

Termination of Nonprofit Alliances: Evidence from China

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Abstract Nonprofit alliances have grown with a striking speed in recent decades. While researchers focus on why nonprofits build interorganizational partnerships, few discuss how such partnerships are terminated. Through a multiple case study of 13 nonprofit alliances that had been established in response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in West China, this study explores how nonprofit alliances were terminated and what caused their termination. Four patterns of alliance termination emerged out of our data analysis: failure at birth, planned termination, failed transition, and evolution into independent organizations. Four determinants were identified as accountable for alliance termination: political pressure, resource shortage, short-term orientation, and leadership failure.

Résumé Les alliances à but non lucratif se sont développées à une vitesse impressionnante ces dix dernières années. Alors que les chercheurs se concentrent sur la raison pour laquelle les organisations à but non lucratif créent des partenariats interorganisations, peu étudient comment ces partenariats prennent fin. À travers l'étude de cas multiples de 13 alliances à but non lucratif créées en réponse au

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séisme de 2008 au Sichuan, dans l'ouest de la Chine, cette étude examine comment les alliances à but non lucratif ont été supprimées et ce qui a provoqué leur suppression. Quatre modèles de suppression d'alliances sont apparus de notre analyse des données: une défaillance à la création, une suppression planifiée, une transition ratée et une évolution vers des organisations indépendantes. Quatre facteurs déterminants ont été définis comme responsables de la suppression de ces alliances: des pressions politiques, un manque de ressources, une orientation à court terme et un manque de leadership.

Zusammenfassung Die Zahl der gemeinnützigen Verbände ist in den vergangenen Jahrzehnten rasant gestiegen. Während sich Forscher darauf konzentrieren, warum gemeinnützige Organisationen interorganisationale Partnerschaften gründen, diskutieren nur wenige, wie diese Partnerschaften enden. Mittels einer multiplen Fallstudie von 13 gemeinnützigen Verbänden, die in Folge des Erdbebens in Sichuan in Westchina 2008 gegründet wurden, untersucht diese Studie, wie gemeinnützige Verbände aufgelöst wurden und was der Grund für ihre Auflösung war. Aus unserer Datenanalyse ergaben sich vier Muster einer Verbandsauflösung: ein Scheitern bei der Gründung, eine geplante Auflösung, ein misslungener Übergang und eine Entwicklung von unabhängigen Organisationen. Es wurden vier Determinanten bestimmt, die für eine Verbandsauflösung verantwortlich waren: politischer Druck, Ressourcenknappheit, kurzfristige Orientierung und Führungsversagen.

Resumen Las alianzas sin ánimo de lucro han crecido con una sorprendente actividad en décadas recientes. Aunque los investigadores se centran en por qué las organizaciones sin ánimo de lucro crean asociaciones interorganizacionales, pocos tratan cómo se terminan dichas asociaciones. Mediante un estudio de caso múltiple de 13 alianzas sin ánimo de lucro que habían sido establecidas como respuesta al Terremoto de Sichuan de 2008 en la parte occidental de China, el presente estudio explora cómo terminaron las alianzas sin ánimo de lucro y que causó su terminación. Cuatro patrones de terminación de la alianza surgieron de nuestro análisis de los datos: fallo en su nacimiento, terminación planificada, transición fallida, y evolución en organizaciones independientes. Se identificaron cuatro determinantes como responsables de la terminación de la alianza: presión política, escasez de recursos, orientación a corto plazo y falta de liderazgo.

Keywords Nonprofit alliance · Alliance termination · Sichuan Earthquake

Introduction

Nonprofit organization alliances have grown with striking speed in recent years (Brown et al. 2000; Duwe 2001; Guo and Acar 2005; Ritchie 1995). Most studies focus on why nonprofit organizations build alliances (Arsenault 1998; Blau and Rabrenovic 1991; Brinkerhoff 2002), which organizations tend to establish alliances (Foster and Meinhard 2002; Guo and Acar 2005), and how to improve alliance management (Brinkerhoff 2002; Yanacopulos 2005). Although the inherent

instability of alliance as an interorganizational establishment is widely recognized in the organization literature (see Das and Teng 2000), surprisingly little is known from the current nonprofit research about the life cycle of nonprofit alliances, how they are terminated, and what determines their termination.

This lack of research on alliance termination is reflected in a most recent literature review (Gazley and Guo 2014) that points to a problem of “survivorship bias” in the existing literature on nonprofit collaboration: researchers tend to select those collaborations that have been more or less successful and omit those that have failed; as a result, failures in collaborative efforts are not carefully documented or analyzed in prior research. In particular, while a handful of cross-sectoral studies do involve alliance failure in nonprofit-government collaboration (Boris and Steuerle 2006; Simo and Bies 2007) and nonprofit-business collaboration (Austin 2000; Crane 2000), none involves alliance failure in nonprofit–nonprofit collaboration. Yet findings from such cross-sectoral research may not necessarily apply to intra-sectoral alliances of nonprofit organizations. Another problem is that the majority of previous literature focuses on the analysis of individual participating organizations rather than alliances themselves and, therefore, tends to be blind to the factors and mechanisms at the alliance level that lead to partnership dissolution.

In this study, we address this gap by examining the evolution and termination of 13 nonprofit alliances established in response to the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake relief in China. More specifically, this multiple case study aims to (a) explore how intra-sectoral nonprofit alliances are terminated from the alliance perspective; (b) examine the impact of environmental conditions and intra-alliance tensions upon alliance termination; and (c) identify other factors causing partnership dissolution and examine the interplay of the different determinants. For the purpose of our study, we focus on the alliances of grassroots nonprofit organizations,¹ excluding those that are affiliated with the government or political institutions and those established for members’ interests such as self-help groups, trade unions, and professional associations. Our analysis reveals the existence of four termination patterns among these interorganizational partnerships: death at birth, abrupt dissolution, failed transition, and evolution into independent organizations. Furthermore, four factors—political pressure, resource shortage, short-term orientation, and leadership failure—are identified as being accountable for alliance termination. In this sense, both environmental conditions and internal management challenges are found to cause alliance termination among intra-sectoral alliances in the nonprofit sector.

