Chapter **27**

Knowledge production in sustainability partnerships: an exploration of the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil[58]

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Abstract

Sustainability partnerships have the potential to function as boundary organisations that bring together stakeholders from different domains of society to jointly produce knowledge linked to action. However, little is known about the practice of knowledge production in such arrangements. In this chapter we develop an analytical framework, based on attributes of the nature of knowledge, the process of knowledge production, and the organisation of this process, to analyse the extent to which knowledge processes in partnerships can be understood as joint knowledge production (JKP). By way of example, we apply the framework to the case of the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), and show that science and scientific knowledge do not necessarily play a dominant role in such boundary organisations.

27.1 Introduction

Scientists and policy makers increasingly acknowledge that sustainability challenges cannot be solved through traditional, linear modes of knowledge production (Cornell et al., 2013). The complexity and interwovenness of sustainability problems encourage the inclusion of a range of stakeholders in problem-defining and problem-solving processes (McNie, 2007). These stakeholders have different values and interests, but also different types of knowledge. The growing involvement of stakeholders therefore means that the traditional prominence of scientific knowledge is increasingly faced with competition from other knowledge claims (Edelenbos et al., 2011), including representatives of the business community and actors from civil society. Although the knowledge held by these actors differs in nature, an integration of different knowledge types is believed to create unique benefits for decision making, including a better understanding of problems, the development of socially robust decisions, and closer links between knowledge and action (Lee et al., 2014). This process of knowledge integration is commonly termed "joint knowledge production" (JKP).

Partnerships for sustainability certification, for example in the field of agricultural commodities, can be conceptualised as so-called boundary organisations that bring together stakeholders from different domains of society (state, market, civil society) to jointly produce knowledge linked to action. Examples of such partnerships are the Stewardship Councils (Auld, 2010; Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013; Pattberg, 2005) and Round Tables (Cheyns, 2011; Ponte & Cheyns, 2013; Schouten, 2013; Schouten et al., 2012). Hundreds of partnerships have been developed for sustainable agricultural products like coffee, cocoa, and cotton (Ecolabel-Index, 2015). Most of them are business-NGO collaborations; although partnerships maintain relations with governments and scientists, these actors are not official members of the partnership.

Up to now, research into these partnerships has mainly focused on achieving or enhancing agreement between different members, and also on the role of trust, collaborative advantage, and leadership (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Glasbergen, 2011). Although the learning potential of partnerships, and their potential to gain and accumulate knowledge for sustainable development, has been acknowledged (Juhola & Westerhoff, 2011; Pedroso & Nakano, 2009; Schouten et al., 2012; Tennyson, 2005; Van Huijstee et al., 2007; Von Geibler, 2012), little is known about the practice of knowledge production in partnerships (Grant & Baden-Fuller, 2004; Phelps et al., 2012).

The focus on knowledge production processes in sustainability partnerships is rather new, and introduces a novel perspective on their functioning as it highlights their role as boundary organisations. Boundary organisations are platforms on which independent actors from different societal domains interact, with interaction intended to result in problem-focused collaborative actions. What we also see is that co-production of knowledge takes place in boundary organisations and that this knowledge is linked to action (Boezeman et al., 2013; Hoppe, 2005; Hoppe & Wesselink, 2014; Lee et al., 2014;

Schut et al., 2013). Actors in boundary organisations originate from different domains of society and represent specific interpretations of reality, worldviews, and types of knowledge. The same can be said about actors in sustainability partnerships. However, although this is an assumption based on literature, we wonder whether the actual knowledge production processes in sustainability partnerships can in practice indeed be understood as joint knowledge production (JKP). To answer this question, we suggest an analytical framework to operationalise and analyse JKP in sustainability partnerships as boundary organisations.

27.2 Knowledge production in sustainability partnerships – an operationalisation

Sustainability partnerships refer, by definition, to collaborative arrangements that involve actors from different domains (particularly from NGOs and business) working together towards a sustainability goal. We expect that collaboration between these different stakeholders influences the characteristics of the boundary work in sustainability partnerships. We distinguish implications for the *nature* of the produced knowledge, the *process* of knowledge production, and the *organisation* of knowledge production in partnerships. First, we expect to find different types of knowledge, including scientific knowledge, practical knowledge, and tacit knowledge. We should not forget that certification tries to steer the production processes of agricultural products like coffee, palm oil, and tea into a more sustainable direction. The farmers whose production processes are to be changed may have relevant knowledge about the way different approaches work in practice. This may include knowledge based on experience (practical knowledge), or knowledge based on unwritten rules and habits passed on through generations (tacit knowledge). Second, the multi-actor character of the arrangements and the work on the interface between different sources of knowledge suggests that knowledge processes are not linear but inherently integrative. This implies that different knowledge types and ideas are integrated (both consciously and unconsciously), rather than being chosen or voted upon. Third, we acknowledge that knowledge production is not a spontaneous process, but must be managed.

