Understanding Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue

The Emerging Concept of Community of Practice

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- Multi-stakeholder dialogue
- Stakeholder dialogue
- Community of practice
- Business for peace
- UNGC

Multi-stakeholder dialogues (MSDs) are initiatives devoted to participative processes of consultation and decision-making (Hemmati, 2002). They involve national and international actors such as businesses, governments, NGOs and civil society. Over the last decade, MSDs have come to the forefront to address pressing global challenges such as sustainable development, climate change, the fight against corruption and the role of business in conflict prevention. The academic literature on those processes has so far highlighted their potential to foster collective learning (Payne and Calton, 2002; Calton and Payne, 2003), consensus building through problem-solving (Turcotte and Pasquero, 2001) and interactive decision-making (Yosie and Herbst, 1998). However an important aspect which has so far been neglected by the academic literature is the way participants experience and conceptualize those initiatives. This paper will analyse a case study of two MSD initiatives organized by the UN Global Compact (UNGC) and Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) as part of the project of "Responsible Business and Investment in Conflict-affected Areas". According to the data being gathered it will be shown how MSDs are primarily described as communities of practitioners in which interpersonal relationships among the participants involved are nurtured through discussions and dialogues on common areas of interest. By showing the similarities between the participants' descriptions of these two initiatives and the main tenets defining a "community of practice" as conceptualized by Wenger (1998), Wenger *et al.* (2002), conclusions and recommendations for further studies will be proposed.

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THIS PAPER EXPLORES A SPECIFIC research context that has so far lacked extensive academic attention: multi-stakeholder dialogue (MSD). MSD initiatives are structured, face-to-face discussions aiming to bring together in decision-making and implementation efforts representatives from different contexts, backgrounds and organizations who have a "stake" in a given issue or decision.

This paper starts by showing how in the current literature on MSDs there are many descriptions of models aiming to provide guidance on how to improve them (e.g. O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2008). Other works seek to explore how these processes impact the dynamics between stakeholder groups (e.g. Mayes *et al.*, 2013). However, there is still a lack of empirical "first-hand" descriptions of these processes (Arrow *et al.*, 2000; Hogg, 1996; Poncelet, 2001), which could shed light on how interpersonal dynamics occurring in this context actually work. To address this research gap, the paper presents two cases of MSD organized by the UN Global Compact (UNGC) and the UN Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI), as part of the joint project entitled "Responsible Business in Conflict-Affected Areas". Consistently, the purpose of the present investigation is to explore one main research question: "How do participants in MSDs perceive and describe these initiatives?"

The paper then presents the personal accounts of the participants in the two cases of dialogue and the emerging similarities between how MSDs are described and the notion of Communities of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2002). This parallel constitutes a contribution to both literatures, as their similarities (as well as differences) have never been shown before. Finally, the reader will find suggestions for further research and contributions to practice.

It is the communication that matters. The practice of stakeholder dialogue

The phenomenon of stakeholder dialogue constitutes one of the most effective forms of stakeholder engagement today (Andriof *et al.* 2002), as it has been seen by both scholars and practitioners as one of the most proactive ways to develop collaborative relationships and effective communication between stakeholders and organizations (Pedersen, 2006; Campbell and Mark, 2006). Consequentially "stakeholder dialogue" initiatives have been increasingly adopted by a number of organizations (some examples include Shell, Coca-Cola, Nestlé, Unilever, General Motors, ENI, Adidas and many others) as part of their strategies to strengthen the participation of a larger number of constituencies (Morsing and Schultz, 2006; Zadek, 2007; Kolk and Van Tulder, 2004; Pedersen, 2006).

Hence, a stakeholder dialogue is defined as

> …a structured discussion between representatives of a company and representatives of one or several stakeholder groups… It is the aim of this dialogue to investigate constellations of interests and issues concerning the company and the stakeholders, exchange opinions, clarify expectations, enhance mutual understanding, and if possible finding new and better solutions (Palazzo, 2010:21).

The popularity of stakeholder dialogue initiatives is confirmed by a study undertaken by KPMG, which shows that among more than 1,600 of the world's largest corporations, 39% of these companies mention structured stakeholder dialogues in their CSR reports (KPMG, 2005, cited in van Huijstee and Glasbergen, 2008).

Stoll-Kleeman and Welp (2006) identified four main typologies of stakeholder dialogue currently undertaken by organizations, namely:

▶ Science-based dialogue

▶ Policy dialogues

▶ Corporate dialogues

▶ Multi-stakeholder dialogues

Science-based stakeholder dialogues aim to improve the knowledge base for decision making (Stoll-Kleemann and Welp, 2006). They link social actors (NGOs, governments, companies) and scientists and are usually adopted to cope with environmental issues (Stoll-Kleemann and Welp, 2006). Policy dialogues are usually conducted by political bodies aiming to ground policymaking in a deliberative process. They foster stakeholders' sense of belonging to a political unit, which could support new legislations and new policies (see also Stoll-Kleemann and Welp, 2006). Corporate dialogues have the main purpose of demonstrating openness to the public and include different views in the corporate decision-making process. Those meeting private companies in a communication process include various groups such as NGOs, customers' representatives, suppliers, associations and so forth (Welp *et al.*, 2006).

