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The symbiotic sustainability model:

Conceptualizing NGO-corporate alliance communication

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Abstract

We introduce the Symbiotic Sustainability Model (SSM) as a macro-level explanation of NGO-corporate alliances. The SSM presents NGO-corporate alliances as distinct interorganizational communication relationships that are symbolized to stakeholders to influence the mobilization of capital. We contend that alliance partners communicatively co-construct the alliance with stakeholders in order to mobilize economic, social, cultural, and political capital. By focusing on the communication of alliances' existence and character, new propositions emerge concerning the role of communication, capital mobilization resulting from NGO-corporate alliances, NGOs and corporations' choice(s) of alliance partner(s), the number of alliance partners organizations are likely to communicate, and the potential risks and rewards of such alliances. The model is illustrated using the Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita Better Banana Program as an abbreviated case study.

Although the exact number is not known, anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of multinational corporations and non-profit, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)¹ establishing relationships has increased in the last fifteen years (Austin, 2000; Bendell, 2000; Elkington, 1998). These cross-sector alliances represent the collaboration of two types of organizations with different levels of public trust on issues of the environment, human rights, and health (Wootliff & Deri, 2001). NGOs have greater public trust than governments, the media, or corporations on these issues. In contrast, corporations have less public trust on various social and cultural issues than governments or NGOs. The increase in NGO-corporate alliances has emerged as the corporation has become the dominant social institution (Deetz, 1992) and NGOs are increasingly called upon to provide a “social safety net” (Andreason, 1996, p. 48). Further, advances in communication technology have placed many multinational corporations in an “emerging goldfish bowl” (Elkington, 1998, p. 326), where events and images from around the world are broadcasted to stakeholders. Messages from NGOs are “massively amplified” (p. 49) and stakeholders learn about corporate activities through NGO and corporate communication.

We define NGO-corporate alliances as interorganizational communication relationships that are symbolized to stakeholders in order to influence the mobilization and creation of capital. We contend that stakeholders, in conjunction with alliance partners, communicatively co-construct the economic, social, cultural, and political value of cross-sector alliances. Following rhetorical and resource exchange scholars, we define communication as a symbolic process by which organizations are constituted (McPhee & Zaug, 2000), rhetorically aligned (Cheney, 1983; Stewart, Denton, & Smith, 1989), and resources are mobilized (Roloff, 1981). Through communication, the economic, social, cultural, and political value of capital is framed, interpreted, made meaningful, mobilized, and/or restricted by alliance partners and stakeholders.

Accordingly, this manuscript seeks to answer the following question: From a communication perspective, how do we understand the growing network of NGO-corporate alliances?

To answer this question, we introduce the Symbiotic Sustainability Model (SSM) as a macro-level communication-based explanation of NGO-corporate alliances. Jones, Watson, Gardner, and Gallois (2004) note that one of the challenges for organizational communication scholars is to move from micro-level² to macro-level theorizing. Such a move is necessary in the area of NGO-corporate alliances for three reasons. First, a macro-level model illuminates phenomenon such as the popularity of social issues, the choice of alliance partners in context of the choices made by other NGOs and corporations, and the implications of NGO-corporate alliance communication for both economic and social issue industries. Second, a macro-level perspective draws researchers' attention toward patterns of communication that shape the organizational landscape, such as prominent social issues or branding. Finally, a macro-level perspective offers testable propositions where NGO-corporate alliances are the units of analysis.

The SSM asserts that communication of cross-sector alliances' existence and character with organizational stakeholders is central to understanding the network of NGO-corporate alliances. The SSM's propositions regarding capital mobilization, NGOs and corporations' choice(s) of alliance partner(s), the number of alliance partners that organizations are likely to communicate, and the potential risks and rewards of such alliances are all based upon this premise. The SSM makes three contributions to communication scholarship. First, the SSM highlights the central role of communication with stakeholders in constituting (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) the existence and character of cross-sector alliances. Stakeholders are "all the groups and individuals that have an affect or are affected by the accomplishment of an organizational purpose" (Freeman, 1984, p. 25). As such, when the SSM refers to stakeholders, it is inclusive of

both organizational members and individuals/groups external to the organizations. Second, the SSM considers stakeholders, NGOs, and corporations as each having an active role in alliance value creation. Third, the SSM, as a macro-level model, provides propositions that may explain the network of NGO-corporate alliances across multiple economic and issue industries.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. To begin, we review the work of interorganizational communication researchers for an overview of the role of communication in interorganizational relationships. Next, we review three existing theories which have been used to explain NGO-corporate alliances. Then, we define and describe the NGO-corporate alliance as a symbiotic relationship. The communication of the existence and character of this symbiotic relationship with stakeholders results in the mobilization, creation, and/or restriction of capital. After that, we introduce the SSM and present its propositions. Finally, we offer the alliance between Chiquita and Rainforest Alliance as an abbreviated illustration of the SSM's elements.

Interorganizational Communication

While communication scholars have not given significant attention to NGO-corporate alliances (for a notable exception see Livesey, 1999), instead focusing on NGO-NGO alliances (Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; Isbell, Lewis, Koschmann, & Goldstein, 2006; Lewis, Isbell, Koschmann & Goldstein, 2006; Miller, Scott, Stage & Birkholdt, 1995; Shumate, Fulk & Monge, 2005; M. Taylor & Doerfel, 2003) or corporate-corporate alliances (Browning, Beyer & Shelter, 1995; Flanagin, Monge, & Fulk, 2001; R. G. Heath & Sias, 1999), they have described the role of communication in interorganizational relationships. Some communication scholars have suggested that interorganizational relationships are composed of depersonalized linkages that retain some interpersonal qualities; these scholars have examined the interpersonal communication that occurred in alliances (Browning et al., 1995; Flanagin et al., 2001; Isbell et

al., 2006; Lewis et al., 2006; Miller et al., 1995). Other communication researchers have examined the network characteristics of interorganizational collaboration (Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; Shumate et al., 2005; Stohl & Stohl, 2005; M. Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). In these studies, communication is essential in maintaining cooperative (Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; M. Taylor & Doerfel, 2003), alliance (Shumate et al., 2005), and information exchange (Stohl & Stohl, 2005) relationships. In all of these studies, communication practices are seen as instrumental in forming and maintaining interorganizational relationships.

Research on interorganizational communication relationships has advanced our understanding of the resources exchanged among dyads and networks of organizations. In addition, interorganizational communication research has informed our conceptualization of the role that communication plays in activity coordination (McPhee & Zaug, 2000), defined as the role of communication in structuring interdependent activity within alliances. However, communication scholars have not focused on the communication of the existence and character of alliances with organizational stakeholders or on NGO-corporate alliances; this communication is part of the institutional positioning flow of communication (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). The institutional positioning flow describes macro-level communication where boundary spanners “negotiate terms of recognition of the organization’s existence and place ... [including] both identity establishment and development and maintenance of a ‘place’ in the interorganizational or larger social system” (p. 15). In addition, the research on NGO-corporate alliances has been grounded in three management theories. As discussed in the next section, these management theories primarily focus on the choice to engage in NGO-corporate alliances, and do not position communication as central to the creation, valuation, and existence of the alliance.

Transaction Costs, Stakeholder Management and Collaboration Theory

Three management theories have been used to explain interorganizational alliances between NGOs and corporations: transaction cost economics (Williamson, 1975, 1981), stakeholder management theory (Collins, Kearins, & Roper, 2005; Freeman, 1984; Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001; Lewis, Richardson, & Hamel, 2003; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997; Phillips, 2003; Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002), and collaboration theory (Gray, 1989; Trist, 1983; Westely & Vredenburg, 1991). In this section, we address the contributions of these theories to interorganizational alliance research, and provide a review of the theoretical and empirical work on NGO-corporate alliances in each of these traditions. In addition, Table 1 provides greater detail of each of these theories' propositions in comparison to the SSM's propositions.

