

PRIVATE-NONPROFIT PARTNERSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF CSR: THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP LEARNING

María Jesús Barroso-Méndez (University of Extremadura, Spain) [✉]

Clementina Galera-Casquet (University of Extremadura, Spain)

Víctor Valero-Amaro (University of Extremadura, Spain)

María Mercedes Galán-Ladero (University of Extremadura, Spain)

Abstract:

In recent years, Cross-Sector Social Partnerships (CSSPs) have become widely adopted by companies, governments and NGOs as mechanisms for working together in order to address complex social issues by combining different rationales to create collaborative value. Given this context, various authors have focused on the study of such partnering processes, proposing different key determinants to favour collaborative value creation, but without making any detailed analysis of those determinants.

Based on the *business-to-business* (B2B) literature, the present study contributes to current knowledge about CSSPs by conducting an in-depth analysis of relationship learning, one of the key determinants that the CSSPs literature has identified in the improvement of value creation.

Keywords: *Cross-Sector Social Partnerships (CSSPs); Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); relationship learning; value creation*

ALIANZAS ENTRE EL SECTOR PRIVADO Y EL NO LUCRATIVO EN EL CONTEXTO DE LA RSC: LA IMPORTANCIA DEL APRENDIZAJE RELACIONAL

Resumen:

En los últimos años, las Alianzas Sociales Intersectoriales (ASIs) han sido ampliamente adoptadas por empresas, gobiernos y ONGs como mecanismo para el trabajo conjunto de cara a abordar complejos asuntos sociales mediante la combinación de diferentes lógicas para generar valor colaborativo. Dado este contexto, diversos autores se han centrado en el estudio de tales procesos de alianza, proponiendo distintos determinantes clave para favorecer la generación de valor colaborativo, pero sin hacer ningún análisis detallado de tales determinantes.

Teniendo como base la literatura *business-to-business* (B2B), el presente estudio contribuye al conocimiento actual sobre ASIs mediante un análisis en profundidad del aprendizaje relacional, uno de los determinantes clave para la mejora de la creación de valor identificados en la literatura.

Palabras clave: *Alianzas Sociales Intersectoriales (ASIs); Responsabilidad Social Corporativa (RSC); aprendizaje relacional; creación de valor*

[✉] Faculty of Economics and Business Sciences (University of Extremadura), Avda. de Elvas s/n 06071-Badajoz (Spain)
e-mail: mjbarroso@unex.es

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing awareness that social problems should not remain as the exclusive domain of governments and civil society organizations, but should be accepted as a responsibility for businesses (Domínguez et al. 2008). In this sense, Cross Sector Social Partnerships (CSSPs) have become widely adopted by companies, governments and NGOs as mechanisms for working together (Brinkerhoff 2002; Deakin 2002; Berger et al. 2004; Dixon et al. 2004; Chettiparamb 2007; Jamali and Keshishian 2009) in order to address complex social issues (Seitanidi 2008) by combining different rationales (Le Ber and Branzei 2010) to generate collaborative value (Austin 2000; Ishikawa and Morel 2008).

This collaborative value creation is built in a series of chronological stages. In this regard, the literature on CSSPs, especially that on private-nonprofit partnerships, notes that the implementation phase of the partnership is the engine of that value creation (Austin and Seitanidi 2012). Among the main determinants of value creation involved in this stage, different authors have highlighted the importance of a relationship learning process, i.e. joint learning between the partners (Austin 2000; Bowen et al. 2010; Steijn et al. 2011; Kort and Klijn 2011). However, to the best of our knowledge, this literature contains no detailed analysis of such a process.

The concept of relationship learning, introduced and developed into the business-to-business (B2B) literature by Selnes and Sallis (2003), can be conceptualized as “a joint activity between two partners in which both parties share information, which is then jointly interpreted and integrated into a shared relationship-domain-specific memory that changes the range or likelihood of potential relationship-domain-specific behaviour” (Selnes and Sallis 2003, p. 80). Therefore, the aim of relationship learning is to improve future behaviour in a relationship for mutual benefit (Cegarra 2007).

