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**Clara Emefa Asempapa, Andjela  
Pavlovic, Francesco Rosati and  
Francesco Rullani**

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## **NAVIGATING HETEROGENEITY IN MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS**

**Clara Emefa ASEMPAPA**

Venice School of Management, [Ca' Foscari](#) University of Venice, Italy;  
claraemefa.asempapa@unive.it

**Andjela PAVLOVIC**

Venice School of Management, [Ca' Foscari](#) University of Venice, Italy;  
andjela.pavlovic@unive.it

**Francesco ROSATI**

Center for Technology Entrepreneurship, Technical University of Denmark; Venice School of Management, [Ca' Foscari](#) University of Venice, Italy; [frro@dtu.dk](mailto:frro@dtu.dk)

**Francesco RULLANI**

Venice School of Management, [Ca' Foscari](#) University of Venice, Italy;  
[francesco.rullani@unive.it](mailto:francesco.rullani@unive.it)

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## **Abstract**

Cross-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships are crucial for tackling the global challenges we face today, but often struggle when partners vary in goals, values, or contexts. This study introduces progressive intermediation as a mechanism that enables collaboration without requiring universal consensus. Drawing on a qualitative case study, we show how intermediaries bridge communication gaps through reframing by translating from structured objectives to experience-based narratives depending on the actors involved. A dyadic and intermediated network structure can foster alignment, inclusivity, and empowerment by adapting communication across diverse actors rather than enforcing homogeneity. By conceptualising progressive intermediation, the paper offers a practical framework for designing partnerships that align heterogeneous actors to promote meaningful local participation.

**Keywords:** cross-sector partnerships; multi-stakeholder partnerships; corporate social responsibility; frame alignment; progressive intermediation

# 1 Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving world, cross-sector partnerships have emerged as essential tools for addressing society's most pressing challenges, such as poverty alleviation, sustainability, and the empowerment of marginalised communities (Dentoni et al., 2016; Selsky & Parker, 2010; Stadtler et al., 2024; Vestergaard et al., 2020). These partnerships, which typically involve nonprofits, businesses, and community organisations, leverage their distinct resources, expertise, and networks to achieve shared objectives (Selsky & Parker, 2010; Vestergaard et al., 2020). Multi-stakeholder partnerships further emphasize inclusivity in decision-making and goal setting, fostering broader engagement across diverse actors (Easter et al., 2023; Grimm et al., 2024).

Despite their promise, these partnerships often encounter significant challenges, particularly when involving highly heterogeneous stakeholders. The differences in priorities, power imbalances, and contrasting organisational cultures frequently impede effective collaboration and coordination (Ahmadsimab & Chowdhury, 2021; Easter et al., 2023). This issue becomes even more acute when partners operate in vastly different contexts or when communication barriers hinder mutual understanding.

Existing literature on cross-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships often assumes a level of homogeneity or shared understanding among partners. This does not reflect the reality of many collaborations. The lack of attention to how diverse partnerships, where stakeholders differ significantly in values, goals, and operational norms, navigate these challenges represents a significant gap in the literature. Addressing this gap requires exploring mechanisms that enable diverse actors to communicate, align their perspectives, and work together despite their differences.

This study examines the question: *How can cross-sector partnerships with highly heterogeneous partners overcome communication barriers and achieve effective collaboration?* Through this lens, the study introduces the concept of ***progressive intermediation***, which emphasises the importance of intermediated interactions over the usual "universal consensus". This study highlights how intermediaries can facilitate frame alignment, reconcile divergent stakeholder goals, and foster collaboration, thereby enabling effective partnerships in contexts of high heterogeneity. This approach is explored through a case study of a fair-trade cocoa supply chain project involving actors with vastly different goals, from smallholder farmers to corporate donors.

By examining this question, the paper contributes to the literature on cross-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships by introducing progressive intermediation as a conceptual tool for understanding how intermediated networks foster outcomes even with very heterogeneous stakeholders, offering practical insights for addressing heterogeneity in collaborative efforts for democratic participation.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Frame Alignment in Cross-Sector and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships**

Achieving collaboration in cross-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships is challenging due to the differing values, priorities, and goals of partners. For instance, businesses emphasise profitability and efficiency while nonprofits and community organisations prioritize social impact and inclusion (Easter et al., 2023; Nonet et al., 2022; Stadtler et al., 2024; Voegtlin et al., 2022). Processes of “*frame alignment*”, that align stakeholders’ conceptualisation of the common activity (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014), address this challenge by creating shared narratives that reconcile these differences, enabling stakeholders to work together (Grimm & Reinecke, 2024). It emphasises the importance of managing tensions and building mutual understanding to foster collaboration.

