

How do NGOs collaborate with other sectors to
enhance CSR initiatives in Vietnam?

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Abstract

The research aims to shed light on the current role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in promoting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices through collaboration between NGOs and businesses on CSR initiatives in Vietnam. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 NGOs over a four-month period from September to December 2021, utilizing online platforms due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Theoretically, this study unveils the critical ecosystem-building function of NGOs in Vietnam, demonstrating how they forge a dynamic network connecting businesses and supply chain, government, other NGOs, international donors, banking institutions, technology companies, foreign agencies, trade associations, working groups, and local communities. This unique role is particularly salient in contexts where government CSR enforcement is nascent, highlighting NGOs as primary facilitators of multi-stakeholder collaboration for CSR advancement. Practically, this study provides potential insights for directly enhancing the capacity of NGOs, businesses, and governments to improve and implement effective policies, while also offering strategic guidance for multi-stakeholder initiatives.

1. Introduction

The current literature reveals diverse roles of NGOs in NGO-business partnerships: CSR drivers (Faroque et al., 2022; Weber and Partzsch, 2018); stakeholder dialogue enhancement (Burchell and Cook, 2013); sustainability development (Darnall et al., 2018); global governance management (Henry et al., 2019); and policy changes (Desai, 2024). Despite having distinct motivations, both NGOs and businesses share similar perspectives regarding CSR initiatives, aligning with societal challenges (Barroso-Méndez et al., 2013). While NGOs aim to educate the private sector about behaviours and sustainability (Liu et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2022), business responds to the growing demand for CSR practices (den Hond et al., 2015), stakeholder pressures (Liu et al., 2020; Park et al., 2014), social stability (Lucea, 2010), and public trust enhancement (Lee et al., 2012). Both entities find mutual benefits in the partnership, accessing each other's untapped resources, such as funding (Hunter, 2015) and specific community expertise (Abiddin et al., 2022).

In terms of geographical scope, there is a dearth of research on the collaboration of NGOs with other sectors to drive CSR in developing nations, as evidenced by the limited number of studies conducted in this area (Cordery et al., 2019; Idemudia, 2014; Sisaye, 2021). Although there has been a proliferation of research on cross-sectoral partnerships over the past two decades, these studies have predominantly been carried out in Western countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, the Netherlands, and Sweden (den Hond et al., 2015; Fontana, 2018; Grigore et al., 2015; Maher and Czarzyńska, 2022), highlighting the increasing role played by NGOs. This emphasis can be explained by the fact that developed countries tend to pay more attention to CSR and sustainability. Nevertheless, this research is still in its nascent stages in emerging regions such as India, China, Bangladesh, and Africa (Davidsdottir, 2015; Idemudia, 2017; Kane et al., 2022; Sharmin et al., 2018; Skagerlind et al., 2015), which leads to an insufficient number of studies in contexts that warrant further exploration.

Furthermore, existing studies have failed to establish a link between national government involvement and NGOs' roles in promoting CSR partnerships with corporations. Specifically, numerous studies have highlighted the limited governance capabilities of governments, particularly in underdeveloped nations (Berliner et al., 2015; Nyangosi et al., 2016) demonstrated in-service distribution (Dick-Sagoe, 2020), social and environmental improvement (Hossain et al., 2017), community welfare security (Cai and Yue, 2020), conflict resolution (Osei-Kyei et al., 2019), MNCs' exploitation prevention (Shuai, 2024), and CSR promotion (Ali and Frynas, 2018). Particularly in developing nations, where NGOs-businesses CSR partnerships are weak, the governmental role has so far attracted little research. Existing literature predominantly characterises limited exploration of the specific roles played by local government (Mirońska and Zaborek, 2019; Kolk and Lenfant, 2012). In these nations, there are fewer public sector agencies involved in CSR implementation among businesses (Ali et al.,

2017; Ehie, 2016; Nguyen and Truong, 2016), which further emphasizes the need for significant NGO engagement in addressing these issues.

