Terms for Endearment: Business, NGOs and Sustainable Development

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The 1990s have witnessed an unprecedented surge in interest and activity in collaborations between firms and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with an impressive number of initiatives currently in operation across the globe (see Lober 1997; Murphy and Bendell 1997a). While research into these developments has, to date, been relatively limited, it has become clear that quite specific questions, issues and problems arise in the context of business–NGO collaboration compared to the rather more researched phenomenon of business–business collaboration (e.g. Varadarajan and Rajaratnam 1989; Hamel et al. 1989; Oliver 1990). Indeed, given that the goal sets of the organisations involved are almost by definition going to be weighted very differently in terms of commercial and social objectives, differences, even clashes, in organisational cultures and values might be expected to be an intrinsic part of such ventures (Hartman and Stafford 1996; Milne et al. 1996). To date, this issue has received scant attention in the literature, and therefore the time for more considerable reflection and analysis of these posited clashes, and their role in influencing the success or otherwise of programmes designed to promote sustainable development, is considerably overdue.

This chapter seeks to explore business–NGO collaboration from an organisational culture perspective. It does so principally in order to develop a more rigorous examination of the possibilities and problems of ‘culture clash’ between such diverse partner organisations, and thereby to explore the likely implications for how these collaborative arrangements might be managed. Martin’s (1992) typology of perspectives on organisational culture is used as the central organising theme for understanding different
interpretations of culture in this context. The main focus of the chapter is a case study conducted by the author of a current collaboration, the WWF 1995 Plus Group. Evidence from this case is examined according to Martin’s categorisation and this is used to explore the cultural dynamics underlying the introduction of the scheme in participating organisations.

The chapter proceeds by offering a brief review of the literature pertaining to business–NGO collaboration, followed by a short introduction to the organisational culture literature, and in particular to Martin’s (1992) typology. The case study methodology adopted by the study is then explained before setting out the details of the Plus Group. The main part of the chapter deals with analysis of the case from an organisational culture perspective, showing how cultural differences between business–NGO collaborators might be understood and accommodated, as well as highlighting some of the limitations associated with particular ways of conceptualising those differences. In the concluding part of the chapter, the contribution of the organisational culture perspective to our understanding of business–NGO collaboration is evaluated, and some recommendations proposed.

### Business–NGO collaboration

Although examples of collaboration between businesses and NGOs have occurred at least since the 1970s, relationships between them have commonly been characterised as highly aggressive and confrontational (Westley and Vredenburg 1991; Stafford and Hartman 1996; Murphy and Bendell 1997). During the 1990s, however, while considerable conflict still remains between these groups, there can be little doubt that both the extent and degree of collaboration between them has been growing steadily. While reliable figures on the scale of such business–NGO alliances are not readily available, there is considerable case study and anecdotal evidence to suggest that the number of formal alliances has indeed grown significantly over the past decade, with Lober (1997) and Murphy and Bendell (1997) both providing details of numerous recent examples, and suggesting reasons for the growth in such activity. Moreover, a 1996 SustainAbility survey suggested that this growth was likely to be maintained into the new millennium with over 85% of its respondents believing that partnerships would increase over the next five years (Elkington 1997). Similarly, the degree of interaction between commercial and civil organisations appears to have intensified. Both Stafford and Hartman (1996; Hartman and Stafford 1997) and Murphy and Bendell (1997), for example, set out examples where NGOs have not merely been the passive recipients of the philanthropic gestures of PR-smart companies, or the ‘brand-for-hire’ endorsers of existing company products, but have played a critical role in developing corporate policy and effecting the strategic development of their commercial partners.

With collaboration then taking on increasingly complex and more interconnected forms, there is clearly a need for partner organisations to be able to work closely and
effectively together over the medium to long term. Westley and Vredenburg (1991), however, suggest that this might be problematic, given the divergence of goal and value systems underlying commercial and not-for-profit organisations; hence there is likely to be some form of 'strategic bridging' across culturally heterogeneous organisations. Milne et al. (1996) also attempt to set out the types of cultural difference that might occur and lead to culture clash, emphasising, in addition to goal incongruity, the prevalence of perceived differences in beliefs, attitudes, problem-solving approaches and ways of working. Hartman and Stafford (1996: 415) take up this theme, emphasising how 'bridging relationships are inherently precarious' but, they argue, 'not necessarily doomed'. They suggest that the stability of the alliance is likely to be inversely related to the degree of conflict evident in the partners' cultural values and to the level of goal incongruity. However, they contend that this can be mitigated if partners succeed in recognising and managing these differences, and manage to foster a degree of trust, openness and commitment.

