

Relational Management Mechanisms for Strategic Alliances Among Nonprofit Organizations

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Abstract This study employs a qualitative multiple-case study to explore relational management mechanisms for strategic nonprofit alliances (NPAs) formed by at least 3 nonprofit organizations by examining collaborative relationships among farmers associations in Taiwan. We explore these mechanisms by analyzing case data from four strategic cooperation characteristics, which can best explain NPAs. To effectively sustain partnerships, our findings suggest that an NPA applies acceptable collaborative rules and regulations, common standard procedures, symmetric information and communication, and capability building and corrective measures when cooperation involves high input commonality. The results also suggest empowerment for partners with deeper input commitment to direct decisions on resource distribution and utilization when collaborative ties involve low input measurability. Regarding high output commonality, we advise NPAs to enforce common output quality control, efficient substandard-output treatment, and external incentives as mechanisms to encourage partners for continued commitment. If relationships involve low output measurability, our findings suggest that

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NPAs heighten partners' voluntary motivation for the common good, with goal-achievement assessment measures, professional certification by external experts, and acceptable and reasonable benefit-sharing methods

Résumé Cette étude utilise une étude qualitative de cas multiple en vue d'explorer les mécanismes de gestion relationnelle pour les alliances stratégiques à but non lucratif formées par au moins trois organisations à but non lucratif, en examinant les relations de collaboration entre les associations d'exploitants agricoles à Taïwan. Nous étudions ces mécanismes en analysant les données de cas de quatre caractéristiques de coopération stratégique, qui illustrent bien les alliances stratégiques à but non lucratif. Pour maintenir efficacement des partenariats, il ressort de nos constatations qu'une alliance stratégique à but non lucratif applique des règles et des règlements de collaboration acceptables, des procédures standards communes, des informations et des communications symétriques et des mesures correctives et de renforcement des capacités lorsque la coopération implique des points communs forts en termes de contribution. Ces constatations laissent également entendre une autonomisation des partenaires dans le souci d'engager plus fermement leur contribution afin d'orienter les décisions sur la répartition et l'utilisation des ressources lorsque les liens de collaboration comportent une évaluation faible de la contribution. Concernant les points communs forts en termes de contribution, nous conseillons aux alliances stratégiques à but non lucratif d'exercer un contrôle qualité commun des contributions, un traitement efficace des contributions de qualité inférieure et des incitations externes comme mécanismes pour encourager les partenaires à s'engager de manière continue. Si les relations impliquent une évaluation faible des contributions, nos observations indiquent que les alliances stratégiques à but non lucratif intensifient la motivation bénévole des partenaires pour le bien commun avec des mesures d'évaluation d'atteinte des objectifs, une certification professionnelle par des experts externes et des méthodes acceptables et raisonnables de partage des avantages.

Zusammenfassung In dieser Untersuchung werden die kollaborativen Beziehungen zwischen Bauernverbänden in Tawain betrachtet und eine qualitative multiple Fallstudie angewandt, um die Mechanismen des relationalen Managements für strategische Bündnisse zwischen mindestens 3 Non-Profit-Organisationen zu erforschen. Wir untersuchen die Mechanismen, indem wir Falldaten zu 4 strategischen Kooperationsmerkmalen analysieren, die die Bündnisse von Non-Profit-Organisationen am besten erklären. Unsere Ergebnisse weisen darauf hin, dass derartige Bündnisse zur Gewährleistung nachhaltiger Partnerschaften akzeptable gemeinsame Regeln und Vorschriften, gemeinsame Standardverfahren, symmetrische Informationen und Kommunikation sowie Kompetenzentwicklung und Korrekturmaßnahmen zur Anwendung bringen, wenn die Kooperation ein hohes gemeinschaftliches Input beinhaltet. Die Ergebnisse weisen zudem darauf hin, dass die Rolle der Partner mit einer größeren Input-Verpflichtung zu direkten Entscheidungen über die Ressourcenverteilung und -nutzung gestärkt wird, wenn die Zusammenarbeit eine geringe Input-Messbarkeit beinhaltet. Mit Hinblick auf ein hohes gemeinschaftliches Output empfehlen wir den Bündnissen, eine

gemeinsame Output-Qualitätskontrolle, einen effizienten Umgang mit einem unterdurchschnittlichen Output und externe Anreize als Mechanismen einzusetzen, um die Partner zu einer anhaltenden Verpflichtung zu animieren. Wenn Beziehungen eine geringe Output-Messbarkeit beinhalten, weisen unsere Ergebnisse darauf hin, dass die Bündnisse die freiwillige Motivation der Partner zur Unterstützung des Allgemeinwohls mittels einer Messung der erreichten Ziele, einer professionellen Zertifizierung durch externe Fachleute und mit Hilfe akzeptabler und angemessener Methoden der Nutzenverteilung erhöhen.

Resumen El presente estudio emplea un estudio cualitativo de múltiples casos para explorar los mecanismos relacionales de gestión de alianzas estratégicas sin ánimo de lucro (NPA, del inglés non profit alliances) formadas por 3 organizaciones sin ánimo de lucro, como mínimo, mediante el examen de las relaciones de colaboración entre las asociaciones de agricultores en Taiwán. Exploramos estos mecanismos analizando los datos de los casos de 4 características estratégicas de la cooperación, que pueden explicar mejor las NPA. Para sostener de manera efectiva a las asociaciones, nuestros hallazgos sugieren que una NPA aplica reglas y reglamentaciones de colaboración aceptables, procedimientos estándar comunes, información y comunicación simétricas, y medidas correctivas y de creación de capacidades cuando la cooperación implica una elevada comunión de ideas. Los resultados sugieren también el empoderamiento de los socios con un compromiso de aportación más profundo con decisiones directas sobre distribución y utilización de recursos cuando los lazos de colaboración implican una baja mensurabilidad de aportación. En relación con la elevada comunión de ideas sobre los resultados, aconsejamos a las NPA a que ejecuten controles de calidad de los resultados comunes, tratamiento eficiente de los resultados subestándar e incentivos externos como mecanismos para alentar a los socios a un compromiso continuado. Si las relaciones implican una baja mensurabilidad de los resultados, nuestros hallazgos sugieren que las NPA elevan la motivación voluntaria de los socios por el bien común, con medidas de evaluación del logro de metas, certificación profesional por parte de expertos externos, y métodos aceptables y razonables para compartir los beneficios.

Keywords Interorganizational relationships · Strategic alliance · Nonprofit partnership · Cooperative relationships management · Agricultural groups

Introduction

Many nonprofit organizations (NPOs), because of external dramatic environments and increasing difficulties in seeking funds from private donations and government subsidies, currently suffer from operational bottlenecks. Therefore, NPOs have adapted to changing environments in various ways, from subcontracting to partnerships, or to outright conversion to for-profit status (Eng et al. 2012; Ryan 1999). Like for-profit organizations (POs), which commonly use interorganizational cooperative relationships to increase their capabilities and resources; NPOs, in

response to environmental uncertainties, also resort to such collaborations to manage external threats and achieve value-creating goals (Chen et al. 2013; Koschmann et al. 2012; Ryan 1999).

Although NPOs adopt a cooperative strategy as an alternative approach to resolving problems, to explore value-creating opportunities for potential breakthroughs, it is more important for NPOs to adequately manage their cooperative ties after establishing interorganizational relationships (IORs). Both business and social-sector organizations are reinventing themselves through alliances (Acar et al. 2007; Peng and Kellogg 2003). Sagawa and Segal (2000) indicated that, instead of framing the purpose of such interorganizational partnerships as the pursuit of opportunities, creating more social values becomes the major reason for collaboration among NPOs.

Strategic alliances are increasingly popular, but organizations may bring different expectations to partnerships. Thus, friction and conflicts from varying expectations might worsen these IORs. Managing conflicts and expectations in partnerships is critical, particularly as interorganizational cooperation among NPOs proliferates. Therefore, NPOs in interorganizational networks may have to apply a set of well-designed relational management mechanisms (RMMs) to sustain partners' voluntary effort and continued commitment.

Differing from POs, NPOs adopt the cooperative strategy mainly for social value maximization (Acar et al. 2007; Chen et al. 2013; Koschmann et al. 2012; Ryan 1999). Both organizational types are principally based on different organizational rationales (Hall 1987; Sheth 1993). For economic rationality, POs seek IORs strategically for profit maximization. NPOs, however, formed to achieve specific social missions, often adopt the collaborative approach to secure resources for maximizing nonprofit services. Therefore, NPOs adopt strategic thinking that is different from that of POs in designing RMMs for IORs.

