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CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: COUNTER-ARGUING OPTIMISM

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INTRODUCING AND CONTEXTUALIZING THE DEBATE

We understand cross-sector partnership as an intense, long-term, deliberate, and continuous integration between two or more sectors that come together in the form of voluntary work arrangements made up of for-profit and non-profit organizations (Ber & Branzei, 2010a; Clarke & Creine, 2018). These identify mutual interests and concerns and exchange, share, or co-develop products, technologies, and services to respond to unmet economic, social, and environmental demands despite public policy agendas (Weber et al., 2022). The long-standing assumption is that cross-sector partnerships can convert market failures and social opportunities into institutional and regulatory improvements that generate social value (Sadabadi & Rad, 2021). Among the benefits are advanced social measures related to economic development, education, safety, sanitation, health, poverty alleviation, infrastructure, and environmental sustainability. At the same time, there are efforts to achieve community benefits by removing barriers to social inclusion and mitigating harmful effects arising from undesirable socio-economic and socio-environmental activities and behaviors (Ber & Branzei, 2010a; Selsky & Parker, 2005).

Two management characteristics enhance cross-sector partnership potential to promote social transformation. The first is the collaboration that configures and optimizes the resources and skills of all partners, resulting in more efficient and effective results (Tulder & Keen, 2018). The second, arising from a strategic questioning of competitive values, conflicts, and imbalances caused by the dominant economic system, is the development of innovations that sustainably

impact people's lives (Bauer et al., 2020; Bhaskar et al., 2022). Cross-sector partnerships reposition systemic responsibilities previously isolated in the market, the State, or civil society. It integrates the strategic expertise of social agents committed to projects of this nature, overcomes barriers inherent to unmanaged collaboration, and provides an alternative path for community development (Chen et al., 2022; Murphy & Arenas, 2010).

The intentions for cross-sector partnerships and their nature unite formal institutions and informal sociopolitical groups (Bauer et al., 2020). The structure of a cross-sector partnership depends on the partners involved and how they are selected (Chen et al., 2022; Lin, 2012), the motivation of partners to work together (Diaz-Kope & Morris, 2022), the primary focus of decision-making processes in the face of shared activities (environmental, development, geographic, and jurisdictional) (Schmid & Almog-Bar, 2020), the sectors represented by the partners (public, private, and civil society) (Kandel et al., 2022; Shumate et al., 2018), the partnership's objectives and functions (Tulder & Keen, 2018), the definition of operational procedures inherent to the partnership (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2018), dependence on other governance systems (Alonso & Andrews, 2019; Huanming & Bing, 2021; Sonesson et al., 2021), and, the democratic implications of decision-making processes (Cohen & Eyal, 2021).

Initially qualified as the "collaborative paradigm of the 21st Century" (Austin, 2007), cross-sector partnerships are heavily debated in sectors that coordinate social life: government, State, public sector, business, private sector, non-governmental organizations, and civil sector, among others (Maiolini et al., 2022; Sdunzik et al., 2022). In principle, at least concerning research on cross-sector partnerships, these sectors corresponded to three institutional segments of society: the exclusively public institutional aspect represented by the government, the State, and the public sector; the exclusively private institutional aspect portrayed by business and the private sector; and the exclusively civil institutional aspect in the civil sector and non-governmental organizations (Dentoni et al., 2021).

Throughout history, multiple events have contributed to the relativization of this institutional mutual exclusivity between societies' public, private, and civil aspects. Some of them are the intense neo-liberalization of States; globalization of Euro-American values and ideals by international systems of cultural production and reproduction; corporate protagonism in agendas previously held by the State; and, a civil action in controversial issues for both the private sector and public institutions (Oskam et al., 2021; Pedersen et al., 2021). The advancement of international influences and demystification of the need for a well-defined separation between the institutional aspects of society paralleled the proliferation of the functions, duties, responsibilities, and activities performed at the local, regional, national, and international levels by cross-sector partnerships. This scenario left individual sectors overshadowed by different combinations of strength and power (Stadtler & Wassenhove, 2021).

The evolution of this context resulted in organizational hybridization due to how many organizations, whether for-profit or not, are owned by members directly and simultaneously related to public, private, and civil society organizations. As a result of this miscegenation, most

contemporary debates analyze cross-sector partnerships based on the partners' involved ideals and objectives (Alonso & Andrews, 2019; Gutiérrez et al., 2016).

