

Integration of Corporate PR Strategies into the Promotion of Social and Charitable Projects: Models, Risks, and Impact Assessment

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Abstract: In the context of intensifying competition for financial, informational, and human resources, the nonprofit sector faces the need to move from fragmented tactical fundraising actions toward integrated communication architectures comparable, in strategic sophistication, to corporate PR practices. The present study aims to analyze and systematize strategic PR models formed in the business environment in order to identify possibilities for their application to increasing effectiveness and long-term sustainability of social projects.

The empirical and analytical basis of the work is built on a qualitative analysis methodology and combines a systematic review of scholarly literature within Scopus/WoS corpora, a comparative content analysis of strategic documents of NGOs (WWF) and corporations (AT&T), as well as case studies that include partnership initiatives in the sports sphere and environmental communication campaigns. This methodological composition ensures comparability of approaches across different organizational types and makes it possible to identify not only declarative elements of strategies, but also the logics of their practical implementation.

The findings indicate that strengthening PR effectiveness in NGOs is associated primarily with adopting the “organizational listening” paradigm, which presupposes institutionalization of feedback and systematic work with stakeholder expectations, as well as with applying the “single narrative” framework in configurations of cooperation with business, where semantic consistency of messages sustains trust and reduces the risk of fragmentation of reputational capital. In addition, “co-governance” models are examined, manifesting in sports projects through distribution of responsibility and coordination of decisions among partners, along with a four-phase stakeholder engagement model in environmental campaigns, where a sequential participation dynamic functions as a mechanism for enhancing communication legitimacy and durability of effects.

In conclusion, the argument is substantiated that mechanical transfer of corporate PR models—without deep strategic adaptation to the mission-driven nature of NGOs and without an expanded risk-management system—may lead to mission erosion and the undermining of trust among key audiences. The presented provisions retain applied significance for the research agenda in media and communication studies, as well as for PR practitioners and nonprofit managers oriented toward increasing strategic returns and public value of social initiatives.

Keywords: Strategic PR; Nonprofit organizations (NGOs); Corporate social responsibility (CSR); Social projects; Promotion; Communication strategies; Organizational listening; Single narrative; Social impact assessment; Greenwashing.

Introduction

The nonprofit (third) sector has entered a phase of deep restructuring driven by a simultaneous rise in demand for social services, intensified competition for financial flows, and the need for accelerated digital modernization. The relevance of the study is determined by technological and strategic shifts of 2024, which form

a qualitatively different operational environment for NGOs and raise requirements for managing communications, partnerships, and trust.

The first contour of change is associated with a growing technological gap in the adoption of advanced instruments. According to source [1], by 2024 in Germany artificial intelligence technologies were used

by every fifth company (20%), reflecting a notable increase relative to 2023, when AI was used by approximately every eighth organization (12.5%). At the same time, it is emphasized that the academic body of research describing AI implementation in nonprofit organizations “remains scarce” [1]. The imbalance is corroborated by industry reviews: report [2] records that, despite a high level of optimism regarding AI (87% of leaders in the philanthropy sphere), pronounced anxiety about its influence persists (61% are “concerned”) [2]. Such a combination of expectations and apprehensions points to strategic uncertainty in the sector and insufficient institutional readiness for technological change.

The second contour of transformation is connected to a shift in the logic of corporate philanthropy. A movement is noted from traditional charity toward the format of “efficient partnerships,” oriented toward “scaling reach” and producing measurable systemic results [2, 3]. Under these conditions, NGOs are forced to adjust communication models, because interaction with corporate donors is increasingly subordinated to business metrics, the language of efficiency, and demands for evidence of impact, which changes the criteria of legitimacy and success for public communications.

Against the background of these processes, a research gap becomes visible. The scholarly tradition describes NGO communications as an interdisciplinary field at the intersection of PR, management, and marketing [3, 4]. However, the communication function in NGOs is often interpreted predominantly instrumentally, reduced to a “variable in the marketing mix,” where the dominant task is considered to be “fundraising.” Consequently, the problem lies not in the absence of PR practices in the nonprofit sector, but in insufficient theoretical elaboration of the transition from tactical, marketing-oriented communications to integrated strategic PR comparable to corporate models of reputation management, multi-component stakeholder ecosystems, and the crisis dynamics of trust.

The purpose of the study is to analyze and systematize strategic PR models adaptable from corporate practice in order to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of social and charitable projects.