An important starting point in our approach is that knowledge processes cannot simply be classified as either entirely jointly produced (JKP) or entirely focused on traditional (scientific) knowledge production. JKP should be analysed on a continuous scale, which allows the identification of first steps towards JKP as well as hybrid mixtures of JKP and traditional, science-focused knowledge production. To this end, we have adopted a quantification approach and visualised the process of JKP and its different phenomena (or components) in a spider diagram (see Figure 27.1). The diagram consists of ten building blocks: four of them relate to the *nature* of knowledge in partnerships, four to the *process* of knowledge production, and two to the *organisation* of knowledge

production. Each building block can be scored; the higher the scores, the more a partnership's mode of producing knowledge can be understood as JKP. For more information on the scoring procedure, see Offermans and Glasbergen (2015).
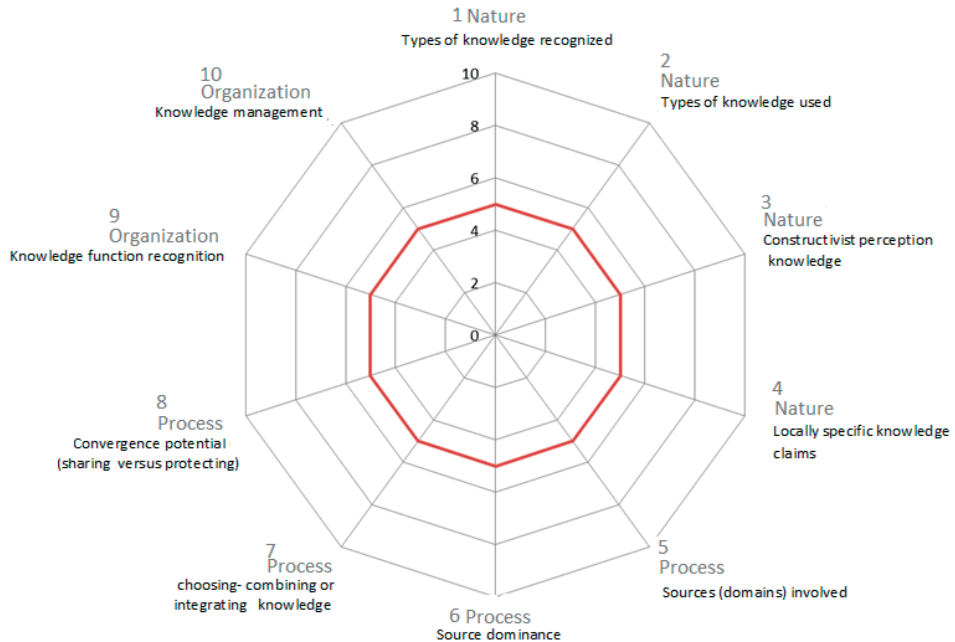

Figure 27.4 Analytical framework to analyse joint knowledge production (JKP) in sustainability partnerships

Nature of Knowledge Production – building blocks 1-4

The first building block in Figure 27.1 refers to the types of knowledge that are recognised in knowledge production in partnerships. The more (different) knowledge types are recognised, the higher the JKP score for this building block. A maximum score is obtained if the values of scientific knowledge, practical knowledge, and tacit knowledge are all recognised by the partnership members. In the second building block, we analyse whether the knowledge types recognised are also actually *used* as input in the knowledge process (e.g. to explain or justify decisions being made). Building block 3 analyses how research results, information, and knowledge are interpreted by the partnership members. The scale varies from very positivist (lowest score) to very constructivist (highest score). Building block 4 looks at the extent to which knowledge claims in partnerships are mostly of a generalised nature (lowest score) or only applicable on a local scale (highest score).

Process of Knowledge Production in Partnerships - building blocks 5-8

Building block 5 indicates whether different membership categories are involved in the knowledge production process. In most partnerships, these categories are predefined. A maximum score is obtained if a clear majority of the different membership categories (domains) have had a say in the knowledge process. The sixth building block analyses the share of each domain in the knowledge production process. A high score is awarded if all domains have a more or less equal input in the knowledge process. Building block 7 refers to the intensity of knowledge integration, and ranges from choosing (lowest score) to combining (medium score) to integrating different knowledge inputs (highest score). The convergence potential (building block 8) assesses whether partnership members are open to unconstrained knowledge sharing and hence have the potential to learn and converge (highest score). A low score is given if members are very protective of their knowledge base and seem reluctant to share knowledge with others.

