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The role and potential of tripartite partnerships to promote strong sustainable consumption in the context of Brazil – An evaluation of possibilities and risks

Abstract

The growing concern about persisting environmental problems caused by overconsumption in the context of Brazil must be understood as an issue of democratic character. However, there is a gap in research examining models that can drive change of sustainable related issues such as sustainable consumption. Critically evaluating existing literature, we discuss the potential of tripartite partnerships (TPPs) to advance sustainable consumption practices. We argue that multisector partnership approaches such as TPPs involving multiple actors can strengthen a socio-political basis for the advancement of public policies and inter-sectorial dynamics offering mechanisms that can foster sustainable consumption. By applying a TPP model as analytical lens, we explore prevalent possibilities and risks of promoting sustainable consumption in the context of Brazil.

Keywords: Sustainable consumption. Tripartite Partnerships. Cooperation, Brazil.

1. Introduction

It is now commonly accepted that the prevailing unsustainability of our socio-economic systems is closely intertwined with practices of overconsumption of products and services (Jackson, 2016a; Lorek & Fuchs, 2019a). Contrary to the ambition of sustainable development, unsustainable levels of consumption and production in the Global North and increasingly in countries of transition such as Brazil pose major contributing factors (Rong, 2010), driving resource depletion and climate change with far-reaching implications for both societal well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014) and the environment (Steffen et al., 2015). Following the increased recognition of the impact of overconsumption, an equally growing sense of urgency has become apparent to facilitate sustainable consumption practices that consider effects on the social and natural environment (Mont, 2019). That is, if we are serious about drawing down emissions as set out in the Paris Climate Accord (UNFCCC, 2015), both new and existing approaches will need to consider wider issues such as the overall volumes of consumption, distributional issues, and related social and institutional changes (Bengtsson et al., 2018).

Providing a prime example of key social and environmental importance, issues of (un)sustainable consumption are bringing together all societal actors. To facilitate more sustainable actions at scale, scholars have called for greater joint action across sectors including governmental interventions (Prothero et al., 2011), pro-active engagement of non-state environmental authorities (Spaargaren & Mol, 2008a) and private sector actors alike (Elf et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2017; Heikkurinen et al., 2019).

While these approaches call for a strengthening of ‘reciprocal obligations’ (Collier, 2018), they locate the catalyst of change in distinct spheres with limited interaction between the micro, meso- or macro level. Instead, and besides its greater complexity, efforts to tackle currently unsustainable levels of consumption will require an active promotion of actions and policies at scale carried by *all* societal actors that are capable of replacing inherently

unsustainable practices with more sustainable alternatives (Bengtsson et al., 2018). It thus calls for a politicisation of consumption and the active extension of citizenship (Echegaray, 2016; Verschuere et al. 2019). In other words, environmental and social issues must be grounded in a democratic understanding that incorporates society and the environment alike questioning the self-regulatory capacity of the market that still employs the notion that it is legitimate to treat the natural environment as freely exploitable (Hammond et al., 2020; Lorek and Fuchs, 2019).

Consequently, we argue that *sustainable consumption practices consist of more than the sum of individualized consumption activities*. Rather, they involve processes on the micro, meso and macro level, demanding structural changes associated with political and market factors nurturing favourable conditions for sustainable practices (Bengtsson et al., 2018; Jackson, 2016; Sanne, 2002). As a result, many multi-layered solutions are required, coordinating and connecting different groups and solutions within a shared context (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018) giving way to a more systemic view that no longer studies production and consumption separately but, instead, examines the joint action of stakeholders and its interconnections. It therefore rejects a sole focus on single actors replacing it with a focus on collaborative networks such as tripartite setting advocating for a democratic-participatory ideal bringing together civil society, public and private sector actors (Oliveira et al., 2018).

Following a number of authors (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018; Brizga et al., 2014; Sepulveda et al., 2020; Spaargaren and Mol, 2008), we argue that democratically led, participatory approaches are needed to promote the transition towards sustainable consumption practices and just sustainabilities more broadly (Podcameni et al., 2019). These need to ensure that the knowledge held by social actors in relation to their local demands becomes a central element considered by all actors. This is especially the case for complex problems such as transitions to sustainable development and associated practices, involving multifaceted policies in the areas of social, environmental and cultural issues (Lorek and Spangenberg, 2014).

With regards to Brazil as the focal case of the paper, historically, environmental issues in Brazil have been insufficiently considered a product of social and political divide (Acselrad, 2001). This is partly grounded in the reason that Brazil has experienced political upheaval over the last decades, returning from an authoritarian military dictatorship to a democracy in 1985 with its democratic institutions arguably still being less developed. Simultaneously, the 1980s came to be known as Latin America's 'lost decade' during which regional economies came to a standstill (Santos and Avritzer, 2002). As a country in transition trying to establish both political and economic stability, an exploitation of the country's abundant natural resources is often considered as shortcut for societal solutions, mostly ignoring environmental and societal problems (Acselrad, 2001), thus following a growth-based logic of 'grow first, clean up later' (Rock and Angel, 2007) of growing first, clean later.

To ensure progress, the formation of a wider sense of environmental citizenship with a focus on sustainable consumption will require large, far-reaching processes, and involve a societal restructuring, a renegotiation of existing power structures and capacities to intervene, together with an increased participation in political decision making processes (Viegas and Teodósio, 2011). Consequently, one of the key prerequisites for achieving sustainable development is a strengthened, broad *public* participation in decision-making processes that has to connect people's local, micro-level practices that either obstruct or enable change with meso- and macro-level processes (Boström, 2020; Pateman, 2012).

Given the increasing attention being paid to partnership developments as shown above and by the UN sustainable development goal 17 (UNICEF, 2018), it appears timely to scrutinise the concept of multi-sectorial partnerships in greater depth. Hence, the objective of this article is to discuss possibilities and risks of promoting strong sustainable consumption in the context of Brazil through the lens of the tripartite partnership model (Stadtler, 2016). Whereas *co-production* and *co-creation* (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018) or related concepts such as

collaborative governance (Ansell, 2012), are the very *processes* that need to occur as part of cross-sectoral partnerships (for an extensive discussion see Brandsen and Honingh, 2018), this paper offers a critical review of tripartite partnerships (TPPs) as the overall *model*, and its potential to drive sustainable consumption practices in the context of Brazil.