Transaction costs economics, when explaining interorganizational alliances, examines how organizational partners protect themselves from the inherent hazards of trading relationships (Williamson 1975, 1981). King (2007) poses that transaction costs will govern the nature of relationships between corporations and environmental NGOs, which he refers to as environmental stakeholder groups. The mechanisms to reduce ex post transaction costs include: a) the environmental group having a good and favorable reputation with corporations, b) engaging in a sequence of joint projects with the same organization and, c) corporations and NGOs maintaining separate corporate engagement and auditing activities. However, the transaction costs view does not focus on the role that communication plays in establishing the nature of cross-sector alliance partners. Further, stakeholders of neither the corporation nor NGO are considered as important in establishing the value of such alliances. Finally, the transaction

cost view assumes that all gains come from the exchange of resources between the two alliance partners, neglecting any resources that might be held by other stakeholder groups.

While transaction cost economics focuses on the costs to benefits assessment of alliances, stakeholder management theory suggests that cross-sector alliance formation is motivated by a corporation's desire to mollify stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholder management theory, as applied to NGO-corporate relationships, is dominated by corporate-centered literature (Barnett, 2007; Mitchell et al., 1997). From a corporate perspective, NGOs are a broad stakeholder category that includes activist groups (e.g., Kendall, Gill, & Cheney, 2007). As such, the current research on NGO-corporate relationships has overlooked the possibility that corporations, NGOs, and other stakeholders are mutually influential. Furthermore, the application of stakeholder theory suggests that activities engaged in by the corporation are designed to mollify influential stakeholder groups (Mitchell et al., 1997; Phillips, 2003), but it does not prescribe the types of actions likely. In short, stakeholders are considered a resource to be managed by the corporation for its benefit.

In contrast, collaboration theory posits that organizations are likely to engage in collaboration when individually they cannot solve an identified problem (Gray, 1989; Trist, 1983). Collaboration is defined as the “pooling of appreciations and/or tangible resources ... by two or more [organizational] stakeholders to solve a set of problems which neither can solve individually [(i.e., a meta-problem)]” (Gray, 1985, p. 912). Westley and Vredenberg (1991) advance the concept of strategic bridging to understand how NGOs and corporations enable coordinated problem solving. Strategic bridging is a form of interorganizational collaboration in which a new organization is formed or an existing organization takes on the role of bringing together disparate groups to solve a social problem. Collaboration theory has been helpful in

understanding NGO-corporate alliances based on common goals and problem solving. However, it has not been applied to enduring NGO-corporate relationships and does not explain which NGOs and corporations would be more likely to form alliances.

Each of these three management theories has their own strengths and limitations. In combination, theorizing about NGO-corporate alliances has not given primacy to the communication of these relationships. In contrast, the SSM, advanced in this paper, examines communication as the “primary constitutive social process” (Craig, 1999, p. 126) that allows for alliances to be symbolized and capital mobilized. In particular, the SSM contends the alliance is made known to stakeholders through communication between alliance partners and stakeholders. Communication in this context includes interpersonal, organizational, and mass-mediated messages between alliance partners and stakeholders. The SSM offers a macro-level of analysis to illuminate how communication of alliances’ existence and character influences the pattern of NGO-corporate alliances likely to emerge.

Symbiotic Sustainability Model

The SSM is based in a community ecology view (Astley, 1985; Bryant & Monge, 2008; Hawley, 1986; Shumate et al., 2005) of organizational networks. Using an ecology viewpoint allows the SSM to consider NGO-corporate alliances broadly, thus avoiding the idiosyncrasies of any single alliance’s outcomes and discourse. Community ecology suggests that relationships between organizational populations, as in the case of NGO-corporate alliances, are different than relationships between organizations in the same population (i.e., alliances among NGOs in an issue industry and alliances among corporations in an economic industry). Economic industry and issue industry are often used as proxies for delineating population boundaries (see Hannan, Pólos, & Carroll, 2007 for a review). Industry is a common and, in the case of economic

industry, regulated classification system describing organizations that provide a common service. For economic industries, classification is based upon the services or goods produced and sold by the set of organizations (e.g., general merchandisers, mining and crude oil production). For issue industries, the common service describes activity designed to address a particular type of social issue (e.g., education, fine arts and humanities) (Shumate & Dewitt, 2008; Shumate, Fulk & Monge, 2005). The relationships between organizations across populations can be commensalistic or symbiotic. “*Symbiosis* denotes a mutual dependence between dissimilar units, whereas *commensalism* means that units make similar demands of the environment” (Aldrich & Reuf, 2006, p. 243).

Dobrev, Ozdemir and Teo (2006) identify two types of niches where organizational populations may overlap: resource and identity niches. Resource niche overlap is well documented in the community ecology literature and refers to environmental demands for resources such as customer base, employees, volunteers (see Aldrich & Reuf, 2006 for a summary of this research). Identity niche overlap refers to the overlap in either the functional or ideological identity niche. Functional identity niches are defined as “the services that the organizations provide” (Dobrev et al., 2006, p. 583), whereas ideological identity niches refer to the “structure of ownership, authority relations, and governance” (p. 583) of organizations. When two organizations act within the same niche, their relationship is commensalistic and can range from full competition to full mutualism. For example, Dobrev and colleagues demonstrate that financial cooperatives and commercial banks in Singapore overlapped in both resource and functional identity niches. As such, the relationships among these organizations was commensalistic and, in this case, fully competitive. In contrast, symbiosis refers to organizational populations that do not draw on the same resources in either identity or resource niches. For

example, Brittan (1994) demonstrates how venture capitalists and high-technology firms exist in a symbiotic relationship that allows both populations to benefit, while not sharing resource or identity niches. Because venture capitalist and high-technology firms do not potentially compete for the same workforce pool or market share, offer different products, and have different ways of providing those services, they do not have overlapping niches.

Similarly, the SSM suggests that corporations and NGOs in alliances operate in different populations and those populations do not have overlapping resource or identity niches. As such, any beneficial relationship between these organizations is symbiotic in nature. Such relationships are based upon interdependencies and occur when organizations in a population branch out from their original functional identity “to fulfill ancillary roles” (Astley, 1985, p. 236). By engaging in symbiotic relationships, organizations “voluntarily trade market independence (or some other form of independence) for community interdependence” in order to buffer themselves from environmental disturbances (Bryant & Monge, 2008, p. 166). When organizations are in sustained symbiotic relationships, Hawley (1986) notes they are more buffered from dramatic environmental changes (e.g., boycotts, social protest, and fundraising and media coverage drift).

Rationale and Assumptions of the Symbiotic Sustainability Model

By grounding the SSM in community ecology, the model makes two assumptions. First, organizations and their populations are responsive to their environment. We suggest that an organization’s environment is dynamic, changing as a result of the activities of organizations in the environment and stakeholder activities. A dense network of relationships among stakeholders creates an even more dynamic and complex environment for organizations (Rowley, 1997). Second, the SSM views symbiotic relationships between various NGO issue industries and corporate economic industries as a network. While for the sake of clarity, we discuss alliances in

terms of dyadic relationships and individual elements, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Interdependencies between the elements described in the propositions play an important role in the configuration of the NGO-corporate alliance network.

However, community ecology alone does not explain the pattern of NGO-corporate alliances. The SSM is a communication model that, while relying on community ecology, makes additional assumptions. The SSM views the network of NGO-corporate alliances as a representational network (Shumate & Lipp, 2008). Unlike flow networks, where messages and resources flow between actors, in representational networks, links represent the public affiliation of two or more actors.

In the SSM, interorganizational communication is understood as the messages that NGOs and corporations create in order enter the public dialogue, offer legitimacy claims, and create positive relationships with publics that can influence their institutional operating environments (Botan & Taylor, 2004; R. L. Heath, 1997; Waltzer, 1988). Prior research on interorganizational relationships has focused on the formation and maintenance of alliance ties via communication (i.e., activity coordination in McPhee and Zaug's (2000) model). As such, this research has ignored the role of the representation of the alliance to stakeholders (i.e., institutional positioning). By focusing on the NGO-corporate alliance network as a representational network, the benefits of the alliance do not originate from the flow of resources or information between the alliance partners. Instead, the SSM suggests that both NGOs and corporations may be assigned capital from stakeholders because of the public affiliation of the two organizations. Thus, the benefits and risks of NGO-corporate alliances are inextricably tied to the communication of the existence and character of the alliance with stakeholders. Both NGOs and

corporations may potentially benefit from the communication of their functional differences, while communicatively aligning themselves (see Stewart et al., 1989) with the alliance partner.

