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REMOVING ROSE-TINTED GLASSES: UNCOVERING THE DARK SIDE EFFECTS OF CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

Complex societal challenges require innovative solutions that go beyond unilateral actions (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). A typical response has become to call for cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) and their potential to leverage the resources and expertise of public, business, and civil-society actors (Nonet, Gössling, Van Tulder, & Bryson, 2022). However, the current partnership "hype" (Van Tulder, Seitanidi, Crane, & Brammer, 2016, p. 4) often overlook the broader negative effects that CSPs may generate. In the burgeoning CSP literature (Clarke & Crane, 2018; Sadri, Aristidou, & Ravasi, 2025; Stadtler et al., 2024), empirical insights into such effects remain fragmented. Specifically, we lack an overarching framework to identify and interpret these effects. We address this oversight by examining dark side patterns through a qualitative meta-analysis (Combs, Crook, & Rauch, 2019; Hoon, 2013). We focus on examining the *what*, *how,* and *why* of societal dark side effects to derive an analytical framework for assessing the implications for research and practice. Guided by our research question: *What evidence of CSPs' societal dark side effects do extant case analyses provide and how and why do these effects occur?* we aim to inductively uncover underlying patterns across varied CSP contexts.

Based on a set of 47 cases, our analysis distinguishes between three types of dark side effects. We then reveal mechanisms of inaction, myopia, and technocracy related to the societal interventions underlying these effects. From a practical perspective, these mechanisms provide a leverage point for anticipating and addressing the harm while, from a conceptual lens, they enable us to identify the actor- and structure-centric antecedents. Building on our analysis, we define and introduce the HIDE (i.e. Harm, Intervention, Dilemma, Ethical Inquiry) framework that enables scholars and practitioners to uncover (i.e. "unhide") the complexities involved in societal interventions.

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METHODS

Following the principles of qualitative meta-analysis (Combs et al., 2019), we aggregated a large range of empirical findings from academic case studies in a systematic and transparent way to reveal novel insights into the "what," "how," and "why" of societal dark side effects. To identify suitable case studies, we used the following criteria: (1) study of a CSP, (2) qualitative research design, (3) reporting of social, environmental, and/or broader societal dark side effects, and published (4) in a highly ranked management journal (5) between 2000-2023. In our data analysis, we first extracted relevant information from the cases into data tables. In the second step, two authors coded the extraction tables on the "what", "how", and "why" of dark side effects. In the third step, we moved from a largely descriptive to a configurative approach (Habersang & Reihlen, 2024) to identify how the effects, mechanisms, and antecedents were related. In the fourth step, we enriched our understanding of the dark side effects by examining the context.

INSIGHTS INTO CSPS' SOCIETAL DARK SIDE EFFECTS

The "What": Evidence of Dark Side Effects

First Level: Harming People and Planet. Social dark side effects emerged in the form of financial, dependency, and health issues created for individual beneficiaries, as well as social tensions and inequalities spurred within and across communities. Financial problems and dependencies were reported in particular for environmental conservation CSPs that eventually deprived local community members of pre-intervention income sources without offering prospects for alternative income (e.g. Begum, de Bruyn, Kristiansen, & Islam, 2021; Powell, Hamann, Bitzer, & Baker, 2017; Rice, 2022). The case examined by Vestergaard, Langevang, Morsing, and Murphy (2020; 2021) further points to the creation of dependencies as the CSP prohibited employed women from conducting their jewelry manufacturing work from home, as they had done previously. This case also exposed health threats, as the employed women had no health insurance for the CSP-based bead production although the work involved crushing glass and working with very hot ovens (Vestergaard et al., 2020; 2021). While the above harm concerned beneficiaries or community members individually, authors also reported on instances where CSPs caused tensions within and across communities. For example, De Wit and Berner (2009) reported how a CSP-linked self-help group was misused for pre-election promotion, thereby creating jealousy and confusion within the group. In contrast to the extensive insights into social harm, evidence of additional environmental harm associated with CSPs was less clearly demonstrated in the cases.

