

Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships and the 2030 Agenda

Challenges and Options for Oversight at the United Nations

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United Nations entities have long entered into multi-stakeholder partnerships with companies and civil society organizations. However, concerns about transparency, accountability and effectiveness have prompted new discussions about the potential need for greater intergovernmental oversight over these partnerships. This study analyzes how oversight of multi-stakeholder partnerships is, or is not, occurring in the UN, it identifies where gaps and challenges exist, and it offers scenarios and options for how increased oversight of multi-stakeholder partnerships by UN member states could be structured with respect to: principles and guidelines for partnerships; due diligence mechanisms; and monitoring, reporting and review of multi-stakeholder partnerships and their results. The study argues for the improvement of existing structures and mechanisms for managing partnerships instead of introducing new and heavy forms of intergovernmental oversight, which may stifle the development of innovative partnership models. As such, a risk-managed – not risk-averse – approach is needed.

The views in this paper are those of the author and do not represent those of the United Nations or any other organizations. The author would also like to thank Daniel Selwyn for research assistance as well as Leslie Wade and Ajit Yogasundram for helpful comments.

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Introduction

The United Nations system has long entered into multi-stakeholder partnerships with companies, civil society organizations, governments, and others and, over the past fifteen years, many UN agencies, funds, and programs have built up a significant track record with respect to the number and types of partnerships they have implemented. During this time, the UN system has slowly developed its capacity to deal with external partners, share best practices, and mitigate partnership risks.

However, three recent developments are driving new discussions on the need for greater oversight of the UN's partnerships. First and foremost, the sheer increase in the number and types of collaborations in recent years has led to greater concerns about ensuring transparency and accountability of these partnerships. Given that UN-led processes such as the 2030 Agenda, Financing for Development, the World Humanitarian Summit and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) have all stressed the need for greater collaboration between public, private, and civil society actors, the number of multi-stakeholder partnerships in which the United Nations takes part is only set to grow.

Second, the effectiveness of the United Nations' partnerships with external actors, particularly from the private sector, has come under more scrutiny. A few cases of poorly conceived partnerships have led to negative reputational implications for the UN; more broadly, there has been a greater examination of the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of multi-stakeholder partnerships as a whole. In particular, based on analyses of the Type II partnerships that emerged from the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, critics charge that partnerships are not living up to their promise as an effective means to achieve development goals, and that the benefits often do not exceed the financial and potentially reputational cost to the United Nations.

Third, a few issues regarding external funding coming in to the UN have caused concern among member states in the wake of the allegations related to the Office of the President of the General Assembly. Particularly, questions have been raised about the Partnership Facility in 2015 and the perceived lack of sufficient transparency in the funding and expenditures of large multi-stakeholder campaigns.

These three drivers are causing some member states to question how the United Nations is positioning itself vis-à-vis potential partners, especially in the private sector, as well as to consider whether a more formalized system of monitoring is required for measuring and reviewing partnerships. As a result, and in order to provide a process for continuing the discussion on how oversight of multi-stakeholder partnerships should occur, member states called upon the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/224 to “hold during its partnership forum to be held in 2016 a discussion on the best practices and ways to improve, inter alia, transparency, accountability, and sharing of experiences of multi-stakeholder

partnerships, and on review and monitoring of these partnerships, inter alia, the role of Member States in review and monitoring.”¹

This study contributes to this discussion and aims to build on previous studies and meetings by deepening the debate on the role of UN entities, in particular member states, in providing oversight of multi-stakeholder partnerships for implementing the 2030 Agenda. It served to inform an expert group meeting which took place on December 5, 2016 on the issue of monitoring and review of multi-stakeholder partnerships in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as the next ECOSOC Partnership Forum to take place on April 5, 2017. In putting together this study, a select number of interviews with member states, experts and representatives from UN agencies, funds, and programs were conducted, together with a literature review. Interview partners can be found in Annex 2.

Section 2 offers a general definition of oversight; informed by this definition, Section 3 analyzes how oversight of multi-stakeholder partnerships is, or is not, occurring within the United Nations, and whether partnerships are effective and where gaps exist; finally, Section 4 presents scenarios and options for how oversight of multi-stakeholder partnerships, particularly the role of member states, could be structured within the UN system.

1 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 70/224, *Towards global partnerships: a principle-based approach to enhanced cooperation between the United Nations and all relevant partners*, December 22, 2015.

Defining Oversight

Oversight, as a means of governance and management of an organization, includes four main elements:²

- **Compliance** of activities with mandates and regulatory frameworks and policies;
- **Financial accountability** for ensuring that funds are fully accounted for and efficiently utilized through transparent and timely disclosure to governing bodies, avoiding conflicts of interest, and preventing fraud and malpractice;
- **Efficiency and effectiveness** measured through review, reporting and evaluation in order to ensure work's impact and to avoid wasting or duplicating resources;
- **Ethical environment** for ensuring adherence to standards of professionalism, integrity, and ethics and mechanisms for detecting and acting on infractions.

In addition to these elements, there are also a number of other principles or attributes which go into building an effective system of oversight, including the separation of duties between executive management and governing bodies; the expectation for leadership to enable an orderly, ethical, economical, efficient, and effective conduct of staff; and the creation of an organizational culture and operating style to act on wrongdoing and improve this environment through learning.³ Lastly, oversight requires a system of rewards and sanctions that is applied in a consistent manner to ensure a culture of accountability.⁴

Oversight is thus made up of both ex-ante and ex-post mechanisms, decentralized at different levels of the United Nations system. The next section provides more detail on the architecture within the United Nations system for engaging in, promoting, and managing multi-stakeholder partnerships, existing oversight mechanisms, and present gaps and challenges.

2 Definition pieced together from different sources, including: UN Evaluation Group, UN Joint Inspection Unit, and UN Population Fund (UNFPA).

3 UN Development Programme (UNDP), UNFPA.

4 M. Mounir Zahran, *Accountability Frameworks in the United Nations System*, United Nations Joint Inspection Unit, 2011.

Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships at the United Nations: Architecture and Oversight Challenges

It is widely acknowledged that multi-stakeholder partnerships are an important means for achieving global environmental, social, and economic progress. The biennial UN resolution “Towards global partnerships” defines partnerships as “voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both public and non-public, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and, as mutually agreed, to share risks and responsibilities, resources and benefits.”⁵

Over the past fifteen years, the United Nations and its agencies, funds, and programs have gathered considerable experience in building such collaborative relationships as they enter a new era of multi-stakeholder partnerships for achieving the 2030 Agenda. Yet, concerns around the integrity, accountability, and transparency of the United Nations’ engagements with external actors continue. Therefore some stakeholders are now open to a discussion on whether more intergovernmental oversight is needed and why.

To add some context to discussions on oversight it is important to make three critical distinctions. First, it is necessary to differentiate between multi-stakeholder partnerships, as defined above, and engagements focused exclusively on leveraging financial contributions from non-governmental sources. One of the key drivers of the renewed call for more transparency and accountability is the member states’ demand for more oversight over who pays what into the United Nations system and how this money is used.⁶ The discussions on the Partnership Facility proposal of the Secretary-General raised concerns among Member States, as it would include funding leveraged from external sources outside of intergovernmental oversight and control. Furthermore, the allegations against the President of the 68th Session of the General

5 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 70/224, December 22, 2015

6 Interviews

Assembly illustrated the reputational risk the United Nations faces in this context.⁷ However, while some of the challenges are similar, transparency and accountability of funding from companies, foundations, and individuals coming into the Secretariat or the General Assembly are not directly related to multi-stakeholder partnerships. As such, these concerns should be addressed separately from discussions on oversight over multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Second, it is also important to distinguish broadly between different kinds of multi-stakeholder partnerships. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are often framed and understood as large, global collaborations among many stakeholders from different sectors towards achieving a transnational goal – for example, the Type II partnerships that emerged out of the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002.⁸ Other, more recent examples include the Secretary-General’s Sustainable Energy for All or Every Woman, Every Child campaigns. The key idea underpinning such multi-stakeholder partnerships is that, where government or intergovernmental action on a particular global issue has failed, transnational coalitions of public, private, and civil society actors can step in to fill the gap.⁹

However, other collaborations between UN agencies, funds, and programs, businesses, civil society actors, and/or local or national governments are also relevant to the discussion. These partnerships are not necessarily global in scope, but rather conducted at a smaller and/or local scale and aim at achieving less transformational, but nevertheless important development or humanitarian outcomes. In fact, these types of multi-stakeholder partnerships make up the vast majority of partnerships within the United Nations.¹⁰ Moreover, some practitioners are convinced that these partnerships, born out of local or unique circumstances, represent the most innovative and effective form of collaboration.¹¹

Yet, recent research focusing exclusively on the disappointing results of some of the Type II partnerships has, intentionally or not, called into question the effectiveness of all multi-stakeholder partnerships, including the cases mentioned above. This can be misleading – particularly when discussing what oversight is needed for these different kinds of partnerships, as well as where and when this oversight should take place.

Third, multi-stakeholder partnerships can by definition include public, private, and civil society sectors in their design and implementation. Nevertheless, most of the concerns around partnerships in the United Nations are rooted almost exclusively in the risk of working with private sector companies or receiving private donations from individuals or foundations. While partnerships with civil society organizations should also be subject to integrity protection measures, monitoring, reporting, and review, it may make sense to differentiate between which oversight measures are needed broadly and which are needed more specifically with regards to business or civil society partners in particular.

7 Interviews

8 See, for example, Pattberg (2015), Andonova & Levy (2003), Dodds (2015).

9 Wolfgang Reinicke, *Global Public Policy: Governing without Government?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

10 Survey data from the Secretary-General’s Report to the General Assembly on partnerships show that agencies, funds and programs estimate hundreds of such partnerships.

11 Interviews

In sum, these three issues are distinct challenges and may require separate discussions on what is needed to ensure effective oversight. This paper focuses on multi-stakeholder partnerships and will not address the issue of non-governmental financing engagements that have little to do with partnerships as defined above. Moreover, where necessary, this paper will differentiate between challenges with regards to engaging with businesses and civil society organizations and any oversight options that could be considered.

The Architecture of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships at the United Nations

While there is no formalized, system-wide intergovernmental oversight of multi-stakeholder partnerships within the United Nations, a set of structures and mechanisms exists for guiding different aspects of partnerships. First, a set of intergovernmental bodies, such as the General Assembly, ECOSOC and the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), operating under the auspices of ECOSOC, plays a role in providing policy

