

Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships in the Post-2015 Development Era: Sharing knowledge and expertise to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

Background Paper

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Executive Summary

In the post-2015 era, multi-stakeholder partnerships are expected to play an increasingly important role in the implementation of sustainable development (“SD”). Their effectiveness, while dependent on many factors, will increasingly be tied to their ability to manage and share knowledge about the issues, processes, and solutions that they are promoting. This challenge has two critical aspects: (1) improving the way partnerships share knowledge *within* their stakeholder constellations; and (2) establishing knowledge sharing processes *among* partnerships that are working on different Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”).

This paper was prepared to provide the background for an Expert Group Meeting — convened by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Division for Sustainable Development (“UNDESA/DSD”) and the United Nations Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD) — on the issues related to partnerships and knowledge sharing. The paper covers the following:

- **A brief historical synopsis** of how multi-stakeholder partnerships emerged, proliferated, and became established as an element of “standard practice” in the implementation of SD.
- **A desk review of current knowledge-sharing practice** in partnerships, which involved selecting a representative set of partnerships (and related institutions); describing them in terms of the scale, scope, and other characteristics; and analyzing their current knowledge sharing strategies and activities. The desk review finds that multi-stakeholder partnerships are generally under-resourced for knowledge sharing and are lagging behind emerging practice in the field.
- **An assessment of knowledge-sharing needs within and among partnerships** based on the emerging post-2015 development agenda and the draft Sustainable Development Goals. This assessment concludes that knowledge sharing should be much more highly prioritized, both within and among partnerships, to respond to the integrative, universal, and transformative nature of the SDGs.
- **The introduction of two knowledge-sharing frameworks for partnerships**, one focused on helping them to improve and advance the programs targeted to their own stakeholders, the other on helping them to collaborate on the establishment of *inter-partnership* knowledge sharing processes. These frameworks are presented as drafts, together with examples as well as illustrative tables and diagrams (in Annex 1).
- **A set of key recommendations**, focused on what partnerships can do to make better use of relatively scarce resources; what the United Nations can do to accelerate knowledge sharing improvement and facilitate inter-partnership exchange; and what institutions that support partnerships can do to contribute to this overall process of improvement and development.

Included in these recommendations is a proposal for **the creation of an annual Conference of Partnerships** designed to foster inter-partnership relationships and to develop a culture of learning and knowledge sharing *among* partnerships; as well as **the establishment of a network of partnership knowledge managers** to facilitate the inter-partnership relationships that effective, inter-disciplinary knowledge sharing requires.

The paper includes, as an Annex, the complete database of partnerships and related institutional entities, together with all the research notes, that were the basis of this review.

List of Acronyms

C4D	Collaboration for Development
DSD	Division for Sustainable Development
EEP	Energy and Environment Partnership
EITI	Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative
IARU	International Alliance of Research Universities
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative
LOD	Linked Open Data
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MRV	International Partnership on Mitigation and Measurement, Reporting and Verification
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NRDC	Natural Resources Defense Council
REEEP	Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership
Rio+20	United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio de Janeiro, 2012
SD	Sustainable Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SICA	Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SLoCaT	Partnership on Sustainable Low-Carbon Transport
TOLKA	Type, Ontology, Learning Loops, Knowledge Processes, Activation (framework)
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, 2002

I. Background and Context

“Partnerships” — a word used throughout this paper to refer to voluntary multi-stakeholder or multi-institutional initiatives, organized around a common purpose, and administered as their own entity, distinct from their constituent partners¹ — have become a common fixture in the international development arena. They come in a dazzling diversity of sizes, topics, and constellations. They are also increasingly recognized as an essential mechanism for promoting and implementing sustainable development, in all its dimensions, and even as “a central element of contemporary sustainability governance.”²

Partnerships allow organizations to pool their resources, including name-recognition and legitimacy, to bring heightened and focused attention to a specific theme, goal, or objective. Institutions create partnerships in order to multiply impact and accelerate change — though their effectiveness in this regard is disputed.³ Simply by existing, partnerships also become an important *aggregator and disseminator of knowledge* about the issues on which they are focused — a central reason motivating the preparation of this report.