As yet, however, despite allusions to these cultural differences and their potential importance, there has been little formal empirical examination of how they might be manifested and experienced in practice, how they might be dealt with or managed by alliance members, and whether indeed they are a significant element of the collaborative process. The most compelling evidence so far is that provided in recent empirical papers by Milne et al. (1997) and Crane (1998), both of which suggest that culture clash does occur in business–NGO collaboration, but neither of which explore the issue in any real depth. It is evident also that the application of the organisation culture concept to business–NGO collaboration has as yet been only very partially applied, and there is an impressive collection of work in the organisation studies literature—much of it critical of the types of assumption and approach characteristic of the use of culture in the business–NGO collaboration literature¹— which might be fruitfully brought to bear. Hence, this study has sought to explore specifically the cultural dimension of business–NGO collaboration in more detail.

### The concept of organisational culture

While organisational culture is clearly an important concept in understanding business–NGO relations, it would be a mistake to assume that its use is not in itself problematic. The organisational culture literature has grown rapidly and in many diverse ways since it was first established in the mainstream organisational studies literature around the early 1980s.² Such developments, though, have created a field with enormous ambiguity

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1. For further discussion of the use and misuse of organisation culture in relation to green business, see Crane 1995 and Newton and Harte 1997.
2. There are a number of excellent reviews of the organisation culture literature, the most comprehensive probably being Brown 1995. Alvesson and Berg (1992) also provide a good account of the considerable growth in this literature during the 1980s.
surrounding its key concepts and their definitions, as well as critical differences in the kinds of perspective commonly applied by culture researchers. Indeed, one of the foremost organisation culture theorists, Joanne Martin (1992), talks of the ‘state of conceptual chaos’ that surrounds the subject, and this can provide serious obstacles to any attempts at modelling and understanding business–NGO relations through the culture perspective. Nonetheless, with culture clearly a key issue in the understanding and management of such relations, it is less appropriate to dismiss culture altogether than to recognise the range of possibilities, the potential criticisms, and the limitations, of any given perspective.

Basically, culture is regarded here as being concerned with a broad range of phenomena: various artefacts such as behaviours, stories, myths, symbols, language, etc.; cognitive beliefs, values, attitudes, and codes; and basic, taken-for-granted assumptions (Schein 1992). These are the basic contents of the culture concept, and might be regarded as three different, though interrelated, cultural levels. Martin (1992), however, makes a critical distinction between the ways in which culture can (and has been) understood and modelled, and these three perspectives—integration, differentiation and fragmentation—form the analytical core of the paper.\(^3\)

The integration perspective assumes that there is a single unitary culture that is widely and relatively unambiguously shared throughout the organisation. Hence, the organisation here has one identifiable set of behaviours, values and assumptions which are accepted and internalised by organisation members and which set it apart from other organisations. The differentiation perspective identifies unity mainly at the level of subcultural groupings and focuses on the conflict and inconsistency experienced between these groups. Hence, the organisation can be seen as a collection of distinct subcultural groups, organised, for example, around hierarchical levels, organisational functions, gender, race, or any number of other features. Finally, the fragmentation perspective assumes little cultural consensus within the organisation and concentrates attention on the ambiguity and complexity of the cultural terrain. Here, the assumption that individual values, beliefs and world-views are shared to any meaningful extent within the organisation is essentially rejected.

This chapter attempts to show the possibilities and limitations associated with each of these three perspectives as they apply to the experiences of those actually involved in the everyday reality of business–NGO collaboration. They are used to interpret the responses provided by collaboration participants in respect to cultural distinctions. In this way it is intended to provide a more informed understanding of the role of culture in business–NGO collaboration. The three perspectives are also used to examine the possibilities for how culture clash might be mediated during the collaboration process.