Although the collaborative strategy has become increasingly important for NPOs, the literature is scant on the cooperative strategy focusing on RMMs adopted by these IORs for nonprofit purposes. Moreover, relevant theories and empirical research have primarily been applied to the private sector or POs, rather than to the nonprofit sector (Peng and Kellogg 2003).

In practice, NPOs may establish cooperative ties with other organizations for nonprofit or for-profit purposes to circumvent the restrictions originally posed by the organization itself. Strategic cooperation among farmers associations (FAs) in Taiwan is a useful focus for this study. Taiwanese FAs are legally defined as civic bodies or NPOs, and are quasi-public, member-oriented, commerce-based, and mutually beneficial (Ding 1998). Further, Taiwan's FAs, under the government's protectionist policy, have experienced stable growth and were closely associated with agricultural development in Taiwan over the past century, but were negatively affected after Taiwan's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2002. Therefore, strategic cooperation has become crucial for FAs wanting to overcome operational difficulties and explore another value-creating area for further development.

FAs in Taiwan have adopted the cooperative strategy in recent years. Once collaborative ties are established, however, we are concerned with whether they can

be maintained and well managed to continue creating desired values. Based on organizational rationales different from those of POs, NPOs like Taiwan's FAs may adopt a different strategic approach in designing their RMMs. Further, in nonprofit cooperative relationships, some partners may contribute more than others to the network, and their input and output may be ambiguous and hardly calculable. Thus, we investigate how NPOs in a collaborative network can design their RMMs to maintain a give-and-take balance and make such collaborations acceptable to all partners, encouraging richer and more capable partners to be more voluntary in continuing their commitment, and motivating those short of resources and capabilities to increase their cooperative aspirations.

Theories and Research Setting

Interorganizational Cooperative Relationships

IORs have recently been the subject of many articles (Guo and Acar 2005; Smith et al. 1995). Most studies have used different terms such as strategic alliance, joint venture, partnership, cooperation, relational contract, network, and linkage to describe IORs (Combs and Ketchen 1999). Oliver (1990) defined IORs as relatively enduring transactions, flows, and linkages occurring between an organization and one or more organizations in its environment. Sagawa and Segal (2000) regarded a partnership as a relationship between two organizations engaging in one or more exchanges. Most definitions of cooperation focus on the process by which individuals, groups, or organizations come together, interact, and form psychological relationships for mutual gains or benefits (Peng and Kellogg 2003; Smith et al. 1995). In brief, IORs are voluntary cooperative agreements between at least two organizations that exchange and share, including contributions by partners of capital and technology- or organization-specific assets to achieve a competitive advantage for partners (Gulati 1995; Peng and Kellogg 2003).

From a strategic perspective, interorganizational cooperation can help organizations survive (Guo and Acar 2005), grow for enhanced performance, acquire and transfer mutually supplementary resources (Ghoshal and Bartlett 1990; Hansen 2002), obtain market share (Kogut 1998), increase capabilities in responding to environmental changes (Ahuja 2000), accelerate organizational learning (Hamel 1991), and boost innovation (Hagedoom 1993). Strategic cooperation is considered a potentially applicable approach to the resolution of problems currently facing NPOs that want a breakthrough in operations by exploring and exploiting IORs.

Most literature has referred to "strategic alliance" to explain IORs in which two or more partners, under a mutually beneficial scenario, cooperate by providing resources to the partnership to achieve strategic goals (Lewis 1990). Strategic alliances offer opportunities for organizations to acquire required resources, and organizations build their own resource endowment by forming alliances. Proposed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) and Guo and Acar (2005), resource dependency theory provides an insight into why organizations pursue increases in organizational power to ensure access to critical resources. In nonprofit settings, because of their

limited resource base, NPOs participate in strategic alliances to reduce uncertainties and build a competitive advantage (Peng and Kellogg 2003). Theoretically, NPOs search for partners who can afford resources that complement their own. Similarly, NPOs deliver various resource and capability types to their partners, because each partner has different needs. However, empirically, what are the RMMs that can encourage NPOs to continue their resource and capability contributions to their strategic alliances for common goals, without feeling that they are sacrificing their own benefits? This warrants further investigation.

Relational Management Mechanisms

Working across organizational boundaries in collaborative networks is one of the most difficult activities managers in any organization type must accomplish. Many cooperative arrangements that begin with the best of intentions become frustrating. Faced with uncertainties regarding other partners, actors adopt a more social orientation and resort to existing networks to discover information that lowers search costs and opportunistic risks (Gulati 1998). Organizations entering cooperative alliances face considerable moral hazard concerns because of unpredictability in partners' behaviors and the likely costs of partners' opportunistic behaviors (Gulati 1999). Das and Teng (1998), examining opportunistic behaviors possibly adopted by cooperative partners, emphasized that control and trust are mutually complementary and reinforcing parallel concepts. Barney and Hansen (1994) asserted that trust between organizations refers to confidence that partners do not exploit others' vulnerabilities.

To build trust and safeguard against interorganizational problems, alliance partners should specify in cooperative agreements each partner's obligatory duties regarding joint outcomes, or create incentives for participants to work primarily for common benefits, and secondarily for private benefits (Acar et al. 2007; Peng and Kellogg 2003). These theories and literature are based primarily on studies involving the private sector or for-profit firms. However, different organizations have different values. NPOs particularly hold a set of values distinct from those in the private sector.

Although stakeholder management may be applied to the social sector, a stakeholder is any individual, group, or organization that can affect, be affected by, or perceives itself to be affected by an organization's direction (Hall and Vredenburg 2005; Savage et al. 1991). Effective stakeholder management creates positive relationships with stakeholders through the appropriate management of their expectations (Hillman and Keim 2001). The concept of relational management to be examined in our research is expected to extend the extant knowledge of stakeholder management. It is a strategy particularly employed by nonprofit organizations to effectively sustain their interorganizational collaborations for agreed goals (Chang, 2005).

Sagawa and Segal (2000) showed that collaborations within the social sector may be intended to achieve goals such as creating new capacities by leveraging the resources of individual organizations, facilitating access to services for individual organizations, resolving conflicts, developing innovative solutions that cannot be

created by a single organization, reducing service duplication, conserving resources in competing for clients or funds, and advocating policies and embraced values.

Although these viewpoints suggested the critical and beneficial role of resource-commitment cooperative ties, mechanisms exerted to adequately manage nonprofit interorganizational collaborations become more important, and should not be ignored. Unlike for-profit firms, NPOs, in maintaining nonprofit collaborations, may feature particular cooperation characteristics that require specific considerations. Thus, they may manage their relationships with mechanisms distinct from those employed to maintain collaborative ties in for-profit alliances.

Farmers Associations in Taiwan

FAs in Taiwan are multipurpose NPOs that perform educational, economic, social, and political functions to compensate for the government's deficiency in local agricultural development (Ding 1998). According to the Taiwan Act of Farmers Associations, FAs operate for such purposes such as safeguarding farmers' rights and interests, enhancing farmers' knowledge and skills, boosting agricultural modernization, increasing crop yields, improving farmers' livelihood, and developing the rural economy.

There are 302 FAs in Taiwan, categorized as follows: town or district FAs, county (city) FAs, municipal FAs, and a national FA. To stay economically independent, most of Taiwan's FAs operate earned-income business ventures by providing production, planning, marketing, education, extension, credit, and insurance services to ensure farmers' benefits and welfare. They are also boundary limited, and each household is limited to one membership per FA.

Although Taiwan's FAs have long enjoyed preferential treatment, and have performed well in a monopolistic or oligarchic closed system under state policies to protect local agriculture; most have run into the harshest-ever operational difficulties under pressure from Taiwan's entry into the WTO, necessitating that Taiwan gradually lift protective measures for trade liberalization. The active role of FAs in filling demand-and-supply gaps between farmers' needs and governmental services has been questioned, and most have no option but to identify ways to transform themselves for more effective services and operations.

In addition to the urgent need for internal organizational transformation, many have resorted to a cooperative strategy for developmental breakthroughs. Through this approach, they have endeavored to integrate resources from different organizations for operational and technological innovation to upgrade local agriculture, and thus, expand Taiwan's agricultural development scope and ensure sustainable operation.

