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Article

# Cross-Sector Partnerships for Sustainability: How Mission-Driven Conveners Drive Change in National Coffee Platforms

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**Abstract:** Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have deployed various strategies in motivating businesses to source sustainably, such as the co-development and promotion of sustainability certification and direct collaboration in cross-sector partnerships (CSPs). This is an important current-day priority, given the ambitions set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and SDG 17 in particular. Increasingly, NPOs have taken up a role as conveners of such CSPs. Research on CSPs has, to date, often considered conveners as a ‘resource’ to the CSP, contributing to its effectiveness. In this study, we shift the focus towards the convener by considering a case of a ‘mission-driven convener’, an NPO that initiates CSPs as a strategy to realize its own sustainability objectives. Our explorative case study—comparing the NPO’s efforts across six countries in setting up national coffee platforms—reviews the concept of a mission-driven convener vis-à-vis established notions on convening and identifies which strategies it applies to realize a CSP. These strategies comprise productively combining certification-driven efforts with CSPs, combining process and outcomes of CSPs, and drawing on cross-level dynamics derived from outsourcing of convening work to local actors. With our study, we contribute to research on CSP conveners by offering an alternative interpretation to the relation between the CSP and the convener, attributing more agency to the convener as a mission-driven organization. Strengthening our understanding of CSPs and conveners is an important means to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

**Keywords:** cross-sector partnerships; convening; coffee; strategy; mission-driven organization; SDGs; sustainability; sustainable supply chains; certification; convener

## 1. Introduction

The global sustainable development agenda—as formulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—makes explicit reference to the importance of cross-sector collaboration in addressing the SDGs in SDG 17, ‘partnerships for the goals’. Cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) have emerged as a promising means for addressing complex sustainability challenges—or “grand challenges” [1,2]—that fall between the capability and responsibility of different societal sectors of business, government, and/or civil society [3,4]. Despite their promise and potential, the last two decades of research on CSPs have also emphasized the manifold challenges associated with such collaborations, for example, the difficulty to align different interests [4,5], inequality between organizations related to an unequal share of resources or misallocation of costs and benefits, which can lead to struggles over power and influence [6–8], or cultural differences involving communication problems and/or lack of trust [4,8].

To facilitate collaboration between heterogeneous actors, CSPs can benefit from the involvement of ‘third-party actors’ to mitigate the challenges mentioned above and to ensure an effective formation and implementation of the CSP.

Research on these third-party actors uses a range of terms to explain what we call conveners [9], [10]. These include ‘brokers’ or ‘broker organizations’ [11–14], ‘bridging agents’ [15], ‘interveners’ [16], or ‘orchestrators’ [17]. We adopt the term ‘convener’ to describe the third party actor and consequently deploy this term throughout the remainder of our paper as it emphasizes how these actors convene, or bring together, heterogeneous actors. Despite the conceptual ambiguity, the common assumption we identify behind much research on conveners is that these actors can be considered a ‘resource’ to the partnership in the sense that their involvement enhances the likelihood of the CSP’s success. For example, conveners can play an important role in the formation and implementation of a CSP. With various levels of involvement, the convener is claimed to support the CSP in achieving its objectives [10,13,16].

In this study, we take another point of departure: Rather than focusing on the success (or lack thereof) of CSPs, we focus on the convener as our unit of analysis. This is important, because the organizations that convene CSPs may also have their own ambition and mission that may reach beyond those of the various CSPs in which they are involved. Initiating and supporting CSPs then may be one strategy to realize their own ambitions. Thus, rather than studying how a CSP benefits from the involvement of a convener, we study how such a convener—which we call a “mission-driven convener”—operates to reach its own objectives. We examine how this convener initiates and participates in CSPs as a *strategy* to realize its own ambitions: In our case, these ambitions are to advance the sustainable development agenda, and SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 15, and 17 in particular. In this manner, we consider the CSP as instrumental—i.e., as ‘a convening strategy’—in achieving the mission-driven convener’s desired sustainability outcomes instead of perceiving the convener as instrumental in facilitating a CSP. We, thereby, scrutinize less-examined elements of convening work, which are important to understand how these crucial intermediary actors operate and addressing the research question: How do mission-driven conveners strategically organize cross-sector collaboration?

To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative, explorative study on a mission-driven convener in the context of supply chain sustainability. Sustainability in global supply chains is one of the contexts in which the ‘partnership promise’ has burgeoned over the past years [18–20]. CSPs in supply chains have some distinct features that make them particularly interesting for our research. First, CSPs in this domain often include multiple companies that operate at different levels in the supply chain (i.e., producers, traders, exporters), which introduces cross-level dynamics that render the CSP more complex [16]. Second, these CSPs can also include multiple businesses from the same supply chain ‘level’, such as direct competitors trying to work together ‘pre-competitively’ on issues of sustainable development. This leads to ‘coopetition’, the co-occurrence of competition and collaboration, which can lead to friction within and between organizations [21,22]. Third, supply chain sustainability touches upon the competitive elements of ‘doing business’, potentially leading to situations where business and social logics collide [23]. Together, these features can potentially inhibit successful collaboration. Simultaneously, the challenges that are commonly associated with CSPs are expected to co-occur and may even be more pronounced in these complex settings—especially if the CSPs aim to address SDGs. Mission-driven conveners, hence, have to face these ‘additional’ challenges when they choose CSPs as their strategy to realize sustainable supply chains and have to convene collaboration among multiple, and sometimes competing, businesses.

Our purpose in this paper is to understand how mission-driven conveners initiate and facilitate CSPs to advance their own objectives towards sustainable supply chains, how these activities relate to alternative efforts such as certification-driven initiatives, and how they deal with the distinct features of various CSPs in this domain. Furthermore, we seek to understand whether and how this ‘mission-driven convening’ differs from common notions of the convening concept, which among others, emphasizes the importance of conveners to be unbiased, neutral actors, with a certain level of

authority [24–27]. However, if we view them as ‘mission-driven’, their neutrality could be questioned. We develop a more fine-grained understanding of the skills, characteristics, and roles that are required to effectively perform a mission-driven role and to effectively navigate this tension.

The organization we study is a government-funded nonprofit organization (NPO), with a mission to strengthen sustainable trade in global supply chains, thereby contributing to the realization of the sustainable development agenda. This organization, founded in 2008, initially aimed to contribute to the Millennium Development Goals 1, 7, and 8. After 2015, it reformulated its objectives in line with the SDGs, and specified for each of its programs the relevant SDGs. To achieve its objectives, it builds CSPs with business, other nonprofit organizations, and governments, in order to jointly tackle the bottlenecks that prevent a sustainability transition in the commodity sectors they work in. We focus here on its work in the coffee sector, where the organization seeks to contribute to several of the SDGs (in particular 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 15, and 17). In this sector, traditionally, sustainability efforts focused on increasing the uptake of certification as a means to guarantee sustainable production and consumption [28]. Only recently, increased attention has been granted to the formation of pre-competitive collaboration between multiple business actors, joining forces with NPOs and/or government(s) in CSPs, which are expected to be more effective in solving the complex sustainability challenges preventing a sustainability transition in the global coffee trade [28–30].