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\(^3\) There are a number of other important categorisations that have been introduced into the culture literature, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider them in sufficient depth to do the arguments justice. See, however, Brown 1995 for a discussion of espoused culture versus culture-in-practice and Smircich 1983 for a discussion of culture as metaphor versus culture as variable. See Crane 1995 for an examination of these in the context of organisational greening.
Case study approach

The research method used to develop these insights has been the single case study. This was considered to be the most appropriate method, given that the study was essentially exploratory and required qualitative depth in order to capture the full cultural complexity of the alliance phenomenon (see Bonoma 1985; Smith 1991). The case selected was the WWF 1995 Plus Group, an ongoing UK green alliance between (at the time of fieldwork) 75 companies and an environmental NGO, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Formally in operation since January 1996 (but effectively formed in 19914), the Plus Group is focused on the environmental management of forest sources for wood and wood-based products (i.e. those with wood, paper and/or pulp components). It is a particularly high-profile collaboration in the UK, and, as one of the first examples of an NGO having direct impact on the internal operations of the business partner, could be seen as a model, or a test bed, for the type of highly interactive business–NGO relationships that are said to be emerging (Aspinwall and Smith 1996). For the study of cultural clash and mediation, the Plus Group is an especially instructive case study, since the membership includes a very diverse range of corporate partners from large PLCs to green niche operators and co-operatives.

A grounded, inductive, research methodology has been used whereby the concern has been to draw out data relating to culture in general rather than to investigate any particular propositions or hypotheses. Data collection consisted principally of a series of 17 semi-structured interviews conducted with individual representatives5 from 13 member organisations during 1996, i.e. after the initial development of the group and the formalisation of its systems and membership criteria, but before many of its proposed benefits had been realised. Interviews covered a range of issues relating to the management of the group, and some of the more general findings are discussed in Crane 1998. Considerable additional data in the form of informal discussions, in-house documentation, marketing artefacts and archival material was also collected. An additional group of 27 interviews were carried out with three corporate members of the group as part of a wider study of environmental management and marketing; this data has also been incorporated into the analysis presented here. Organisations were sampled theoretically, such that they were considered to provide insight into the emergent theory rather than reflecting any kind of systematic statistical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Pragmatic considerations, though, also played a important role here, for there were only a limited number of firms that agreed to be part of the study and which could be practically included. Most interviews were recorded on audiotape and then transcribed; all other data was recorded in field notes and then written up before being subjected to analysis.

4 The Plus Group can be regarded as an prolongation of an earlier, virtually identical alliance, the WWF 1995 Group. This had been in operation since December 1991, but, having reached its original date of termination, was renamed and relaunched as the Plus Group (due to terminate in 1999). For the purpose of this study, they are regarded as a single alliance.

5 The individuals consulted were the main representatives of corporate partners plus two members of the WWF project team.
The form of grounded analysis used was highly iterative in nature, with data being successively broken down, or ‘coded’ such that themes, patterns and relationships could be identified and established (Strauss and Corbin 1990). These were then developed further into theoretical constructs and stories while constantly comparing back with the original data to ‘check’ their validity, and to determine what new data had to be sought. Corroboration of analysis was sought by content analysis of interview transcripts, and by cross-referencing across organisations and with published data. Successive iterations of coding and analysis were thus conducted until logical, plausible and internally consistent findings emerged. It should be recognised, however, that this is only one interpretation that could have been placed on the data, albeit one that has been arrived at after an exhaustive process of analysis and re-analysis. The approach used is to some extent inherently subjective, but its value lies in its potential for uncovering the richness of the area under study and developing considerable depth of insight.

### The WWF 1995 Plus Group

The avowed aim of the Plus Group alliance has been to ensure an appropriate level of environmental management at the forest sources used to produce the components of products marketed and sold by member companies (Bendell and Sullivan 1996). These members have included, among others, major UK companies such as B&Q, The Body Shop, Boots the Chemist, Railtrack, Sainsbury, Tesco, as well as numerous smaller and less-known organisations, including many of the above’s suppliers. The project has involved the establishment of an effective means for assessing and certifying forest management procedures based on widely accepted criteria, and the development of an eco-label and market for products meeting these standards. This centred on the formation of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an independent membership NGO made up of representatives from environmental and social groups, the timber trade and the forestry profession. It was formally established in 1993 to evaluate, accredit and monitor certifiers of forest management practice, and is now central to a number of national collaborations across the globe between buyer groups and NGOs. The formation of a green alliance to tackle these problems has represented a significant departure from the usual conflict between businesses and environmental groups in relation to timber-based products, particularly since NGO demonstrations were clearly an important catalyst in the initial creation of the group (Murphy 1996a, 1996b).