Despite internal and external hardships and setbacks, Taiwan's FAs have a beneficial basis to implement a cooperative strategy. They boast many core competencies such as well-linked marketing systems for agricultural products, well-maintained processing and manufacturing facilities, diversified multifunctional services, high customer loyalty from farmer members, abundant human and natural resources, and rich people-to-people and IORs. Collaborative partnerships can strategically help FAs accelerate organizational learning, acquire and transfer

complementary resources, enhance capabilities in responding to environmental uncertainties, boost innovation, grow for greater performance, and survive (Ahuja 2000; Baum and Oliver 1991; Ghoshal and Bartlett 1990). It has thus been recommended as useful for resolving problems currently facing Taiwan's FAs to promote and undertake interorganizational strategic collaboration. Like FAs in Taiwan, many NPOs have been facing similar problems. How to integrate and leverage their core competencies and other resources through a cooperative strategy is becoming urgent and crucial.

Strategic Cooperation Characteristics

NPO strategic cooperative relationships can be categorized as nonprofit joint operations, for-profit joint ventures, nonprofit alliances (NPAs), and for-profit alliances (Chang 2005). Nonprofit joint operations and for-profit joint ventures are cooperation types in which partners build strong relationships and join capital and resources to organize a new independent entity. Nonprofit or for-profit alliances are cooperative types in which partners do not form another independent entity, but maintain loose ties. This categorization, made in accordance with an analytical induction from a study based on observed phenomena and related literature, serves as a basis for our case analysis.

According to findings from a previous study (Chang 2005), if cooperation involves high business separability and high necessity for relation-specific asset input, we suggest organizing another new independent entity as an option (i.e., nonprofit joint operations or for-profit joint ventures). If cooperation involves low business separability and low necessity for relation-specific asset input, we suggest not organizing an independent entity (i.e., NPAs or for-profit alliances).

High business separability refers to collaborative relationships involving business and related affairs not pertaining to the partners' original professional expertise, and separable from partners' other assets. Business and related affairs are more economically efficient and effective if handled by external professional teams because standards and professional management skills required for most of these operations already exist in the marketplace (e.g., trading of agricultural products or materials, processing, wholesale, logistics, retail management, promotion, marketing, training, and education). In contrast, low business separability is defined as collaborative relationships involving business and related affairs originally pertaining to the partners' professional expertise, and also involving relationships between NPOs and their respective members. Related resources are also organization specific. In case of any problem or good performance, it tends to be linked with the partner in question (e.g., production, quality control, breeding, and farmland utilization).

High necessity for relation-specific asset input refers to collaborative relationships involving the establishment of many additional resources and capabilities specifically for use in such relationships (e.g., full-time personnel, professional technology and skills, utilities or equipment, and other hardware or software). These assets are exclusively for common use and are shared by partners, and they belong to the collaborative network. Meanwhile, low necessity for relation-specific asset

input is defined as collaborative relationships involving little additional establishment of resources and capabilities specifically for use in these relationships. Most of the assets are derived from individual partners' original establishment. Even if a partner invests any asset for collaborative purpose, the individual investing partner still retains the invested asset for organizational contribution and operation, rather than it belonging to the collaborative network.

Regarding the "nonprofit or for-profit" decision (Chang 2005), if cooperation involves high input and output commonality, and low input and output measurability, we recommend the nonprofit option (i.e., nonprofit joint operations or NPAs). If cooperation involves low input and output commonality, and high input and output measurability, we recommend the for-profit option (i.e., for-profit joint ventures or for-profit alliances).

In terms of input and output commonality, high input commonality refers to collaborative relationships in which partners help and complement each other to dedicate required tangible and intangible resources. Even if a partner is assigned to lead a certain task, the assignment requires other partners and even government authorities or external experts to jointly invest resources and effort to help execute the task for the common good. In contrast, low input commonality is defined as collaborative relationships in which each partner is held fully responsible for the tasks assigned. To implement this assignment, the individual partner must invest all required tangible and intangible resources and take risks for any related performance. Even if other partners must become involved, the rights and responsibilities are clearly divided and regulated.

Meanwhile, high output commonality refers to collaborative relationships in which most of the related values or performances are achieved because of common creations and endeavors as well as sharing among participating partners, or even by all of society. Any problems or achievements as well as reputation effects created, if any, in such relationships, are also attributed to the collaborative network. In contrast, low output commonality is defined as collaborative relationships in which the related values or performances are achieved chiefly because of each partner's creations and endeavors made in accordance with the tasks or cooperative value activities assigned for each individual partner's contribution in the network. Each partner assumes responsibility for its performance or any other consequence of their own assignment. Any achievement or reputation effect generated from such a relationship is thus attributed to each relevant partner, rather than to the collaborative network or the whole of society.

Regarding input and output measurability, high input measurability refers to collaborative relationships in which the contributions made by each partner are highly programmable and quantifiable, thereby facilitating the use of market prices or other management tools to coordinate each partner's contributions and clearly calculate and measure their costs. In contrast, low input measurability is defined as collaborative relationships in which partners exchange and invest tangible or intangible resources and services without requesting due payment, or regardless of the required costs. Some partners contribute more than others, and their individual input is ambiguous. Thus, it is difficult to clearly calculate and measure each partner's contributions to the collaborative ties.

Meanwhile, high output measurability is defined as collaborative relationships in which achieved values or performances are highly apparent and quantifiable, thus

facilitating the use of market prices or other management tools to coordinate the exchange relationships pertaining to each participating partner, and clearly calculate and measure individual profits and benefits. In contrast, low output measurability refers to collaborative relationships in which the intended values or performances cannot be achieved or shown immediately, or if achieved, are unobvious or ambiguous, and mostly qualitative. Thus, it is difficult to use market prices or other management tools to coordinate the exchange relationships pertaining to each participating partner, or to clearly calculate and measure each partner's profits and benefits. Satisfaction or acceptability by partners, therefore, is often employed for such an evaluation.

In nonprofit collaborative ties, partners often help and complement each other for agreed goals or missions and sharing values and achievements in the collaborative network or the society. Some partners contribute more than others without requesting due payment. Their IORs even require government authorities or external experts to jointly invest resources for the common good. Most of their contributions to the network are intangible or qualitative. Also, it is difficult to evaluate the intended or achieved values immediately. Based on the case findings of a previous study (Chang 2005), nonprofit interorganizational collaborations specifically involve the four strategic cooperation characteristics of high input and output commonality, and low input and output measurability. In these collaborations, high input commonality tends to co-exist with low input measurability, and high output commonality tends to co-exist with low output measurability. Each partner's contributions to collaborations are difficult to calculate clearly, whereas commonly achieved outcomes are often shared. Because it is more difficult, motivating nonprofit partners and heightening their voluntary aspiration is strategically significant in such nonprofit relationships. Without mechanisms appropriately designed to resolve potential problems resulting from these cooperation characteristics involving nonprofit collaborations, it will be hard to maintain their partnerships. Consequently, we focus on exploring RMMs by analyzing cases only from the four strategic cooperation characteristics that can best explain nonprofit alliances.

Methodology

Methods

We adopted an exploratory qualitative research approach because the observed phenomena are emergent in Taiwan's society. Exploring new theoretical grounds in an emergent context requires fieldwork (Hoskisson et al. 2000; Yin 1994). Further, in-depth fieldwork can reveal managerial strategic intentions and causalities for complex issues (Strauss and Corbin 1990) in an emergent nonprofit collaborative context.

Our research design is a multiple-case inductive study because multiple cases enable replication logic in which cases are treated as a series of experiments, each confirming or discrediting inferences drawn from others (Yin 1994). Multiple-case

research results are typically more generalizable and better grounded than single-case study results (Graebner and Eisenhardt 2004). We adopted a writing policy to separate the analyses and case descriptions, with expectations to provide concrete and detailed descriptions of each case, which can serve as a basis for further analysis. To make the study more informative, we attempted to provide a brief introduction to the studied alliances in our sample section.

Sample

Although NPO strategic collaborations can be categorized into four types (i.e., nonprofit joint operations, for-profit joint ventures, NPAs, and for-profit alliances), we focused solely on NPAs. We targeted NPAs for our sample cases, with each formed by at least three FAs. We did not observe collaborations between two partners, because numerous studies have already examined this alliance type.