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. Section 2 (Theoretical background) positions our research in the scholarly debate on sustainable trade—and the coffee sector, in particular (Section 2.1). Moreover, we offer a short synthesis of research on the role of conveners, as discussed in the literature on CSPs (Section 2.2). By doing so, we emphasize the gaps in our understanding of what convening entails if we approach the phenomenon from an actor-perspective, that is, viewing the convener as a mission-driven change-maker initiating and orchestrating CSPs to achieve its sustainable development objectives. Section 3 (Research context and case description) introduces our field of research and focal organization. Section 4 (Materials and methods) is divided into two sub-sections, addressing the data-collection (Section 4.1) and our approach to data analysis (Section 4.2). Section 5 (Findings) presents the results of our study in four sub-sections, including the strategy (Section 5.1), implementation (Section 5.2), and outcomes (Section 5.3) of the CSP approach, and a final sub-section in which we scrutinize mission-driven convening (Section 5.4). Section 6 (Discussion) reviews our main findings and interprets the study’s results in light of existing research, outlining our contribution as well as listing some of the limitations of our study that can provide stepping-stones for future research on this topic. Lastly, Section 7 presents a brief overview of our conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. NPOs’ Shifting Role(s) in Stimulating Sustainability in Global Supply Chains: From Certification to CSPs

NPOs have played an important role in establishing voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) together with business actors as a means to realize organizational accountability for sustainability issues in supply chains. They have also been instrumental in promoting the uptake of certification through these VSS among businesses in global supply chains [31–33]. However, across multiple disciplines, the debate continues on VSS’s impact on sustainability in the supply chain, including business ethics and CSR literature [34–36], and supply chain management literature [37–40]. Such critical research evokes questions of whether certification through VSS can adequately address more complex issues such as soil degradation, poverty, or deforestation—and whether transformation requires more than certification alone. This critique is worrisome since VSS were originally developed to tackle such complex sustainability issues and to fill the void of insufficient governmental action to address them [41,42].

Meanwhile, CSPs have emerged as a promising means to address complex sustainability issues, with a corresponding prominent place in the UN SDGs (whereby SDG 17 concerns partnerships). This indicates that, in practice, partnerships have almost reached a paradigmatic status in the work

of governments and NPOs in addressing sustainability issues. In academia, research on cross-sector collaboration also has burgeoned [6,16,43]. CSPs are believed to be well suited to address complex sustainability challenges that are the shared responsibility of different societal sectors [4] and involving a variety of actors. Moreover, CSPs are considered to have transformative potential towards the SDGs [17,44]. In the practice of supply chain sustainability, the focus of NPOs has also broadened, from promoting certification to stimulating organizations to collaborate with them in CSPs, including multiple actors from business, nonprofit and/or government sectors to address common sustainability issues in their supply chains [37,40,45].

As such, the role of NPOs has changed, and increasingly, these organizations are initiating CSPs together with business actors, in which they can play a variety of important roles, such as convener or facilitator [46]. Working in CSPs implies that businesses have to develop a broader perspective of a more inclusive supply chain that also includes competitors and ‘non-traditional’ supply chain actors such as NPOs [40], inevitably leading to multi-actor CSPs and ‘cross-level dynamics’ among its stakeholders [16]. These dynamics can also involve ‘coopetition’, when businesses need to collaborate with competitors [21,22]. The facilitating role that NPOs play in such CSPs is intended toward enabling business partners to look beyond their individual competitive agendas and work together in ‘pre-competitive’ partnerships, i.e., working with their competitors on non-competitive issues, such as sustainability challenges they (collectively) face in their supply chain [47]. NPOs, hence, take up an important role as initiators of, and conveners in CSPs, as a means to realize their own sustainability objectives to work towards large-scale sustainable and inclusive growth, realizing transformation in terms of the SDGs. This characterizes them as mission-driven. As the initiative lies among the NPOs, and because of the distinct challenges involved in such pre-competitive CSPs, this type of mission-driven convening differs from common concepts of convening, as we now explain.

## 2.2. *Conveners: Definition, Skills, and Role*

Over the past decades, research on (cross-sector) collaboration has studied the role of ‘convener’ using a broad range of terminology, such as brokers or broker organizations [11,13,14,48], bridging agents [15], interveners [16], or orchestrators [17]. The broadest term applied to this type of actor is ‘intervener’ [16]. An intervener draws on a variety of influencing strategies, of which ‘convening’ is one—primarily required in the initial phases of partnership formation by bringing relevant parties together and scoping the interest of joint action. Stadler and Probst [13] consider convening as one of three roles taken up by what they call ‘broker organizations’, while recently, Yan et al. [46] identified convening as one of the potential roles that NPOs can play in CSPs. In this study, we adopt the term ‘convener’, building on prior conceptualization [9,10,24,26,49]. This choice is also motivated by its centrality in our empirical domain—where the NPO we study explicitly refers to its strategy and activities as ‘convening CSPs’. Research often defines convening as sub-activity of a larger, overarching concept, taking place in the earlier stages of partnership formation, i.e., bringing together the relevant parties and scoping the interest of collaboration [10,26,50]. In line with Stadler and Probst [13], however, we consider the relevance of convening as extending well beyond the early phases of the CSP and as an ongoing activity throughout the partnership’s life cycle. Hence, we define a convener as an actor or organization that brings together heterogeneous actors in a CSP and plays a crucial bridging role in balancing different partners’ interests in order to drive the CSP process forward throughout its implementation.

Prior literature has discussed a wide variety of skills and characteristics required to effectively play the role of a convener. For example, conveners need to have a certain level of authority, either formal or informal [24]. Attributes that can be used as a means of authority are legitimation, facilitation, mandate, and persuasion [24]. Another frequently mentioned attribute is neutrality or being “a balanced or unbiased party” [26]. Finally, conveners’ familiarity with the situation or context of the partnership is seen as highly relevant [26]. These attributes are considered to enable conveners to effectively play their role in the formation and implementation of CSPs.

Conveners' roles in a CSP can differ. In a proactive approach, they can be initiators of a CSP, in a responsive approach, they can be asked by other stakeholders to fulfill their convening role [13,16]. Their role and circumstances influence which attributes are relevant means of authority. For example, responsive conveners' authority is primarily based upon legitimation and facilitation, while proactive conveners need persuasion or mandate [13,24]. Furthermore, conveners can be participants in the partnership, or the convening role can be outsourced to a neutral third party without a direct stake in the CSP [16]. The activities and/or responsibilities of the convener can also be shared among different actors. That is, the organization bringing the relevant parties to the table is not necessarily the same organization that subsequently negotiates the partnership agreement or mediates potential conflicts between partners during implementation [16].

In sum, research on convening has emphasized the different elements of their role, applying a variety of terms, discussing the skills required for convening, and the role of the convener in the CSP. In our empirical domain, we encounter an NPO that positions itself as convener that initiates CSPs as a strategy towards achieving its sustainability objectives, namely sustainable production and consumption in global supply chains. Following the shifting role of NPOs in stimulating sustainability in global supply chains from certification to CSPs and with a growing emphasis on co-competition, we consider this NPO to be a "mission-driven convener" because it strategically uses CSPs to achieve its own sustainability objectives across different global supply chains. As an initiator, the NPO takes on a proactive convening role [13], but how it performs that role, and whether the skills, authority requirements, and roles commonly associated with conveners are equally relevant for mission-driven conveners, remains unclear. Moreover, how mission-driven conveners balance their ambiguous role—i.e., facilitating a complex set of stakeholders while having their own objectives and agendas as well—has not been adequately explained in the literature on 'regular' convening discussed above. Nonetheless, understanding such questions is of significance given the important role mission-driven conveners can play in the realization of the SDGs, and SDG 17, in particular [17,44]. In response to this need, we examine this mission-driven convener, set in the context of sustainable coffee.

### 3. Research Context and Case Description

The coffee sector has been a popular context for organizational scholars for some time, with research mostly focused on certification as a means to strengthen sustainability in the sector. Most of these studies mirror the general (scientific) debate on (the shortcomings of) certification, for example, elaborating on the emergence of certification in the coffee industry [28,51], zooming in on the roll-out of certification in specific coffee-producing regions through case studies [52–54], or scrutinizing the impact and effectiveness of certification [55,56] and the poor connection between the 'Northern' voluntary sustainability standards with the 'Southern' reality of smallholder farmers [57]. Recently, Glasbergen [57] argued that by focusing on the effectiveness of certification, researchers fail to acknowledge the 'real' question of whether certification is the most appropriate means to increase sustainable production of coffee (and other sectors).