According to its importance, the aim of the present work is to contribute to the current knowledge of CSSPs, in particular, of partnering processes between businesses and NGOs, by conceptualizing how relationship learning has the potential in enhancing the value creation of CSSPs via efficiency, effectiveness and/or innovation. More specifically, following the business-to-business literature, the present research has the following objectives: i) to provide a clear definition of the term “relationship learning”; ii) to find out the different sub-processes that comprise this joint learning process; and iii) to present the different types of desirable outcomes that this learning process can generate in this particular context. The rest of the paper is therefore structured as follows: in the second section, we carry out a brief review of the concept and types of cross-sector social partnerships in the context of CSR; in the third section, we demonstrate the relevance of relationship learning in the literature on CSSPs by means of a review of the main value creation determinants described in this context; in the fourth section, we address the gap in research that was identified by examining the relationship learning construct; in the fifth section, we connect relationship learning and value creation, providing examples from the literature on the potential outcomes that this learning process could create in this particular context; and finally, we discuss the study’s conclusions.

2. Cross-Sector Social Partnerships in the context of CSR

Cross-Sector Social Partnerships (CSSPs)¹ are mechanisms aimed to address complex social and ecological problems that are too wide to be solved by any one organization (Clarke and Fuller, 2010). Irrespective of their name (e.g. inter-sector social partnerships, cross-sector partnerships), such collaborations differ in their scope, timeframe, purposes, and in their participants (Sanzo et al. 2012). Specifically, it is possible to identify four types of CSSPs (Selsky and Parker 2005; Seitanidi 2008; Seitanidi and Crane 2009):

- a) private-nonprofit partnerships, between businesses and NGOs/NPOs, and also referred as social alliances (Berger et al. 2004);
- b) public-private partnerships, between governments and businesses;
- c) public-nonprofit partnerships, between governments and NGOs/NPOs; and
- d) tripartite partnerships businesses-NGOs-governments, aimed at addressing more complex issues.

¹ In this paper we use the terms “partnerships”, “alliances” and “collaborations” as interchangeable. At any case, and in line with Murphy et al. (2012), all these terms refer broadly to relationships between public, profit and nonprofit sectors that are ongoing for at least a certain period of time, as opposed to punctual interactions.

Within this set of categories, this research focuses on the first one, that is, the dyadic partnerships between businesses and NPO/NGOs, whose relationships have proliferated over the past twenty-five years (Austin 2000; Murphy et al. 2012). According to Jamali and Keshishian (2009), nowadays stakeholder advocacy groups have gained visibility in different contexts. Specifically, NGOs have been active in most recent years, more adjusted to CSR policies and activities, and more willing to collaborate with businesses in order to achieve common goals (Jamali and Keshishian 2009). These groups have decreased their confrontational style, showing a more favourable collaborative tendency in the context of CSR (Williams and Conley 2005). Due to this fact, an increasing number of businesses consider NGOs as important partners in their pursuit for improving their legitimacy and impacts in the CSR field (Jamali et al. 2011).

On the above basis, private-nonprofit partnerships have generally been structured according to the developmental stage of the collaboration relationship. According to the “*continuum of collaboration*” suggested by Austin (2000), which has been extensively referred to by many authors in leading journals (e.g. Berger et al. 2004; Seitanidi and Ryan 2007; Seitanidi and Crane 2009; Seitanidi 2010; Austin and Seitanidi 2011), we can distinguish three stages through which these partnerships progress: i) a philanthropic stage (stage I); ii) a transactional stage (stage II); and iii) an integrative stage (stage III).

As the alliance moves along this continuum, its characteristics change in terms of the level of participation, importance of the mission, size and type of resources used, focus of activities, level of interaction, complexity of management, trust, and strategic value, as indicated in Table 1.