While partnerships have long been part of the implementation of sustainable development, recent UN documents throw additional emphasis on both the concept of “partnership” generally, and the role of multi-stakeholder partnerships specifically. Here are three examples:

- The July 2014 report of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals states that “the implementation of sustainable development goals will depend on a global partnership for sustainable development with the active engagement of governments, as well as civil society, the private sector, and the United Nations system” (Paragraph 14). More centrally, the report makes a specific call — under proposed Goal 17, target 17.16 — for “multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support the achievement of sustainable development goals in all countries, particularly developing countries.”
- The outcome document of the third International Conference on the Small Island Development States, the SAMOA Pathway, recognized that “international cooperation and partnerships of various kinds and across a wide variety of stakeholders are critical for the implementation of the sustainable development of small island developing States.” (Paragraph 12). The outcome document requested the Secretary-General to, in consultation with Member States, to present recommendations, including through the use of existing intergovernmental mechanisms, for a partnership framework to monitor and ensure the full implementation of pledges and commitments through partnerships for small island developing States (paragraph 101)⁴.
- The UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction held in March 2015 called for “the creation of partnerships to implement the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.” It also welcomed expressions of voluntary commitments from partnerships as well as from NGOs, private sector actors, local communities, research institutions, and others.⁵

¹ For a description of how partnerships fit into the general international call for “action-oriented voluntary initiatives to complement government-led action in realizing sustainable development,” see: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction/about>

² “Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships: Building Blocks for Success,” International Civil Society Center, Berlin, 2014, p. 4.

³ The effectiveness of multi-stakeholder partnerships is beyond the scope of this report. However, the subject has been extensively studied, and report cited above by the International Civil Society Center (2014) does an excellent job of summarizing and synthesizing current research.

⁴ See the “Partnership Framework at the SIDS Action Platform: <http://www.sids2014.org/partnershipframework>

⁵ See: <http://www.wcdrr.org/preparatory/commitments/>

About this Report

Given the important role that partnerships are expected to play, and the central role that knowledge sharing plays as being part of their purpose as well as essential to their effective functioning, this report attempts to answer several key questions:

1. What are multi-stakeholder partnerships currently doing to share knowledge? What patterns can be discerned in their knowledge-sharing activity?
2. What trends are emerging in knowledge-sharing within and among partnerships? What new “best practices” are there to learn from?
3. What new requirements does the Post-2015 Development Agenda place on partnerships going forward, especially given the integrated nature of the forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals and the general need for more cross-cutting collaboration?
4. What frameworks or models might be useful for conceptualizing the way partnerships work with knowledge-sharing, both within partnerships (where all the stakeholders are focused on the same topic) but also among them, to facilitate greater levels of exchange and cooperation?
5. What recommendations on knowledge sharing can be offered, not just to partnerships themselves, but also to the institutions and organizations that encourage, facilitate, or support them?

A. How partnerships for Sustainable Development have evolved

Partnerships have always been part of the global sustainable development (“SD”) movement, starting from the first UN Conference on Environment and Development, or “Earth Summit,” in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. A wide variety of multi-entity coalitions, initiatives, councils, and similar processes were active in the run-up to the Earth Summit and beyond, at both the global and country level. Interest in partnership generally continued to build throughout the 1990s, as both non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”) and business groups became increasingly involved in SD and searched for recognized niches and ways to contribute, as well as to collaborate with each other. But the concept of partnerships as a recognized element of the global process of implementing SD had its formal starting point in Johannesburg.

In the 1990s, the development of Partnerships was strongly facilitated by the rise of email, which reduced communication transaction time and allowed for more effective sharing of basic coordinating information between organizations.