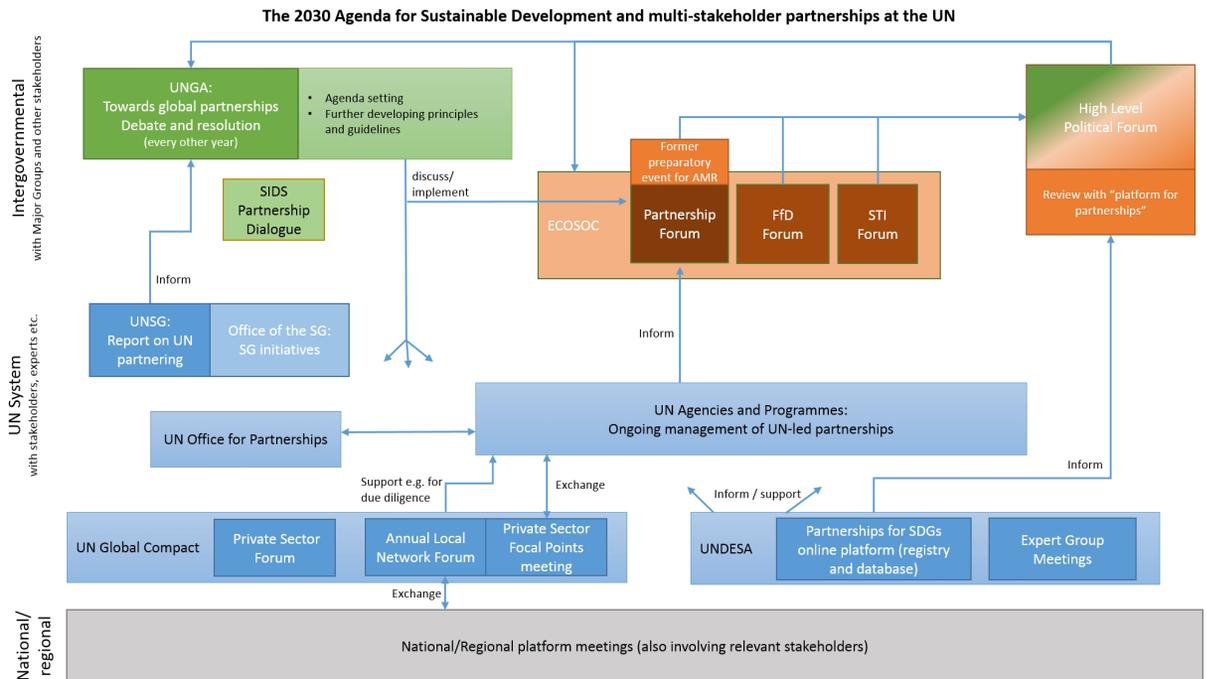


Chart 1: The Architecture of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships at the United Nations¹²

12 Chart from: Marianne Beisheim and Nils Simon, *Multi-stakeholder partnerships for implementing the 2030 Agenda: Improving accountability and transparency*, Independent analytical paper commissioned by the United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, 2016.

guidance. Moreover, some offices and departments such as the Secretary-General's Office, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the United Nations Global Compact Office (UNGC), and the United Nations Office for Partnerships (UNOP) also serve various functions with regards to, for example, collecting and sharing information on partnerships and best practices, and providing partnership advisory services.

At the entity level, broad oversight of agencies, funds and programs is the responsibility of intergovernmental executive boards, with various tasks delegated to other offices or departments, managers, legal officers, and staff. Finally, external bodies, such as civil society organizations, the media, or the general public also play a watchdog role and report on activities of the United Nations. Chart 1 shows the different entities involved in multi-stakeholder partnerships at the United Nations.

The Role of Member States

General Assembly

The General Assembly is the main intergovernmental body responsible for providing policy guidance on partnership activities between the United Nations system and external partners. In this respect, the primary mechanism is the biennial agenda item and resolution, "Towards global partnerships," which both provides a mandate to United Nations entities to work with the private sector and details specific measures to ensure that these engagements are being conducted effectively and in a way consistent with the values of the United Nations.

To assist the General Assembly with its work, the Office of the Secretary-General submits a biennial report to the General Assembly titled, Enhanced cooperation between the United Nations and all relevant partners, in particular the private sector. This report, facilitated by the Global Compact Office, informs the negotiations of the resolution by providing a broad review of general trends in partnerships, concepts and models, ongoing challenges, and lessons learned.¹³ Data for this report is gathered through a survey of all agencies, funds, and programs conducting partnerships, a survey of member states, as well as interviews with staff throughout the system.

Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

The mandate of the Economic and Social Council gives it broad authority to deal with multi-stakeholder partnerships for achieving international development goals.¹⁴ In this context, the Council has the authority to engage in consultations with external entities such as civil society organizations and companies, and to serve as a central

¹³ See, for example, United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 70/224, December 22, 2015, Resolution 68/234, December 20, 2013, and Resolution 66/223, December 22, 2011.

¹⁴ United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, October 24, 1945; United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 61/16, January 9, 2007, and Resolution 68/1, September 20, 2013.

mechanism for system-wide coordination of United Nations entities on relevant issues. Moreover, it is responsible for reviewing progress towards achieving international development goals and, in this respect, it convenes the High-Level Political Forum – the central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. It also holds an informal, annual Partnership Forum that aims at promoting successful examples of partnerships, sharing lessons learned, and discussing challenges to effective partnering.¹⁵

More recently, however, the council has been given more responsibility. The 2015 General Assembly resolution, “Towards global partnerships,” requested that ECOSOC “hold during its partnership forum to be held in 2016 a discussion on the best practices and ways to improve, inter alia, transparency, accountability, and the sharing of experiences of multi-stakeholder partnerships and on the review and monitoring of those partnerships, including the role of Member States in review and monitoring.”¹⁶ As a result, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) has convened expert group meetings and commissioned independent studies in order to inform discussions on the transparency and accountability of multi-stakeholder partnerships that took place at the 2016 ECOSOC Partnership Forum and that will take place again at the 2017 Partnership Forum.

High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)

The High-level Political Forum, convened under ECOSOC, has a mandate to provide political leadership, guidance, and recommendations for sustainable development, as well as to serve as the primary mechanism for following up and reviewing progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments. At the same time, the HLPF is called on to provide a “platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders.”¹⁷

Other Entities

In addition to these intergovernmental structures, other UN entities gather lessons learned and facilitate knowledge exchange on key challenges related to, for example, due diligence and improving partnership effectiveness. The Global Compact Office, in addition to producing the report of the Secretary-General on Enhanced cooperation between the United Nations and all relevant partners, in particular the private sector as mentioned above, also releases other studies and tools and coordinates the UN Private Sector Focal Points Network. This annual forum convenes partnership practitioners from all agencies, funds, and programs, as well as business participants and UNGC Local Network representatives, to share knowledge on partnership success factors and discuss solutions to common challenges.

15 See: <http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/partnership2015/>.

16 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 70/224, December 22, 2015.

17 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 67/290, July 9, 2013.

Agencies, Funds, and Programs

United Nations agencies, funds, and programs are at the front line for dealing with the issues most pertinent to effective ex-post and ex-ante oversight, particularly due diligence, effectiveness, monitoring, and reporting. Oversight within each entity is a tiered system, with the intergovernmental executive boards holding ultimate responsibility, with various levels of day-to-day oversight tasks delegated to different bodies, for example, partnership divisions, legal departments, or partnership managers.

Without any system-wide oversight template, agencies, funds, and programs have each developed their own systems for overseeing their partnership activities and reporting on them. According to the results of a survey conducted as part of the 2013 Secretary-General's Report to the General Assembly on "Enhanced cooperation between the United Nations and all relevant partners, in particular the private sector," most agencies, funds, and programs have developed what they consider to be effective due diligence mechanisms for screening potential partners and identifying risks throughout the lifespan of their partnerships.¹⁸ Many have also either directly adopted the Secretary-General's "Guidelines on Cooperation between the United Nations and the Business Sector" or have used these as a basis for developing their own guidelines.¹⁹ However, the same survey, as well as the survey conducted for the Secretary-General's 2015 Report, points to persistent challenges with regards to evaluating partnerships and measuring their results.

