Boundary-Spanning Environmental Challenges in Port ESG: The Marine Debris Paradox and Collaborative Governance

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https://doi.org/10.35609/gcbssproceeding.2026.1(15)

ABSTRACT

Ports are under growing pressure to demonstrate strong environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance. However, many environmental challenges—such as marine debris—transcend port boundaries. This creates an underexplored dilemma: port operators are held accountable for environmental outcomes they cannot unilaterally control. This qualitative study examines that dilemma through a case study of Sabah Ports Sdn Bhd (SBSP) in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. Despite annual beach cleaning, collected waste increased from 210 bags (2022) to 294 bags (2023). The waste originates not from port operations, but from upstream communities and nearby islands. The impact, however, manifests within port jurisdiction, directly affecting ESG metrics. We conceptualize this as responsibility without control: the port is accountable for an outcome it cannot improve alone. This raises the core research problem: How can organizations manage ESG performance when key environmental indicators are shaped by external actors? Standard internal management approaches are inadequate for problems where the source is external, the impact is internal, and control capacity is low. Drawing on collaborative governance theory (Ansell & Gash, 2008) and social-ecological systems thinking (Ostrom, 2009), this study asks: 1. How do port operators navigate the "responsibility without control" dynamic?, 2. What collaborative mechanisms can address boundary-spanning challenges?, We introduce a source-impact-control framework to diagnose such problems and argue that effective responses require multi-stakeholder governance beyond organizational boundaries. For practitioners, the findings suggest that ESG performance increasingly depends on ecosystem-level collaboration, not internal action alone.

JEL Codes:

Keywords: *Boundary-spanning challenges, marine debris, port sustainability, collaborative governance, ESG*