The road from Johannesburg

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002, voluntary multi-stakeholder partnerships were more formally recognized as an important mechanism for the promotion and implementation of sustainable development. They came to be known as “Type 2 Partnerships”, to emphasize their “non-negotiated” character⁶ and to distinguish them from the partnerships that were expected to form “between Governments of the North and South, on the one hand, and between Governments and major groups, on the other, to achieve

⁶ “Frequently Asked Questions: Type 2 Partnerships,” official (archived) website of the WSSD: http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/basic_info/faqs_partnerships.html

the widely shared goals of sustainable development.”⁷ In connection with the WSSD, the first registry (or officially sanctioned list, published on the Internet by UN) was created.⁸ The first guidelines for what constituted a partnership deserving of formal recognition of this kind were also established.⁹

The road to Rio+20

By the time the world gathered once again for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 (“Rio+20”), multi-stakeholder partnerships had multiplied, certainly in terms of those recognized by the official UN registry that is mandated by the outcome document of Rio+20 (see paragraph 283 of *The Future We Want*), but also more generally, in many other contexts and at all levels, from global to local. The Millennium Development Goals of 2000 — and all the activity that accelerated around them during the decade — placed great emphasis on partnerships as well. Numerous initiatives were undertaken specifically to encourage the establishment of public-private and multi-stakeholder partnerships to help achieve the MDGs and/or to advance sustainable development. By Rio+20, the phrase “Type 2” was all but forgotten: partnerships were part of standard practice.

The Future We Want also reflected this evolution of partnership into standard practice when it recognized (*inter alia*) “that involvement of all stakeholders and their partnerships, networking and experience sharing at all levels could help countries to learn from one another in identifying appropriate sustainable development policies” (paragraph 64). The document also made many and repeated calls for new, innovative partnerships to tackle the wide variety of SD challenges; and it explicitly called for the creation of a registry to track voluntary commitments by stakeholder groups to “implement concrete policies, plans, programs, projects and actions to promote sustainable development and poverty eradication” (paragraph 283).

The road to Post-2015, and beyond

Today, partnerships have become a “default mode” of organization: when a sustainable development issue or goal is sufficiently large, complex, and/or urgent, a partnership is often formed to address it. Sometimes these partnerships are global in scope and are initiated at the highest levels of the United Nations (such as “Sustainable Energy for All” or “Every Woman Every Child”); and of course, sometimes they are much smaller and more limited in scope, both geographically and in terms of their ambition level.

It is widely assumed that the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals will lead to a further increase in the formation of partnerships, as well as the further elevation of their status as a centrally important mechanism for the implementation and

“[F]acing these vexed [global] challenges is not only a burden; it is far more an opportunity to forge new partnerships and alliances that can work together to advance the human condition.”

— Ban Ki-Moon, UN Secretary-General, in *“The Road to Dignity by 2030,”* Dec 2014, paragraph 16

⁷ “World Summit on Sustainable Development Plan of Implementation,” United Nations, 2002, paragraph 3. The word “partnership” appears in that document 40 times. The final mention comes at the end of the document in paragraph 150 and is worth citing here: “Enhance partnerships between governmental and non-governmental actors, including all major groups, as well as volunteer groups, on programmes and activities for the achievement of sustainable development at all levels.”

⁸ Links to this original registry from the official WSSD website now link to the UN’s current SD in Action knowledge base: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction>

⁹ These were known as the “Bali Guiding Principles” and are documented here:

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/dsd/dsd_aofw_par/par_mand_baliguiddprin.shtml

Reporting on how the Principles were developed during the PrepCom process leading up to WSSD can be found here: <http://www.iisd.ca/wssd/partnerships.html>.

achievement of the SDGs.¹⁰ In the Secretary-General's synthesis report of December 2014 ("The Road to Dignity by 2030"), he identifies partnership generally, and "multi-stakeholder, issue-based coalitions" specifically, as a "must" for bringing about "a truly universal transformation of sustainable development" (paragraph 65).