Gaps and Challenges

Within the existing system for managing partnerships across the United Nations, a number of real or perceived gaps exist – in the structures as well with respect to protecting integrity and ensuring monitoring, reporting and effective review – which may necessitate the need for more oversight. While the General Assembly and its biennial "Towards global partnerships" resolution serves as the most important mechanism for discussing issues related to multi-stakeholder partnerships at the United Nations and for presenting policy guidance to entities engaging in partnerships, there is a feeling among some within the United Nations system that this forum is not enough and that additional discussions are needed to facilitate basic understanding of these issues and to craft more effective resolutions to move the system in the right direction.²⁰

Moreover, full implementation of the recommendations in the resolutions is still deficient. For example, the 2015 resolution highlighted "the need for the United Nations system to develop, for those partnerships in which it participates, a common and systemic approach that places greater emphasis on transparency, coherence, impact, accountability, and due diligence, without imposing undue rigidity in partnership

¹⁸ United Nations Resolution 68/326 goes into greater detail on the extent of integrity measures in the agencies, funds and programs.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interviews

agreements.”²¹ Specifically, it suggested that the following challenges needed to be addressed:

- Implementation of the “Guidelines on a Principle-based Approach to the Cooperation between the United Nations and the Business Sector,” including from a gender perspective;
- Disclosure of partners, contributions, and matching funds for all relevant partnerships, including at the country level;
- Strengthening of due diligence and risk management measures that can safeguard the reputation of the organization and ensure confidence-building;
- Ensuring that these elements are coherently reflected in the reporting of partnership activities to the respective governing bodies;
- Guaranteeing that these elements are reflected in system-wide reports and in the reports on initiatives of the Secretary-General to be submitted for the consideration of Member States.²²

Some entities, such as the World Food Programme (WFP) (see Box below), UNICEF, and UNHCR, are addressing these challenges quite well, by not only avoiding risks, but also implementing strategies for managing them accordingly. Other UN entities are not so advanced for various reasons, three of which are addressed here. First, with regards to guidelines and due diligence, there remain some inconsistencies in the quality of these mechanisms across the United Nations system and, as illustrated by some ill-conceived partnerships over the years, a bad decision by one agency can have a reputational effect on the entire UN system.²³ Member states have thus suggested the need to update existing guidelines, such as the “Guidelines on a Principle-based Approach to the Cooperation between the United Nations and the Business Sector,” in order to more effectively mitigate risks and ensure partners and partnerships align with the values of the United Nations.

However, most agencies, funds, and programs have already either adopted these guidelines or instituted their own based on these, in addition to launching their own due diligence systems. In fact, the most-cited challenges have little to do with a lack of guidelines or not being able to identify bad partners or partnerships. On the contrary, the most prominently cited hurdles are bureaucratic partnership workflows, particularly legal uncertainties and delays, as well as time and staff constraints.²⁴ At the same time, 13 out of 15 agencies, funds and programs feel that their organization sufficiently ensures the integrity of the United Nations, with 11 entities also having reported the development or updating of partnership guidelines since 2013.²⁵ This suggests that, with respect to guidelines and due diligence, even those less advanced agencies, funds, and programs have integrity-protection mechanisms in place that may also, to some extent, be hindering their ability to be a more effective partner. Given this,

21 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 70/224, December 22, 2015.

22 Ibid.

23 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 70/296, August 6, 2015.

24 Survey of 18 United Nations agencies, funds and programs conducted in April 2015.

25 Ibid.

it is important that member states be much clearer with regards to what they believe is failing within the current set of guidelines or their implementation across the United Nations system, and which aspects, if any, need to be changed or added.

The WFP also sets a good example in its due diligence process. By managing this process through its legal department, it creates a firewall between its due diligence process and the partnerships teams in order to ensure conflicts of interest are avoided or managed.²⁶

Second, evaluation of partnerships remains a major issue due in large part to monitoring and reporting challenges. In a 2015 survey of 18 agencies, funds, and programs, almost half of the respondents cited monitoring and evaluation as one of the key challenges with respect to partnerships, with just over 40 percent reporting that

they evaluate “almost none” or “none” of their partnerships. Evaluation efforts are complicated by various challenges in the areas of monitoring and reporting, in particular with regards to disclosure and funneling meaningful data from partnerships, through the respective UN entity in which they are being conducted, and then up to the General Assembly, ECOSOC, and the HLPF. Specifically, respondents cited ongoing difficulties with respect to quantifying the value of partnerships, specifically in-kind contributions of products, services, and technical assistance. Moreover, monitoring, reporting, and evaluating partnerships at the field-level remain a challenge due to limited capacity and deficiencies in the flow of information from local offices to headquarters. Finally, some also report difficulties with respect to simply organizing and publishing this information in a meaningful way.

Moreover, with the exception of the broadly structured and aggregated report of the Secretary General to the General Assembly on partnerships every two years,

data on the number, scope, participants, contributions, and results of multi-stakeholder partnerships throughout the system remains largely unavailable. While many agencies, funds, and programs do include partnership data in their annual reports, these reports often present aggregated data and it is difficult to draw any conclusions on their impact. There is also no harmonized reporting framework across the United Nations system on partnerships, further complicating efforts to conduct effective review.

BOX: Oversight of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships in the World Food Programme

The World Food Programme has one of the most advanced oversight systems in the United Nations for its work in multi-stakeholder partnerships. Its latest strategy for the years 2013-2017, approved by its Executive Board, lays out a number of mechanisms for ensuring that risks to the WFP and the United Nations are mitigated, and that its partnerships are as effective, accountable, and transparent as possible. For all of their partnerships the WFP has three sets of guiding principles: namely, strategic principles – the framework within which all WFP partnerships have to operate; precautionary principles – which limit risk and exclude partnerships that may be detrimental to the WFP; and prescriptive principles – which establish the rules of good practice for all partnership work. It also conducts cost-benefit analyses of potential engagements, designs appropriate governance arrangements for partnerships, and defines key performance indicators for reviewing the performance of its partnerships. While reporting on results remains a key challenge, the WFP’s new strategic plan proposes a new results framework that will allow for reporting on how partnerships are performing, also with respect to the Sustainable Development Goals.