However, assembly-style communication, which assumes fully inclusive dialogue among all participants, often fails to address the subtle and specific needs of complex partnerships (Clement et al., 2018; Grimm et al., 2024; Rivera et al., 2010). Indeed, Grimm and Reinecke (2024) argue that frame alignment is not a one-time achievement but a continuous process that unfolds in interaction phases where diverse stakeholders negotiate their expectations and contributions, developing mutual understanding over time. This reduces the inefficiencies of dense, fully connected networks, making it easier to navigate the complexities of these collaborations (Reinecke et al., 2018).

### **2.2 Network Structures and Intermediation in Cross-Sector and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships**

This approach is mapped by the network literature. Network theories offer an interactional understanding of cross-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships, emphasising how actors connect, communicate, and collaborate (Burt et al., 2021; Clement et al., 2018;

Grimm et al., 2024; Halevy et al., 2019; Rivera et al., 2010). Traditional views often conceptualise partnerships as closed networks with a dense web of ties among actors (Selsky & Parker, 2010), fostering inclusion, but often impose significant coordination burdens, slow decision-making, and reinforce existing hierarchies, thereby limiting their effectiveness (Rivera et al., 2010).

Unlike closed networks, networks with brokers who link otherwise disconnected actors mediate tensions and align perspectives in localised, smaller clusters, reducing coordination costs within them and enabling agile and effective collaboration (Burt et al., 2021; Clement et al., 2018; Halevy et al., 2019). Brokers facilitate communication, bridge structural holes (Burt, 1992), ensure the efficient flow of resources and knowledge, minimize redundancy, and address inefficiencies in dense, interconnected networks (Kwon et al., 2020; Quintane & Carnabuci, 2016). In other words, dyadic relationships and intermediated connections create effective dialogue, avoiding inefficiencies of universal consensus-building that may manifest instead within dense networks (Kwon et al., 2020).

### **3 Methodology**

To assess the research question, we study the network of collaboration within Europe-based multistakeholder partnerships aimed at empowering beneficiaries in the Global South. This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, influenced by the work of Yin (2017) and Eisenhardt (1989), to explore the dynamics of relationships within a cross-sector partnership in a Fairtrade project. The primary focus is a single in-depth case study of the partnership with different partners across different sectors to provide contextual insights. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of the interactions, structures, and processes within the partnership, capturing the complexity of such heterogeneous stakeholder relationships. The methodological emphasis on a single case aligns with Yin's (2017) perspective on case study research as a robust strategy for investigating real-world phenomena in their natural context.

#### **3.1 Research Setting**

We study a Fair-Trade project structured around ethical supply chains involving a European Fair-Trade Organisation, a European Retail Firm, the Local Subsidiary of another European Fair-Trade Organisation, and a group of Local Cooperatives in a West-African country. The project unfolds over a five-year horizon, targeting 1,000 organic cocoa farming households and aspiring to address producers' community needs through both social and

economic development activities, structured around four interconnected components:

1. *Integrated Nutrient Management and Agricultural Practices*: The program emphasises the transformation of farming practices through demonstration fields, compost sites, and tree nurseries. These interventions aim to enhance biodiversity, improve soil fertility, and increase yields. Field agents employed by the Local Subsidiary play a critical role in disseminating these practices, enabling farmers to observe the tangible benefits of adopting sustainable techniques.
2. *Income Diversification*: Recognising the vulnerabilities associated with a mono-crop economy, the program promotes diversification through intercropping and alternative income sources, such as converting cocoa byproducts into marketable goods.
3. *Digitalisation and Mobile Payment Systems*: The introduction of a digital platform reconfigures farmer-buyer relationships by enhancing transparency and efficiency. Mobile payment systems are integrated to reduce transaction risks and ensure traceability, reflecting the program's commitment to leveraging technological innovation as a means of addressing structural inefficiencies in the supply chain.
4. *Post-Harvest Management*: Interventions in post-harvest practices, including centralised fermentation and drying techniques, seek to improve the quality of cocoa beans. These practices underscore the role of knowledge-sharing and experimentation to align with global demands.