Moreover, existing studies have concentrated on investigating NGOs' roles on a small scale and within a single sector. Specifically, NGOs' performance has been examined in their collaboration with multinational corporations across various aspects, including foreign operations (Kourula, 2010), supply chain management (Stekelorum et al., 2020), new business model generation (Dahan et al., 2010), legitimacy management (Marano and Tashman, 2012), stakeholder dialogue (Knobel and Ruël, 2017), institutional capacity enhancement (Khan et al., 2015), and in a conflict context (Skippari and Pajunen, 2010; Villo et al., 2020). Similarly, studies have tended to focus on specific sectors, such as fast fashion (Crapa et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2020), coffee (McFall et al., 2017; Fontana and Pisalyaput, 2023), and aviation (Mousavi and Bossink, 2020). Additionally, some research focuses on particular aspects such as social capital (Moshtari and Vanpoucke, 2021), sustainable business models (Sarbazvatan, 2022), sustainable labeling schemes (Poret, 2019), nature conservation (Overbeek and Harms, 2011), global value chain (Bitzer and Glasbergen, 2015), and value creation (Nielsen and Neergaard, 2018). Consequently, there is a lack of research at a larger scale that provides an overview of NGOs' contribution to CSR promotion in a particular national context, especially in developing nations. Furthermore, contemporary studies have concentrated on delineating the role of NGOs within the context of CSR through the lens of their engagement levels, sidelining an in-depth exploration of their pivotal role in promoting CSR initiatives (Burchell and Cook, 2013; Laasonen et al., 2012; Sanzo et al., 2015; Sethi et al., 2017). This emphasis, however, limits the understanding of the sustainable contributions of NGOs across various dimensions. This study will shed light on how NGOs can enhance the implementation of CSR initiatives within a sustained collaboration.

To rectify the gap in scholarly exploration, the current research aims to highlight the sustained contribution of proactive NGOs. This inquiry is particularly pertinent in Vietnam's distinctively challenging context of limited CSR implementation (Bilowol and Doan, 2015; Ho, 2017; Thanh and Podruzsik, 2018), a weak governance system and severe environmental disasters (Luu, 2011; Tran et al., 2020). Aligning with the BAM 2025 theme of *"On the Border: Management Challenges, Business Opportunities and Disrupted Institutional Contexts"*, the anticipated outcomes of this comprehensive investigation will have substantial value for advancing the understanding of sustainable and responsible business practices. Specifically, this research will explore the impact of interdisciplinary collaboration on sustainable business outcomes, the transformative roles of public and private sector actions in driving sustainability, the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development, the dynamics of actor and network transitions in sustainability initiatives, how non-profit sector facilitates innovative business models to address sustainability challenges, and the critical importance of sustainable supply chain management. This provides an insightful portrayal of the multifaceted role of NGOs across various CSR dimensions. This developmental paper started to look at *"How*

NGOs collaborate with other actors to enhance CSR initiatives in Vietnam through their partnerships with businesses”.

2. The roles of NGOs in CSR

Economic globalisation raises various concerns in society (Arenas et al., 2009) that require corporations to pay attention to their corporate code of conduct (Erwin, 2011). This encourages CSR adoption in highly developed industries in which there is little pressure for the implementation of codes of conduct (Sethi, 2011). According to Arenas et al. (2009), NGOs are considered to be agents of social transformation providing an understanding of CSR initiatives. NGOs have experience with economic globalisation and concerns surrounding economic development. Despite their traditional confrontation towards businesses, NGOs have become more active recently, approaching and adjusting to CSR activities and policies (Faroque et al., 2022), as demonstrated by the trend to collaborate with corporations in CSR (Moldovan et al., 2016). They are aware of how important CSR can be, when implemented, to achieve their goals of social transformation. NGOs' roles have changed significantly ‘from gadflies into allies’ (Yaziji, 2004), and from adversaries to partners (Laasonen et al., 2012) once NGOs have formed strategic partnerships (Nielsen and Neergaard, 2018) and dealt with the potential challenges of partnership working (Hakkarainen, 2020). Evaluations of NGOs' performance have concluded that they have been significant (See Table 1)

Table 1: NGOs roles in CSR

Author	NGOs’ roles
Faroque et al, 2022	Major practitioners and facilitators of CSR
Faroque et al., 2022	CSR drivers
Poret, 2014	Primary actor involved in strategic roles
Ditlev-Simonsen and Wenstøp, 2013	The second main role after the business owner
Burchell and Cook, 2011	Primary secondary stakeholder
Baur and Palazzo, 2011	A special stakeholder
Beckman et al., 2009	Key factor