If partnerships are to do the job expected of them, they need to improve their capacity to collaborate, mobilize resources, and implement projects and programming. In order to improve their performance in this way, they will need *excellent knowledge sharing*, both internally among partnership members, but also in terms of how they make their aggregated knowledge available in maximally useful ways. Knowledge sharing is key to both the internal functioning of partnerships, and to their public profile and impact.

B. Characterizing the SD partnership landscape today

To better understand how partnerships for SD use, manage, and share knowledge, and to look for patterns, it is useful to differentiate them. Other studies have focused on differentiating partnerships by *function*. This review's typology focuses attention first on their *scale* and *scope*, because these features have significant impact on their knowledge sharing strategies and approaches.¹¹ The analysis clusters partnerships into the following categories for analysis purposes:

Grand Global Partnerships (broad goals, high visibility)

These are large-scale partnerships involving many partners where the effort seeks from the outset to increase global visibility, as well as action and coordination, on a high-priority set of issues. These partnerships are usually thematic and focused on the achievement of specific goals, but their aims and activities are extremely broad and inclusive. Examples include Sustainable Energy for All ("SE4All") and Every Woman Every Child.

Specialized Global Partnerships (focused goal or goals, lower visibility)

Specialized Global Partnerships are those where the focus is more specific and visibility (e.g. extensive media exposure) is less important. Examples include the Partnership on Sustainable Low-Carbon Transport ("SLoCaT"), the Mountain Partnership, and the Alliance for Financial Inclusion.

Independent Global Partnerships

Many prominent global partnerships working on SD do not formally include any UN entities (as do the partnerships classified as above). Sometimes these partnerships evolve into, or are administered as, independent non-governmental organizations. Examples include the World Ocean Council, the Global Green Growth Institute, and the We Mean Business Coalition (a "mega-partnership" focused on business and climate change).¹²

Regional Partnerships

¹⁰ At least one writer has already called for the creation of "mega-partnerships" focused on the individual SDGs as a way of organizing, monitoring, and evaluating multi-stakeholder activity around their realization. See: "Multi-stakeholder partnerships: Making them work for the Post-2015 Development Agenda," Felix Dodds, University of North Carolina, 2015.

¹¹ Another approach might be to cluster partnerships by the SDGs to which they most closely relate. However, given that the Post-2015 agenda aims at increasing *integration*, and given that many partnerships deal with many or even all of the SDGs, such a clustering might be misleading. See the discussion on integration in Section III(A).

¹² The boundary between initiatives that present themselves as "partnerships" and those that present themselves as "NGOs" is sometimes blurred. For reference, draft SDG 17, in target 17.16, describes multi-stakeholder partnerships as initiatives that "mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support the achievement of sustainable development goals."

At the regional (multi-nation geographic area) level, as well as inter-regional level, partnerships are also emerging as an important mechanism for change. However, this study includes only a few true regional partnerships, such as the Inter-American Social Protection Network and the Energy and Environment Partnership with Central America (EEP), part of the Sistema de Integración de Central America (SICA, a regional coordinating body).

National and Subnational Partnerships

Partnerships are also an increasing feature of national-level efforts to drive Sustainable Development, with national governments often playing a similar convening or catalyzing role as does the United Nations at the global scale. Examples in this study include Germany's "Developpp" initiative — a "meta-partnership" that in turn creates other public-private partnerships, with financial support from the German government — and the Partnership for Sustainable Communities, a US Government inter-agency initiative. We have also included one example of a sub-national partnership, from the state of Hessen in Germany.

We also looked at other, related ways to create typologies, such as the geographic scope of partnerships, and the kinds of institutional mixes they represent — though in reviewing these, the reader should keep in mind that we were using a mix of sampling methodologies that privileged UN-related partnerships. The results are presented in the next section.