Literature Review

In the nonprofit world, a wide range of terms are used to describe an alliance relationship, including “alliance,” “association,” “coalition,” “conference,” “council,” “federation,” “forum,” “league,” “network,” “strategic alliance,” and “union,” among others. In this study, we define nonprofit alliance as a strategic

¹ Such nonprofit organizations are often called nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in China and many other developing countries.

partnership among two or more nonprofit organizations that pursues common missions, values, or goals; shares resources and decision-making power; and has some type of formal agreement among members.²

There is an extensive body of knowledge about alliance instability (a broader term that includes but not limited to dissolutions of alliances) in the context of strategic alliances among business organizations. While most researchers view alliances as inherently unstable, there is no consensus on what factors cause alliance instability. Several theoretical approaches predominant in the extant literature provide partial insight into the possible deficiencies in alliances. For example, according to transaction cost theory (Williamson 1975, 1985), self-interested opportunistic behavior of partner firms can be damaging, is costly to deter, and results in a lack of interfirm trust that eventually undermines the stability of alliances. Resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), on the other hand, emphasizes the role of alliance relationships in helping acquire critical resources and reduce uncertainty; it is thus natural that the alliance will be dissolved after firms acquire those critical resources from their partners. Another perspective, agency theory (Jensen and Meckling 1976) emphasizes that managers tend to make decisions based on self-interest rather than the interests of their firms; therefore, they are likely to internalize alliances (i.e., fold them into their own firms) to reduce their own compensation costs or employment risk.

In their review of these prevailing perspectives, Das and Teng (2000) address the limitations of existing theoretical approaches and present an internal tensions perspective on alliance instability. According to this perspective, the intrinsic vulnerability of alliance lies in “three key pairs of competing forces—namely, cooperation versus competition, rigidity versus flexibility, and short-term versus long-term orientation” (p. 85), which generate internal contradictions and tensions that may lead to alliance instability. First, the tension between cooperation versus competition is highly salient within strategic alliances, as alliance partners oftentimes are direct or indirect competitors. Thus, a careful balance between cooperation and competition is necessary to prevent the alliance from falling apart. Second, being structurally flexible and being structurally rigid forms another pair of opposing forces within strategic alliances. While strategic alliances are intrinsically more flexible than formal organizations, a high level of structural rigidity can be achieved through equity investment or contractual specifications. Third, the tension between the short-term and long-term orientations may also result in the instability of strategic alliances.

By contrast, the literature on the termination of nonprofit alliances is sparse and fragmented and, in most cases, lacks a theoretical foundation. Despite these

² The extant literature offers no clear definition of alliance suitable for nonprofit organizations and the intra-sector perspective of the third sector. Most alliance studies focus on strategic motivations for alliances among firms and stress “products, technologies and services.” For example, Gulati (1998, p. 238) put forth the well-accepted and often-utilized definition “strategic alliances as voluntary arrangements between firms involving exchange, sharing, or codevelopment of products, technologies, or services.”

limitations, several factors stand out from this research as particularly significant or unique to the termination of nonprofit alliances.³ One factor is related to the incongruence in mission, value, and ideology among partner organizations or between a partner organization and the alliance. For example, in the context of social alliances,⁴ Berger et al. (2004) suggest that the success of an alliance might be undermined by a lack of fit between the mission of an organization, be it business or nonprofit, and that of the alliance. In a study of the coalition work in the prochoice movement during the period of late 1960s and early 1980s, Staggenberg (1986) identifies the ideological conflicts of individual movement organizations as an important reason for the dissolution of those alliances. Dutting and Sogge (2010) similarly note that irreconcilable ideological differences among organizations are one of the major factors that place NGO alliances at risk.

Another factor is related to the resources needed to develop the alliance and keep it going. Establishing and sustaining a partnership is not cost free; it requires considerable time and resource commitment on the part of participating nonprofit, which oftentimes is already understaffed and operating with limited financial resources. In a study of three-sectoral partnerships for community regeneration, Lowndes and Skelcher (1998, p. 329) find that continued participation without a dedicated budget to maintain the collaborative program might eventually take a toll on partner organizations, developing a sense of “network fatigue” among them. Yet in many cases, it is not the lack of resources per se but rather an unfair distribution of costs and benefits among partners that causes a partnership breakdown (Berger et al. 2004): if some partners perceive themselves to be over-exploited and under-valued, or if they come to the conclusion that the benefits of the alliance are too low but costs are too high, then the alliance will start to disintegrate.

The above review of literature makes apparent the need for more research on the dissolution of alliances in the nonprofit sector. While arguments and findings from the strategic alliance literature shed light on the value of various theoretical approaches for understanding alliance instabilities, the bulk of the discussion is focused on for-profit businesses and therefore not entirely applicable to the nonprofit sector organizational context. For example, the tension between cooperation and competition might be less salient in the context of nonprofit organization alliance; staffing and forms of organizational slack may also differ. Moreover, some theoretical approaches such as institutional theory are curiously missing from this stream of research, despite the relative normality of alliances and mergers in the for-profit form, a rise of inter-sectoral partnership, and a diversity of partnership examples in the nonprofit landscape. Thus, at present, research on alliance termination in the nonprofit sector is very limited. For the most part, this small body of research lacks a theoretical framework, focuses almost exclusively on the instabilities of cross-sectoral partnerships rather than intra-sectoral partnerships, and remains quiet on the specific mechanisms of alliance termination. This is

³ Termination as mere dissolution or demise of an alliance is not tantamount to any kind of nonsuccess or failure. For example, a time-bound agreement between the partners to part ways at a future time-point certain does not imply any kind of performance judgment.

⁴ According to Berger et al. (2004), social alliances differ from strategic alliances in that they involve at least one nonprofit partner and that they include both economic and social objectives.

particularly salient from a policy and practice perspective, as alliances among nonprofit organizations, though not well researched and understood, are not uncommon and are subject to normative notions that alliances are positive and worthy of sustenance. Although this research is agnostic on the value of alliances and their duration, understanding alliance termination is essential to understanding their very existence.