The article is divided into five sections. Following the introduction providing a brief overview of the issues of sustainable consumption in Brazil, a practical and theoretical review of sustainable consumption is offered **in Section 2**. Third, a discussion of multi-sector approaches and their potential to drive sustainable consumption in the context of Brazil, the role of (participatory) democracy, and a discussion of possibilities and risks involved in tripartite partnerships when trying to promote strong sustainable consumption is offered, as well as a brief overview and discussion of existing tripartite partnerships in action within the Brazilian context. Fourth, we summarise some of the main points. The paper ends with a brief discussion of the issues raised and final considerations.

2. Consumption practices in Brazil: Status quo and what lies ahead

The prevalent focus on economic growth through a continuous increase in production and consumption has led to a transformation towards a global consumer society (Jackson, 2016). Following a decade of economic stagnation during the 1980s, Brazil, as most other Latin American countries, has recently tried to accelerate its economic growth ambitions (Financial Times, 2019; Freire-Gibb and Gregson, 2019).

Research on consumption practices in Brazil by Barbosa and Veloso (2014) suggest that consumption across social classes follow a “the more, the better” logic, **equating increased consumption with greater well-being**. Similarly, in a study by Schäfer et al. (2011) surveying current and future consumption aspirations among a sample of Brazilians, the authors concluded that, **besides evidence of increases of organic, eco-labelled, certified and fair-trade products**, the majority of the respondents strived to engage in resource-intensive lifestyles

similar to industrialized countries and high-income groups, which has led to a situation of overconsumption in Brazil¹.

However, Echegaray (2016) maintains that boycotts and buycotts can provide a potent tool to express growing post-materialistic values among Brazilians (see also Inglehart, 2019). Yet, social psychological research argues that one reason for the lack of sustainable consumption is the so-called ‘value-action gap’ (Holt, 2012). Recent research from the Instituto Akatu (2020) examining the relationship between Brazilian consumers and sustainability highlights that most people hold pro-environmental values while maintaining unsustainable consumption practices. However, a value-action gap can equally exist in environmental policy (Blake, 2007). According to Blake (2007), this gap can be overcome by placing greater emphasis on more equitable distribution of responsibilities between actors.

For instance, Echegaray (2016) argues that citizens perceive corporations as empowered agents that can drive change towards more sustainable consumption opportunities, which, in turn, can support the politization of consumers. However, at the same time, only one in seven Brazilians reported to exercise their consumer power to realise political goals by influencing corporate behaviour (Echegaray, 2016). Simultaneously, Brazilians – especially young Brazilians – have little or no trust in the current government and their willingness to drive change towards more sustainable practices (Instituto Akatu, 2020) further enforced through the Federal Government’s apparent opposition to environmental sustainability (The Guardian, 2019).

Arguably, this led to limited ambitions from private sector. Besides growing awareness and pledges by businesses, current actions usually aim to tackle the negative *consequences* of consumption related practices providing short-term solutions *compensating* for negative impacts rather than providing wider transformations tackling root causes that hold the potential

¹ Brazilian consumers currently use up all its annual renewable resources five months before the end of the year, according to the FootprintNetwork.org: <https://www.overshootday.org/newsroom/country-overshoot-days/>

to influence practices towards more sustainable long-term solutions (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013). Instead, they merely provide a "greening" of production and consumption practices and are often referred to as 'greenwashing' (Ariztía et al., 2014).

Taken together, hitherto, progress is insufficient. To intervene in existing consumer practices, it is crucial to understand them in their entirety. This includes an understanding of consumption practices as cultural phenomenon possessing symbolic meaning that shapes the differences and similarities between people and entire social groups (Jackson, 2016). Any attempt to change consumption practices will require multidisciplinary, systemic and participatory approaches based on an integrative political framework (Bengtsson et al., 2018). That is, promoting sustainable consumption ideally involves processes of structural changes associated with political and market factors, the provision of favourable conditions more widely (Oliveira et al., 2018), as well as cultural factors with the latter being of particular importance in the case of Brazil (Barbosa and Veloso, 2014).

In addition, a transition towards more sustainable systems requires not only technological innovations and individual changes in consumption but also collective actions and political, economic and institutional changes (Brizga et al., 2014; Spaargaren and Mol, 2008; Viegas and Teodósio, 2011), grounded in transparent, information rich and participatory processes allowing for debate and opportunities for joint decision-making (Guimarães, 2001).

According to Sachs (2007), today there is - in theory - considerable room for manoeuvring changes in current patterns of consumption and lifestyles through an active engagement in emancipatory processes, even if they are deeply rooted in unfavourable socio-economic conditions and culturally specific circumstances. For example, the notion of contemporary citizenship describes a process of collective social learning and the construction of emerging yet concrete political practices that allow to move towards a new frame of reference for consumer practices (Viegas and Teodósio, 2011).

Notwithstanding, a transformation towards more sustainable consumption practices depends on a critical review of standards of cooperation within and across sectors. Finding ways to reconcile economic growth, access to sustainable consumption options, and the protection of the environment presents a complex set of challenges that requires structural and long-term changes in order to accelerate the take-up of more sustainable consumption practices (Spaargaren and Mol, 2008).

However, a focus on sustainable consumption seemingly stands in contrast with recent discussions emerging in the global north promoting the voluntarily simplification of lifestyles (Alexander and Ussher, 2012), steady-state economics (Blauwhof, 2012) or degrowth measures (Hanaček et al., 2020). As in the case of Brazil as a country in transition, this discussion holds potential for conflict due to its high levels of inequality and economic and politic instability. A focus on consuming ‘better’ could facilitate a period of slow growth (Victor, 2010), providing a transition period allowing private sector actors and citizens to reduce their social and environmental impact while tackling the vast array of interwoven social problems existent in Brazil (Salata, 2016).

