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Implications of non-governmental organizations' roles in the success of agricultural public-private partnerships: A case study of Tanzania's Southern agricultural growth corridor partnership initiative

Judith S. Kahamba [a,b,c,*], Xiuli Xu [a]

[a] College of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University, No.17 Qing Hua Dong Lu, Haidian District, 100083 Beijing, PR China
[b] Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväsklyä, P. O. Box 35, 40014, Finland
[c] Department of Development and Strategic Studies, Sokoine University of Agriculture, P.O. Box 3024, United Republic of Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are increasingly involved in public–private partnerships (PPPs) as key players in delivering services and goods. This paper explores a unique scenario in the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT) PPP initiative, in which NGOs serve as secondary partners. These NGOs augment an already established PPP as the partnerships revolve around the NGOs' donor-funded projects. Drawing on the institutional logics perspective, the paper examines how NGOs' roles within the context of PPPs influence the success and sustainability of a soybean strategic partnership. Based on interviews with actors involved in the partnership, focus-group discussions with smallholder farmers, and key informant interviews with leaders of farmers' groups and SAGCOT Center Limited staff, the paper identifies two key roles NGOs play in the partnership. First, building farmers' capacity through training in soybean production and processing to foster inclusiveness; second, mediating between companies and smallholder farmers by linking them to input suppliers and soybean buyers. The paper highlights the partnership's vulnerability, stemming from NGOs' roles shaped by competing logics within the partnership and the nature of their donor-funded projects. Also, the phasing out of NGO projects has weakened the soybean strategic partnership. The study argues that the NGO's role in promoting inclusiveness depends on aligning partnership interventions with the NGOs' institutional logics. It recommends expanding NGOs' roles to include strengthening farmers' associations and institutionalizing sustainable farmer-private-sector linkages to ensure long-term inclusiveness and resilience within agricultural PPPs.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the implications of the role played by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in agricultural public–private partnership (PPP) development initiatives. Since the 1970 s, NGOs and PPPs have been regarded as alternatives to development due to the increasing resource constraints and government failure in welfare and development (Besley & Ghatak, 2017; Hulme, 1997). Engagement of NGOs in PPPs, in particular, has been seen as a good option for delivering services and goods and for effectively implementing their projects (Haque, 2020; Das, 2019; Solana, 2014). The NGOs' involvement in PPP resonates from their work mission of serving poor and marginalized groups; in this regard, they can address the traditional PPP challenge of inclusiveness and benefiting the poor (Hospes et al., 2016) as well as creating synergy and better allocation of the risks and costs of a specific development project (Austin, 2010; Solana, 2014).

Extensive research on partnerships involving NGOs has covered various topics, including the motives of NGOs and corporations (Poret, 2019); the success or effects of partnerships (e.g., (Ajith et al., 2022; Jamali et al., 2011; Sharma & Bansal, 2017); service delivery (Besley & Ghatak, 2017; M. Meyer et al., 2021); governance (Calò et al., 2024; Haque, 2020); the relationship between NGOs and corporations (Baur & Palazzo, 2011; Jayaraman et al., 2018); value creation and interactions with business (Åhlström & Sjöström, 2005; Diepeveen, 2024). Some of these studies illustrate that the success of NGO-business partnership projects depends on trust (Jayaraman et al., 2018), social capital, and re-

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: judith.s.kahamba@jyu.fi, judith.kahamba@sua.ac.tz (J.S. Kahamba), xxl@cau.edu.cn (X. Xu).

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engineered core partnership operating logic (Jamali et al., 2011), along with the willingness of NGOs and businesses to find '*creative work-arounds'* to emerging problems (Sharma & Bansal, 2017). Ählström & Sjöström (2005) argue that NGO-business partnerships are possible only when the NGO's strategy is not reliant on autonomy from corporate influence, suggesting that businesses should approach NGOs' differing strategies with caution. Some scholars criticize business-NGO partnerships as paradoxical, unstable, and strategically risky (Ashman, 2001; Solana, 2014), characterized by hostility and mistrust (Rondinelli & London, 2003). Furthermore, it is argued that such partnerships blur the roles of companies and NGOs, creating new risks for partners, including competition, *"NGO capture,"* and inconsistency (Poret, 2019).

Few studies have examined the roles of NGOs in public–private partnerships. They highlight roles such as co-designers, a voice for poor people, and capacity builders (Hospes et al., 2016); facilitators and coordinators (Yan et al., 2018); and enforcers of accountability (Foo, 2018). This has limited information on the African context and does not focus on NGOs that engage in agricultural PPPs. We resonate with (Hospes et al.(2016) in recognizing that the type and nature of PPP dynamically influence NGOs' roles in PPP. It is claimed that promoting inclusiveness in PPP is the key role of NGOs in the Global South (Hospes et al., 2016). The concept of inclusiveness in the PPP requires further investigation, given challenges in agricultural PPPs regarding farmers' inclusion in decision-making (Beekmans et al., 2014). However, there is limited empirical evidence to support this, particularly in Africa, where agricultural PPPs are being promoted between a public sector organization, businesses, and civil society organizations to support better inclusion and empowerment of subsistent farmers, enabling agriculture to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development (Bitzer et al., 2013; Bovaird, 2004).