Methods and Data

Nonprofit Partnership in the Sichuan Earthquake Relief

The magnitude 8.0 Sichuan Earthquake in West China caused more than 69,000 deaths and resulted in 17,000 missing people in May 2008 (the State Council 2008). The economic loss was estimated as high as ¥8.45 trillion (US\$1.24 trillion). Four months later, the 3-year Sichuan Earthquake reconstruction master plan worth ¥10 trillion was launched. In early 2012, the central government declared the rebuilding plan complete.⁵

More than 300 grassroots nonprofits entered the earthquake-stricken areas and provided direct relief services (Zhu and Chan 2009), in addition to numerous organizations collecting relief materials and donations, managing communication, and training volunteers in nonstricken areas. These nonprofits built various types of interorganizational partnerships in response to the disaster relief, including nonprofit-government collaboration, nonprofit-for-profit corporation collaboration, and collaboration among nonprofits themselves.

Owing to the striking outcomes of these collaborative efforts, some nonprofit researchers optimistically claimed that China has entered a new era of nonprofit partnership (for example, Zhu and Chan 2009). In fact, few nonprofit alliances, especially intra-sectoral alliances, were founded in the Chinese nonprofit sector before the Sichuan earthquake. However, it turned out that almost all nonprofit partnerships that were founded for the Sichuan earthquake relief came to an end within 4 years after the disaster, though the comprehensive community recovery is far from being finished.⁶ The termination of these partnerships provides an opportunity to empirically examine what accounts for alliance dissolution in the nonprofit sector.

⁵ The state Council News Office declared on Feb 24th 2012 that the Sichuan Earthquake post-disaster reconstruction plan has been completed. See http://www.china.com.cn/zhibo/2012-02/24/content_24698719.htm.

⁶ Despite the government declaring the fulfillment of the post-disaster reconstruction in the sense of facility and infrastructure rebuilding, community recovery may require 10 or more years for disasters as huge as the Sichuan Earthquake. For example, Chang (2010) examines the Kobe Earthquake recovery and finds that the local economy experienced a three to four year temporary boost and then stabilized. Also, Kobe regained the same population 10 years after the disaster. Comerio (2004) found that more than half of the recovery projects in San Francisco and Santa Cruz were still under construction 15 years after the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake.

Case Selection

The case selection criteria are that (a) the alliance comprised two or more distinct organizations (i.e., an interagency arrangement of two or more formal organizations); (b) nonprofit organizations were the majority of the alliance, accounting for more than half the members; (c) members had fully shared and publicly declared goals regarding earthquake relief or post-disaster recovery; (d) the alliance had a clear (rather than tacit) organizational structure; and (e) the alliance took some type of joint or collective action in response to the disaster.

The research plan aims to include all nonprofit alliances that meet the selection criteria. To create the alliance list, we reviewed all related issues of *Disaster Relief Observer for Social Organizations*, an electronic magazine published by a nonprofit media organization.⁷ During the Sichuan Earthquake, the magazine was the most comprehensive source about nonprofit relief efforts. Also, we searched the Internet by using all alliance-related key words in Chinese, including “*lianmeng* (alliance),” “*zhongxin* (conference or network),” “*wangluo* (network),” “*lianhe xingdong* (joint action),” “*lianhehui* (conference),” and “*pingtai* (platform or conference)” to check for any other alliances missing from the initial list. Finally, we asked nonprofit network leaders to review the list to identify redundancy and missing case examples and data.

The final list entails 13 nonprofit alliances as shown in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the major affected region, Sichuan, hosted four nonprofit relief alliances. Alliances also appeared in most neighboring provinces, such as Gansu, Shanxi, Guizhou, and Congqing, and in some nonprofit hotspot cities, like Kunming, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Xiamen. The number of participating organizations varied from four to 28. Mission focus and primary programmatic activities included collecting and disseminating disaster information, assessing victims’ needs, raising money and relief materials, recruiting and training volunteers, providing settlement services, taking care of children and the elderly, and enhancing public awareness of disaster preparedness.

Data Collection

After identifying relief alliances among nonprofits and selecting our cases based on the study’s selection criteria, we used three methods to collect data undertaken through extensive field study including: observation, semi-structured interviews, and document study. Participant observation was performed in the NHP and the CVDR (full alliance names are indicated in Table 1). The first author worked as a program manager in the NHP between June 2008 and July 2011 and participated in its establishment and restructuring. He also performed participant observation in the CVDR between June 2008 and July 2011 as a representative of a different organization that was CVDR’s member.

⁷ The organization was Beijing Zhendanji Center for Nonprofit Communications, a private nonenterprise unit registered in Beijing.

Table 1 Descriptive information of 13 nonprofit alliances after the Sichuan earthquake

Alliance	Abbr.	Location	Formation	Closure	Member organizations ^a	Focus areas	Main outcomes
Sichuan united office for NGO disaster relief	SUO	Chengdu	May 2008	June 2008	1 GONPO and 23 nonprofits	Raising and delivering relief materials; information collection and dissemination	Raised relief materials of ¥10 million; conducted 12 disaster investigations
Sichuan 5/12 center for voluntary disaster relief	CVDR	Chengdu	May 2008	March 2012	28 nonprofits	Information sharing; strategy coordination; volunteer training; capacity building	Raised relief materials of ¥2 million, supervised 133 volunteers, received more than 240 organization visitors
Zundao volunteer center	ZVC	Zundao Town, Sichuan	May 2008	June 2009	1 government department, 1 enterprise, and 18 nonprofits	Raising and delivering relief materials; volunteer recruiting supervision; child education; community-based victim service	Raised relief materials of ¥10 million, supervised 400 volunteers, established 10 community culture centers
New hometown plan	NHP	Chengdu	June 2008	March 2012	4 nonprofits	Integrated community recovery service	Established an integrated community center, developed three victim self-help organizations, hosted 30 long-term volunteers
Kunming NGO united relief	KUR	Kunming	May 2008	May 2008	6 nonprofits	Raising relief materials	Raised relief materials of ¥70,000
Xiamen emergency relief group	XERG	Xiamen	May 2008	May 2008	7 nonprofits	Raising relief materials	Raised relief materials of ¥567,000
Shanxi voluntary united relief	SVUR	Xi'an	May 2008	June 2008	13 nonprofits	Community-based victim service; raising relief materials	Raised relief materials of ¥700,000 and supervised about 40 volunteers
Shanghai new hump project	SNHP	Shanghai	May 2008	May 2008	1 GONPO and 4 nonprofits	Raising relief materials	Raised relief materials of ¥2 million
Guangdong care for Sichuan migrant people	GCSMP	Guangdong	May 2008	May 2008	15 nonprofits	Mental health assistance for victims	Almost nothing