The SSM focuses on the representational network for two reasons. First, corporations and NGOs alike incur significant financial costs to communicate their value to various stakeholders, including the existence and character of NGO-corporate alliances (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). For example, the buy (RED) campaign, where a portion of the profits from (RED) products from the Gap, Motorola, Apple, Armani, Converse, and American Express go to the Global Fund, in order to buy AIDS medications for Africans (<http://www.joinred.com/>), is among the most publicized set of NGO-corporate alliances in recent years. According to *Advertising Age*, \$100 million was spent on publicizing the buy (RED) campaign. Yet, the alliance has raised only \$18 million for the Global Fund (Frazier, 2007). This level of spending suggests that the communication of the existence and character of NGO-corporate alliances to stakeholders should be given primacy in scholarly research about these alliances (see Edwards, 2006 for an addition exemplar of NGO-corporate alliance communication). Further, a growing network of corporations and NGOs are developing alliance brands (Winthrop, 1999). Brand alignment allows corporations to communicate and market to socially conscious consumers. Co-branding also allows premium prices to be charged for products and raises awareness about social issues among consumers beyond NGOs' more traditional stakeholders. While scholars have provided extensive normative evaluations of corporate social responsibility (for example Stohl, Stohl, & Townsley, 2007) and descriptive accounts of campaigns (S. King, 2006; O'Connor, 2006), the role of institutional positioning communication in NGO-corporate alliances has not been the focus.

Second, because NGOs and corporations do not share identity niches (Dobrev et al., 2006), the communication of the existence and character of an alliance with organizations in another identity niche allows both organizations to communicate another identity to stakeholders. The corporation's functional and ideological identity is related to revenue-generation and profit-making (Friedman, 1970). In contrast, NGOs' functional identity is related to the social issue they engage and their ideological identity is related to the "the principles of volunteerism and altruism" (Suar, Hota, & Sinha, 2006, p. 161). Lewis (2005) summarizes these differences; NGOs are more mission-centered than corporations, rely more heavily on social capital and volunteer relationships than their corporate counterparts, and corporations do not have the same outward, social focus of NGOs, regardless of levels of corporate social responsibility. Thus, NGOs are able to associate themselves with the identity of a product or organization within a corporation's identity niche and corporations are able to associate themselves with a social identity within a NGO's identity niche.

Following social identity theory, when an organization takes on an "ancillary role" (Astley, 1985), a set of identity-creating processes take place (Stryker & Burke, 2000). One of the most important of these processes is identity verification (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Identity verification is a process where "actors seek to validate or affirm their identities through processes of symbolic exchange with different segments of their heterogeneous environment. It is through these processes that actors various identities are legitimated (and de-legitimated) over time" (pp. 245-246). As such, the interdependence of these two types of organizations must be socially constructed through communication. The introduction of a new business line or a new program fits within the existing socially codified identity niches of these organizations. For example, when the American Heart Association introduced the Choose to Move program to encourage

women to exercise and improve their heart health, such a program fit within their existing role and identity within the interorganizational environment (i.e., the promotion of heart health). However, NGO-corporate alliances represent affiliations among organizations in different identity niches and thus lack pre-existing socially codified identities (see Pólos, Hannan & Carroll, 2002). For example, when Macy's became the primary sponsor of the American Heart Association's GoRed for Women campaign, Macy's took on the ancillary role of promoting women's heart health. In such cases, the constitution of the alliance should be characterized by high levels of institutional positioning communication (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) to establish an agreed upon definition of its existence and character.

Role of Communication in Cross-Sector Alliances

The SSM poses that communication of the existence and character of alliances to stakeholders is central to the benefit realization of these relationships. The communication of the *existence* and *character*, or identity, refers to the institutional positioning communication (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) of the NGO-corporate alliance. Communication of cross-sector alliances occurs through multiple channels including: public relations and advertising campaigns, cross-branding, and interpersonal communication between organizational stakeholders and leaders. Following legitimacy theory (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995), we suggest that the *value* of alliances is conferred upon organizations by stakeholders. As such, the representational networks' configuration and the value of particular ties within the network are created through communication of alliances' existence and character with stakeholders and stakeholders' response.

When NGOs and corporations form alliances, their functional differences may make such communication particularly influential. In Starbucks' alliance with Conservation International,

both alliance partners have managed their relationships with stakeholders, taking on critics of their alliance (Bowen, 2004), and publicizing their successes (Austin & Reavis, 2002). For example, when the *World Watch* magazine criticized Conservation International's collaboration with businesses, including Starbucks, as influencing their commitment to conservation and indigenous peoples, Conservation International fired back in a press release with a line by line rebuttal. In order to reap the benefits of the alliance, both NGOs and corporations must retain their independence and functional differences while being engaged symbiotically. Sue Mecklenburg of Starbucks argues that Conservation International needed "to maintain their independence as an NGO, otherwise what they say is not really [of] the same value as it would have been [if] had you gotten them to agree to say only what you'd like them to say" (Austin & Reavis, 2002, p. 9). The valuation of NGO-corporate alliances is based upon stakeholders' assessment of the legitimacy and worth of the partner's organizational purpose and execution of that purpose. Therefore, we propose that:

P1: The existence, character, and valuation of NGO-corporate alliances is communicatively co-constructed by alliance partners and stakeholders.

Capital Mobilization in NGO-Corporate Alliances

The SSM suggests that the communication of the existence and character of NGO-corporate alliances with stakeholders is critical to understanding these cross-sector relationships. The communication of cross-sector alliances with stakeholders allows alliance partners to potentially mobilize capital that would not be available to these organizations otherwise. Symbiotic relationships allow organizations to take on "ancillary roles" (Astley, 1985) and thereby access capital from stakeholders who verify the identity (Kraatz & Block, 2008) of the

alliance. Stakeholders are conceptualized as having influence in the mobilization and/or restriction of capital for both NGOs and corporations.

Forms of capital. We rely on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital accumulation³ to understand the role of communication in the mobilization of various forms capital by stakeholders, including economic, social, cultural, and political capital. Bourdieu contends that the forms of capital are unique yet intimately related and organizations can increase the value of accumulated capital by diversification. The power of capital is increased when the forms are combined. Communication is the mechanism by which capital is mobilized and distinctions between organizations and their activities are made. Stakeholders may value or devalue an alliance between a corporation and NGO because it makes both the corporation and NGO distinguished from other organizations that do not have cross-sector alliances. As noted by Deetz (1992), "no employment of a distinction can be neutral. The distinction values: the difference is worth noting, and that we are going to utilize that difference to make a distinction" (p. 132). Thus, the communication of a cross-sector alliance to stakeholders aims to make both the NGO and corporation distinct from other organizations with similar social issue focus or within the same economic industry. Stakeholders and alliance partners utilize and rely on those communicatively created distinctions to mobilize and/or restrict capital.

Communication and capital. The value of capital, in all its forms, is communicatively framed, maintained, interpreted, and made meaningful by alliance partners and stakeholders. In NGO-corporate alliances, both organizations seek to accumulate various forms of capital. However, the form(s) and amount of capital desired by each partner may be distinct. For example, an NGO may seek economic capital while a corporation may want to accumulate cultural capital from communicating the alliance. Similarly, NGOs and corporations may

communicate the alliance in order to accumulate capital from different stakeholder groups or from the same stakeholder group. A corporation's stakeholders may include shareholders, employees, regulators, customers, and communities in which they operate. A NGO's stakeholders may include staff, volunteers, grantors, donors, political leaders, and issue publics. While some corporations and NGOs may share stakeholders, for example employees of a corporation may also be donors for a NGO, other stakeholder groups are distinct. The SSM suggests that the communication of the NGO-corporate alliance may be co-constructed in different ways by different stakeholder groups.