This emphasis on certification is understandable, given the fact that certification comprised the start of the coffee sector's sustainability journey. This journey began in the late 1980s with the establishment of the 'Max Havelaar' concept, which developed into the certification system presently becoming common practice in ensuring sustainable production in most (agro-food) supply chains. The coffee sustainability journey is eloquently presented by Millard [28], who differentiates between two phases of coffee sustainability: First, (international) roasters and traders stimulated the increase of third-party certification as an assurance of sustainable production and consumption. Since 2004, the second phase signifies a shift in focus, whereby on the one hand industry is developing its own company standards to compete with previously established multi-stakeholder standards, while on the other hand multi-company initiatives are emerging—often supported by donor agencies and/or civil society organizations. Our empirical focus fits with this second phase, namely the emergence of multi-stakeholder initiatives, or 'sectoral sustainability platforms' [29,30] that are set up to directly

target sustainability issues in supply chains by working together with multiple (business) organizations in CSPs.

We studied the work of one Europe-based international NPO (“the Convener”). The Convener aims to strengthen sustainability in global supply chains in multiple commodity sectors—among which is the coffee sector. Funded by several European governments, its strategy is threefold: It convenes cross-sector collaborations, co-funds business investments in sustainable production and trade, and collects and disseminates lessons learned from its programs. The Convener’s coffee program aims to address the SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 15, and 17, and focuses on six (coffee-producing) countries: Two in Africa, two in Asia, and two in Latin America. In one of the African countries initially selected by the Convener the national platform structure did not materialize. Instead, government representatives of another African country initiated a collaboration with the Convener. It is this second country that is part of our analysis in this paper (labeled Africa 1).

Although the coffee program was (strategically) managed from the Netherlands, the Convener outsourced several coordinating activities to so-called ‘Country Coordinators’ (CC) installed in each of the six focus countries: In two countries these CCs were employed by the Convener, in the four other countries the role of the CC was taken up by other organizations. We studied the Convener’s efforts in developing national cross-sector collaboration platforms in these six countries between 2012 and 2016 and report on these cases to shed light on the strategies of a mission-driven convener. It should be noted that our collected data informs on convening efforts that preceded the formulation of the SDGs: At the time, the Convener explicitly aimed to contribute to MDGs 1, 7, and 8. Therefore, the strategy of the Convener did not directly refer to any specific SDGs at the time of data collection. In our Discussion-section, we discuss the implications of our findings in light of the current SDGs.

#### 4. Materials and Methods

The present explorative study has the objective of increasing our understanding of how mission-driven conveners strategically organize CSPs. We used a qualitative research design and purposefully sampled the coffee sector as a relevant context for this study, as it is considered the front-running industry for sustainability initiatives [30,57,58]. We used a case study research methodology [59,60], building on six cases (six national coffee platforms/CSPs) that were embedded within one larger case (the Convener’s coffee program). Having six cases in different institutional conditions allowed us to examine the core elements of the strategic convening process.

##### 4.1. Data Collection

We collected our data between March and August 2016 through a combination of interviews and document analysis. Some additional (secondary) data were collected in 2018. Data were collected in four steps, summarized in Table 1. First, we analyzed a variety of documents, including strategic plans, previous studies on the Convener’s coffee sector work, its annual plans and reports, and communication materials (e.g., websites). We also engaged in informal conversations with Convener employees and conducted an in-depth interview with the (then) Program Director to gain in-depth insight into the Convener’s work and strategy since its coffee program’s inception in 2012. Our second step consisted of a questionnaire, in which the six CCs were asked to provide (1) general information about their platform’s geographical scope, date of inception, etc., (2) information on the platform’s legal status, mandate and funding, (3) their platform’s vision, objectives and results to date, (4) information on their platform meetings, i.e., frequency, agenda, attendance rates, and (5) the governance structure. CCs were also asked to share with us any available supporting documentation on their national platform. This enabled us to better understand the commonalities and differences in the platforms’ structure and organization and the connection between the Convener in the Netherlands and the CCs in each country. Following the questionnaires, we scheduled interviews with the CCs to better understand the country context and their platform, from their own perspectives. The third step of data-collection consisted of a series of interviews with platform members in each country (see Appendix A for the topic-list for

the interviews), identified by CCs and conducted by phone or Skype, as a means to include multiple stakeholder perspectives. These 15 additional stakeholder interviews provided in-depth insights into the differences between the six country contexts in terms of the implementation of the Convener's strategy, as well as sensitizing us to variety in the local context, appreciation, and experience with CSPs in general. We deliberately sought to include a wide variety of perspectives on the Convener's work to complement the Convener's own perspective with that of the 'convened' organizations: In each country, we aimed to include (besides the CC) at least one private sector, and one nonprofit interviewee. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in over 400 pages of interview transcript. The final step of data collection took place in 2018 when we collected additional secondary data from the Convener's website and read (consultancy) reports to update us on the developments in its coffee program between 2016 and 2018. This step served to trace developments in the six national platforms, following a merger that occurred in 2016 between the Convener's coffee program and another sustainability program in the coffee sector.

**Table 1.** Overview of the (process of) data-collection, data-sources, and use in analysis.

Data-Collection Steps	1 Convener Perspective	2 Country Coordinators' Perspective	3 Platform Stakeholders' Perspective	4 Context and Sector Development Beyond the Case Studies
<b>Objectives</b>	To understand the Convener's role, rationale, and way of working in order to gain an in-depth understanding of its strategy.	To collect factual information on key platform characteristics toward a cross-case comparison of six cases (documents), and to understand the perspectives and roles of the CCs convening the platforms at the national level (interviews).	To add the viewpoints and experiences of stakeholders participating in the six country platforms.	To reconnect with the developments in the coffee sector, to gain updates on trends and progress of the sector since the initial period of data collection.
<b>Interviews</b>	Program Director Convener (1) and multiple informal conversations with the Program Director and other Convener employees	Country Coordinators (6)	Platform members (15)	n/a
<b>Documents</b>	Strategic plans, (impact) studies, annual plans, and reports on strategy	Questionnaires on national coffee platforms (6) and supporting documentation	n/a	Websites and (publicly available) reports on progress of the coffee platforms and general sector developments
<b>Outcomes</b>	In-depth insight gained into the (history of) the Convener's coffee program and its strategic considerations.	In-depth insight gained into the perspectives of the CCs as local conveners of the platforms, insight in platform's status, differences, and similarities.	Various perspectives collected, including evaluations on the platforms' achievements.	Findings contextualized through understanding of the current sector's status on an aggregate level.

#### 4.2. Data Analysis

We adopted an abductive approach in the analysis of our data. In practice, this implies a creative, back-and-forth process of discovery, alternating between the collected data, emerging ideas, and existing literature [61]. We were, thus, informed by our prior knowledge of the relevant literature, but also open to the richness of our data [62], and utilizing the richness of our qualitative data to develop a 'new way of seeing' [63] concerning convening.

Our analysis started hands-on with the development of a practitioner report for our focal organization (the Convener), summarizing the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned from



the six country platforms to showcase their and facilitate cross-country learning. Writing this report turned out to be very instrumental in our own further analysis, as it sensitized us to the cross-level dynamics at play in the program: The interaction between the international level at which the Convener operated, and the national level—where the CCs were expected to roll-out the national platform strategy. Furthermore, it showed very clearly the variety in implementation (and challenges) across each of the six countries, whilst the strategy of the Convener for each of these countries, and the results achieved, were very similar.

We proceeded along this line of discovery when we continued our data analysis, comprising a thorough round of coding using the qualitative data analysis software package MaxQDA. Because of our interest in the role of the Convener in the CSPs, we started by coding the interviews with the Convener's Program Director and the six CCs, as these interviews provided the most information on the Convener's strategy, as well as the relationship between the Convener and the CCs in the developmental phase of the (international) coffee program and the national platforms. The interviews with other stakeholders involved in the platforms, which we coded in the next phase, were instrumental in contextualizing the results found in this first coding round and complemented the Convener and CCs' perspectives on how the mission-driven convener had strategically organized the CSPs. Moreover, this iterative analysis allowed us to better understand the differences in CSP formation across the six countries and the diversity in challenges faced throughout the implementation. Finally, we verified our analysis with our host organization, which provided additional insights and sharpened our analysis.