Finally, multi-stakeholder dialogues are distinctive from other types of collaborative processes as they usually bring together participants from at least three sectors: businesses, governments and NGOs (Poncelet, 2001). These are mostly used for dealing with the issue of economic development, responsible business practices, environment and ecosystems sustainability (Calton and Payne, 2003) and usually involve international actors as well as international organizations, global constituencies and communities (Hemmanati, 2002; Dodds *et al.*)[1].

It is important to note that stakeholder dialogue is a multiple phenomenon which varies greatly according to the context and the purposes of the stakeholder dialogues themselves (Rowe and Frewer, 2000). These can span from a simple

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1 See http://portals.wi.wur.nl/msp/?page=1257

passive dissemination of information (consultative or "one-way" form of information given to passive recipients), in which the implementation of stakeholders' inputs is exclusively at the companies' discretion, to an active engagement (two-way form of communication; i.e. dialogue), in which the different parties have potentially the capacity to influence the outcomes of the dialogue (Rowe and Frewer, 2000).

Furthermore, Kuenkel *et al.* (2011) broadly distinguish stakeholder dialogues as geared towards either consultation or collaborative implementation. In the first typology (consultation) the role of stakeholders is to contribute with their expertise or viewpoints, and the obligation to follow the information gathered relies fully on the company's discretion (Kuenkel *et al.*, 2011). These processes can be used either to raise awareness of a particular issue of common concern, or to increase the potential interest of certain stakeholders for future collaborations. They also provide corporations with useful inputs for their decision-making process but do not include an active and reciprocal role played by those consulted (Kuenkel *et al.*, 2011).

Collaborative implementations focus instead on the active participation of different stakeholders for solving a common problem or issues at stake. Usually stress is put on the importance of the commitment to collaborate and to the joint responsibility for the outcomes of the process. An example of this is the so-called multi-stakeholder initiatives or MSD (Kuenkel *et al.*, 2011).

From a practitioner perspective stakeholder dialogue is adopted through different methodologies (e.g. Future Search, Deep Democracy, Open space technology, The World Café, Sustained Dialogue, Action Research, just to quote few examples), which typically involve round-tables of different groups of stakeholders and are often mediated by a "facilitator" or "mediator" who guides various degrees of communication. Bojer *et al.* (2006) have mapped ten of those methodologies which have some features in common such as enabling open communication, questioning previous judgements and worldviews and generating new ideas.

What are multi-stakeholder dialogues?

Multi-stakeholder dialogues constitute quite a unitary and specific typology of stakeholder dialogue. In actual fact, although these processes have taken different names such as multi-stakeholder "platforms", "partnerships", "round-tables" or "forums", some common characteristics can be identified: the participation of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, the focus on the articulation and proactive resolution of common concerns, the encouragement of partnerships among different sectors, and an ongoing process of collective learning and problem solving (Hemmanati, 2002). Due to the differences between MSDs and other forms of stakeholder engagement and dialogue, in the last 15 years the academic literature has so far focused specifically on

this type of initiative (examples include Hemmanati, 2002; Poncelet, 2001; Enayati, 2002; Calton and Payne, 2003; Payne and Calton, 2004; Turcotte and Pasquero, 2001; McIntosh *et al.*, 2004; Waddell, 2002; Yosie and Herbst, 1998).

Accordingly, these studies (which can be seen as part of the broader literature on stakeholder dialogue and stakeholder partnership) identify some of the main characteristics of MSDs, such as collective learning (Payne and Calton, 2002; Calton and Payne, 2003), problem solving and consensus building (Turcotte and Pasquero, 2001), interactive decision-making (Yosie and Herbst, 1998), assembling, transforming, multiplying and spreading knowledge to reach implementable solutions (Enayati, 2002). Other works also highlight MSDs as processes conducive to inducing personal changes through social learning, the production of new cultural forms (e.g. new meanings) and the generation of new relations among the participants (Poncelet, 2001).

Gap in the literature on stakeholder dialogue and multi-stakeholder dialogue

Although a few studies have provided empirical investigations on stakeholder dialogues, these types of initiatives remain largely unexplored (Greenwood 2007; Ayuso *et al.*, 2006; Burchell and Cook, 2006a, b, 2011; Greenley and Foxall, 1997; Gao and Zhang 2001). Furthermore, empirical descriptions from the participants' perspective of how stakeholder dialogues (and more specifically multi-stakeholder dialogues) are perceived and conceptualized are almost completely unexplored (Arrow *et al.*, 2000; Gilette, 1995; Hogg, 1996; Poncelet, 2001).[2]

By addressing this gap this paper seeks to provide a contribution for at least two academic streams of research. First, the descriptions of how MSDs are directly experienced by their attendees could contribute to the literatures on collaborative decision-making and stakeholder participation, as few studies have provided empirical accounts of these initiatives (Poncelet, 2001). Second, the business ethics literature focusing on stakeholder relations (e.g. stakeholder theory) can greatly benefit from real-context empirical data inductively supporting some of its main theoretical claims (e.g. the importance of fostering *humanized* relationships between stakeholder groups; Freeman and McVea, 2005).

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2 The only example being found in the literature is Poncelet, 2001.

The importance of multi-stakeholder dialogues in the context of the business and peace literature

Another emerging research agenda that may benefit from an empirical investigation of MSDs is business and peace.[3] This multidisciplinary area of research seeks to develop an empirical and theoretical foundation to understand the role of business in conflict prevention (Haufler, 2015). According to Ford (2015) there are three wider trends within this literature:

▶ How corporations (singly or cross-sector coalitions) may become more engaged in contributing to more peaceful and sustainable societies matching the elevated popular, market and regulatory expectations regarding the social/environmental responsibilities of businesses.

