

CULTIVATING SUSTAINABILITY: POLY CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN HYBRID ORGANIZATIONS

Alexander I. Mitchell, College of Business Administration, Cal Poly Pomona, 3801 West Temple Ave., Pomona, CA 91768, 909-869- amitchell@cpp.edu

Lydia Chen Shah, College of Business Administration, Cal Poly Pomona, 3801 West Temple Ave., Pomona, CA 91768, lydiachen@cpp.edu

Sustainability is an organizational and societal necessity. However, competitive firms are struggling to develop strategic approaches to address sustainability concerns [10]. The challenges of sustainability are even more acute for organizations that seek to address both economic and social missions – so-called ‘hybrid’ organizations [2, 4, 5]. These organizations tend to view sustainability as achieving alignment between revenue-generating business models and socially-oriented organizational principles [13]. Hybrid organizations work towards achieving a fusion of logics necessary to achieve both commercial and prosocial mandates in ways consistent with market and industry norms [2]. Typically, hybrid organizations work to align their value creation with balancing interests and concerns from key stakeholders [11].

The dominant view of sustainability practices amongst hybrid organizations in the academic literature relies on assumptions closely linked with strategic management and corporate social responsibility, creating a perspective that hybrid organizations are simply a variant of for-profit organizations [5]. However, from a sustainability perspective, hybrid organizations appear to push conventional notions of sustainable practices and models in progressive ways that transcend simple adherence to regulatory or institutional norms of behavior [4, 5, 6]. From this vantage point, hybrid organizations and their decision-makers behave more like cultural entrepreneurs [3, 7, 8, 15], skillfully working to construct a social environment that is conducive to fostering sustainability for both the organization and its economic mission, as well as the broader community linked with the social mission. However, little research has explored hybrid organizations as cultural entrepreneurs [9], a glaring oversight given that these organizations occupy important sites where orthodox assumptions around sustainability inherent in commercial business practices lead to market failures [12].

Using an ethnographic approach [1], we explore a complex hybrid organizational context through the lens of cultural entrepreneurship. We seek to understand how hybrid organizations develop relationships, programs, and activities that foster sustainability. We focus on a specific hybrid organization, a family-run farm that produces chemical-free produce and livestock, and its connections with a broader community of social change organizations looking to support local economic development and initiatives related to food sovereignty. The farm’s plight to engage a movement around land preservation and sustainable lifestyles has been fraught with challenges. The focal organization and the broader set of social change organizations are precariously situated, relying on a variety of sources of income, as well as inconsistent political support from local government and community institutions. Our findings draw from ongoing depth interviews, accumulating field notes, and extensive immersion in the context, interpreted through the lens of cultural entrepreneurship [14]. Our data reveal the farm is aggressively pursuing a web of initiatives designed to foster its own commercial growth, as well as improvements in food production and consumption in local communities. We theorize the decision-making approach of the farm as *polycultural entrepreneurship*, a practice rooted in developing complementary relationships in order to drive a broader movement for social change while maintaining the hybrid focus of the organization. We argue this sustainable approach to business practices offers novel theoretical and practical contributions of interest to sustainability researchers and anyone seeking to make a social impact.

Keywords: sustainability, polycultural, entrepreneurship, hybrid organizations, marketing

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