Second Level: Harming Existing Systems. The cases included in our sample further provided evidence of CSPs harming existing systems. These effects manifested as disturbances to public and nonprofit activities, a de-responsibilization of the public sector, and monopolized market structures, ultimately leading to adverse outcomes for social groups or environmental goals. For example, Buse and Harmer (2007, p. 263) reveal how global health partnerships disturbed public-sector priorities and activities in developing countries by "imposing those of donor partners" and "wasting resources through inadequate use of recipient country systems and poor harmonization" (p. 259). Societal disturbances also arose when CSPs undermined public-sector responsibilities. For example, in some cases, CSPs served as platforms to conceal or enable corruption, thereby undermining the enforcement of public regulations. Finally, CSPs disrupted societal structures by creating problematic market shifts, such as by granting

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preferential access to multinationals and disadvantaging local producers (Hedberg & Lounsbury, 2021; Stadtler & Karakulak, 2022).

Third Level: Harming System Transformations. Our analysis next uncovered that in some cases, instead of delivering improvements, CSPs impeded necessary long-term change. This future-oriented effect manifested in two ways: CSPs withholding resources from more effective solutions or legitimizing contested actors. In the former cases, scarce financial and time resources—especially from public and civil society sources (e.g. De Wit & Berner, 2009; Pavlovich & Akoorie, 2010; Thümler, 2011)—were absorbed by CSPs with minimal outcomes, making them unavailable for potentially more effective initiatives. For example, for a CSP aiming to address wellness and healthcare needs of unserved social groups, Awad (2023, p. 944) reported that the partners focused on installing tents "up and down, up and down" (in the words of an interviewee), while the needs for medicine distribution remained unmet.

Alternatively, CSPs served to legitimize contested private actors or industries (e.g. Bitzer, Francken, & Glasbergen, 2008; Powell et al., 2018; Thümler, 2011), while failing to effectively address the focal social and environmental issues. For example, a CSP in the shipping industry was reported to facilitate industry lobbying to benefit the partners (Hessevik, 2022), while at the same time allowing them to abstain from "advocating a ban on emissions in Norwegian world heritage fjords, because this issue conflicted with their business model" (p. 12).

The "How": Mechanisms Spurring Dark Side Effects

Inaction. Moving to investigating how CSPs created these effects, we first identified the mechanism of "inaction", i.e. CSPs' lack of interaction with the societal problem. In our sample cases, inaction and slow progress frequently related to CSPs that shielded or lent legitimacy to contested actors (Brisbois, Morris, & de Loë, 2019; Cooper & Wardropper, 2021; Idemudia, 2017; Szulecki, Pattberg, & Biermann, 2011), thereby concealing slow progress through numerous CSP meetings and discussions.

Myopic focus. We call the second mechanism "myopic focus" because it related to what the partners failed to address, as they left out important aspects of the societal problem. For instance, partners focused on economic or environmental-scientific problem dimensions without sufficiently acknowledging the related social and environmental complexities (e.g. Bitzer et al., 2008; Hedberg & Lounsbury, 2021). However, a myopic focus was not always biased toward economic perspectives. Other cases depicted a bias toward environmental concerns at the detriment of wider socio-economic perspectives (e.g. Davies & White, 2012; Lund-Thomson, 2009; Rice, 2022) or a negation of the problem's political or historical embeddedness (Budabin & Hudson, 2021; Ng, Chervier, Roda, Samdin, & Carmenta, 2023; Powell et al., 2018).

Technocratic intervention. We use the term "technocratic" interventions for the third mechanism to denote the partners' emphasis on technical expertise and rational decision-making (Peters & Rava, 2017) that clashed with local beneficiary needs and/or context conditions. This disconnect with beneficiaries' realities was particularly evident in cases reporting the creation of financial dependencies and social tensions or inequalities.

The "Why": CSP Antecedents of Dark Side Effects

Actor-centric antecedents. Moving to the antecedents, we first identified actor-centric factors relating to who sets the strategic agenda. Our analysis pointed to problematic power constellations with a focus on the role of private-sector, Global North, and public-sector actors, which in turn impacted the CSP interventions and societal effects. In terms of patterns, we found that cases involving excessive power held by private-sector actors were often linked to harm

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inflicted on people and the planet, as well as setbacks to transformation efforts—particularly by legitimizing contested actors without contributing to societal progress. Furthermore, cases connecting dark side effects to the excessive power of private-sector partners frequently described a myopic focus in the intervention design, especially the omission of problem dimensions in value chain or industry CSPs. These insights suggest that, particularly in cases where CSPs aim to address social or environmental issues caused by industry activities, there is a risk that industry partners may leverage their influence to narrow the CSP's focus and stall progress. This can lead to an inefficient allocation of scarce resources with minimal positive societal impact while simultaneously shielding contested companies or entire industries from pressure to take meaningful action, thus perpetuating the status quo.