Under the criteria for membership of the alliance, member companies have been required to pledge themselves to a number of commitments relating to their sourcing of relevant products, the ultimate aim of which has been to phase out by 1999 all forest sources not meeting standards adjudged to be ‘well managed’ as defined by the FSC (based on a range of social, environmental and economic sustainability indicators). The principal environmental management system introduced through the alliance has been supplier questionnaires, circulated through the supply chains of member companies, and
in turn feeding into company databases of forest sources and management systems. Questionnaires track the chain of custody of timber-based product components, with a view to encouraging source forests to develop certified management systems. FSC endorsement can be attached to products in the form of an eco-label, although, at the time of fieldwork, few certifiable products had reached retailers’ shelves. The role of the WWF in the collaboration has been to manage and co-ordinate the alliance, to set targets (in view of the arguments and needs of current and prospective business members), to assess companies’ progress towards them, and to act as a gatekeeper for membership.

# Cultural differences and similarities

Respondents indicated a range of cultural differences and similarities within the domain of the alliance, and these can be usefully examined from each of Martin’s (1992) three perspectives, as the following sections illustrate.

## Integration perspective

The integration perspective has dominated the (albeit limited) literature to date that has considered cultural issues in relation to business–NGO collaboration. Here the assumption is that the partnering organisations each have a single, unified culture which is shared by its own members, but which is distinct from that of the other organisation(s). It is this difference between the organisational-level cultures of environmental groups and businesses that is seen by Hartman and Stafford (1996) among others as creating inherent tension in collaborative arrangements. In the current study, such differences between the WWF and the business partners were indeed referred to by many respondents, with some corporate respondents in particular focusing on the different ways in which problems tended to be approached, apparent variations in time-scales for reaching decisions and implementing policy, and the vastly different context in which decision-making had to take place. Essentially, for some corporate executives there were considerable doubts as to the WWF’s understanding of businesses priorities, prompting suggestions from some quarters that they were ‘too short-sighted business-wise’, ‘blindly changing parameters’ and, hence, ‘unable to appreciate commercial pressures’. As one company representative put it: ‘There’s a real culture clash between those two styles . . . from my personal experience, I don’t think you can bring the two together’.

However, not all respondents were as dismissive; and, overall, cultural differences were in the main seen as acceptable, given the inevitability of some kind of difference between business and NGO partners. In fact, it was the relative similarity and congruence of the WWF to business organisations, compared to other ‘fanatical’ pressure groups (as they were often labelled), that most respondents saw as contributing both to their company’s enthusiasm for the initiative, and to the relative smooth running of the alliance process:

The WWF is considered to be for the socially acceptable green person isn’t it? Whereas, if you want to be a little more awkward and argumentative you go
and join Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth or something like that . . . I suppose [my company] can be said to be conservative with a small ‘c’, and we would go along with a pressure group that is socially acceptable. Everybody accepts WWF because it’s nice people isn’t it? They don’t take the aggressive attitude (planning manager, corporate partner).

Fineman and Clarke’s (1996) study of firms’ responses to green stakeholders makes a similar point, arguing that companies have been generally unwilling or unable to accept the legitimacy of concerns raised by the more confrontational green pressure groups. For companies, a willingness on the part of NGOs to adopt their preferred mode of raising and resolving issues—setting up meetings and working groups, having ‘civilised’ office-bound discussions, etc.—rather than traditional pressure group tactics of direct action, confrontation and boycott appears to be the only way that collaboration will be contemplated. If cultural differences exist, then it seems that it is the pressure groups that must adapt, not businesses. The following company respondent, for example, states unambiguously where they see the burden for achieving cultural harmony lying:

The WWF might become a bit more business-like, but I don’t think the businesses are going to become more WWF-like—other than the fact that they will try and introduce an ethical policy . . . But the way of working? I hope not. I may resign if [respondent’s company] becomes more like the WWF! (environment manager, corporate partner).