Throughout the data analysis process, we attempted to make sense of our findings in light of a broad spectrum of the existing literature and possible explanations—as is common in the abductive mode of inquiry [61]. Among several possible ways of telling the story [64], we chose to report our findings as a case of mission-driven convening, emphasizing the cross-level dynamics at play. Because of the explorative nature of our research (i.e., studying the underexplored phenomenon of mission-driven convening), we chose a narrative strategy in presenting our results. In doing so, we provide a rich description of our case to detail how the mission-driven convener strategically organized the CSPs in our case. From this rich description, we derive three thematic implications for research on (mission-driven) conveners, which we present in Section 6 (Discussion).

## 5. Findings

Our findings are presented in four sub-sections. The first three sections present the strategy development, implementation, and first achievements of the work of the Convener. These sections illustrate three important themes related to mission-driven convening: First, the productive combination of field-level projects with a CSP approach in the strategy development, second, the pragmatic handling of cross-level dynamics in contextualizing the implementation of the strategy, third, the connection between process and outcomes to realize first achievements. We connect these three themes in the fourth sub-section and relate them to our concept of 'mission-driven conveners', thereby responding to our research question of how mission-driven conveners strategically organize cross-sector partnerships.

### 5.1. Strategy Development: A Productive Combination of Field-Level Projects with a CSP Approach

Upon request of four large, international coffee roasters and three other coffee sector stakeholders (an industry association, donor, and an NGO), the Convener launched its coffee program in 2012. It focused its vision on smallholder farmers, aiming "to address the sustainability issues faced by smallholder coffee producers, to organize production in ways that truly benefit the farmer and, by benefiting the farmer, increase the quality and reliability of production for roasters and traders" (internal document). The Convener had a clear vision, supported by a twofold strategy.

On the one hand, it co-financed 'field-level projects' with individual (international) businesses, investing in training these businesses' suppliers in 'good agricultural practices'. The aim of these projects was to support suppliers in implementing more sustainable production practices that could enable them to potentially become sustainably certified in the future. This part of their strategy

was, thus, largely focused on increasing the percentage of sustainably produced (and/or sustainably certified) coffee. Implemented in individual companies' supply chains, they were, in the vocabulary of the Convener, considered more 'competitive'. The Convener deliberately did not co-finance the cost for the audits to obtain sustainability certification here. This was considered a commercial issue under the responsibility of individual coffee producers and/or traders: Once trained in good agricultural practices, for some producers, it would make commercial sense to obtain certification and sell their sustainably produced coffee as sustainably certified coffee. Simultaneously, the Convener wanted to "facilitate 'precompetitive' and public-private cooperation in major coffee-producing countries" (Convener website). This part of their strategy was, thus, aimed at developing collaborative structures (CSPs), including multiple stakeholders from different societal sectors, to jointly address so-called 'systemic issues' that prevented the coffee sector's transition towards sustainable production and trade. Its objective here was to "move beyond the earlier competitive and certification driven efforts, and towards a much more systemic and institutionalized, pre-competitive collaborative, impact-oriented approach, to make the coffee sectors in key producing countries more sustainable" (Convener's Annual Report, 2013). The fact that the Convener had "the [financial] means to support these field-level projects" was key in convincing businesses to participate in these innovative, collaborative structures, as the Program Director shared in the interview: In fact, while the Convener's co-funding of more competitive 'field-level projects' was restricted to maximum 30% of the total project budget (in Africa this was later adjusted to a maximum of 40% of the budget), pre-competitive collaborative structures could receive up to 70% co-funding from the Convener. The different co-funding ratios were in line with the Convener's mandate as a government-funded organization, aiming to advance the public good.

The Convener focused its two-fold strategy on six coffee-producing countries. These countries were identified through an initial scoping study (conducted in 2012): Two African, two Asian, and two Latin American countries were selected. Following the scoping study, the directorate of the Convener visited these countries to meet with relevant stakeholders, aiming to better understand each country's particular 'systemic issues'. These visits further strengthened the Convener's conviction that stimulating public-private dialogue was required toward enabling a sector-wide transformation of the coffee sector, by way of stakeholder engagement and commitment:

"During many of these visits, we had stakeholder sessions where these people were sitting together at the same table for the first time: Exporters, government, etc. So, we concluded: We should not organize this from the Netherlands! We should create structures here in the [local] country that can pull the work, and we can finance these structures to enable them to work on climate change issues, beyond certification agenda's, farmer training. [ . . . ] That is why we suggested developing a new, pre-competitive agenda, a new structure for talking and working with each other. So that should be established, institutionalized, and would become the vehicle for change." (Program Director, the Convener)

In the first years of its coffee program, the Convener referred to 'strengthening public-private dialogue' quite loosely, without the term 'platform' being used to refer to the initiatives per se. Not until the 2014 Annual Report first reference was made to a platform: "Establish well-functioning public-private dialogue platforms [ . . . ] that bring coffee sector stakeholders together and drive a common national sustainability agenda [ . . . ]". In its ambition to make the coffee sector more sustainable, the Convener, thus, deliberately chose a CSP strategy to achieve its overall objective and aimed to organize six national coffee platforms in the six focal countries.

Key to our findings was first, the Convener's positioning as 'mission-driven' with the objective of strengthening sustainability in the coffee sector, by initiating a CSP to strengthen coordination and pre-competitive collaboration in production countries. Second, the Convener's two-fold strategy signifies a productive combination of more competitive field-level projects (potentially leading to certification depending on the priorities of producers and/or traders) and pre-competitive collaborations for systemic change in an overall strategy. Third, its emphasis on the production side of the supply chain demarcates a clear shift from earlier certification-driven approaches, often pushed from the

buyer-end of the supply chain. Instead, the Convener attempted to organize the sector in a 'bottom-up' manner, before knowing which exact issues each country struggled with most. Finally, the contextual differences between production countries required a regular strategic adaptation to the local context, which evoked a need for the Convener to organize cross-level dynamics, as we now illustrate.

### *5.2. Implementation: Pragmatically Dealing with Cross-Level Dynamics*

An important component of implementation was the contextualization of the international strategy, which required the Convener to strategically organize cross-level dynamics among different stakeholders. With cross-level dynamics, we refer to the connection between convening at the international level by the Convener and its Steering Committee (SC), and at the national-level primarily by the Country Coordinators (CCs).

To facilitate its work at the international level, an SC was installed, meeting every six weeks to guide the international agenda and the pre-competitive national platform work (rather than the more competitive field-level projects). Initially, the members of the SC were the organizations that had requested the Convener to initiate the coffee program, comprising international roasters and coffee sector stakeholders, although the composition of the SC changed over time as members came and went. SC members joined the Convener during several scoping visits to the focal countries, which—in the words of the Program Director of the Convener—“has been hugely instrumental in supporting the Convener’s role and in creating a joint focus and framing of the global program”. The SC was charged with the disbursement of the available funds, comprising the Convener’s own public funding sources and private sector contributions (from international roasters). These funds were assigned by the SC to strategic proposals submitted by the Convener with CCs of each national platform. The Convener managed the Secretariat of the SC.

To facilitate its work in the different local contexts, the Convener sought organizations or individuals in each of the six countries to serve as advisors in scoping the key sustainability issues and stakeholders in their respective countries. In all but one country in Asia, these advisors were later on installed as CCs, to support the local roll-out of the Convener’s (international) strategy. For the Convener, one of the reasons to work with local advisors in the scoping of their program was to show their willingness to integrate into the existing stakeholder community and build on existing structures and efforts of other (local) organizations, as opposed to starting new initiatives. In five of the six countries, these CCs became responsible for the project management of all in-country field-level projects co-financed by the Convener. The Convener sought out individuals or organizations that would “not [be] implementing any projects themselves to avoid any conflict of interest. [ . . . ]. So, they must be neutral in the sense that they are not connected to a certain certification standard, private sector company, or government. They had to be able to work for us without constraints. So, they had to be neutral, with a certain level of authority, and of course, know the coffee sector” (Representative, Convener). Eligible organizations were selected as CCs depending upon the Convener’s existing network and their position in the respective country. For example, in the two Asian countries, the Convener was (at the time) already setting up national offices, so selected CCs were effectively employed by the Convener. In the other four countries, the CCs were external organizations. All CCs were firmly grounded in the local contexts.