In a more detailed way, the above mentioned stages Table may be described as indicated by Austin (2000):

- In the *philanthropic stage*, the donor-recipient relationship generates just a modest strategic value. This stage is characterized by a low level of participation, peripheral importance of the mission for both partners, minor investment in resource, narrow focus on activities, infrequent interaction, and simplicity.
- In the *transactional stage*, the relationship moves beyond pure corporate philanthropy to involve the development of projects with specific objectives and deadlines (such as cause-related marketing programs, sponsorship of events, special projects and corporate volunteer services), with moderate levels of investment in resources, interaction, context, and strategic value.
- In the *integrative stage*, there is conjoint value creation between the partners, a high level of participation, and the importance of the relationship to the organization’s mission changes from having been peripheral to being strategic. The scope of activities widens, the complexity of management grows, and multiple and distinct resources are exchanged.

As it can be easily perceived, “value generation in an alliance is not constant, but grows over time” (Austin 2010, p.14). This is due to the fact that it depends on the presence of different characteristics in the partnership relationship.

Table 1. The *continuum of collaboration*

Nature of the relationship	Stage I. Philanthropic	>>>	Stage II. Transactional	>>>	Stage III. Integrative
Level of participation	Low	-----		-----	High
Importance of the mission	Peripheral	-----		-----	Central
Magnitude of resources	Small	-----		-----	Large
Resource type	Money	-----		-----	Major competences
Focus of activities	Narrow	-----		-----	Broad
Level of interaction	Infrequent	-----		-----	Intensive
Trust	Modest	-----		-----	Deep
Management complexity	Simple	-----		-----	Complex
Strategic value	Minor	-----		-----	Major

Source: Austin (2000, p. 35)

3. Value Creation Determinants in CSSPs: The importance of joint learning between partners

Most of the literature on CSSPs, especially that on partnering processes between businesses and NGOs, has assimilated the terms “success” and “aims achievement of the collaboration” (Le Ber and Branzei 2010; Murphy et al. 2012), which is related to the “collaborative value creation”. The relationship between “aims achievement of the collaboration” and “collaborative value creation” is due to the fact that different authors (Austin 2000; Gourville and Rangan 2004, Austin 2010; Murphy and Arenas 2010; Austin and Seitanidi 2011), have mentioned it as being at the core of effective collaboration, i.e. achieving its objectives is value creation, “being what motivates, sustains, and produces impact from cross-sector partnering” (Austin 2010, p. 13).

Numerous authors have proposed different definitions for the term “value” in collaboration or “collaborative value creation” (Austin 2000; Le Ber and Branzei 2010; Murphy and Arenas 2010). Recently, Austin and Seitanidi (2011, p. 2), in an extensive literature review on collaboration between businesses and NGOs, have conceptualized collaborative value creation as “the transitory and enduring benefits relative to the costs that are generated due to the interaction of the collaborators and that accrue to the organizations, individuals, and society”. Similarly, Kivleniece and Quelin (2012) define the notion of collaborative value as the sum of benefits for the partners and society in general obtainable from the exchange. As such, the foregoing definitions emphasize the role of outcomes in the creation of value while suggesting that such outcomes (benefits/costs) correspond to different subjects (Austin and Seitanidi 2012).

At any case, collaborative value creation depends on multiple determinants at different chronological phases (Austin and Seitanidi 2011). However, since the implementation phase of the partnership is considered to be the motor of value creation in collaboration (Austin and Seitanidi 2012), most of the literature on CSSPs –and specifically that on partnering processes between businesses and NGOs–, has proposed value creation determinants involved in this phase. A synthesis of the content of most relevant contributions is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Main determinants of value creation involved in the implementation phase of CSSPs, in particular, in partnerships between businesses and NGOs

