

Examining how Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) in Malaysia communicate with corporations

Chooi, Irene Mei Ting ✉

University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia (irene.chooimt@gmail.com)



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Abstract

Stakeholder demand for corporations to demonstrate greater ecological responsibility, as well as funding and mission pressures for Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS), has led to a rise in cross-sector partnerships between the two. Such partnerships are beneficial to both parties, but despite holding higher public trust, research shows ENGOS suffer more risks. There is a research gap on ENGO-Corporate partnerships in Malaysia. It is important to fill this gap as environmental sustainability is a global concern, but such efforts in a developing country like Malaysia are still in their infancy. This exploratory study aims to fill this gap by drawing from Stakeholder Theory to examine how ENGOS communicate with corporations in a partnership. A phenomenological, exploratory, semi-structured qualitative study was conducted with five members of ENGOS who had experience communicating with corporations. The research verifies that ENGOS in Malaysia are aware of partnership risks and emphasize communication before formalizing partnerships through screening and education as a method of risk mitigation. A novel finding is that some ENGOS in Malaysia perceive short-term partnerships to be greenwashing attempts. Ultimately, Malaysian ENGOS are aware of their disadvantages but are still willing to work with corporate partners to pursue their environmental mission. The results justify the need to expand the study and could be considered to motivate budding ENGOS to improve their self-protection mechanisms via legal contracts. The results could also inspire corporations to consider long-term sustainability partnerships.

Keywords: sustainability, SDG, environment, cross-sector partnerships, Stakeholder Theory

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1. Introduction

Climate change is at the forefront of the global debate in the 21st Century. These concerns include land degradation, biodiversity loss, air and water pollution, and climate change (Parker, 2019). Environmental concerns affect every part of the world, including Malaysia, which experiences haze, floods, landslides, deforestation, and water pollution (Mohamad Saleh, 2017). Partnerships to solve these ecological challenges are essential. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) encourage this under Goal 17, specifically 17.16, which calls on all quarters to embrace global partnerships for sustainable development, and Goal 17.17, which encourages effective public, public-private, and civil society partnerships. As a UN member state, Malaysia adheres to the SDGs. Cross-sector partnerships occur in Malaysia in various ways, including government-private and corporate-civil society. The nation's stock exchange, Bursa Malaysia, further promotes cooperation between companies and their stakeholders by implementing sustainability reporting legislation. These stakeholders include "investors, customers, employees, suppliers, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and local communities" (Bursa Malaysia, 2018).

Corporations are a clear choice in the selection of impactful partners towards the SDGs, as businesses are the drivers for change in the communities they operate in (Chandler, 2017). They also have a substantial environmental footprint due to the sheer size of operations and supply chain reach (Stibbe & Presscott, 2020). Cross-sector partnerships involving corporations are in part forced by the increased environmental consciousness of the global community (Bursa Malaysia, 2018; Liu et al., 2020; Maktoufi et al., 2020; Prasad et al., 2019; Poret, 2019; Topic & Rohwer, 2018). The idea of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) emerged as an attempt to bridge this gap between corporations and the communities they serve (Chandler, 2017). However, stakeholders such as consumers become suspicious of these efforts, and corporations found themselves facing accusations of greenwashing (Plank & Gschoesser, 2019), therefore losing public trust.

NGOs are powerful partners for corporations as "vindicators of the general society", especially in a developing country like Malaysia (Asfaw et al., 2017). In the case of environmental protection, Environmental NGOs (ENGOS) are critical cross-sector partners for corporations. ENGOS were born in response to landscape and wildlife threats and thus are critical and knowledgeable in championing environmental sustainability issues (Berny & Rootes, 2018). Therefore, they hold high public trust when it comes to the environment (Poret, 2019). They are also considered representatives of the environment, which has no voice (Chandler, 2017). This makes them stakeholders of corporations twice over. Research has established that cross-sector partnerships are important for environmental sustainability (Asfaw et al., 2017; Idemudia, 2017; Lee, 2018), and such partnerships have also been examined in-depth mainly in developed countries such as Sweden, France, and the United Kingdom (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2019; Fontana, 2018; Poret, 2019; Topic & Rohwer, 2018). This leaves a research gap in ENGO-Corporate partnerships, especially in developing countries. It is critical to address this, as environmental sustainability efforts in Malaysia are still in their infancy (Govindasamy & Suresh, 2018), as are CSR policies (Prasad et al., 2019).