Moving towards implementation, in each country, the Convener mapped the existing structures and initiatives already in place together with their CCs, scoping if and how a national platform strategy could contribute to overcoming systemic issues standing in the way of a sustainability transition for the country’s coffee sector. Not surprisingly, the countries varied greatly, for example, regarding stakeholders’ prior experience with working in multi-stakeholder settings, the extent to which the sector was organized and/or other local institutions were already in place, or government involvement and participation, to name a few. This led to a very diverse implementation process in terms of the Convener’s strategy, and CCs faced different challenges depending on their specific country context. Examples of implementation challenges mentioned by interviewees include geographical

challenges, challenging interactions with government, securing sufficient funding, maintaining a results-oriented approach and creating real accountability in a voluntary platform, maintaining member- and government engagement, reaching farmers, and connecting sectors with a different work pace. In three of its focal countries, the Convener found that there were already some structures in place that enabled public-private dialogue, while in the other three countries, public-private dialogue was largely non-existent. To avoid duplication of efforts, in the countries where platforms already existed, the Convener initially focused through its CCs on co-financing field-level projects, while connecting with the existing platforms, aimed at strengthening or accelerating their work on sustainability (some of these existing platforms had a wider, coordinating function in the country's coffee sector). Acknowledging existing initiatives was recognized as an important step in this phase: "Respect them and acknowledge their achievements and current initiatives. If you break trust in this process, it is very hard to win it back" (CC, Latin America). In the three countries where public-private dialogue was less developed, the CCs were an important link toward setting up a national platform and involving relevant stakeholders. Table 2 provides a brief overview of the key characteristics of each platform.

**Table 2.** Six coffee platforms—overview of key organizational characteristics.

	Africa 1 <sup>1</sup>	Africa 2 <sup>1</sup>	Asia 1	Asia 2	Latin America 1	Latin America 2 <sup>1</sup>
<b>Start date platform</b>	2009	2007	2015	2013	2013	2012
<b>Commodity in scope</b>	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Multiple
<b>Legal status</b>	Undefined	No legal status	Association under country's law	No legal status	No legal status	No legal status
<b>Chair of platform</b>	Government representative	Government representative	Director of roaster/trading company	Government representative	None appointed	Ambassador of the Netherlands
<b>Secretariat</b>	Private sector association	Country Coordinator	Executive Director of platform	Research Institute	Country Coordinator	Country Coordinator
<b>Frequency of meetings</b>	Monthly	Monthly	Differs per committee	Bi-annually	Three times a year	Yearly
<b>Attendance rate of meetings</b>	50–60%	Inconsistent	Close to 100%	Over 70%	Close to 100%	Unknown
<b>Members</b>	Public sector (4); private sector (7); farmer cooperatives (4), NGOs or donors (3), (research) institutions (2)	Public sector (5); private sector (4); NGOs or donors (7)	Public sector (1); private sector (14); farmer cooperatives (5); NGOs or donors (14); (research) institutions (1)	Public sector (7); private sector (5); farmer cooperatives (2); (research) institutions (1)	Public sector (7); private sector (9); NGOs or donors (# unknown)	Public sector (1); private sector (13); NGOs or donors (11)

<sup>1</sup> These platforms already existed prior to the Convener's involvement.

Our data revealed that a crucial role in the platforms' development and the mitigation of each of their country-specific challenges was played by the CCs, primarily because of the contextual variation described above. The Convener coordinated a generic strategy, providing the platforms with direction and financial resources, and connecting them to international-level ambitions. The CCs, meanwhile, drove the 'local convening' in their countries, bringing relevant partners together, driven by their favorable positioning in their country to play this role. We found that platform stakeholders acknowledged the convening role played by the CCs in the platforms because they were (1) well-connected with a valuable network in the country's coffee sector, (2) knowledgeable on the coffee sector, and (3) able to speak multiple 'languages'. In other words, CCs understood the perspectives of the private sector, government, and other stakeholders, and were able to translate

between them, as exemplified by the following quote: “The Director of [CC] has more than 33 years of experience in the field, so s/he knows everyone. And the people that work with them, they are agronomists. [ . . . ] So, they have a good knowledge of the field so they can transit. They can go to a meeting with the Ministry and be effective. And at the same time, they can go and do a workshop with farmers on a very basic level and they can speak their language” (stakeholder, Latin America 1). Other interviews confirmed this acknowledgment, for instance: “[CC] has a lot of experience in working with farmer cooperatives and with the big companies” (stakeholder, Asia 1).

Our analysis showed how the Convener deliberately ‘outsourced’ a large part of the convening work to these CCs as local facilitators. From our interviews with stakeholders, we also found that CCs were often recognized in their capacity as conveners, more so than the Convener itself—who was more distant to platform members and was primarily perceived as an important donor. However, this evaluation on the Convener’s role in the platform differed, depending on whether the CC in the country was employed by the Convener, and whether the country’s platform existed prior to the Convener’s and/or CC’s involvement. Furthermore, the Convener emphasized how their financial backing, agenda, and authority enabled the CC’s convening role in each of the countries and how, in some cases, their visits to the country “were essential to raise existing initiatives and platforms to the required level of visibility and authority. [ . . . ] Of course, over time, this role decreased” (Program Director, Convener).

In sum, the implementation of the Convener’s strategy shows a contextualization of the international strategy to ensure a fit within the national context. While the SC played a guiding role, the CCs, as ‘local conveners’, were essential for the implementation of the Convener’s overall CSP strategy in each of the production countries. Who was most fit to perform the role of CC was determined in part by a pragmatic approach of the Convener, who installed either their own (local) staff or reached out to other organizations in their network. The cross-level dynamics in our case, therefore, relate to the different convening levels at which the Convener and their CCs operated both internationally and locally. Section 5.3 reports on the outcomes of this process.

### *5.3. First Achievements: Connecting Process and Outcomes to Realize Sustainability Objectives*

The three achievements mentioned most often when asking about the first results of the national platform strategy of the Convener include one primarily related to the outcomes of the platform work, and two primarily related to the process, although the Convener actively sought to connect these two elements in its work—as we will now explain.

An important part of the Convener’s strategy was to collect and disseminate the lessons learned from the field-level projects that they co-funded with private sector partners. In this manner, it strategically drew on the field-level projects to show sector stakeholders the value of pre-competitive collaboration in the national platforms. The field-level projects that the Convener co-financed were more ‘competitive’ in the sense that they focused on one supply chain only (i.e., they could include a producer and/or trader within one supply chain), although project implementation was often supported by an NPO. Private sector stakeholders submitted proposals to the Convener for project co-funding. The CCs were charged with managing the national project portfolio, which included collecting and sharing lessons learned from their country projects. The aim here was to prevent duplication of efforts and to align instructions on ‘good agricultural practices’, taught to farmers and farmer cooperatives. Building on these shared lessons, the CCs and Convener stimulated the joint development of harmonized farmer training materials, collecting good practices from earlier projects. These materials were developed in multi-stakeholder sessions, including among others, the CCs and (competing) private sector companies, agricultural authorities (i.e., Ministries), and other coffee stakeholders in the country. These harmonized training curricula became the first concrete deliverable for most of the national platforms:

“It provides the multi-stakeholder coalition something to dig their teeth into, as they actually cannot disagree on its the relevance: It leads to a ‘booklet’, a concrete result, a training

program, a train-the-trainer program, a roll-out . . . something of which all partners can say: Look! That is a great accomplishment!” (Program Director, the Convener)