Table 1 continued

Alliance	Abbr.	Location	Formation	Closure	Member organizations ^a	Focus areas	Main outcomes
Gansu united relief group	GURG	Lanzhou	May 2008	June 2008	7 nonprofits	Disaster information collection raising relief materials	Raised relief materials of about ¥50,000, investigated one township, and trained about 20 volunteers
Chongqing voluntary relief center for the 5/12 earthquake	CVRC	Chongqing	May 2008	May 2008	8 nonprofits	Disaster information collection; raising relief materials	Raised relief materials of ¥20,000 or so
Chongqing volunteer union for disaster relief	CVUDR	Chongqing	May 2008	July 2008	9 nonprofits	Raising relief materials; recruiting and supervising volunteers	Raised relief materials of ¥700,000 or so and recruited 130 volunteers
Guizhou Voluntary disaster relief network	GVDRN	Guiyang	May 2008	February 2009	1 GONPO and 17 nonprofits	Raising relief materials; volunteer recruiting and supervision; community-based victim service	Raised relief materials of ¥500,000 or so and recruited 60 volunteers

^a “GONPO” represents “government-affiliated nonprofits” that are affiliated with and dependent on government departments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in all 13 alliances, between May 2008 and February 2012. For each alliance, at least two leaders or important team members (i.e., those with significant levels of authority and responsibility) were interviewed face-to-face or by telephone. Each interview lasted 30–90 min and was audio recorded. All alliance leaders were interviewed after the dissolution of their alliances, but four were also interviewed before the dissolution. As a result, 60 alliance leaders and important sponsors participated in the interviews. Finally, we collected archival data from alliance websites, meeting minutes, program pamphlets, progress reports, self-evaluation reports, announcements, organization blogs, and newspaper articles.

Data Analysis

Data analysis comprised coding and categorizing, identifying similarities and differences, and comparison. Additionally, data triangulation was used to improve internal credibility, which includes two aspects: comparing data from the same type of source and between different types of sources. Alliances were observed in different scenarios from office work to board meetings and in different developmental stages from formation to dissolution. For a given alliance, interviewees were selected from different organizations to restrict institutionalized viewpoints that might bias the findings. On the other hand, data from different sources were compared for additional verification and evidence of themes and patterns.

Longitudinal observation was also performed to improve external validity in this study. The authors have tracked the phenomenon of grassroots nonprofit partnerships in China since 2006, 2 year before the Sichuan Earthquake, and kept observing them even after the termination of the 13 relief alliances analyzed in this article. The longitudinal observation gives us an opportunity to go beyond individual alliances and understand the interactions across interorganizational collaborations and their environments from a systematic and long-term perspective.

Findings

All 13 alliances included in our study terminated within 4 years after the earthquake. We follow the models proposed by Das and Teng (2012) and Kanter (1994) to characterize the types of terminations and to examine how these alliances dissolved.

Termination Types

Das and Teng (2012) suggest that an alliance usually experiences three phases: formation, operation, and outcome. Termination can happen in each phase. Kanter (1994) notes the influence of collaborative learning and transition during alliance operation. Based on their models, the developmental processes of nonprofit alliances were analyzed and compared to find their similarities and differences. Four types of termination then were identified: death at birth, abrupt dissolution, failed

Table 2 Four patterns of alliance termination after the Sichuan earthquake

Termination pattern	Termination time (after the disaster)	Alliance characteristics	Approach	Alliances
Death at birth	1–2 weeks	Outside earthquake-hit areas; composed of small nonprofits	Automatic dissolution in failed collective actions	KUR GCSMP CVRC
Abrupt termination	2–4 weeks	Majority of members outside earthquake-hit areas; composed of small nonprofits	Immediate dissolution after the end of emergency aid	SUO SNHP XERG GURG CVUDR
Failed transition	2–12 months	Based in or close to earthquake-hit areas; led by influential nonprofits	Unexpected dissolution after the failure of institutionalizing partnerships for post-disaster recovery	GVDRN SVUR ZVC
Alliance evolution	3 years	Engaged by local nonprofits; restructured after emergency relief; engaged in multiple networks	An independent nonprofit was established to replace the alliance	NHP CVDR

transition, and evolution into independent nonprofit organizations. Their characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Death at Birth

This type of termination occurred when an alliance failed to take effective collective actions after formation and simply disappeared within the first 1–2 weeks after the disaster. Three alliances included in this category were established by nonprofits outside the earthquake-affected region, most of which were small organizations serving local communities. Although formal alliance structures had been developed in each partnership, such partnerships proved to be infertile in collective response—they failed at the very beginning.

Planned Termination

Alliances of this type dissolved themselves immediately after the end of emergency relief. One of them was located in Sichuan, three in neighboring provinces, and one outside the earthquake-stricken region. Compared to those alliances that silently disappeared, terminations in this group seemed more planned and well-organized. They developed closure schedules, reported collective performance, and officially announced alliance dissolution.

Failed Transition

Some alliances planned to continue their involvement in post-disaster recovery but failed to adapt the partnership to the new situation. Of the three alliances that fit this pattern, one was located in Sichuan and the other two in neighboring provinces. They were dissolved 2–6 months after the emergency relief, when most victims were displaced from stricken communities and resettled in temporary camps. In addition to more comprehensive performance evaluations and financial disclosure, such terminations were also accompanied with official announcements of their ending.