C. The emergence of partnership as a specialized area of focus

Partnership has only recently become a "subject" around which people and institutions organize study and support-related activity, but it is growing, and the type of attention being paid to partnerships is developing. This development can generally be seen as happening in four phases:

- 1. Registries:** People began by cataloging and characterizing partnerships in formal lists.
- 2. Guidelines:** Starting with the Bali Guiding Principles of 2002, referenced above, the UN and other institutions (including funding institutions) have successively framed the conditions, rules, and standards for partnerships. Reference to and alignment with these guidelines is also a test for inclusion in the sanctioned registries of partnerships.
- 3. Research:** Recent years have seen an upturn in the formal analysis of trends and effectiveness in partnerships (of which this present paper is one example).
- 4. Supporting institutions and consultancies:** Finally, partnerships have now reached the stage where specialized agencies have been set up specifically to study and support them.¹³

However, a scan of the available literature on partnerships has not yet surfaced a study of the present kind, focused specifically on the role of knowledge sharing in and among partnerships. The review that begins in the next section is possibly the first of its kind.

¹³ These include (1) the Partnering Initiative, UK: <http://thepartneringinitiative.org/> and (2) the Partnerships Resource Center of the Rotterdam School of Management, Netherlands: <http://www.rsm.nl/the-partnerships-resource-centre/>

II. Knowledge-sharing in multi-stakeholder partnerships working towards sustainable development: a review of current practice

A. Methodology of the review and general description of the sample

This desk review analyzed 64 entities selected to represent the apparent diversity of the SD partnership landscape. These entities were identified and selected for review through a combination of their notoriety (partnerships that are prominent, well-known, and/or closely identified with the United Nations); from their well-articulated descriptions in existing registries (such SD in Action Registry or the SIDS 2014 Partnerships Platform); and by Internet search using keywords, principally in English, with some limited exploration of partnerships whose working language is German or Spanish.

The analysis methodology consisted of carefully reviewing the websites and related documents for each identified entity to determine what the partnership was (and also whether it was formally a partnership or had some other organizational form — see below); who participated in it; the types of knowledge-sharing activity or “channels” it was engaged in; the types of knowledge disseminated through those channels; and any special knowledge-sharing tools or features that were worth noting, among other factors. Categorization schemes for the findings were not derived from previous research but were developed during the process of analysis.

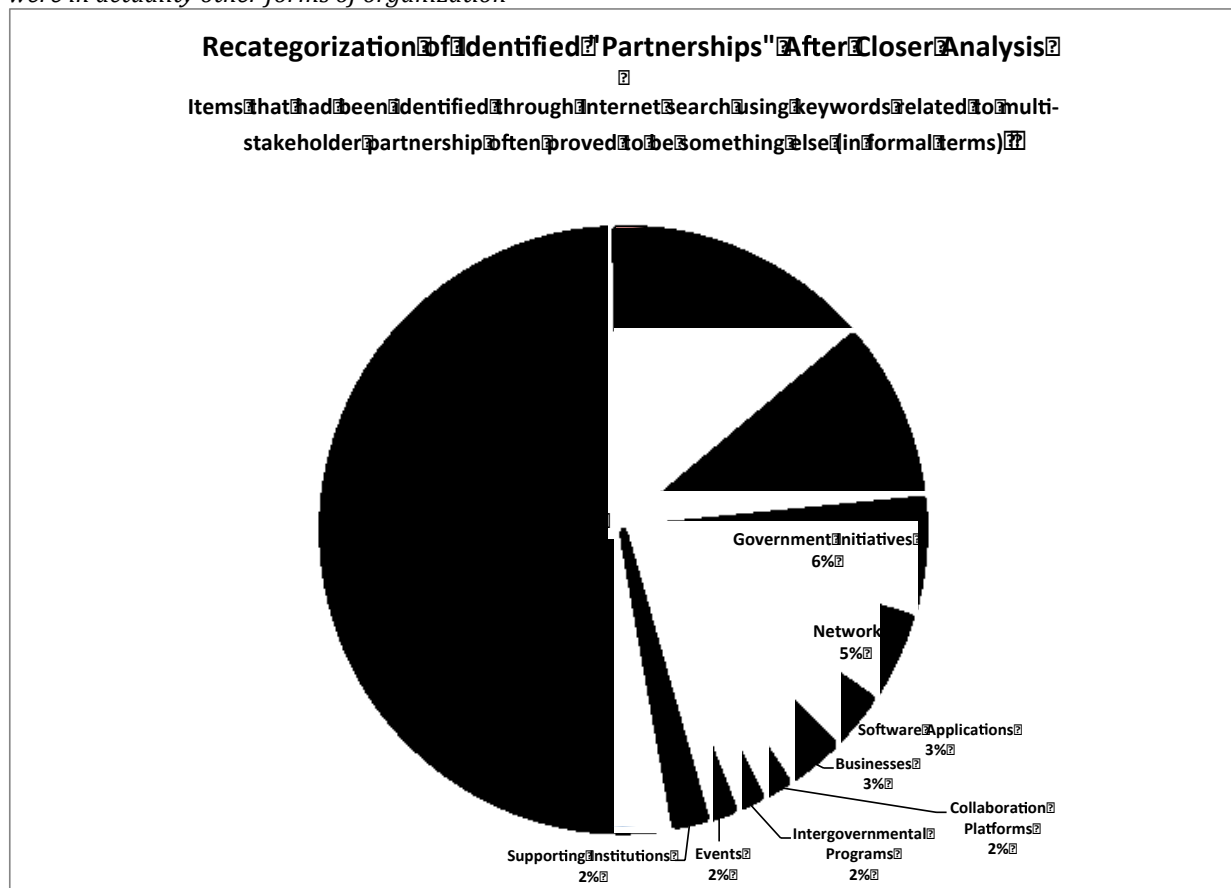
First the entries were categorized according to the typology described above. About 42% of the entries were UN-initiated or otherwise closely related to UN processes and programs (Table 1).