The division of responsibilities across these project components is clearly established among the partners. The Local Subsidiary oversees the implementation of the project and the direct contact with the Local Cooperatives (established by local agents), acting as a direct buyer of their cocoa and realizing the social initiatives (e.g., farmers' training and support) of the project within their communities. The role of the European Fair-Trade Organisation is more of a mediator, making regular contact with the Local Subsidiary and once-a-year field trips to the West African Country to meet with the beneficiaries and prepare the report for the European Retailer. It also buys the cocoa from the Local Subsidiary and sells it to the European Retailer, which in turn also finances the social side of the project.

This research setting offers a fertile ground for capturing the dynamics of ethical value chains, and specifically how tensions are managed across dyadic interactions, and how they are being transported from one to the next to ensure that the activities are being carried out as planned.

## **3.2 Data Collection**

A total of 42 interviews, 17 ad-hoc dialogues, and 2 weeks of field trip observations were conducted with the cocoa growers of Local Cooperatives, and employees from the Local Subsidiary, the European Fair-Trade Organisation, and the European Retailer. So far, we have collected data in two phases: online and during two field visits to the West African country. In the first phase, we conducted online meetings (six interviews and four ad-hoc dialogues) with employees from the Local Subsidiary, the European Fair-Trade Organisation, and the European Retailer. In the second phase, we carried out two field trips to the West African Country to ascertain in-depth contextual data. The first trip, in August 2024, included 8 interviews, 5 ad hoc dialogues, and 1 week of observations. The second, a follow-up visit in November 2024 with a delegation from the European Fair-Trade Organisation, involved 28 interviews and 8 ad hoc dialogues, and 1 week of observation. These field visits were crucial for understanding participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and the dynamics of the partnership.

Interviews with employees of the European Fair-Trade Organisation and European Retailer were conducted in Italian, while those with the European headquarters of the Local Subsidiary were in English. Interviews with the Local Subsidiary in the West African Country were conducted in English and French, while farmers from Local Cooperatives were interviewed in Ewe, the local language, with translation support from English or Italian. All interviews and ad-hoc dialogues were recorded and transcribed for systematic analysis. Field observations further enriched the data by capturing non-verbal cues and contextual insights, essential for understanding the relational dynamics within the partnership (Yin, 2017).

## **3.3 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for systematic coding and theme development. This process involved multiple stages of coding and theme refinement, aligning with Eisenhardt's (1989) approach to case study research, where data is used to refine and build conceptual insights. Additionally, qualitative network analysis complemented this approach by mapping the structural dynamics of the partnership with triangulation across interviews and field notes, ensuring validity as recommended by Yin (2017).

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Progressive Intermediation: Bridging Worlds

In the context of the Fair-Trade project, the mechanisms of progressive intermediation emerge as pivotal for creating and sustaining a multi-stakeholder partnership that connects diverse actors along the cocoa supply chain—from Local Cooperatives in the West African country to the European Retailer. Unlike traditional multi-stakeholder partnerships that operate through centralised, collective deliberation, this project employs a dyadic supply chain network. This structure involves direct interactions between adjacent actors in the chain, enabling stakeholders with vastly different priorities and contexts to collaborate effectively without requiring full alignment of perspectives. A representative from the European Fair-Trade Organisation said:

*“It is a mediated relationship at many levels because we do not have a direct relationship with the Local Cooperatives or with the cooperatives; we have to go through another market, from the European headquarters of the Local Subsidiary to the Local Subsidiary [in the] West African Country. The Local Subsidiary [in the] West African Country reports to the cooperatives, and the cooperatives report to the cocoa growers. So, we have at least four levels before our information reaches the final recipient, and as children learn in the game of ‘telephone,’ it’s tough.”*

At the heart of progressive intermediation is the reframing of information as it moves through the supply chain. Each actor tailors the information they receive to suit their downstream counterparts. This adaptation allows high-level corporate goals to align with grassroots realities, bridging the communication gaps that often hinder collaborations involving highly diverse stakeholders.

