

Introduction: Progress or Peril? Partnerships and Networks in Global Environmental Governance

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In the summer of 2002, Johannesburg, South Africa hosted the largest international conference ever held: The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), where 21,000 delegates from more than 180 countries came together. Their mission was to devise a way out of the “implementation gap” in global environmental governance. Initially, Johannesburg was envisioned as the turning point in the decade-old campaign for sustainable development and the event that would inject much needed energy into a process that has never been short on political declarations, but has always lacked sufficient momentum to produce concrete action.

The preparatory process for the 2002 Summit, however, did not leave much room for illusions as to what could be accomplished. And to no one’s surprise, the results of the Summit appear to be mixed at best. Rather than galvanizing a new generation into an environmental action agenda for the 21st century, the meetings only served to further highlight the political stalemate on the most important issues. For example, the Political Declaration of Heads of States is essentially a reconfirmation of principles that states had already agreed upon a decade ago at the Earth Summit in Rio. Even worse, it took considerable effort during the Summit to convince a few governments not to *reverse* some of the accomplishments of the 1992 Earth Summit.

Despite the overall disappointing results, however, a number of encouraging future actions were announced, among them government “commitments” to significantly reduce the loss of biodiversity by 2010 and to halve the number of people without access to safe water by 2015. The problem remained, however, that these “commitments” would simply join the other empty promises as the agreed to plan of action failed to speed up the implementation process. Not only were implementation plans stalled, they were significantly watered down due to concerns with trade liberalization. (See IUCN 2002 for an overview of Summit results. See Bruno 2002 for a more critical perspective.)

What made the Summit memorable, however, was not the heckling and gridlock that surrounded the negotiation of environmental treaties. Rather, what took the world stage in Johannesburg, and sparked controversy, criticism, and some flashes of hope, was the vision of a new and innovative type of environmental governance. Jonathan Lash, President of the World Resources Institute, described this new element as “(. . .) the first stirrings of a new way of governing the global commons – the beginnings of a shift from the stiff formal waltz of traditional diplomacy to the jazzier dance of improvisational solution-oriented partnerships that may include non-government organizations, willing governments and other stakeholders.” (WRI 2002) It is an exploration of the so-called “Type-II” outcomes – officially described as specific commitments by various partners to contribute to and to reinforce, within a partnership framework, the implementation of the outcomes of the intergovernmental negotiations of the WSSD – that stands at the center of the contributions to this volume.

This new breed of governance, involving partnerships comprised of governments, international organizations, private companies, and civil society organizations, has been integrated into the intergovernmental negotiation process and is labeled as one “official” outcome of the Johannesburg Summit. In the Political Declaration, Heads of State proclaimed that “(. . .) sustainable development requires a long-term perspective and broad-based participation in policy formulation, decision-making, and implementation at all levels. As social partners we will continue to work for stable partnerships with all major groups, respecting the independent, important roles of each of these” (WSSD 2002a). The Plan of Implementation further reads: “(. . .) the implementation [of agreed targets] should involve all relevant actors through partnerships, especially between Governments of the North and South, on the one hand, and between Governments and major groups [business and civil society], on the other, to achieve the widely shared goals of sustainable development. As reflected in the Monterrey Consensus, such partnerships are key to pursuing sustainable development in a globalizing world” (WSSD 2002b).

Partnerships are “non-negotiated” items on the official WSSD agenda. In other words, partnerships are only negotiated among those directly involved. Ideally, partnerships are voluntary, decentralized, and self-governing. Partners agree to pursue common goals, and commit

specific resources as they deem fit. In addition, there is no central authority that coordinates or oversees partnership activities. As noted by the delegates, partnerships are meant to complement the WSSD Program of Implementation and help translate the commitments into action.

A majority of government delegates and international bureaucrats have welcomed the move toward partnerships. In a recent speech, Mark Malloch-Brown, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), hailed the partnership agenda as “[o]ne of the more encouraging outcomes of Johannesburg’s Earth Summit earlier this month (. . .). Some of these [partnerships] will probably prove to be old-fashioned, flag waving exercises with minimal impact that I hope will be quickly winnowed out, but a significant number – especially around water and energy – carry some real potential and they need to be supported and used as models for future initiatives” (Malloch-Brown 2002).

The inclusion of partnerships as an official Summit outcome was also welcomed by large parts of the business community and labeled as one of the successes of the Summit (Moody-Stuart 2002). As the CEOs Holliday (DuPont), Schmidheiny (Anova Holding) and Watts (Shell) note: “Business partnerships with governments and NGOs are an important tool to help ensure that corporate goals converge with social obligations in the developing world (. . .).” Partnerships lead to “(. . .) better management of risk and stakeholders’ expectations, development of new markets and innovative products and services, legal and contract compliance, and business process and productivity” (Holiday, Schmidheiny, Watts 2002: 158, 160).

The move toward partnerships has not gone forward unchallenged. It has met fierce opposition from large parts of the NGO community. Many NGOs express concern that the partnership theme was a fad exploited by governments to abdicate their responsibility to agree on further binding commitments during the Johannesburg Summit, and is a cheap plot by multinational companies to “greenwash” their operations. Moreover, there is a widespread perception that the small are losing out to the big once again. Whereas large NGOs – such as Greenpeace, IUCN-World Conservation Union or the World Wildlife Federation (WWF) – have the means and the leverage to design and develop partnerships according to their *gusto*, the voices of small NGOs or representatives of small businesses are often lost in the partnership hype. In the Girona Declaration, for example, a number of

NGOs stated: “The emphasis on so-called ‘Type-II’ outcomes, such as partnerships between business and governments or NGOs, effectively privatizes the implementation of the Rio ‘commitments’ set out by governments 10 years ago, and gives an ultimate seal-of-approval to corporate lobby groups and their ‘best practice’ projects. The bias towards ‘Type-II’ commitments also reflects the lack of political will to negotiate effective and legally binding solutions to the world’s most pressing social and environment problems” (Corporate Europe Observatory 2002).

