

## chapter 4

# From Output to Impact: Action Agenda for the United Nations

In his Millennium Report published in 2000, Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted: "Today, global affairs are no longer the exclusive province of foreign ministries, nor are States the sole source of solutions for our small planet's many problems. Many diverse and increasingly influential non-governmental actors have joined with national decision makers to improvise new forms of global governance." As a consequence, the Secretary-General concluded that the United Nations needs to become more effective at reaching out to business and civil society in order to develop a more systematic and focused approach for the organization to forging new "coalitions for change".<sup>1</sup>

As the previous chapters have shown, a great deal has been accomplished in these last five years. The United Nations has embarked on a fundamental path of transformation, opening itself to new partnerships with business and civil society in support of United Nations goals and starting to put the necessary skills, policies, mechanisms and tools in place to enhance its interface capacity.

As a result, most United Nations funds, programmes and agencies have come a long way to turn their organizations into more effective partnership players. It has become fashionable in recent years to dismiss the United Nations as an unwieldy, bureaucratic institution resistant to innovation and change. However, in the context of partnerships, the innovative capacity and the degree of experimentation and organizational change that can be observed at the United Nations tell a different story. Building partnerships with business and civil society has become a catalyst for reform and institutional innovation across the entire United Nations system.

Equally significant, the United Nations is not only becoming more focused and systematic in its engagement of business and civil society in concrete partnership projects. The United Nations has also started to successfully open up its intergovernmental processes to include the perspectives of non-governmental actors. This is starting to transform the nature of global public policy-making, away from the old "club model" of intergovernmental diplomacy towards more open and inclusive formats that help to leverage the perspectives and resources of business and civil society to the process.

In spite of these notable accomplishments the report identifies a number of challenges and areas where the United Nations needs to take further action. Partnerships with business and civil society can make a great contribution towards supporting the purposes and principles of the United Nations, as set out in the Charter and the Millennium Development Goals. Giving business and civil society a voice in the intergovernmental process can be enriching and add to the likelihood of impact and sustained change. Nonetheless, partnerships require far more than a rhetorical commitment. In particular they require strong management and local ownership to produce sustainable impact that furthers the goals of the United Nations.

The United Nations needs to remain focused on its efforts to improve the interface capacity of the organization. Inviting business and civil society to the table is only the first step. The United Nations needs to be prepared to engage its partners in an impact-oriented

fashion while upholding the independence of the Organization and without compromising on goals and mission. In order to do that, the United Nations should ensure that it leverages its core competencies to this process, including its legitimacy and value-based mission.

As noted above, some progress has been made, but much more needs to be done. Specific actions are required to scale up successful experiments and allow cooperative engagements with non-governmental actors to be a stronger force for institutional change. In particular, the United Nations needs to take further action on four fronts:

- (1) Fostering internal skills, policies, mechanisms and tools for partnership work.
- (2) Supporting local ownership by building capacity at country and regional levels.
- (3) Engaging in systematic impact assessment to build the foundation for “smart selectivity”.
- (4) Investing in system-wide learning and coordination of partnership work.

It would be a mistake to advocate one-size-fits-all solutions. Each United Nations fund, agency and programme should develop its own strategy and approach to leverage the potential of partnerships. Still, there are a number of concrete steps the United Nations system can take to build the necessary conducive cultural and institutional environment for its partnerships with business and civil society.<sup>2</sup>

## Fostering internal skills, policies, mechanisms and tools for partnership work

There are three areas in which action needs to be taken in order to enhance capacity:

### Action item 1: Facilitate more systematic training

Providing staff with the opportunity of continual training in the area of partnerships is necessary to make a contribution to stronger partnership management. Training should not merely concentrate on “soft skills” such as stakeholder engagement and partnership brokering. It is equally important to provide staff with “hard skills”, including tools to manage the legal process, to manage risks and to measure impact.

Various United Nations organizations have started to provide such training to staff. These efforts need to be scaled up. Partnership training should be mainstreamed in existing and resourced training programmes for United Nations staff. The work of the United Nations System Staff College and the UNDP Learning Resources Centre should be continued and expanded. Also, where possible, the business community could be engaged in improving the skills of United Nations staff in building partnerships. In order to develop a better understanding of corporate culture, some United Nations organizations feature staff exchange programmes on a project-specific basis. Such programmes have proven to be beneficial for enhancing the skills of staff and bringing business expertise to the United Nations.

In addition, more resources should be allocated to sending staff to external training courses. In recent years, various public and private universities and research institutions have started to offer training courses for staff from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors geared at enhancing skills and capabilities to understand and build partnerships. These trainings have proven to be particularly useful for United Nations staff, since their multi-sectoral setup allows them to learn from colleagues from other sectors.

