

An introduction to multi-stakeholder partnerships

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"The issues we face are so big and the targets are so challenging that we cannot do it alone. When you look at any issue, such as food or water scarcity, it is very clear that no individual institution, government, or company can provide the solution."

Paul Polman, CEO, Unilever

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly acknowledge the interconnectedness of the prosperity of business, the prosperity of society and the prosperity of the environment. They represent a fundamental shift in approach, naming all societal sectors as key development actors, and requiring an unprecedented level of cooperation and collaboration among civil society, business, government, NGOs, foundations and others for their achievement. We all hold key parts of the solution, and we all stand to benefit by collectively driving forward sustainable development.

What are multi-stakeholder partnerships?

Multi-stakeholder partnerships (sometimes known as: public private partnerships for development, cross-sector collaboration, collective action) are a vehicle through which interested players can collaborate on specific challenges or exploit opportunities in ways that achieve greater impact than they could achieve alone.

"Multi-stakeholder partnerships involve organisations from different societal sectors working together, sharing risks and combining their unique resources and competencies in ways that can generate and maximise value towards shared partnership and individual partner objectives, often through more innovative, more sustainable, more efficient and / or more systemic approaches."¹

The power of MSPs comes from the different approaches – public service mandate, people-focused or market-based – and the complementary resources – technological, human, social or economic – that partners from different sectors can together bring to the table.

NGOs and civil society	Business	Government / parliamentarians	International agencies/ UN	Donors and foundations
Technical knowledge / capacity	A market-based / commercial / value creation approach	Regulatory framework (e.g. licenses for water etc.)	Technical support, knowledge and experience	Funding and support
Access to and deep knowledge of communities	Power of the brand and access to customer base	Integration with public systems / long term planning	Legitimacy and impartiality	In many cases foundations can be less risk adverse and support more experimental and innovative approaches, providing proof of concept that can be expanded by more traditional donors
Legitimacy / social capital	Technical and process innovation	Taxation policy	Access to a global network	
Passion and people-focus	Power of the value chain	Capacity building (e.g. agricultural extension services)	Political access	
	Infrastructure / logistics	Provision of land and supporting infrastructure		
		Democratic legitimacy		

Table 1: Some of the complementary resources different sectors can bring to the table. Source: The Partnering Initiative

¹ Definition: The Partnering Initiative (partnerinit.org). Please note the distinction from regulated PPPs (Public Private Partnerships) in which business provides upfront investment to

deliver public infrastructure / services taking profit through long term payments from government or end users

How are they being used?

MSPs can be used wherever there is an alignment of interest among different actors and where there is potential for collective action to contribute to the SDGs while generating value for all the parties – whether business, social or environmental.

They have the potential to i) leverage a range of resources around a particular issue; ii) create innovative approaches from the diversity of the contributions and iii) tackle complexity and implement systems change.

They can operate at any level from global to local. Global partnerships (for example the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health; Sustainable Energy for All; the Global Fund), tend to focus on policy and advocacy, setting of standards and norms, showcasing action and pledges, creating good practice and knowledge exchange, and development of financial instruments / common trust funds.

At the country level, MSPs are a way of getting the greatest output value from combining the resources available in a different way. MSPs might contribute to any of the SDGs (often several at once), and can work in any number of ways – joint advocacy and knowledge sharing, capacity building, policy development, pro-poor product and service development, direct on-the-ground action, mediating equitable use of natural resources, building business competitiveness etc.

Wherever system change is required, for example creating new sustainable agricultural value chains or implementing innovations in health care delivery, MSPs are an essential vehicle, providing an overarching common vision and the necessary coordination and support for collaboration of multiple actors each playing essential parts and together building a new, functioning, sustainable system.

Examples of MSPs include:

Name	Who is involved?	When?	Goals
Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), worldwide. rspo.org	The seven sectors of the palm oil industry: oil palm producers, processors or traders, consumer goods manufacturers, retailers, banks/investors, and environmental/social NGOs	2004-ongoing	To transform the palm oil industry in collaboration with the global supply chain, and put it on a sustainable path -> Reduce environmental damage
Market Access for Cattle Herders, West Kenya. http://tinyurl.com/puvq7xk	SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, local government, local small and medium enterprises (SMEs), micro-finance NGOs	2006-2009	Setting up local markets to trade cattle -> Improve market system -> Increase farmer income
Landcare, Australia http://tinyurl.com/no459kc	A movement of farmer organisations, government, and environmental NGOs: over 4,000 local community groups	1989-ongoing	Combating soil salinity and erosion through sound land management practices and sustainable productivity
World Economic Forum's New Vision for Agriculture: Grow Africa and Grow Asia http://tinyurl.com/pzp9q3n	Alliance between agrifood businesses, government, and civil society to create a more sustainable and inclusive food system	2008-ongoing	Transforming the agriculture sector by simultaneously delivering food security, environmental sustainability, and economic opportunity

Examples of MSPs which contribute towards the SDGs. Source: Adapted from *The MSP Guide: How to design and facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships*, Brouwer, Woodhill et al. (2015) Centre for Development Innovation, Wageningen

What do multi-stakeholder partnerships involve?