This research approach was adopted because, in addition to our limited time and resources, independent for-profit joint ventures in Taiwan formed with strategic intent have been established not long ago. Examining their performances would currently be difficult. We did not examine for-profit alliances because such collaborations are mostly dominated by cooperating POs that chiefly follow the economic rationale for profit maximization. Neither did we observe nonprofit joint operations, not only because few cases of this type were available for examination but also because most independent nonprofit joint operations by FAs were established in accordance with the regulations of government policies, and were short of partners' self-organizing motives and strategic intent.

Table 1 Case background

| Case | Year established | Agricultural produce involved | Covered area | Partners | Leading FA |
|------|------------------|---|----------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
| A | 2001 | Single species (shaddocks) | Cross-regional | Rural FAs | Tungshan Town Farmers Association |
| B | 2001 | Single species (mangos) | Regional in a single county | Rural FAs | Yuching Town Farmers Associations |
| C | 2002 | Single species (quality sprouted rice) | Cross-regional | Urban and rural FAs | Panchiao City Farmers Association |
| D | 1997 | Multiple species (quality produce) | Cross-regional | Urban and rural FAs | Taipei City Farmers Associations |
| E | 2002 | Single crop category (rhizome crops: potatoes, carrots, and burdocks) | Regional in neighboring counties | Rural FAs | Tounan Township Farmers Association |

FA farmers association

We conducted field observations and interviews at the farming sites and key partners' headquarters of five NPAs, referred to as A, B, C, D, and E for convenience (Table 1).

Case A was a cross-regional NPA formed by 4 rural FAs, and Case B was a regional NPA in a single county formed by 5 rural FAs. They engaged in alliances to improve the production and marketing of shaddocks and mangos, respectively. In their alliances, partners shared experiences and learned from each other in farm management and farming techniques and joined effort to promote their produce. Although the alliances tried to divide their collaborative tasks based on the strengths of each FA, the contribution of each partner was difficult to calculate. For example, they often had to join effort to design education and training programs, establish common quality standards and operating procedures, breed new varieties or develop new processed products, and design marketing and sales strategies. They also invited government authorities and external experts to endorse and advise on their collaborative endeavor. The alliances usually implemented their collaborative tasks under the leadership of a leading FA.

Case C and Case D were cross-regional NPAs formed each by a leading urban FA and a number of rural FAs across the island of Taiwan. Case C focused on the production and promotion of quality sprouted rice (a single species) while partners in Case D worked together to develop and promote different quality agricultural produces (multiple species). Although the leading urban FAs in the two cases did not have their own farmland, they took charge with seeking resources and formulating marketing and sales strategies. They also set common quality standards and joined the effort of other rural FAs to improve their farming and production techniques. With the collaborative endeavor under the leadership by the urban FA, rural partners could manage to enhance their capabilities and control their produce quality while expanding their scale for cost reduction and brand building.

Case E was a regional NPA formed by more than 4 rural FAs in neighboring counties to improve the production and marketing of a single crop category (rhizome crops: potatoes, carrots, and burdocks). The leading FA shared its processing facilities and developed the information system for production tracking and quality control. Partners even joined effort to export their agricultural produces with a common brand while sharing experiences to manage their farms and advance their farming skills together.

All selected alliance cases were conceived by a leading FA, with the association's CEO serving as alliance convener. We selected these cases primarily based on our preliminary observations and related literature review with consultations from scholars, policymakers, and experts in agricultural practices. Eisenhardt (1989) maintained that a qualitative case study should select cases useful for theory building. Further, the sampled cases have been well acknowledged in Taiwan's agricultural sector as more successful alliances. Moreover, the first author has personal contacts, which provided the trust required to gain entry for the extensive discussions and visits (Inkpen 1997). For further in-depth theory building, we observed and interviewed several other similar agricultural collaborations for analytical reference.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Our research involved several stages. We began by reviewing literature concerning IORs. In addition to field observations and interviews, we collected data from yearbooks, industry publications, and other archival sources. We included eight pilot interviews with scholars, experts, policymakers, and practitioners in the area of farmers' services. Upon establishing an understanding of basic conceptual and empirical contexts, we conducted more than 60 open-ended interviews over 14 months. Respondents included alliance conveners, key partner leaders, and project managers (Table 2).

We also consulted government officials, agricultural experts, management scholars, and other reference groups for opinions. We interviewed 8 officials from two governmental agencies, including the ministerial-level Council of Agriculture and a training and R&D station, which offered guidance and assistance in agricultural management and FA development. We also interviewed 3 senior executives of two government-sponsored NPOs responsible for agricultural resource integration and affairs related to HR training and planning and strategic cooperation among agricultural groups, and 2 experts in agriculture-related fields.

The interviewer recorded each interview with the respondent's permission before transcribing key interviews in each case, with the remaining recorded data saved for analytical reference. We asked follow-up questions by phone or e-mail when requiring clarification. Through data collection, we took steps to minimize informant bias. Informants included multiple individuals from alliances or collaborative institutions, leading institutions, government authorities, key partners, and experts of managerial practices regarding FAs.

In brief, for data triangulation, we used several sources: (a) qualitative data from open-ended interviews with leaders and project managers from the alliance cases, key collaborative partners, and related stakeholders; (b) e-mails and phone calls to follow-up the interviews and track real-time cooperative operations; (c) archival

Table 2 Respondent background

| Position | Alliance cases | | | | | Other institutions | Total |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---|---|---|---|--------------------|-------|
| | A | B | C | D | E | | |
| Alliance conveners | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | – | 5 |
| Leaders of key partners | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | – | 11 |
| Project managers | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 2 | – | 13 |
| Government officials | – | – | – | – | – | 8 | 8 |
| Agricultural experts | – | – | – | – | – | 5 | 5 |
| Management scholars | – | – | – | – | – | 5 | 5 |
| Managers of other alliances | – | – | – | – | – | 5 | 5 |
| Total | 7 | 5 | 7 | 5 | 5 | 23 | 52 |

Table 3 Collected data

| Case | Archival data | Meeting minutes | Website information | Face-to-face interviews (times) | Recorded interviews (data) | Observation and interview notes | Case transcriptions (pages) | Case histories (pages) |
|------|---|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| A | Publications and inside or open documents | V | V | 12 | V | V | 56 | 19 |
| B | Publications and inside or open documents | V | V | 6 | V | V | 38 | 18 |
| C | Publications and inside or open documents | V | V | 9 | V | V | 47 | 14 |
| D | Publications and open documents | V | V | 7 | V | V | 46 | 12 |
| E | Publications and open documents | V | V | 7 | V | V | 37 | 19 |

I. "V" refers to the use of specified collected data, and all the collected data were written in Chinese. 2. Face-to-face interviews do not include those conducted with government officials, management scholars, agricultural experts, and managers of other referred alliances

data, including institutional websites, related organization publications, internal and open documents, and other materials provided by informants; (d) observation and interview notes; and (e) NPO and PO literature. We used the collected database to write a descriptive alliance history of each case for further analysis (Table 3).

Data Analysis

As is typical in inductive research, we analyzed the data by building individual case studies before comparing cases to construct a conceptual model (Eisenhardt 1989). The case writing process took approximately 4 months, and each case writing was mailed to the related alliance's convener for verification on facts and interpretations.

Upon completing individual case write-ups, we conducted a cross-case analysis, relying on methods suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984) and Eisenhardt (1989) to develop conceptual insights. For any case analysis, we had no a priori hypothesis. We initially compared cases to identify common dilemmas and refine the unique aspects of each case. We also created tables and graphs to facilitate further comparisons. We compared successive pairs of cases to develop the emerging constructs and theoretical logic.

We sought to identify RMMs of more strategic significance to NPAs. The identified RMMs were considered most critical in the success and failure of different attempts to coordinate their collaborations in NPAs formed by Taiwan's FAs. The information from the interviews was interpreted in a series of discussions between the first author and his research partners. The interpretations and findings were also further checked by five strategic management scholars and two other experts in the practices of farmer services and agricultural strategic alliances with a Ph.D. in agricultural extension and cooperative economy, respectively.

During analysis, we attempted to raise the level of abstraction as the analysis evolved (Eisenhardt 1989). Common themes emerged from different interviewees and cases during discussions. Where we found inconsistencies, we sought clarification from respondents. Inconsistencies typically stemmed from miscommunication or differences in the interpretation of questions. Our conclusions emerged as an iterative process from a series of internal and external discussions (Eisenhardt 1989; Hoskisson et al. 2000; Yin 1994). By examining the RMMs derived from our studied cases and other collected data, we provide normative findings for NPAs.