Table 1: Partnership Types in the Review Sample

Grand Global Partnerships	7
Specialized Global Partnerships	20
Independent Global Partnerships	16
Regional	6
National	5
Subnational	1
Not Applicable (not partnerships)	9
Total	64

However, the presence of so many items deemed “Not Applicable” prompted a more thorough re-assessment of the sample. On closer inspection, it was determined that a number of initiatives *framed* as partnerships, or having a similar profile, or “showing up” when doing the relevant Internet searches, do not fit the criteria of being multi-stakeholder, multi-institutional, and separately administered initiatives. This reanalysis produced the following profile of the analysis sample (Figure 1).

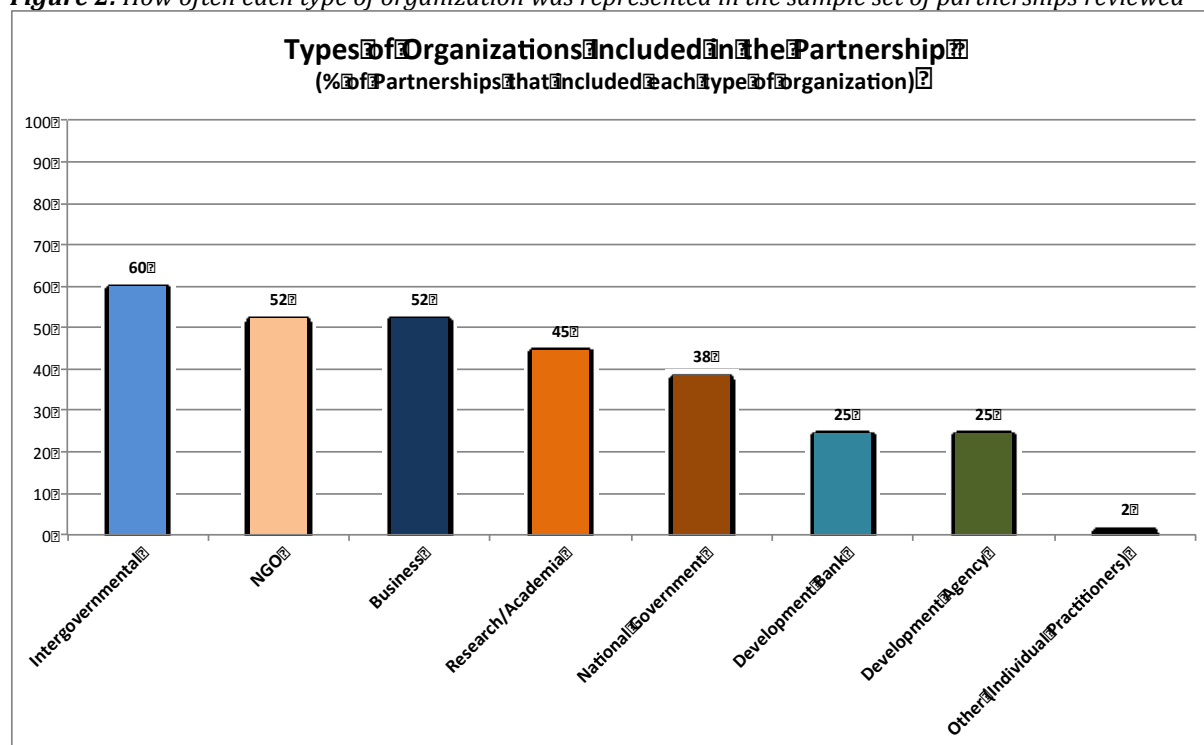
Figure 1: When partnerships in the sample were reviewed more closely, it was discovered that many of them were in actuality other forms of organization