Particular stakeholders mobilize and/or restrict capital in response to alliance communication. If stakeholders verify the existence and character of the alliance and positively value the alliance, they will mobilize capital for an organization that was not previously available. The communication of a cross-sector alliance allows both NGOs and corporations to distinguish themselves from other organizations in their respective industries. However, following Edwards (2006), we suggest that stakeholders are not simply recipients of organizational communication regarding the value of alliances. Stakeholders may also restrict capital based upon their valuation of the NGO-corporate alliance. Stakeholders restrict capital when they limit organizational access to previously available capital. When organizations communicate the existence and character of NGO-corporate alliances, through institutional positioning communication, stakeholders may reject the asserted identity. First, the stakeholders may question the legitimacy of one or both partners' functional and/or ideological identities. For example, if a NGO's leaders have misappropriated funds, a cross-sector alliance may be devalued because the stakeholders may question the legitimacy of the NGOs ideological identity. Second, stakeholders may question the compatibility of the identities of the two organizations

forming the cross-sector alliance. O'Connor, Shumate, and Meister (2008) found that some stakeholders believed that a corporation should only engage social issues directly linked to their core business operations. For example, stakeholders of mining companies may mobilize capital in response to alliances with environmental NGOs, but restrict capital in response to an alliances with fine arts NGOs. Third, stakeholders may question the functional or ideological identity of the NGO-corporate alliance. For example, critics of the buy (RED) campaign have launched a counter-campaign entitled buy(LESS) (see www.buylesscrap.org). These critics question the functional and ideological identity of the NGO-corporate alliance, rather than the legitimacy of either the Global Fund or its corporate partners. Stakeholders' valuation may be communicated to others in their network, through interpersonal or mass-mediated communication. In sum:

P2: Cross-sector alliance partners and stakeholders' communication and co-construction of the existence, character, and valuation of the alliance mobilizes and/or restricts various forms of capital for NGOs and corporations.

Choice of Alliance Partners

The SSM suggests organizations that have relationships with coveted stakeholders and have already accumulated desired capital from stakeholders will be more attractive as cross-sector alliance partners. Alliances with such organizations allow the partnering organization to access stakeholders and associated capital existing in different resource and/or identity niches. For example, in the McDonalds-Environmental Defense Fund alliance, McDonald's reservoir of economic, social, and cultural capital made them an attractive partner for the Environmental Defense Fund (Livesey, 1999). Similarly, "EDF's position as a mainstream environmental group made it an attractive ally" (Livesey, 1999, p. 14). Further, the choice of alliance partner is influenced by their position in the existing network of symbiotic relationships. Previous or

current successful cross-sector alliances provide additional evidence of an alliance partner's ability to mobilize desired stakeholder capital. However, if a potential alliance partner has existing alliances with competitors, they will be less attractive, since capital associated with their stakeholders has already been mobilized for a competitor and, thus, may not be readily available to the organization.⁴ Therefore:

P3: Alliance partner choice is influenced by the alliance partner's perceived ability to mobilize stakeholders and their associated capital, as evidenced by the partner's already accumulated capital and their current position in the symbiotic network.

One way that organizations reduce uncertainty is by mimicking behavior has been successful for other organizations (Haunschild & Miner, 1997). Similarly, organizations may use *outcome imitation* as one mechanism to decide from which economic or issue industry to choose a partner. For example, if Ford's partnership with Susan G. Komen for the Cure yields benefits for Ford, other automobile manufacturers may be more likely to seek out an alliance with a health NGO. Therefore,

P3a: Organizations are more likely to seek alliance partners in an economic or issue industry if competitors within their industry have sought similar alliances with partners in that industry and have achieved gains.

While outcome imitation and mimicking may be one way to reduce uncertainty, choosing to partner with the same NGO or corporation as a competitor has drawbacks. The benefits of NGO-corporate alliances, according to the SSM, are derived through institutional positioning communication. If an organization has a cross-sector alliance with the same organization as competitors, the unique place of the alliance within the interorganizational system is diminished. Therefore, we propose:

P3b: Organizations are less likely to seek alliances with partners that have an existing relationship with another organization in their industry.

Prior interorganizational alliance research suggests that past alliance success increases the probability of an organization being selected as an alliance partner (Gulati & Gargiulo, 1999). However, for cross-sector alliances, prior success must be related to a NGO-corporate alliance rather than an intra-industry alliance. Past success may be evidenced by the amount and type of capital accumulated in a prior NGO-corporate alliance.

P3c: Organizations are more likely to seek alliance partners who have had a prior cross-sector alliance that led to capital accumulation for another alliance partner outside of their industry.

Number of Alliances Communicated

The SSM suggests that there are diminishing returns as the number of alliances communicated increases. While public goods research on interorganizational alliances suggests an increase in return as the number of alliance partners increase (Monge et al., 1998), the resource-based view suggests that there is a high cost to maintaining multiple alliances (Burt, 1982). Both public goods theory and the resource-based view have application to networks of alliances in which activity coordination (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) is described. However, these theories do not suggest theoretical mechanisms for representational networks in which institutional positioning (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) is described. In representational networks, the returns are derived through communication about the relationship with parties external to the relationship, such as stakeholders, governments, and organizational members. The SSM draws its proposition about the number of cross-sector alliances likely to be communicated from Cialdini's (1993) scarcity principle. The scarcity principle suggests that, when opportunities are

perceived as limited, their value increases. Thus, if the number of cross-sector alliances communicated by an organization is limited, the communication of the existence and character of those alliances to stakeholders will be more persuasive. In contrast, communicating numerous NGO-corporate alliances may result in fragmented communication.

The fragmentation of communication and stakeholder capital may result in a dispersion of capital among multiple alliance partners, whereas a limited number of alliances may allow more capital to be accumulated by each partner. As noted by McIntosh (2007), stakeholders have “great awareness of the values that a particular brand or corporate entity embodies” (p. 54). Corporations may seek to be associated with particular issues (Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006) and NGOs may seek to be associated with particular types of economic industries and their products. For example, Rainforest Alliance chose to be associated with Chiquita because of its desire to be associated with bananas as a product (J. G. Taylor & Scharlin, 2004). In the case of NGO-corporate alliances, communication about too many alliance partners may result in conflicting or confusing value statements.

When organizations first realize the benefits of symbiosis, they will continue seeking new alliance partners in order to exploit gains from stakeholders. In general, new alliance partners must represent opportunities to communicate with stakeholder groups unavailable or underrepresented in pre-existing NGO-corporate alliances. The exact number of alliances to communicate is a strategic choice, driven in part by competitors’ choices and the nature of the industry. However, preliminary empirical research suggests that organizations may limit the number of alliances that are communicated to stakeholders to one or two organizations per issue or economic industry (see XXX, 2008). Thus:

P4: As the number of cross-sector alliance partners increases, the communication of such alliances results in a diminishing return from stakeholders; conversely, the communication of a limited number of alliances increases perceptions of value.

Risks of NGO-Corporate Alliances

The SSM suggests that the largest cross-sector relationship risk arises when alliances are unable to communicate their value, benefits, and legitimacy to *both organizations' stakeholders*. First, the legitimacy of one or both organizations' function and/or ideological identities may be questioned by their own stakeholders for the reasons specified above. The NGO may be viewed as "selling out" or being captured (Rodgers, 2000). For example, when Greenpeace worked with Foron, a refrigeration company, to produce a compressor and refrigerator that ran on an alternative ozone/climate safe refrigerant, some critics charged that the NGO was "losing its radical edge" and "abandoning boats for suits" (Hartman & Stafford, 2006, p. 56). The corporation may be viewed as failing to meet its duty to shareholders by concentrating on the potential long-term rewards of such alliances or capitulating to the desires of a non-legitimate stakeholder (Mitchell et al., 1997). Second, NGOs and corporations in alliances are vulnerable to criticisms from partners' stakeholders. For NGOs, this includes criticisms from NGOs across issue industries that are concerned about the corporation's activities and a corporation's shareholders who may question the legitimacy of the NGO's activities. For corporations, criticism may arise from NGO stakeholders, including members of the NGO who are not convinced of the value of the alliance (Westely & Vredenburg, 1991).

P5: NGOs and corporations in alliances risk a loss of legitimacy from their own stakeholders and criticism from the alliance partner's stakeholders.