Structure-centric antecedents. Our analysis further suggests that some dark side effects can be traced back to flaws in CSP design and governance processes. These flaws included issues with inclusivity and weak accountability structures. Alternatively, where included, some stakeholder groups were silenced, chose to defect (e.g. Powell et al., 2018), or lacked the financial resources, meeting places, skills, and representation structures (e.g. Begum et al., 2021) to benefit from their seat at the table. Evidence of inclusivity problems was often associated with a technocratic intervention design that eventually clashed with beneficiary realities and local context conditions, thereby causing social problems (e.g. financial and dependency problems for individuals and tensions or inequalities among social groups).

The second structural antecedent, accountability, relates to compliance (i.e. being held to account), transparency (i.e. giving account), and responsiveness (i.e. taking account of) (Zadek, 2006). Compliance and follow-up were an issue particularly in CSPs aimed at addressing industry-related social and environmental harm (Diprose, Kurniawan, Macdonald, & Winanti, 2022; Hessevik, 2022; Idemudia, 2007). Overall, evidence of accountability problems was often linked to the use of a technocratic intervention design that did not align with local context conditions, thereby disturbing existing system activities and structures.

TOWARD A CRITICAL INTERVENTION PERSPECTIVE

To better equip scholars and practitioners in understanding respective effects, we draw on our analysis to suggest a critical intervention perspective. Specifically, we apply this perspective to propose an analytical framework referred to as HIDE to acknowledge the societal harm (H), explore the related intervention mechanisms (I), and reflect on the potential dilemmas in the related organizational context (D) and ethical inquiry (E) related to the harm.

Harm. The HIDE framework illustrates that societal harm can occur at multiple societal levels: directly to people and the planet, to existing systems addressing societal challenges, and/or impeding transformative efforts toward better systems. These levels are interconnected, as shown in 14 cases that provided insights into societal effects across them. Fostering greater attention to societal harm is critical for assessing the overall societal impact or value of CSPs (Van Tulder et al., 2016; Stadtler, 2016). However, should harm be weighed against societal benefits, including the question of benefits and harm for whom, how many, and for how long? For instance, is it acceptable for a CSP to focus on social groups where progress is most likely while inadvertently creating social inequalities for those in urgent need of support (see e.g. the employment CSP mentioned in the findings)? One could argue that, in many countries, it is the public sector's responsibility to assist them (Schrempf-Stirling, 2018), but what if the latter is unwilling or unable to do so (Hamann, 2019)? Additional research to extend respective understanding is critical, as well as to develop insights into the frequency of societal dark side

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effects. While our analysis was limited to what management scholars revealed in their case analysis, future research may use large primary CSP datasets and potentially build on information from involved institutions (e.g. DAC Evaluation Resource Centre or the SDG Action Platform).

*Intervention***.** With respect to the "how," attention is directed to shortcomings in the societal interventions, such as inaction, myopic focus, and technocratic intervention designs. Our analysis suggests that inaction becomes problematic when CSPs operate at the cost of other initiatives aimed at addressing societal challenges and driving change. This can occur by diverting scarce public and nonprofit resources, contributing to the de-responsibilization of the public sector, or legitimizing contested actors. Second, our analysis suggests that a myopic focus—one that overlooks critical problem dimensions, target groups, or capacity-building needs—can be problematic due to the complex interconnections among societal challenges, social groups, and the long-term sustainability of solutions (OECD, 2023a). Finally, technocratic intervention designs that fail to align with the realities of the targeted beneficiaries or local contexts highlight the need to recognize that every societal problem is contextually situated. This calls for a critical examination of interventions before implementation, especially given the limited room for trial and error in social settings (Kroeger & Weber, 2014). The proposed HIDE framework, with its focus on interventions, creates opportunities to rectify or prevent harm in at least some cases (see dimension Ethical Inquiry). While altering fundamental partnership antecedents—such as unbalanced power structures—can be particularly challenging (Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2022), our analysis suggests that these imbalances are not inherently harmful. Instead, they become problematic when they manifest as detrimental intervention mechanisms.