Organising Joint Knowledge Production in Partnerships - building blocks 9-10

Building block 9 analyses whether partnership members recognise their partnership as a knowledge producing arrangement. This scale ranges from "not at all" (lowest score) to "entirely" (highest score). The final building block (number 10) analyses whether boundary work is managed in partnerships. Once again, we look at management on a continuous scale. Between fully managed (highest score) and no management (lowest score), there may be hybrid versions of knowledge management (for example in line with conflict management).

27.3 Applying the framework to the RSPO

By way of example, we applied the framework of Figure 27.1 to the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). The RSPO is one of the most important and high-profile sustainability partnerships (Ponte & Cheyns, 2013). Its goal is to transform markets to make sustainable palm oil the norm, and they claim to have more than 1000 members (Pesqueira & Glasbergen, 2013; Schouten, 2013; Schouten & Glasbergen, 2012). Ordinary members are divided into seven subgroups: banks and investors (11 members), consumer goods manufacturers (334 members), environmental or nature conservation NGOs (26 members), oil palm growers (120 members), palm oil processors and traders (310 members), retailers (46 members), and social and developmental NGOs (12 members). They hold a yearly General Assembly (GA) with voting rights for all ordinary members, and yearly Round Table (RT) meetings. Detailed minutes of meetings are accessible to the public at large through their website. We analysed the minutes of GA6 (in 2009) and GA10 (in 2013) and the written answers of RSPO members to the

question what they hope to gain from joining the RSPO and/or how they can potentially contribute to the RSPO. Finally, we analysed the content of presentations and welcome sessions during the first day of the tenth RT (in 2012). Based on our analysis, we scored the different building blocks in the spider diagram of Figure 27.1. For more information on the methodological procedure, see Offermans and Glasbergen (2015).
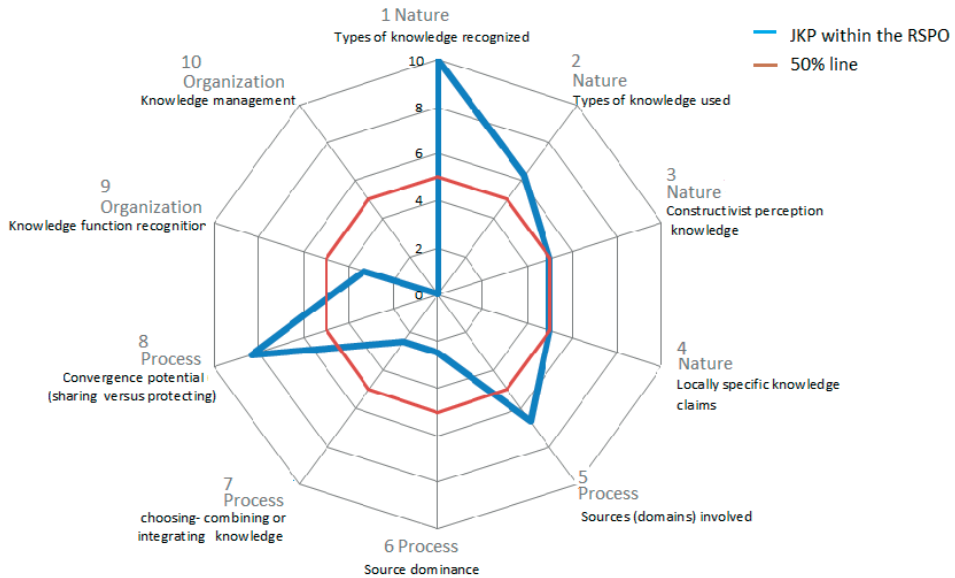

Figure 27.5 Results of applying the JKP analytical framework to the RSPO

The Nature of Knowledge Production in the RSPO

We observed a strong emphasis on *expert* knowledge. During the GAs and RT, value was attached to research results from research institutes and particularly NGOs: "*I also want to highlight and recognize the work of NGOs who worked hard to promote sustainability. WWF has made use of satellite technologies [..] and [..] developed a tool using the Google maps engine. This tool illustrates the impact of degraded forest and shrinking forest on wildlife and biodiversity*" (official address RT 10). Although expert knowledge was most prominent, smallholder knowledge (whether overt or tacit) was recognised as well, in both GAs and the RT. Members stated, for example, that smallholders have unique knowledge about the way different management options apply to their situation. However, although being recognised for its value, smallholder knowledge was hardly *used* in the knowledge process. Overall, a diversity of knowledge types were acknowledged, but NGO-driven expert knowledge was most dominant.

The third building block in Figure 27.2 shows a balance between positivist and constructivist interpretations of knowledge. Positivist interpretations related to

statements about fact-driven measurement tools (and the underlying assumption that they tell the absolute truth) or the importance attached to scientific proof and expert knowledge. Regarding the *applicability* of knowledge (building block 4), we observed a balance between generalised and localised knowledge claims. GA6 and the RT often discussed the possibility to apply lessons learnt elsewhere in the world to the RSPO working area, thus focusing on generalised knowledge. GA10 however, emphasised explicitly that smallholders in Indonesia cannot be compared to smallholders in the rest of the world, indicating a more localised approach towards knowledge claims.

The process of Knowledge Production in the RSPO

Regarding the domains involved in knowledge production (building blocks 5 and 6) we observed that all domains were encouraged to supply and demand knowledge. The most common (and dominant) knowledge supply came from NGOs, while the least direct contributions came from banks and investors, universities, and research institutes. We conclude that the knowledge supply is diverse as regards the domains involved in producing knowledge, but also relatively homogeneous because of the unequal input dominated by NGOs.

On the knowledge integration scale (building block 7) the RSPO does not go beyond combinatory efforts. At the GAs, different opinions and knowledge sources were referred to and different domains were involved in knowledge production. However, at a certain moment this process of responding to each other and to the resolutions at stake was simply stopped to start a voting procedure, in which RSPO members had the possibility to vote for or against a resolution, or to abstain from voting. This is a matter of choosing knowledge types and sources rather than of combining or integrating them.

The convergence potential of the RSPO (building block 8) is high. During the GAs and RT, RSPO members did not seem reluctant to become involved in the knowledge production process and to share thoughts and knowledge. Based on the answers on the RSPO website, it seems safe to argue that the desire that was expressed to exchange ideas and best practices will most probably lead to learning and possibly to knowledge convergence.

Knowledge Management in the RSPO

Whether the RSPO is recognised by its members as a knowledge producing arrangement (building block 9) is debatable. The set-up of the roundtable meeting was academic, with PowerPoint presentations and the submission of abstracts. Almost all sampled abstracts referred to knowledge. This set-up suggests that people attend the meeting with a view to learning or sharing knowledge. The analysis of answers on the website, however, showed a different pattern. Of the 171 answers we analysed, 60 contained a reference to knowledge. Only ten members explicitly used the term

knowledge. This implies that the knowledge producing function of partnerships is recognised, but not very strongly. The last building block (number 10) had the lowest score in the entire framework. This means that there were no signs of knowledge management in any of the meetings analysed. In the GAs and RT, time was constrained and controlled through time management, but there were no signs of knowledge management.

27.4 Conclusion

Although this is only an example, the application of our framework to one of the best-known sustainability partnerships (RSPO) reveals some characteristics of boundary work in such arrangements. First, scientific knowledge is only brought in sporadically, and mainly by actors outside academia or research institutes. Universities and research institutes have no direct knowledge input in boundary work in the RSPO. Although the knowledge input is fairly diverse, the *use* of these different inputs is rather restricted. Second, the knowledge supply is strongly dominated by NGOs. It is also notable that tacit knowledge from smallholders is recognised for its value, but hardly used in the knowledge process or decisions. Third, different knowledge inputs are selected rather than integrated. Diverse knowledge inputs were introduced into the discussions, but discussions were stopped to start a voting procedure. This is a matter of choosing between different knowledge inputs rather than integrating them. Fourth, knowledge production and knowledge processes are hardly managed. Time and decision-making were organised and closely controlled, but there were no attempts to systematically deal with knowledge or knowledge processes.

In general, this first application of our framework indicates that boundary work in sustainability partnerships tends to be a a joint effort to a limited extent as far as knowledge production and knowledge processes are involved. Following from this, we can also conclude that the partnership's most important knowledge product – the sustainability certificate – is only partly a joint outcome. This is remarkable, as the objective of organisations like partnerships is precisely to bring different domains together in a collaborative process to work out new management practices.

The results also say something about the practice of spanning boundaries, and more particularly about the role of science in spanning boundaries. Research into boundary work frequently presumes active involvement of researchers and scientific knowledge. Although scientific knowledge is negotiated in boundary work, it is still considered to be an essential addition to other types of knowledge. However, the application of our framework to the RSPO shows that research into boundary work should extend its scope beyond the often used, but restricted, areas of science and policy. The RSPO is probably only one example of a boundary organisation where researchers are not even

directly involved in the knowledge production process and where scientific knowledge only plays a minor role.

It is not our aim to develop the framework into a fully objective measurement tool (if this is possible at all). The most interesting and promising use is probably its potential use as a dialogue tool to open up discussions about, and reflect upon, boundary organisations. Using the spider diagram in a deliberative context may lead to scoring or rescoring the building blocks by introducing new evidence or suggesting changes in the way knowledge is produced, and by doing so, removing boundaries between different domains and reduce their dominance.

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