

17 PARTNERSHIPS  
FOR THE GOALS

## CIES RESEARCH BRIEF 6

Spring 2021

# Are partnerships effective in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals?

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### Researching the effectiveness of sustainability partnerships: a key question for the 2030 Agenda

Multistakeholder partnerships, a broad notion that includes a constellation of collaborative governance arrangements between international organizations, states, local governments, non-governmental organizations, foundations, companies, and research institutions, are explicitly seen as key means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Almost by definition, they are expected to leverage financial resources, skills, technology and knowledge in support of global public goods, complementing the commitments made by governments as part of multilateral negotiations and agreements.

Despite the optimistic assumptions, we still have limited knowledge on the extent to which partnership expectations may have materialized. Given the variety of approaches, structures and scales, which may characterize partnerships, from small projects implemented at the local level to global programs capable of mobilizing large amounts of resources, the concept of partnership effectiveness itself remains hotly debated. Moreover, significant questions continue to surround the actual successes of the partnership initiatives launched over the past two decades, as well as the factors and design choices that may enhance their contribution to solving sustainable development problems. Compounding our blind spots on partnership effects, no established frameworks or agreed-upon indicators exist at the inter-

national level for evaluating partnerships and analysing the mechanisms through which their effects are brought about. For example, the indicators adopted to assess multistakeholder partnerships as part of SDG 17 narrowly emphasise the amount of funding mobilized through partnership initiatives, focus on partnerships supported through development cooperation, or are based on self-reporting by governments.

### A disaggregated framework for understanding partnership effectiveness

One key problem in assessing partnerships is usually that of untangling their problem-solving impact – that is, their effects on the sustainable development issue that they are created to address – from other social and policy factors. In implementation, partnership activities usually interact with other contextual factors, such as political conditions or external shocks. Moreover, partnerships are often embedded in pre-existing networks of actors and collaborative initiatives that they seek to complement or expand, thus making it difficult to establish precise causal relationships between a specific project and its wider sustainability impacts.

The research project on *Effectiveness of Partnerships for Advancing the SDGs* adopted a disaggregated approach to respond to this challenge, identifying a set of discrete and yet inter-related pathways that can be used to gain a larger, cumulative understanding of effectiveness within a specific partnership initiative. These include: (i) the 'nominal' attainment of the partnership's self-defined goals; (ii)

the creation of value (financial, political, reputational, or else) for the partners; (iii) the promotion of increased collaboration among these partners; (iv) the delivery of positive environmental, social and economic impacts for affected populations; and (v) the influence on collaboration and institutions outside the partnership.

The project also presented an analysis of several hypotheses about the internal structuring of partnerships and its influence on partnership effectiveness. In particular, the project focused on the presence of sophisticated forms of contracting that clearly specify partners' responsibilities and accountability, the credible commitment of resources by the partners, the fostering of innovation, and the degree of adaptability and learning-by-doing.

Finally, the project sought to apply its innovative framework to a range of case studies across thematic areas and cross-cutting issues, in order to present new real-world data [Table 1].

### Partnership effectiveness from local populations to global collaboration

The findings of the project reveal that the nominal attainment of a partnership's self-defined objective, the creation of value for its partners and its effects on their internal collaboration can be seen as intermediate pathways to the problem-solving effectiveness of a partnership, but they are unable to provide a comprehensive measure of its impacts.

At one end of the spectrum, the most important partnership impacts are often produced at the level of local implementation and through effects on affected populations. Such impacts can also be seen as a necessary condition for a partnership's ability to contribute to problem-solving for sustainability: taking local livelihoods, community participation and the mediating role of domestic institutions into account may play a crucial role in determining overall partnership effectiveness, particularly in those issue areas – such as biodiversity conservation – which require the targeting of underlying socio-economic drivers. However, while partnership strategies often do include issues of local engagement and benefits, these are also the dimensions that most frequently suffer from lack of well-planned implementation, measurable targets, and adequate monitoring frameworks.

At the other end of the spectrum, the macro-level impacts of partnerships on collaborations between external institutions and in wider governance systems can contribute to problem-solving for sustainability even in cases where a specific initiative do not achieve its own goals, for example through its spill-over effects on organizational learning, capacity-building and dissemination of new knowledge and practices. As experimentalist institutions which build upon, and give rise to, dense webs of collaborative arrangements between a range of stakeholders, partnerships rarely fade away without leading to some form of cross-fertilization within and across governance regimes.

## References

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Table 1: Case studies and samples used across the project's research strands.

| Issue area or cross-cutting theme                             | Case studies / partnerships included in the sample   |
|---|--|
| Biodiversity and clean energy                                 | Amazon Region Protected Areas (ARPA) Programme (Brazil); Instituto Nacional de Biodiversidad (INBio, Costa Rica); San Cristóbal Wind Power partnership (Ecuador)                   |
| Carbon funds and markets                                      | All World Bank-brokered market mechanisms for greenhouse gas emissions reduction since 1997 (e.g. Prototype Carbon Fund, Forest Carbon Partnership Facility)                       |
| Natural resource revenue management                           | Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)   |
| Children's rights   | The Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children  |
| Global health: polio  | Global Polio Eradication Initiative  |
| Global health: access to medicines                            | 10 product development partnerships for drugs, vaccines and diagnostics (DNDi, FIND, IPM, IVCC, IVI, MMV, Meningitis Vaccines Project, PATH, TB Alliance)                          |
| Durability and adaptability of partnership arrangements       | 27 partnerships from the Roy Family Award for Environmental Partnerships dataset   |
| Local implementation of transnational partnerships            | Reserva de Desenvolvimento Sustentável do Uatumã, a sustainable development reserve in the Brazilian Amazon that is supported by the ARPA Programme (Brazil)                       |
| Diversity in partnerships' governing boards                   | Three partnerships focusing on climate change (Adaptation Fund, Green Climate Fund, and Global Environment Facility) and three focusing on health (GAVI, GFATM, Roll Back Malaria) |
| Role of broker organisations in multistakeholder partnerships | Four global health partnerships (focusing respectively on malnutrition, equitable use of vaccines, disease eradication, and drug development)                                      |

When it comes to the relationship between partnership structuring and effectiveness, the project also confirms that Institutional features and dynamics do make a difference on the long-term impacts of a partnership. While the four conditions explored by the research are usually closely interrelated, the findings suggest that the specificity of partnership arrangements appears to be a core driver of effectiveness, because it can create the basis for greater clarity and accountability in resource commitment, enable flexible governance arrangements and processes that facilitate organizational learning and adaptation, and set the rules for the creation of innovative solutions to support partnership implementation.

At the same time, the project finds that the success of a partnership model does not guarantee that it will be replicated outside

of its geographical and political context or have a catalytic effect on international collaboration – particularly in the absence of strong linkages between a partnership and the relevant international governance frameworks. This difficulty in achieving higher-order impacts highlights that a glaring gap remains for SDG implementation. As individual partnerships are themselves vulnerable to shifting political interests and gridlocks in international negotiations, they are unlikely to fill it.

## Acknowledgments

This Research Brief draws on the findings of a 3-year research project that was coordinated by Prof. Liliana Andonova at the Centre for International Environmental Studies, The Graduate Institute Geneva, and supported by a grant of the Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS) under its call for projects 2017. The project started its activities in the fall of 2017 and ended in December 2020. For more information, visit: <http://www.effectivenessofpartnerships.org>.

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