The shared protagonism of these partners reinforces the potential of cross-sector partnerships to operate in communities with different socio-economic needs. For many who study issues, directly and indirectly, related to this topic, cross-sector partnerships are synonymous with social advances, improvement in quality of life, reduction of poverty rates, environmental protection, and fairer distribution of resources and income (Clarke & Krane, 2018; Kolk et al., 2008). The strand of literature with this constructive and optimistic vision of cross-sector partnerships is dominant, but it is not unique or isolated. Another trend that could be more expressive in terms of supporters and publications persists, intending to reveal that, although necessary, cross-sector partnerships generate unexpected and unwanted results. This more critical perspective questions if the adverse effects caused by cross-sector partnerships justify their benefits and outstanding results (Ber & Branzei, 2010a, 2010b; Eversole, 2018; Murphy & Arenas, 2010).

Economy and management are the areas that most publish research in partnerships (Koschmann et al., 2012; Vestergaard et al., 2021). However, this topic also receives the attention of areas such as public administration (Page et al., 2015), anthropology (Eversole, 2018), political science (Fischer & Sciarini, 2016), strategy (Tulder & Keen, 2018), management studies (Ber & Branzei, 2010a), organizational theory (Vurro et al., 2010) and sociology (Riehl & Lyon, 2017). This essay intends to contribute to two strands, not necessarily separate, that research cross-sector partnership. One involves research associating management studies and cross-sector partnerships (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2019; Alonso & Andrews, 2019; Ashraf et al., 2017; Clarke & MacDonald, 2019; Schuster & Holtbrügge, 2014). The other addresses discussions on the relationships between cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development (Blok, 2014; Bode et al., 2019; Dentoni et al., 2021; Feilhauer & Hahn, 2021; Mousavi & Bossink, 2020). However, the focus of this essay deviates from the optimism that prevails in debates that integrate cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development, establishing itself as a counter-argument to this dominant narrative. Therefore, this essay's contribution offers an alternative approach to reflection and interpretation for studies that relate cross-sector partnerships, sustainable development, and management studies in the same scope.

Recently, two scientific journals published special issues in line with this relationship between cross-sector partnerships, sustainable development, and management studies. In 2021, *Business & Society* (Volume 60, Issue 5) published a special issue entitled "towards collaborative cross-sector business models for sustainability". Pedersen et al. (2021) report that the articles published in this special issue address the intersection between cross-sectoral collaborations, business model thinking and sustainability, and corporate efforts to create, deliver, and capture value for business and society. These publications reinforce the importance of research going beyond the study of individual organizations, looking at broader groups of organizations, and exploring broader institutional conditions to face sustainability challenges (Pedersen et al., 2021). Also, in 2021, the *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal* (Volume 12, Issue 6) published a special issue entitled, "cross-sector dialogue for sustainability: to partner

or not to partner”. [Louche et al. \(2021\)](#) explain that the articles published in this special issue offer a theoretical contribution to the partnership and intersectoral dialogue between civil society organizations, companies, and their associated supply chains. The articles published in this special issue address various forms of partnerships used in different sectors, within sectors, across sectors, and internationally. Finally, these same articles demonstrate the variety of factors or contingencies related to cross-sector partnerships leading to their formation, enabling these partnerships’ development and results at the micro, meso, and macro levels ([Louche et al., 2021](#)).

The researchers who led these special issues present challenges for research and studies about cross-sector partnerships, sustainable development, and management studies. [Pedersen et al. \(2021\)](#) advocate rethinking sustainability concerning the limits of existing concepts and the logic of transitions between actors, processes, and results to reach recognizably sustainable solutions. To [Louche et al. \(2021\)](#), the studies that jointly address cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development tend to accept the representativeness of these collaborative arrangements provided for by the seventeenth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal. According to [Louche et al. \(2021\)](#), there need to be more publications that suggest or propose alternative paths to sustainable development or that reveal the pitfalls behind this imperative, according to which the only path to sustainability is a partnership. For [Louche et al. \(2021\)](#), cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development discussions fail to reveal the tensions hidden by results and benefits admitted as socially responsible.