Alliance Evolution

Only two alliances survived the challenges of partnership institutionalization and continued their engagement in post-disaster recovery. Both evolved into independent nonprofits in which some former core members were still closely engaged by participating in the programs or serving at the board after alliance dissolution.

Termination Factors

Next, we identify four major factors as accountable for alliance termination in the case of the Sichuan Earthquake, including political pressure, resource shortage, short-term orientation, and leadership failure. Combined in varying forms, these factors determined the termination of all 13 nonprofit relief alliances, though in different developmental phases.

Political Pressure

Hostile and alert to voluntary association, China's government has taken graduated control to restrict and suppress nonprofits (Kang and Han 2008), especially those that involve human rights, social equality, democracy, or government corruption. The measures include restricting registration, checking political stand, keeping surveillance, and punishing uncooperative organizations (for example, Spires 2011; Yang 2005). Such regulations made many nonprofits inaccessible to appropriate registration as nonprofits (Spires et al. 2014). Among the 13 alliances, only SNHP has all members registered. In some alliances like GURG and CVRC, most members were unregistered.⁸ In addition, due to politicization of disaster management, nonprofits' participation had long been banned until 1 month before the Sichuan Earthquake.⁹

⁸ Registration difficulty persisted even two years later when the government took tentative measures to loosen registration regulation in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Chengdu, and Guangzhou. For example, Spires et al. (2014, p. 76) conducted a survey between 2009 and 2010 and found "in Yunnan improperly registered (including completely unregistered) NGOs accounted for 66.3 % of the provincial total. The situation was similar in Guangdong (74.6 %) and in Beijing (69.6 %)."

⁹ The Ministry of Civil Affairs promulgated the Administrative Measures for Disaster Relief Donations (jiuzai juanzeng guanli banfa) in April, 2008. The Article 11 states that "If in need, donations received by the civil affairs administrations above the county level can be entrusted to social welfare agencies and licensed charitable organizations to deal with." See <http://guangxi.mca.gov.cn/article/mzyw/jzjj/201506/20150600828775.shtml>.

But only those registered as “disaster relief” organizations were allowed, which made most nonprofits still ineligible. As a consequence, any unregistered or ineligible nonprofit organization that was engaged in disaster relief risked being charged as illegal and severely punished.

After the earthquake occurred, the state took the following measures to continue restricting nonprofits’ participation in emergency relief and community recovery. First, government-affiliated nonprofits squeezed out independent nonprofits. The Red Cross Society of China (RCSC), a nominally voluntary society but actually a ministry in the central government, and the China Charity Federation (CCF), another nominally voluntary society affiliated with the Ministry of Civil Affairs as a quasi-ministry agency, were designated to receive private donations and relief materials from overseas and domestic sources. Independent nonprofits were required to work under the leadership of either organization.

The second measure was substitution and incorporation. Realizing the value of voluntary societies, some local governments built their own volunteer teams. For example, the MZ Volunteer Association, an affiliate to the local Communist Youth League (CYL), was a shell organization. During the earthquake relief, the association recruited local volunteers and established eight volunteer teams. Other governments incorporated cooperative nonprofits into their own systems.

Finally, uncooperative nonprofits were ostracized from the quake-hit regions. With the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games approaching and the start of post-disaster reconstruction, some nonprofits were seen as “social instability forces” and expelled from the stricken communities. For example, the CYL in MZ County stipulated in an official document:

When the first anniversary of the 512 Event is approaching, a number of volunteers will enter MZ. Some ill-intentioned people under the cloak of volunteers will perform activities to undermine social stability... Individual volunteers and volunteer groups in the following categories will be asked to leave MZ: (a) those who cannot verify their legal identities; (b) those without volunteer identity cards and recommendation letters (from government agencies); and (c) those who don’t volunteer, or whose service doesn’t match local needs.

This stipulation directly led to the breakdown of the ZVC. Retaliating against the unruly nonprofits who opposed government incorporation, the local government refused to give them recommendation letters. Their only choice was to declare withdrawal from the town and then dismissal.

Admittedly, political pressure varied across different phases in disaster management due to situational changes (Xu 2014) and across locations as the result of the learning effects of local government—nonprofit partnership (Teets 2009). But the generally repressive environment constituted a major concern among nonprofits.

It is understandable that nonprofits must be alert to potential political risks. Many “experienced” organizations even developed a set of self-checking measures for their everyday practice to reduce or moderate political risk. Also, being clearly aware that voluntary associations have been a taboo for the post-communist state, nonprofit leaders assumed that multiple-organizational collaborations would bring

about greater political risks than individual organizations. Therefore, some strategies were employed to alleviate political pressures upon the alliances, including using the rhetoric of volunteerism to reduce the linguistic sensitiveness of nonprofits, having a registered organization, especially one with good relationship with the government, as the host of the alliance, focusing on raising relief materials rather than money, and developing many “don’ts,” (such as not releasing or spreading any negative comments about the government and not releasing important disaster information before the authorities’ verification).

Despite these safeguard measures, the ubiquitous political pressure as a critical part of nonprofits’ environment impacted all alliances and their members, though the extent varied. Even the most successful alliances clearly felt this pressure, indicated in this comment from a leader of the CVDR:

We invited our Taiwanese counterparts to introduce their successful experience in building nonprofit federations after the Chi–Chi Earthquake the first month after the Sichuan Earthquake. Their post-disaster recovery practice set a good example for us. However, we soon realized that the government would not tolerate grassroots nonprofits to build such strong alliances in mainland China.

Resource Constraints

Besides political risks, resource constraints have been a significant challenge for the Chinese nonprofit sector since its revival in the 1980s (Lee 2009). Only government-managed “nonprofits” and public foundations were given the legal right to carry out public charitable solicitation. However, free-standing nonprofits could neither benefit from their fundraising nor from other private foundations because few entities were grantmakers. Foreign donors thus were the primary funding source for Chinese nonprofits. But the proportion of revenue they received was very limited compared to government agencies and education and research institutions (Spire 2011).