Potential Rewards

The SSM suggests that both capital from alliance partners' stakeholders and protection in a changing environment may be the result of enduring NGO-corporate alliances. Drawing from community ecology (Hawley, 1986), the SSM poses that organizations in enduring symbiotic relationships will be more buffered from environmental perturbations than organizations not in symbiotic relationships. Enduring, in this case, is not defined in terms of time, but based upon the ability of the organizations to constitute an agreed upon social identity for the alliance that is verified by stakeholders (Kraatz & Block, 2008). NGO-corporate alliances that experience stakeholders restricting capital must negotiate the existence, character, and valuation of the alliance in order to gain acceptance from stakeholders. This negotiation may occur through direct exchange with stakeholder groups or through the use of persuasive campaign strategies to demonstrate the veracity of the identity claims.

Many NGO-corporate alliances may crumble under pressure from stakeholders (see proposition 5) and thus would not achieve the goal of sustainability. For example, when Pollution Probe received criticism from Greenpeace for their endorsement of a questionable line of green products produced by Loblaws, a Canadian grocery chain, the alliance quickly dissolved (Westely & Vredenburg, 1991). Neither Loblaws nor Pollution Probe reaped the rewards of the cross-sector alliance, and both organizations incurred costs including expenditures related to communicating the alliance and damage to their respective reputations.

However, when NGO-corporate alliances endure, sustainability may be achieved. As such, corporations in symbiotic relationships with NGOs would be less likely to experience boycotts, social protest, and substantial changes in government regulation of their business practices. Similarly, NGOs in symbiotic relationships would be less likely to experience

fundraising drift due to shifting public opinion and more likely to receive consistent media attention. NGO-corporate alliances that are symbiotic and sustainable can create loyalty among stakeholders based on the value premises communicated. The level of attachment to the values represented by an enduring alliance is associated with increases in capital (Braun, 2004; Roberts, 2004). In combination, we propose that:

P6: NGO-corporate alliance partners will be more buffered from and less vulnerable to disturbances in their environments than corporations and NGOs not in enduring cross-sector alliances.

Communication and NGO-corporate alliances

While each of the propositions is described as independent above, the whole is more than the sum of its parts (see Figure). Each of the propositions relies upon communicating and re-communicating the identity of cross-sector alliances with stakeholders. As such, the communication and valuation of NGO-corporate alliances is a dynamic process. The identity of the alliance in the future is constrained on one hand by the normative expectations of stakeholders and on the other hand by the commitments made by both parties as the alliance was communicatively constituted (Kraatz & Block, 2008). In the Figure, proposition 2 is dissected into two parts: the mobilization of capital and the restriction of capital. If capital is mobilized for the alliance partners, the alliance must be reaffirmed to stakeholders in order to continue to reap the benefits, since public communication with stakeholders decays over time (Grunig & Repper, 1992). In contrast, if the alliance results in capital restriction by stakeholders, the alliance is considered risky. If the potential capital accumulation outweighs the costs, then alliance partners are likely to try to negotiate with stakeholders. However, if the costs outweigh the potential capital accumulation, then the alliance will no longer be communicated; further, if the benefits of

the alliance were derived through institutional positioning communication, then alliance partners may dissolve the alliance

The SSM is a macro-model that takes into consideration other organizations' accumulation of capital and their position within the symbiotic network. Drawing from community ecology theory (Hawley, 1986), being buffered from a dynamic environment is one of the reasons why organizations form symbiotic relationships. This is visualized in the Figure as a dashed starburst that insulates the symbiotically sustainable cross-sector alliance from the environment. However, NGO-corporate alliances are only buffered from a changing environment; they are not immune to changing evaluations from stakeholders. Stakeholders continually re-evaluate organizations in comparison with others in the same industry (O'Connor, Shumate, & Meister, 2008). The NGO-corporate alliance co-evolves with the expectations of stakeholders and their willingness to mobilize capital for organizations that fulfill particular ancillary roles. As the network evolves, new communication strategies are likely to emerge and a different portfolio of alliances (Hoffman, 2007) may be communicated.

The SSM posits that the communication of NGO-corporate alliances is fundamental to understanding alliance partner choice, capital accumulation, and the risks and rewards of these alliances. At the center of the model is the communicative constitution (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) of the NGO-corporate alliance. The risks and rewards of NGO-corporate alliances are related to the communication of its existence and character. This process, while initiated by the alliance partners, eventually occurs in concert with stakeholders and is perhaps best described as identity verification (Kraatz & Block, 2008). NGO-corporate alliances are communicated to stakeholders through a variety of channels. Alliance partners spend economic capital to influence stakeholder perceptions of the alliance and its partners, often through public communication. In turn,

stakeholders communicate their evaluation of NGO-corporate alliances through their own counter-campaigns, amplifying campaigns, and interpersonal communication with other stakeholders. Such communication influences the mobilization, and/or restriction of various forms of capital. In order to enjoy the benefits of symbiotic sustainability, the SSM suggests that the character of the alliance is continually subjected to co-construction by stakeholders and alliance partners. As such, NGO-corporate alliances are not retained but instead re-enacted and re-affirmed (Weick, 1979).

Illustration

The SSM, as a macro-level model, seeks to explain the network of NGO-corporate alliances and examines NGO-corporate alliances as the unit of analysis. At the risk of oversimplification, we turn to a case study to illustrate the model. In doing so, we describe the above elements and their interdependencies in the context of a single sustained NGO-corporate alliance: Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita's (formerly United Fruits) Better Banana Program. The goal of this section is to illustrate the elements of the SSM through an abbreviated case study. While the case is illustrative of the elements of the model, it is not a test of the propositions. We selected the Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita alliance⁶ for the following reasons. First, the alliance has been well-documented, thus providing ample information on both the process and the products derived (Alserver, 2006; Chiquita, 2007; Esty & Winston, 2006; Morgan, 2006; Nickbarg, 2006; Rainforest Alliance, 2000, 2007; Stein, 2001; J. G. Taylor & Scharlin, 2004). Second, the alliance has demonstrated symbiotic sustainability characteristics. Third, the alliance demonstrates the role of communication in both emphasizing NGO and corporation functional and/or ideological identities while minimizing the differences between these organizations' identities and the alliance.

The Rainforest Alliance is a NGO, based in New York. It was founded in 1986 with few members and no revenues (Landau, 1993). In 1990, the Rainforest Alliance began to develop its niche in the NGO landscape, the environmental certification of cash crops. Their first major program, SmartWood, certified areas in Indonesia to be harvested by timber companies (Alserver, 2006). As such, the Rainforest Alliance built a reputation as a business-friendly NGO, who had legitimacy among environmental NGOs (Landau, 1993). In addition, Rainforest Alliance had established the ECO-OK brand, giving it a cultural capital advantage. Rainforest Alliance, while having some success with the SmartWood program, needed to show their stakeholders that they could do more and get environmental concessions from another industry.

Chiquita has a checkered past on environmental and social issues. In the 1950s, Chiquita funded a Central Intelligence Agency-led coup to oust the democratically-elected leader of Guatemala based on concerns about the new leadership's agricultural policies (Esty & Winston, 2006). In short, "For decades the \$3.9-billion-a-year fruit giant was synonymous with the notion of the rapacious multinational. Farm workers toiled long hours in dangerous conditions, agrochemical runoff contaminated water, and tropical forests were cleared for expansion" (Alserver, 2006, p. 73). Chiquita found itself in the midst of a financial and brand crisis. "Banana customers and activist in northern Europe cared about how bananas are grown and how workers are treated thousands of miles away in the tropics. They rallied behind a protectionist European Union quota, tariff, and license system that sharply cut Chiquita's potential banana market" (J. G. Taylor & Scharlin, 2004, p. 9). Chiquita faced Chapter 11 bankruptcy as a result (Stein, 2001). Both Chiquita and Rainforest Alliance lacked forms of capital necessary to fulfill their publicly communicated mission statements; thus they sought a suitable alliance partner.

Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita have developed their current alliance for over a decade (see J. G. Taylor & Scharlin, 2004). In 1994, Rainforest Alliance initiated communication with potential partners in a non-traditional way. They placed an ad in *Ranger Rick* magazine, a publication of the National Wildlife Federation, encouraging children to write the CEOs of Chiquita, Del Monte Fresh, and Dole to “make all of their plantations ECO-OK” (p. 34). Letters from around the country poured into the banana companies from children urging them to comply with certification standards set out by Rainforest Alliance.