Taken together, shifting existing consumption practices will require the formation of decentralized, collaborative networks across all levels grounded in democratic principles bringing together Brazil’s citizenry, policy maker and private sector organisations (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2015; de Albuquerque, 2019).

3. Tripartite partnerships, participatory democracy and their potential to drive strong sustainable consumption practices

3.1. *From bilateral towards tripartite partnerships*

Sachs (2007) emphasizes that, as of today, participation takes up a lot of space in development discourse and is mostly marked through top-down approaches where more powerful actors set the agenda, while the contribution of civil society is either co-opted or occurs at a later stage

during the implementation stage thus resulting in power-asymmetries. At the same time, an early identification of real needs of the population and how they can consume more sustainably often depends on bottom-up approaches (Boström, 2020). Yet, bottom-up approaches are often slowed down due to a lack of buy-in on a political or industry level (Sachs, 2007).

Table 1 summarises a number of key interactions between different societal actors in a traditional sense illustrating the actors' means of operation. The columns indicate the actor that exerts the power relationship (e.g. citizens vote public sector representatives during elections). Besides traditional bi-lateral interactions of societal actors as shown in Table 1, *additional* interactions between all actors in the form of tripartite multi-sector partnerships are possible, holding the potential to facilitate more sustainable consumption practices.

Insert Table 1 here

More generally, Table 1 also indicates the role of the different agents. For instance, public sector actors such as governments provide the overall societal structures including legal frameworks and infrastructure, and set out solutions to tackle collective action problems. Private sector actors make available products and services provided within the legal framework set out by the government and respond to individuals who, in turn, define market demand. Individual citizens as well as citizen groups are to uphold, or to challenge legal frameworks and, more directly, have a say in private sector undertakings through their consumption decisions.

To improve and expand the understanding within the area of multi-sector partnership research, Selsky and Parker (2005) consolidate the literature on partnerships between sectors to address social issues, improve and grow possibilities to advance progress in the field. They suggest that actors from different sectors with different mindsets and backgrounds brought together to tackle the same issue are more likely to provide innovative solutions and develop new capabilities. Moreover, Selsky and Parker (2005) present three categories that can be used

for the analysis of cross-sectoral partnerships: 1) resource dependency; 2) social issues; and 3) the wider societal sector. With regards to resource dependency, a key factor in sustainable consumption research, they argue that organisations seek to collaborate to meet first and foremost their organisational demands or overcome organisational problems. In this sense, partnerships are understood as tools designed to provide short-term gains while social issues occur as *added* benefits with inter-organisational dependencies kept to a minimum to preserve the organisation's autonomy (Selsky and Parky 2005). Therefore, to catalyse joint actions in favour of sustainable consumption initiatives, different agents need to collaborate in democratic partnership settings to draw on their respective capabilities and find solutions to collective action problems such as unsustainable consumption practices.

3.2. Tripartite Partnerships

Tripartite partnerships can be defined as multi-sector partnership setting involving governments, companies and civil society organisations (Stadtler, 2016). Related approaches include the Triple Helix Model (Etzkowitz, 2003; Rodrigues and Melo, 2013), and Quadruple Helix Model² (Carayannis et al., 2018) that share the ambition to create a 'consensus space' to generate collaborations and new knowledge, and an 'innovation space' to develop innovative solutions and implement joint action (Edmunds et al., 2019). However, whereas the public and private sector are actors found in all models, the Triple Helix Model places greater emphasis on academic institutions. Quadruple Helix Models extend the model by including the citizen as fourth actor. To account for wider consumption practices while focusing more on and emphasising the role of the citizens in the process, we refer to tripartite partnerships instead, describing the active engagement between the private sector, the public sector and citizens. Furthermore, by doing so, we distinguish between TPPs as deliberately wider concept and other

² NB: More recently it has been further expanded to the Quintuple Helix Model deliberately including the environment (e.g. Carayannis et al., 2018).

concepts with different foci such as innovation systems and entrepreneurship ecosystems (Freire-Gibb and Gregson, 2019).

We acknowledge the central role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in existing models and for enabling more sustainable practices, as well as the extensive literature placing organized civil society movements as critical agents that hold the power to mobilise individual citizens and whole groups (e.g. Bano, 2019; Lorek and Fuchs, 2013). Given the influence of NGOs in Brazil in recent years, actions by the Federal government in Brazil have attempted to picture NGOs as enemy to the progress of Brazil (e.g. The Guardian, 2019). Inter-sectorial partnerships including NGOs *and* governmental bodies are therefore deemed rather both unlikely and perhaps even counterproductive in the current political climate. However, to provide a timely and realistic analysis taking the current reality of the Brazilian context into consideration, NGOs were, instead, excluded from our analysis. However, NGOs might indirectly influence TPPs through their increasing attempts to collaborate with private sector actors and their general presence, influencing values and practices of Brazilian citizens as well as national and international businesses operating in Brazil.

Work by Teodósio (2011) exemplifies the development and importance of TPPs in the context of Brazil arguing for an accelerated modernisation of management as part of social policies. In his understanding, TPPs need to involve an expansion of citizenship that is grounded in a strengthened understanding of the role of political institutions, novel relationships between the companies and society, and the notion of risk and urgency in solving problems of social and environmental interest (see also Verschuere et al. 2019). Outcomes from TPPs need to be seen as desirable by all actors and involve shared motivation between actors (Alford and Freijser, 2018), providing a pathway for a more advanced and democratic progress towards the expansion of a society benefiting through an increase in inclusive citizenship (de Albuquerque, 2019).

Whereas Selsky and Parkey (2005) stress that external pressures from interest groups and public opinion may encourage or even force institutional decision makers to pay close attention to both environmental and social issues, Teodósio (2011) emphasizes the strong voluntary character inherent in the process of establishing TPPs. Collaborative practices aiming to tackle unsustainable consumption are often permeated through shared pro-social and pro-environmental values, and follow an interest in nurturing social transformation towards the expansion of active citizenship, ethics in social management and social responsibility, and participatory democracy. Yet, a discursive idealisation can conceal the critical perception of inter-sectoral collaborative processes, disregarding differing interests, values and rationalities that occur naturally (Steen et al., 2018; Teodósio, 2011).