The UN has advocated the adoption of cross-sector partnerships historically, since the first mentions of sustainable development. The UN has stressed this kind of partnership’s management and innovation capacities at local, regional, national, and global levels, becoming an ambassador of this approach to development. As a result of this endorsement, sustainable development ascended globally from an institutional, neoliberal, political, technocentric, and Euro-American reading ([Borim-de-Souza et al., 2019](#); [Gladwin et al., 1995](#); [Mebratu, 1998](#)). The response to the challenges highlighted by [Pedersen et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Louche et al. \(2021\)](#) begins by reframing the expression “sustainable development” based on an interpretation that allows, in addition to countering optimism, to explore the contradictory aspects of the interfaces between cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development.

In this theoretical essay, we assume that sustainable development is a socially shared discursive construction based on universal and generalizable Euro-American standards disseminated by the cultural circuit of capitalism ([Borim-de-Souza et al., 2019](#)). Sustainable development is one of the manifestations of history’s mercantile aspect that subjugate the environment oscillations to dynamics favoring a structural model suited to economic criteria ([Borim-de-Souza et al., 2021](#)). This pattern is valued by international institutions, such as United Nations, in agendas related to sustainable development ([Mebratu, 1998](#)). These institutions are representative symbolic systems of social structures endowed with diverse interests, including the economic, whose differential leadership capacity grants authority to delegate, manage, produce, and reproduce an instrumental administration of the natural world aligned with the dominant interests concerning sustainable development ([Gladwin et al., 1995](#)). Debates on this

issue simultaneously generate belief in the social importance and justify the relevance of the dominant position occupied by organizations, which, consequently, legitimately monopolize what is conventionally accepted as the “truth” about sustainable development (Borim-de-Souza et al., 2019, 2021).

Based on this more critical reading of sustainable development, the understanding of the importance of undesirable impacts generated by cross-sector partnerships, the need to strengthen a more questioning approach to the discussion in management studies, and the agreement with the challenges highlighted by Pedersen et al. (2021) and Louche et al. (2021), our theoretical essay aims to counter-argument the optimism inherent in the dominant literature that discusses the relationship between cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development.

Our contribution is threefold. First, by questioning the legitimacy of cross-sector partnerships as the primary means for achieving sustainable development, we call attention to the need for research that analyzes the effects and impacts of these initiatives from the perspective of those with little or no decision-making power. Second, by exploring the contradictory aspects of cross-sector partnerships, we intend to contribute to the rise and consolidation of a more reflective approach to the subject, which aims to consider how much the unexpected and adverse results caused by these partnerships justify the benefits they deliver for the communities served. Third, by inserting these discussions into the scope of management studies, we reinforce the purpose of making this area, at least in terms of relations between cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development, overcome technical superficiality and advance towards a more robust and in-depth analytical capacity.

This essay is organized as follows. This first section introduced and contextualized the debate. The second section addresses concerns and dilemmas regarding cross-sector partnerships. The third section explores how the demands of the United Nations for sustainable development based on the performance of cross-sector partnerships are answered by unbalanced dialogues in terms of strength, representativeness, and power. The fourth section closes this essay with final comments, practical implications, and suggestions for future studies.

DILEMMAS AND CONCERNS

Theorists and practitioners of cross-sector partnerships are assertive about the ability of these initiatives to promote systemic transformations in the social and environmental spheres (Clarke & Crane, 2018). They are enthusiasts who aim to describe these impacts in depth to face criticism regarding the potential adverse effects of these same cross-sector partnerships. One of the justifications that favor cross-sector partnerships is how their management structures contribute to incorporating social and environmental concerns at systemic levels of governance (Auld et al., 2015; Huanming & Bing, 2021). Some less enthusiastic authors counter-argue and denounce the cross-sector partnerships as legitimizing the corporatization of activism and social imbalance (Dauvergne & LeBaron, 2014). According to this more critical perspective, social and environmental

problems appear on decision-making agendas as demands imposed on cross-sector partnerships, not as claims they want to get involved voluntarily.

Besides management literature, other disciplines share interests in cross-sector partnerships. Politics, health, geography, development studies, and environmental science agree on this forced connection between cross-sector partnerships and social and environmental agendas. We have, therefore, a paradox that, in addition to generating confusion and provoking theoretical and conceptual inaccuracies, reveals the fragility of interdisciplinary approaches to cross-sector partnerships. Each of the disciplines mentioned above has a thorough understanding of systemic transformation, which is why they also have a specific notion of the necessary conditions for planning and operationalizing effective cross-sector partnerships (Clarke & Crane, 2018; Henry et al., 2022; Kolk et al., 2008; Vestergaard et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2022).