Scientific novelty is determined by the conceptualization of an integrated strategic PR model

for NGOs, grounded in the principles of “organizational listening” and “single narrative” as instruments for increasing effectiveness and resilience of social initiatives.

The author’s hypothesis is that the application of integrated strategic PR models borrowed from the corporate sector (including reputation management, stakeholder engagement, and co-creation approaches) can ensure not only increased fundraising effectiveness, but also the achievement of long-term systemic social impact, provided that accompanying risks are controlled, including “greenwashing” and loss of authenticity.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative interdisciplinary design was used as the methodological foundation, oriented toward analytical unfolding and synthesis of theoretical approaches and applied cases reflecting mechanisms of integrating corporate PR into NGO practice. The research framework was formed as a combination of complementary procedures ensuring comparability between conceptual models and empirical manifestations of strategic communication in different organizational contexts.

The first element consisted of a systematic literature review focused on peer-reviewed academic publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science over the last five years. The theoretical field of the review relied on core sources on nonprofit sector communication, including the Routledge Handbook of Nonprofit Communication. Key explanatory constructs were used as conceptual supports, among which the theory of “Organizational Listening” occupies a central position. This theoretical configuration makes it possible to treat communication not as an auxiliary function, but as a managerial resource linked to legitimation, reputational resilience, and trust dynamics.

The second component comprised a comparative content analysis of strategic documents, applied to identify and align stable communication patterns, goal orientations, and stakeholder engagement instruments. The empirical corpus included public corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports of large companies (in particular, Unilever and AT&T), as well as strategic plans of international nonprofit organizations (for example, OKACOM/WWF). Comparing these

document types makes it possible to reconstruct differences in logics of strategic positioning, approaches to measurability of results, and formats of institutionalizing responsibility to interested parties.

The third element was represented by a multiple case-study method used to test, in applied terms, the relevance of the identified theoretical models. On the basis of secondary data and practice descriptions, cases were examined that demonstrate the coupling of business instruments with social initiatives. Given the subject focus, emphasis was placed on partnerships in the sports industry and on communication strategies of environmental campaigns. This selection of cases makes it possible to trace how joint value creation, distribution of roles, and managed narrative alignment transform mechanisms of engagement and public support.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the theoretical base makes it possible to state that a PR paradigm functionally subordinated to marketing tasks has historically prevailed in the nonprofit sector. In accordance with the provisions of the Routledge Handbook of Nonprofit Communication, NGO communications are often interpreted as an instrumental function oriented toward ensuring the organization's "economic sustainability," that is, toward fundraising [3]. Within this logic, communication is predominantly one-directional and concentrates on

"message transmission" to donors and volunteers, providing short-term mobilization of resources with limited depth of interaction with the environment. At the same time, under conditions of a new competitive configuration [2], the reproducibility of such practices becomes insufficient, which determines the need to move toward a more complex model in which communications perform functions of strategic management of relationships and legitimacy within the stakeholder ecosystem. A key concept of such a transition is the theory of "Organizational Listening" proposed by Macnamara, where "listening" is defined as the "missing component" of most PR models [5]. It is emphasized that traditional strategies, as a rule, "begin with organizational goals," without providing prior "identification of stakeholder interests," as a result of which communication policy proves to be weakly aligned with the expectations and context of interested parties [4, 5]. An applied operationalization of this approach is presented in Macnamara's "MEL Manual," where it is proposed to use a "Theory of Change" that "works backward" [6]. The logic of the model presupposes a sequence from fixation of desired "impacts" to determining necessary "outcomes," and only then to designing "activities," which structurally advances mission and stakeholder needs as the primary basis of communication planning, in contrast to tactical fundraising [6]. The scheme in Fig. 1 visualizes the indicated paradigmatic shift.