### Action item 2: Streamline legal proceedings

Complex and time-consuming legal proceedings in the United Nations were highlighted as one impediment to establishing partnerships. While such proceedings are critical for protecting the United Nations brand, reputation and credibility, they should not be so time-consuming as to stifle the establishment of new partnerships. In interviews, many United Nations staff members argued that there exists a gap between what senior management says with regard to the willingness and capacity of the United Nations to work with external stakeholders and the resources, recognition and incentives provided to staff performing these functions. Although much has been accomplished already, there is an urgent need to further advance institutional reform to close this gap. Existing institutional incentive structures that emphasize avoiding risks and safeguarding the status quo need to be adapted to better support partnerships. A task force of United Nations legal department personnel, Private Sector Focal Points and external stakeholders (from business and civil society) should be created to explore methods for simplifying legal requirements for partnerships and streamlining them across agencies in order to speed-up the partnership creation process.

### Action item 3: Improve partner selection processes

Various United Nations organizations have instituted detailed due diligence processes for potential partners, sometimes using third-party service providers, in order to comply with the guidelines issued by the Secretary-General and their own internal regulations. Smaller United Nations organizations find it difficult to implement such mechanisms, usually due to a lack of resources. This problem will be exacerbated once country offices become more active drivers of new partnerships. Possibilities for cost-effective United Nations system-wide approaches should be explored in order to facilitate a consistent and transparent application of United Nations selection criteria. In addition, partners should also be encouraged to demonstrate their commitment to responsible business practices through participation in the United Nations Global Compact and adherence to its principles.

## Supporting local ownership by building capacity at country and regional levels

Some United Nations organizations and particularly UNDP as the administrator of the Resident Coordinator System of the United Nations, have made some efforts to build capacity at country and regional offices for partnership engagement. Building capacity in these offices is crucial to ensure local ownership in partnerships and to facilitate bottom-up growth of such collaborative initiatives.

### Action item 4: Integrate partnerships in country planning frameworks

Despite progress, greater efforts should be made to further promote partnerships at the country level. So far, much of the engagement of country and regional offices in partnership work can be traced to the leadership of individual Resident Coordinators. Their experiences should be captured and disseminated throughout the Resident Coordinator System and fed back into country planning mechanisms. The United Nations should also more fully mobilize system-wide catalysts, such as the United Nations System Chief Executives Board (CEB) for Coordination and thereby mainstream partnership capacity building into well-established and resourced programmes.

### Action item 5: Provide training to United Nations staff in country and regional offices

One particularly important component of building capacity at the country level is the provision of training for country office staff. The valuable work the United Nations Systems Staff College (UNSSC) and the UNDP Learning Resources Centre should be continued and expanded. The recently created “Partnerships and the United Nations Global Compact” programme has the potential to serve some of these training needs and deserves additional resources to achieve greater scale and reach. This programme should build on the experiences that have already been gathered in providing training in regional and country offices – for example the partnership training model that was implemented by UNDP’s Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (profiled above).<sup>3</sup> The United Nations should more fully mobilize system-wide catalysts, such as the United Nations System Chief Executives Board (CEB) for Coordination and the UNSSC’s United Nations Learning Community of senior human resources managers and mainstream partnership capacity building into well-established and resourced programmes, such as the Resident Coordinator System. Finally, partnership building learning competencies should be reinforced in the Senior Management Network Learning Framework via the “United Nations Learning Community” of senior United Nations human resources managers. Another entry point is the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) and the Development Group Office (DGO) which encourage United Nations partners to work through the UNDG Programme Group to develop training modules on substantive subject matter – such as partnering with the private sector – to be made available through the UNDG website for supplemental training for country teams.

## Building the foundation for “smart selectivity”

Almost all United Nations organizations have become involved in partnerships during the past decade. As demonstrated in previous chapters, many of them have produced impressive results. In order to reach the next level in this process, the United Nations will need to scale up those partnership activities that do work and scale down those that do not.

### Action item 6: Introduce a selectivity mechanism

Scaling-up and scaling-down requires being selective. In order to be selective, the United Nations needs a selectivity system in place. That system should consist of two basic sets of indicators.

The first set relates to the contribution a partnership can potentially make to the mission and goals of a specific United Nations organization and to what extent it has the potential to draw on and benefit from its core competencies (functional selectivity). The United Nations should not get engaged in partnerships that do not have the potential to contribute to mission accomplishment, or that do not build on the core competencies of the organization. The second set of indicators relates to the potential impact a partnership can have and its input/output ratio (performance selectivity). This second set of indicators should be based on the results of systematic and comparative impact assessment of partnerships that have already been implemented.

A selectivity system based on these two sets of indicators can not generate black and white results. With few exceptions, it is not possible to determine a priori how a partnership may develop and what kinds of impact it can produce. However, a system of “smart selectivity” provides the basis for an informed judgment. What it requires is not only a clear strategic vision on the part of the United Nations about what kind of partnerships it would like to get engaged in – it also requires more systematic impact assessment to capture and disseminate best and worst practice.

### Action item 7: Engage in systematic impact assessment on partnerships

Impact assessment helps to strengthen partnerships. Some United Nations organizations have already gathered some experiences in assessing the impact of partnerships and the results – as well as the techniques used. These experiences should be widely shared across the United Nations system. Individual impact assessments and evaluation studies will not be sufficient to detect larger patterns and trends. Current research on partnerships suffers from a lack of comparable case studies and other data. Resources should be made available to facilitate such applied research work in order to improve the systematic understanding of where, when and under what circumstances partnerships are likely to deliver.