Besides its voluntary character, Teodósio (2011) argues that **by including differing, yet** potentially important aspects offered by other actors can have far-reaching **positive** implications. For instance, one prominent example is that of co-optation. A co-optation is constructed to manage opposing views through assimilation when significant differences exist in the respective understanding of how power is executed to achieve the goal in question (Bronzo et al., 2012), ultimately limiting the scope for collective approaches such as TPPs (Steen et al., 2018).

In contrast, the growing demand of partnerships bringing together all societal actors is rooted in the notion that traditional industry partnerships are not sufficiently equipped to solve urgent challenges (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018). Teodósio (2011) stresses that discussions concerning traditional roles of each actor in its respective area and resulting tensions originate from power dynamics. These involve the change and permanence of its *praxis* to meet or disassociate with organisations from other spheres marked by different rationalities and practices.

Besides possible risks, which we will discuss later, there is a growing consensus pointing towards the potential of TPPs as an important pillar of a transition towards more collaborative and sustainable practices based on democratic consensus and co-creation (Bano, 2019; Jetté and Vaillancourt, 2011). Indeed, to allow for a well-functioning inter-sectoral partnership, a number of shared objectives have to be formulated and agreed upon, with roles and responsibilities being defined in conjunction with all stakeholders. For instance, Bronzo et al. (2012) list several objectives in line with civil society's both responsibilities and needs, namely (i) performing public tasks that have been delegated to them by the state, (ii) perform publicly demanded tasks which neither the state nor the companies are able or willing to execute for them, and (iii) influence the political actions of the state, business and other non-profit organisations. Therefore, whereas co-optation is often understood as a risk for collaborative actions to promote sustainable consumption, Bronzo et al. (2012) argue that it is necessary to see co-optation as a potent mechanism for accommodating conflicts and providing alternatives that may also generate areas of comfort for actors, including those co-opted and dominated in partnerships between the government, companies, and NGOs.

Any sincere attempt to advance sustainable development presupposes an active sharing of assets and information between sectors and the active engagement of citizen participation in decision-making processes thus both incorporating and consolidating the concept of political responsibility in public activity (Guimarães, 2001).

Insert Figure 1 here

Figure 1 is based on earlier conceptual work by Brandsen et al. (2005) illustrating an articulation of the TPPs model. In TPPs the citizen-government link (A-B) is marked through a strengthened understanding and acceptance of a shared responsibility that can be expressed in and through principles grounded in participatory democracy. This includes an improved awareness and understanding of sustainable development, which serves as the basis and enabler

for sSC. The link between businesses and government (A-C) is a more formal relationship expressed through co-creational attempts of important regulatory mechanisms driving sustainable consumption opportunities through product and service offerings. This stands in contrast to traditional activities such as institutionalized lobbying mechanisms (Table 1). In the TPPs model, co-creational approaches between the public and private sector include citizens (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018). Complementing these, a strengthened citizen-private sector partnership (B-C) equally based on co-creational principles is required that goes beyond corporate philanthropy or traditional corporate social responsibility approaches (Elf et al., 2020). NGOs, usually operating on the nexus between all three actors described in this paper are excluded for clarity reasons. However, it seems important to mention that NGOs have been opting recently for more cooperative approaches with the private sector and the public sector (Dias and Teodósio, 2011).

Finally, questions remain concerning the effectiveness and the capacity of these partnerships. Thus, it is of key importance to identify factors and theoretical approaches that promote *the development of TPPs* that go beyond silo-thinking and common bilateral relationships.

3.3. Tripartite partnerships in action: lessons from Brazil

As already highlighted, the promotion of sustainable consumption requires collective action and political, economic, and institutional changes that converge on the need for articulation between actors from the state, the market, and civil society.

Over the last decade, a number of TPP initiatives have been implemented with differing levels of success. For the purpose of this paper, we will briefly introduce and discuss a number of TPPs in action **providing examples of progress towards well-functioning TPPs in different contexts across Brazil with varying foci.** For instance, in his research on TPPs in Brazil, Teodósio (2011) examined three different examples across Brazil, namely *Um Milhão de*

Cisternas (One Million Cisterns), a programme trying to promote access to water in the Brazilian semiarid region in the state of Bahia, and two programmes with social foci in the form of *Além das Letras* (Beyond Letters) in Rio de Janeiro, and *Novas Alianças* (New Alliances) in the state of Minas Gerais. His analysis of a large number of interviews showed the importance of taking into consideration local and social realities, and the active collaboration across actors. According to Teodósio (2011), TPPs can be understood as expressions of mature or maturing democracies. This is important to note since both the research and these projects were commissioned prior to a shift in political leadership in Brazil in 2016. Similarly, Friant (2019) in his analysis of Porto Alegre's introduction of more deliberative democracy processes through the introduction of a participatory budgeting argues that collaborative approaches, such as participatory budgets, provide citizens with a channel to take part. As a result, shared problems such as the overconsumption of resources through unsustainable consumption can be tackled collectively through creative solutions.

Further examples of TPPs in the context of Brazil with an environmental focus include a major electronics collection campaign in the main metropolitan areas of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte and the Federal District/Brasilia promoted by the federal government in 2011 in partnership with the Dutch multinational conglomerate Phillips, the food retailer Carrefour, as well as Descarte Certo and Oxil, two collection and recycling cooperatives. The objective of the partnership was to reduce environmental impacts caused through the contamination of otherwise recyclable materials through chemical and toxic components of appliances, and a 'conscientisation' of waste separation that can lead to an increased potential of reusing of materials such as plastic, glass and metals. Through the introduction of tripartite processes, collection and sorting processes were improved, and, consequently, greater amounts of materials were recycled, and consumer awareness regarding the issues and danger disposing electronics in ordinary waste grew (MMA, 2014).