The restrictions prohibiting nonprofits to fundraise exacerbated organizational pressures driven by the very real and extensive needs of victims after the earthquake. Noticing that some individuals and organizations had collected private donations without government permission, the General Office of the State Council (2008) released an ordinance 1 month later after the earthquake. Article 3 reads “Funds raised by other types of institutions or organizations should be transferred to the special bank accounts managed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the RCSC, or the CCF.” As a result, more than 80 % of the total earthquake relief donation (including cash and relief materials) of ¥76 billion finally flowed into governments’ bank accounts (Deng 2009).

Thus, the donations received by nonprofits were very slight, which was reflected by the financial dimensions of the nonprofit alliances as shown in Table 1. While two large alliances, SUO and ZVC, raised materials of about ¥10 million and mobilized hundreds of volunteers, most alliances amassed far smaller resources, which resulted in some organizational challenges and pathologies.

First, alliances had no funding to support full-time staff and cover overhead expenses. Among the 13 alliances, only seven obtained small amounts of administration grants from foundations, private donors, or corporation donors. Two alliances eventually developed employee teams, though not until the community recovery phase. But during emergency relief, all alliances were staffed exclusively by volunteers—alliance leaders also served as volunteers. In fact, many nonprofits temporarily suspended their regular programs and shifted to earthquake management. Such organizational volunteering would prove to be short lived as they could not obtain funding for disaster relief.

Alliances also suffered from insufficient program funding. This challenge was especially insurmountable for those attempting to participate in community recovery. Although they managed to collect large amounts of relief materials, raising materials for reconstruction was another question: Private donors were usually interested in responding to victims' pressing needs rather than long-term needs. On the other hand, foundations preferred individual organizations to interorganizational partnerships for the ambiguity of responsibility sharing inevitably existed in the latter increasing perceived investment risk. A good example is the CVDR whose leader was clearly told by a foundation officer: "We will like to give the CVDR a grant if you register as an independent organization."

Even those relatively resource-rich alliances felt financial tension. Having two corporate giants, one foundation, and tens of nonprofits as members, ZVC ostensibly was the strongest alliance in terms of financial capacity. During emergency relief, ZVC collected relief materials of nearly ¥10 million from foundations, companies, private donors, social clubs, and even some government agencies. A private foundation provided a grant of ¥50,000 to support overhead costs, adding to another grant of ¥10,000 donated by an entrepreneur. In addition, ZVC launched a revenue-generating project by selling postage stamps within its network. Even so, ZVC was still faced with financial inadequacy, as it described in a self-evaluation report released in September 2008:

Funding shortage is seriously affecting volunteers' engagement. If we move forward to the long-term plan, we will need more financial and material support to pay project costs, administrative expenses, and volunteer subsidies.

Alliances took many measures to alleviate resource constraints. Some alliances simply put fundraising restriction aside and publicly raised money through Internet tools. For example, GVDRN received about ¥82,000 by publicizing an individual bank account in some Internet-based communities. Protections and transparency mechanisms were also used to respond to donors, including: (a) donors could acquire access to donation information and thus track the use of money collected; and (b) a finance statement was released to demonstrate accountability when the alliance was dissolved. Other relatively cautious alliances focused on raising money through personal networks such as friends, relatives, and volunteers. When all these efforts became futile, closure became the only option for alliance leaders.

Short-Term Orientation

Nonprofits built interorganizational collaboration to meet the participation threshold for effective disaster management that was beyond the capacity of individual organizations. However, aware of various limitations, some alliances developed a clear (and generally limited) timeline for their involvement in the alliance. Among the five alliances that experienced abrupt termination, four were set as “task-oriented” (McLaughlin 2010). They were created to meet emergent needs in the earthquake relief rather than to take part in post-disaster recovery. Member organizations reached the agreement during alliance formation that the alliance would be terminated shortly after the end of emergency relief.

Such short-term time orientation was reflected in mission statements and work areas. Missions in alliances located outside earthquake-affected regions usually focused on providing relief materials. For example, the SNHP stated its mission, “We mobilize social support, collect necessities for emergency relief work, and send them to the earthquake-hit areas through formal channels.”

Short-term time orientation was also demonstrated in work areas and functional roles undertaken. XERG clearly described its work areas in its poster: “Following the life-saving cycle in earthquake disasters, XERG will collect relief materials in about 10 days. We only accept materials on our list of necessities. Donated money will be used to purchase medicine.”

Several factors contributed to the short-term orientation. The first factor was geographic distance. When located outside disaster areas, nonprofits would face steep operational costs if engaged in long-term post-disaster recovery. Geographic distance also created low commitment in disaster management among participating organizations, especially when urgency of action aroused by the patriotism and nationalism stirred by narrative of national calamity soon faded in unaffected areas. In contrast, alliances located in affected areas generally had higher commitment and longer-term duration in post-disaster engagement.

The conflict of work areas and functional priorities was another reason for short-term orientation. Due to eligibility restriction by the government, few nonprofits included disaster management in their work areas before the earthquake. Therefore, joining relief alliances was just a temporary deviation from their regular programs. They had to go back to their original tracks immediately after emergency relief. In fact, among the 13 alliances, eight did not have any member organizations that had conducted disaster management projects before the earthquake.

Therefore, when emergency relief was coming to an end in late May, alliances with short-term orientation naturally chose to close down. In an announcement released on its website, SUO clearly stated its reason for termination:

The significance of emergency relief efforts will decline. Government supplies can be effectively delivered into earthquake-hit areas (to meet victims’ needs). The key of disaster management in a long time will be disease control, resettlement, and recovery. After cautious and in-depth discussions, SUO decided to put an end to our current work before May 30. We will release our financial statement within 1 month.

Leadership Failure

According to Ospina and Sorenson (2006), there are two basic types of leadership: collaborative leadership and individual leadership. While the traditional model of leadership focuses on the role of individual leaders, the constructionist model suggests that as the property of the social system, collaborative leadership creates the conditions and mechanisms for all participants to address collective problems (Huxham and Vangen 2000). In this study, the two types of leadership both influenced alliance stability and closely relate to the political realities, resource constraints, and time horizons that are discussed above.