▶ How the private sector can engage in the design, delivery and funding of the poverty-reduction and sustainable development global policies and agenda.

▶ The social impact of the private sector in terms of transparency and regulatory norms particularly regarding the increasingly dispersed supply chains and portfolios in emerging markets.

Across these three main trends, partnerships between businesses and non-business organizations have increasingly been presented as key processes to strengthen the role of the private sector in tackling sustainability and peace challenges (Selsky and Parker, 2005; Kolk and Lenfant, 2015). However, as Ford (2015) argues, scholars still know very little about whether peace-related dialogues between business actors and other stakeholders (especially civil society) are effective in stimulating business in addressing peacebuilding activities. This is because only a small number of empirical and qualitative studies have provided descriptions of how cross-sector dialogue and partnership initiatives work in practice (Kolk and Lenfant, 2015). More specifically, there is very little research within the business and peace literature investigating round-table initiatives such as those convened by the UN Global Compact with its Business for Peace Initiative (Ford, 2015).[4] More studies could inform both businesspeople and policy-makers on how to sustain cross-sector relationships, which are gaining increasing importance for fostering peace in fragile states (Kolk and Lenfant, 2015).

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3 For an extensive review of this literature see the Academy of Management Perspective's (AMP) Symposium on business and peace (2015)

4 The Business for Peace platform is the largest initiative in the world seeking "to support companies and enhance positive business contributions to development and peace", https://www.unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/our-work/governance/peace/background

Addressing the gaps: UNGC case study

This research focused on two multi-stakeholder dialogue initiatives convened by the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) and the United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI). The UNGC has over 12,000 corporate participants and other stakeholders from over 145 countries. For this reason, it is the largest voluntary corporate responsibility initiative in the world.[5] It was announced by the (former) Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the World Economic Forum in 1999 and officially launched in 2000 in New York. The UNGC has two main objectives:

▶ The development and implementation of responsible and sustainable corporate policies and practices around the world based on the UNGC "Ten principles of sustainable business"[6] in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption.

▶ Catalyse business actions and collaborative activities in support of the UN aims and goals (such as the Millennium Development Goals or the Sustainable Development Goals).

The Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) was convened by the United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative and the UN Global Compact and was launched by the Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2006. It is a London-based international network of investors willing to put six Principles for Responsible Investment into practice.[7] Its goal is to understand the implications of sustainability for investors and support signatories to incorporate these issues into their investment decision-making and ownership practices. It has so far over 1,260 institutional signatories from all round the globe, representing about US$45 trillion in assets under management.

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5 https://www.unglobalcompact.org/AboutTheGC/index.html

6 https://www.unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/mission/principles

7 These principles are:

  1) We will incorporate ESG (Environmental, Social, and corporate Governance) issues into the investment analysis and decision-making process

  2) We will be active owners and incorporate ESG issues into our ownership policies and practices.

  3) We will seek appropriate disclosure on ESG issues by the entities in which we invest.

  4) We will promote acceptance and implementation of the Principles within the investment industry.

  5) We will work together to enhance our effectiveness in implementing the Principles.

  6) We will each report on our activities and progress towards implementing the Principles.

"Guidance on Responsible Business in Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas"

Since 2009, the UNGC, together with the PRI, have facilitated the private sector, civil society and academia in the development of the "Guidance on Responsible Business in Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas". The guidance document is voluntary and aims to offer a practical understanding of the types of actions and measures expected from responsible businesses operating or with an interest in high-risk areas (such as Congo, Colombia and other countries) in accordance with the UNGC's "Ten Principles of Responsible Business" and PRI's "Six Principles of Responsible Investment". The guidance was developed by the UNGC office, the PRI initiative and an expert group comprising company representatives, investors, civil society leaders, UN representatives and academics in a series of multi-stakeholder events (Istanbul, 2009, New York, 2009, Khartoum, 2010, Tokyo, 2010 and New York, 2011). Following these MSDs a pilot project for the implementation of the guidance included an additional multi-stakeholder dialogue held in 2011 in Copenhagen involving businesses, investors, civil society and NGOs' representatives.

According to one of the organizers, these MSDs were seeking to include the investors' views into a document to regulate the way business is undertaken in conflict-affected areas that could be adopted and implemented by companies operating in those contexts:

> The majors purpose (of these MSDs) was to come up with the guidance document ("Guidance on Responsible Business in Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas") and to define what were the expectations of companies operating in conflict countries…and try to capture not only the perspective of stakeholders like NGOs or the companies themselves but also incorporate what the investors thought, which was in a way an innovative element (UN representative).

For the purpose of the current investigation, two distinct multi-stakeholder dialogues have been chosen within the initiatives that focused on the development of the "Guidance": one in New York in 2009 and another in Copenhagen in 2011.