Note that only 52% of the sample qualifies as a “true partnership.” Most of the others are formally:

- “NGOs” with an individual organizational identity and board of directors (while they may present themselves as partnerships, their governance is not formally a partnership of multi-stakeholder institutions)
- “Government initiatives,” where other organizations are invited to participate but not as true partners in a governance sense
- Looser “Networks” that do not share the common goal-setting and separate program administration of partnerships
- Web platforms that have the appearance of being partnerships but that do not have any other organizational activity or governance (in this sample they are called “Knowledge Hubs”)
- Support mechanisms, events, etc. that serve partnerships

Within that landscape, there is a great diversity of constellations. Only 60% of the entities in our sample include an Inter-governmental (e.g. United Nations) partner, for example. NGOs and Businesses are present in 52% of these partnership constellations, followed by Research and Academic institutions (45%), National Government entities (38%), Development Banks (25%), and governmental Development Agencies (25%). (Figure 2)

Figure 2: How often each type of organization was represented in the sample set of partnerships reviewed

In sum, “partnerships” come in all shapes, sizes, and constellations — *and those differences make a difference for knowledge sharing*. For example, global multi-institutional partnerships often have relatively small coordinating secretariats, with relatively small budgets, and may also find it difficult to fund and to prioritize knowledge sharing from a governance perspective. Business-focused partnerships may have access to a higher standard of knowledge-sharing technology. Partnerships that are actually structured as NGOs may have greater freedom to focus managerial attention (as well as budget and fund-raising activity) on knowledge sharing than do multi-institutional partnerships, with their more complex governance and management structures.

This significant diversity in how “partnerships” are constituted gives rise to differentiated recommendations concerning how they should develop their knowledge-sharing strategies and programs, as will be considered later in this paper.