NGOs have generated strategic impacts on the CSR practices of businesses from various aspects. From a social perspective, NGOs highlight the strategic impact of improving CSR activities through knowledge training, stakeholder dialogue, solving social issues, and promoting innovative growth (Burchell and Cook, 2013; Moldovan et al., 2016; Mousavi, and Bossink, 2020; Sanzo et al., 2015). Specifically, NGOs take their responsibility to oversee safe working conditions standards in factories and suppliers' workplaces, to safeguard labour rights (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2017; Hertel, 2010). Engaging in partnerships with businesses, the impact of NGOs’ vital activities can be seen in social outcomes, such as strengthening communities’ voices (Park et al., 2014), solving social problems (Nyangosi et al., 2016), alleviating local citizens' poverty (Pérez, 2012; Rattan, 2019) and adapting to social change (Jayaraman et al., 2018). This involves increasing CSR awareness, transforming business practices, and building CSR capacity for vulnerable areas (Weber and Partzsch, 2018). From an

environmental perspective, NGOs drive businesses towards sustainable production and product development (Liu et al., 2020), encouraging environmental labeling (Darnall et al., 2018), and empowering customers' sustainable consumption (Lorek and Spangenberg, 2014). Similarly, NGOs raise environmental awareness through corporate projects and enhance CSR practices through pollution reduction (Schweitzer and Meng, 2023) and effective e-waste control methods (Rattan, 2019). NGOs drive global business sustainability by setting ethical standards and environmental initiatives, and by fostering green alliances for businesses and their supply chains (Peng et al., 2022). From an economic perspective, NGOs understand global trade issues and enforce corporate follow both local and international standards (Baumann-Pauly et al, 2017; Dahan et al., 2010; Weidenbaum, 2009). NGOs also offer useful insights for helping corporations to decrease institutional threats (Burchell and Cook, 2011), blur institutional distance (Mbalyohere and Lawton, 2022), change businesses' CSR behaviour (Whitehead, 2014), transform the current institutional system (Kolk and Van Tulder, 2010) and deal with international forces (Liu and Heugens, 2024). This enhances business reputation and liability in both host and international market performance. NGOs also show their significant power in global governance (Dahan et al., 2010; Denedo et al., 2017, see Table 2). Some major NGOs like Oxfam, CARE, and Save the Children have demonstrated their roles as significant political actors (Massari, 2021).

Table 2: NGOs's global governance roles

Author	NGOs' global governance roles
Garciandia, 2023	Addressing human rights, democracy, and justice issues
Lauwo et al., 2016; Weaver, 2018	Filling global institutional gaps resulting from failed corporate governance regulation by governments
Denedo et al., 2017	Resetting governance systems
Jaysawal, 2017	Addressing global social and capital disparities
Tortajada, 2016	Improving public policy influence
Grosser, 2016; Khan et al., 2015	Influencing government policy and legitimacy
Stohl and Stohl, 2010	Enforcing human rights compliance
Scherrer, 2009	Establishing political strategies

3. Multi-Stakeholder initiatives for CSR

Emerging from stakeholder theory, multi-stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) establish multi-entity governance partnerships to address the multifaceted challenges of global sustainability governance (Bennett, 2017). This collaborative framework necessitates cross-sector engagement (Tanimoto, 2019) among corporations, civil society organizations, government entities (Zeyen et al., 2016), unions, and academia (Mena and Palazzo, 2012) to facilitate collective effort and decision-making on global social, economic, and environmental issues. Notably, NGOs actively participate as watchdogs (Searcy, 2017), representing communities' voices (Cheyns, 2014), consumers (Thorsøe, 2015), and advocating for social and

environmental sustainability (Porter and Kramer, 2011). Their involvement enhances the impact and sustainability of MSI standards (De Bakker et al., 2019), and helps ensure objectives meet societal expectations (Cheyns, 2024). Various scholars discuss MSIs under different nomenclatures (see Table 3)

Table 3: MSIs definition

Author	MSIs definition
Baranova, 2022	Multi-stakeholder networks
Bartley, 2022	Transnational private regulation
Cashore, 2017; Van der Ven et al., 2018	Non-state market-driven governance
McNutt and Pal, 2011	Global public policy networks
Custos and Reitz, 2010	Public-private partnerships
Bendell et al., 2010 Goldstein and Butler, 2010	Multi-stakeholder collaborations

Consistent with their terms, MSIs operate as private entities with voluntary 'soft law' regulation, lacking government enforcement (Mena and Palazzo, 2012). This structure addresses existing governance voids (Levy et al., 2016) by offering a strategic advantage over conventional partnerships, embracing diverse backgrounds (Fransen, 2012) and prioritizing equality (Khazaei et al., 2015). This inclusion fosters diverse voices on complex issues, enabling all stakeholders to participate in problem-solving (Moog et al., 2015). Although MSIs manifest at various scales including global, regional, national, and local (Okereke and Stacewicz, 2018), these remain at a nascent stage with low global legitimacy (Rasche, 2012). Challenges include neglecting local governance networks (Rasche, 2012), existing power asymmetries (Arenas et al., 2020), issues of credibility and authority (Koliev and Bäckstrand, 2024), and potential disruption to sustainable relationships within supply chains involving producers, suppliers, and traders (Searcy, 2017). However, MSIs differ from rigid legal mandates, highlighting government limitations in global regulation (Jordana et al., 2024).