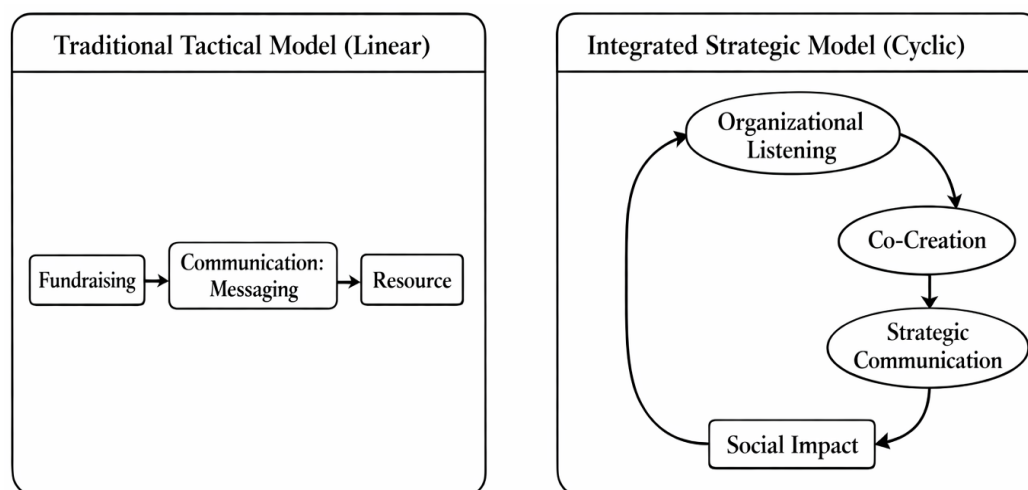


Fig. 1. Evolution of PR models in NGOs (compiled by the author based on [3]).

The indicated transition toward strategic communications is further complicated by the technological gap outlined in the Introduction. Empirical evidence on the diffusion of AI in the corporate environment (Fig. 2) shows that business

systematically invests in data-analysis tools and predictive analytics [1], effectively institutionalizing technologically mediated "listening" as an element of the managerial control loop. Against this background, nonprofit organizations—experiencing a deficit of

strategic “listening” as a component of PR models [5] while simultaneously lagging behind in the adoption of AI solutions [1]—face the risk of reducing digital transformation to narrowly operational automation. In such a configuration, the introduction of AI instruments (including chatbots) may remain limited to servicing fundraising processes, that is, reproducing short-term tactics of resource attraction rather than developing full-fledged mechanisms for diagnosing stakeholder expectations and tracking the dynamics of stakeholder trust.

Such utilitarian use of AI does not remove the original strategic problem; on the contrary, it preserves and even amplifies the outdated paradigm of

communication as “message transmission” [3], shifting it into a digital format without revising the underlying logic of interaction with the environment. The consequence is a growing asymmetry: the corporate sector raises efficiency through data, forecasting, and adaptive relationship management, whereas NGOs risk becoming locked into a model of technologically accelerated, yet conceptually unchanged fundraising. As a result, the gap in communication performance between NGOs and business expands, because digital tools begin to function not as a means of strategic “organizational listening” [5] but as an amplifier of one-dimensional operationalism oriented toward extracting resources [3].

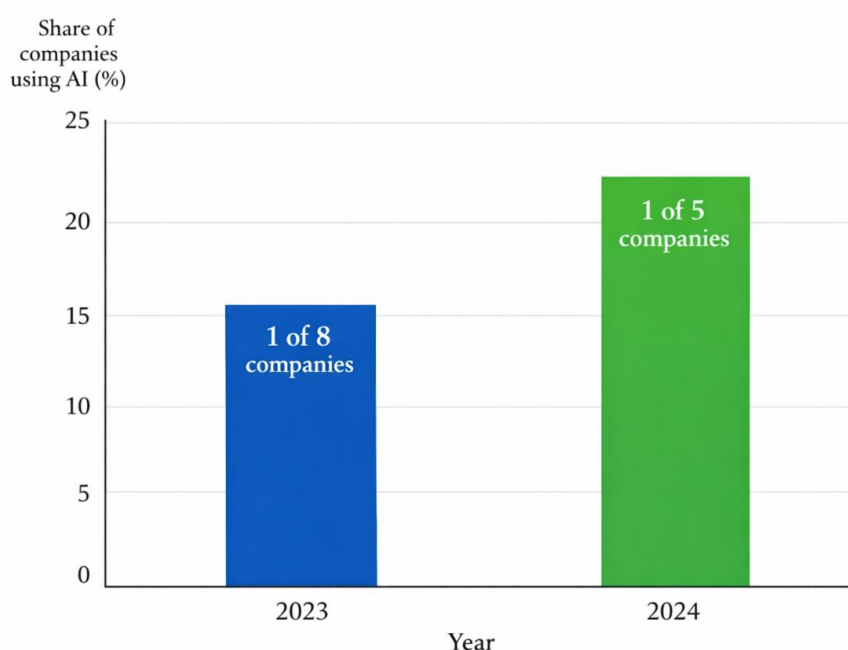


Fig. 2. Dynamics of AI adoption in Germany’s corporate sector (2023–2024) (compiled by the author based on [1]).