These discussions intersperse recommendations in favor of transformations at the macro level and ask for innovations at the micro level without, in most cases, talking to each other. The micro level examines how partners enact various sectoral protocols to respond to emerging tensions and conflicts. The macro level, in turn, assesses the extent to which cross-sectoral partnerships are environmentally participative, institutionally dependent, and socially influenced (Ahmadsimab & Chowdhury, 2021; Haack et al., 2019; Hesse et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2022). To provoke critical reflections on cross-sector partnerships, this section presents some dilemmas identified by the pertinent literature more recently. At the micro level, we address the following dilemmas: internal benefits and impacts; competence and agency; inclusion and efficiency; expectations and trust. At the macro level, we resort to the following dilemmas: power and representativeness; public and private; global governance and local democracy; natives and foreign. We address these dilemmas objectively in the following paragraphs.

This confusing theoretical situation prevails because, although there is much research on cross-sector partnerships, there remains a focus on their internal benefits and characteristics that disregards the importance of their outcomes and social impacts (Tulder et al., 2016). Even indirectly, mainstream positions admit that cross-sector partnerships generate social improvements by the simple fact that they exist (Vestergaard et al., 2020). The same literature that arbitrarily propagates the ideal of cross-sector partnerships as social benefactors neglect its scientific responsibility since it does not support its information from scientific evidence (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a, 2012b). Management studies, for example, feel comfortable in this discursive space because, in addition to avoiding deeper theorizations about cross-sector partnerships, they deal with controversial and sandy themes, such as the issue of poverty, in a superficial and silent way. That is, there is a preference not to address the subject. However, if it is essential to discuss it, an approach of relativizing seriousness from time and scale predominates. Impacts, therefore, comprise measures launched in long-term scenarios that do not threaten the immediate expected results of these partnership activities (Blowfield & Dolan, 2014; Stadtler, 2018). The impacts include the long-term, direct and indirect effects related to the costs and benefits added by the partners to society (Tulder et al., 2016).

Blowfield and Dolan (2014) explain that the intentional positive impact on the lives of those in developing countries can qualify partners as development agents. However, Vestergaard et al. (2020) verified partners' inability to prioritize the poor when analyzing cross-sector partnerships as potential development agents for poverty alleviation. From this finding, Vestergaard et al. (2020) stated that cross-sector partnership efforts deliver results developing competence without agency. Partners ensure they deliver on their promises by providing resources and expertise to their most direct beneficiaries. However, neither the most direct beneficiaries nor the community is empowered to transform their lives through effectively applying these resources and skills. From this observation, Vestergaard et al. (2020) warn that many cross-sector partnerships do not promote agency in the communities they serve. That is, they do not develop in beneficiaries the capacity to make independent decisions and to act freely based on these same decisions (Kabeer, 1999). In short, there needs to be community training to instruct them on converting resources into results and responses consistent with their needs.

How can this be possible if cross-sector partnerships have an inclusive essence that guarantees the participation of the most relevant stakeholders in decision-making? When many stakeholders participate in decisions, cross-sector partnerships gather the information that enables solutions to maintain or increase the number of available resources to the communities served. This decision-making practice has repercussions on recognizing cross-sector partnerships as legitimate entities due to their high levels of inclusion and the democratic character of their management (Henry et al., 2022; Mena & Palazzo, 2012). Even though inclusion is one of the hallmarks that grants a social license for the operation of the cross-sector partnership, it may be responsible for compromising the efficiency of the entire structure. By involving many stakeholders in decisions, processes tend to be time and resource-consuming. Maintaining high levels of inclusion can cause the feeling of unnecessary effort in some of the stakeholders involved (Gray & Purdy, 2018; Henry et al., 2022). Any perception of inefficiency concerning the time dedicated and the efforts made can compromise the interest and willingness of stakeholders to participate in a cross-sector partnership (Clarke & MacDonald, 2019). When private sector partners are involved, the efficiency ideal suppresses the inclusion ideology (Hille et al., 2019; Sharma & Bansal, 2017; Stadler, 2018). In this case, due to reduced levels of inclusion, the *raison d'être* of the cross-sector partnership may be compromised, and the project, as a whole, may be entirely discontinued (Henry et al., 2022).