The majority of NGOs, however, do not seem to fundamentally oppose the notion of partnerships. In fact, many NGOs – large and small – are already successfully working in partnership initiatives with business and governmental actors. At the same time, however, many NGOs are voicing increasing dissatisfaction with the way governments and the U.N. are handling partnerships, frustrated that they do not have the right mechanisms and processes in place to ensure the transparency and accountability of partnership initiatives. They argue that partnerships can complement – not substitute for – governmental action, but only if there is a strong rules-based framework in place to ensure that critical issues such as power asymmetries, transparency, and accountability can be addressed. Similar objections had previously been raised by NGOs at the end of 2000 about the U.N.’s Global Compact and the U.N. General Assembly’s Partnership Resolution.

The Global Public Policy Institute (in collaboration with IUCN-The World Conservation Union) hosted a side event during the Johannesburg Summit (entitled Networks as Innovative Tools of Environmental Governance) to provide a forum for debate on these issues. By bringing together a wide range of perspectives on the debate – from the private sector, governments, civil society, and academe – the panel discussion provided a valuable forum for a constructive discussion on how to move the partnership debate forward. The contributions to this volume not only summarize the discussion hosted by GPPi in Johannesburg, they also reflect on the outcomes of the Summit and the next steps that should be taken, specifically with regard to the “Type II” partnership agenda.

Three key issues figure prominently in all of the contributions to this volume: 1) the notion of “additionality” of partnerships as well as their relationship to international environmental treaties; 2) the need for basic rules of the game; and 3) the quest for greater accountability

and legitimacy in partnerships. The individual contributions to the volume reflect a wide range of viewpoints and perspectives on these issues, and it would be difficult if not impossible to find much common ground. However, all contributions share one insight: that partnerships – *properly* conceived and managed – can in fact make a useful contribution to global environmental governance. Yet, it will require a good deal of work and imagination on the part of all those involved to find a common way forward in defining the term “proper” in this context, and to devise common strategies to make partnerships a useful and widely accepted mechanism in global environmental governance. This volume intends to move the debate forward, starting from the notion that partnerships and networks are a good tool, but can only achieve their potential if appropriately executed so as to be inclusive, accountable, and effective.

In the first chapter, Maria Ivanova provides a brief history of the “Type I/Type II” debate in the WSSD process, explaining the growing emphasis on the role of partnerships in global environmental governance. She argues that, up to this point, partnerships have not complemented governmental action. Instead, she contends, partnerships are simply “repackaging” existing initiatives. The Johannesburg Summit established the notion of the partnership as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Ivanova concludes that “in order for partnerships to provide added value, international organizations need to develop a mandate for initiatives as well as strong assessment and monitoring mechanisms.”

The next five articles bring together practitioners’ perspectives on the partnership debate. Joji Carino, a local activist and policy advisor working at the European office of the Tebtebba Foundation, argues that for partnerships to be effective, equitable, and legitimate, a binding international framework for corporate behavior needs to be put in place. Hans Peter Schipulle, Deputy Director General of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, contends that partnerships can make a useful contribution to the promotion of sustainable development. Building on recent successful examples of public-private collaboration in the context of German development cooperation, Schipulle emphasizes the importance of learning and the dissemination of best practice. Björn Stigson, President of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, writes that companies have long been engaged in partnerships

with a variety of actors. He warns that striving for a “perfect solution” in partnership management is a dangerous temptation. Instead, he emphasizes that voluntary initiatives should be seen as one important component of a more gradual, pragmatic approach to sustainable development. Achim Steiner, the Director-General of IUCN-The World Conservation Union, argues that the four most fundamental principles for partnerships are inclusiveness, transparency, understanding each other’s rights and risks, and capacity building. Steiner also highlights the critical role convenors play in the partnership process. Finally, Sascha Müller-Kraenner, the Director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation’s Washington, D.C. office, contends that partnerships will form an important component of the emerging system of global environmental governance. He argues that a rules-based framework for partnerships will have to include lean but effective reporting and monitoring requirements.

In the seventh chapter, Jan Martin Witte, Charlotte Streck, and Thorsten Benner provide a new conceptual framework for analyzing partnerships. They point out some of the critical design and process challenges that demand attention and serious commitment from all actors involved and outline an overall value and rules framework for “Type-II” outcomes in the WSSD process.

In the last chapter, Thorsten Benner, Maria Ivanova, Charlotte Streck, and Jan Martin Witte distill some of the main lessons learned from the contributions to this volume and sketch a future action agenda.

In his urgent call for further commitments and implementation during the Johannesburg Summit, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan emphasized that “(. . .) ‘we’ not only includes the governments who give those commitments, but must include everyone who can make a difference. A common plan of action must be agreed and adopted by governments. And this plan should be reinforced with voluntary partnerships among many different actors: governments, the business sector, non-governmental organizations, local communities, the academic community, and concerned individuals all over the world. This is the alliance for progress – the only alliance – that can realize the great goals we have set ourselves at the Millennium Summit, Doha, Monterrey, and now at Johannesburg” (United Nations 2002). In the coming years, governments, business, and NGOs will have to work together to live up to this very ambitious, yet promising and exciting agenda.

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