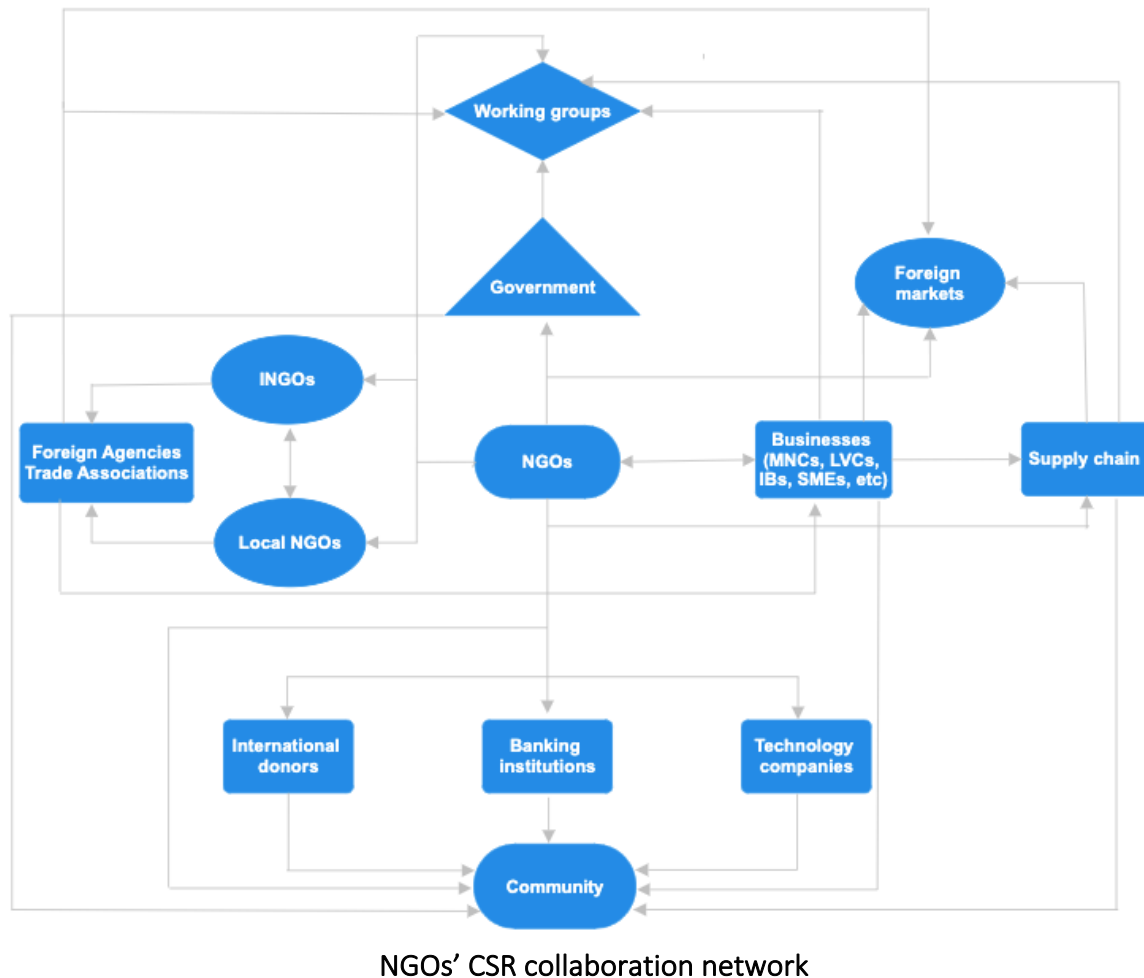
4. Methodology

Data was collected over a four-month period from September to December 2021, through in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of 23 NGOs including 11 international NGOs and 12 local NGOs. The interview protocols comprised three parts (Part I: General questions pertaining to the roles of the interviewees and the extent of their engagement in CSR initiatives, Part II: The CSR relationship between NGOs and businesses, and Part III: Potential plans of NGOs for promoting CSR in Vietnam). Non-probability purposive sampling was utilized once potential organizations were selected based on their collaborative experiences and various criteria were followed to identify suitable data for the study (Vehovar et al., 2016). Hence, snowball sampling was applied to approach potential NGOs. The participants held crucially management positions of NGO-business CSR engagement within corporations including CEOs, Country Directors, Programme Directors, Programme Managers,

Corporate Partnership Leads, Business Development Managers and Sustainable Business Coordinators. The interviews were conducted via various online platforms, including Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Zoom and Skype, to avoid the high risk of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The duration of each interview ranged from one to four hours, depending on the amount of information shared by the interviewees. Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the data findings, using the procedures of open coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding procedures.