Indeed, the development of these curricula is one of the three achievements most often mentioned in our interviews when asking CCs and platform stakeholders about the results and achievements of their platform, as it clearly shows the value of collaborating: “We have involved the best people from nine organizations. No single organization can have a team like this involved in a task or project” (CC, Latin America 2). The result was more than the harmonized approach to farmer training (the ‘outcome’) itself: Sector stakeholders also came to recognize the relevance of collaborating pre-competitively on certain issues and realizing that they were facing similar challenges, they built mutual trust as they met with peers from other (competing) organizations in person: “The platform has managed to put together actors from industries that have never sat together in the past. We have managed to discuss, to find out we have issues to tackle that . . . we are all facing, and that maybe, if we would together face them, we would be stronger” (Stakeholder, Latin America 2). This result then provided a stepping stone for the Convener and the CCs to discuss—in later stages of the CSP—other, more complex platform-related issues, as had been their intention from the start:

“It [the sustainability curriculum] was very logical because it was a ‘harmless’ first deliverable of a platform. For us, the platform was an enabler to address all sorts of issues. For example, the use of forbidden pesticides, a public-private subject [ . . . ], or managing water licenses [ . . . ]. But a lot of these issues are difficult, political, require adjustments in regulations, so, more long-term issues. But those [platform] structures are going to help you get a grip on these issues, once trust is established. So, we asked ourselves, what is a ‘harmless’, and relevant theme with which you can build the trust between different stakeholders? The sustainability curriculum!” (Program Director, the Convener)

However, interviews with the Program Director and other stakeholders revealed that the sustainability curriculum was more than just ‘harmless’: It also deliberately provided a useful, neutral catalyst for the platforms. Thus, the incremental strategy worked. For instance, in one of the Latin American countries, a joint response was formulated by the national platform to an NGO-campaign critiquing the (lack of) sustainability of ‘their’ coffee sector. Because the structure for a pre-competitive public-private dialogue was already being developed (i.e., the national platform), the sector was able to coordinate a “non-defensive” response and mitigate its reputational risk, while also showing the efforts it had already undertaken to address the issue raised by the NGO. As the country’s CC explained:

“They organized a special meeting to discuss the issue and how they would reply to the report of [ . . . ]. I guess the [platform] helped in this process because the entities are already participating, already discussing sustainability [ . . . ] So, when [NGO] comes they’re not starting to discuss sustainability or problems on the field, it is already part of the process and it was much easier to have the meeting organized because things are already on the table, you know?” (CC, Latin America 1)

Besides the national curricula—the first tangible ‘outcome’ of the Convener’s CSP strategy—the achievements most often mentioned by interviewees included (1) the coming together of all stakeholders in the country’s platform, and (2) the increased coordination in the country’s coffee sector thanks to the platform. Both of these ‘process’-achievements mirror the objectives that the Convener had envisioned for the platforms, namely to “facilitate better coordination in the sector, improvements in government policy with feedback from the (private) sector, and international credibility for local sustainability initiatives” (Convener’s Annual Report, 2014). Thus, the platforms were essentially set up as an instrument to facilitate coordination and policy influencing, while the sustainability agenda was not yet clearly defined for each country. This was reflected in early achievements, which once more highlight the initial focus on establishing a well-functioning CSP, as opposed to focusing on

results achieved through the CSP from the start: “It is a huge success just to get it started and get it off the ground because there is so much work in getting people together. To come up with bylaws, the initial funding commitment, to secure the initial team. So just the fact that [the platform] has already survived a year is a great achievement” (Stakeholder, Asia 1). The fact that the platform’s establishment is considered an achievement in itself shows how stakeholders had faith in this way of working. This was also recognized by the Convener:

“There is a lot of enthusiasm in the sector about this model [ . . . ]. At the moment, it is the promise of the effect [ . . . ] and a visible amount of energy around it. And the actual results are still quite difficult to determine. But for sure, several things would not have happened without these platforms”. (Program Director, the Convener)

Despite the limited results beyond the various sustainability curricula at the time of our research, several national platforms were institutionalized quite early on in the process. That is, they were formalized as a (mandated) entity in their country of focus and recognized in the country’s sector by its coffee stakeholders (including the public and private sector). The early, positive responses to the training curricula strengthened stakeholders’ faith in and enthusiasm for the platform and accelerated the multi-stakeholder dialogue, which then led to more formalized agreements on the stakeholders’ joint ambitions, objectives, targets, deliverables, and structure. Platform ‘rules’ were established, including frequency of meetings or the development of sub-committees, and Chairs and Secretariats were appointed. In one of the Asian countries, the platform was quickly established as an independent association, employing staff. This development was in line with the Convener’s long-term strategy to be only temporarily involved in the national platforms.

The platforms’ initial results show the strong connection between the process of organizing the platforms and the platforms’ sustainability outcomes. In the case of the sustainability curricula, the Convener capitalized on their (earlier) work in the field-level projects to show stakeholders the value in collaborating pre-competitively, which supported the establishment of the platforms. During the platform formation, emphasis was initially placed on the process of establishing well-functioning CSPs, more so than on the realization of tangible sustainability outcomes. The platforms, once firmly established and recognized, were expected to become vehicles for change. With these results, we show how a CSP-strategy requires a long lead-time in its development, which supports our proposition that mission-driven convening calls for a different type of convening.

#### *5.4. Implications for the Notion of ‘Mission-Driven Convener’*

Having presented the strategy development, implementation, and initial achievements in detail, we have shown how a mission-driven convener strategically organized cross-sector collaboration. To better understand this process, we now examine the role of the mission-driven convener, by highlighting the cross-level dynamics that emerged from our data during our analysis, that is, the connection between convening at the international level by the Convener, and at the national-level primarily by the CCs. We consider these dynamics from three perspectives: The Convener, the CCs, and other platform stakeholders.

The Convener specifically aimed at connecting the international-level coffee roasting companies and the coffee-producing countries, by creating “international credibility for local sustainability initiatives” (Convener’s Annual Report, 2014). It realized, from the start, that it was uniquely positioned to connect the national and the international level in the coffee sector:

“The fact that we can organize pre-competitive structures, that only have the farmer benefit in mind, and where we can organize a dialogue between the international and national private sector and local governments on systemic improvements. This is what everybody, including myself, finds fantastic—it is where we, as an organization, have our sweet spot. This is what we can do.” (Representative, the Convener)

Meanwhile, the Convener realized that in most of their focus countries, it was not well-positioned to connect the relevant organizations within these countries. Instead, the CCs, many of whom it had already installed as advisors in the scoping phase of their program, were much better positioned to do so. Moreover, this aligned with the Convener's strategy to develop 'independent' structures:

"It was a kick-start model. We pay for the Secretariat for a few years, and at a certain moment, the members need to take over. It absolutely is [an exit strategy]. And now, with the merger with [another sustainability program], it moves really fast. From the start, it has been the intention that it would be a structure independent from us as an organization". (Program Director, the Convener)

To achieve their mission of addressing systemic issues in the coffee supply chain, the Convener quickly recognized the importance of 'outsourcing' their convening role at the national level to the CCs as local conveners. This cross-level convening dynamic was apparent in all six countries.

The strength of the connection between the two levels—and consequently the strategic influence the Convener could exert at the national level—differed between the countries where the platforms had existed prior to the Convener's coffee program and those where the Convener had initiated the platforms through their CCs. For example, in one Latin American country, the platform was already set-up and led by an international NPO with significant expertise. Their relationship with the Convener was initially centered around the coordination of the field-level projects: "they said: There is already a platform working on sustainability issues, so it makes sense for us not to create a new one [ . . . ]. So, in the beginning, the idea was that we will be the local coordinators for the field-level projects that they have" (CC, Latin America 2). Meanwhile, in the other Latin American country, the CC relied heavily upon the Convener's expertise, asking them for input and feedback on stakeholder meeting agendas and at times even having the Convener physically present: "We set the date for the meetings, we send the invitations, we suggest the agenda but also ask for suggestions and we discuss this with the Convener, so what are the goals? What are the main issues?" (CC—Latin America 1). In the two Asian countries, the Convener had local staff employed, which facilitated close involvement as these employees served as CCs for these countries. The Convener later embraced this practice in more countries (and other programs). In Africa, the relationship was more distant, as the CCs in these countries came from the same Africa-based NPO already involved in the national platforms prior to the Convener's involvement. Overall, however, the Convener instigated the process of developing harmonized training materials in all but one country, and also funded the roll-out of already existing materials in the sixth country, which was considered an important achievement for all platforms and provided important recognition of the Convener's involvement.

