quality of decisions but also strengthens stakeholder commitment to sustainability initiatives.

Organizations can also leverage digital platforms to facilitate ongoing stakeholder dialogue, allowing for real-time feedback and collaborative problem-solving (Visser, 2011). This approach has been particularly effective in industries like urban planning and renewable energy, where stakeholder input is critical for aligning projects with community needs and environmental standards (Coenen et al., 2012).

5.3. *Leveraging marketing and responsibility functions for effective communication and empowerment*

Effective communication is central to overcoming the barriers to multi-stakeholder collaborations. Cross-functional teams that combine marketing's expertise in its communication with responsibility's focus on authenticity and data-driven insights can develop clear and compelling narratives that resonate with diverse stakeholders (Kotler & Lee, 2005).

Schaltegger and Wagner (2006) emphasize that communication should not only focus on the successes of sustainability initiatives but also transparently address challenges and setbacks, fostering an environment of openness and continuous improvement. Case studies, storytelling, and sustainability reports can be used as tools to highlight the impact of collaborative efforts and inspire broader participation in the ecological transition (Hart & Milstein, 2003).

6. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The results of this research have important implications both academically and for practical applications regarding multi-stakeholder collaborations in the context of ecological transitions. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the existing literature on multi-stakeholder collabo-

rations by clarifying the mechanisms through which stakeholder synergies can break down barriers and co-create value to facilitate ecological transitions. One focus is the integration of marketing and CSR functions that can drive communication and stakeholder empowerment in the ecological transition. In particular, it highlights the importance of reconceptualizing traditional business paradigms to include broader social and environmental considerations. Future research should further explore the theoretical constructs of empowerment and interconnectedness, examining their roles as mediators and moderators within multi-stakeholder contexts. The development of sound theoretical models incorporating these constructs could improve our understanding of stakeholder dynamics and collaborative outcomes.

For the managerial implication, the findings suggest that organizations need to take a more holistic approach to stakeholder engagement. By redefining their role within the multi-stakeholder landscape, organizations can move beyond profit goals and actively contribute to environmental sustainability and social responsibility. This requires the development of comprehensive performance metrics that include not only financial results, but also social and environmental indicators. Companies should implement strategies that promote stakeholder engagement, transparency, and trust, which are key to building collaborative relationships that can effectively address ecological challenges. Future research should prioritize several key areas. First, empirical investigations are needed to assess how multi-stakeholder governance models can be effectively implemented in various sectors, particularly those with a limited history of collaboration. Understanding sector-specific challenges and opportunities will provide insights into best practices for facilitating effective collaborations.

Second, it is imperative to examine the skills and technological infrastructure needed to support multi-stakeholder collaborations. Research should focus on the role of digital tools in improving transparency, accountability, and trust among stakeholders. Studies in this area could produce practical frameworks for leveraging technology to facilitate effective communication and collaboration.

Finally, future research should explore the relational dynamics of empowerment and interconnectedness within multi-stakeholder networks. Investigating how empowerment initiatives can strengthen stakeholder relationships and promote equitable collaborations will be critical to understanding the complexities of multi-stakeholder engagement. This research can also help identify best practices for promoting a culture of collaboration that effectively addresses ecological transitions.

In conclusion, this study clarifies the vital role of multi-stakeholder collaborations in facilitating ecological transitions through the integration of marketing and accountability functions. The results emphasize that empowerment and interconnectedness are key levers in overcoming obstacles to effective collaboration. By fostering collaborative relationships that prioritize sustainability and social responsibility, organizations can contribute significantly to addressing the pressing challenges posed by ecological degradation.

This research provides a fundamental understanding of how multi-stakeholder collaborations can be structured to achieve both ecological and social goals. While this study offers valuable insights, it also recognizes the limitations inherent in examining the complex cultural and institutional barriers to collaboration. Continued exploration of these barriers, along with the dynamics of stakeholder interactions, will be essential to advancing our understanding of effective multi-stakeholder engagement.

Future research should build on these findings by investigating the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder collaborative efforts in different contexts. By promoting dialogue between stakeholders and researchers, we can collectively advance strategies that harness the transformative potential of multi-stakeholder collaborations, ultimately contributing to a sustainable future.

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