Organizations in cross-sector partnerships that differ in profit orientation often have different expectations regarding the project, contributing to a contradictory value creation logic. Conflicts over the expectations and identities of partners tend to lead cross-sector partnerships into scenarios of mistrust, disagreement, and premature bankruptcy (Clarke & Crane, 2018; Vogel et al., 2022). Although many partners try to identify, understand, and overcome these dissimilarities, the possibility for misalignments that culminate in social, environmental, and economic damage to those, directly and indirectly, participating in this collaborative initiative is reasonably accurate (Ber & Branzei, 2010b; Seitanidi, 2008). Partner values and purposes simultaneously promote synergy, encourage innovation, enhance skills, and create professional and institutional barriers. In this sense, deeply rooted cultural, structural, and philosophical differences negatively impact the

potential for success since partners cannot be objective in observation, interaction, and decision-making (Clegg & McNulty, 2002; Watts, 2001). This scenario results in dysfunction and failure or defaults to dominant organizational norms.

Cross-sector partnerships, when making goals and decisions, have both the ability and potential to promote economic and social improvements to the life quality of those in disadvantaged communities and restrain the power of these voices (Cornelius & Wallace, 2010). They also fail to follow through, support, and manage the long-term outcomes of their projects (Eversole, 2018). In terms of power, the disproportion in interactions between organizations representing the sectors involved in a cross-sector partnership generally prioritizes private and public interests to the detriment of civil needs since these come from less structured initiatives lacking experience and funding (Burrit et al., 2020; Lehmann, 2006). The disparity concerning profits, funding, and ethical distinctions between partners culminate in social insufficiencies that often reinforce and exacerbate weaknesses and shortcomings initially seen as resolved by cross-sector partnerships (Berger et al., 2004; London et al., 2005). Such discrepancies relativize the socio-environmental responsibility of these collaborative arrangements and produce more promising results to partners endowed with more significant amounts of economic capital. This context establishes an unfair and unethical interest priority, where economic imperatives suppress advances in the social and environmental spheres (Cornelius & Wallace, 2010; Diamond, 2010).

Movements against the privatization of public goods and services argue that cross-sector partnerships, as a plausible governance system for sustainable development, raise traditional debates about public-private responsibilities and attributes (Huanming & Bing, 2021; London et al., 2005; Pierre & Peters, 2000). There is no doubt about the liberal and democratic implications of management practices aimed at sustainability carried out by these initiatives at both micro and macroeconomic levels (Mol, 2007; O'Reagan & Oster, 2000). Two fundamental points drive the democratic critique of cross-sector partnerships: the first warns that the constitution and operationalization of cross-sector partnerships fail in matters essential to democracy, such as those of creation, representation, management, interaction, and accountability; and the second denounces the alienation of State power from democratically elected governments that, by encouraging and tolerating the existence of cross-sector partnerships, outsource their public responsibility to promote collective well-being (London et al., 2005; Meadowcroft, 2007).

When public administration loses its autonomy to govern, it undergoes a process of social discredit. One of the main reasons for this is the rise of multinational corporations as influential political players (Andrews & Entwistle, 2010; Griffiths, 2000). Another important reason is the progressive professionalization of social movements as players with accumulated social capital at a level that makes them indispensable for selecting and solving public problems. From this perspective, international cross-sector partnerships imbalance local democracy and national policies (Googins & Rochlin, 2000; Huanming & Bing, 2021; Seitanidi, 2008). While such cross-sector partnerships have a global dimension, the democratic representation of communities directly and indirectly related to these collaborative arrangements and their outcomes remain

restricted to the nation/State scope. Thus, these transnational institutional structures controlled by managers outside democratic electoral processes replace structures organized through democratic elections (Streck, 2002; Vurro et al., 2010). Furthermore, international cross-sector partnerships, mainly guided by the interest of their private sector partners, are an extension of a dependency characteristic of the global capitalist order. Local societies in developing countries subjugate their interests and sovereignty to foreign, typically Euro-American, companies that favor economic outcomes over social and environmental ones (Glasbergen, 2007; Griffiths, 2000; Meadowcroft, 2007).