A few studies have highlighted factors that might undermine NGOs' roles in partnerships, including limited donor funding and blurred distinctions between their roles and those of private companies (e.g. Hospes et al., 2016)). Moreover, these studies have not attempted to assess the influence of institutional logics on the roles NGOs play in the PPP and how this shapes the performance and sustainability of the PPP, underscoring the need for further research. Hospes et al. (2016) recommend investigating whether the benefits for the poor can be sustained beyond the funded partnerships' time frame, especially when NGOs' roles include representing, mediating, or enabling.

Against this backdrop, our study is inspired by the institutional logics perspective (Thornton et al., 2012), which extends neo-institutional theory by exploring how the institutional logics architecture within NGOs and partnerships as hybrid arrangements influences the role of NGOs in agricultural PPPs. This perspective offers a deeper understanding of how NGOs interpret partnership goals, navigate contradictions, and respond to pressure from donors and market actors. We also discuss how such influences the vulnerability of the agricultural PPPs in rural settings. We use the SAGCOT PPP initiative case study to present a unique scenario of NGO-corporate partnerships in which NGOs are secondary partners yet very important actors, as the strategic partnerships evolve around the NGOs' donor-funded projects. The study addressed the following question: What roles do NGOs play in the SAGCOT Soybean strategic partnership, and how do these roles promote inclusiveness? How do the institutional logics the NGOs use within the PPP influence their role in the partnership operation?

SAGCOT PPP is a twenty-year mega-level PPP initiative launched in 2010 to boost agricultural production and integrate smallholder farmers into crop value chains in the Southern corridor through a nuclear farms-outgrowers scheme and strategic partnerships in strategic crop value chain approaches (SAGCOT, 2011). SAGCOT's strategic partnership of NGOs and private companies seeks to include smallholder farmers in its decision-making and involves many actors. Thus, SAGCOT strategic partnerships constitute a distinctive case for understanding NGOs' roles in PPP arrangements, in which NGOs implement donor-funded projects whose key objective is to serve farmers.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Institutional logics as an extension of neo-institutional theory

This study is grounded primarily in the institutional logics perspective (Thornton et al., 2012), which forms the central analytical lens for examining the roles of NGOs within agricultural strategic partnerships. Institutional logics extends neo-institutional theory, which has been extensively used to analyze PPP dynamics, by focusing on institutional processes that shape organizational behavior. For instance, cultural-cognitive processes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991), institutional isomorphism occurring through coercive, normative, and mimetic influences (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and the interplay between formal and informal rules (Scott, 2001). According to neo-institutional theory, institutional elements shape how partnerships are structured, governed, and legitimized.

The neo-institutional theory from which the institutional logics perspective evolves has, however, progressed beyond its traditional focus to explore actors' contestation and agency (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), institutional entrepreneurship and institutional work (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006), and institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012). Institutional logics refers to 'socially constructed patterns of symbols and material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals and organizations produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality' (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999p. 804). They determine how organizational actors practice and experience accountability daily, shaped by regulative, normative, discursive, and habitual influences (Thornton et al., 2012). This study expands the definition by showing how institutional logics shape actors' views of their roles and actions in PPPs.

Several studies used neo-institutional theory to examine PPPs. Devkar et al. (2020) found that regulatory institutions fostered partnerships. (Matos-Castaño et al., 2014) noted that "goodness of fit" between structures and perceptions influences PPP sustainability. Peci and Casady (2019) called for institutional reforms to enable PPPs. Most of these studies focused on institutional influences without exploring how actors interpret and enact institutional logics.

By applying the institutional logic perspective (Thornton et al., 2012), this study extends existing scholarship on NGOs in PPPs by exploring how NGOs' roles influence the success or failure of PPPs. Recognizing that logics are rooted in individuals' and organizations' identities, interests, and values (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), and that organizations operate under multiple, sometimes contradictory logics (Thornton et al., 2012) to rationalize decisions and practices (Skelcher et al., 2005), we argue that partnership actors interpret their roles through these logics. Institutional logics can dominate specific sectors, coexist, or hybridize by combining elements from multiple logics (Lounsbury, 2007; Mars & Lounsbury, 2009). Consequently, PPPs experience shifts in institutional logics via structural overlap (Thornton, 2004). Scholars highlight the role of institutional logic in shaping value creation in hybrid arrangements such as PPPs (e.g., Ferry et al., 2024; Klijn et al., 2021; Thornton, 2004).