Author/s	Trust	Commitment	Communication	Mutual respect	Joint learning	Functional conflict
Austin (2000)		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Berger et al. (2004)	✓	✓				
Schiller (2005)	✓					
Arya and Salk (2006)		✓				
Senge et al. (2006)			✓	✓		
Seitanidi and Ryan (2007)			✓	✓		
Ishikawa and Morel (2008)		✓	✓	✓		
Tennyson and Harrison (2008)	✓	✓				
Bowen et al. (2010)					✓	
Rivera and Ruffin (2010)	✓					
Seitanidi (2010)						✓
Austin and Seitanidi (2011)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Jamali et al. (2011)	✓	✓	✓			
Kort and Klijn (2011)					✓	
Steijn et al. (2011)					✓	
Austin y Seitanidi (2012)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: own elaboration from quoted contributions

As it can be observed, the literature on CSSPs identifies as one of the main value creation determinants in the implementation stage the presence of a joint learning process between partners (Austin 2000; Bowen et al. 2010; Steijn et al. 2011; Kort and Klijn 2011). For example, in a study of partnering processes between businesses and NGOs, Austin (2000) notes that the joint learning between the two partners can generate a greater volume of mutual and exceptional benefits, and meet the different types of systemic challenges more efficiently and effectively. In a study of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), Steijn et al. (2011) note that sharing knowledge can lead to better, more innovative, policy outputs for complex societal problems. However, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no detailed analysis of such a value creation process. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to contribute to the advance of the current understanding of CSSPs by conducting an in-depth analysis of this joint learning process, in order to find out the different sub-processes that comprise it, and to illustrate, following B2B literature, the numerous types of desirable outcomes that it can generate, particularly in this new context.

4. Relationship learning: the construct

Following Knight (2002, p. 439) *interorganizational learning* can be defined as “learning in a dyadic or interorganizational context and where the learner can be an individual, a group, an organization, a dyad or a network”.

Figure 1 shows that interorganizational learning can take place across all learning contexts and at all learner types encompassing all available combinations. As such it represents a general construct that requires further elaboration to allow for meaning to emerge within contexts and levels of analysis. Along this line, Larsson et al. (1998, p. 287) mention that interorganizational learning can be viewed as “the collective acquisition of knowledge among a set of organizations”. According to Levinson and Asahi (1995) four steps are identified during the process of interorganizational learning: i) becoming aware and identifying new knowledge; ii) transferring and interpreting new knowledge; iii) using new knowledge by adjusting behaviour to achieve intended outcomes, a step when power can play a role if considered as the relative power of those participating organizations influencing the new knowledge utilization patterns; and iv) institutionalizing new knowledge. The process of interorganizational learning may take place in either collaborative or arm’s length relationships, in which the relationship terminates after a short-term goal is attained (Fang et al. 2011).

On the other hand, relationship learning as a particular type of interorganizational learning. Addressed at network level, i.e. “network learning” (Knight 2002; Knight and Pye 2004; Knight and Pye 2005), it is characterized, *exclusively*, by close collaborative relationship between partner organizations. In order to provide a definition of relationship learning that allows us to differentiate this construct of the above mentioned and more general construct of interorganizational learning, we prefer to extrapolate the definition of network learning as proposed by Knight (2002) in his study on interorganizational networks and so propose the following definition: “relationship learning involves a learning process by two organizations as a group within the partnership context”. Cases of relationship learning would be mapped on to any of the cells in the bottom row of the matrix in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Interorganizational learning

		Learning context				
		Individual (I)	Group (G)	Organization (O)	Dyad (D)	Interorganizational (I-O)
Learner	Individual (I)				INTERORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING	
	Group (G)					
	Organization (O)					
	Dyad (D)					
	Network (N)					

Source: Knight (2002)

Figure 2. Relationship learning

		Learning context				
		Individual (I)	Group (G)	Organization (O)	Dyad (D)	Interorganizational (I-O)
Learner	Individual (I)					
	Group (G)					
	Organization (O)					
	Dyad (D)	RELATIONSHIP LEARNING				
	Network (N)					

Source: adapted from Knight (2002)

As shown in Figure 2, relationship learning can take place across all learning contexts, but it is positioned exclusively on the dyad learner level, as such relationship learning constitutes a focused construct that takes place on the collective level of analysis. Following Night and Pye (2005), we can highlight that relationship learning, like network learning, is characterized by changes to relationship-level properties. In other words, if two organizations change the group's behaviour or cognitive structures through their interaction, then it is on the collective –and not the organization– level that the organizations learn.