26 Interview

Third, while the efforts of ECOSOC, particularly the Partnership Forum, toward raising the profile of multi-stakeholder partnerships are appreciated by member states and other United Nations entities, neither ECOSOC or the Partnership Forum contribute any specific oversight function and it remains unclear what roles member states expect ECOSOC or the Partnership Forum to play.²⁷ The High-Level Political Forum, for its part, is expected to review and report on the progress of achieving the 2030 Agenda, including the contribution of multi-stakeholder partnerships to this effect. Yet, in the absence of robust, system-wide reporting on partnerships, as well as the means for meaningfully synthesizing this information, reviewing the impact of partnerships will remain a major challenge. In this respect, while the Partnerships for Sustainable Development Goals platform can play an informative role in demonstrating the value of multi-stakeholder partnerships for achieving the SDGs, in its current iteration it cannot be a substitute for the much more robust data that will need to come from the agencies, funds, and programs on their partnership activities.

27 Interview

Options for Oversight of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships at the United Nations

Multi-stakeholder partnerships must be transparent, accountable, and conducted in a way that protects the integrity of the United Nations while also contributing to achieving goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals. There is now a perceived need to improve the current system of governing partnerships as described above by potentially implementing new forms of member state oversight. For example, an ECOSOC special event in February 2015 on multi-stakeholder partnerships stressed that “business as usual is no longer an option” when discussing how multi-stakeholder partnerships can effectively contribute to achieving goals.²⁸ Yet, the suggestions made during the event and subsequent meetings, in addition to discussions in the General Assembly and in the context of the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review, are not all that different from what is already occurring in the non-formalized system. Thus, the key questions are: what is actually needed, what roles can and should member states play with regards to more formalized oversight of these activities, and what options exist in this respect? Also, which roles should they not play and why?

In this context, the following sections address three specific issues: namely, principles and guidelines; due diligence; and monitoring, reporting, and review. For these issues, three scenarios illustrate the different options that member states could consider for expanding oversight in these areas:

- A “building on existing practices” scenario that maintains the trajectory of incrementally building on the current system of managing multi-stakeholder partnerships at the United Nations, but without formal intergovernmental oversight beyond what already exists at the level of agencies, funds, and programs. As such, options are generally limited to adopting good practices that already exist and basic measures to ensure organizations are following their own policies with regards to guidelines, due diligence, and monitoring, reporting, and review.
- A “light intergovernmental oversight” scenario that provides options for a marginally formalized system of member state oversight across these issue areas. These options would primarily serve to promote more standardization and harmonization on these issues across the UN system.

28 See: http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/newfuncnt/pdf15/2015partnerships_summary.pdf. Accessed 31 October 2016.

- A “heavy intergovernmental oversight” scenario that provides options for moving towards a much more demanding system of intergovernmental oversight. This would entail the creation of extra system-wide oversight mechanisms to ensure that common standards are being adhered to.

The options presented here are certainly not exhaustive; rather, they are a selection of possibilities that emerged out of the key issues identified through interviews and supplemented by a literature review. There are other avenues and options that could be considered which have been recently put forth by other experts and studies.²⁹

Principles and Guidelines

Multi-stakeholder partnerships within the UN should conform to clear and compulsory principles, while also being subject to more flexible guidelines set by each United Nations entity engaging in partnerships, in accordance with their capacity to manage risks. The current system has various sets of principles and guidelines that are used as a baseline by agencies, funds, and programs for ensuring the UN’s integrity is protected when engaging in multi-stakeholder partnerships – for example, the “Guidelines on a Principle-based Approach to the Cooperation between the United Nations and the Business Sector,” the “Principles of the Global Compact,” the “Bali Guiding Principles,” and the “Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.”³⁰

Guidelines which are put forth by UN entities themselves are usually enshrined in strategic plans adopted by the Executive Boards, and a minimal level of oversight already exists for ensuring guidelines are in place and are being complied with. As such, a number of agencies, funds and programs largely oppose any movement towards any form of binding, system-wide guidelines, as they feel that this may stifle their ability to try innovative new partnership models or attract good partners by putting them at a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis other global actors.³¹

There remains some inconsistency across the United Nations system in ensuring that partnerships undertaken by respective UN entities abide by such guidelines. However, it remains relatively rare that agencies, funds, and programs enter into partnerships which have negative implications on the United Nations and which could have been prevented ex-ante through more or stronger guidelines.³²

29 See, e.g., Dodds (2015), Beisheim and Simon (2016), and United Nations Economic and Social Council. The Future We Want, the UN System We Need, Papers by the Independent Team of Advisors to the ECOSOC Bureau, ECOSOC Dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the United Nations development system, 2016.

30 See Annex 3 for a list.

31 Interviews

32 Interview

Building on Existing Practices

A few options could be considered to promote good practice in this area:

- Member states could call for all agencies, funds, and programs engaging in multi-stakeholder partnerships to commit to or adapt an existing set of guidelines if not done so already, as well as to make these publicly available.
- All UN entities could also do some form of regular self-reporting on how they comply with their own guidelines through annual reports or other publications. At present, while most entities have released publicly available information on their guidelines, there seems to be little information detailing the processes for determining ex-ante and ex-post compliance with these guidelines.³³

Light Intergovernmental Oversight

In an effort to further systematize specific principles and guidelines, the following options exist:

- Member states could consider making an existing set of principles binding, e.g., some constellation of those presented in Annex 3. For example, this could include ensuring that all partners are listed as members of the Global Compact. The development of guidelines in this scenario would remain the responsibility of the agencies, funds, and programs.
- ECOSOC or the General Assembly could request that all agencies, funds, and programs engaging in multi-stakeholder partnerships participate in a system-wide review of the principles and guidelines being used and how these respective entities monitor the compliance of their partnerships. This mapping and analysis could additionally serve as a means to identify and communicate good practices in this area.
- Agencies, funds, and programs would then be responsible for complying with and reporting on the implementation of these principles, while also developing their own guidelines for partnership activities approved by their respective boards.

