

## Moving the Partnership Agenda to the Next Stage: Key Challenges

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Partnerships have been one of the key official outcomes of the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), included in the Political Declaration of Heads of State and in the Plan of Implementation. The integration of the partnership theme into the official intergovernmental negotiation process can be regarded as a logical continuation of a general trend towards collaborative governance that also features prominently in Secretary-General Annan's plans for UN reform. Partnerships with business and civil society are playing an increasingly important role for governments and international organizations that are challenged to cope with an ever more complex external environment.

At the same time, the debate on partnerships for sustainable development has become increasingly polarized in the aftermath of the Johannesburg Summit. On the one hand, there is a steadily rising number of partnerships, accompanied by the increasingly enthusiastic partnership rhetoric employed by companies and developed country governments. On the other hand, there is broad concern about the weaknesses and potential pitfalls of the partnership agenda, voiced by civil society organizations and many developing countries.

Yet, as the contributions to this volume also show, there is an emerging, if fragile, consensus that partnerships – in principle and under certain conditions – can make a difference. It is high time for all key actors to build on and strengthen this fragile consensus by addressing the key challenges in the partnership domain. As argued in the contribution by Witte, Streck, and Benner, there are a number of crucial structural and procedural design features of partnerships that are instrumental for increasing the efficiency and legitimacy of public-private partnerships.

As with individual partnerships, there can be no single recipe for success. Yet, all contributions to this volume highlight five critical sets of issues that need to be addressed in the future if partnerships are to become an effective and legitimate part of the global environmental governance system:

1. *Devising effective means of linking partnerships to the traditional intergovernmental outcomes of the WSSD process and other multilateral environmental agreements.* This should include mechanisms for prioritization and coordination of partnership activities. Partnerships can only make a meaningful contribution to the promotion of sustainable development if they can be tied into the overall international action agenda. While partnerships are decentralized and fragmented by nature, international organizations such as the UN, its specialized agencies (in particular the United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP) and the World Bank need to find ways to channel partnership activities into priority areas to reinforce traditional intergovernmental activities. Furthermore, international organizations should provide a coordinating framework for partnerships so that resources can be allocated in the most effective and efficient way possible. This is not a call for stronger vertical control. In contrast, coordination of partnership activities should itself be organized in a network-like fashion, with international organizations functioning as convenors and platforms.
2. *Initiating a multi-sectoral negotiation framework (possibly modeled on the experience of the World Commission on Dams (WCD)) to develop a set of basic ground rules for partnerships that are an official part of the WSSD process.* Partnerships are voluntary efforts. There need to be basic rules of the game, however, to address power asymmetries, lack of accountability, and other pressing issues. A binding legal framework for partnerships – negotiated and ratified by governments – is neither politically realistic nor practically desirable. Instead, a useful starting point for the development of basic partnership rules would be a multi-sectoral negotiation network – possibly convened by the UN – that should include participants from all

sectors and all world regions. The WCD process has proven to be an effective mechanism to overcome political stalemate by bringing a broad range of stakeholders to the negotiation table. Such a process is not easy, and requires skillful political leadership. Yet it may be the only way forward to address this challenge.

3. *Fostering a pluralistic system of accountability to strengthen the legitimacy of partnerships, including efforts to facilitate the use of “naming and shaming,” the development of new sustainability reporting schemes, and other activities.* As described in the contribution of Witte, Streck and Benner to this volume, accountability is one of the most critical issues arising in the context of partnerships. Again, no easy fixes are in sight. Promoting networks such as the Global Reporting Initiative surely is one important component of a future action.
4. *Helping to build capacity for stakeholders in partnerships by creating a training and learning network for partnerships.* Capacity-building is not only crucial for those actors that are constrained by their lack of access to financial resources from participating effectively in partnerships. A significant part of capacity-building is also training and learning – training to operate in a partnership environment and learning how to interact with actors from other sectors. Such training and learning is crucial for all involved – government officials and company executives as well as NGO activists. A learning network should strive to connect the various efforts on partnerships of think tanks, international organizations, and public sector agencies and to facilitate sharing experience across different partnerships. It should also bring together analysts and practitioners of networks and partnerships and highlight both success stories and failures. A single-minded focus on “best practice” often prevents learning from mistakes. A learning network should also play an important role in providing training services for networks and partnerships as well as helping to further develop monitoring and evaluation frameworks. An international organization such as UNEP and/or a major NGO or think tank should take a leading role in serving as a hub for such a learning network.

5. *Crafting powerful mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating partnerships.* We will only know whether partnerships contribute positively to the sustainable development agenda if we devise effective ways to monitor and evaluate them. One of the key tasks for international organizations in the context of partnerships should be to create effective monitoring and evaluation structures. The results of that work could then also be fed back into the training and learning network. The newly created Partnership Office at the UN could play a key role in this context.

This broad action agenda should not prevent us from addressing two fundamental questions: “What if?” and “Why bother?” What happens if we are unable to put in place a systematic approach to partnerships within the WSSD context? And is putting together a partnership agenda important or necessary?

At this point it seems clear that any further delay in addressing the pressing issues related to partnerships will inevitably result in a sustained political backlash. NGOs will campaign against what they perceive to be, predominantly, an effort by governments to abdicate their responsibility for protecting the environment and a shrewd strategy of multinationals to greenwash their reputation. Governments will come under pressure not to participate in any more partnerships. And businesses will go on the defensive, trying to fend off any possible efforts of what they perceive might be an “over-regulation” or “bureaucratization” of partnerships. Therefore it is all the more important to swiftly develop and implement “rules of the game” for partnerships that do not let governments and international organization off the hook, that prevent companies from simply “free-riding” on the sustainable development agenda, and that hold NGOs accountable for their contributions.

Why bother? The more appropriate question is “What other useful mechanism is there”? Traditional intergovernmental diplomacy has failed to provide solutions to the most pressing problems. Partnerships are no panacea for the world’s environmental problems, but neither are they useless or necessarily dangerous. They can make important contributions to the promotion of sustainable development.

Our prime concern should be to prevent partnerships from degenerating into the equivalent of diplomatic declarations without results. As Jeffrey Sachs, Special Advisor to the UN Secretary General, reminds us, the key question is whether there is “real finance behind these goals, behind these high aspirations. If there isn’t real financial help and new financial help from the rich countries, these problems are not going to be solved in the poorest of the poor countries, no matter what partnerships are signed” (quoted in Moore 2002).

If executed appropriately, partnerships can be the wave of the future in environmental governance. The loss of this timely and useful device for international problem-solving could only take us further away from resolving the environmental problems of our generation. Our task is to transform partnership approaches to global environmental governance from a necessary evil into a virtuous institutional innovation. This can only be done if there is political will and dedication on the part of all stakeholders.

#### REFERENCES

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