Results

Although NPAs by NPOs may employ many mechanisms to manage partner relationships, we consider the strategic cooperation characteristics that can best explain NPAs and explored only the mechanisms of greater strategic significance. NPAs often involve the four cooperation characteristics including high input commonality, low input measurability, high output commonality, and low output measurability. Accordingly, we discuss our findings of the explored RMMs as follows.

High Input Commonality

The following discussions regarding the explored RMMs are based on findings from the case data analyzed from the strategic cooperation characteristics of high input commonality, which refers to collaborations in which partners help and complement each other to dedicate required tangible and intangible resources. Even if a partner is assigned to lead a certain task, the assignment also requires other partners, and even government authorities or external experts, to jointly invest resources and efforts to help execute the task for the common good.

Based on our findings, partners in NPAs tend to integrate resources through work specialization, in accordance with each participant's specialty in resources and capabilities. Partners may differ in degree of input in the cooperative network, but all network members enjoy equivalent power (one member, one vote). Under such asymmetric-exchange relationships, if an alliance wants to keep boosting a partner for voluntary input, it must first establish a set of regulations "acceptable" to all partners, in which each partner's rights and responsibilities, commitment directions, and objectives are clearly defined. These collaborative regulations may take the form of agreements, work plans, task requirements, or contracts.

For example, Cases A and B tended to employ annual work plans agreed by all partners to provide direction for task division and work specialization. Cases C, D, and E relied on contracts acceptable to all partners to regulate each partner's rights and responsibilities. Although certain partners such as the leading FA often volunteer to provide more input and accept more responsibility for collaborations, the "acceptability" of regulations governing the partnerships remains being considered a golden rule for such mutually beneficial ties. These regulations may be unfair to partners who contribute more than others, yet must be acceptable to them. Those who volunteer to contribute more, as noted by respondents from the planning FAs, tend to see potential values for the future development of the involved businesses in the agricultural industry.

Cooperative regulations are intended to structurally regulate IORs *ex ante* and *ex post*. They serve as a core for control and governance over each partner's input in alliances (Das and Teng 1998). Although NPAs may not require a written contract as strictly provided in for-profit relationships, they have yet to apply acceptable regulations to shorten the gaps in values among partners (Seetoo 1999). Acceptable regulations provide flexibility for each partner's input and due benefits, and directions for each partner's commitment of resources and efforts for common goals. Such a mechanism, strongly endorsed by all respondents, help alliances and partners facilitate the management of NPO collaborations featuring high input commonality.

In addition to acceptable rules and regulations, credibility is the key to coordinating NPO relationships (Dees et al. 2001). NPAs, according to our findings, can also use their credibility as a basis to build common production and operating procedures, which can serve as common standard procedures (CSPs). With these CSPs, alliance partners can undertake and improve their production and operations, even if their collaborations involve high input commonality.

All examined alliances employed CSPs to unify partners' input behaviors and resource exchange relationships. For instance, they provided partners with CSPs to manage affairs such as soil treatment, tree pruning, seeding, flower maintenance, harvesting, disease control, orchard management, product classification and packaging, and warehousing. Farming experts also used these CSPs to guide and oversee each partner in field operations.

CEO Chang of Tounan Township Farmers Association in Case E noted, "It was difficult in the beginning to require farmers to follow CSPs because in farmers' traditional conception, they did not want others questioning their farming methods. Every farmer has his/her own way of growing produce. Regardless, we have to insist on enforcing CSPs; otherwise, it would be impossible for the alliance to provide produce and services at scheduled times and with consistent quality. Only with these CSPs can we produce agricultural produce as manufacturing industrial products." Chang also serves as the convener of Case E.

To enforce CSPs, the five cases also employed information systems to keep track of all production and operating procedures. "If any procedure is found dismissed, we correct it immediately," noted CEO Wang of Panchiao City Farmers Association. "CSPs are imperative, and should be strictly enforced if our alliance wants to effectively manage partners' relationships for consistent input." As noted by most respondents, CSPs have allowed alliance partners to have a clear idea of how to assist and guide their member farmers in farming. They also help partners understand how to provide input as required by the alliance for common goals, which can prevent friction and conflict in NPAs involving high input commonality. If NPAs can apply CSPs properly, it facilitates coordinating partners for common input, and adequately manages their IORs.

Further, our analysis results show that alliance partners are more willing to accept CSPs built after partners have sufficiently exchanged information and opinions. Like strategic alliances formed by POs engaging in IORs, information is an important element for exchange among nonprofit partners (Seetoo 1999). NPAs can achieve information symmetry through sufficient information exchange among partners, which can help build trust (Das and Teng 1998). If alliances can strengthen communication among stakeholders, it facilitates motivating partners to take voluntary action for unified input.

In the studied cases, most alliances tended to enhance information symmetry through various formal and informal interaction platforms. They held frequent meetings for partners and other stakeholders to exchange information and views. Partners used these meetings to settle disputes or coordinate mutual relationships. Because most partners might also be competitors between themselves in the same agricultural business, sufficient communication for information symmetry can help maintain a balance acceptable to partners in such competitive and cooperative relationships. In addition to central and local government authorities, who as shown in all examined alliances, often served as a common bridge for partners' communication, Cases A and B employed an impartial third party to assist their alliances in integrating information related to the businesses involved. They asked local agricultural improvement stations to collect related production and marketing information, and provide professional consultation services for alliance partners.

Transparency in operations is necessary for NPOs as well as NPAs to maintain credibility for social endorsement (Craig 2004). Failing to maintain information symmetry among partners makes fulfilling operational transparency more challenging. If IORs involve high input commonality, NPAs can gain their partners' support for common input through symmetric communication and information exchange, which helps manage their IORs effectively.

Regardless, in NPAs, not every partner has sufficient resources and capabilities to implement projects required by CSPs. Regarding high input commonality, our findings show that alliances can design and enforce capability building and other corrective measures to assist less capable partners. By doing so, those short of resources and capabilities or failing to meet the CSP requirements of the alliance can gradually enhance their capabilities through these corrective measures, further motivating them to keep their continued commitment for common input.

Value is always created in interorganizational collaborations when increasing partners' capabilities during environmental changes (Ahuja 2000; Miner et al. 1990). Partners in cooperative networks can also learn through each other's complementary capabilities (Gulati 1999). If NPAs can use collaborative ties to create learning and capability building values for partners, this helps increase less capable partners' aspirations for continued commitment, facilitating adequate IOR management.

For instance, our findings show that partners in each alliance might have their own valuable specialty or unique resources and capabilities. NPAs can apply task specialization to mutually supplement partners' resources and capabilities, and use this mechanism for interactive learning. Such mechanisms existed in all cases.

Case A also adopted another approach to boost partners' learning. In Case A, partners were responsible for different task forces. In the first year, every partner was assigned to lead the task force in which they were more specialized. In the second year, however, another partner would be assigned to lead that task force. By rotating the leadership role of the task forces, partners can exchange experiences and learn from each other. This mechanism also allows those less experienced or less specialized in certain skills to learn from their more experienced and specialized counterparts.

Among other corrective measures employed, all the studied alliances received subsidies from government authorities to provide "free" training courses, workshops, seminars, and field trips as incentives for partners and their member farmers to continue learning and improve their capabilities. Regarding these activities, scholars and experts in agricultural practices were invited to impart their professional knowledge and experiences, and participants could use these opportunities to exchange information and experiences. Cases A, B, C, and E would assign farming experts from FAs or agricultural improvement stations to teach farmers directly in the fields, enabling farmers to follow CSPs in growing their crops. Following this analytical induction, we noted that NPAs with high input commonality can employ corrective measures such as work specialization and task rotation, free professional guidance and consultation services, free training sessions, and other learning activities to incentivize partners to build and improve their capabilities.

Following the mentioned analytical induction involving high input commonality, we provide the following normative findings as suggested in RMMs:

- F1.1: To sustain collaborations involving high input commonality, NPAs should use acceptable regulations to clearly define partners' rights and responsibilities and commitment objectives.
- F1.2: To sustain collaborations involving high input commonality, NPAs should employ CSPs to unify partners' ways for resource input.
- F1.3: To sustain collaborations involving high input commonality, NPAs should strengthen information and communication symmetry to increase partners' confidence in alliances.
- F1.4: To sustain collaborations involving high input commonality, NPAs should enforce capability building and corrective measures to motivate partners to follow common input requirements.