The transition to strategic PR in the nonprofit sector presupposes a shift in emphasis from episodic resource attraction to the construction of stable cross-sector alliances in which communication serves not a transaction, but the joint attainment of socially significant outcomes. However, empirical materials indicate that formally constituted partnerships, in and of themselves, do not guarantee effectiveness. Thus, analysis of the Laudes Foundation report shows that collaboration performance increases when partners orient toward “co-creating projects” and when there is “greater flexibility of rules,” allowing managerial procedures to be adapted to contextual dynamics and role distribution [16]. As an organizational condition, the need for “careful partner selection” from a “relevant

field” is emphasized—that is, selection based on substantive competence and thematic fit with the initiative, rather than on brand recognizability as such [16]. Partnership, in this view, is interpreted as a mechanism of complementarity of resources and expertise, not as reputational “attachment” to symbolic capital.

A similar logic is recorded within corporate discourse as well. The Giving in Numbers 2024 report notes a donor shift toward “strategically aligned” formats of engagement oriented toward “systemic change” [2]. An illustrative example is AT&T’s alliance with the NPO Boys & Girls Clubs of America, in which the corporation provides not only funding but also

technological expertise to establish learning centers—thus embedding partnership activity into the contour of its own core competence [2]. Such a configuration strengthens the sustainability of cooperation because the value of the partnership is determined not by the size of the donation, but by the integration of the company's specific resource into the architecture of the social project.

Managing alliances of this kind requires not so much expanding a communication channel as coordinating meanings and expectations among different influence groups. In this regard, an instrument characteristic of corporate communications is applicable—the “Single Narrative” model. In the palm-oil communications case, this concept is defined as a “consistent, inclusive, and evidence-based storyline, collectively supported by all key stakeholders” [12]. The case demonstrates that a “fragmented communication ecosystem” among producers—where 72% of analyzed messages were not coordinated—produced a strategic loss expressed in an “asymmetry of narrative power” in confrontation with more coordinated NGO campaigns [12]. In other words,

heterogeneity and misalignment of public messaging create vulnerability even in the presence of material resources, because agenda manageability is determined not only by the ability to speak, but also by the capacity to sustain a coherent evidentiary frame.

This example reveals the “single narrative” as an instrument with an offensive orientation, enabling consolidation of problem interpretation and redistribution of symbolic power in the public sphere. At the same time, the model's potential is not exhausted by confrontational scenarios and can be productively transferred into partnership logic: jointly developing a “single narrative” with corporate allies (in comparable configurations, such as the AT&T case [2]) provides semantic alignment, reduces the risk of mutual reputational losses, and moves interaction from the mode of superficial co-branding—which is a tactical device—into the mode of co-creation of value, functioning as the strategic foundation of an alliance. The differences between CSR approaches and strategic NGO PR, as noted, are systematized in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of communication strategies: CSR and Strategic NGO PR (compiled by the author based on [3]).

Criterion	Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	Strategic PR in NGOs
Primary motive	Reputation management, risk reduction, loyalty increase (may be “self-interested” or “public-benefit”)	Mission fulfillment; achievement of measurable social impact
Key stakeholders	Investors, consumers, regulators, employees	Beneficiaries, donors, volunteers, government, society at large
Communication strategy	Often “informational” (one-way), more rarely “interactive”	Should be “interactive” and grounded in “listening” (two-way)
Success metrics	Reputation improvement, sales growth, media reach, ROI	Long-term social change, project sustainability, SROI (Social Return on Investment)
Example	Unilever: “Sustainable Living Plan” (combining “self-interested” and “public-benefit” motives)	OKACOM/WWF: four-phase stakeholder engagement model (focus on co-governance of resources)

The “Single Narrative” framework (Fig. 3) makes it possible to align different motives (Table 1) within a common strategic objective.