Another example is provided by the TPP programme to reduce the consumption of plastic bags in Xanxerê in the state of Santa Catarina (Oliveira et al., 2021). Oliveira et al. (2021) argue that a major factor contributing to the success of the project can be attributed to the deliberate construction of spaces for dialogue and negotiation between the three sectors to generate viable alternatives and promote a change with a focus on sensitising society regarding the negative impacts of plastic on the environment.

The above examples provide insights into recent accomplishments as well as the wider potential of TPPs to minimise environmental impacts and improve the awareness and understanding of environmental and social issues through the facilitation of fair, participatory approaches. They also highlight the importance of democratic principles as important basis for TPPs, which we will turn to next.

Notwithstanding the potential benefits of TPPs, one of the main challenges is the chronically difficult task to motivate actors to continue actions over extended periods of time. It thus points towards a lack of institutionalising TPPs process, manifesting them in the very social fabric of local communities and society more general. Potential reasons for that lie within the greater complexity of these diverse partnerships as well as the lack of political and private sector appetite to share power with citizens as well as changes in political orientations and, potentially, a resulting shift away from democratic principles.

3.4. The role of democratic processes in tripartite partnerships

Besides advancements in recent times, strategies based on resource efficiency and technology alone do not constitute a sustainable lifestyle (De Young, 2019). The promise of operationalizing and implementing strong sustainable consumption governance focuses on consumption in its simultaneous pursuit of social justice and ecological sustainability. To promote sustainable consumption in the context of Brazil, a process of *re-democratisation* of the country through a social and democratic public management approach is urgently required.

TPPs can address societal and environmental needs more easily (Paula, 2005), and promote higher standards of operational efficiency and consolidation of rights in the country (Teodósio, 2011).

As stressed by Friant (2019), “[d]emocracy faces a crucial challenge in order to demonstrate that it can work effectively and efficiently towards solving the social and environmental challenges of the twenty-first century; otherwise, authoritarian solution will become ever-more appealing”. Most of the TPPs introduced in the previous section were commissioned before a political shift from left wing politics towards right wing politics in 2016 took place in Brazil. Prior to that, following the military dictatorship and the return to a democracy, the new Brazilian constitution introduced in 1988 led to greater decentralisation. Subsequently, efforts by the government were made to distribute power more equally across societal actors. In recent years, the current Federal government has tried to centralise power again. This is not to say that another shift in political direction is necessary *per se*. However, what seems incontestable is that democratic, place-based, bottom-up approaches and processes are necessary to overcome *wicked* challenges such as climate change, inequalities and unsustainable consumption are to be overcome.

For instance, active co-creation between different societal actors can be nurtured through an application of participatory democracy. According to Pateman (2012, p. 10), participatory democracy³ is an argument about democratisation acknowledging that the “capacities, skills, and characteristics of individuals are interrelated with forms of authority structures”. The ambition must be to overcome the historical restrictions (too) often imposing outdated logics of the state apparatus and its tradition of authoritarian and patrimonial political culture (Paula, 2005) and, instead, allow individuals to interact within and contribute to

³ Please note that while we acknowledge both the importance and distinctiveness of deliberative democracy with its focus on deliberation focuses on discussion and debate between citizens and other stakeholders, in this paper we will draw first and foremost on participatory democracy with its focuses on empowering citizens to take action.

democratic structures thus experiencing what Frey and Stutzer (2005) call ‘procedural utility’, an approach to human well-being emphasizing *conditions* and *processes* leading to outcomes, rather than only the outcome itself. That is, it allows citizens to take on an active role in decision-making processes. While usually restricted to a citizen-public sector interaction, TPPs extend its role actively involving the private sector.

Consequently, approaches aiming to tackle root causes can be identified through an improved participation among societal actors. With regards to an ideal model of participation between civil society and other actors, the political role of civil society is not directly related to the conquest and control of power but, instead, to the generation of inclusive engagement within the cultural public sphere (Santos and Avritzer, 2002). Sachs (2007) convincingly argues that multisector engagement approaches need to act as a facilitator of public opinion as well as constituent of *collective* opinion in spaces outside the state and market. In this sense, civil society have an ongoing, more active interest in public policies. These must be primarily characterized by a commitment to value rationality that is rooted in responding to the needs of civil society (Hoffmann, 2011). As already advocated by Erich Fromm (1976, p. 221) in his seminal work almost half a century ago, only an active participatory democracy has the potential to result in progress and move away from a view of the good life as one defined predominately by material resources.

Besides the usual pillars of sustainability, namely the environmental, economic and social pillar, considerations of political and territorial dimensions are of profound importance in the context of Brazil. Existing conflicts around environmental issues within the country and the power disputes they both nurture and cause can lead to different conclusions. One of its main points of contention lies in the space of public policies and in the action of social movements and civil society that often stand in seemingly direct opposition (Della Porta, 2020). Despite the many achievements of these movements, the analysis of conflicts and their results

reveal the stark differences in power in accessing natural resources and their potential to impact social structure (Bronzo et al., 2012).

Yet again, a promotion of social participation at all stages is of key importance (Alford and Freijser, 2018). Considering the potential divergences and conflicts rooted in ideological nature that permeate this process, TPP engagement processes will necessarily start at the design stage, require continuous participation in the stage of implementation and, eventually, pertinent management of actions and policies related to the socio-environmental challenges of consumption in the context of Brazil.

That is, if a sustainable, participatory economic democracy is to become a real possibility, an enhanced engagement with citizens and, therefore, greater public control is needed going beyond semi-democratic processes. TPPs provide a potentially powerful model to attempt to modernize social relations, potentially democratising currently unequal access to consumption and wider participation in society.

3.5. Private sector actors and consumption practices

Positioned on a meso-level, interacting with both citizens and the public sector, private sector actors inhabit a critical role in the transition towards more sustainable consumption scenarios. Recent research has shown that sustainable business activities can change consumption practices of customers (Young et al., 2018; Elf et al., 2020). To align corporate interests more closely with wider societal interests, TPPs can take on a role to mediate between the market and public sphere alike, thus actively influencing key decision-making processes as well as propagating values, ideas and approaches that have the potential to accelerate a transition towards more sustainable consumption practices (Oliveira et al., 2018). Businesses following market logics demand that corporate activities are not devoid of self-interest (Michaelis, 2003). Yet, we argue that there is a distinction to be made between gains that are obtained from TPPs

that involve genuine, active involvement and consideration of all actors, and the imposition of sole interests usually leading to insufficient sustainable consumption improvements.