Interestingly, platform members generally tended to associate the convening role to the CCs rather than to the Convener itself. In fact, members often ascribed to the CC the skills and roles commonly associated with conveners, such as their familiarity with, or expertise in the (national) coffee sector and relevant networks, their negotiation skills, facilitation and trust-building, their ability to 'bridge between', or speak the languages of both private and public sectors, and their neutral or unbiased position between different stakeholders' interests. Meanwhile, the Convener was in some countries and by some stakeholders merely perceived as a donor to the platform, or more specifically to the field-level projects: "I do not know very much about [the Convener]. I know they are working with some cooperation in specific projects" (stakeholder, Latin America 2). In some cases, specifically, when platforms existed prior to their involvement, this perception was correct. However, this perception also related to the Convener's efforts and its influence on the platforms largely taking place behind the scenes and on a bilateral basis. Nonetheless, the Convener maintained frequent contact with the CCs, organizing calls on a weekly basis to discuss ongoing business. Indeed, to the CCs, it was clear that the Convener did more than just fund the platforms. This was particularly the case in the two countries where the Convener engaged its local staff as CCs: "The Convener, through my own active role in the platform, provides support and direction." (CC, Asia 1). However, in other countries, a more active, strategic Convener role was also recognized by the CCs: "The more strategically-focused support has



really come into play this year. We have an objective now in our strategic plan with [the Convener], to provide that technical support to the platform” (CC, Africa 2).

In sum, the convening role of the Convener was most apparent at the international level, while at a local level, it was mostly outsourced to the CCs. For platform stakeholders in most countries, the Convener’s level of influence remained largely ‘unseen’ and they were often merely perceived as a donor to the platform. Nonetheless, in most countries, the Convener had a close connection with the CCs and wielded significant influence in the development of the platforms’ strategies. Fundamentally, the Convener’s authority vis-à-vis the CCs came primarily from two sources: The mandate of the international coffee roasters who backed the program financially and through their involvement in the SC, and the financial contributions the Convener itself made to the program. Thus, depending on the strength of its connection with the CC in each country, the Convener’s influence ranged from advising or guiding, to leading local platform-related efforts. This led to a similar strategy in each country in terms of developing a platform and working on national sustainability curricula, but also to very different implementation processes, appropriate to the contextual variety.

## 6. Discussion

With this explorative research, we aimed to answer the question: How do mission-driven conveners strategically organize cross-sector collaboration? In this section, we further interpret three main themes that emerged from our findings, namely the productive combination of field-level and CSP strategies, the pragmatic approach to cross-level dynamics, and the strategic combination of process and outcomes to realize first achievements. We position these themes in the context of existing literature on CSPs and conveners, and present the implications for the focal concept of the mission-driven convener. In doing so, we advance our understanding of what convening entails when undertaken by mission-driven organizations, who seek to realize their sustainable development objectives and contribute to the SDGs through the initiation and implementation of CSPs as strategic vehicles for change.

First, our findings show how the mission-driven convener studied here productively combined two elements in its strategy: The co-financing of more *competitive* field-level projects and the establishment of *pre-competitive* CSPs in production countries. Our case showed how field-level projects facilitated the development of cross-sector collaboration platforms, leveraged by the mission-driven convener, to demonstrate to partners the value of collaborating pre-competitively. Moreover, the Convener presented its convening work as a holistic program to the international coffee roasters: Its contribution to more *competitive* field-level projects was linked to the (cash and in-kind) investment of coffee roasters in the *pre-competitive* cross-sector collaboration platforms. To this end, the co-funding ratios stressed the importance of the systemic versus the individual company-level sustainability initiatives. The emphasis placed on “systemic change” in our case study also is in line with the SDGs’ overarching focus on systems change and transformation. Hence, our findings show the relevance of a CSP strategy to realize such transformation and underline the importance of partnerships (SDG 17) in achieving the SDG objectives.

We build on prior critiques of the (limited) impact of voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) on field-level, supply chain sustainability [34–40], and the high expectations of collaboration through cross-sector partnerships as being a relevant means to address sustainability issues [18–20,40], detailed in our theory section above. Our findings do not so much represent a shift from certification to CSPs but introduce an alternative strategy toward interconnecting and combining field-level and CSP-level efforts. Indeed, the cross-sector collaboration platforms we studied were not set-up to address potential shortcomings of the certification approach to sustainability aims. Rather, the mission-driven convener aimed to address sustainability challenges at field-level and enable farmers to implement the ‘good agricultural practices’ they required before they could engage in certification schemes: Farmers could opt for certification if they deemed it an attractive commercial option. Once the platforms were more firmly established, the mission-driven convener encouraged these to address more complex issues

besides good agricultural practices (and/or certification). Thus, where critical researchers urge us to look at solutions beyond certification to solve more complex sustainability challenges in global supply chains [56,57], and CSP researchers position CSPs as relevant instruments to address more complex sustainability challenges [18–20], we find that certification-driven efforts and CSP-driven efforts at field level can also move in tandem and that CSP-driven efforts can have value before, besides, and beyond certification.

Second, our findings show how a mission-driven convener dealt with the cross-level dynamics in their strategic ambitions for the sector in a pragmatic way: They outsourced a significant part of the local convening to CCs, who were better positioned for this role given their stakeholder networks and local knowledge. The Convener's pragmatic approach was also reflected in its selection of the CCs: They engaged their own local staff when possible and connected to existing initiatives and well-positioned others when necessary. This approach also proved fruitful in the Convener's efforts to meet the needs and requirements of each individual country: They were now able to contextualize the overall strategy to fit the local context. This contextualization strategy is important, as it relates to a common critique of NPO strategies in general, that is homogenization and the neglect of contextual variety in problem domains and regions [65,66]. This tendency is strengthened where agencies exert top-down pressure on NPOs to develop strategic plans and account for these plans toward their donors [66], which calls for measurable, quantifiable, and comparable approaches across contexts and borders. We find that in our case this "loss of sensitization" did not occur thanks to the CCs' involvement, who were able to adapt the overall strategy to local needs, to identify which structures were already in place, which stakeholders were important to include early on and to understand political sensitivities around their work. Hence, the cross-level dynamics between the Convener and its locally convening CCs were an essential element in the successful implementation of the Convener's broader international strategy. Working towards its mission required the Convener to carefully balance local and international requirements, working with an SC at the international level and with CCs at the national level allowed them to do so.