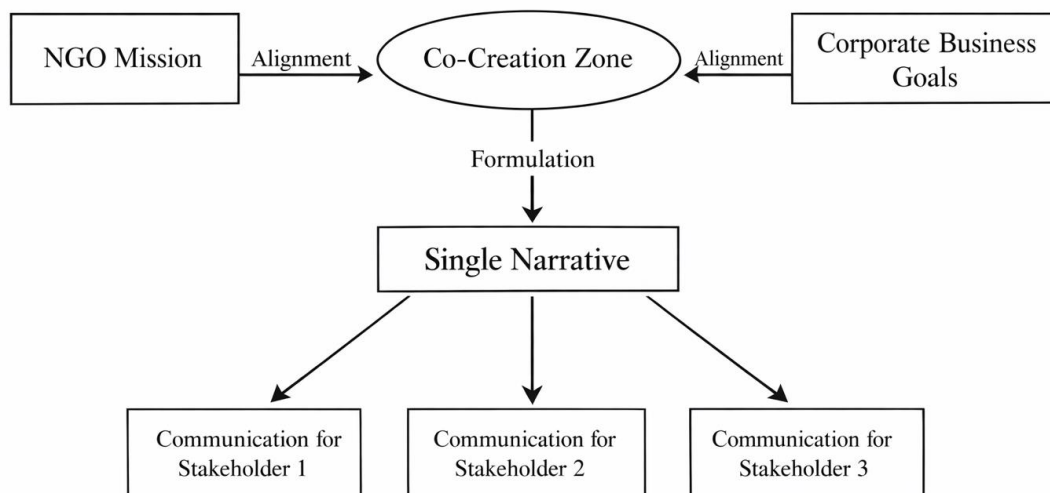


Fig. 3. “Single Narrative” framework in NGO–business partnerships (compiled by the author based on [2]).

Practical materials from the thematic case studies confirm that integrating strategic communication approaches can increase the effectiveness of social initiatives by making partnership forms more complex and by institutionalizing procedures for engaging interested parties. Empirical examples show that the strongest effects are achieved when interaction moves from symbolic and transactional formats to models that assume shared distribution of responsibility, coordination of meanings, and managed stakeholder participation within the decision-making cycle.

The sports industry has traditionally used CSR practices as an instrument for engaging audiences and strengthening social legitimacy [9]. At the same time, the most effective formats go beyond elementary sponsorship, where interaction is reduced to the representation of support (for example, placing an NGO’s logo on equipment) without changing the project’s governance logic. Analysis of the Growchapel Community Garden case in Glasgow [11] documents a shift toward a “co-governance model,” in which the city council, local charitable organizations, and sports facilities act as equal participants in governing a public space. In such a configuration, an NGO is not confined to the role of a resource recipient; it becomes a subject capable of programming the partner’s infrastructure toward the achievement of social effect—by influencing rules of asset use, service design, and parameters of accessibility. Similar models of strategic partnership formed at the intersection of educational institutions, sports venues, and charitable foundations are reported

in other studies as well [10]. Taken together, this points to a shift from sponsorship as a form of tactical PR to joint governance of assets and institutional responsibility, which corresponds to the logic of strategic PR.

Strategies of leading environmental NGOs provide representative patterns of strategic PR oriented toward managing complex multi-component ecosystems. Analysis of the “OKACOM Communication and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy (2020–2025),” in which the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is identified as a key partner [8], makes it possible to reconstruct a model based on sequential expansion of participation and on embedded feedback mechanisms. The document distinguishes four phases of stakeholder engagement: assessment of stakeholder needs; inclusion in planning and strategy development; participation in implementation; and joint monitoring and evaluation [8]. This four-phase construction functions as an applied realization of Macnamara’s theoretical idea of “Organizational Listening” [5]. If Macnamara’s critique is directed at PR models that “begin with organizational goals” [5], the strategy under consideration starts with “assessment of stakeholder needs” as the primary step (Phase 1), establishing the priority of external diagnosis and expectation alignment over the internal logic of institutional settings. In this way, it is confirmed that leading NGOs employ a strategic “listening” approach to coordinate ecosystems that include governmental structures, nonprofit organizations, and civil society institutions, as reflected in Fig. 4 [8].