## Investing in system-wide learning and coordination of partnership work

As this report demonstrates, some United Nations organizations are ahead of others in terms of experience in working with business and civil society. As a consequence, there is great potential for information sharing and learning across the United Nations system, including the exchange of best and worst practice on partnerships.

There are various low-cost solutions that could help the United Nations share relevant experiences and provide business with an easily accessible window into their world.

- The United Nations Global Compact Office should ensure that regular meetings of Private Sector Focal Points of the United Nations system are convened to facilitate networking and an exchange of ideas and best practices.
- The United Nations System Staff College should be recognized as a system-wide resource for learning and mentoring on partnerships and adequate resources should be made available to facilitate its work in this arena.
- The existing pages of the United Nations website that focus on the work of the United Nations with business and civil society need to be used more effectively.
- An online community of practice including an email list and bulletin board to enable better networking and communication between United Nations Private Sector Focal Points should be created.
- An electronic newsletter to foster an easier exchange of experiences among United Nations Private Sector Focal Points should be developed.

Over time, resources should be made available to create a central portfolio of ongoing partnerships in the United Nations system. This has a triple purpose of showcasing partnerships to both business and United Nations staff, avoiding duplication and acting as a minimum accountability mechanism.

As noted above, there are no one-size-fits all solutions for reform – each United Nations fund, programme and agency needs to develop its own, tailor-made approach towards partnering with business and civil society. Adapting the United Nations to the new challenge of working with external stakeholders requires time and will not be accomplished overnight. Any large-scale process of organizational change takes determination, time and resources to get the job done.

As highlighted in this report, the United Nations' value-based mission, convening power and geographical reach provide the Organization with unique strengths when partnering with non-governmental actors. These institutional strengths have proven to be important factors for why business enters into partnerships with the United Nations. Furthermore, as this report has shown, once business accepts the United Nations' value proposition and aligns its practices with universal principles, a company's propensity to engage in operational initiatives increases significantly. United Nations principles can thus form a robust basis for long-term relationships and ongoing engagement with business. The United Nations value proposition provides a profound incentive for its partners and should be further leveraged.

Governments are supporting the process of organizational change and adaptation at the United Nations to make the Organization fit for partnerships. They also execute political oversight, thereby lending important legitimacy to the many ongoing initiatives. Many Governments also actively participate in partnership projects themselves, as the case studies included in this report show. In fact, the participation of Governments – both local and national – is crucial for local ownership as well as partnership impact. Finally, many Governments have also launched their own bilateral partnership programmes, reaching out to other stakeholders in order to enhance their work.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, there is not just a potential for learning across the United Nations system. Governments should also support and foster an exchange of information about best and worst practice between their own bilateral agencies and the relevant United Nations organizations. Partnerships clearly serve as a vehicle for meeting Government goals and objectives. Governments should therefore continue to lend their backing for the United Nations as it reaches out to business and civil society – through oversight, progress reviews and resource support.

In his report "In Larger Freedom: Towards Security, Development and Human Rights for All," Secretary-General Kofi Annan writes: "The United Nations was built for a different era." Now, the challenge is to adapt the institution to the requirements of an ever moving, globalized world. The world that Secretary-General Kofi Annan describes in his bold reform proposal demands innovative responses to the challenges of globalization. The leadership of the United Nations has begun to put partnerships with business and civil society at the forefront of its vision. Now is the time to match vision with systematic action. In a world of complex challenges, partnering with business and civil society is not as much a choice as it is a necessity for the United Nations. Partnerships provide opportunities and they pose challenges. Partnerships among the United Nations, business and civil society have emerged as one important new component in the toolbox of global governance. They are no substitute for effective Government action. However, in a world of major resource constraints and ever more daunting global challenges, partnerships are not merely "nice to have". Partnerships constitute indispensable instruments and their potential needs to be fully leveraged. To this end, the United Nations needs to continue on its path of reform, putting all the necessary skills, policies, tools and mechanisms in place to foster impact-oriented and sustainable partnerships.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> United Nations (2000). "We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century. The Millennium Report of the Secretary-General." New York: United Nations.
- <sup>3</sup> Many of the steps included below were also raised during the most recent United Nations Private Sector Focal Point meeting in Geneva in May 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> For more information on that programme, please refer to the UNSSC website at <http://www.unssc.org/web1/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Bilateral development agencies that facilitate such work include, among others, the UK Department for International Development (see <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/dfidwork/privatesector.asp>); the U.S. Agency for International Development (see [http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/global\\_partnerships/](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_partnerships/)); the Dutch Foreign Ministry ([http://www.minbuza.nl/default.asp?CMS\\_NOCOOKIES=YES&CMS\\_ITEM=25C1628353A04992A005246635DDD958X3X39280X49](http://www.minbuza.nl/default.asp?CMS_NOCOOKIES=YES&CMS_ITEM=25C1628353A04992A005246635DDD958X3X39280X49;)); and the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) (see [www.gtz.de/ppp](http://www.gtz.de/ppp)).