New York and Copenhagen MSDs' background

After the inception of the project for "Responsible Business in Conflict-Affected Areas" in Istanbul (2008), both the UNGC and PRI started working on a MSD to be held in New York in 2009 to draft a guidance document considered essential to spur collaboration and engagement between investors and companies operating in conflict zones. The title of the MSD was "Expert Group Meeting on Responsible Investment in Conflict-Affected Countries". There were 52 participants from large multinational corporations, investment groups, civil society organizations, NGOs, UN and international organizations from all around the

world. As reported by several interviewees, the representation of a very broad range of stakeholders was an important factor for the success of the initiative. The purpose of the MSD in New York was to discuss collaboratively what constitutes responsible investment in challenging operating environments such as war and conflict zones and to set out a set of general and practical principles for responsible business operations in the areas of core business, strategic social investment, engagement and advocacy.

After the successful MSD in New York and the publication of the "Guidance document", both PRI and the UNGC decided to keep collaborating and set up a further MSD in Copenhagen in 2011, which benefited from the good synergy that the two branches of the UN had found while collaborating in the organization of the previous MSDs. In the Copenhagen MSD there were 30 participants, including representatives of companies, investors and civil society. According to the organizers, this initiative aimed to enable companies, investors and civil society representatives to share experiences, lessons learned and progresses made while engaged on steps to advance the "Guidance on Responsible Business in Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas" in their daily operations. Topics of discussion were among others: engaging GC Local Networks, translating the Guidance into operational reality, and presentations of recently developed tools and initiatives. This MSD was also an opportunity for the Expert Group members to address the issue of how companies can demonstrate that they are "responsible" while operating in unstable environments (such as regions that are experiencing citizen protests) as well as explore ideas for what the Expert Group could do collectively.

Research sample and methodology

Twenty in-depth interviews with high-level representatives of business organizations, investors, UN and non-governmental organizations who directly participated in one or both MSDs held in New York (2009) and Copenhagen (2011) were collected and recorded. These interviews gathered the participants' feelings, impressions, descriptions and insights about their personal experience in the MSDs. Furthermore, the interviewees represented all the groups of stakeholders invited to the two initiatives (representatives of corporations, investors, NGOs, civil society organizations and the UN).

The main approach in the project was to organize data and generate themes drawing out from the main research question, namely: "How do participants in MSDs perceive and describe these initiatives?" All responses went through the "constant comparison" analysis which looks for "patterns and processes, commonalities and differences" and draws out themes accordingly (Schwandt, 2015). In fact, the research's aim was neither to formulate substantive theory (as in grounded theory), nor to seek the participants' felt meanings (as in phenomenology), but rather to induce patterns reflective of the *participants'*

descriptions and perceptions of their experiences (which was also the unit of analysis of this study).

Data analysis was developed through thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), which is used in qualitative research and focuses on examining themes within data (Daly *et al.*, 1997). As Yin (2013) states, while doing comparative case study research each case must be analysed in full before making a comparative analysis. Consistently, each case of MSD was analysed *separately* from the other. This is because the two MSD initiatives had their own contextual features impacting upon participant's experiences. Consistently, each interview within each case of MSD was also analysed separately from the others so as to produce a first set of "unique" themes (i.e. specific to the interview under analysis). These were not compared with the themes emerging from the other interviews until the first round of analysis was finished. To do so, all interviews were transcribed[8] and the transcripts were uploaded into the software for qualitative analysis, NVIVO.[9]

Findings and discussion

As previously illustrated, the main purpose of the "Responsible Business in Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas" initiative, according to the *organizers'* perspective, was to reach one main target: the development and implementation of a guidance document that could provide organizations operating in conflict-affected countries with an internationally recognized benchmark on "responsible business". Hence, for the achievement of this target the organizers needed the support and active participation of a number of actors and organizations who shared a common area of interest, expertise and similar ambitions to implement more sustainable and responsible business practices. Interestingly, while analysing the case study *from the perspective of the participants*, an unexpected aspect came to the foreground. In their view the two MSDs (New York and Copenhagen) were primarily characterized by an idea of building a "community" of people who were gathered together because of a common interest and commitment to a specific domain (e.g. responsible business), rather than by the achievement of a specific goal. Interestingly, instead of describing these initiatives primarily from a pragmatic perspective, for example "the MSD was an initiative in which I met other people to collaboratively tackle X", the description offered by the participants was more similar to, "the MSD was an initiative in

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8 All interviews were transcribed by the researcher and run in parallel with the interviewing phase.

9 This software allows the user to highlight and code sections of texts as mirroring the process of hand-coding, but with the usefulness of being able to store large amounts of data in one place and in electronic format.

which we, *as a specific community of likeminded people*, met to address a common area of concern X".

Accordingly, this "unique" group of people coming from (in most cases) very different backgrounds, felt they were gathered to share and exchange—as a **community of practitioners** within a common professional practice—the focal topics of the MSD they were attending. Hence, according to their views, the concepts of *community* and of *practice* were the most characteristic aspects of the two MSD initiatives.

The concept of "community of practice"

The emerging description of MSDs as groups of people (i.e. *communities*) committed to a shared domain of *practice* appears to be strongly consistent with the concept and definition of "communities of practice" as developed by Etienne Wenger (1998, 2000, 2002). In his works communities of practice are defined as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wegner, 2002, p. 4). Within this context the people involved share "their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems" (Wenger and Synder, 2000, pp. 137–138). Moreover members are involved in the development of a set of relationships over time (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98) and form a community developed around a particular area of knowledge. Hence this knowledge gives the members a sense of shared (professional) identity and expertise (Wenger, 1998).