*Dilemma***.** Overall, a societal dark side effect analysis is not meant to view such effects as inherent to CSPs, but rather to diagnose their contextual embeddedness (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007). By doing so, it aims to deepen the understanding of these shortcomings, enabling their explanation, assessment, and potential resolution. Consequently, the third pillar of the HIDE framework highlights dilemmas within the CSP context, aligned with the question: Was the harm foreseeable or not? If yes, was it intentional—at least by some actors—yet, perhaps inevitable? In some situations, societal harm may arise in an unforeseen way, triggered by contextual changes. However, in about half of the cases we analyzed, the dark side effects seemed somewhat predictable but ultimately inevitable, given the contextual conditions. Alternatively, interventions took place in contexts of weak governments and corrupt environments (Begum et al., 2021; De Wit & Berner, 2009; Ng et al., 2023), where involving corrupt system actors almost inevitably leads to social tensions or further de-responsibilize the public sector. In such conflict-ridden cases, collaborative actions can only operate at the lowest common denominator, often hindering more impactful solutions.

These insights suggest that CSPs may at times be entangled with opportunistic political regimes, exploitive local or global contexts, or short-term oriented funding mechanisms, making them just one element in a much larger causal chain. Acknowledging these intricate interdependencies within often ambiguous systems constitutes the "dilemma" element of the HIDE framework, allowing for the consideration of guardrails regarding expectations of what CSPs can achieve. Meanwhile, exploring changes or reinforcing mechanisms within these interdependencies opens a compelling avenue for research, potentially leveraging the rich body of critical management literature, such as on dysfunctions of capitalism (e.g. Olwig, 2021; Schneider, 2020), imperialism and post-colonialism (Banerjee, 2003; Ergene, Banerjee, &

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Ergene, 2024; Ziai, 2017), political opportunism (Hamann, 2019), and representation structures (Larson, Barletti, & Vigil, 2022).

*Ethical Inquiry***.** The fourth pillar of the HIDE framework addresses cases where societal dark side effects were unintentional, yet to some extent foreseeable (e.g. in about 40% of our cases). This raises interesting questions about where to draw the line when determining what is "unintentional" in the context of societal interventions, particularly those that require careful consideration and anticipation as part of the duty of care. In examining cases where the dark side effects seemed somewhat foreseeable, our analysis, along with the authors' comments, offers a valuable set of suggestions. Specifically, addressing inaction can in some cases be a question of enhancing accountability structures (see George, Fewer, Lazzarini, McGahan, & Puranam, 2024). A myopic focus might be addressed by forging a better understanding of the problem before taking action (i.e. during the problem-setting stage, Gray, 1985; Clarke & Fuller, 2010). This involves considering its various stakeholders, the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of the issue, as well as intertwined capacity-building needs (e.g. Gebre-Mariam & Bygstad, 2019; Vestergaard et al., 2020). Addressing technocratic intervention designs then directs attention to equal treatment of stakeholders during implementation, as emphasized by the OECD's (2023b) guide on applying a human rights and gender equality lens. Most importantly, an obvious measure is investing in understanding the local context and the conditions of beneficiaries to anticipate the effects of planned interventions (e.g. anticipating stigmatization, Budabin & Hudson, 2021, or disruptions of nonprofit actions, Karakulak & Faul, 2024).

Based on these four pillars, the HIDE framework provides guidance for scholars and practitioners in uncovering (i.e. "unhiding") the societal dark side effects of interventions, prompting inquiry into how harm may materialize and why. On this basis, it may encourage the development of prevention strategies at different levels to mitigate these effects, similar to the Swiss Cheese Model of accident causation (Reason, Hollnagel, & Paries, 2006). At the institutional level, measures such as transparency regulations and double materiality requirements play a crucial role. At the organizational level, establishing comprehensive third-party evaluations as a standard practice can enhance accountability. Furthermore, when focusing on interventions, it is essential to uphold professional standards (e.g. OECD, 2023b), as well as provide training and implement confidential reporting channels at the team level.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on a qualitative meta-analysis of the what, why, and how of CSPs' societal dark side effects, we have introduced a critical intervention perspective together with an analytical framework to support researchers and practitioners in identifying and interpreting societal dark side effects. We suggest that the adoption of a critical intervention perspective, and the HIDE framework more specifically, may speak to scholars interested in societal interventions more broadly, such as social enterprises (Chalmers, 2021), nonprofit and international organizations (Ambos & Tatarinov, 2022), social (Voegtlin, Scherer, Stahl, & Hawn, 2022) and public innovation (Meijer & Thaens, 2021), and companies' unilateral corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). For example, patterns of inaction, myopia, and technocracy may also be an issue in such contexts and future research could focus on examining the organizational antecedents that may be specific to each form of organizing.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS