

A Business Perspective on Partnerships

*Björn Stigson*¹

Introduction

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) reaffirmed the need to move beyond dialogue toward partnerships. Clearly, the way forward will be characterized by common endeavors between governments, business, and civil society.

In Johannesburg, I believe business demonstrated a strong commitment to action that overcame the initial surprise of those who like to depict business as the absent villain or backroom schemer. Accused of “hijacking” the Summit in its opening days, the large number of corporate delegates finally impressed most by exhibiting a genuine readiness for dialogue and initiative.

A Long-Time Tradition

Partnerships are not new to business. They have been around for a long time. In the World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD), we have always hailed partnerships as a prerequisite for making progress. In our daily work, we cooperate with a variety of players. Let me give you a few examples.

Companies have found that the sustainability challenges are too big for one single company to handle on its own. Therefore, they have chosen to work in partnership with other companies, but also with non-business stakeholders, to look at the sustainability performance and challenges facing their industries. This is the essence of our six sector projects – forestry, mining and minerals, cement, mobility, electric utilities, and the financial sector.

Together with the University of Cambridge, we are developing an online sustainable development tutorial for companies to train their employees. We have just published a new guide on biodiversity with the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and

¹President, World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD).

Earthwatch. Together with the IUCN and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), we have been involved in a program to integrate environmental considerations into the economic decision-making in China. In the energy and climate debate, we cooperate with UNDP and the UNFCCC to frame “rules of the game” for the Clean Development Mechanism. In the field of sustainable development reporting, we are engaged with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) to channel business input into the development of reporting guidelines.

Avoiding the Temptation of Labels

During the official preparatory process leading to the WSSD, the United Nations elevated partnerships, the so-called “Type II initiatives,” onto the official agenda to boost the outcome of the Summit.

We supplied a number of proposals for “Type II initiatives,” but at the same time stated that the label was not important to us. We start partnerships to achieve certain results together with others, not to obtain a certain label.

Partnerships in Times of Weak Governance

Partnerships come particularly into focus when governance systems are not functioning. Partly triggered by the Summit, a debate has surfaced as to the ability of present institutions to govern a globalized world.

Five years ago, the WBCSD developed *Global Sustainable Development Scenarios* leading up to 2050. There were two parameters that more than others distinguished our scenarios. One was the uncertainty related to the resilience of our ecosystems. The other key parameter was governance. One of our three scenarios, *Jazz*, demonstrated that markets were a prerequisite to helping society become more sustainable.

The Value of Voluntary Initiatives

Voluntary initiatives can help start a process of change and “getting things done.” But they are only part of the solution. Good legislative frameworks are needed. This is particularly crucial for

tackling issues such as climate change, which require a global framework for action.

We should not strive to monitor voluntary initiatives. A few years ago, the Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) went through a process of reviewing voluntary initiatives, but this proved unsuccessful. We should draw lessons from the past and favor a learning-by-doing approach. The value of voluntary initiatives is precisely in bringing together actors who believe they can achieve results by themselves and do not need an external body to monitor their actions.

But NGOs rarely accept this. We have recently concluded a two-year project on mining and minerals. This entailed extensive dialogues throughout the globe, bringing together some 5000 stakeholders. Despite this broad outreach, some NGOs simply did not want to engage and criticized our project without even participating in our consultations.

We should also avoid the temptation many NGOs succumb to of striving for the “perfect solution” first without even considering how to get things done. In companies, you first start with a vision of what you want to achieve and you progress through trial and error. These differences in approach may explain why there has been some reticence on both sides for companies and NGOs to cooperate.

A key message from Johannesburg is that partnerships between government, business, and civil society are needed. I am confident that the business sector will respond to the challenge and move beyond the rhetoric of voluntary initiatives into “walking the talk” toward real partnership initiatives.