Low Input Measurability

The following discussion regarding the explored RMM is based on findings derived from the case data of strategic cooperation characteristics of low input measurability, which are cooperative relationships in which partners exchange and invest tangible or intangible resources and services without requesting due payment, regardless of costs. Some partners contribute more than others. Because their individual input is ambiguous, it is more difficult to clearly measure each partner's contributions to collaborative ties.

Strategically, NPAs must better assign partners with richer resources and stronger strategic needs for collaborations to lead alliance task forces, and select partner leaders with greater ambition to further develop the target industry as alliance convener. Because input involves high commonality and ambiguity in NPAs, according to our findings, alliances empower conveners and task-force leaders to direct decisions on the distribution and utilization of alliance resources. With this power serving as a mechanism in managing collaborative ties, those who contribute more than others have more voluntary motivation to continue their input commitment. It allows them to plan alliance resources in the direction of strategic needs, either for their own organization or for their aspired development of the overall target industry.

Addressing this RMM, however, CEO Huang of Yuching Town Farmers Association, who served as convener of Case B, complained that he had not been given sufficient power to determine alliance resources. He noted that most of the partners were selfish and wanted to use alliance resources for their own interests.

"As alliance convener, my association is requested to invest more resources than others, but we have never received feedback. Moreover, government subsidization is decreasing yearly. Because my association is strong and famous enough and can handle related affairs in domestic and foreign mango markets, we would rather choose to do it alone," Huang said.

Regardless, most respondents in Case A described their collaborative ties as satisfactory. Assigned task-force leaders noted that most of their alliance resources

were first planned in each task force, and then discussed in the alliance. After their decision, each task-force leader was responsible for distributing and utilizing resources as planned in his/her task force.

“We help and supplement each other, and the collaborative effects are increasingly better, so we will continue our alliance,” the interviewed CEOs of three FAs who led each task force in Case A said unanimously. The other three cases, C, D, and E, were each planned by leading FAs. Leaders of the planning FAs had the power to coordinate partners and decide how to distribute and utilize resources. Most alliance resources, however, were distributed and utilized as planned in their collaborative agreements, as noted by most respondents in these three cases.

Through analytical induction, we discovered that the power to direct alliance resources can be an internal incentive to motivate those who have committed more input than others to continue their commitment. This mechanism can satisfy leading partners’ strategic needs, and allow them to use it to promote their social status and expand network relationships. Thus, we provide the following normative finding as suggested in RMM:

F2.1: To sustain collaborations involving low input measurability, NPAs should empower cooperating entities with deeper input commitment to direct decisions on resource distribution and utilization.

High Output Commonality

The following discussions regarding the explored RMMs are based on findings from the cases analyzed from the strategic cooperation characteristics of high output commonality, which refers to cooperative relationships in which most related values or performances are achieved because of common creation and endeavors, and shared among participating partners, or even by all of society. Problems or achievements and reputation effects, if any, are also attributed to the collaborative network.

Because NPAs involve high output commonality, most studied cases tended to enforce strict quality control over alliance products and services. They applied common quality criteria to test, assess, and classify products and services from partners. With stringent quality control, alliances served as a quality watchdog for consumers. Because products and services provided by alliances boasted consistently good quality, this helped increase their credibility, building a good public image that could further encourage partners to continue efforts for common output.

In NPAs like those formed by FAs, each partner may use different methods to grow crops and produce or process their products. Consequently, output quality may differ among different partners. To avoid disputes stemming from irregular output qualities, emphasized by most respondents, strict quality control is indispensable if an alliance wants to sustain a high-profile common output and effectively manage IORs.

Among our cases, A, B, and E tended to strictly request partners to assign experts to guide and assist farmers and test their crops in fieldwork. By doing so, they could oversee and ensure that all agricultural products were grown, fertilized, classified,

and packaged to meet required criteria. They also enforced pesticide and insecticide residual testing on alliance products. Cases C and E started conducting quality control with soil testing and seed selection. Case C also established a rice-sifting machine to strictly select high-quality rice for sprouting purposes. In Case D, only pesticide- and insecticide-free agricultural products that passed quality certification were allowed for sale on the home delivery & e-commerce net.

Our analytical induction shows that common quality control can be an effective mechanism to motivate partners, and thus, adequately manage IORs if NPAs can use the mechanism to provide good products and services of consistent quality.

Although strict common quality control can upgrade output quality, thereby enhancing alliance credibility, our case study shows that not every partner could provide output as required by common quality criteria. Further, every partner was likely to have problems of substandard output. To prevent these partners from feeling that common quality criteria would disadvantage them and render losses, the alliances tended to adopt supporting measures to help treat substandard products.

Cases A, B, and E would develop methods to effectively maximize the utility of substandard agricultural produce. For instance, they developed value-creating methods to process substandard produce. If it could not be processed, they would use it to make compost or organic fertilizers. For those who could hardly grow qualified crops because of natural conditions or other reasons, the alliance would join government efforts to help them guide their member farmers for crop transfer or subsidize them to reduce or stop production. These measures could also prevent substandard produce from overproduction, thereby preventing the ruining of market quality order or disturbing alliance tasks to upgrade common output quality.

Therefore, supporting measures to assist partners in treating substandard output helps them see potential benefits or values they can jointly create from such ties. Further, in nonprofit relationships, alliances should not ignore disadvantaged partners' needs, but seriously consider how to jointly create value for all of society (Seetoo 1999).

In addition to common quality control and substandard-output treatment measures, our analytical induction shows that NPAs can employ preferential subsidization or other incentives to maintain IORs and encourage partners for continued commitment. Social embeddedness stemming from relationships with other stakeholders often affects partners' involvement in IORs (Granovetter 1985). Our findings show that NPAs could obtain preferential subsidies or other rewards from government authorities or other stakeholders because of their achievements in assisting partners or member farmers in upgrading production techniques and output quality. With these incentives, most respondents noted that partners can be encouraged to continue their voluntary motivation for more active commitment to upgrade their output quality.

In addition to preferential subsidization, Cases A, B, and E indicated that government authorities tend to employ resource distribution measures as conditions to encourage partners and member farmers to provide the output required by common criteria. These resources would go to individual partners only through the alliance. Any partner failing to meet the requirements would be unlikely to receive resources.

Among other incentives, Case C was commissioned by the ministerial-level Council of Agriculture to hold the annual “Champion Rice” contest because of the alliance’s remarkable achievement in promoting quality upgrading of Taiwan’s rice. Case E received preferential subsidies to establish required facilities because of their successful advancements in revolutionary field-management measures and enforcing a food-traceability system. These incentives, however, were absent in Case D, because the alliance tended to exchange resources with farming partners through direct transactions.

From the government’s viewpoint, as noted by respondents, it can adopt such subsidization requirements as potential incentives to link government policies with alliance partners’ collaborative behaviors. By doing so, they can encourage partners to commit efforts in the direction of intended objectives. These policies can allow those managing to operate as required by common alliance criteria to receive feedback and further motivate them to deepen their collaborative commitment.

Following the mentioned analytical induction involving high output commonality, we provide the following normative findings as suggested in RMMs:

- F3.1: To sustain collaborations involving high output commonality, NPAs should employ common quality control to increase output credibility
- F3.2: To sustain collaborations involving high output commonality, NPAs should motivate partners to follow common output criteria with measures to effectively treat substandard output.
- F3.3: To sustain collaborations involving high output commonality, NPAs should provide external incentives to encourage partners to follow common output criteria.

Low Output Measurability

The following discussions regarding the explored RMMs are based on our findings from the strategic cooperation characteristics of low output measurability, which refers to relationships in which intended values or performances cannot be achieved or shown immediately, or if achieved, are ambiguous, and mostly qualitative. Thus, it is more difficult to use market prices or other management tools to coordinate exchange relationships pertaining to each partner, and to clearly measure each partner’s profits and benefits.

Goal setting is a useful social control mechanism in interorganizational collaborations (Das and Teng 1998). In NPAs with low output measurability, as shown in our analytical induction, goal setting can reduce the necessity to monitor partners’ cooperative behaviors (Ouchi 1979). Through goal setting, NPAs can guide partners and other stakeholders to gradually achieve a consensus. A regular achievement assessment of individual and common goals is considered a normative control mechanism (Das and Teng 1998) that can prevent partners from violating commonly accepted requirements.