Just as all pressure groups were not seen as the same, so too were member companies rarely regarded as culturally homogenous, and it was common for respondents to describe them as falling into broad cultural groups. First, the retailers in the group represented a significant presence, and, in terms of size and turnover, conducted a significant majority of the business activity relevant to the initiative. Having organised themselves into a discrete sub-group within the overall group, the retailers tended to be seen by some as a different kind of entity to the other corporate members, with their own goal systems and ways of working. The green niche companies were also to some extent seen as forming a particular cultural group, operating with distinctly different priorities to those companies with broader strategic positions. Indeed, they were seen in some quarters to be closer culturally to the NGO partner than the other commercial organisations. But, again, the differences between organisations should not be overemphasised, and the experiences of one green niche firm that had developed out of a charity project funded by the WWF was instructive on this point. As the chief executive explained, the workings of a charity and a commercial organisation (albeit an environmentally attuned one) were increasingly becoming more homogenous:

Certainly, a lot of the phrases and a lot of the systems are being introduced into the voluntary sector from the commercial sector (chief executive, corporate partner).

So, from the unitary perspective, the overall impression suggested by respondents was that cultural differences between organisations did exist, and did matter, and certainly could be the cause of certain conflicts, but it was clear that these tended to be viewed in
a relative way. Hence, some charities were seen as more similar to commercial organisations than others, some companies were seen as more similar to particular companies than others, and some companies were seen as more similar to charities than others.

**Differentiation perspective**

Despite being the most common view of organisational culture, the integration perspective is not, however, the only one that can be applied to business–NGO collaboration. Indeed, this particular lens provides a picture that tends to miss many of the essential dynamics that underlie the collaboration process, and could even fail to recognise some of the more critical elements in the effective management of business–NGO relations. By focusing more on the subcultural level, then, a different, and to some extent more important understanding can be developed. The differentiation perspective does not then assume that any of the collaborating organisations can be seen in terms of a single unified culture that distinguishes it from the other organisation(s). Rather, it focuses attention on the cultural groups and micro-communities that might coalesce around particular functions and social groups within the organisation. Cultural heterogeneity between these groups, then—and any attendant clash, conflict or mediation—becomes the key issue, not whether organisations as a whole are similar or different.

Certainly, respondents from the Plus Group quite frequently described situations and issues in terms of subcultures. As with the descriptions of unified cultures, subcultures tended to be outlined in terms of degrees of environmental awareness/concern and commercial awareness/concern. Hence, there was a widely held belief that the project team within WWF actually responsible for the running of the Plus Group was in many ways more in tune with business interests than was much of the rest of the organisation. As this WWF respondent suggests, the members of the project team needed to be ‘business-friendly’, and this inevitably imposed a certain cultural distance with other parts of the organisation:

> If you are in corporate partnerships [within the WWF] you have to work with business continually: so you’re more of a business person than you are an environmentalist. If you are a forests officer then you are somewhere in between. Inevitably, there are different cultures of people in an organisation (project manager, NGO partner).

So, for the NGO partner, subcultural differences were seen as inevitable, and in fact as essential for the success of the collaboration: the need to maintain both commercial and environmental credibility meant that only by seeing the organisation as culturally differentiated could all constituencies be satisfied.

Subcultural differences also extended, though, into the corporate members, reflecting the different roles played by certain employees and/or functions in the operation of the initiative. Company representatives in the alliance were frequently drawn from general management (in the smaller companies) or technical, quality or environment sections (in the larger companies), but crucially only rarely from the marketing or procurement division. As a result, the role of company representatives in their host institutions was
principally to influence existing purchasing arrangements habitually conducted by other staff, rather than to oversee the procurement process or to initiate new arrangements themselves.