Third, our findings show how the mission-driven convener in our case deliberately connected CSP *process* and CSP *outcomes* in order to strategically advance the platforms' objectives: Based on the experiences and lessons learned in the field-level projects, the first 'task' of the newly established national platforms was to develop a national sustainability curriculum to harmonize farmer training across each country. This first, very tangible outcome of cross-sector dialogue (directly contributing to SDG 12) sparked interest in the model of pre-competitive collaboration, facilitating the work of the Convener and the CCs in the formation, implementation, and institutionalization of national coffee platforms. These early outcomes observed in our case, sometimes achieved prior to the actual formation of the platforms, are at odds with regular life cycle models of CSPs, where the establishment of the CSP and the definition of a common agenda normally precedes the implementation and results [16,50]. Moreover, CSPs usually are established with a specific objective in mind, as partners come together over an issue of mutual concern [4,67]. In our case there was a broadly defined objective (i.e., "to facilitate better coordination in the sector, improvements in government policy with feedback from the (private) sector, and international credibility for local sustainability initiatives"), but the concrete objectives per country platform were not yet defined, as the sustainability challenges were expected to differ per country. We found that, besides the harmonized farmer training materials as concrete output, much time and effort of both the CCs and the Convener went into establishing the platform structures to foster public-private dialogue—which was also often mentioned as an important achievement by platform stakeholders. The establishment of the platforms' structure, thus, went in parallel with defining the actual objectives that these platforms were expected to achieve: Indeed, to convince stakeholders to participate, issues had to be clearly defined. By pragmatically connecting process and outcomes in its efforts to kickstart the CSPs, the establishment of a CSP driven by a mission-driven convener appears to be a more 'messy' and flexible process compared to CSP life cycle processes commonly addressed in the literature. The importance of the interconnection between process and

outcomes has been acknowledged by communication scholars studying collaboration [68–70]. We build on these insights and confirm their relevance to CSPs, a specific type of collaboration. In doing so we advance research on the distinction between process and outcomes of CSPs, and show how these two elements interact in the context of sustainable development: An initial emphasis on process can be justified where this supports efforts to promote sustainability—even when this might make it difficult to ultimately measure the actual outcomes of the CSP.

By answering the question of how mission-driven conveners strategically organize CSPs, our research contributes to our understanding of conveners in the domain of CSPs. First, we contribute to CSP literature by developing an alternative approach to conveners. From an actor-perspective, conveners can be considered mission-driven organizations, which are not instrumental to a CSP but instead develop CSPs as instruments to realize their own sustainability objectives: We define these actors as ‘mission-driven conveners’. Mission-driven conveners have a stronger, guiding, or leading role in the partnership design and implementation, and therefore they have to ensure that they are considered legitimate actors to take up this role. Second, we have shown how mission-driven conveners develop legitimacy by productively making connections between (a) process and outcomes of CSPs, and (b) international and national-level activities. By alternating between concrete activities leading to early results and the convening process itself, they drive CSP formation and institutionalization. Moreover, they productively shape the cross-level dynamics in their work, by recognizing that they occupy an international strategic position to convene and that at a national level they require others (CCs) to convene on their behalf.

Our research also has implications for practice, first, by emphasizing a need for flexibility and pragmatism for mission-driven conveners to succeed, which extends beyond the application of common techniques and requirements commonly associated with CSP- or convening success (i.e., ensure equal representation, upfront clarity on goals and expectations). For instance, our case study showed how a mission-driven convener initially took an inclusive approach during the scoping phase, inviting all stakeholders that were deemed essential to enable the success of the CSP in each particular country, but then kick-started their CSP efforts with ‘coalitions of the willing’. Meanwhile, throughout the process, it kept the door open for additional stakeholders who wanted to participate in the process and contribute (financially) to the program. We also showed how a mission-driven convener created value in collaboration by realizing early results, and how it outsourced their convening work where this stood to benefit the CSP. This pragmatic approach enables a mission-driven convener to realize quick wins and creates ‘momentum’ in the sector when stakeholders become enthusiastic about the process, thereby laying the groundwork for addressing the more complex sustainability issues in each country. Second, our findings have implications for the sustainable development agenda as set forth in the SDGs, as they (a) illustrate the important role mission-driven conveners can play in establishing and implementing CSPs (SDG 17) to advance other SDGs (notably 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, and 15), and (b) elaborate on the how of realizing the SDG agenda’s overarching focus on systems change and transformation through a CSP approach.

Despite our best efforts, our study has certain limitations, particularly concerning the limited data per country. We deliberately focused our research on the level of the mission-driven convener rather than attempting a cross-case comparison of the different country platforms, with the aim to generate a comprehensive understanding of how mission-driven conveners strategically organize CSPs. We did not include direct observations or participation in our chosen methodology, and therefore we were unable to witness the work of the Convener first-hand, for example, during meetings with stakeholders in the national platforms. By including interviews with many different stakeholders (CCs and platform stakeholders from each of the six countries), we sought to arrive at a complete picture of the strategy of the Convener, also adding the experiences and perspectives of others and not only the Convener’s own evaluation of its work. Moreover, the ultimate result of the Convener’s strategy is not included in our study, as at the time of our research, most platforms were newly established, or the Convener had only recently become involved. This limits our understanding of the long-term outcomes of the

Convener’s strategy. However, such limitations also point out relevant directions for future research, for example, studying longitudinally the work of mission-driven conveners, examining across different sectors whether similar cases of mission-driven conveners exist in other supply chains, or looking beyond the domain of sustainable trade towards other pressing issues of sustainability.

With this paper, we aimed to establish the concept of “mission-driven conveners”, which we consider a relevant phenomenon in the current “partnership society” [71] and in view of the emphasis placed on collaboration toward the realization of the SDGs. Our analysis identified some distinct features of mission-driven conveners, such as the strong enabling role they play compared to conventional conveners, as well as their flexible approach to CSP development: Productively connecting field-level and CSP activities, pragmatically dealing with cross-level dynamics and seeking connections between process and outcomes. CSP and sustainability studies would benefit from further analysis as to whether these distinct features of mission-driven convening reappear in different contexts, toward furthering our understanding of how conveners can successfully advance the important mission of realizing the SDGs.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper studies an important enabling feature of SDGs implementation, namely how a mission-driven convener strategically organizes cross-sector partnerships. We have shown how a mission-driven convener productively makes connections between the different elements involved in its work: (a) Combining field-level, certification-driven efforts with CSP formation, (b) making use of cross-level dynamics by taking up part of the convening itself at the international level, while outsourcing this work to better-positioned others at the national level, and (c) combining the process of establishing CSPs with the realization of early outcomes of the CSP. Together, these insights show how mission-driven conveners differ from conventional notions of the concept, in the sense that these actors have a more dominant role in the CSP, legitimized by their pragmatic and flexible approach to CSP formation. The CSPs in this context are strategically organized as a means to realize sustainability outcomes and systemic change in supply chains. Knowing more about different forms of organizing sustainability in supply chains is highly relevant given the importance adhered to collaboration in CSPs for the advancement of the sustainable development and transformative ambitions as set out in the SDGs, and through this study, we contribute to such knowledge.

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## Appendix A

Topic list for the interviews with platform’s CCs and stakeholders (including potential probes):  
Introduction

- How long have you been involved with the platform, and how long in this role?
- How would you explain the work you do in the national platform (NP)?

Narrative on how platform started/developed over the past few years

- Can you briefly describe the development of the NP?
- Are there any other public-private collaborations existing in your sector/country?

Effectiveness of the platform (follow-up on NP questionnaire)

- Do you think the NP is a useful tool to solve the sustainability issues in the sector (+ why)?
- Do you think the appropriate stakeholders are included? Do stakeholders have specific roles?
- How are the dynamics in the group, is there trust and mutual understanding?
- Are partners committed to the goals/objectives, and is the NP on track in reaching its goals?
- Are there sufficient financial resources to achieve the goals?
- Overall, do you think the NP is effective, what would you improve?

Key achievements

- How do you define success in terms of the NP?
- Can you share with me the most important achievements/successes of the NP?
- What do you still hope to achieve in the coming years?

Key challenges faced

- What are the most important challenges faced by the platform?
- Can you give an example of how you faced (one of) these challenges?
- What are the biggest platform challenges for you in your role?

Learning points

- What is the most important thing you learned in your role?
- What advice would you share with anyone trying to organize a country platform?
- What do you think are the skills that are needed to fulfill a coordinating role in the NP?

Local ownership

- Why is there a platform needed, according to you?
- Do you feel there is sufficient local commitment/ownership of the NP?
- Do you think the platform would continue if international funders (for example, the Convener and/or CC) would (partly) pull out? Please explain.
- Who has the most influence on the agenda/work of the NP?

Role/support of the Convener

- What is the role of the Convener in the NP?
- According to you, what role should the Convener play?
- What is the Convener's level of involvement?
- Would the process continue without the Convener (+ their funding)?

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