A dearth of literature available has identified diverse institutional logics shaping PPPs, including public and private logics (Beck et al., 2015), professionalisation and social protection (Osei-Amponsah et al., 2018), market, community, administrative, and regulatory/public (Gottlieb et al., 2018). Beck et al. (2015) noted that conflicting logics in an IT-based PPP initially diverged but later converged into a dominant public–private institutional logic. Osei-Amponsah et al. (2018) observed that market logic was dominant, although other logics, including professionalization, Grassroots empowerment logic, and social protection logic, were present among different actors. Gottlieb et al. (2018) highlighted that the partnership was initially driven by community logic but later encountered competing logics, in which the community logic emerged as a highly legitimate solution for coping with the partnership's institutional pluralism. Nevertheless, the existing literature suggests that NGOs in collaboration with corporations face external pressures to become more market-based than community-centred, which may involve multiple logics (Cornforth, 2020).

This study explores this issue further, providing empirical evidence on how NGOs draw on institutional logics to justify, negotiate, and, at times, recalibrate their roles in agricultural PPPs. That is the role NGOs play within PPPs and the logics they use to legitimate their roles and interventions when interacting with profit-driven companies. As NGOs pursue community development and well-being (Mason, 2022), engaging in PPP may lead to hybrid logics that combine social and market-oriented approaches.

2.2. Hybridity in relation to PPP

The notion of hybridity serves as an important contextual anchor. Hybridity has been regarded as a complex concept that applies to a range of distinct organizational phenomena, from PPPs and cross-sector collaborations to social enterprises (Klijn et al., 2021), with various contrasting socially constructed practices, routines, and beliefs among actors with diverse sets of value objectives (Quélin et al., 2017). Hybridity could be an organizational response to competing institutional demands or a product of cross-sectoral collaboration engaging the state, market, and non-profit actors that pool their resources together and blend their logics from their field to complete a task (Doherty et al., 2014; Ocasio & Radoynovska, 2016; Skelcher & Smith, 2015). Although the hybridity concept does not inform our analytical framework, it helps us focus our analysis and view PPP as a collaborative, cross-sectoral arrangement involving businesses, NGOs, and the government as actors with diverse logics. It gives us a starting point for understanding the combined logic of PPP actors.

2.3. The role of NGOs in the PPP

The literature shows that NGOs participate in various types of partnerships (Hospes et al., 2016). The authors point out that promoting inclusiveness in the PPP is the key role of NGOs in the Global South. The scholars distinguish three types of inclusiveness role of the NGOs in inclusive Green Growth— (a) *input inclusiveness* as the inclusion of the poor and marginalized in the design of partnerships; (b) *throughput inclusiveness*, referring to the inclusion of the poor and marginalized in decision-making processes of a partnership; and (c) *output inclusiveness* which means the inclusion of the poor and marginalized in the benefits resulting from partnerships in terms of income and access to resources (also see (LaFrance & Lehmann, 2005). In the inclusiveness role, the NGOs act as mediators, reconciling the ideas, concerns, and interests of the involved companies and the poor and enabling the poor to represent their interests, such as mobilizing farmers to form strong cooperatives.

Yan et al. (2018) explored NGO partners' different roles in large cross-sector social partnerships (CSSPs) and found multiple roles, including enabling, which involve service provision, consulting, and capacity development; coordination that comprised bridging different parties in CSSPs; and facilitation manifested in initiating, leading, and advocating social change. Foo's (2018) work reveals the prominent NGO's role of increasing accountability of public programs in limited capacities in the context of urban environmental governance in Boston and underscores the vital role of environmental NGOs as enablers of partnership success. The existing literature suggests a knowledge gap on the interconnectedness of NGOs' roles in agricultural partnership, logics within NGOs, and partnerships. Therefore, from an institutional logic perspective, our paper contributes to debates on the role of the third sector in strategic partnerships within agricultural value chains in developing countries.

3. Methods

This paper is part of the Ph.D. dissertation. The study was conducted in five districts in the Njombe and Iringa Regions of Tanzania from September 2020 to March 2021, involving SAGCOT strategic partnership actors in the Ihemi Cluster. The cluster was launched in 2015 and established its first strategic partnerships for key crops, including soybeans, potatoes, and tea. The study targeted actors in the strategic partnership in the soybean value chain, including four NGOs—CARE International, Clinton Development Initiative (CDI), CARITAS, and BRITEN; one Community-Based Organization (CBO); one private company (soybean processor); and smallholder farmers.

The study adopted a qualitative research design. The study participants were selected using the purposive sampling technique (Neuman, 2006) guided by theoretical saturation or regarding the sample size (Cleary et al., 2014). Identification of the study participants was assisted by the SAGCOT Center Limited (SCL) Ihemi Cluster manager, who provided a list of NGOs and private companies engaged in the SAGCOT PPPs, along with their contacts. From this list, appropriate participants were selected purposively and contacted. The Cluster manager also provided the contact information for the farmers' group leaders who helped organize the smallholder farmers who participated in the study.