Lorek and Fuchs's (2013; 2019) concepts of weak sustainable consumption (wSC) and strong sustainable consumption (sSC) provide a useful distinction allowing to understand and analyse results and wider impacts. Whereas wSC can be seen as a greening of products of services providing incremental improvements, often limited to a few lifestyles and consumer groups, sSC demands changes in both consumption levels and patterns alike (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013).

Besides smaller Brazilian companies having offered more sustainable products for many years (UNEP, 2020, p. 62), bigger businesses have been slower to adapt to the changing landscape. However, responding to international pressure as well as growing awareness on a national level (Instituto Akatu, 2020), Brazilian private sector actors have more recently started improving the sustainability of their products and services more sustainable products allowing for a greater potential of wSC.

However, private sector approaches alone are often more likely to only change consumption patterns (i.e. wSC) rather than overall consumption (i.e. sSC) (Lin and Hsu, 2015). That is, the majority of activities implemented by public and private sector actors focus mainly on the encouragement and enablement of consumption that follows more conscious (e.g. fairtrade products) and efficient (e.g. products with a lower carbon footprint) consumption practices (Bengtsson et al., 2018; Lorek and Fuchs, 2019). This is not to say that wSC practices are not important to consider and nurture. Instead, these have to be understood as an initial, yet important stepping stone that leads to subsequent, sSC.

Wider progress, however, will require a multitude of approaches. That is, moving towards sSC practices demands far-reaching changes to the existing economic system, structural factors as well as changes in private sector practices and prevalent power

relationships guiding daily routines and lifestyles (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013; Sanne, 2002). Further advances might depend on the level of intervention by influential societal actors such as the public sector **with their power to provide the necessary legal framework**, and their active and sustained commitment to local communities (Middlemiss, 2014).

Raising awareness of the need for sustainable consumption practices facilitated through learning initiatives (Bradbury and Middlemiss, 2014) can also lead to the immediate adoption of wSC and provide the basis for subsequent sSC (Lorek & Fuchs, 2013). Yet, an effective management of the inherent complexity embedded within humans' non-linear behaviours as part of socio-environmental systems perpetuating mass consumption will require additional efforts (Geels et al., 2015) **that go beyond private sector efforts and include structural changes that are best achieved and adopted when developed in conjunction. Indeed, TPPs can take a lead role providing important exemplars and scalable solutions that, in turn, can allow for wider changes.**

3.5.1. Tripartite processes and sustainable consumption practices

As a country in transition, Brazil's economic focus is predominately on economic growth through the consumption of goods and services with limited concern about the resulting socio-environmental impacts (Barbosa and Veloso, 2014). Simultaneously, international discourses and debates that seek ways of coping with the socio-environmental challenges of contemporary societies increasingly emphasize the need to rethink and redefine the roles and responsibilities of the government, companies and civil society actors within the public sphere (Steurer, 2013). While it has been argued that promoting an access to goods and services is of key importance for Brazil, which is historically shaped by large social inequalities, broader measures of social progress are needed that go beyond economic means such as income distribution and concentration of wealth (Jackson, 2016b; Stiglitz et al., 2009). These can only emerge and be

developed through the active engagement of citizens and a strengthened co-creation as part of TPPs (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018b).

The promotion of inter-institutional articulations, concretized in partnerships and cooperation agreements has more recently become a driving force enabling the necessary modernisation of Brazilian institutions (IBGE, 2012). A report by the IBGE (2012), argues that multi-sector partnerships enable actors on different levels to address problems *together*, seize local potential on a micro-level and meet real needs of Brazilians through wider, meso and macro-level processes, **that is, tackling collective action problems such as overconsumption and climate change more widely**. TPPs can serve as an important vehicle to promote integrated actions in the economic, socio-cultural, environmental and political-institutional spheres. Whereas the distinction between the different actors can be difficult at times and conceal the interrelationship among sectors as noted by Alford (1992), we argue that it is precisely the imprecision and blurring of boundaries that enables the sharing of roles and responsibilities and, eventually, drives joint action (Steen et al., 2018).

The displacement of the environmental sustainability challenge to the sphere of consumption emerges as an aggregating and emancipatory possibility. This can strengthen the interest of individual and collective participation in the dilemmas and political decisions of everyday life, bringing socio-environmental issues of consumption into the realm of the private sector and public policies (Echegaray, 2016). This is of particular importance since most consumption practices occur on a micro-level in the form of citizen behaviours, often shifting focus and responsibilities to the end consumer. Simultaneously, private sector actors can significantly influence citizens' consumption practices through marketing and lobbying practices as shown in Table 1. **Citizens in turn can express their needs that are key to their well-being and voice concerns about social and environmental issues (Frey and Stutzer, 2005). Through a closer interaction with citizens, businesses have greater access to these information**

and hold the potential to co-create solutions that allow to go beyond wSC. Lastly, public sector agents have equally more access to information to provide the necessary infrastructure and legal framework to drive urgently needed progress. A joint effort can then allow to improve processes of formulating and implementing public policies and market strategies (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2015). Taken together, to ensure far-reaching changes to consumption practices on all levels, that is, entire local, national and international discourses will need to address current social and environmental challenges through improved inter and intra-sectoral communication emerging from and distributed by TPPs (Viegas and Teodósio, 2011).

It thus stands in contrast to the depiction the concept itself has been largely characterized as the promotion of ‘more sustainable’ products, services and behaviours over the last 30 years (Fuchs and Lorek, 2019). Again, while recognizing the relative importance of small changes that individuals can make in their lives, meso- (e.g. businesses) and meta-level actors (e.g. governments) will need to encourage citizens to participate in wider changes necessary to move towards sSC (Lorek and Fuchs, 2019), and provide the necessary context and infrastructure (Tukker et al., 2008). Consequently, an active participation in TPPs can facilitate behavioural changes in consumption practices, which, in turn, can trigger social innovation leading to the development of alternative structures.