NPAs are often short of quantitative profit-making data serving as performance indicators. To review whether proper decisions are made, a mission is achieved as expected, or resources are fully utilized in NPAs, which is thus deemed less urgent

than in for-profit alliances. To effectively manage NPO performance, Seetoo (1999) suggested acceptability, satisfaction, commitment, and efficiency in goal achievement as measures to evaluate performance.

Likewise, as noted by our respondents in Cases A and E, NPAs can use these constructs as indicators to design their performance assessment mechanism, which is described as an effective ante and post control. Although the other cases have yet to strengthen their practical implementation in this regard, all conveners in our cases agreed with this suggestion.

Because all of our cases were involved in the promotion and extension of high-quality agricultural produce, their output would often require more time to observe the effects and values. Most innovative produce promoted or newly developed by these NPAs come short of market criteria for value evaluation. Goal-achievement assessment measures have thus become more important at this developmental and promotional stage. NPAs like our cases would generally enforce these goal-achievement assessment measures as an internal control mechanism, and then periodically submit status reports to government authorities or other stakeholders on a performance basis to seek external resources. With this RMM, the alliance can coordinate partners for continued efforts to achieve desired values and goals.

In NPAs, whether an output meets common quality criteria or those goal-achievement assessment results are satisfactory, partners' opinions may differ. This is because their output value mostly cannot be measured immediately, or that quantitatively calculating collaborative effects is difficult. Even if alliances have common criteria to control output quality, each partner may apply them differently. To avoid likely disputes stemming from partners' cognitive discrepancies, as noted in our findings, NPAs should authorize external experts to assess partners' output by relying on their professional knowledge and experience. Assessment results endorsed and certified by external experts are considered more credible and easier to accept by partners.

Most of our cases would assess their agricultural products through professionals at agricultural improvement stations, government-sponsored research institutes, or through university professors. These professionals would assist the alliances in building CSPs and quality criteria and sample-testing partners' output. Although Case D did not apply its own quality criteria in testing agricultural produce, those sold in its home delivery & e-commerce net were all organic or high-quality produce stamped with expert-acknowledged national certification. With professional certification by external experts serving as an RMM, NPAs can make their output assessment results more acceptable to partners to further boost their voluntary motivation.

Although many RMMs may exist for NPAs to coordinate partners to support each other in promoting and marketing high-quality innovative products and services, as shown in our case study induction, alliances have yet to design and apply a set of reasonable and acceptable benefit-sharing methods. Most leaders in our cases embraced a nonprofit mission for the common good. They tended to operate alliances mainly for common welfare. They remained concerned not to ignore but seriously consider each partner's interests and benefits in such nonprofit relationships. Even if profits or benefits shared with partners were minimal, the

alliance had yet to pay a certain fee for each partner's services. As noted by most respondents, these benefit-sharing methods must at minimum be considered reasonable and acceptable by all partners.

Cases C and D, for instance, shared benefits or profits at rates that were clearly provided in their cooperation agreements or contracts, because they were strategic relationships between urban and rural FAs. Although the leading FAs in Cases A, B, and E had to accept more cost liabilities and risks, acceptability was primarily considered in benefit sharing.

However, Convener Huang of Case A noted that some of its partners had failed to follow this principle. "Farmers associations in Tainan District, for example, have a problematic pricing strategy. They charged too much in profits for their developed products. In such nonprofit relationships, a low-profit pricing policy is more acceptable. They think they should charge more because they developed and produced the products, but this kind of thinking is unreasonable and unacceptable. If they charge too much, things become more expensive. Consumers have to either pay higher prices or not buy the products. Thus, it becomes harder or even impossible for other partners to help them promote the products. They should also consider a reasonable ratio of benefits for other partners. If not, the voluntary motivation from other partners to help them market products will be low."

Most of our cases are still adjusting their benefit-sharing systems as their collaborations evolve. Further, developing and promoting high-quality innovative agricultural produce usually takes longer, as does observing its values and returns. Fairness leads to trust (Das and Teng 1998). Although NPAs find it challenging to maintain absolute fairness in benefit sharing, acceptability and reasonableness in benefit-sharing methods designed in consideration of each partner's capability, uniqueness, heterogeneity, and commitment remain crucial in maintaining such relationships.

Therefore, based on the mentioned analytical induction involving low output measurability, we provide the following normative findings as suggested in RMMs:

- F4.1: To sustain collaborations involving low output measurability, NPAs should apply goal-achievement assessment measures to substitute for clearly measuring quantitative performances.
- F4.2: To sustain collaborations involving low output measurability, NPAs should assess output quality and goal achievement through professional certification by external experts to reduce disputes over evaluation results.
- F4.3: To sustain collaborations involving low output measurability, NPAs should employ acceptable and reasonable benefit-sharing methods in consideration of each partner's capability, uniqueness, heterogeneity, and commitment to coordinate relationships.

Following our findings derived from the context of Taiwan's FAs, this study suggest four RMMs for NPAs involving high input commonality, one mechanism for collaborations involving low input measurability, three mechanisms for collaborations involving high output commonality, and three mechanisms for collaborations involving low output measurability. These are useful and valuable insights found in our case study. They are measures NPAs can adopt to mitigate

potential damages and improve the outcome of their IORs. We organized the explored mechanisms to build an integrative conceptual table of RMMs for NPAs (Table 4). Many or all of the normative findings can be generalized to other settings, but future studies are required for verification.

Discussion and Conclusion

FAs in Taiwan, which boast a history of nearly 100 years, have unique business models compared with other NPOs. Although NPOs like Taiwan's FAs may establish different collaborative types, we focused only on NPAs, because this type involves high input and output commonality, and low input and output measurability, and maintaining partnerships and deepening partners' voluntary motivation for continued commitment is more difficult and strategically crucial.

For collaborations involving high input commonality, our RMM findings suggest that NPAs use acceptable cooperative regulations to clearly define partners' rights and responsibilities and commitment objectives, employ CSPs to unify partners' ways for resource input, strengthen information and communication symmetry to increase partners' confidence in collaborations, and enforce capability building and corrective measures to encourage underprivileged partners to follow common input requirements. To sustain collaborations involving low input measurability, the results suggest that NPAs should empower partners with deeper input commitment to direct decisions on resource distribution and utilization.

If alliances want to sustain collaborative ties involving high output commonality, our findings suggest that NPAs should employ common quality control to increase output credibility, motivate partners to follow common output requirements with measures to effectively treat substandard output, and provide external incentives to encourage partners to continue upgrading common output quality. For alliances involving low output measurability, our induction results indicate applying goal-achievement assessment measures to substitute for clearly measuring quantitative performances, controlling output quality through professional certification by external experts to reduce disputes over evaluation results, and employing acceptable benefit-sharing methods in consideration of each partner's capability, uniqueness, heterogeneity, and commitment to coordinate interorganizational collaborations as strategically effective RMMs.

Theoretical Implications

This field research has implications for theories related to relationship management in NPAs established by NPOs. Different from for-profit alliances, NPAs usually involve social factors and other stakeholders for the common good. Looking after underprivileged partners is always of primary concern in nonprofit collaborations while privileged and capable partners tend to contribute more to the alliances. Given this understanding and the importance of credibility and trust in such nonprofit IORs, our research expands on the extant literature by exploring effective RMMs for NPAs chosen by NPOs as a strategic collaborative type for joint value creation.