Most research describes the advances and improvements cross-sector partnerships offer, but there is a lack of research on poverty, distortion of democracy, and broader political implications caused by these collaborative arrangements (Crane, 2010; Glasbergen, 2007; Utting & Zammit, 2008). Although cross-sector partnerships receive significant attention in many literature areas, there is a lack of information on the implications of having partners from different countries or between corporate groups and marginalized stakeholders who live where the partnership acts (Vestergaard et al., 2020). The lack of concern, attention, and robust theoretical discussion on this latter point is a valid and potent criticism (Vestergaard et al., 2021). It implies that cross-sector partnerships may reproduce the historical contract of social marginalization of natives and the marginalized. Natives and other marginalized are often disconnected and excluded from projects' public images. Especially from the Euro-American and capitalist cultural circuit perspectives, they are considered weak, poor, disinterested, isolated, illegitimate, alien, non- or sub-human, and invisible (Murphy & Arenas, 2010).

In addition to the concerns and dilemmas presented, cross-sector partnerships are questioned as representative structures of initiatives responsible for operationalizing and delivering social, economic, and environmental practices committed to sustainable development. The criticisms aim to provoke reflections directed at this supposed relationship of interdependence between cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development so defended and encouraged by the dominant literature and the United Nations. These contributions question the legitimacy, recognition, and ethical prominence of cross-sector partnerships as agents of sustainable development and the primary means of achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

RESPONDING TO UNITED NATIONS DEMANDS THROUGH IMBALANCED DIALOGUES

The widespread definition of sustainable development (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987) that promises socio-economic growth while meeting the current needs of humanity without compromising future generations has yet to be fulfilled. To encourage the system, with its environmental, social, and economic ramifications, to achieve this ideal type of development, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has promoted many international conferences where decisions made were published in official documents. The

proposals and operationalizations debated at these events mostly came from international institutions: International Institute for Environment and Development, United Nations, and World Business Council for Sustainable Development, among others (Borim-de-Souza et al., 2015; Mebratu, 1998).

This inserts socio-environmental problems into political agendas and places substantial responsibility on implementing sustainable development through market strategies oriented towards clean production, egalitarian economic growth, value-added operations, energy conservation, resource disposal reduction, and eco-efficient corporate practices. Parallel to this historical path of sustainable development, a notion of sustainability emerged, defending the maintenance of the world's ecological heritage and respecting societies' values, institutions, cultures, and history. This aligns sustainable development with sustainability in identifying severe global problems throughout the economic, ecological, and environmental spectrum (Burrit et al., 2020; Gladwin et al., 1995; Mebratu, 1998).

Since its first international conferences, the UNDP has identified partnerships as an opportunity to integrate the civil, public, and private sectors in policies and practices committed to sustainable development. The adherence of partnerships to the ideals and purposes of the UN Development Program is reinforced by the use of the following expressions in its official documents: in 1992, global partnership (United Nations, 1992); in 2000, global partnership (United Nations, 2000); in 2002, multilateral partnerships (United Nations, 2002); and, in 2015, multilateralism and global partnership (United Nations, 2015). As demonstrated, several United Nations initiatives recognize cross-sector partnerships as an essential paradigm for facing global challenges, such as those currently described by the Sustainable Development Goals.

The United Nations, governments, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and research institutes, among others, favor a more sustainable world (Louche et al., 2021). This collective effort aims to propose and operationalize an alternative development approach. To demonstrate the conversion of proposals into practices, everyone involved in this project chose cross-sector partnerships as the organizational model and management ideal toward sustainable development for the different sectors that organize life in society (Pedersen et al., 2021). It is a multistakeholder structure that coordinates and collaborates on numerous advances related to sustainability (MacDonald et al., 2019). More recently, the UN Sustainable Development Goals resumed and renewed the importance of cross-sector partnerships as an example of governance committed to sustainability.

When the UN Sustainable Development Goals reinforce the importance of partnerships, they legitimize cross-sector partnerships as the most appropriate collaboration strategy for the contradictions and imbalances of the 21st Century (Vestergaard et al., 2021). Sustainable Development Goal 17 encourages the strengthening and revitalizing partnerships for sustainable development (United Nations, 2019). Target 17.16, more specifically, is emphatic in declaring that the Sustainable Development Goals will only be made possible for all countries through the mobilization and sharing of knowledge, skills, technologies, and financial resources (United Nations, 2019). In addition, target 17.17 encourages and foment

partnerships between public, private, and non-governmental agents, both for the development and multiplication of good experiences and for the construction of more improved strategies for resource management, conservation, and distribution (United Nations, 2019). Therefore, the UN Sustainable Development Goals recognize cross-sector partnerships as benchmarks for best sustainability practices (Louche et al., 2021).