In general, these differences in role were reflected in distinct subcultural identities, such that many company representatives presented themselves as being more environmentally aware and concerned than their procurement colleagues. Hence, the representatives tended either to be specialist environmental staff, or at least ‘enthusiastic amateurs’, whereas salespeople and buyers were predominantly described by interviewees as ‘not environmentally conditioned’ but very much more ‘hard-nosed’, driven mainly by concerns for cost reductions, sales margins and, more colourfully, ‘screwing down the current supplier another 5%’. Clearly, within these subcultures, individuals might in many respects display a healthy diversity, but substantial unity was certainly evident in terms of differences in terms of cultural knowledge and frames of reference, particularly since individual roles, goals and systems of assessment tended to reflect these divisions.

What this means is that company representatives often felt more culturally aligned and bonded to their environmental counterparts in other companies than they did to their immediate colleagues in the procurement division of their own companies. Hence, subcultural affiliations could not only form within organisations, but even across them.6

**Fragmentation perspective**

Such views of culture are not, however, without their critics, and Martin’s final perspective on organisation culture, fragmentation, suggests that the emphasis placed on the sharing of culture is too static and reductionist. In the fragmentation view, culture is seen as much more ambiguous, and the cultural affiliations and interpretations of the individual are seen as constantly shifting, and frequently contradictory. Hence, those involved in the business–NGO alliance might be indeterminate in their beliefs and values, and thus sporadically and loosely connected by their changing positions on a variety of issues. Their involvement, their subcultural identities, and their individual self-definitions fluctuate depending on which issues are activated at a given moment (Martin 1992: 153).

Through this perspective, then, culture clash would be seen as issue-based and highly contextual rather than based on overall group differences, and would occur both across and within individual organisations. Moreover, clash might even be manifested *within* the individual, since their transitory membership of shifting coalitions could potentially lead to personal ideological tension.

Among the Plus Group members, the fragmentation perspective helped to shed light on the apparently contradictory positions held by some respondents, and how they

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6 This clearly has strong parallels with the development of cultural identification among particular professions where professional training and socialisation engenders particular values and frames of reference that are widely shared by practitioners regardless of their institution of employment.
seemingly operated with multiple role identities. This was most evident in the case of those company representatives who felt themselves to be very much with a foot in both camps with respect to the initiative. They wanted the project to work well, and this meant collaborating horizontally with immediate competitors in order to develop buying power; at the same time, however, given that most firms had rationalised their membership in terms of developing some kind of differential edge over competitors, they also wanted to prevent these firms from becoming members:

> From a business perspective . . . anything that gives me competitive advantage is going to be welcome . . . so from that perspective I’d be happy if everybody stays away and gives us a free run. On a broader scale, ultimately it’s got to become better if more people become involved and committed to it (marketing manager, corporate partner).

As such, managers in member companies might be seen as drifting between apparently conflicting subcultures, thus challenging both the integration and the differentiation perspectives. More deeply, some managers clearly lived with some form of value ambiguity regarding their environmental beliefs, since they found themselves frequently emphasising different justifications for their organisation’s involvement in the project according to the situation and the audience. Hence, company buyers would be confronted with a clear no-nonsense business argument for the initiative, while meetings with other environmentally committed representatives might bring forth more moral and emotional rationales. Thus, respondents would sometimes offer apparently contradictory assertions of their own environmental beliefs—again, what position they took depended on the particular role they were asked to play. However, this did not seem to be a cause of a great deal of stress on the part of respondents, and seemed very much to be regarded as an intrinsic part of the ambivalence and theatre of corporate life.

So what we have, then, is three varied accounts of the cultural dynamics of business–NGO collaboration as seen through the distinctive lenses of integration, differentiation and fragmentation. Martin’s (1992) suggestion is that neither perspective is more right, or more ‘real’, than the others, but that any cultural context can be better understood by using all three. Hence, it is not the concern here to assess each perspective’s relative contribution to our understanding of business–NGO collaboration, but to use them to develop a more rounded picture of this phenomenon, and to aid in identifying the means of managing it more effectively. It is to this, and in particular the role of cultural mediators, that the discussion now turns.