These authors also identified two important differences between network and interorganizational learning that can be extrapolated. On the one hand, they mentioned that there is often a strong focus on the appropriation of learning by the individual organization. On the other hand, they noted that even in the studies where it is recognized that the interaction might lead to new joint learning, the focus is typically on how each organization can derive private benefits. Relationship learning, unlike interorganizational learning, emphasizes the distinctive collaborative level of analysis, i.e. the dyad together (see Clarke and Fuller 2010; Seitanidi et al. 2010). In this sense, relationship learning consists of three major value creation processes based on close relationships between the partners: information sharing, sense-making and knowledge integration (Selnes and Sallis 2003). A degree of relationship between partners is a fundamental prerequisite for knowledge sharing that provides the necessary conditions (Fang et al. 2011). Specifically:

- *Information sharing* between partner organizations is a starting point and a necessary element of relationship learning (Selnes and Sallis 2003). Partner organizations must share information to coordinate and plan their tasks in order to improve their respective performance (Cannon and Perreault 1999).

- *Joint sense-making* or interpretation of the shared information acts as a mechanism for explaining and communicating the link between information and its meanings (Fang et al. 2011). As a consequence, the dialogue between the partners within in relationship plays a fundamental role in this value creation process. The dialogue can be conceptualized as a process itself (or sub-process, if preferred) characterized by a disposition to listen to each other and a capacity to talk over (Grönroos 2000). Moreover, given that partner organizations vary in the ways they make sense of the same information, in this sub-process it is necessary that partner organizations utilize mechanisms to create learning arenas between organizations (McQuarrie 1993), as for example, board meetings, management meetings and task-force teams (Selnes and Sallis 2003).

- *Knowledge integration* occurs when organizations develop relationship-specific memories whereby shared knowledge is stored (Cheung et al. 2011). Relationship memory includes organizations' collective insights, beliefs, behavioural routines, procedures and policies (Johnson et al. 2004). In addition, relationship memory is shared, i.e. it is external to the organization, but internal to the partnership relationship. This means that the production of knowledge is a property of the relationship, and consequently both organizations have access to it regardless their location (Lukas et al. 1996; Selnes and Sallis 2003; Johnson et al. 2004). Therefore, relationship-specific memory interacts with the original knowledge possessed by the participating members, which produces innovative and enhanced ideas (Fang et al. 2011) to address more efficiently complex problems.

Following Fang et al. (2011) we suggest that the joint activities “information sharing” and “joint sensemaking” favour knowledge development in CSSPs, which is integrated in a *partnership-specific memory* (a joint outcome of this learning process). Moreover, in the next section, relationship learning and value creation will be connected, providing examples from the B2B literature about the potential desirable outcomes that this learning process can generate in this context.

5. The role of the relationship learning in the creation of different types of desirable outcomes in CSSPs

Relationship Learning can be conceptualised as “a process in which the two parties strive to create more value together than they would create individually or with other partners” (Selnes and Sallis 2003, p. 81).