Following the original definition of "community of practice", Wenger *et al.* (2002) lately expanded its conceptualization by defining three main tenets as the bedrock upon which to build and cultivate a community of practice:

▶ **The domain**. A community of practice has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest, knowledge or expertise which defines a set of issues and creates a common sense of identity. "A well-defined domain legitimizes the community by affirming its purpose and value to members and other stakeholders. The domain inspires members to contribute and participate, guides their learning, and gives meaning to their actions" (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p. 27). The members of the community also value their collective competence and learn from each other (Wenger *et al.*, 2002).

▶ **The community**. A community of practice is primarily not just a social community but a community for social learning where members develop relationships and interactions based on trust and mutual respect (this understanding is related to the situation of the community within a specific shared domain of interest as noted). These relationships foster a sense of belonging and mutual commitment as members are more willing to engage in joint discussions, expose their ignorance, ask difficult questions, listen carefully and share information to help each other pursue their interest within their common domain (Wenger *et al.*, 2002).

► **The practice**. A community of practice is made by *practitioners* who develop a shared repertoire of resources such as experiences, stories, tools, *ways of addressing recurring problems* and *shared practices* consisting of a common set of situations, problems and perspectives. While the "domain" defines the topic the community focuses on, Wenger defines "practice" as "the specific knowledge the community develops, shares and maintains" (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p. 29). This process takes time; therefore it can only be created by a sustained and more or less regular interaction (Wenger *et al.*, 2002).

Interestingly, the three abovementioned concepts of a **domain**, a **community** and a **practice** are strongly consistent with the main themes reflecting the participants' description and experience of MSD in this study.

It is important to clarify that since the purpose of the research question of the paper was *explorative*, the similarity between the participants' accounts of the two MSDs and the concept of community of practice was somewhat unexpected, in that it was not linked with the focus of the literature on MSDs, nor was it in the articulated objectives of the organizers. For this reason the following three sections highlight some of the key similarities between the themes that have emerged and the three main tenets of the concept of community of practice as described by Wenger (1998, 2000, 2002). However the following sections do not seek to provide the reader with an exhaustive analysis of the consistencies between MSDs initiatives and communities of practice *in general*. Rather, their aim is to constitute a starting point for further works aiming to deepening the unexplored similarities and differences between these two phenomena in different contexts.

Acknowledging the existence of a common domain

According to Wenger (1998, 2000, 2002) a community of practice has an identity defined by a *common domain*. More precisely, the members have a commitment to a shared domain of *knowledge and expertise* which defines a common topic, a set of issues. This inspires members to contribute and participate by guiding their learning, and legitimizes the community by affirming its purpose and value to members and other stakeholders (Wenger *et al.*, 2002).

The existence of a common domain in the UNGC-PRI case study was reflected by the fact that investors, corporate representatives and civil society members were asked to attend the initiatives to share their knowledge on a very specific area of interest: responsible business in conflict-affected areas. This means that the vast majority of attendees had a similar professional experience in common. Therefore, the UNGC and PRI organizing teams were able to successfully support the development of a **common domain of interest**. This was made by encouraging discussions in which the participants could recognize the existence of a "*trait d'union*" between their experiences and challenges and those of others operating in conflict affected-countries. In fact, the way the MSDs were structured shows that the organizers sought to ignite discussions over issues that the participants felt as their own. That is why round-table discussions were

perceived, together with the informal side-meeting conversations, as the most interesting part of the initiative. On those occasions participants were encouraged to co-create meanings and ideas to address a common domain of interest they felt, to a greater or lesser degree, to be a part of *their own* professional domain. I would infer that this sense of active participation *and* ownership over the discussions, on a domain of interest that the participants felt *as common as well as their own*, is what made the round-table exercises successful:

> When you come (to these MSDs) you see that you probably have more interests in common than you think you do…so you might come with the perception that you have very different views on things but I think these kinds of discussions…reveal that there are common kind of areas of interest and more commonalities than you think…that's my impression, my experience… (business representative).

Another important characteristic of the common domain of interest emerging within the UNGC initiatives was its *inspirational* role. During the interviews I came across several times the idea that the United Nations is generally perceived as a force for good which conveys important initiatives around highly inspirational topics. Hence, the common domain of responsible business in conflict-affected areas, *because* it was addressed under a prestigious and neutral party such as the UN, was perceived to be highly motivating for the attendees. This is another important aspect in common with Wenger's (2002) idea of "common domain". In his view, a common domain (to be as such) should also constitute a source of inspiration and motivation for the members of a community of practice. This is reflected by the following quote, which shows how motivating it was for the people attending the MSD initiative to have a common interest or ambition to make business a force for good: "What I find certainly inspiring in these kinds of initiative is that we shared the common ambition to make the financial industry a force for good and that was really motivating" (business representative).

> I was very excited, I get excited every time I go to the UN…the building alone excites me just for what it represents and, even in my advanced stage, I still get very excited about walking into that building…and going into the rooms and sitting at the tables…and you do get a lofty feel that you are trying to do something, for what is perceived by everybody in that room, that needs to be done (business representative).

The concept of community in the UNGC case study

The idea of *community* is another important aspect emerging from the participants' description of the two MSD initiatives and it also reflects the second of the three tenets constituting Wenger's description of "community of practice". For Wenger (1998) and Wenger *et al.* (2002) the term "community" describes a group where members engage in joint discussions and activities, and share information to help each other pursue their interest within

their common domain. Another important aspect of the idea of community is the *development of relationships among the members of that particular group* (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Consistently, the concepts of *community* and *commonality* emerged as elements strongly characterizing the two MSDs according to the participants' descriptions.