The literature has also established that corporations and ENGOS engage in partnerships for different reasons. Corporations choose such partnerships to meet stakeholder expectations (Liu et al., 2020), boost their profits and reputation, and differentiate themselves from the competition (Maktoufi et al., 2020; Poret, 2019; Topic & Rohwer, 2018). While ENGOS seek to further their mission, gain funding, boost their visibility and reputation (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2019; Berny & Rootes, 2018; Liu et al., 2020; Poret, 2019; Topic & Rohwer, 2018). However, the bulk of the risks in a cross-sector partnership falls on the ENGOS. This includes threats to their integrity, independence, credibility, legitimacy, autonomy, reputation and co-optation (Idemudia, 2017; Poret, 2019; Topic & Rohwer,

2018). Effective communication strategies can help ENGOs mitigate these risks and form fruitful partnerships that can even help strengthen the ENGO's internal processes (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020).

Given their knowledge in environmental matters, greater public trust and higher risk status in this partnership, this study will be conducted from the ENGOs' perspective. The aim of this novel and exploratory study is to provide rare insight into how Malaysian ENGOs communicate with corporations in a cross-sector partnership. The results will be beneficial for ENGOs, corporations, the government and academia. This study will draw upon the Stakeholder Theory, which posits that organizations depend on their stakeholders for legitimacy (Baah et al., 2021; Mousavi & Bossink, 2020; Poret, 2019). As mentioned above, ENGOs are stakeholders of corporations in and of themselves and also as representatives of the voiceless environment. Research has also found that ENGOs are effective in impacting the environmental aspect of corporate CSR efforts in their capacity as stakeholders (Asfaw et al., 2017; Lee, 2018; Poret, 2019). Therefore, the research question of this study is as follows:

RQ1: How do ENGOs in Malaysia communicate with Corporations in a cross-sector partnership?

2. Methodology

A phenomenological, exploratory, semi-structured qualitative research was conducted with five respondents. They were asked a series of open-ended questions probing the entire communication process of the cross-sector partnership, from pre-formation to conclusion, with specific partnership examples. Each interview was conducted online via Zoom over an average of 50 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. A two-tier codebook was used for the inductive codes. Criterion sampling was first used to identify members of ENGOs with a minimum of two years of experience in communicating with corporations, followed by snowball sampling to identify more respondents. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the fact that thematic saturation was achieved at the fifth interview, the interview process was concluded with the fifth respondent. Table 1 lists the profiles of the interviewees.

Table 1

Profile of Interviewees

Interviewee	Focus of Environmental Non-Governmental Organisation (ENGO)	Experience
E1	Reforestation	2 years
E2	Conservation through partnerships	7 years
E3	Conservation through partnerships	11 years
E4	Reforestation	12 years
E5	Conservation and Reforestation	6 years

3. Results

This research found that the bulk of the communication in a cross-sector partnership happens in the early stages, before the partnership is formalized. ENGOs conduct background checks on potential corporate partners by speaking with them directly, searching for information and records online, and contacting their ENGO or NGO networks. The information deemed important to investigate includes the corporation's annual report, the nature of its business, and potential scandals. This screening process is critical to avoid greenwashing, which most respondents identified as their primary concern (E1, E2, E3, E5). Respondents also draw a correlation between the duration of partnerships and greenwashing, where shorter durations are perceived with more suspicion (E1, E2, E4). Respondent E1, who works with a reforestation ENGO, mentioned that tree-planting is a laborious process and short-term partnerships of below 3 years might not be worth their time. While respondent E5 linked the duration of funding to the financial sustainability of the ENGO.