The literature on CSSPs suggests that value creation can take several forms (Ravald and Grönroos 1996; Sheth and Sharma 1997; Woodruff and Flint 2003; Cheung et al. 2010; Steijn et al. 2011). Recently, Steijn et al. (2011) identified that such value creation can take three different forms by contributing to the improvement of partnership outcomes: i) decreasing the cost of outcomes (efficiency); ii) increasing outcomes (effectiveness); and iii) developing new outcomes (innovation). The first refers to obtaining the same benefits at lower costs (Kenniscentrum 2002), hence value creation can be assessed using a cost-benefit analysis (Kolk et al. 2008); in the second, value creation derives from securing greater benefits for the same costs (Kenniscentrum 2002); and, finally, the third refers to innovative outcomes within the partnership, which appear as specifically relevant in complex environments (Luo and Peng 1999).

However, as the literature of CSSPs has not yet paid adequate attention to the construct of relationship learning, we draw from the business-to-business literature in order to demonstrate the types of outcomes. The assumption that relationship learning leads to a greater value can be found in numerous research studies on B2B relationships (e.g. Johnson and Sohi 2003; Selnes and Sallis 2003; Johnson et al. 2004; Ling-Yee 2006; Cheung et al. 2010, 2011; Fang et al. 2011). On this basis (see Table 3), we propose that relationship learning contributes to value creation by delivering:

- *Less costly outcomes*: the relationship learning process between partner organizations generates the same benefits for lower costs.
- *Better outcomes*: the relationship learning process creates greater benefits for the same cost, because of this joint activity enhances the value of the product or service that is being delivered.
- *New outcomes*: the relationship learning generates new solutions through the knowledge combination.

Table 3. Examples of outcomes derived due to relationship learning process in business-to-business relationships

Less costly incomes (<i>efficiency</i> is improved)	Better outcomes (<i>effectiveness</i> is improved)	New outcomes (<i>innovation</i> is stimulated)
Operational efficiencies (Cannon and Perreault 1999; Jean and Sinkovics 2010)	Coproduction of products that meet market demands from the standpoint of quality, delivery, and costs (Vargo and Lusch 2004; Jean and Sinkovics 2010)	Innovative and enhanced ideas (Chen et al. 2009; Jean and Sinkovics 2010; Fang et al. 2011)
Cycle time reduction (Hult et al. 2002)	Improvements in the current processes (Myers and Mee-Shew 2008)	Improvements in new process innovations (Cheung et al. 2011)
Reduction times needed to order and deliver products (Cheung et al. 2011)	Improvements in the partner’s competences (Wu et al. 2011)	Improvements in new product outputs –i.e. effectively meeting customer needs– (Cheung et al. 2011)
Reduction of costs associated with doing business with each other (Jean and Sinkovics 2010; Cheung et al. 2011)	Joint competitive advantage (Pine et al. 1995; Dyer and Singh 1998; Chang and Gotcher 2007)	Identification of ways to improve quality (Selnes and Sallis 2003)
Efficiencies for both buyers and suppliers (Cheung et al. 2011)	Development of a better product quality (Myers and Mee-Shew 2008)	
Identification of ways to reduce or remove redundant costs (Selnes and Sallis 2003)		
Identification of ways to increase speed and flexibility (Selnes and Sallis 2003)		

Source: own elaboration from quoted contributions

Table 3 groups the main outcomes derived from a relationship learning process in B2B partnerships taking in mind the different forms of value creation mentioned. Accordingly to such listing, we put forward the following propositions:

P_1 : relationship learning contributes to the cost reduction in partnerships between businesses and NGOs.

P_2 : relationship learning contributes to the increasing the likelihood in achieving the intended outcomes in partnerships between businesses and NGOs.

P_3 : relationship learning contributes to the generation of new outcomes, and hence it increases the innovation in partnerships between businesses and NGOs.

Additionally, it is worthy to mention that such outcomes derived from this relationship learning process are desirable outcomes in partnerships between businesses and NGOs. According to Table 4, businesses and ONGs could achieve different desirable outcomes: on the one hand, businesses could obtain opportunities for innovation (e.g. Yaziji and Doh 2009), product and process innovation (e.g. Austin 2000) or competitiveness (e.g. Porter and Kramer 2011); on the other hand, NGOs could achieve opportunities for innovation (e.g. Holmes and Moir 2007), opportunities for improvement of processes (e.g. Seitanidi 2010) or opportunities for developing unique capabilities and knowledge creation (e.g. Porter and Kramer 2011).