From the perspective of collective leadership, partner misfit and ineffective governance significantly contributed to alliance dissolution. Nonprofit alliances in our study were challenged with three types of partner (mis)fit: resource fit, strategic fit, and mission fit.¹⁰ Resource fit refers to the degree “to which partners possess compatible resources, that is, resources that can be effectively integrated into a value-creating strategy” (Das and Teng 1999, p. 56). Successful nonprofit alliances required three types of basic resources: legitimacy, access to economic resources (materials or funds), and volunteer labor. Legitimacy provided protection against political pressure, access to economic resources allowed alliances to raise relief materials, and fund to support collective projects, and volunteers were critical in project management and service delivery. In our study, futile alliances, especially those that failed at birth, apparently suffered from resource misfit. For example, the KUR was founded by three small nonprofits and one volunteer network. Only one of them was registered, but it was under close government surveillance. Mainly affected by inadequate legitimacy, the alliance leaders decided to use only personal networks in collecting materials and funds. Moreover, the limited connections of founding organizations with the public affected volunteer recruitment. KUR achieved little.

Alliance stability also requires strategic fit, the degree “to which partners have compatible goals in the alliance” (Das and Teng 1999, p. 56). Strategic misfit might not significantly affect alliances with short-term time orientations because they generally focused on the relatively simple task of collective relief. However, lack of strategic fit severely threatened alliances that planned to participate in post-disaster reconstruction. For example, the founding organizations of SUO had expected to restructure the partnership for community recovery but soon found divergence among members on future program direction and strategic priorities. Some organizations wanted to develop a disaster preparedness center, while the others tried to build a community-based platform to assist victims in reconstruction and also facilitate more nonprofits’ engagement. The unresolved controversy resulted in the abrupt dissolution of the entire alliance.

Finally, mission fit proved to be most critical for the long-term collaboration among nonprofits. Mission fit is defined here as the degree to which partners have compatible missions in the alliance. Unlike for-profit organizations, nonprofits are a

¹⁰ The impact of partner fit changes by alliance objective and over time. Complex objectives were more vulnerable to partner misfit than simple objectives.

community of values and are driven not primarily by profit but rather by public good (Minkoff and Powell 2006; Payton and Moody 2008). Conflicting missions among allied organizations contributed to termination even in alliances equipped with adequate resource fit and strategic fit. ZVC provided an apt example. When the local government tried to reinforce its control upon ZVC by establishing a government-led steering committee, a major controversy occurred within ZVC. Nonprofits contended that ZVC should be independent from the government while volunteer groups with business backdrops claimed that government's leadership would increase ZVC's legitimacy and enhance organizational performance. Incompatible mission conflicts culminated with NGOs' withdrawal from ZVC.

In addition to partner misfit, ineffective governance also undermined collective leadership. Provan and Kenis (2007) identify three types of governance in interorganizational partnerships: shared governance, lead organization, and network administrative organization. In the shared governance mode, the alliance is governed directly by members without separate governance entity. For nonprofit alliances, shared governance means important decisions are made by a council of representatives from all parties. The lead organization mode occurs when one organization plays the role of alliance leader. Finally, members may set up a separate administrative entity to manage the alliance, as seen in the administrative organization mode. Among the 13 relief alliances, seven used single governance modes and the other six applied a mix of two or more modes.

Eight alliances were governed directly by all members, which reflected the strong culture of equal participation in the nonprofit sector. However, such equality risked compromising efficiency in decision making, especially when the alliance had a large membership. In some cases, shared governance would fail in reaching any agreement without strong mutual trust among members. For example, nine small nonprofits and volunteer organizations that had no previous collaborative relationships created CVUDR after the earthquake. At the formation meeting, the participating organizations built a governing group composed of leaders from each member. However, CVUDR failed to convene a second meeting to move forward until its termination when the governing group was neither able to win strong commitment from member organizations nor quickly develop a collective plan in response to the earthquake.

To reduce the complexity of the shared governance, some alliances created a special administrative organization to make decisions on behalf of the member council. But this mode had a disadvantage: The durability and performance of the alliance would primarily depend on the administrative group. In fact, the only two alliances to use this mode, GCSMP and SUO, had both been terminated before the start of post-disaster reconstruction. GCSMP's dismissal was primarily caused by the administrative group's failure to develop a joint program that most member organizations would be interested in. Some partners finally acted alone in response to the disaster. In SUO, the administrative group of five members made the decision to close the alliance shortly after emergency relief.

When most members lacked experience and resources in relief management, the lead organization played an important role in managing the partnership. Lead organizations were usually well staffed, well connected with grant makers and

private donors, and influential in the local nonprofit sectors. They contributed to alliance durability in terms of legitimacy, grants, management skills, and labor support. However, using this mode alone might undermine equality and lead to discontent among other members because of lack of buy-in or shared authority. For example, a nonprofit leader explained why her organization withdrew from CVRC:

I was called by some NGO leaders to attend a meeting and discuss establishing an alliance. But after arriving at the meeting room, I found important decisions about alliance governance and strategies had been made by them alone. We soon quit the alliance, because we disagreed with their strategies and working styles.

To offset the disadvantages of the single governance mode, some alliances used a mixed mode. Generally, using a mixed mode was more common than solitary modes, but alliance durability also depended on the size and goals of the alliance. For example, CVDR combined shared governance and an administrative committee. The committee was in charge of everyday management and minor decisions, while leadership elections and major decisions took place at the annual plenary meeting. SUVR mixed shared governance and lead organization to balance equality and efficiency. NHP even built a governance structure combining all three modes: a supervisory committee was composed of leaders from each of four partners, a special executive team was in charge of regular programs, and the lead organization played the “firefighter” role in internal tensions.

With respect to individual leadership, alliance leaders were found to have significant impact on partnership durability. Although almost all individuals in the lead positions were local nonprofit leaders, they varied in terms of leadership skills, personal networks, and prestige. Generally, junior leaders were less likely to make up for the disadvantages of the partnership (and hence, sustain an alliance) than renowned leaders. In fact, the termination at birth in CVRC, GCSMP, and KUR could be tracked to leadership shortcomings and inexperience.