In-depth interviews were conducted with NGOs and private companies participating in the partnership to gain insights into their roles and overall experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with SCL staff and leaders of farmers' groups, as they were knowledgeable (Akhter, 2022) about how strategic SAGCOT partnerships work and how farmers' groups operate in the PPP, respectively. Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with smallholder farmers to capture their opinions, feelings, or reactions, attitudes, and experience in a larger group (Wilson, 1997).

The KIIs were conducted with SAGCOT Center Limited staff to capture information on the SAGCOT strategic partnership process and the roles each partnership actor envisaged for their role in the partnerships. The in-depth interviews with 9 participants from 4 NGOs and 1 Community-based organization, two from one private company (soybean processor), aimed to answer the questions regarding how the partnership works, the interventions, their roles, how they work together to achieve the partnership goals, the challenges they face in the partnerships, and how they overcome them. These interviews ranged from 70 to 100 min, with a median time of 90 min.

Other companies that happened to buy soybeans but were not partners in partnerships were not interviewed because they were not bound to partnership agreements. Key informant interviews with 10 leaders of farmers' groups captured general information on how farmers were engaged in the strategic partnership, the benefits they derived, and the challenges they faced in participating.

Moreover, five (5) FGDs were conducted with 54 soybean smallholder farmers from five villages in Njombe, Iringa, Kilolo, and Wanging'ombe districts. Each FGD comprised 8 to 12 participants, including men, women, and youth, to provide deeper insights into their involvement in the partnerships, their interactions with private actors and NGOs, the benefits they derived from the partnerships, and the risks and challenges they faced. The FGD duration ranged from 70 min to 90 min, with a median time of 80 min.

Farmers' ages ranged from the 20 s to the 60 s, and the majority had a primary education. All participants produced local soybean varieties (Soya #2 and Soya #4), and the majority had farms ranging from 1 to 3 acres. Most had income ranging from TZS. 500,000 to TZS 3,000,000 per year (See Table 1 for more information on participants' characteristics). The discussions lasted between 60 and 90 min and were conducted in Swahili. With the participants' consent, they were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis techniques (Clarke and Braun, 2013) due to their efficiency in depicting the common themes in the responses. In the analysis, we

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of FGD participants.

Characteristics	Description	Percentage
Sex	Male	52%
	Female	48%
Age	18–25	10%
	26–39	35%
	40–50	30%
	51 and above	25%
Education status	Non-formal education	5%
	Primary level education	70%
	Secondary level education	24%
	College level education	1%
Marital status	single	5%
	married	65%
	Separated/widowed/ divorced	30%
Farm size grown soybeans	0.25–0.5 acre	4%
	1-2acres	72%
	3-4acres	24%
	100,000–500,000	12%
Income generated from soybean per year (est. in TZS)	500,000–1,000,000	14%
	1,000,001–2,000,000	17%
	2,000,001–3,000,000	30%
	3,100,000 and above	5%

followed the phases outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), which began with familiarizing ourselves with the data. Then, transcripts were systematically coded manually to develop patterns within the participants' responses (Braun, Clarke, and Weate, 2016), including identifying codes, ideas, and themes and describing them (Ibrahim, 2012). The potential themes were reviewed and refined in light of the research questions (Terry et al., 2017). The data patterns helped identify unique quotes, compile the data, and summarize them in accordance with the research questions. The results have been presented in narrative form, with quotes to illustrate the findings.

4. Results

4.1. Description of the SAGCOT soybean strategic partnership as a hybrid arrangement

A soybean strategic partnership was formed in 2015 with Silverlands Company as a take-off driver (soybean processor). NGOs and companies must complete and sign the partnership form and pay the annual partnership fee to become partners. However, NGOs join the partnerships only if they already have development projects in the community, and they can join at any time. The study revealed that the soybean strategic partnership was based on donor-funded development projects. The implementation of the partnership was guided by partnership principles and guidelines outlined in various documents, including the inclusive green growth tools for small-, medium-, and large-scale producers.

The business company sought to provide a soybean market to smallholder farmers in three regions: Iringa, Njombe, and Songea. The NGOs that participated in this partnership include CARE International, CARITAS, Clinton Development Initiative (CDI), and BRITEN. All four NGOs carried out distinct donor-funded projects focusing on improving smallholder farmers' soybean production and marketing, whose objectives shaped their approaches to partnership activities.[1] Other actors were not partners but worked with NGO partners to improve farmers' productivity and market access, including Alfa Agrovet, Njombe Agricultural Development Organization (NADO), agricultural extension officers, government seed regulatory agent (TOSCI), and the government agricultural research institution (TARI Uyole). It was further discovered that some key partners (such as CARITAS) were no longer involved in the soybean strategic partnership as their project had phased out. However, we had to interview CARITAS staff and private extension officers who participated in the soybean project implementation to learn about their experiences.