Arguably, there is an opportunity in the case of countries in transition. as in the case of Brazil with an estimated 80% of its infrastructure is yet to be build in the upcoming decades (Tukker et al., 2008). If harnessed correctly through co-production and co-creation processes embedded in TTPs, it could provide a unique opportunity to promote sustainable development and incorporate more sustainable mechanisms into Brazil’s economy, pre-empting the development of structures that nurture unsustainable practices and instead allow to leapfrog sustainable structures of production and consumption (Akenji and Bengtsson, 2014; Tukker et al., 2008). Moreover, TPPs can be of great importance in the management of social and

environmental projects. For instance, the recent upsurge in interest in climate assemblies, or the introduction of public sector officials such as so-called future commissioners as in the case of Wales⁴ aiming to align public sector decision making processes and resulting legal frameworks with those of the private sector and, in particular, its citizens. They can thus operate as intermediary channels that promote structural and long-term changes from a bottom-up perspective and operate as a gateway for effective TPPs.

3.6. Risks and solutions offered by TPPs to promote sustainable consumption

Notwithstanding the importance of partnerships, highlighted throughout this paper, different actors might be reluctant to engage in TPPs due to vested interests dismissing the scientific consensus on a looming climate breakdown (IPCC, 2018), the crossing of planetary boundaries and social issues for the sake of profits if citizens are not sufficiently involved and the necessary legal framework is not in place. These actions then can be described as weak, unaligned or shallow attempts at best, not matching the challenge (Bronzo et al., 2012). With a growing awareness of the need for more sustainable consumption practices (Instituto Akatu, 2020), Brazil has an opportunity to implement TPPs, which naturally involve mechanisms that allow to hold each other's practices in check and, therefore, hold greater potential to avoid greenwashing to occur.

Challenges can also emerge from power-hierarchies within socio-democratic structure thwarting the transition towards more inclusive citizenship and sustainable practices when engaging in multisector partnerships such as TPPs. Based on a democratic perspective, political mediation must not be prescind from the real objectives of TPPs addressing the socio-environmental issues associated with consumption in the context of Brazil. As highlighted by Bano (2019), it is essential to look at innovative state-government reforms that give way to

⁴ See <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/>

cross-sectoral partnerships such as TPPs, which can result in improved, more sustainable public-sector performances. The inherent challenge in the case of Brazil is then that emerging TPPs require more flexible and collaborative approaches enacted on a local level, as well as on wider levels where possible and which are based on the adaptation of principles grounded in participatory democracy rather than linear, top-down approaches.

Moreover, Steen et al. (2018) argue that when boundaries between different sectors become blurred “co-production and co-creation may inadvertently lead to a lack of clear responsibilities”, and to a possible absence of accountability necessary to ensure that the quality of output (e.g. sSC opportunities) is given. However, as argued previously, power asymmetries and potential co-option can be overcome through the blurring of boundaries and the active accepting and sharing of responsibilities that previously lay outside the actor’s remit (Steen et al., 2018) – A process that poses a key underlying mechanism of TPPs.

Another, yet linked potential risk involves the ideological differences within TPPs. Teodósio (2011) argues that different partners may attribute greater importance to sustaining existing practices and projects in the long term, especially when considering the insertion of governmental actors that are subject to the alternation of power. Whereas pragmatic, economic, ideological as well as commercial and populist aspects may pose major obstacles when engaging in partnerships with a focus on issues such as unsustainable consumption, Hindess (1982) suggests that actors need to fight it out in so-called ‘arenas of struggle’. During this process, the application of democratic principles and the active and continuous discourse within TPPs, based on the former, will allow to eventually overcome obstacles (Bronzo et al., 2012).

A further key challenge emerges from the structural dynamics of already existing relationships. This dimension refers to possible dilemmas faced by actors that result from power relationships both within and between corporations trying to maintain their competitive

advantage that can fundamentally influence power relations when negotiating and developing more structured processes as part of TPPs (Bronzo et al., 2012).

With regards to state actors, their participation in TPPs may lead to the sharing, or even (partial) outsourcing of responsibilities that were traditionally understood to sit with the government (Steen et al., 2018; Teodósio, 2011). Prominent examples include education and health services, among others. Portilho (2005) argues that these processes can be understood as a *transference* of regulatory activity and responsibility. These are characterized by at least two aspects: First, through a transfer of role and responsibility from the government to the market, thus attributing more attention to market self-regulatory processes. Second, through a transfer from the government and the market to citizens thus shifting responsibilities resulting from consumption choices and practices to the end-user (Frey and Stutzer, 2005). However, and in contrast to a *shifting* of responsibilities, recent empirical studies have shown that a strengthened *interplay* between the private sector and citizens can lead to the adoption of more sustainable practices while increasing levels of trust (Elf et al., 2019; Elf et al., 2020).

Hence, acknowledging changes in responsibilities and actively *sharing* responsibilities can allow the initiation of more democratic processes, moving away from purely top-down approaches where governments seemingly impose laws onto consumers, towards more lateral and collaborative approaches. This is in line with Jackson and Michaelis's (2003) argument that policies for sustainable consumption must go beyond the rigidity of control and persuasion and, instead, should be based on the idea of governments, companies and civil society as active collaborators and partners of learning in the process of change grounded in democratic principles. This is of particular importance in the context of Brazil as suggested by some commentators (e.g. de Albuquerque, 2019). Indeed, growing evidence suggests that TPPs based on democratic principles not only deliver against the Sustainable Development Goals such as SDG 17, *Partnership for the Goals*, but can actively drive sustainable development

through a wide range of ways such as the implementation of climate change policies (Musah-Surugu et al. 2019).