Much of the innovation from successful partnerships flows from their unusual structures and forms. Unlike regulated public-private partnerships (see footnote above for distinction), multi-stakeholder partnerships are voluntary undertakings operating under their own principles. They are highly context-specific, building on the interests, capacities, resources and leadership of

the partners involved. They succeed by focussing on a common vision, with willingness to take risks and be highly creative and flexible in achieving that vision. They represent a different way of doing development, requiring new skillsets and mind sets.

Where have multi-stakeholder partnerships come from? What are the trends?

Multi-stakeholder partnerships have been growing in popularity over the last 25 years since Agenda 21 was launched at the 1992 Rio World Summit. Their

use was given a significant boost both by the Johannesburg Summit in 2002 and the Rio+20 Summit in 2012 where they were included as official outcomes. While the Sustainable Development Goals explicitly include multi-stakeholder partnerships within Goal 17, they are essential across all of the Goals.

MSPs have grown particularly strongly within in the business sustainability agenda, with companies entering collaborations to tackle the human, social, infrastructure or environmental challenges to the sustainability of their operations.

To date, the majority of MSPs have operated at the global level, with a single development issue as their focus and seeking to drive their agenda across regions and countries (top-down approach) Increasingly however, MSPs are focusing their efforts at country level, tackling, wherever feasible, multiple development issues in a ('horizontally') integrated way. At the local level, they are able to take full account of the local context and are being built up more organically based on the needs and the resources and energies available (bottom-up approach). A number of global partnerships, for example, Scale Up Nutrition, are trying to combine both the global (to achieve scale) with the local (to be locally relevant and sustainable) through 'vertical integration'.²

What are some of the challenges of MSPs?

Partnering across societal sectors is difficult. It requires bringing together organisations with quite different approaches, cultures, interests, vocabularies and values to together find an equitable approach that delivers value for all.

This results in considerable transaction costs and MSPs should only be used when they will generate significant added value.

While the partnering community has made significant inroads into understanding what makes for effective partnering, the majority of partnerships are not set up and operating optimally, and are not delivering to the maximum of their potential. There are currently no agreed standards for partnering.

What does effective partnering require from individuals and organisations?³

While all multi-stakeholder partnerships are context specific, many broadly-applicable lessons can be learned from experience. Effective partnering requires (at least) seven things:

1. **Breaking through** our assumptions and preconceptions about each other
2. **Recognising and relishing diversity** as an asset rather than a problem
3. **Properly valuing the many different contributions** each partner brings
4. **Developing new skills** in partnership-building, collaboration brokering and collective leadership
5. **Understanding the systems and contexts** in which partnerships operate
6. **Applying the highest standards**, rigour and accountability to all partnering endeavours
7. **Investing in the partnering process** in order to optimise engagement and create the conditions for efficiency, innovation and sustainability

How do MSPs get started?

Many MSPs in the past have originated fairly sporadically, for example from individuals with a strong vision or through ideas being co-generated from creative conversations. More recently, a number of countries and organisations have begun to build 'platforms for partnership'⁴, ongoing mechanisms to catalyse collaboration for development in a much more systematic way.

Platforms undertake activities to convene and align government, business, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations donors and other development actors around a particular issue or geography, facilitate innovative collaborative approaches and directly broker and support new partnering action.

The '**Roadmap for systematically engaging business as a partner in development**'⁵, developed for and launched at the GPEDC HLM in Mexico in 2014, sets out an approach through which governments can map their development priorities against the interests and resources of business and other development actors, and, through platforms and other mechanisms, much more systematically develop MSPs that can leverage all societal resources towards their SDG priorities.

Citation:

An introduction to multi-stakeholder partnerships, Darian Stibbe and Dave Prescott, The Partnering Initiative, Oxford 2016

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² See 'Delivering on the Promise'; World Vision and The Partnering Initiative (<http://thepartneringinitiative.org/research-and-learning/delivering-on-the-promise/>)

³ Ros Tennyson, Partnership Brokers Association

⁴ <http://thepartneringinitiative.org/research-and-learning/platforms-for-partnership/>

⁵ Download the Roadmap at: <http://bit.ly/1TZbH3A>