Since the UNGC-PRI MSDs were occasional events organized on average once a year, the interviewees clearly described the importance of developing relationships and networking within those limited occasions compared with more regular MSD events they had attended elsewhere. The theme "*Networking within a small community*" emerging from the data analysis shows two important aspects reflecting Wenger *et al.*'s (2002) definition of community. First a number of interviewees taking part in the study recognized their belonging to a small "community" or small "crowd" and used the expression "our world" to refer to the initiatives convened by the UNGC. This means that a number of attendees were already aware of being part of a small community of like-minded people who had the chance to meet, network and discuss under the UN umbrella.

Second, several interviewees reported to have developed a number of *relationships* with other representatives within the MSDs under analysis. Again, this is another important tenet described by Wenger *et al.* (2002) as part of the concept of community. What emerges as a clear characteristic of the UNGC's MSDs was that the organizers strongly encouraged the development of relationships between members through informal chats, small talks and networking activities. Therefore, within the context of the UNGC, networking and face-to-face contacts were seen as probably the most important aspect of those meetings. This observation was confirmed, for example, by one member of a civil society organization who stated: "I tend to see these meetings more as networking opportunities, kind of getting to know people and also establishing relationships that then make it easier to kind of work with each other as the process develops".

Within networking activities, informal conversations and dialogues played a very important role to spur the creation of interpersonal bonds. Actually, through dialogues people were more likely to share their real challenges from a more personal point of view, therefore providing the interlocutors with a chance to get closer to each other and develop interpersonal bonds: "So when you get to these multi-stakeholder processes through dialogue you get to know and understand the needs, feelings and aspirations of the other participants and you create stronger relationships with those other participants" (civil society representative).

The concept of practice in the UNGC case study

As previously described, the "practice" is for Wenger *et al.* (2002) the third main tenet defining a "community of practice". This specific type of group is composed of "practitioners" who are actively engaged in professions related to the common domain of interest and who learn from each other's expertise. Therefore, according to Wenger, in communities of practice practitioners have the chance to share experiences, anecdotes, stories, a common set of situations and *ways of addressing problems that the other members can then use* in their daily professional activities (Wenger *et al.*, 2002).

A number of participants mentioned that the two MSDs were providing them with the space for sharing experiences, information and perspectives on practices of responsible business and investment adopted by different organizations operating all around the world. Despite those differences the information exchanged throughout official presentations and informal discussions all had a common denominator: *building a deeper interpersonal and inter-organizational understanding* and learning. This process of understanding and learning occurred as people were encouraged to exchange and share concrete experiences, anecdotes, examples and challenges they faced in their working activities: "I think that these dialogues can be a very good driver for sharing information and arguments and ways of describing things and using examples or even having case examples of how other companies have approached that" (business representative).

Hence, the exchange of ideas, tools and information occurred throughout both formal (e.g. official presentation) and informal conversations (e.g. coffee breaks) and it contributed to developing a shared repertoire of "lessons learned" available for other members of the community in case they were facing similar challenges in different contexts. I would argue that the motivation for people to put an effort into trying to understand the other's experiences was mainly for the purpose of applying this information to their own professional challenges. Hence, this act of shared learning sounds consistent with Wenger's idea of developing a set of stories and cases that aims to become a shared repertoire to support the participants in their daily practice (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Table 1 summarizes the similarities between the three tenets of communities of practice according to Wenger (1998) and Wenger *et al.* (2002), the main themes emerging from the data analysis of the case study, and some significant quotes from the interviewees.

Table 1 Comparison between the concept of community of practice and the findings of the case study

Community of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2011)	Emerging themes from the data analysis	Quotes
The *domain*. A community of practice has an identity defined by a shared domain of *interest*, expertise or knowledge. The domain inspires members to contribute and participate, gives meaning to their actions and guides their learning from each other (Wenger *et al.*, 2002)	"Acknowledging commonality by sharing experiences and challenges"	"When you come (to these MSDs) you see that you probably have more interests in common than you think you do…, so you might come with the perception that you have very different views on things but I think these kinds of discussions…reveal that there are common kind of areas of interest and more commonalities than you think… That's my impression, my experience" (business representative)
The *community* "creates the social fabric of learning. A strong community fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. It encourages the willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions and listen carefully" (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p. 28). Members engage in joint discussions, activities and share information to help each other pursue their interest within their common domain (Wenger, 2000)	"Networking within a small community"	"It's a very small community and at this point I am highly familiar with the other participants" (business representative). "Those type of meetings and the lounge and the coffee breaks…I mean the whole point of it, is being there face-to-face, it's to connect as human beings to each other and companies are made of people at the end of the day and things progress or don't progress because of the relationships with each other so I do think it's very…generally very important and relatively easy to make connections with people because that's the way we are wired I think at the end of the day. So you obviously represent your company but you are there to connect as people" (business representative)
The *practice*. A community of practice is made by *practitioners* who developed a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, *ways of addressing recurring problems, shared practices* consisting of a common set of situations, problems and perspectives. This process takes time; therefore it can only be created by a sustained and more or less regular interaction (Wenger *et al.*, 2002)	"Building a deeper interpersonal and inter-organizational understanding"	"People tried to understand the other's experiences for the purpose of applying them to themselves and to their own challenges…so that they have a lesson learnt to draw from in dealing with their own challenges that they are dealing with" (civil society representative)