4. Summary

In this paper, we have argued that the adoption of TPPs can allow for a redirection of cultural, political, institutional and technological resources to promote changes in consumption practices that meet the aspirations of sustainability, potentially informing a new *logic* that eventually becomes integral part of ideologies and market practices (Holt, 2012).

Emerging insights from existing TPP models in with different foci in Brazil show promising results. Focusing on the urgent issue of overconsumption, we have argued that TPPs aiming to promote sustainable consumption need to understand their shared responsibilities in the process, that is, their co-responsibility as part of the quest to tackle environmental and social problems. The second key factor underlying TPPs is that of democratic principles. By engaging in TPPs rooted in democratic principles allows usually excluded or neglected actors to actively contribute, the necessary transition towards sSC practices driving a more both democratic and sustainable society in the context of Brazil holds greater potential to ultimately become a reality. Indeed, to allow for truly far-reaching changes towards sustainable consumption practices, an improved communication and open sharing of responsibilities within and across sectors is needed.

Based on the above, it seems clear that there are several risks and impasses to be considered when trying to engage in TPPs. However, following the reviewed evidence, we conclude that the benefits and the urgency outweigh the potential risks.

5. Discussion and final considerations

The promotion of sustainable consumption as a socio-environmental problem carries great complexity due to its multifaceted nature (Jackson, 2016). Despite this complexity, it has been

suggested that a transition towards sustainable consumption patterns is inevitable and will require a fundamental rethinking of current production and consumption patterns (Guimarães, 2001). New inter- and intra-sectoral partnerships need to emerge as a possibility to address these issues by promoting dialogues among stakeholders, strengthening the participatory instances and conducting the democratic negotiation of conflicts (Teodósio 2011).

Social and environmental challenges will not be solved with the help of palliative solutions barely masking what lies ahead but, instead, require deeper reflections on existing human lifestyles (Naves, 2011). Instead, we have argued that Brazil's socio-environmental issues will only be effectively addressed through a broader process towards sustainable development. This will need to be grounded in principles of participatory democracy (Pateman, 2012), so that interests of actors on different levels can be considered and made compatible with broader sustainability concerns such as sustainable consumption without engaging in often dominating top-down power dynamics. At the same time, varying interests of different social actors involved in the process of promoting sustainable consumption are sometimes conflicting, calling for new governance models. We suggest that this is essential for the legitimization of proposals for solutions involving governments, companies and organisations as in the case of TPPs that can result in an active strengthening of 'reciprocal obligations' (Collier, 2019).

The current Covid-19 pandemic has shown that our civilisation depends on networks, both immaterial, human networks as well as material networks such as infrastructure, providing the "connective tissues and circulatory systems of modernity" (Edwards, 2003).

In the attempt to build back better following the Covid-19 pandemic, the application of TPPs could provide a model that holds the potential to introduce strong, resilient and equal processes grounded in democratic principles. This seems particularly relevant for the Brazilian context. As a country of transition, Brazil must overcome the incompleteness that historically permeates its public sphere and the exercise of citizenship (Teodósio, 2011). **Future research**

should examine the resilience of existing TPPs in Brazil during the pandemic and compare them with conventional forms of governance.

With regards to consumption, to promote weak but especially strong sustainable consumption it is necessary to recognize that broader structural changes are required that go beyond technological or educational innovation. That is, the involved responsibilities within the process towards more sustainable practices cannot be attributed to a specific sector alone. Instead, it seems necessary to adopt a perspective in which actors engage in collaborative ways to allow urgently needed changes.

Moreover, strengthened interactions between different actors can allow for a shift away from growth obsession and its tightly linked concept of consumerism, which has shown to have detrimental effects on wellbeing (Dittmar et al., 2014). TPPs can provide societal actors with a model to promote societal well-being. Yet, concepts of well-being are poorly understood within (local) government (Rablen, 2012) and require an active *re*-establishment between ethics, economics and politics (Bengtsson et al., 2018; Lorek and Fuchs 2013), that allow new rationalities to emerge. Actively engaging in TPPs can thus build better, more resilient and legitimate responses to the challenges our world is currently facing. Lastly, as argued by Audretsch and Moog (2020), a strong, firm democracy is beneficial for entrepreneurship. With its vast need for social innovation, Brazil, by drawing more on TPPs can actively engage with previously unattended populations that remain invisible, thus becoming part of the effort to reverse the currently unsustainable status quo.

The various possibilities for promoting sustainable consumption as presented in this paper require an improved understanding, promotion and execution of active citizenship. However, it is important to emphasize that these partnerships are not only permeated by consensual aspects and co-creation in the interactions between the parties about the changes that are necessary. Indeed, we have argued that conflicts of interest and power disputes

naturally emerge. While these can pose risks to the establishment of collaborative actions, they will need to be solved to provide more sustainable consumption opportunities and can help to overcome environmental and societal issues.

Consequently, considering that our article focuses on the broader Brazilian context, we advocate a spatial and local application of strong TPPs that can be achieved through decentralization processes. In other words, intersectoral partnerships can facilitate the participation between actors and strengthen the democratic processes. That is, the concretisation of these changes depends on the way actors as part of TPPs in Brazil will define their forms of articulation to determine their roles and responsibilities within the process. The ambition must be to overcome the historical restrictions resulting from silo-thinking and imposed by the logic of the state apparatus and its tradition of authoritarian and patrimonial political culture (Paula, 2005). Further empirical research is needed to analyse how TPPs can be adapted, replicated, improved and expanded so it can best contribute to a fairer, more democratic and sustainable future.

In conclusion, we have outlined in this paper how, through the adoption of TPPs grounded in democratic and transparent co-creational approaches and a heightened sense of urgency, a transition towards sustainable consumption practices is possible. We have shown that, by actively engaging in TPP models, an effective equalisation of the forces involved in the process of establishing actions and strategies to promote democratic processes and sustainable consumption can emerge. TPPs can thus give way to political action and the integrated exercise of citizenship and 'procedural utility' (Frey and Stutzer, 2005) as a driving force for sustainable development and sSC practices, ultimately allowing to overcome existing dilemmas grounded in today's predominately unsustainable consumer society.

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