### 4.2 Roles of Key Intermediaries

#### 4.2.1 European Fair-Trade Organisation’s Role in the Chain

The European Fair-Trade Organisation serves as a pivotal intermediary, bridging upstream and downstream priorities within the supply chain. It mediates between the European Retailer’s corporate objectives, which emphasize efficiency, scalability, and measurable outcomes, and the grassroots realities of the Local Subsidiary and the Local Cooperatives.

For the European Retailer, the European Fair-Trade Organisation employs *a*

*comparatively more structured framing*, focusing on data-driven arguments such as certification standards, market forecasts, and supply chain efficiency. This framing ensures alignment with the European Retailer's corporate priorities while emphasising the project's ethical sourcing objectives.

*“With the European Retailer, we have an umbrella project called the sustainable cocoa project. They buy a lot of cocoa from our sustainable cocoa supply chains, and actually, in their sustainability plan, it states that by [...] let's say that, that part (commercial) is very, very solid, rigid, and structured (the relationship with European Retailer) is more structured, here, even on a formal level. Then we have, with the European Retailer, we have the Partnership Agreement, the Fair-Trade Project, the Protocol etc.”*- a representative from the European Fair-Trade Organisation.

Conversely, when interacting with the Local Subsidiary, the European Fair-Trade Organisation adopts *a comparatively more experience-based framing*, focusing on values, similar experiences, and a shared set of tools built around the common direction the two organisations try to follow.

*“I don't know if the solidity of the relationship is justified by the type of contract. I believe it is on two levels. The first is a relational level [...] right from the beginning, he managed to establish a type of relationship with the management of the Local Subsidiary in such a way that if there is any trouble, he just picks up the phone to discuss it. There's a lot of transparency, and everyone is very aligned from a commercial standpoint. Also, because we have always told them that we'll enter into this commercial dynamic if you guarantee that you won't leave us hanging.”*- a representative from the European Fair-Trade Organisation

This reframing enables the Local Subsidiary to link its everyday activities to the higher-level goals of the partnership, solving problems and frictions by deepening collaboration and mutual adjustment.

#### **4.2.2 Local Subsidiary's Role in the Chain**

The Local Subsidiary links Local Cooperatives with the European Fair-Trade Organisation, transforming into action the social programs and economic arrangements jointly developed with the European Fair-Trade Organisation, thanks to its network of agents that operate within the cooperatives of local growers.

The Local Subsidiary does, in fact, operate as a downstream intermediary, deeply

embedded in the West African country's cocoa-producing regions. It translates broader project goals into practical, actionable steps for Local Cooperatives, providing critical support ranging from technical training to community development initiatives. It is this proximity to farmers that enables the Local Subsidiary to implement community-level projects, such as improving agricultural yields and promoting agroforestry practices. By employing highly skilled agricultural technicians as agents who are indigenous to the community, the Local Subsidiary ensures that Local Cooperatives can understand and apply the information effectively. In this case, the Local Subsidiary adopts *a comparatively more experience-based framing* to convey its proposals to the local communities of growers.

*"... as I said, we invest in people, right? With the team, with those guys being extremely close. We provide training via the agents. We support them with the best practices or access to, let's say to the best of the science. Then we also support them financially with projects, because some of them mentioned, for example, what they would like to suggest is the creation of schools for children."*- a representative from the European headquarters of the Local Subsidiary.

This is not the same approach the Local Subsidiary uses when dealing with the European Fair-Trade Organisation. In this case, the discourse acquires *a comparatively more structured framing*, leveraging the same values and background, the Local Subsidiary engages the European Fair-Trade Organisation in conversations meant to adapt high-level goals into culturally and contextually relevant structured programmes for cooperatives and farmers.