Benefits of developing a community of practice within a MSD

As outlined in the communities of practice literature (e.g. Wenger, 1998, 2000; Dermott, 2000) CoPs entail a number of benefits compared with other learning groups such as informal networks, formal work groups or project teams (see for example Wenger and Synder, 2000). One advantage is to encourage groups to *leverage their tacit knowledge* through sharing information, experience and concrete examples about an area of common interest (Wenger, 2008). Interestingly, the sharing of concrete cases of how companies were approaching common issues related to responsible business was one of the key successful elements of the UNGC-MSDs, as reflected by the following quote:

> I think that these MSDs can be a very good driver for sharing information and arguments and ways of describing things and using examples or even having case examples of how other companies have approached that…so you go back and say: look, X is doing this way and we should do it because it's now becoming the industry standard… That sort of sharing of information and sharing of approaches and sharing experiences can be the *real benefit* (of the MSDs) (business representative).

CoPs have also the advantage of focusing on everyday problems, developments in the field and practical aspects constituting an important pool of information for the members to navigate through their challenges in their daily working life (Dermott, 2000):

> I found the meeting (MSD) definitely very successful because it was enabling the companies and the investors to actually use the guidance and seeing how relevant it would be in their day-to-day operations and then share these experiences and lessons learned… (civil society representative).

> I thought it was a very interesting scenario for sharing good practices and best practices around the world, the fact that you could sit on a table and talk to peer companies industries or other companies and then realize that we encounter most of the same problems or…obstacles in our career…and to be able to have different answers and different ways of solving these problems was also very, very interesting, considering the difference geographically and the contexts where we operate in (business representative).

Finally, communities of practice typically spur the *development of relationships* among the members of the group (Wenger *et al.*, 2002), encouraging social learning, trust development and mutual respect (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). This dynamic was also described by the participants in the study as one key factor of success for the UNGC-MSD: "The biggest value of these MSDs was the connections with the other people working on some projects in similar areas who often have a stake in this bigger issue…so, the relationships are really valuable…" (business representative).

> (The real benefit) of the meetings with companies and with the other investors was that you really had that line of time to kind of get to know one another and meet each other in a much more personal way (business representative).

As the previous quotes have shown, the typical advantages of being part of a CoP were identified (explicitly or implicitly) with the most successful factors of

the UNGC-MSDs. This suggests not only that MSDs can entail some of the key aspects of CoPs, but that according to the participants in the study, these aspects had actually a very positive impact on their practice within the framework of the MSD and potentially also beyond it.

Challenges to the development of a stronger community of practice within the MSD initiatives

As previously shown, the two MSDs organized by the UNGC and PRI show a number of consistencies with the concept of "community of practice". Nevertheless, I argue that the aspect of CoPs that required more attention was the development of a sense of *community*, compared with a *common domain* or a *common practice* (the existence of these two was clearly reported by the interviewees).

The absence of a stronger sense of community was probably due to the lack of *time* during the two events to nourish feelings of trust and familiarity, *especially between the new members*. Actually, the UN initiatives were held only once a year and lasted for approximately one day, hence the participants had quite sporadic occasions to meet and to develop a strong sense of "community" of practitioners, as Wenger *et al.* (2002) and Wenger and Synder (2000), describe it. More specifically, a more regular attendance, with a more stable number of participants would have contributed to develop stronger relationships of trust as well as the development of a common language among participants coming from such different locations and backgrounds.

However, it is worth mentioning that *time* in this context was a "pure" resource, meaning that it was not measured against performance metrics or the achievement of tangible outcomes such as in certain business organizations. Instead, the attendees had a space in which their contributions were subject to a more informal norm: that of time for *socialization*. This is why many interviewees noted that on the days of the meetings there was too much time allocated to official presentations and formal panel group discussions, considered as the less stimulating aspects of the gathering. These activities were described as taking time out from more interactive *processes of socialization*. In actual fact, according to the majority of interviewees, the informal discussions held during coffee breaks and lunches were the most fertile contexts in which individuals could exchange information, professional experiences, share challenges and develop relationships. Consistently, according to Wenger *et al.* (2002), these are all key elements (i.e. informal interactions, informal discussions, and development of relationships) necessary for the development of a "community of practice". I would then argue that future UNGC initiatives will need to strike a balance between time allocated for the presentational part of their meetings and the time dedicated to processes of socialization. This is not to say that panel discussions or official presentations did not play a substantial role in the development of a community of practice within the UNGC meetings. Nevertheless, these formal types of interaction mainly benefited the reinforcement of a *common domain* and a *common practice*. On the other hand, more time allocated to informal interactions, together with the moderation of professional facilitators,

could have greatly benefited the further development of a stronger *community*, as many interviewees reported.

Contributions

Contributions to the literature on CoP, multi-stakeholder dialogue and business and peace

This paper has sought to pave the way for future investigations showing the consistencies between CoPs and MSDs. This conceptual parallel emerges as a new direction, as neither Wenger (1998), Wenger *et al.* (2002), nor the current literature on MSDs have previously shown this linkage. This is probably because there are very few publications that had gathered and exposed empirical data from the stakeholders participating in this specific type of initiative. For this reason, the parallel between how *people describe their experience* and the concept of *community of practice* could not emerge without the *direct accounts* of stakeholder representatives attending MSDs. Although MSDs often occur within a limited, well-defined period and with a number of interests from different sectors to be considered, the UNGC-MSD cases show that the three pillars of CoP—common domain, community and practice—were recognized by the participants in the study to be central aspects of these initiatives. Future studies could extend the research area and explore similarities within other cases of MSDs.