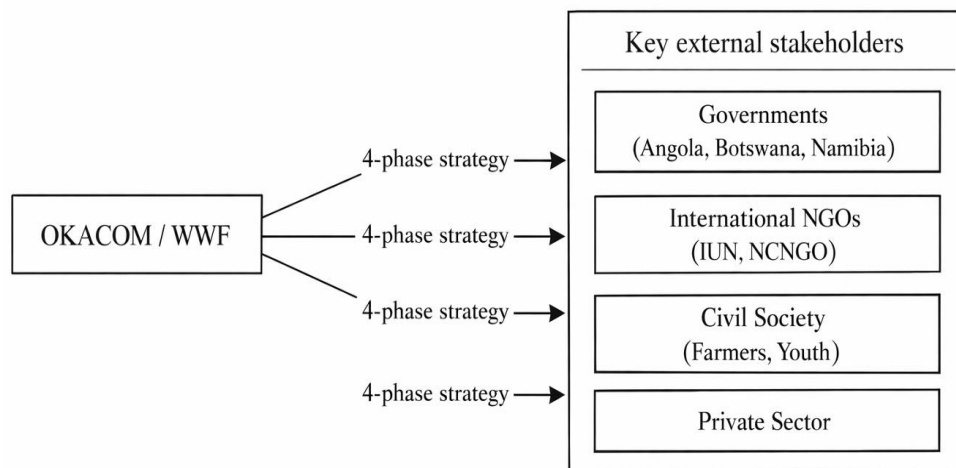


Fig. 4. Simplified stakeholder map of OKACOM/WWF (compiled by the author based on [8]).

Integrating corporate PR instruments into NGO practice, despite its potential advantages, is accompanied by substantial constraints shaped both by demands for evidence of results and by systemic organizational deficits and reputational threats. Taken together, these conditions form a field of managerial risks in which the strategicization of communications requires not only an expanded toolkit, but also the construction of quality-control regimes, ethical robustness, and resilient trust maintenance.

Assessment of strategic PR effectiveness cannot be limited to financial indicators, because the volume of attracted funds primarily reflects short-term resource dynamics and only weakly describes systemic social impact. Industry reports point to the need to move toward more complex measurement circuits that include “social impact analysis conducted by impartial institutions,” “perception research,” and “corporate reputation assessment” [17]. Such a metric reconfiguration presupposes the introduction of independent verification procedures, the development of research competencies, and the capacity to work with multilevel indicators of trust and legitimacy—an evolution that inevitably increases the load on NGOs’ organizational resources.

A key internal barrier in many cases is formed precisely at the level of resource-and-competence deficit. A systematic review of the literature on NGO challenges identifies a stable set of chronic problems [14]. First, “ineffective communication and networking” are noted, leading to “duplication of efforts” and “destructive competition for resources,” which weakens the sector’s collective capacity for coordination and reduces overall effectiveness [14]. Second, “poor governance” and low

performance of boards of directors are highlighted, which constrain strategic discipline and reduce the quality of decision-making [14]. Third, “lack of sufficient... funding” and “strong dependence on donors” are emphasized, making planning short-term and increasing vulnerability to external priorities [14]. These structural deficits directly affect the communication function: research on PR strategies indicates that “limited resources” and the “complexity of managing crisis communication” are among the main obstacles to establishing and maintaining trust-based relationships with stakeholders [18]. Therefore, even where strategic models exist, implementation may be blocked by insufficient managerial infrastructure and the absence of stable crisis-response procedures.

The most significant external risk is associated with the phenomenon of “greenwashing” and related forms of “social washing” that arise when NGOs are coupled with corporate agendas and instruments. Under conditions of high public sensitivity to authenticity and accountability, reputational claims can take on an existential character, because they undermine the sector’s primary intangible asset—trust. A quantitative estimate of the destructive effect of inauthentic CSR is presented in the empirical study [13], which records two statistically significant negative consequences. First, CSR greenwashing addressed to primary stakeholders (for example, employees) “negatively and significantly” affects trust with a coefficient $\beta = -0.463$, at $p < 0.001$ [13]. Second, CSR greenwashing oriented toward secondary stakeholders (society, NGO partners) “negatively and significantly” reduces employee identification with the company with a coefficient $\beta = -0.310$, at $p < 0.001$ [13]. This confirms that reputational distortions are not confined to external perception: they

transmit into internal circuits of engagement and organizational identity, intensifying risks of partnership

destabilization and delegitimation of a communication strategy.

Table 2. Barriers and risks in integrating business models into NGO activities (compiled by the author based on [13, 14, 18]).