That year, due in part to pre-existing social relationships between managers of Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita, the first meeting between representatives of the two organizations occurred. The meeting has been described as somewhere “between hostile and neutral” (J. G. Taylor & Scharlin, 2004, p. 35). However, top officials kept meeting and Chiquita’s Latin American Farm management agreed to pilot Rainforest Alliance’s green certification in 1995. The first press releases about the relationship were created by Rainforest Alliance. By 1999, an extensive certification protocol had been developed and used on Chiquita Farms throughout Latin America. In 2001, Chiquita published its first Corporate Social Responsibility Annual Report including information on the progress and certification of many of their farms. In 2005, Chiquita and Rainforest Alliance launched a new co-branding effort targeted at the European banana market. The alliance continues today.

Choice of Alliance Partner

The SSM suggests that a partner’s accumulated capital and existing position in the symbiotic network creates a signal to potential allies that they are capable of mobilizing capital from stakeholders. Rainforest Alliance had the economic and cultural capital to make them an attractive alliance partner. Their previous environmental certification experience with the

SmartWood program demonstrated that they had sufficient economic capital to run a certification program and the ECO-OK brand gained prominence because of the program's success.

Additionally, Rainforest Alliance possessed social capital through their relationships with Costa Rican NGOs. This meant that there were local NGOs on the ground that could help to monitor and certify plantations. Further, Rainforest Alliance, as an environmental NGO, had the political capital to influence environmentally conscious stakeholders, including other politically active NGOs. In short, the NGO with the economic, social, cultural, and political capital to certify Chiquita plantations was Rainforest Alliance. Finally, Rainforest Alliance had no existing alliances with other corporations in the banana industry.

Rainforest Alliance strategically chose both the banana industry in general and Chiquita in particular because of the economic, social, cultural, and political capital accumulated.

Bananas, as a product, have cultural capital. Bananas are the 4th most important crop in the world with a market size of nearly \$5 billion a year (Nickbarg, 2006). Within the industry, Chiquita had accumulated substantial economic and cultural capital. First, Chiquita supplies 25% of the banana consumption in North America and Europe (Nickbarg, 2006). Second, Chiquita has historically placed a large investment in its brand, being one of the first companies to place the brand sticker on each of its bananas. As such, Robert Kisting, president and COO of Chiquita Fresh group states: "the Chiquita brand is the single most valuable asset the company owns – 'more valuable than our farms and more valuable than our ships'" (J. G. Taylor & Scharlin, 2004, p. 54). This brand valuation distinguished Chiquita's cultural capital accumulation from Del Monte or Dole. Further, Chiquita had no existing alliances with environmental NGOs, allowing Rainforest Alliance to make a more persuasive argument about the alliance's value.

Thus, the Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita alliance illustrates how organizations' capital accumulation and position in the symbiotic network influences the choice of alliance partners.

Role of Communication in the Valuation of the Rainforest Alliance-Chiquita Alliance

The SSM suggests that the communication of cross-sector alliances is the essential element in their valuation. Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita found in each other alliance partners that could provide opportunities to communicate with stakeholders and mobilize capital that individually they could not. The alliance provided each partner with unique communication messages to internal and external stakeholders. Chiquita was able to communicate to external stakeholders its compliance with environmental regulations and that its farms had been independently certified. Rainforest Alliance was able to communicate to stakeholders that it had achieved what other NGOs could not by gaining on the ground access to Chiquita farms and enforcing standards previously resisted by the banana giant.

The Better Banana program promoted the alliance through a variety of activities including: "trade shows, letter-writing campaigns, publications, an extensive website, and developing personal contacts. The programme's marketing ... targeted industries and retailers" (Winthrop, 1999, p. 309). The Rainforest Alliance used its website and press releases to communicate the value of the Chiquita Alliance since its inception. In 2000, before the Chiquita corporate social responsibility report was released, Rainforest Alliance stated in a press release that through the Better Banana program "water quality, worker health and safety, and wildlife habitat were being protected" (Rainforest Alliance, 2000). The Rainforest Alliance's website currently features 63 articles about the alliance (Rainforest Alliance, 2007).

Chiquita began its communication strategy through the use of specialized communication targeted at particular intermediaries. In 2001, Chiquita created its first corporate social

responsibility annual report, which won several awards (Morgan, 2006). A letter from Rainforest Alliance stating the percentage of farms certified was featured at the beginning of the report.

Since then, Chiquita has featured its relationship with Rainforest Alliance in each of its

Corporate Responsibility Annual Reports and in separate reports. In 2003, the report stated:

We committed in the mid-1990s to achieve certification of all our company-owned banana farms to the rigorous standards of the Rainforest Alliance, a leading international conservation organization whose mission is to protect ecosystems and the people and wildlife that live within them by implementing better production practices for biodiversity, conservation, and sustainability. In 2003, for the fourth consecutive year, 100 percent of our owned farms in Latin America earned Rainforest Alliance certification on the basis of scheduled and surprise annual audits. In addition, we work with our independent growers to continually improve performance and achieve certification to the standards we adopt for our owned farms. At year-end 2003, 75 percent of independent-grower banana farms supplying Chiquita in Latin America were Rainforest Alliance certified, up from 33 percent two years earlier. WWW.RA.ORG (URL in original).

Dennis Christou, vice-president of marketing in Europe states Chiquita's early strategy:

Chiquita has decided not to communicate CSR [corporate social responsibility] in the classical sense of marketing communications by using it as an advertising message. We have decided to make it a much slower process by education leading opinion-makers, those with an interest in CSR and our critics. We want to convince them that we're doing is a real commitment toward change" (*Chiquita, A brand that is bearing fruit*, 2003, p. 16).

In 2005, the communication of the alliance reached new heights when Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita opted to create a new label, which links the Miss Chiquita icon and the Rainforest Alliance's tree frog logo. Chris Willie, director of sustainable agriculture programs at the Rainforest Alliance, explains:

As bananas are the No. 1-selling product in most grocery stores, to have a company like Chiquita adopt responsible cultivation practices has far-reaching benefits for the environment, farm workers, and the consumers ... The Rainforest Alliance-certified seal will help consumers recognize Chiquita's commitment and investment, and therefore allow them to make an informed decision about what they buy (*Labels show Chiquita bananas Rainforest certified*, 2005, ¶ 3).

In recent years, both organizations have launched a new round of advertising, in which co-branding and partnership have been visually represented to stakeholders. In one Dutch ad, an animated green Rainforest Alliance frog reclines on a large yellow banana 4 times its size, draping its long legs down the curve of the fruit. At the top of the advertisement, are the following words in large type: “ziehier ons nieuw vriendje” (here is our new boyfriend). The new co-branded Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita sticker that appears on each bunch of bananas in Europe is prominently displayed in the lower right hand corner and the URL for Rainforest Alliance in the bottom left.

Number of Alliance Partners Communicated

The SSM suggests that organizations will strategically communicate a limited number of cross-sector alliances in order to increase perceptions of value. Rainforest Alliance has restricted the scope of their alliances “mainly because of not wanting to spread itself too thin early in the evolution of its program” (J. G. Taylor & Scharlin, 2004, p. 78). Chiquita similarly sought out a

limited number of additional NGO alliances. Even under considerable pressure from European consumer groups, they have resisted relationships that would require them to meet different standards than that of the Better Banana program. Under pressure to adopt similar standards for human rights, Chiquita formed an alliance with Social Accountability International. Social Accountability International also provides a yearly certification to Chiquita farms (Werre, 2003), which appears next to the environmental certification from Rainforest Alliance in the Chiquita corporate social responsibility report (Chiquita, 2007). Thus, Chiquita and Rainforest Alliance have strategically communicated a limited number of cross-sector alliances to stakeholders.

Risks and Rewards of the Rainforest Alliance-Chiquita Alliance

The SSM suggests that cross-sector alliance partners face criticisms from their own stakeholders and inherit each others' critics. However, over time, they may be buffered from environmental disturbances, if the alliance's identity is verified (Kraatz & Block, 2008) by stakeholders. Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita's alliance illustrates this pattern.