4.2. The NGOs' roles in the partnership

NGOs played several roles in the partnership, mainly aimed at improving productivity and farmers' access to the soybean markets. These roles varied among NGOs and reflected the fundamental institutional logics embedded within each project design. We also learned that the NGOs' roles were predominantly aligned with the scope of their donor-funded projects, which poses a question of whether the NGOs' activities promoted strategic partnerships or sought to accomplish the NGOs' already set goals.

4.3. Capacity building

The first role of NGOs in the partnerships was capacity building. The study adopts the United Nations' definition of capacity building as 'a process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes, and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world.' The NGOs trained farmers in good agronomic practices, using government-employed extension officers and/or private extension officers they had hired for the project. CARITAS contributed to improving agronomic skills in Njombe by hiring private extension officers to conduct regular visits to promote practices such as timely farm preparation, planting, fertilizer use, and harvesting. One of the FGD participants in Njombe district narrated:

The training we received focused on planting soybeans at the correct spacing, applying pesticides, and harvesting when appropriate. The training has given us confidence in producing soybeans because we have all the necessary skills. The only challenge is the lack of a soybean market.[2]

Interviews with some private extension officers hired during the soybean project implementation further elaborated that farmers were trained in farm preparation, seed planting, proper weeding, and harvesting. A private extension officer who worked in CARITAS's soybean project in Njombe narrated:

I think farmers had never received extension services as they did during the implementation of the soybean project. First, farmers were trained in groups, and then there were regular visits to them. We ensured that farmers prepared farms on time, planted at the required distances, applied fertilizers properly and on time, and weeded on time. We also insisted they harvest on time to avoid losses on the farm. During the production season, our daily task was to visit farmers, and the project facilitated transport for us[3].

A similar finding was reported in an interview with a CARE International participant. CARE's project focused on women's economic empowerment and family nutrition through soybean processing and marketing. It trained women to process dry soybeans, mix them with cereal and nut flours, and produce soybean-based, nutrient-dense flour [*unga wa lishe*], which was normally given to young children. Women

[1] While all NGOs' projects trained farmers on good agronomic practices for soybean production, CDI introduced soybean seeds and prioritized farmers' mobilization for soybean production and the creation of market linkages; CARE engaged field farmer schools in agronomic training and focused on women's skills in the soybean value addition and marketing; BRITEN focused on mobilizing farmer groups to enhance soybean productivity, but its interventions did not include helping farmers secure soybean markets.

[2] Participant #4, focus group discussion with soybeans smallholder producers, Mngate Village, Njombe district, October 2020

[3] In-depth interview, private extension officer, Njombe district, October 2020.

were also trained on how to prepare packaging materials, label them, pack processed soybeans, and add nutrition information. BRITEN and CDI contributed to capacity building by forming and supporting farmer groups with technical training within their donor-funded projects.

4.4. Mediation

The second role was the mediation. In this role, NGOs act as 'a go-between in reconciling the ideas, concerns and interests of the involved companies and the poor' (Hospes et al., 2016, p.11). The partnership was established to secure the market and ensure the availability of improved soybean seeds among smallholder farmers. In carrying out this role, NGOs first linked farmers to agro-input suppliers, as there was no business partner supplying agro-inputs in the partnership. They identified several business actors outside the partnership to enable farmers to easily access farming inputs. CARE International connected Alfa Agrovet farmers in Njombe to supply inputs. Similarly, BRITEN and CARITAS engaged agro-input dealers to aggregate farmer demand and facilitated access to inputs, although these linkages were short-lived and depended on the project cycle.

Additionally, CARE, CARITAS, and CDI linked farmers to soybean buyers. Interviews with these NGOs and farmers revealed that the private partner set a very low price of TZS 600 per kg, while farmers wanted to sell a kilo of soybean for at least TZS 1000 per kg to earn some profit. Consequently, some NGOs devised a new strategy to identify other private actors who could buy farmers' soybeans at reasonable prices and on time. For instance, CARE International connected farmers to Alfa Agrovet to purchase soybeans when the partnership arrangement became unreliable. As a CARE representative explained during the interview:

…if the company [partner company] goes to Songea, buys 1 kg at TZS. 600 may be because production in Songea is high, or sometimes imports from neighboring countries, because the company can buy at a low price compared to here…You can find that some farmers who produced could stay with soya for a year because there is no profitable local market… Last year's season [2019], we decided to work with Alfa Agrovet, as the company sometimes supplied inputs to farmers.[4]

Similarly, CDI identified buyers when the partnership price is too low. In the Iringa region, FGDs with soybean farmers in the Iringa and Kilolo district councils revealed that farmers under the CDI's soybean projects sold their soybeans to Tanfeeds Limited. The company was approached by the CDI in 2014, when farmers began producing soybeans. It facilitated a relationship between farmers and Tanfeeds Ltd, allowing the farmers to sell soybeans at higher prices. Thus, farmers, through their groups, sold soybeans to this company at a price negotiated by the Clinton Foundation despite the organization being in the partnership since 2015. Moreover, this company proved unreliable in the long run, discouraging farmers from continuing to grow soybeans. As the study participant from CDI reported:

We buy soya ourselves. As I said, in 2018/2019, we invested in hub farmers. Our last time to buy soya was in 2018; after the government directed the closure of borders, farmers were selling soya at very low prices and were not making a profit. So, most farmers stopped producing soya… The buyer came through our organization, purchased soya, and deposited the money into the farmers' group account… We usually look for a buyer who offers a good price…[5]

The NGOs' decision to seek other buyers was mainly influenced by their project objective of supporting the economic development of their beneficiaries. For example, participant CDI reported that the organization had already identified other prospective buyers rather than business partners because the company's price was too low to benefit farmers.

While the Njombe region seemed to have some success with market arrangements between a business partner and CARITAS to buy soybeans produced by farmers under the *Soya ni Mali* project, the business partner bought soybeans only in 2016 and 2017. The major challenge the business partner reported was low soybean production by farmers and a lack of trust among farmers, as some opted to sell their soybeans to other traders secured by NGOs. Farmers wanted to sell their soybeans at a price of at least TZS. 1000/= per kilogram, while the company could buy soybeans from Zambia at an equivalent price of TZS. 500/= per kilogram.

4.5. Farmers' inclusiveness in PPP

In this study, we conceptualize inclusiveness based on Hospes et al.'s (2016) inclusiveness framework and define it as a process that intentionally incorporates marginalized and vulnerable groups into the processes and benefits of PPP. Our study reveals that this role was partially done. Based on this inclusiveness framework, the findings revealed that NGOs mainly promoted output inclusiveness, such as training and market access. However, market access was not always a direct result of the partnership but often stemmed from NGOs' interests that aligned with project objectives. While all NGOs' training aligned with the partnership objectives, CDI facilitated group-based marketing arrangements for soybeans with non-partner buyers, and CARE emphasized women's group participation in soybean processing and searched the market outside the partnership, which did not align fully with the broader partnership objective of improving soybean productivity and selling the beans to the business partner. Only the market arrangements between CARITAS and Silverland company demonstrated market access in line with the PPP objectives. Thus, as the NGOs' projects progressed, donor-funded project requirements increasingly shaped their engagement in the partnership. They focused on short-term outputs and outcomes tied to reporting and accountability structures embedded in project funding cycles, which influenced their mediation practices and reduced emphasis on long-term partnership sustainability mechanisms. Therefore, overall, the output inclusiveness role with the partnership remained weak.

Our findings also show that input inclusiveness was quite limited, with farmers having little influence in designing the partnership or shaping interventions. Similarly, throughput inclusiveness, or participation in decision-making, was weak because NGOs did not do enough to strengthen farmers' collective institutions, such as cooperatives, that could amplify their voices.

4.6. Institutional logics within the partnership

The partnership did not involve formal contractual agreements among the private companies and NGOs. Instead, participation by these actors was flexible, with actors joining and exiting over time. Coordination also relied largely on shared expectations and informal arrangements, particularly in the partnership's early phases, suggesting that for the partnership to kick off and succeed, the partners must be guided by community logic (Gottlieb et al., 2018).

We identified two competing logics that shaped the soybean strategic partnership— community and market logics. In the context of NGOs, we define community logic as a framework in which actors prioritize shared values, practices, and goals within a community, thereby fostering trust, reciprocity, and moral responsibility (Thornton et al., 2012). Market logic, on the other hand, refers to the principle where actors are driven by the pursuit of profit maximization and efficiency (Thornton et al., 2012). At the initial stages of the partnership, both NGOs and private actors appeared to operate under a joint community logic, with a shared goal of supporting smallholder farmers. Over time, however, divergency emerged. NGOs increasingly prioritized securing alternative market opportunities for farmers rather than relying on a private partner that offered low prices, driven by a combination of community-driven commitments and donor-funded project requirements, while private

[4] In-depth interview, NGO#1, September 2020

[5] In-depth interview, NGO#2, September 2020.

companies prioritized cost-efficiency and profits, sourcing soybeans from alternative sources at a lower cost.

Therefore, private companies primarily employed market logic. On the NGOs' side, however, community logic coexisted with a donor-funded project logic that required NGOs to meet short-term output targets and outcomes tied to their funding cycles, and hence to adhere to accountability structures, reporting, and deliverable requirements embedded in donor-funded projects.