*"Via the European Fair-Trade Organisation, so I would say the overall partnership is on three levels. The first one is the financial contribution. That is basically independent of the volume. This is the money we use for the real project, the development, and whatever we do to expand. The second is the premium paid over the market price for the volume, which allows us to have a certain sustainability across the processes..."*- a representative from the Local Subsidiary

### **4.3 Reframing Across the Supply Chain: From Structured to Experience-Based**

A distinct feature of progressive intermediation is the progressive reframing (Grimm & Reinecke, 2024) of information as it moves from upstream to downstream actors. This reframing transitions from abstract, structured concepts at the upstream end to concrete, experience-based narratives at the downstream end. At the upstream level, the European

Retailer's priorities centre on efficiency, scalability, and measurable outcomes. The European Fair-Trade Organisation communicates with the European Retailer using certification standards and market analysis, aligning the project with the retailer's business objectives.

*“From a commercial point of view, the two major problems, the truly insurmountable ones, are that they do not provide the quantity they promised, and that the product does not meet the agreed quality standards. Because you know that when a customer, especially industrial customers, places an order, it's not just about quality; there's a technical sheet that specifies the cocoa I'm buying from you, the 350 tons I'm purchasing, must meet these quality parameters. If you don't meet them and they check when the product arrives in the European Country, I will send everything back to you. So, these are the two hurdles where you absolutely cannot fail; you can't give in on these.”*- a representative from the European Fair-Trade Organisation.

Moving midstream, the European Fair-Trade Organisation adapts these concepts into terms that resonate with the Local Subsidiary. Although it suffers from the contractual pressures from the upstream firm due to shared values with the Local Subsidiary, it manages to find a common language and find alternative solutions in case there are problems with the negotiated quantities and the quality of cocoa that the Local Subsidiary manages to obtain from the Local Cooperatives. Another positive aspect that facilitates their collaboration is the focus on their shared values and joint efforts in identifying actionable techniques adapted to the local context, such as pruning methods or agroforestry techniques.

*“... the third level is the communicative or the social aspect. Having a partner that is really interested in what we are doing. Not only from happy producers, and we are doing ever so good for the world, but really also from a business perspective”*- a representative of the Local Subsidiary.

At the downstream level, the Local Subsidiary reframes these concepts further for farmers, emphasizing practical applications through everyday examples, such as the use of compost and neem oil to improve yields.

*“And I think that's really our strength in the Local Subsidiary is that we know every farmer independently. We track them, we have them on our agents. We didn't see this today, but our agent has a mobile phone with geographical points of every farmer. We track the purchase. We can trace this, which is very few people.”*- a representative from the European headquarters of the Local Subsidiary.

This dynamic flow ensures that information is tailored to the specific needs and contexts of each actor, enabling the supply chain to function cohesively despite the diversity of stakeholders involved. In this context, where partners are cognitively distant, their being apart and linked only indirectly *via intermediaries* becomes an asset of the partnership, rather than a problem.

*“... then we (European Fair-Trade Organisation) can't intervene too much because the relationship between Local Subsidiary and the Cooperatives is between Local Subsidiary and the Cooperatives, we intervene at the level of visits, projects etc. but not so much on how the relationship is structured.”*- A representative of the European Fair-Trade Organisation.