### Cultural mediators

Given the rather different representations of business–NGO collaboration offered by the three perspectives on culture, and the clear evidence of perceived culture clash of various forms suggested by them, two key questions need to be resolved. First, how can, or should, the different representations be reconciled? And, second, how can this perceived
clash be dealt with, if at all, in the alliance process? Case evidence from the Plus Group initiative revealed that the key issue in addressing these issues was the role played by what are referred to here as ‘cultural mediators’. Essentially, these are certain individuals and groups within the alliance who were found to act as bridges between some of the various constituencies involved, principally by establishing common meanings and understandings across cultural boundaries. Effectively, they were translators of cultural knowledge between cultural and subcultural groups, providing shared vocabularies and frames of reference, such that cultural clash did not impose impossible obstacles for effective communication to take place and for mutual respect and understanding to be fostered.

The Plus Group project managers in the WWF were cultural mediators in that they had to translate the environmental goals of their organisation and its concomitant values of conservation, dialogue, participation, etc. into a form acceptable, and even desirable, for business interests. Hence they had to prove how the WWF, and the Plus Group project, were not antithetical to business goals and beliefs. This took the form of setting up appropriate formal systems (‘they’ve been able to set up practical goals’) articulating benefits in terms readily appreciated by business (‘[the WWF] are actually addressing [commercial] issues and saying to us: in a business sense we understand that, unless there is a business payback to you, you’re probably not going to be interested’) as well as adopting the appropriate symbolic trappings of corporate convention—an outwardly ‘professional’ approach conducted by ‘short-haired, suit-wearing’ managers providing the requisite diet of glossy brochures and corporate launches. Hence:

[The WWF] are aware that they can’t afford to have a stereotyped environmentalist approach. They can’t be woolly and indeterminate on things. They can’t have high moral principles and ideas but not have actually any degree of a sense of reality with it, because there’s no way they’ll get to tie business in (environment manager, corporate partner).

So the project team operated as mediators between the unitary cultures of the WWF and the business partners. Environmentally committed company representatives also adopted similar roles, mediating between the commercially oriented culture of their firms and what was still perceived as a relatively idealistic approach on the part of the WWF. To this end, they too sought to distance themselves from the stereotypical ‘environmentalist’ image of the ‘beads and braids brigade’, which might have weakened their credibility within the organisation. Again, there was a strong emphasis here on ensuring that they communicated the correct level of pragmatism and professionalism in order to achieve corporate approbation. In this way, the cultural mediators could be regarded as helping both sides to see the position of the other in what might otherwise be a relationship between incompatibles:

Pressure groups are in the business of campaigning and they are not in the business of making other people’s lives easy. I’m not in the business of being good to pressure groups. And the businesses are selling what they sell . . . so its a constant tension between everybody’s needs. And we try to smooth the waters—I’m not sure successfully, but we try (environment manager, corporate partner).
Critically, there was a general consensus that the perceptions of cultural difference between the two partners tended to be increasingly allayed, or at least accepted, over time. Mutual adaptation and learning smoothed the waters of cultural heterogeneity. Thus, the corporate partner might grow more comfortable with green issues, and, as the following company representative indicates, the NGO partner might become more attuned with the commercial approach:

[The WWF] have very idealistic objectives . . . but my immediate director . . . encourages me to take the line of: ‘try to teach them how to be commercially minded!’ [laughs]. And they are, they are! They are beginning to understand. And I think deep down they understand where we are coming from. But of course they can’t be seen to be changing camps—they’ve got to be idealistic to drive it forward (planning manager, corporate partner).

So, while cultural change of some kind might have been beneficial to the running of the initiative, it was also accepted that too much adaptation could erode the particular strength that each partner brought to the partnership in the first place—the systematic procedures and commercial ‘clout’ of the businesses, and the credibility and motivation of the NGO. Hence, the degree of balance in this respect appears to be a critical one, particularly, it seems, for the NGO partner, since it is they who, in the search for market-based environmental solutions, appear to shoulder the greatest burden for change.