Furthermore, the present paper contributes to fill the gap within the business and peace literature focusing on partnership and dialogue by providing an empirical description of round-table discussions organized by the UNGC. As previously outlined, there is currently very little research investigating how international business and non-business organizations collaborate to tackle issues related to conflict and peace development (Kolk and Lenfant, 2015). The present case studies constitute one of very few direct descriptions of this collaboration by illustrating *how* individuals from business, civil society and international organizations meet and discuss issues concerning "responsible business in conflict-affected areas". I argue that further empirical descriptions would dramatically increase our understanding of the drivers, challenges and motivations (at both an individual and organizational level) standing behind these increasingly important initiatives.

Contribution to practice

Although the present paper sought to discuss the theoretical implications of empirical data, some of the current findings also have interesting implications for the organization of both MSDs and CoPs.

First, the present investigation has illustrated how dynamics of socialization and social learning do arise specifically within informal conversation, small

group discussion events and side meeting activities. As previously shown, the participants in the study described those activities as the most productive and interesting part of the initiatives. This *empirically* confirms what Wenger states about organizing concrete communities of practice:

> The primary source of value creation lies in informal process, such as conversations, brainstorming, and pursuing ideas. Formal organizational designs and processes are still important but they contribute to value creation to the extent that they are in the service of informal processes (Wenger, 2000, p. 244).

Hence practitioners working in the field of MSD and/or community of practice development have empirical data supporting the importance of designing more spaces for informal communication so as to foster dialogue, interpersonal bonds and effective collaboration between individuals representing different organizations.

Second, the practitioners working in the organization of MSDs can now rely on practical suggestions provided by the rich literature on communities of practice as I sought to show that MSD initiatives (those that have developed over a reasonably long period of time) *can* be conceived as specific types of community of practice. In fact, in the two cases under analysis, the participants reported to share a common domain of interest, to be part of a community of people meeting on a more or less regular basis and to share a common repertoire of resources which they use to address some of challenges they face in their own organizations. However, I would argue that this conceptual parallel is not *explicitly* clear in most cases to practitioners organizing those events. This is confirmed by the absence of the concept of community of practice in the current literature on MSDs as well as by the lack of suggestions on how to organize MSD activities within practice-oriented literature drawing upon Wenger's ideas. However I contend that Wenger's suggestions would be of great help to practitioners to decide what *types* of activities MSDs may need. These activities may be formal or informal meetings, panel discussions, problem-solving sessions or group exercises. For example, in my view Wenger (2000) gives specific suggestions on five areas deemed to be sensible for the development of community of practices which could be valuable tools in the organization of MSDs too. These suggestions focus on:

▶ Developing leadership within the community through enabling leaders to play their role to help the community develop

▶ Implementing connectivity between the attendees by brokering relationships between people who need to talk or between attendees who need help or can offer help

▶ Devising processes by which newcomers can become full members of the group without diluting the community focus

▶ Drafting concrete learning agenda by exploring knowledge gaps and by developing projects to close those gaps

▶ Producing a number of artefacts (such as documents, tools, stories, website) to keep the community focused and alive throughout the time.

Also, as previously shown, the CoP's literature stresses three key elements: *domain, community* and *practice*. These may be very useful points of reference in the organization of multi-stakeholder dialogues, in particular to keep these collaborative efforts ongoing and *alive* after the actual event has taken place. Some of the key questions to ensure that a community of practice can develop within MSDs are outlined below:[10]

▶ **Domain**. What is the participants' shared domain? In other words: what topic and issues do the participants really care about? How is the domain connected to the different strategies of the organizations involved? What is the leading edge of the common domain? What are the gaps in knowledge within this particular domain? To what extent and how are organizations incentivizing their employees to regularly attend the initiatives? What is in it for the participants and their organizations? Are members ready to take some leadership in promoting/developing the domain?

▶ **Community**. What kinds of activities will help develop trust and generate synergies between the participants? What roles are people going to play? How will newcomers be introduced into the community? How can the community balance the various needs/interest/priorities of members? Who is going to champion the development of the community (from an early stage of development to a mature stage) by providing guidance, legitimacy, funds or other means for the community to thrive? How can the community members stay connected after the MSD has taken place (e.g. online tools and platforms)?

▶ **Practice**. The participants in communities of practice have to become proactive in taking charge of the development of their practice. Therefore, it becomes crucial for a CoP to ask itself: what kinds of learning activities should we organize and what knowledge should we share and document? How should the knowledge be organized to fully reflect the practice of members? How can it be easily accessible and constantly updated? Who is going to be the community librarian?

The previous suggestions are just an example of how the CoP literature can inform the practice of MSDs. However, I am confident that practitioners working in both fields (i.e. community of practice and MSDs) can find very useful and practical information by further exploring academic works focusing on the intersection between these two areas. This paper is a first example of that.

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10 Many suggestions in the three sections draw upon Wenger *et al.* (2002, p. 45).

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