4.7. The implications of NGOs' roles and the vulnerability of soybean strategic partnership

The partnership performed well in the first two years (2015 and 2016) and experienced dynamics thereafter. Our first observation is that the role of linking farmers to other soybean non-partner buyers posed a vulnerable effect on the partnership. Interviews with SCL staff, partnership actors, and smallholder producers revealed that selling soybeans to non-partner companies was risky for business partners and smallholder farmers. For example, in the 2016/2017 season, soybean smallholder producers in the Iringa district under the CDI could not sell soybeans as the non-partner buyer the NGO had contacted did not appear. Most farmers incurred losses, and some gave up soybean production in subsequent seasons. Since farmers sold soybeans to other companies, the company could secure only 7000 tons per year in two years, less than the minimum amount (10,000 tons) the company planned to purchase from the farmers when joining the partnership. From 2017/2018 onwards, the company stopped buying soybeans from farmers in the Ihemi Cluster and began importing soybeans from Zambia to meet its factory demand. This implies that, despite the partnership being acknowledged to exist, practically, its survival was at risk.

Our second observation is that the mediation role NGOs played in the partnership to link farmers to input suppliers and soybean buyers created dependency on NGOs rather than building farmers' collective agency. The NGOs did not invest in building strong farmers' associations to amplify farmers' voices and positively influence long-term partnership performance. This was validated by the poor performance of partnerships following the phasing out of some NGO projects. FGD with farmers revealed that after the CARITAS' project ended, the farmers in the Njombe region could not approach the business partner. As one female FGD participant in Kilolo pointed out[6], "…*We produced soybeans, but we never even met the buyers. We just received information that the price this year is this much, but we cannot negotiate the price.*

On the other hand, an interview with the company revealed that it had no information on soybean availability among farmers in the Njombe and Iringa regions. These findings suggest that NGOs' interventions, although helpful in the short term, created systemic vulnerabilities by weakening the market-based coordination expected within the PPP.

5. Discussion and contribution of the findings to the literature

5.1. Hybridity of soybean strategic partnership

The study demonstrates that the SACGOT soybean strategic partnership functioned as a hybrid arrangement, without a contractual agreement, as partners joined and left over time. Unlike contractual PPPs with clearly defined roles and obligations, this partnership relied heavily on informal coordination and shared expectations. This hybridity shaped the institutional environment in which actors enacted their respective logics, resulting in a dynamic system in which logics converged early in the partnership but diverged over time. The findings extend existing literature (e.g., Doherty et al., 2014; Quélin et al., 2017) on cross-sectoral collaborations by showing how agricultural strategic partnerships in developing-country context can be dynamically shaped by partners' competing logics. The absence of binding contractual mechanisms makes the hybrid partnerships vulnerable to logic fragmentation, especially when the partner's participation is linked to externally funded development projects. Thus, suggesting that for the partnership to kick off and succeed, the partners must be guided by community logic (Gottlieb et al., 2018) to demonstrate their commitment to the partnership.

Our findings corroborate observations by other scholars (e.g., Doherty et al., 2014; Ocasio & Radoynovska, 2016; Skelcher & Smith, 2015) that partnership hybridity happens when there are collaborations between business and not-for-profit actors who pool their resources together and blend their logics from their field to achieve their intended goals.

5.2. NGOs' roles and their influence on inclusiveness in the soybean strategic partnership

The study identifies two key roles differently enacted by NGOs within the partnership, including capacity building and mediation. Capacity-building efforts included training smallholder farmers in soybean production and processing, while mediation involved linking farmers to agro-input suppliers and soybean buyers. This is consistent, but narrower than, roles identified in prior research on NGO engagement in cross-sectional partnership, such as coordination (LaFrance & Lehmann, 2005; Yan et al., 2018), accountability (Foo, 2018), which might be due to the nature of the partnership.

While it has been argued that the key role of NGOs in partnerships in the global South is to promote the inclusion of farmers (Hospes et al., 2016), our study offers new insights into this. The findings show that the extent to which the NGOs' promoted inclusiveness was limited. While NGOs promoted output inclusiveness via training and market linkages, they did not significantly enhance farmers' participation in designing interventions (input inclusiveness) or decision-making power (throughput inclusiveness). This undermines long-term sustainability. Inclusiveness outcomes reflect NGOs' underlying logics rather than the PPP framework, challenging the presumption in the literature that NGOs driven by their pro-poor mission, should facilitate marginalized groups' influence in partnerships (Hospes et al., 2016; LaFrance & Lehmann, 2005).

The findings suggest that inclusiveness role of NGO depends on the partnership type, how well its logic aligns with broader community development activities (Mason, 2022). Thus, partnership-wide inclusiveness cannot be assumed when NGOs have diverse goals influenced by donor funding, project timelines, and organizational identities. These findings reaffirm critiques of NGO-business collaborations, highlighting role confusion and tension from competing institutional logics (Ählström & Sjöström, 2005; Poret, 2019).

5.3. Institutional logics and their influence on NGOs' role in the partnership

From the institutional perspective (Thornton et al., 2012), the findings illustrate how competing logics influenced NGOs' role enactment and ultimately influence partnership sustainability. NGOs operated under competing institutional logics, including community logic that coexisted with donor-funded project logic, and market logic of private companies, which influenced the nature and effectiveness of the NGOs' interventions. Private companies on the other hand were primarily guided by market logic. Although these logics initially coexisted as a joint community logic centred on a shared goal of supporting smallholder farmers their divergence over time was not reconciled through partnership governance.