Initially, the Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita alliance was criticized by local activists in Costa Rica, global activists in Europe, and the press. For example, Foro Emaus, a Costa Rican activist interviewed for J. G. Taylor and Schalin's (2004) book, stated that he viewed the Better Banana program as "greenwashing" and asserted that "Chiquita was paying off the Alliance" (p. 110). Similarly, Banana Link in the UK criticized the program as having lax standards. Most damaging was a 1998 report by *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, that challenged both the "the independence and rigor" of the certification process (Gallagher & McWhitter, 1998). Additionally, "by agreeing to work together in the certification process, Chiquita and the Rainforest Alliance inherited each other's critics" (J. G. Taylor & Scharlin, 2004, p. 135). In particular, the Rainforest Alliance was criticized by human rights observers for failing to hold

Chiquita to task on worker rights. Their relationship made them, in a sense, guilty by association. The Rainforest Alliance, a conservationist group, argued that it was not equipped to certify or work with Chiquita on labor and human rights issues.

Over time, however, the critics have largely been silenced (Foster, 2004; J. G. Taylor & Scharlin, 2004). The continued assertion and negotiation of an alliance with an identity based upon environmental certification makes Chiquita less of a target than Dole or smaller banana producers like Noboa. Rainforest Alliance, when they began their work with Chiquita had only the SmartWood experience, a small staff of nine, and a membership of 18,000 (Landau, 1993). While Landau suggested the Rainforest Alliance had become a “leading conservation organization with an active membership and agenda” (p. 47) before the Chiquita alliance, such recognition pales in comparison to its current place within the conservation industry. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations recognizes *Rainforest Alliance Certified* as the only NGO certification standard for environmental conservation (Dankers, 2003). Rainforest Alliance’s membership has grown to 33,000 and, since 2002, their revenues have grown from 6.1 million⁷ to 12 million (Rainforest Alliance, 2007). While the resources gained from the alliance partners directly were considerable, the capital mobilized by communication with stakeholders was of greater impact to both Chiquita and the Rainforest Alliance.

Chiquita declared bankruptcy in 2001, the same year as all of their farms were first certified by the Better Banana program. Since then, Chiquita was chosen by several major banana retailers as their supplier, has been added to several socially conscious investing indices, and has won several awards for its 2001 corporate social responsibility report (Werre, 2003). *Fortune* noted that Chiquita had “cleaned up its act” (Alserver, 2006, p. 73), featuring the banana producer’s relationship with the Rainforest Alliance. Chiquita has grown to annual revenues of

\$4.5 billion and in 2006 had the number one share of the EU Latin American banana market (Chiquita, 2007).

In sum, the Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita alliance provides an illustrative example each of the elements of the SSM. By communicating a limited number of alliances, perceived value was created that translated into tangible benefits for both organizations. Those benefits included economic, social, cultural, and political capital. The communicative co-constitution of the alliance with stakeholders allowed the alliance to achieve symbiotic sustainability.

Implications

The SSM makes three contributions to communication theory. First, the SSM highlights the central role of communication with stakeholders in constituting (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) the existence and character of NGO-corporate alliances. The SSM uniquely focuses on the representational network (Shumate & Lipp, 2008), rather than the flow of messages or resources among alliance partners. In doing so, the SSM offers insight into questions involving the portfolio of alliances likely to be communicated and the risks and rewards of such representation.

Second, the SSM considers stakeholders as having a co-constitutive, active role in the characterization of cross-sector alliances. The communicative positioning of the alliance influences whether the relationship is legitimized and capital mobilized. Stakeholders are not viewed as passive recipients of organizations' claims, but instead evaluate the content of those claims in terms of the identities of both partners, their perceived compatibility, and the identity of the alliance. Further, since NGOs and corporations do not share the same resource or identity niches, the communicative co-constitution (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) and identity verification (Kraatz & Block, 2008) of NGO-corporate alliances are essential, since both organizations take on ancillary roles when forming a symbiotic relationship (Astley, 1985). Drawing from

community ecology (Hawley, 1986), the SSM suggests that creating and communicating a cross-sector alliance, if its existence and character are positively valued by stakeholders, has the potential to buffer both partners from environmental disturbances better than a program launched independently by either organization.

Finally, the SSM as a macro-level model seeks to explain the network of NGO-corporate alliances across economic and issue industries. As a macro-level model, the SSM draws researchers' attention toward the network of relationships between particular economic industries and particular issue industries. The theory is generative in that it opens up a new set of issues for investigation including: popularity of social issues, the choice of alliance partners in context of the choices made by other NGOs and corporations, the implications of NGO-corporate alliance communication for both economic and social issue industries, the role of economic industries in setting the agenda for prominent social issues, and the cross/co-branding of alliances.

For managers of corporations and executive directors of NGOs, the SSM offers some practical guidance for the communication of cross-sector alliances. First, the SSM suggests that the evaluation of cross-sector alliances by stakeholders will at least in part be influenced by stakeholders' assessment of the legitimacy and worth of the partner's organizational purpose and execution of that purpose. As such, formative research on stakeholders' perceptions of the potential partner may aid organizations in evaluating the potential costs and benefits of cross-sector alliances. Second, the SSM suggests that cross-sector alliances may open up new risks to organizations, arising from contentious stakeholders of the partner organization. Managers and executive directors would do well to identify potential partners' disgruntled stakeholders before engaging in cross-sector alliances. Even with diligent research, however, managers and executive directors cannot fully anticipate potential criticisms of a NGO-corporate alliances' functional

and/or ideological identity. As such, feedback from stakeholders should be continually monitored (R. L. Heath, 1997). Finally, the SSM suggests that the rewards of a cross-sector alliance are derived from its communicative constitution. Both alliance partners should recognize the large expenditures associated with communicating the existence and character of the alliance with stakeholders. Further, if the alliance receives public criticism from stakeholders, the alliance partners may be subjected to the additional costs of a counter-campaign or negotiating with stakeholders.

The benefits of symbiotic and sustainable NGO-corporate alliances notwithstanding, we would be remiss not to discuss the implications of these alliances for corporate social responsibility. The SSM as a macro-level model draws attention to the industry-level impact of partner choice and number of alliances communicated. The SSM suggests that corporations and NGOs will strategically communicate a limited number of alliances. As such, the SSM begins to address the question of the right-right decision making in corporate social responsibility (Kidder, 1995; May, 2006). Right-right choices are “genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in one of our basic, core values” (Kidder, 1995, p. 18). Right-right decisions occur for corporations when they compare their fiduciary responsibility with their responsibility to an enlarging global commons. NGO-corporate alliances may represent a right-right-right dilemma for corporations, a decision balancing a corporation’s fiduciary responsibility, their responsibility to a global commons, and the various social issues which they might engage. This decision is not so much about whether to engage in socially responsible behavior, a significant issue also deserving of interest, but a dilemma about which socially responsible behavior to enact. Corporations must select among a number of potential right social issues in order to avoid fragmentation of communication to stakeholders. Thus, corporations may be motivated to choose

social issues and NGOs which they believe offer a *triple bottom line* (Elkington, 1998). As corporations increasingly take on bigger roles in the public sphere, such a focus on profitable social issues may leave many important issues isolated from the growing symbiotic network. Additionally, communication of acceptable NGO-corporate alliances raises questions about which social issues may be neglected in corporate-funded public communication. For example, when Chiquita decided to focus on its environmental footprint, it also made the decision not to engage “an increasingly militant international labor and farmers’ rights movement” (J. G. Taylor & Scharlin, 2004, p. 103).

Limitations and Future Directions

Admittedly, the communication focus of the SSM sacrifices other lines of inquiry. For example, the SSM does not provide answers about the civil society function that NGOs should serve or the scopes of activities for which corporations are responsible. Additionally, the model does not prioritize between the valuation of different types of capital (e.g., economic versus cultural) or the characteristics of different stakeholder groups (e.g., consumers versus suppliers, internal stakeholders versus external stakeholders). Further, the SSM does not suggest how the communication of cross-sector alliances may influence the (dis)identification of staff and their interpersonal discourse with both co-workers and external stakeholders groups. The SSM does not account for differences in communication channel and content in the co-construction of the alliances worth by stakeholders nor address issues of power in NGO-corporate alliances. Further, the SSM model does not address other types of cross-sector alliances including NGO-government and government-corporate alliances. Finally, by choosing a macro-level focus, in which the alliance is the unit of analysis, the SSM neglects the individual discourse that may occur among stakeholders as they make sense of the alliance.

Each of these limitations can be considered directions for future work. Specifically, research is needed that identifies the characteristics of alliance partners, stakeholders, and capital that influence the formation, endurance, and dissolution of NGO-corporate alliances. Additionally, we acknowledge that NGO-corporate alliances do not organically come into being. Instead, the characteristics of the communication for activity coordination (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) between alliance partners and stakeholders should be examined. This line of inquiry should include the channel and content of messages and the related persuasive implications. The ethical implications of NGO-corporate alliances remain largely unproblematized and should be further investigated.

Future research should also address the impact of the communication of cross-sector alliances on the internal stakeholders of both organizations. Public relations scholarship suggests a dynamic interplay between organizations' internal identity and external organizational image (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Further, Caillouet and Allen (1996) have demonstrated that employees' discourse with outsiders is influenced both by the organization's public image and their commitment to the organization. A ripe area for future research is to examine the impact of cross-sector alliances on both NGO and corporate employees' perceptions of the organization, commitment to the organizations, and discourse with external stakeholder groups.

Additionally future research should examine alliances between governments and corporations or NGOs. Increasingly governments have turned to NGOs as integral parts of service delivery (see Kim & Barnett, 2007). Additionally, as evidenced by recent government bailouts of corporations in the 2008 financial crisis, governments and corporations also have complex relationships. Future research would do well to investigate the implications of such relationships from a community ecology perspective (Hawley, 1986).

Conclusions

In this manuscript, we sought to answer the following question: How do we understand the growing network of NGO-corporate alliances? Our answer was to investigate the way that NGO-corporate alliances are symbolized to stakeholders. By focusing on the communication of the existence and character of the alliance, new propositions concerning the role of communication, capital mobilization, choice of alliance partner, number of alliance partners communicated, and the potential risks and rewards of such alliances emerged. We argue that such a change in focus is necessary in order to account for the significant expenditures related to communicating the alliance to stakeholders and because NGOs and corporations do not share identity or resource niches.

The SSM makes three contributions to communication theory. First, the SSM focuses on the representational network (Shumate & Lipp, 2008) created as NGOs, corporations, and stakeholders co-construct the existence and character of the cross-sector alliance. Second, the SSM considers stakeholders, NGOs, and corporations as each having an active role in alliance value creation and risk. Third, drawing on community ecology (Hawley, 1986), the SSM as a macro-level model provides propositions that may explain the network of NGO-corporate alliances across multiple economic and issue industries.

In this paper, we have offered a theoretical framework for understanding NGO-corporate alliances, specifying the descriptive characteristics of these relationships. There is a growing network of NGOs and corporations who are aligning their organizations publicly (McIntosh, 2007). NGO-corporate alliances represent a new way of thinking about the role of communication in the global commons.

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Footnotes

¹ We use the term NGO rather than nonprofits (NPOs) throughout for consistency across nations. NPO is generally used to refer to organizations who have gained 501(c)3 tax exempt status in the United States. Similar organizations are referred to as NGOs internationally. NGO as a term is inclusive of NPOs.

² As noted in the limitations section, by choosing a macro-focus rather than a micro-focus we do not focus on the individuals within or external to the organizations as the unit of analysis. Instead, the organizations and the alliance becomes the unit of analysis. Such a choice necessarily brings some issues into focus, while obscuring other issues.

³ Bourdieu was chosen because of a) inclusivity of multiple forms of capital, b) reliance on communication rather than structure to explain how capital is socially constructed, and c) premise that the different forms of capital are interconnected.

⁴ By network position, we refer to degree centrality in a symbiotic network that is block-modeled based upon industry as an attribute (see Wasserman & Faust, 1994 for an explanation of degree centrality and block-modeling). If an organization has a high degree centrality overall, but a small indegree centrality from an organization's own industry, we suggest they are more likely to be chosen as an alliance partner.

⁵ One of the blind reviewers for this article noted that the Rainforest Alliance-Chiquita example fits the model almost too well. When we initially developed the SSM, we developed network drawings of the various economic sectors and social issue sectors that might have connections depending upon their advantageous presentation to various stakeholder groups. We found that when our colleagues reviewed original drafts of the manuscript, the presentation was too abstract. So, we sought out many examples of NGO-corporate alliances to illustrate the

model more concretely. When we stumbled upon Taylor and Scharlin's (2004) book, we were delighted with the extended example. While the Rainforest Alliance-Chiquita alliance provides a nice example of the elements of the model, it does not suggest that the SSM is concerned only with organizational dyads. Instead, we envision the testing of the propositions will involve using the individual alliances as the unit of analysis in a large network study. One alliance would make for a very sparse test of the propositions indeed.

⁶ Growth in revenues determined by an examination of IRS 990 forms available at the Foundation Center's website (<http://dynamodata.fdncenter.org/990s/990search/eseach.php>).

Table 1: A comparison of the Symbiotic Sustainability Model (SSM) with three theoretical perspectives

Proposition	Theory	Claims
Role of	SSM	Valuation of alliance co-constructed by the alliance partners and stakeholders (P1)
Communication	TCE	Facilitate exchange between alliance partners (Dyer, 1997)
	Stakeholder Theory	Listen to and respond to expectations of important stakeholders (Freeman, 1984)
	Collaboration theory	Facilitates problem solving (Westley & Vrendenburg, 1997)
Capital	SSM	Stakeholders may mobilize and/or restrict capital due to communication and co-
Mobilization		construction of alliance's existence/character (P2)
	TCE	Economic capital gained through transaction (A. King, 2007; Williamson, 1981)
	Stakeholder Theory	Important or powerful stakeholders have capital (Mitchell et al., 1997)
	Collaboration Theory	Capital mobilized to solve organizational problems (Westley & Vrendenburg, 1997)

Table 1 continued

Choice of Partner	SSM	Alliance partner's perceived ability to mobilize the desired capital from stakeholders (P3)
	TCE	NGOs- fair dealing/ corporations-issue reputation is a valuable asset (A. King, 2007)
	Stakeholder Theory	NGOs that are powerful or legitimate corporate stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 1997)
	Collaboration Theory	Alliance partners are stakeholders in a macro-issue (Westley & Vredenburg, 1997)
Number of partners	SSM	Strategic communication of a limited number of alliances (P4)
	TCE	Depends ex post/ex ante transaction costs and benefits (A. King, 2007)
	Stakeholder Theory	None
	Collaboration Theory	Interorganizational network needed to solve meta-problems (Westely & Vredenburg, 1997)

Table 1 continued

Risks	SSM	Criticism from own and partner's stakeholders, leading to loss of capital (P5)
	TCE	Opportunistic behavior of alliance partner (A. King, 2007)
	Stakeholder Theory	Failure to meet expectations of important stakeholder group (Mitchell et al., 1997)
	Collaboration Theory	Investment results in disappointing outcomes/failures (Vanagen & Huxham, 2003)
Rewards	SSM	Buffered from disturbances in their environments (P6)
	TCE	Products or processes generated in the alliance (A. King, 2007; Williamson, 1981)
	Stakeholder Theory	Corporate social insurance in case of violation of social contract (Post et al., 2002)
	Collaboration Theory	Solution to the problem (Westley & Vrendenburg, 1997)

NOTE: TCE = Transaction Cost Economics

Table 2: Elements of the SSM illustrated through Rainforest-Alliance and Chiquita Alliance⁵

SSM Element	Illustrative example
Role of Communication	Better Banana program existence and character communicated via corporate social responsibility reports, letter-writing, press-releases, websites, advertising, and co-branding.
Capital Mobilization	Both Chiquita and Rainforest Alliance have reaped economic, social, political, and cultural capital from stakeholders in response to alliance.
Choice of Partner	Economic, social, cultural, and political capital and lack of existing relationship with other organization within industry made both organizations attractive alliance partners.
Number of partners	Both organizations have communicated a limited number of NGO-corporate alliances.
Risks	Criticism from both organization's own stakeholders and Rainforest Alliance received criticism from Chiquita's stakeholders.
Rewards	Alliance continues to be communicated to stakeholders. Both organizations maintain better position together than when separate and in comparison to their competitors.

Figure Caption

The Symbiotic Sustainability Model