The benefits and advances disclosed by publications on cross-sector partnerships explain why political and scientific documents insist on these collaborative initiatives as the preferred means of achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Vestergaard et al., 2021). However, questions that provoke critical reflections on the relationship between cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development contest this popularity. Authors representing this perspective argue that, regardless of the nature and objectives of a cross-sector partnership, partners will only accept to participate in this collaborative arrangement if they are sure of their gains (Borim-de-Souza et al., 2021; Vestergaard et al., 2020). If all partners obey this logic, many negotiations are necessary to ensure that everyone feels, even minimally, benefited by composing a collaborative project. Therefore, joining a cross-sector partnership implies giving up some or many expectations so that all partners effectively participate and obtain results (Fougère & Solitander, 2020; Pedersen et al., 2021).

The decisions involving all partners – granting social, environmental, cultural, political, and economic identity to the cross-sector partnerships – are a better expression of the project than the decisions made by each partner in isolation (Henry et al., 2022). Despite the many gains, optimizing resources, skills, interests, and objectives has repercussions on losses that harm those involved in the partnership, such as the partners and the communities.

Depending on the assignments made, the partners may identify that the collective gains resulting from their participation in the cross-sector partnership are much smaller than the gains arising from a possible individual action in this same context (Griffiths, 2000; Meadowcroft, 2007; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Even in these cases, partners may choose to stay in the cross-sector partnership for several reasons, such as the high costs and risks of independent installation (Selsky & Parker, 2005, 2010), the social return for acting in the cross-sector partnership (positively influencing other activities of the partners) (Vogel et al., 2022), and the gradual construction of a network of trust between partners, the community, local authorities, and regional consumers and suppliers (Borim-de-Souza et al., 2019). Partners partaking in cross-sector partnerships know that, even if they are rewarded, they may obtain more significant gains if they choose alternative paths. However, they may prefer the partnership and preserve and recover their equity by adopting more conservative investment and intervention strategies (Clarke & Crane, 2018). These are decisions with consequences that are inevitable for the communities served by the cross-sector partnership concerning the quantity and quality of services and products delivered (Vestergaard et al., 2020).

The possible losses and damages commented on refer, for the most part, to more economic and social aspects, both on the part of the cross-sector partnership and the part of the communities served. Another front of loss and damage for the communities served is the disregard for their

cultural heritage by the members who join the cross-sector partnership (Borim-de-Souza et al., 2021; Tulder & Keen, 2018). According to the authors who critically analyze the relationship between cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development, the publications that address this interdependence are mostly Euro-American and Western-centric. It is a dominant point of view with theorizations taking place without reference to the peculiarities and particularities of the regionalisms from where cross-sector partnerships are installed. It is important to note that most communities lacking the services and products of a cross-sector partnership are in developing countries (Ber & Branzei, 2010a; Eversole, 2018).

So far, we have identified some dilemmas and decisions that question the close relationship between cross-sector partnerships and social improvements for the communities they serve. According to the presented dilemmas, a cross-sector partnership, in its planning, foundation, and operation, needs to deal with selection decisions or optimizations between internal benefits and impacts; competence and agency; inclusiveness and efficiency; expectations and trust; power and representativeness; public and private; global governance and local democracy; and, natives and foreigners. Parallel to these choices, decisions hover over cross-sector partnerships that need to meet the expectations of all partners, aim to reduce or divide the amount of investment needed to start activities, fight for the permanence of partners who could gain more through an independent intervention, and affect the cultural heritage of the communities served through the introduction of socio-economic practices of production and provision of services that are closely related to a Euro-American behavioral pattern.

These are dilemmas and decisions that end up favoring some groups over others. From this situation, it is worth asking whether cross-sector partnerships are the most appropriate strategy for micro and macroeconomic practices oriented toward sustainable development in social and economic terms (Louche et al., 2021). Doubt is a consequence of findings about the management of many cross-sector partnerships alternating between a strategic and administrative monologue and conflictual and instrumental communication processes, whereby participants believe that their contributions and disagreements are effectively considered (Brand et al., 2020). It is an exclusionary model of interaction that silences the voice, desires, perceptions, and values of civil society representatives with little or no power and more urgent needs for survival and care (Lauwo, 2018). However friendly they may be, cross-sector partnerships are formal management structures. The partnership seeks to guarantee the supply of products and services that improve communities' quality of life, ensuring the preservation or enhancement of partners' and stakeholders' assets (Henry et al., 2022).