In this regard, NGOs' practices within the partnership were rooted in a hybrid institutional logic that combined community development

[6] Participant #4, focus group discussion with soybeans smallholder producers, Luganga village, Kilolo district, October 2020.

norms with donor-driven operational obligations in the projects. However, instead of being interpreted as opportunistic deviations from partnership commitments, these NGOs' actions reflect stable yet complex institutional logics guiding their practices within the partnership, which are rooted in organizational identities and donor-funded project accountability requirements. The, shift from a joint community logic to hybrid logic does not represent a change in NGOs' core logics but rather a shift in the practical focus of their work,[7] as donor-funded projects were time-bound. However, the dominance of donor-funded project logic led NGOs to prioritize short-term deliverables overt long-term sustainability, inadvertently contributing to dependency and weakening market-based linkages within the partnership. Therefore, NGOs did not abandon their specific community logic to take over a joint community logic; instead, their hybrid logic influenced their mediating role and ultimately contributed to the partnership's vulnerability. These findings resonate with literature highlighting how competing institutional logics generate frictions in cross-sectoral collaborations (Thornton et al., 2012; Gottlieb at al., 2018). Despite supporting (Ählström & Sjöström's 2005) argument that for NGOs to partner with a corporation, it must be open to some level to allow the corporate influence in its activities, they further underscore that all actors should not be independent of each other.

The findings further underscore the influence of institutional logics on the roles played by the partnership actors (Coule & Patmore, 2013) and resonates with (Reay & Hinings, 2005) who claim that shifting dominant institutional logics emerging partnership logic requires international and coordinated efforts among the actors or would depend on the social identities derived from the competing logic (Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006).

5.4. Implications for the theory and practice

The study contributes to the institutional logics literature by showing how the competing logics influence NGO-business sector collaborations in agricultural PPP in Sub-Saharan Africa. It demonstrates that institutional logics are active interpretive frameworks that guide the way actors define partnership goals, allocate roles and legitimate their interventions. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on corporate-NGO partnerships (e.g., (Poret, 2019; Sharma & Bansal, 2017), the study findings demonstrate how donor-funded NGO interventions within PPP can lead to PPP vulnerability by prioritizing short-term project goals over long-term partnership sustainability. This theoretical insight challenges an assumption that PPP actors naturally converge toward common goal simply because they share a partnership platform and urges the adoption of intentional governance mechanisms to reconcile diverse logics over time.

From a practical view, the findings suggest that to enhance PPP sustainability, NGOs should extend their roles beyond short-term mediation and capacity building. They should actively strengthen farmers associations, build durable linkages to private actors and institutionalize farmer participation in governance structures to increase their bargaining power and reduce dependency on NGOs interventions. Moreover, formal contracts between partners could enhance accountability and commitments to shared partnership goals.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, our study yields several significant insights contributing to a nuanced understanding role of NGOs in agricultural PPP through institutional logics lens. It shows the hybrid nature of the SAGCOT strategic partnership and how lack of formal contracts makes it complex as it becomes more shapes by competing logics. It shows two competing logics: the community logic and market logic with community-driven NGO's and business interests respectively, which shape the partnership. Despite NGOs play vital role such as capacity building and mediation, their focus was on achieving donor-funded project goals rather than ensuring long-term partnership. This dynamic underscore the importance of cultivating shared logics or hybrid governance structures that bridge community and market values.

A critical observation emerges regarding the competing institutional logics influencing NGOs' role in promoting inclusiveness among farmers in PPPs. The findings reveal that NGOs involvement in PPP does not inherently lead the expected inclusiveness of smallholder farmers. Inclusiveness was achieved primary at the output level, with limited influence on farmers' decision-making power or agency with the PPP governance structure. The mediation role benefited farmers in terms of improving short-term marker access; however, when these market linkages were not aligned with partnerships' broader objectives, they contributed to the vulnerability of the partnerships. These outcomes highlight how the partnership's hybrid nature shapes its work, with NGOs' actions shaped by both community-oriented and donor-funded project logics rather than a single unified partnership logic.

Overall, our study highlights that the tensions observed within the SAGCOT soybean partnership are inherent to hybrid partnership arrangements, in which multiple institutional logics coexist without clear mechanisms for alignment. It underscores the need to expand NGOs' roles beyond short-term mediation and capacity building to include strengthening farmers' associations and institutionalizing linkages between farmers and the private sector to enhance the inclusiveness and sustainability of agricultural PPPs.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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[7] For example, NGOs committed to building the capacity of farmers in good agronomic practices but made limited investments in strengthening farmers' collective agency, which was necessary for improving farmers' voice within the partnership.

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