Table 4 Definitions of relational management mechanisms and practices of each case

| Strategic cooperation characteristics | Relational management mechanisms | Definitions | Nonprofit alliance cases (NPAs) | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| | | | A | B | C | D | E |
| High input-commonality | Acceptable cooperative rules and regulations | Managing common input behaviors through acceptable collaborative agreements, operational and task-specification requirements, or contracts acceptable to all partners in which each partner's rights and liabilities as well as commitment directions and objectives are clearly defined | H | H | H | M | H |
| | Common standard procedures | Establishing commonly required production and operational procedures as guidelines for partners to unify their input, and to undertake and improve their production and operations accordingly | H | H | H | M | H |
| | Information and communication symmetry | Providing partners with interaction and coordination channels for information exchange, and enforcing measures to encourage information sharing and increase information transparency | H | H | H | * | H |
| | Capability building and corrective measures | Employing corrective measures such as work specialization and task rotation, free professional guidance and consultation services, free training, and other learning activities as incentives for less capable partners to build and improve capabilities, or as a means to help them implement related tasks effectively | H | M | H | M | H |
| Low input-measurability | Resource distribution and utilization power | Empowering the conceptualizing partner and leaders or representatives of those partners or other cooperating entities with more input commitment in the alliance to decide through task forces or committees on how to distribute and utilize alliance resources | H | * | H | H | H |
| High output-commonality | Common quality control | Enforcing quality assessment and classification-testing to control common output quality in order to jointly provide products and services with excellent and consistent quality | H | H | H | H | H |
| | Substandard-output treatment measures | Providing measures (e.g., manufacturing processed foods or compost or enforcing crop transfer or fallow policy) to help partners effectively treat inferior products or other output failures so that they can meet common quality criteria | H | H | * | * | H |
| | External incentives | Providing preferential subsidization or other incentives through government authorities or other stakeholders to encourage partners to enhance quality and continue following common criteria in order to supply good-quality products and services | H | M | H | * | H |

Table 4 continued

| Strategic cooperation characteristics | Relational management mechanisms | Definitions | Nonprofit alliance cases (NPAs) | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| | | | A | B | C | D | E |
| Low output-measurability | Goal-achievement assessment measures | Enforcing measures judging from partners' and other stakeholders' acceptability and satisfaction to periodically review and evaluate the goal-achievement status related to common output | H | M | M | L | H |
| | Professional certification by external experts | Authorizing external scholars or practical experts to evaluate and certify the alliance's output quality, performance, and goal-achievement status with their professional knowledge and experience | H | H | H | M | H |
| | Acceptable benefit-sharing methods | Adopting benefit-sharing methods acceptable to all partners in consideration of each partner's capability, uniqueness, heterogeneity, and commitment | M | M | H | M | H |

“H” refers to a high degree of practical implementation in the specified proposition; “M” refers to a medium degree of practical implementation; “L” refers to a low degree of practical implementation; * refers to a practical implementation that has yet to be evaluated

First, our study links with the strategic alliance literature. Das and Deng (1998) examined strategic alliances and emphasized that trust and control are two parallel concepts that are mutually supplementary and strengthening. We applied this interpretation to explore the RMMs in nonprofit collaborations. To enhance trust in NPAs, our findings show that alliances should apply information and communication symmetry (Das and Teng 1998) and adopt acceptable and reasonable benefit-sharing methods. This advice builds upon the argument that mutual trust is usually more effective to increase collaborative efficiency (Gulati 1995; Dyer 1997) in nonprofit IORs.

From the control perspective, we consider NPAs' collaborative characteristics of high input and output commonality, and suggest acceptable collaborative regulations and goal-achievement assessment measures. Satisfaction and acceptability from partners and other stakeholders related to goal achievement (Das and Teng 1998; Cadbury 1999), in NPAs, are emphasized as more relevant and crucial than quantitative performances.

Because credibility is a primary motivator in managing nonprofit ties (Dees et al. 2001; Drucker 1990), we identify CSPs, common quality control, and professional certification by external experts as effective RMMs for NPAs involving high input and output commonality, and low output measurability. Furthermore, we do not ignore weaker partners in NPAs, and recommend that measures be adopted to build and correct capabilities and efficiently treat substandard output as RMMs. This suggestion is aimed to motivate those unable or failing to meet CSP requirements or output quality control criteria for continued participation in alliances.

This research examines NPAs formed by at least three FAs and other stakeholders from the social exchange perspective. This alliance type stresses the importance of "generalized reciprocity" (Das and Teng 2002), and tends to instill social factors in designing RMMs. This consideration is apparently emphasized in our findings regarding tentative efforts made by NPAs to maintain partnerships with capability building and corrective measures, substandard-output treatment measures, and acceptable benefit-sharing methods. To examine how NPAs can effectively manage IORs and sustain partners' continued commitment, we also refer to Granovetter's concept of social embeddedness (1985), and consider asymmetric-exchange relationships often existing in nonprofit relationships. This consideration leads to our finding of external incentives provided by government authorities and other stakeholders as an effective mechanism to encourage nonprofit partners to follow common output criteria.

Regarding relationship management involving power structures, we consider nonprofit strategic cooperation characteristics of low input measurability, and suggest that NPAs motivate capable and richer cooperating entities by empowering their leaders or representatives to direct decisions on alliance resource distribution and utilization. This suggestion is based on successful NPAs often requiring additional contributions from privileged partners.

Management in Nonprofit Organizations

This research provides a practical reference valuable for NPAs among FAs and for those among other NPOs. First, strategic collaborations allow FAs to join efforts to

overcome difficulties and co-create values when facing external threats. It is also a feasible alternative for FAs and other NPOs to seek opportunities and tackle operational and other organizational restraints. With external threats challenging FAs and other NPOs engaging in economic activities, government authorities can employ subsidization requirements or budgetary control systems as external incentives or potential punishment mechanisms to encourage them to undertake collaborative initiatives for greater common output. This policy should be enforced on a resource-sharing and common-utilization basis to prevent waste resulting from equal resource distribution.

Further, policymakers should consider different strategic cooperation characteristics of NPAs, and direct them to effectively manage partnerships with CSPs, open information sharing and communication channels, common output quality control, and acceptable benefit-sharing methods. Because community spirit (McKinsey 2002) is often the key to NPAs' success, policymakers must address the needs of both privileged and underprivileged partners so that they can collaborate for the common good. Therefore, they may satisfy strategic expectations from those with richer resources and deeper commitment by empowering them to decide on alliance resource utilization. They can look after weaker partners by assisting them in building and improving their capabilities or helping them treat substandard output efficiently.

Policymakers should also guide NPAs to learn from for-profit managerial practices and assist them in designing and enforcing collaborative regulations. Although NPAs may not have to strictly define each partner's rights and liabilities or related penalties as for-profit ties do through contracts, relevant regulations should be written in a manner acceptable to all partners. This suggestion considers that many NPOs, especially those like Taiwan's FAs, often start collaborations based only on oral promises made among organizational leaders. Such a collaborative undertaking may be in vain or discontinue halfway if any organization changes its leader or regrets the oral promise afterward.

To prevent such misdealing, policymakers should direct and guide NPOs to sign a written agreement before joining any collaboration of this kind. This document should clearly define the alliance's goals, operational requirements, and task specialization guidelines with each partner's rights and responsibilities specified. The alliance and authorities should then enforce and oversee control and goal-achievement assessments *ex ante* and *ex post* in accordance with these agreed-upon collaborative regulations. If necessary, they may examine alliances' common output through professional evaluations certified by external experts to increase credibility, effectively managing IORs for partners' continued collaboration.

Limitations and Future Research

Our research design has limitations that provide opportunities for future research. First, our study concentrated only on NPAs among Taiwan's FAs, with few sampled cases, thus limiting generalizability. Future researchers can conduct empirical research with a larger sample to further examine relationships between strategic cooperation characteristics and the RMMs we explored. Despite difficulties in

finding a sufficiently representative sample to actually present a significant image of nonprofit collaborations, future research should attempt to assess our findings in NPAs established by other NPOs. Also, the rigid categorization of the strategic cooperation characteristics involving NPAs may limit our exploration of RMMs whereas the degree in input or output commonality, and input or output measurability may lead to variations in RMMs. Although the cooperation characteristics of high input and output commonality, and low input and output measurability are specific to nonprofit alliances, do they exist in for-profit alliances as well? It is another concern deserving further investigation.

Second, NPO collaborations often involve government authorities and other stakeholders in an alliance constellation, but we did not examine such RMMs, and future research should.

Third, we did not conduct in-depth examinations of phenomena related to potential dynamic changes of interorganizational collaborations among FAs. Future research can examine this issue more concretely and explore the reasons behind it.

Finally, NPOs cooperating to perform economic activities may maintain nonprofit collaborations or change operations for-profit making. Nonprofit or for-profit, they may also face another option (i.e., whether to organize another new independent entity or keep the relationships more loosely linked in alliances). Future research can examine RMMs in for-profit collaborations or an independent entity jointly established by NPOs. Further investigation is warranted to explore how NPOs can keep their original core values and effectively manage partnerships when their ties are changed for profit making or maintained under an independent nonprofit or for-profit entity.

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