It is a risk management that, aiming to protect the partners' investments and confirm their socio-economic gains, hides the suppression of the voices of the communities served based on negotiations conducted by valuing consensus and broad representation (Fougère & Solitander, 2020). Suppose the partners need to add up to this majority. In that case, a coordination process is undertaken in favor of a consensus aligned with the partners' interests. The possibility of the partners not meeting their objectives signals the threat of discontinuity (Clarke & Krane, 2018; Vogel et al., 2022). Although a cross-sector partnership aims to deliver social advances and

improvements, the economic aspect is the guiding criterion for decisions. In this sense, when defining which improvements to offer and how to deliver them, cross-sector partnerships select which parts of the community will be served and decide the level of service directed to them (Murphy & Arenas, 2010). It is an unbalanced dialogue that provides a different opportunity for participation and decision-making for partners and the community. Cross-sector partnerships, therefore, simultaneously enable improvements in socio-economic indicators and produce/reproduce the marginalization of a portion that will remain unattended, will no longer be served, or will begin to be served with less intensity (Fougère & Solitander, 2020; Louche et al., 2021; Vestergaard et al., 2020). From this context, the following question arises: is it acceptable for cross-sector partnerships to pay for the social benefits of a part of the community due to the marginalization/exclusion of members of this same community?

FINAL COMMENTS, PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE STUDIES

We developed this essay to counterargue the optimism inherent in the dominant literature that discusses the relationship between cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development. We support this counter-argument by presenting four dilemmas at the micro level (internal benefits and impacts; competence and agency; inclusion and efficiency; expectations and trust), four dilemmas at the macro level (power and representativeness; public and private; global governance and local democracy; natives and foreign) and decisions usual of cross-sector partnerships (meet the expectations of all partners; reduce or divide the amount of investment; partners aware of the limitation of their earnings; affect the cultural heritage of the communities served). The concerns, dilemmas, and decisions listed reinforce that cross-sector partnerships, despite advances, gains, and benefits, generate results that have repercussions on the marginalization/exclusion of members who are part of the communities served. In addition to strengthening the counter-argument to the optimism characteristic of discussions and debates that bring together cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development, these findings support the need to critically evaluate these collaborative arrangements as representative agents selected by the United Nations as forces to achieve sustainable development.

From the developed discussions, we present two leading interpretations for cross-sector partnerships. One is in line with the optimism of the dominant literature on the relationship between cross-sector partnerships and sustainable development. The other is in line with the perspective that questions this optimism. From a more optimistic perspective, cross-sector partnerships are systemic responses as collaborative arrangements structured from strategic integration of resources and competencies of organizations linked (although not exclusively) with the public, private, and social sectors. By identifying opportunities to resolve market failures, they perform collective work resulting in sustainable innovations, simultaneously creating value in the socio-economic and socio-environmental spheres, delivering institutional improvements,

and contributing to political-economic globalization. From a more critical view, cross-sector partnerships deal with democratically flawed and essentially contradictory initiatives. Divergent interests and objectives between partners violate professional and institutional barriers, possibly generating high potential global impacts that can distort national policies and disrupt long-term commitments to communities.

In practical terms, this essay rescues the critical care for the planning, implementation, and operationalization of a cross-sector partnership. As efficient, fast, and capable as private partners are, it is essential to remember the relevance of public and third-sector partners. Even if public partners question many actions by bringing up the legal aspects of these decisions and even if third-sector partners fight against management practices devoid of empathy and respect, they must be listened to and valued equally to private partners. The speed of response imposed by the market should only be taken with evaluating the capacity and interest of the communities served. To this end, it is essential that cross-sector partnerships, in their processes and management practices, remember that they operate with the more significant aim of promoting social, environmental, and economic benefits sought for the well-being and life quality of the communities served.

We invite the academic community to develop future studies that complement the counter-argument sustained in this essay. Studies that disagree with this anti-optimistic position are welcome since the peculiar complexity and controversy of the subject under debate provoke different manifestations of agreement and disagreement. We also encourage the elaboration of studies that analyze the counter-argument from a theoretical lens from organizational studies or another source that grants more breadth to the highlighted criticisms. Finally, we recommend developing research that provides, in contact with reality, space for the most affected and minor participatory voices in decision-making processes to express their views about cross-sector partnerships, sustainable development, and their respective interactions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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