Discussion and Conclusions

Theoretically, an alliance can be terminated across both ends of the spectrum of interorganizational partnership: They can return to individual organizations or informal networks as they were before alliance formation or evolve into a highly integrated structure such as a federation or merger (McLaughlin 2010; Provan 1984). Some authors have indicated the possibility of building federations or mergers among nonprofit organizations (Selsky 1998; Singer and Yankey 1991; Wernet and Jones 1992). However, alliances in this empirical study proceeded along just one end: All were dissolved into individual organizations or informal networks. Although in two cases the alliance had evolved into an independent nonprofit organization, the new organization functioned primarily as a separate organizational entity rather than an interorganizational structure. Our study explored various reasons why these alliances devolved from their partnerships. However, the same set of reasons is inadequate to explain why they failed to evolve into collaboration

of higher levels such as federations or mergers. In other words, failure factors differ from success elements, though very often they are highly related. Furthermore, the nature of the relationship between the alliance and its more intense counterpart is still unclear: must a more intense form of collaboration (e.g., federation or merger) be based upon a less intense one (e.g., alliance)? Or will the structure begin directly from individual organizations and skip the alliance operation process?

Another area deserving further research is the effect of political context on alliance development. In China, while the current regime discouraged civil society, previous studies found a fragmented state in which the government might build local, limited, and issue-based partnerships with nonprofits out of calculation of government performance and moral image (Lu 2009; Spires 2011; Xu 2014). Although all nonprofit alliances formed in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake all dissolved, our long-term observation reveals that alliance-building has become a popular strategy for nonprofit organizations in response to the more recent disasters, including the 2010 Yushu earthquake and the 2013 Ya'an earthquake. In addition, cross-organization partnerships have significantly expanded to other areas such as foundation management, other (nondisaster) forms of community and economic development, and nonprofit accountability. Do these new developments signal merely the continuity of the fragmented state and the necessity of nonstate interventions, or do they indicate the improvement of the entire institutional environment after 2008 as anticipated by Shieh and Deng (2011)?

The third area we suggest for further research is the interrelationships between the four determinants of alliance termination. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine how these four determinants interact with each other, the limited available data indicate the existence of such interrelationships. In addition to its direct influence upon alliances, political pressure indirectly contributed to resource constraints and short-term orientation: government restriction deprived nonprofits of fundraising eligibility; risk of punishment (or dissolution) kept many nonprofits from collecting relief materials. Moreover, registration failure in nonprofits made private foundations cautious of funding their proposals, as shown in CVDR's case. Political pressure also enhanced short-term time orientation in the case of SUO, ZVC, and KUR. Fearful of government raking-up measures after disaster relief efforts, these alliances applied the "first come, first leave" strategy before they were actually faced with political challenges. Short-term orientation in turn might be responsible for leadership challenges resulting in alliance demise. When an alliance was intended to respond to disaster relief, inadequate emphasis was placed upon building partner fit and governance structures, as shown in the case of SUO and CVRC, which contributed to partner misfit and inappropriate governance structures. However, such associations need further examination.

The findings in this study contribute to nonprofit collaboration research by improving our understanding of alliance termination, an under-explored topic. First, though environmental uncertainties are noted as a cause of collaboration failure, such literature mainly addresses the context of political coalitions (Lupia and Strom 1995; Leeds and Savun 2007; Wright and Goldberg 1985) and to a lesser extent international business partnerships (Serapio and Cascio 1996; Yan and Zeng 1999). This study shows that environmental factors, mainly political pressure and resource

constraints, played critical roles in alliance termination in the nonprofit sector. In this sense, nonprofit alliances, especially those in developing countries, must devote special attention to their institutional environment and related organizational and governance structures.

Relatedly, this study enriches knowledge of voluntary termination. Although most alliances have to terminate themselves due to external or internal challenges and mandates, some others with short-term orientations voluntarily put an end to the partnerships. Task orientation and focus is a central reason for termination suggested by McLaughlin (2010), but short-term orientation can also act as a proactive strategy to adapt to the environment. It increases the flexibility of interorganizational collaboration and promotes the capacity for future partnerships. In this sense, disassociating termination with collaborative failure, voluntary self-dissolution challenges the tradition of measuring alliance success by partnership stability and length (Yan and Zeng 1999).

Finally, this research expands our understanding of internal tensions in interorganizational collaborations. Research from political science and business management often notes that internal rivalries and competing instrumentalities among member organizations play the major role in alliance failure (Das and Teng 1999; Larsson et al. 1998; Park and Ungson 2001). Some nonprofit research (e.g., Dutting and Sogge 2010; Staggenborg 1986) similarly suggests that partner conflicts lead to partnership dissolution. This study not only found the influence of internal tensions on one hand, but it also cast doubt on the assumed effect of strong partner rivalry on the other. Internal tensions grew in nonprofit alliances mainly because of partner difference in terms of missions, focus areas, strategies, and even ideologies and personalities of leaders. However, competition over resources or reputation rarely appeared as a significant element of collaborative relationships in the Sichuan Earthquake case. This is particularly salient for alliances formed around shared values or a similar public mission, as seen in nonprofit alliances and potentially for other inter-sectoral alliances motivated by cooperation and public goods orientation.

Although this study has direct salience to disaster relief and recovery settings and related natural or man-made disasters, one limitation of our study lies in the fact that alliances in this study were event-based rather than theme-based. This fact might lead to sample bias because event-based alliances are more likely to set up a definite timeline according to the expected life cycle of the specific event. In addition, the nature of crisis management might reinforce uncertainty in event-based alliances. Future studies may help overcome this sample bias by investigating both event-based and theme-based alliances, comparing their termination patterns, and analyzing the differences and similarities of termination mechanisms. By laying out salient structural, functional, and process dimensions and patterns moderating nonprofit alliance termination, we set the stage for further theory development and empirical exploration.

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