Heavy Intergovernmental Oversight

Beyond the light intergovernmental oversight scenario, additional steps could be taken to further strengthen intergovernmental oversight regarding principles and guidelines of multi-stakeholder partnerships:

- If the current set of principles are deemed inadequate, member states could consider launching a new intergovernmental process for identifying a system-

³³ A full mapping of all publicly available information on this issue was beyond the scope of this study. This impression is based on a brief scanning of the websites, annual reports and, where available, partnership strategy documents of 13 different agencies, funds and programs actively engaging in multi-stakeholder partnerships.

wide, binding set of principles that all multi-stakeholder partnerships and non-governmental fundraising efforts should abide by. These could then be put into effect through an intergovernmental decision facilitated by either the General Assembly or ECOSOC.³⁴

- A similar process could be undertaken for defining binding guidelines. As agencies, funds, and programs differ in their capacity and expertise to manage risks, allowing customized guidelines is likely the best option. However, these guidelines, as well as measures being taken to ensure compliance, should be transparent.
- Member states could call for an instrument which fields complaints about partnerships that may be damaging to the reputation of the United Nations.³⁵

Due Diligence

At present, conducting due diligence on potential partners is the responsibility of each United Nations entity, though generally based on a set of adopted guidelines discussed above. Slow but continuous progress has been made on this front, and most agencies, funds, and programs have developed robust systems for vetting potential partners, or they use an external due diligence service provider under a shared contract facilitated by the Global Compact Office, or something in between. Yet due diligence remains a challenge, and often results of vetting processes are not shared between United Nations entities. Moreover, some entities still lag behind in their ability to effectively conduct due diligence on potential partners, thus creating reputational risks for the whole system. As such, more guidance and coordination in this area could be helpful.

Building on Existing Practices

Just as they are reluctant to accept system-wide guidelines, agencies, funds, and programs – particularly those which have more advanced due diligence systems and strategies for mitigating partnership risks – are also hesitant to accept a system-wide due diligence framework. As such, marginal improvement steps could include:

- Greater coherence and knowledge-sharing on selection criteria among agencies, funds, and programs engaging in partnerships. This would not necessarily mean fully aligned criteria, rather to expand and deepen such discussions in already existing fora such as the Private Sector Focal Points Network in order to promote broad-based improvement across the United Nations system on the screening and strategic selection of partners.
- More knowledge-sharing on good practices with regards to avoiding and managing conflicts of interest in due diligence processes would also be beneficial. The efforts of the World Food Programme (see Box) in this respect could serve as guidance to other agencies, funds, and programs.

³⁴ See also, for example, Dodds (2015), Beisheim and Simon (2016).

³⁵ Interview

Light Intergovernmental Oversight

While the Secretary-General's report to the General Assembly on partnerships provides information to member states on practices of due diligence and general challenges, conclusions are aggregated; thus, intergovernmental oversight of the due diligence activities does not extend beyond the executive boards of agencies, funds, and programs. Some options for extending this include:

- Member states could call for the development of a UN-internal, system-wide due diligence service which agencies, funds, and programs could use, if desired. Given its past involvement and leadership in this area through the Private Sector Focal Points network, the Global Compact Office could be mandated to serve as the facilitator and report on progress. This service could also maintain a database of all due diligence reviews conducted to eliminate redundancies and to improve coherence. Occasionally, this service could also release guidance products which share knowledge and lessons-learned on effective due diligence.
- Agencies, funds, and programs could opt out of this service and use their own systems; however, if the service were widely used it could collect input that could further inform guidance products
- ECOSOC, which is mandated to improve system-wide coordination, could undertake a more systematic review of these practices across the UN system in order to identify weak spots and to recommend specific actions that may need to be taken by lagging UN entities.

Heavy Intergovernmental Oversight

- Member states could develop and introduce system-wide due diligence standards to be implemented by all United Nations entities. The development of these standards could be linked to the process of developing stronger guidelines, as proposed in Section 4.2. Ideally, such a system would improve coherence across the United Nations system with regards to partner screening and selection in order to avoid duplicative screening processes, but also to mitigate against companies “shopping” around the United Nations to find those entities with the lowest standards. Minimum standards could include, for example, that companies are signatories to the Global Compact, that they abide by its ten principles, and that de-listing due to failed reporting or infractions could be considered exclusionary criteria for engaging in UN partnerships.

Monitoring, Reporting, and Review

There has been some progress with respect to improving reporting frameworks for multi-stakeholder partnerships, for instance, by designing the Partnerships for SDGs platform around SMART reporting criteria (specific, measurable, achievable, resource-based, with time-based deliverables) and through the linking of this platform and its

criteria with Global Compact Office's partnership reporting platform.³⁶ Nevertheless, these voluntary reporting platforms are no substitute for the system-wide reporting needed to ensure adequate review of how these partnerships contribute to the sustainable development goals.

While some United Nations entities, for example WFP (see Box above) and UNICEF, have started to develop more thorough systems for tracking their partnerships and reporting their contributions to achieving development goals, there is no system-wide coherence for reporting on partnerships at all, let alone their contributions to achieving the sustainable development goals. In addition, no processes exist for creating a meaningful synthesis of the data which would enable an effective review.

Building on Existing Practices

Some agencies, funds, and programs have realized that, without more robust reporting systems that demonstrate the value of multi-stakeholder partnerships for achieving development goals, there is a risk that top-down oversight processes may follow which may stifle their ability to realize the full potential of partnerships.³⁷ As such, some United Nations entities are both improving their reporting systems and considering how to lead most effectively other entities who may be lagging behind.³⁸ Therefore, the following options do not require formal member state oversight, but may nevertheless lead to some progress:

- Those agencies, funds, and programs which have developed results-based reporting and key performance indicators for partnerships could share these systems and provide guidance to other United Nations entities in creating their own systems along these lines. To some extent, informal conversations to this effect are already happening, but other fora such as the annual United Nations Private Sector Focal Points meetings or the Partnership Forum could provide opportunities to discuss this further.³⁹
- A comprehensive, system-wide mapping and review of existing multi-stakeholder partnerships across the United Nations system could more effectively pinpoint remaining key issues, how serious they are with respect to damaging the UN's integrity, as well as present good practices, and provide guidance on actions to ensure transparency, accountability, and effectiveness.