Moreover, from an external view, the relationship learning could contribute to improve the impact of such partnering processes in the society identifying and providing better solutions and innovations to address more effectively the needs of the beneficiaries (Ishikawa and Morel 2008).

6. Conclusions

Cross Sector Social Partnerships represent the collaborative paradigm of the 21st century (Austin 2000). They continue to thrive globally (Bendell et al. 2010), due to their potential to address complex social problems (Seitanidi 2008) while creating collaborative value (Ishikawa and Morel 2008). Even so, while the CSSPs literature has shed some light on the main determinants that favour such value creation –and specifically in the implementation phase–, there has yet to be a detailed analysis of these value creation determinants.

Table 4. Examples of desirable outcomes in Social Alliances that could be achieved through a relationship learning process

Subject	Type of outcome	Desirable outcome in social alliances	Relationship learning (B2B)
NGOs	New outcomes	Opportunities for innovation (e.g. Holmes and Moir 2007)	Chen et al. (2009) Fang et al. (2011)
	Better outcomes	Opportunities for improvement of processes (e.g. Seitanidi 2010) Development of unique capabilities and knowledge creation (e.g. Porter and Kramer 2011)	Myers and Mee-Shew (2008) Jean and Sinkovics (2010) Fang et al. (2011)
Businesses	New outcomes	Product and process innovation (e.g. Austin 2000) Opportunities for innovation (e.g. Yaziji and Doh 2009)	Chen et al. (2009) Jean and Sinkovics (2010) Cheung et al. (2011) Fang et al. (2011)
	Better outcomes	Competitiveness (e.g. Porter and Kramer 2011)	Pine et al. (1995) Dyer and Singh (1998) Chang and Gotcher (2007)
Society	New outcomes	Better innovations to address the needs of the beneficiaries (Ishikawa and Morel 2008)	Fang et al. (2011)

Source: own elaboration from quoted contributions

This paper aimed to contribute to the current knowledge of CSSPs by conducting an in-depth analysis of relationship learning, one of the key determinants identified in the literature on CSSPs as involved in the improvement of value creation. The potential of relationship learning for the achievement of different types of outcomes can be synthesized in the following two considerations:

- Relationship learning comprises a series of social exchanges based on close relationships. As stated by Fang et al. (2011), close relationships enable the partner organizations to share idiosyncratic knowledge, which leads to better, more innovative outcomes.

- Following Selnes and Sallis (2003), relationship learning is not focused on the appropriation of learning by the individual organizations but is reflected in a community of learning profoundly integrated into the relationship. This community of learning interacts with the original knowledge possessed by partner organizations, producing better, more innovative products and policy outputs with the capacity to address complex social problems more efficiently (Kort and Klijn 2011; Steijn et al. 2011).

Finally, we leave for the pending research agenda on CSSPs –especially on businesses-NGOs partnerships– the empirical testing of our propositions. Thus far, “empirical efforts have followed an inductive path, a key endeavour for a substantially new field of inquiry” (Rivera and Rufin, 2010, p. 66). We believe, though, that based on those efforts as well as the vast existing literature on B2B partnerships, we have been able to develop propositions that can be taken into account in empirical research designs to test their validity. In addition, we propose that future research studies might be aimed at extending our analysis, examining the main precursors of this joint learning process. According to the literature on interfirm relationship learning (Selnes and Sallis 2003; Ling-Yee 2006), the capacity of a relationship to learn is closely connected to the relational context in which it is embedded. Therefore, future researches could analyze two main antecedents of the development of this learning culture: trust and commitment (Selnes and Sallis 2003; Ling-Yee 2006; Cheung et al. 2010; Yang and Lai 2012).

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