As a means of bridging and buffering heterogeneous cultural beliefs, behaviours and attitudes, cultural mediators were also strongly associated with the subcultural view of organisations. Clearly, where there is a group of such individuals, they might be seen as occupying a distinct subculture within their own organisation, e.g. the project team in the WWF, or particular environment teams in the corporate partners. This might even, as it was argued earlier, be manifested as a cross-organisational subcultural affiliation. Indeed, for the corporate partners, respondents emphasised how mediation was necessary not just between themselves and their NGO partners, but within their organisation. As it has been argued, the representatives saw themselves as subculturally distinct from company buyers and therefore it was seen as necessary again to adapt their own cultural frames of reference in order to communicate with and motivate these key constituencies in the initiative. Hence, buyers were perceived as needing ‘hard-nosed’ commercial arguments with clear directives and performance incentives, rather than ‘emotive’ or ‘ethical’ arguments, in order to act on the policy on a day-to-day level:

How I go about [motivating the buyers]—all I can do is try and make the case . . . show how it relates to customers and how . . . there’s a danger of losing business ultimately if we don’t actually come up with . . . the [certified product] that those people are going to want to buy (environment manager, corporate partner).

Obviously, one of the problems with this is that, although mediation may be essential to lubricate the wheels of collaboration, it can dilute, even corrupt, the cultural meanings that any particular constituency may have wished to preserve intact. Much like ‘Chinese whispers’, the message intended may not be the one received after being filtered through
different cultural layers. This might be seen as a particular concern for NGOs establishing collaborations aimed at environmental or other social goals, since some of the key objectives in this case may well be associated with consciousness-raising, education, and surfacing and challenging of entrenched assumptions and values.

There must also be concerns regarding the particular individuals charged with the role of cultural mediation and its concomitant needs for boundary-spanning and cultural reinterpretation. Clearly, this requires a certain understanding of cultural differences and the different bonds and affiliations that might exist within the domain of the alliance. Without the requisite dexterity in the skills of cultural transition and translation, these individuals might easily falter in their responsibilities, particularly if they do not even recognise that this is an essential part of their role. Moreover, the fragmentation perspective on culture would suggest that identifying cultural ties and affiliations might be highly problematic given such complexity and dynamism in any cultural context. More worryingly, perhaps, the individual mediator might experience considerable stress on account of the need to engage and express different, even contradictory, values and beliefs. Hence, unless collaborators recognise the role of the cultural mediator, and prepare for it accordingly, then fractures in the alliance might well develop from these points of stress, creating adverse outcomes at both the personal and organisational levels.

**Conclusion**

The evidence presented here shows quite strongly how different conceptions of organisation culture can lead to different understandings of business–NGO collaboration, and even to variations in prescriptions for how they can be effectively managed. Crucially, some of the limitations of the integration perspective, so commonly applied to this phenomenon, have been revealed, suggesting that a more considered interpretation of culture should be applied in the future. This seems to be particularly the case for academic researchers, since it is clear from the results here that practitioners, as a matter of course, already tend to see culture in multiple ways. As has already been noted (Crane 1995; Newton and Harte 1997), the green business literature has a propensity to import concepts such as organisational culture from other fields without attending to their full implications and without considering more critical perspectives. It is hoped that this chapter will provide at least some impetus for researchers into business–NGO collaboration to refrain from taking this particular route.

Finally, it should be clear from the analysis that some dexterity with cultural analysis can be extremely useful in understanding business–NGO collaboration, particularly given the potential for various forms of clash illustrated by the respondents in this study. Confronting the need to address cultural disharmony within, as much as across, collaborating organisations is essential, and would certainly be a fruitful avenue for future research. The role of cultural mediators in this respect appears to be a key one, and their skills in acting as cultural bridges may well be crucial to the success of the
collaborative effort, and to the types of value typically communicated and institution-
alised as part of this effort. Collaborating organisations would therefore be well advised
to acknowledge both the necessity and dangers of such a role—or certainly at least to
accommodate for them, since it would appear that some form of mediation may well
emerge naturally as part of the alliance process. The mediating role, however, is unlikely
to be adopted with ease, and it is certain to be complicated by arrangements such as those
in the Plus Group, where much of the key work of the initiative is conducted among
groups culturally removed from those deciding and implementing policy. In this light,
careful selection of personnel and some degree of appropriate training might well be
highly advantageous in order to improve the odds of collaborative success. This would
be especially relevant where the possibilities for stress on the part of mediators might be
significant given the fragmentary nature of their cultural context and the need to juggle,
even reconcile, what might be perceived to be highly incongruous values.