5. Early findings

Figure 1 below summarises the main findings of the study.



It is found that *NGOs in Vietnam have developed an improved collaboration network for promoting CSR initiatives* (See Table 4). This suggests that NGOs play a crucial role in Vietnam by creating strong networking that connects related actors, to make CSR implementation more effective. Therefore, the networking capability of NGOs in this nation is a distinct asset in their engagement with businesses to promote CSR initiatives.

Table 4: NGOs- other actors' main activities

NGOs- other actors partnership	Main activities
NGOs - MNCs and businesses	NGOs collaborate with diverse business entities, including Multinational Companies (MNCs), Large Vietnamese Corporations (LVCs), International Businesses (IBs), and Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs). They seek funding from these partners to advance CSR practices and sustainability initiatives that encompass social enhancement, economic development, and environmental mitigation.
NGOs - Businesses' supply chain	NGOs collaborate closely with businesses' value chains to enhance supply chain capacity for CSR and sustainable development.
INGOs - Local NGOs	INGOs empower local NGOs by enhancing their capacity to implement partnership activities, providing essential expertise, experience, and skills for their future collaborations with businesses
NGOs - International donors and Banking institutions	NGOs play a vital role in connecting diversely potential funding streams from international donors to various banking institutions with both businesses and smallholders. This facilitates the implementation of CSR initiatives and broader sustainable practices for businesses in their production and operation.
NGOs - Technology companies	NGOs collaborate with technology companies and innovative start-ups to generate novel ideas and develop valuable CSR programs that effectively tackle social and environmental issues for their corporate partners.
NGOs - Foreign agencies, and Trade associations	NGOs approach foreign agencies to expand their networks with potential businesses and to leverage existing funding for supporting businesses' CSR and sustainable initiatives. Concurrently, NGOs collaborate with trade associations to foster sector-specific partnerships and exert significant influence in promoting broader CSR and sustainable practices. Specifically, they work closely with small businesses across diverse sectors to provide crucial support for sustainability activities that helps them enhance sustainable production and obtain international certification for accessing potential global markets and meeting international market standards.
NGOs- Government	NGOs have successfully deepened the Vietnamese government's involvement in their collaboration projects, thereby increasing its awareness of and responsibility for CSR promotion. This engagement also helps secure government support in public

	areas management, including policy improvement, economic development, and public infrastructure.
NGOs- CSR promotion in foreign markets	NGOs in Vietnam also play a multi-faceted role in advancing CSR and sustainability in international markets. Specifically, they empower large Vietnamese corporations to implement their CSR activities effectively through persistent engagement, consistent follow-up, evidence-based research, and long-term environmental analysis. By collaborating with international NGOs, local NGOs significantly contribute to the international promotion of CSR by guiding corporations towards robust practices.
NGOs- Working groups	NGOs have actively fostered a more integrated CSR development environment in Vietnam by establishing multi-actor working groups such as CSR, ethical, and sustainability working groups that connect various NGOs, businesses, their supply chains, foreign agencies, trade associations and government bodies. This initiative has transformed the traditional one-to-one NGO-business partnership model into a dynamic, multi-stakeholder collaboration. As a result, a new platform has emerged where diverse actors can collectively address national issues and make more significant contributions to the economy, society, and the environment.

6. Further Paper Development

From the data collection, we have developed some preliminary analysis about NGOs' interaction with other sectors such as businesses, government, supply chain, other NGOs, international donors, banking institutions, technology companies, foreign agencies, trade associations, working groups and local communities for enhancing CSR practices of businesses. Specifically, we observed diverse interaction modalities, ranging from collaborative partnerships to capacity-building initiatives of various actors which further explored NGOs' roles, government's roles, and working groups for this potential paper. We also further analysed and found that NGOs has built a collaboration networking for fostering the effectiveness of CSR initiatives in Vietnam. This structure is shown by the aboved figure. Until the Conference in September, we intend to present this finding. We believe that any potential comments and feedback particularly related to the practical implications of the study are invaluable for this research.

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