Barrier type	Description
Internal	Resource deficit: limited financial and human resources for implementing complex PR strategies.
Internal	Governance deficit: “poor governance,” lack of competencies, ineffective networking, and duplication of efforts.
Internal	Crisis vulnerability: complexity of managing crisis communications due to lack of resources and preparation.
External	“Greenwashing”: risk of entering an inauthentic partnership that undermines stakeholder trust.
External	Dependence on donors: tendency to “adapt interventions to donor preferences” rather than to beneficiary needs.

Comparing the identified barriers and risks makes it possible to reconstruct a “vicious circle” in which NGOs’ structural constraints transform into reputational threats and then—back again—into institutional vulnerability. Internal “limited resources” [18], combined with “strong dependence on donors” [14], create an asymmetry of negotiating positions and reduce nonprofits’ ability to build partnerships in terms of strategic equivalence. A forced orientation emerges toward funding availability as the primary criterion, which increases the likelihood of entering alliances without sufficient preparatory analytics and without the organizational “reserve of resilience” needed to manage complex stakeholder ecosystems.

Under such conditions, the capacity to conduct a full diagnosis of the interests and expectations of key groups becomes constrained—that is, to implement “needs assessment” as the starting phase of engagement (Phase 1 in the WWF/OKACOM model) [7, 8]. Similarly, the potential to demand or institutionally consolidate a “co-governance model” in partnership configurations comparable to co-governance practice [11] is reduced, because transition to joint decision-making presupposes additional transaction costs, managerial competence, and stable accountability mechanisms. Resource and governance deficits thus contribute to preserving the

transactional character of interaction, in which the NGO becomes not a co-architect of the initiative, but a dependent participant with limited influence over meaning frames and the criteria of credibility of a partner’s claims.

It is precisely at this stage that the probability of a reputational trap increases: given insufficient autonomy and control procedures, an NGO may de facto become a silent accomplice to corporate “greenwashing,” because it lacks the capacity for independent verification, narrative correction, and public differentiation of responsibility. Such involvement undermines the central intangible resource—stakeholder trust—which is confirmed by the quantitative results of the empirical study [13, 15]. Consequently, reputational erosion appears not as a side effect, but as a regular outcome of structural vulnerability: declining trust complicates resource mobilization and strengthens donor dependence, thereby closing the cycle and reproducing the initial internal constraints.

Conclusion

The conducted analysis confirms that PR effectiveness in the nonprofit sector within the current institutional and technological environment is

determined by the capacity to move beyond tactical practices oriented primarily toward fundraising and one-way “message transmission,” and to shift to a strategic level where communications function as a mechanism for managing the stakeholder ecosystem and as an infrastructure for co-creating value. In this way, communication activity takes on the character of a managerial resource ensuring legitimacy, partnership resilience, and accumulation of trust, rather than merely short-term mobilization of financial and volunteer flows.

The stated goal was achieved through analysis and systematization of key corporate PR instruments possessing potential for adaptation to NGO tasks. These instruments include the “Organizational Listening” paradigm as a foundation for strategic communication design; the “Single Narrative” framework for coordinating partnerships and aligning interaction meaning frames; as well as applied models of “co-governance” and multi-phase stakeholder engagement, enabling a shift of interaction into a mode of institutionalized participation and accountability. Collectively, these elements describe a transition from a transactional approach to communications toward an ecosystem logic in which the alignment of expectations and procedures matters more than media intensity.

At the same time, the proposed hypothesis received only partial confirmation. On the one hand, integration of the identified instruments can indeed support the achievement of systemic social impact, as demonstrated by the WWF and AT&T examples. On the other hand, the reconstructed “vicious circle” limits the scalability of this potential: internal NGO barriers, including resource deficits and weak governance circuits, increase vulnerability to external reputational threats—above all, risks of “greenwashing.” Under such conditions, mechanical transfer of business instruments without strategic adaptation to the mission-driven nature of NGOs and without sufficient resourcing for risk management leads not to strengthening but to mission erosion, because it undermines the sector’s baseline capital—public trust.

The applied significance of the work lies in offering NGO managers and communication specialists testable models for diagnosing and improving their own strategies, including the four-phase stakeholder engagement model as a structure for auditing processes of listening, participation, and evaluation. From a

managerial perspective, it is advisable to assess potential corporate partners not only by the volume of funding, but also by the degree of strategic fit with the NGO mission and by readiness for genuine “co-creation,” which fundamentally distinguishes partnerships that generate public value from interactions functioning primarily as an instrument of reputational “social washing.”

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