Education is also critical in the early stages of the partnerships. This is where ENGOs spend time teaching their corporate partners about their environmental work, the importance of said work, and the duration of time needed to achieve the desired results. Respondent E2 said educating corporate partners was a challenge, “They want everything in a very very short time and you know that to see a remarkable change in river, especially in environment, will take some time.” This education process also involves setting practical expectations for corporate partners, including the risks involved when dealing with nature and natural cycles. For example, trees planted during the partnership may die.

The formalization of partnership is a vital part of the process. Legal agreements and contracts are drawn up, stating the budget and scope of work. These formal documents serve as protection for ENGOs by preventing reputation abuse. Respondent E5 said having a legal contract in place protected them from further abuse in a previous cross-sector partnership with a corporation, “They were claiming credit for our previous work. ... So we said you need to stop this, remove everything. This is not in the [agreement], you are breaching this. We are going to terminate the partnership, take legal action if [you don’t] take it down.”

In the midst of the partnership, ENGOs provide corporate partners with frequent updates. The next important communication keystone occurs towards the end of the partnership, where discussions are held about contract renewals and expansions. All respondents indicated pressures in this process, as funding is linked to the sustainability of the project at hand. As respondent E2 explained, this is a huge challenge for ENGOs because if there is no smooth transition of funding for environmental programs when the existing partnership ends, “usually I would say 90% it will [be] done. It will over. I mean if you don’t continue through other platforms, [the environmental program] will die off.”

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This exploratory study successfully answers the research question of “How do ENGOs in Malaysia communicate with Corporations in a cross-sector partnership?” They do so carefully and strategically with the ultimate goal of advancing their mission, despite the risks involved, of which they are aware. The main takeaway from this study is that ENGOs invest substantial care and effort during the pre-formalization period of partnerships with corporations. It also verifies existing literature that ENGOs experience financial and power imbalance risks in a partnership (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2019; Fontana, 2018; Liu et al., 2020; Poret, 2019), and that they are very mission-focused (Poret, 2019; Topic & Rohwer, 2018), and yet these findings provide immense novel value in the Malaysian landscape.

Although more effortful at the outset, the entire communication process, from start to finish, is designed to advance the ENGO’s mission of environmental sustainability. The care practiced in the screening process to try and identify potential greenwashing and scandals indicates ENGOs are well aware of the risks involved in a cross-sector partnership. The dedication to providing education to their corporate partners despite their limited resources to maximize the chances of a successful partnership is yet another indicator of the lengths ENGOs go to for their mission.

The shared concern among respondents about the duration of the partnership serves as a wake-up call for corporations that may be unaware that short durations are perceived as greenwashing, and also poses environmental risks, as the ENGO becomes financially unable to continue its work. Another interesting point is that while respondents shared that legal contracts are crucial for self-protection, they also admitted that these documents are not foolproof due to financial resource limitations to pursue legal action. Still, this information can be useful to budding ENGOs to insist on protections before formalizing cross-sector partnerships and valuable to existing ENGOs as a reminder to boost their legal protections.

5. Limitations

The largest limitation of this study is the number of respondents. Due to the limited number of experienced

ENGOS in Malaysia and the transitory nature of ENGO employees, it was difficult to secure interviewees who fit the criteria of having a minimum of two years' experience in communicating with corporations. Despite having achieved thematic saturation with the five respondents who are experts in their field with a collective experience of almost four decades, further interviews would have produced richer data and a deeper insight into the ENGO-Corporate relationship in Malaysia. Another limitation is that all of these ENGOS are based in the Klang Valley, which could have created a geographical bias. There is also a risk of bias in the perception of the communication process in a cross-sector partnership, as this study only investigated the point of view of the ENGO.

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