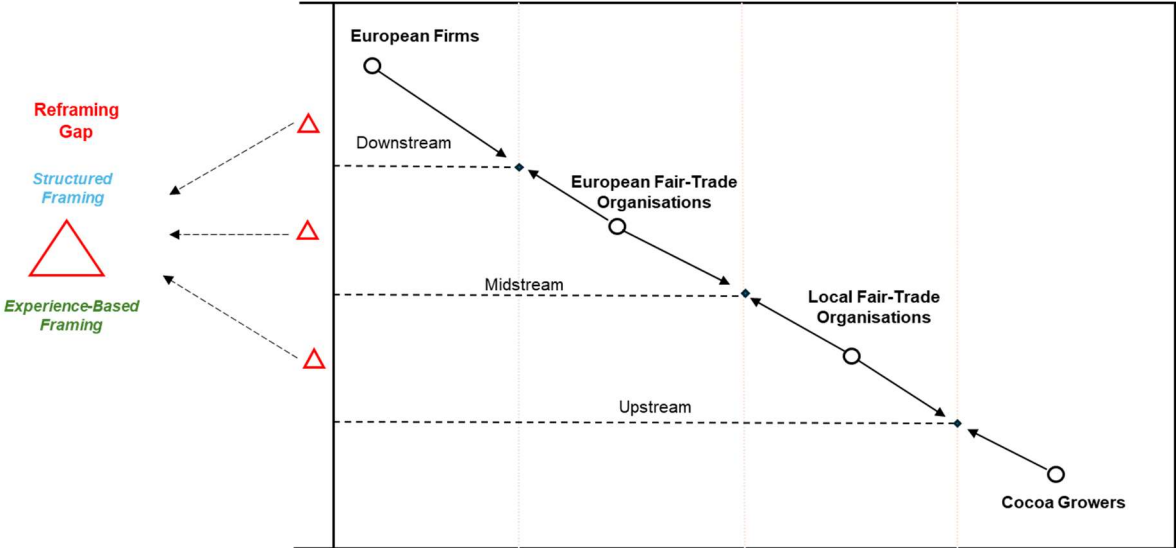


Figure 1: Mechanisms of Progressive Intermediation

## 5 Discussion

The findings highlight the significance of progressive intermediation in enabling diverse multi-stakeholder partnerships to function effectively. By allowing each actor to tailor information for their correspondents, the project accommodates stakeholders with vastly different priorities and contexts (Grimm et al., 2024; Grimm & Reinecke, 2024). This flexibility is critical in overcoming the communication barriers that often plague collaborations involving highly heterogeneous actors. Progressive intermediation challenges traditional assumptions about multi-stakeholder partnerships, which often emphasize collective deliberation and consensus-building. Instead, it demonstrates the viability of dyadic and intermediated network

structures (Rivera et al., 2010) that rely on reframing rather than universal agreement. This approach not only enhances the adaptability of multi-stakeholder partnerships but also fosters inclusivity by allowing diverse stakeholders to participate meaningfully.

The success of the Fair-Trade project also shows the potential of progressive intermediation to create sustainable and inclusive supply chains. By bridging the communication gaps between upstream and downstream actors, the project aligns corporate objectives with grassroots realities, ensuring both efficiency and equity. The Local Subsidiary's role as a local intermediary is particularly noteworthy. Its close engagement with Local cooperatives exemplifies how field-level expertise can translate high-level goals into meaningful community impact. This highlights the importance of local intermediaries in ensuring that multi-stakeholder partnerships remain grounded in the contexts they aim to serve.

The dyadic structure and reframing mechanisms of the Fair-Trade Project offer a blueprint for addressing the challenges of diverse multi-stakeholder partnerships. By emphasizing intermediated interactions over universal consensus, the project demonstrates how heterogeneous partnerships can achieve alignment and functionality. This approach has broader implications for the design of multi-stakeholder partnerships. It suggests that effective partnerships do not necessarily require full alignment of perspectives but can thrive by creating structured spaces for reframing and progressive intermediation.

## **6 Conclusion**

This study highlights the importance of progressive intermediation in enabling effective collaboration within heterogeneous cross-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships. By examining the case, the research demonstrates how intermediaries facilitate communication across diverse actors, bridging upstream corporate goals and downstream grassroots realities. Through reframing information to align with the priorities of successive stakeholders, progressive intermediation allows partnerships to function cohesively without requiring universal consensus. The findings emphasise the value of dyadic and intermediated network structures over fully connected networks, reducing coordination burdens and enhancing inclusivity. Local intermediaries, such as the Local Subsidiary, play a critical role in translating high-level objectives into contextually relevant, actionable practices, fostering community participation and ensuring the effective implementation of initiatives.

Furthermore, this study highlights the adaptability of progressive intermediation in dynamic and complex partnerships. By allowing information to be reframed in ways that

resonate with different stakeholders, it mitigates cognitive distance and ensures that actors remain engaged and aligned despite their differing priorities. This flexibility is particularly crucial in supply chains where stakeholders operate at varying scales, from large corporations to smallholder farmers. Additionally, progressive intermediation reduces power asymmetries by ensuring that local actors have a voice in shaping decisions and practices that directly affect them.

This study contributes to the literature by presenting progressive intermediation as a framework for addressing stakeholder heterogeneity. It offers a practical blueprint for designing adaptable, equitable, and sustainable partnerships that align diverse objectives while driving localized impact. Future research should explore how progressive intermediation operates in different industries and policy contexts, assessing its potential to improve governance, enhance sustainability efforts, and foster more resilient multi-stakeholder collaborations.

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