Light Intergovernmental Oversight

Given the importance of monitoring and reporting for effective review of multi-stakeholder partnerships, additional steps could be taken, including:

³⁶ For more information, see: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction/pd4sdgs>. Accessed 6 November 2016.

³⁷ Interviews

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Interview

- Guiding principles for the review of multi-stakeholder partnerships could be discussed during the ECOSOC Partnership Forum, and Member States could decide on these principles in ECOSOC or the General Assembly.⁴⁰
- With the mandate to review the role of multi-stakeholder partnerships in achieving the 2030 Agenda, the High-Level Political Forum could leverage the ECOSOC Partnership Forum to feed input on the review of multi-stakeholder partnerships into the HLPF Ministerial Declaration.⁴¹
- The mapping and review suggested in the “building on existing practices” scenario could be institutionalized by, for example, conducting this on a yearly basis and by ensuring this information is synthesized in a clear way. This synthesis could then feed into the ECOSOC Partnership Forum, the High-Level Political Forum, and the General Assembly.

Heavy Intergovernmental Oversight

- Member states could encourage the development and system-wide uptake of a common reporting and/or evaluation framework that links the contributions of partnerships directly to, for example, the indicators of the sustainable development goals.
- The complaints mechanism suggested in the Principles and Guidelines section above could be expanded to field complaints regarding partnerships that are not fulfilling expectations with regard to transparency, accountability, or effectiveness, and to subsequently review these and provide guidance.

⁴⁰ Informal Summary of the 2016 ECOSOC Partnership Forum. See: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=30022&nr=216&menu=3170>. Accessed 30 October 2016.

⁴¹ See also Dodds (2015), Beisheim and Simon (2016).

Conclusion

The range of options presented in this paper offer tentative suggestions for increased member state oversight on multi-stakeholder partnerships at the United Nations. In discussing these options, the key is to promote a risk-managed approach that allows for experimentation. Member states will need to address the trade-off between, on one hand, the real or perceived need for more or stronger oversight mechanisms and on the other hand, the flexibility to let UN entities to try something new or innovative. Too little oversight could potentially damage the United Nations brand or waste valuable resources, while too much oversight could complicate United Nations entities' ability to both find good partners and try innovative partnership models.

Given that the agencies, funds, and programs serve as the primary location for conducting oversight over multi-stakeholder partnerships and ensuring integrity, effectiveness, and results, any system-wide or centralized oversight efforts could not only create burdensome processes and bureaucracy, but also limit ability of these entities to create an impact. A balanced solution – one with the flexibility for each entity to implement partnerships consistent with their capacities, mandates, and risk-management systems – would likely be the most effective. Therefore, while some of the options in the “light intergovernmental oversight” scenarios may be worth considering, those options in the “heavy intergovernmental oversight” scenarios, particularly with regards to the creation of new mechanisms, should be discussed and considered with caution. In this context, using and improving existing structures and mechanisms for managing partnerships is preferable, with new oversight mechanisms introduced only in clear cut cases.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that being overly prescriptive regarding which partnerships are desired or accepted may further institutionalize existing partnerships that may be safe but ineffective, while deterring those that might make more meaningful contributions to achieving the 2030 agenda.

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Annex 1: Table of Scenarios and Options

	Building on Existing Practices	Light Intergovernmental Oversight	Heavy Intergovernmental Oversight
PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES	<p>All UN entities could commit to or adapt an existing set of guidelines and make these publicly available.</p> <p>All UN entities could regularly self-report on how they comply with their guidelines.</p>	<p>Make an existing set of principles binding, but leave guidelines flexible.</p> <p>Conduct a system-wide review of the principles and guidelines and how compliance is being monitored by UN entities.</p> <p>Agencies, funds, and programs would then be responsible for complying with, and reporting on the implementation of, these principles and getting board approval for their own guidelines.</p>	<p>If the current set of principles are deemed inadequate, member states could consider launching a new intergovernmental process for identifying a system-wide, binding set of principles that all multi-stakeholder partnerships and non-governmental fundraising efforts should abide by.</p> <p>A similar process could be undertaken for defining binding guidelines, though this should ideally be avoided.</p> <p>Member states could call for an instrument which fields complaints about potentially damaging or ineffective partnerships.</p>
DUE DILIGENCE	<p>Promote greater coherence and knowledge-sharing on selection criteria among agencies, funds, and programs engaging in partnerships.</p> <p>More knowledge-sharing on good practices with regards to avoiding and managing conflicts of interest in due diligence processes would also be beneficial.</p>	<p>Member states could call for the development of a UN-internal, system-wide due diligence service which agencies, funds, and programs could use, if desired. The Global Compact Office could be mandated to serve as the facilitator and to report on progress, as well as to potentially maintain a database of all due diligence reviews and release guidance products.</p> <p>ECOSOC could undertake a more systematic review of due diligence practices across the United Nations system in order to identify weak spots and to recommend specific actions that may need to be taken by lagging UN entities.</p>	<p>Develop and introduce system-wide due diligence standards to be implemented by all United Nations entities.</p>



MONITORING,
REPORTING,
AND REVIEW

Those UN entities which have developed results-based reporting and key performance indicators for partnerships could share these systems and provide guidance to other United Nations entities in creating their own systems.

Conduct a comprehensive, system-wide mapping and review of existing partnerships across the UN system to identify key issues, present good practices and provide guidance on ensuring transparency, accountability and effectiveness.

Guiding principles for the review of multi-stakeholder partnerships could be discussed during the ECOSOC Partnership Forum, and Member States could decide on these principles in ECOSOC or the General Assembly.

The High-Level Political Forum could leverage the ECOSOC Partnership Forum to feed input on the review of multi-stakeholder partnerships into the HLPF Ministerial Declaration.

The mapping and review suggested in the 'building on existing practices' scenario could be conducted yearly and ensure this information is synthesized in a clear way; this synthesis could then feed into the ECOSOC Partnership Forum, the High-Level Political Forum, and the General Assembly.

Member states could encourage the development and system-wide uptake of a common reporting and/or evaluation framework which links the contributions of partnerships directly to, for example, the indicators of the sustainable development goals.

The complaints mechanism suggested in the 'Principles and guidelines' section could also field complaints regarding partnerships which are not fulfilling expectations with regard to transparency, accountability, or effectiveness. The mechanism could subsequently review the partnership and provide guidance.

Annex 2: Interview Partners

Jay Aldous, Director, Private Sector Partnerships, World Food Programme

Dr. Marianne Beisheim, Senior Associate, Global Issues, German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Felix Dodds, Senior Fellow, Global Research Institute, University of North Carolina

Hiba Frankoul, Partnerships Manager, Programme & Innovation, Private Sector Engagement, Private Fundraising and Partnerships, UNICEF

Karolina Mzyk Callias, Policy Specialist, Foundations, Istanbul International Centre for Private Sector in Development, UNDP

Angus Rennie, Senior Manager, Partnerships and UN Relations, United Nations Global Compact

Sergio Rodrigues dos Santos, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Brazil in Tel Aviv (previously Minister-Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations)

Stefanie Schmid-Luebbert, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations

Tatjana von Steiger, Minister, Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations

Leslie Wade, Chief, ECOSOC Interorganizational Cooperation Branch, Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination, UN DESA

Ajit Yogasundram, ECOSOC and Interorganizational Cooperation Branch, Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination (OESC), Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Annex 3: Existing Principles and Guidelines

Guidelines on a Principle-Based Approach to the Cooperation Between the United Nations and the Business Sector

The purpose of these Guidelines is to provide a framework to facilitate the formulation and implementation of partnerships between the United Nations and the business sector while safeguarding the integrity, impartiality and independence of the United Nations and preventing and mitigating potential risks of adverse impacts on people and the environment.

To view the guidelines, visit: https://www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/issues_doc/un_business_partnerships/guidelines_principle_based_approach_between_un_business_sector.pdf.

The Principles of the Global Compact

Human Rights

- Principle 1: Businesses should support and respect the protection of internationally proclaimed human rights; and
- Principle 2: make sure that they are not complicit in human rights abuses.

Labour

- Principle 3: Businesses should uphold the freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
- Principle 4: the elimination of all forms of forced and compulsory labour;
- Principle 5: the effective abolition of child labour; and
- Principle 6: the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

Environment

- Principle 7: Businesses should support a precautionary approach to environmental challenges;
- Principle 8: undertake initiatives to promote greater environmental responsibility; and
- Principle 9: encourage the development and diffusion of environmentally friendly technologies.

Anti-Corruption

- Principle 10: Businesses should work against corruption in all its forms, including extortion and bribery.

For more information, see:

<https://www.unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/mission/principles>.

The Bali Guiding Principles

Objective of Partnerships

Partnerships for sustainable development are specific commitments by various partners intended to contribute to and reinforce the implementation of the outcomes of the intergovernmental negotiations of the WSSD (Programme of Action and Political Declaration) and to help achieve the further implementation of Agenda 21 and the Millennium Development Goals.

Voluntary Nature/Respect for Fundamental Principles and Values

Partnerships are of a voluntary, 'self-organizing' nature; they are based on mutual respect and shared responsibility of the partners involved, taking into account the Rio Declaration Principles and the values expressed in the Millennium Declaration.

Link With Globally Agreed Outcomes

Partnerships are to complement the intergovernmentally agreed outcomes of WSSD: they are not intended to substitute commitments made by governments. Rather they should serve as mechanisms for the delivery of the globally agreed commitments by mobilizing the capacity for producing action on the ground. Partnerships should be anchored in the intergovernmentally agreed outcomes of WSSD (Program of Action and Political Declaration) and help achieve the further implementation of Agenda 21 and the Millennium Development Goals.

Integrated Approach To Sustainable Development

Partnerships should integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in their design and implementation. They should be consistent, where applicable, with sustainable development strategies and poverty reduction strategies of the countries, regions and communities where their implementation takes place.

Multi-stakeholder Approach

Partnerships should have a multi-stakeholder approach and preferably involve a range of significant actors in a given area of work. They can be arranged among any combination of partners, including governments, regional groups, local authorities, non-governmental actors, international institutions and private sector partners. All partners should be involved in the development of a partnership from an early stage, so that it is genuinely participatory in approach. Yet as partnerships evolve, there should be an opportunity for additional partners to join on an equal basis.

Transparency and Accountability

Partnerships should be developed and implemented in an open and transparent manner and in good faith, so that ownership of the partnership process and its outcomes is shared among all partners, and all partners are equally accountable. They should specify arrangements to monitor and review their performance against the objectives and targets they set and report in regular intervals (self-reporting). These reports should be made accessible to the public.

Tangible Results

Each partnership should define its intended outcome and benefits. Partnerships should have clear objectives and set specific measurable targets and timeframes for their achievement. All partners should explicitly commit to their role in achieving the aims and objectives of the partnerships.

Funding Arrangements

Available and/or expected sources of funding should be identified. At least the initial funding should be assured at the time of the Summit, if the partnership is to be recognized there.

New/Value Added Partnerships

Ideally, partnerships for sustainable development should be “new”, i.e. developed within the framework of the WSSD process. In case of on-going partnerships, there has to be a significant added value to these partnerships in the context of the WSSD (e.g. more partners taken on board, replicating an initiative or extending it to another geographical region, increasing financial resources, etc.)

Local Involvement & International Impact

While the active involvement of local communities in the design and implementation of partnerships is strongly encouraged (bottom-up approach), partnerships should be international in their impact, which means their impact should extend beyond the national level (global, regional and/or sub-regional).

Follow-up Process

Partnerships should keep the Commission on Sustainable Development informed about their activities and progress in achieving their targets. The CSD should serve as a focal point for discussion of partnerships that promote sustainable development, including sharing lessons learnt, progress made and best practices.

Opportunities to develop partnerships for sustainable development will continue after the WSSD. Submissions of partnerships after the Summit will be considered in the follow-up process. For more information, see: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/dsd/dsd_aofw_par/par_mand_baliquidprin.shtml

Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights

To view the Guiding Principles, visit:

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf

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