B. Existing practices and knowledge-sharing mechanisms

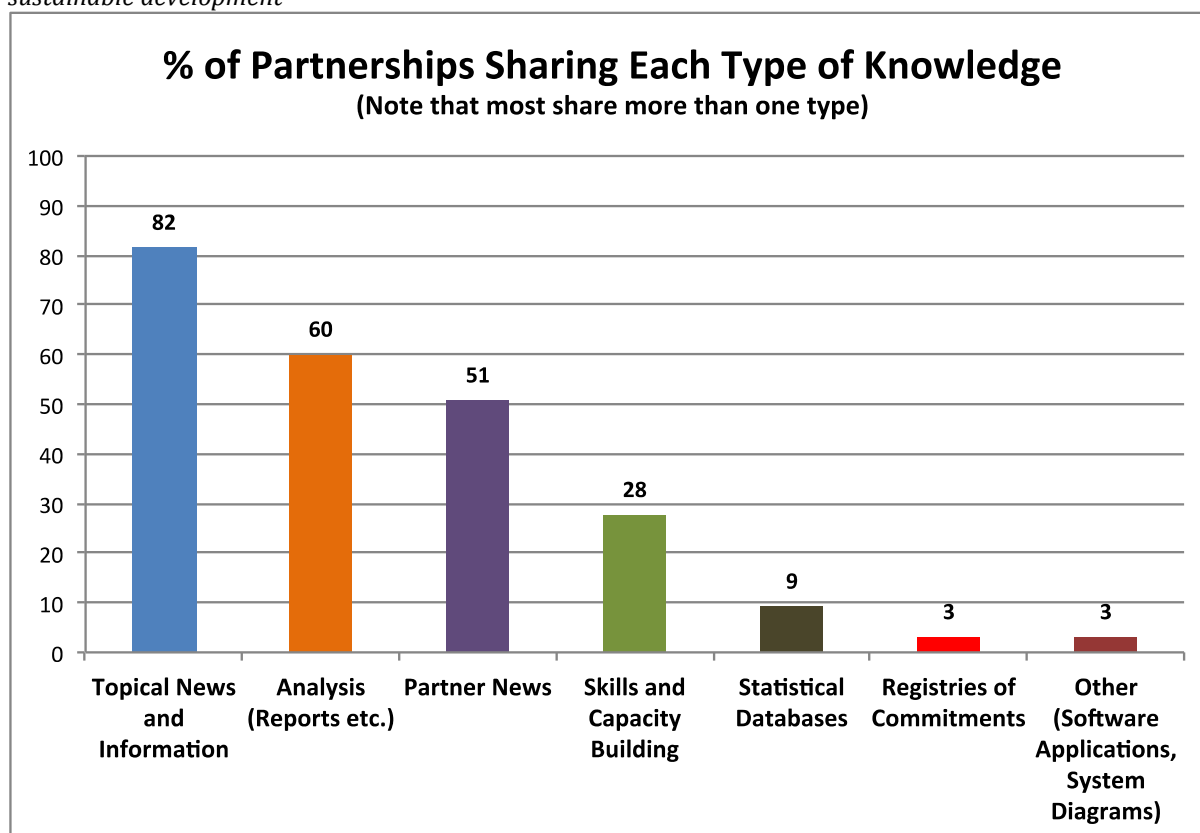
While some partnerships are formed for the express purpose of knowledge sharing, all of them engage in it. We analyzed the knowledge-sharing activity of this sample in terms of (1) types of knowledge shared and (2) channels for delivery of that knowledge.

1. Types of Knowledge Shared

The great majority of the entities in our sample (82%) were engaged in sharing **news and information** related to the topic around which the partnership (or NGO, Network etc. — we will use “partnership” for simplicity) was formed. Only half of them (51%) share information about **what other members of the partnership are doing**. A majority (60%) go beyond news and information to provide more **in-depth reports, studies, and other analysis-related knowledge**. Fewer than one-third (28%) offer active **skill- or capacity-building (knowledge transfer) services** of any kind. Smaller numbers of partnerships provide access to **statistical**

databases (9%), **registries of commitments** (3%), or specialized **knowledge-sharing tools** such as software applications or diagramming platforms (3%).

Figure 3: An analysis of the types of knowledge being shared by multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development



2. Channels through which knowledge is shared

The Internet, and specifically the traditional organizational **website**, is far and away the dominant technology and methodology by which partnerships disseminate information and share knowledge — to their own members, to other partnerships and initiatives, and to the general public. In this sample, fully 100% of them make use of this technology.¹⁴

For analysis purposes, we lumped websites and published **documents** together into one category, because it is no longer easy to differentiate them. Some organizations still publish brochures and annual reports as separate documents, but often these publications are in .pdf format and integrated into the website; and sometimes they are not separately packaged as documents at all.

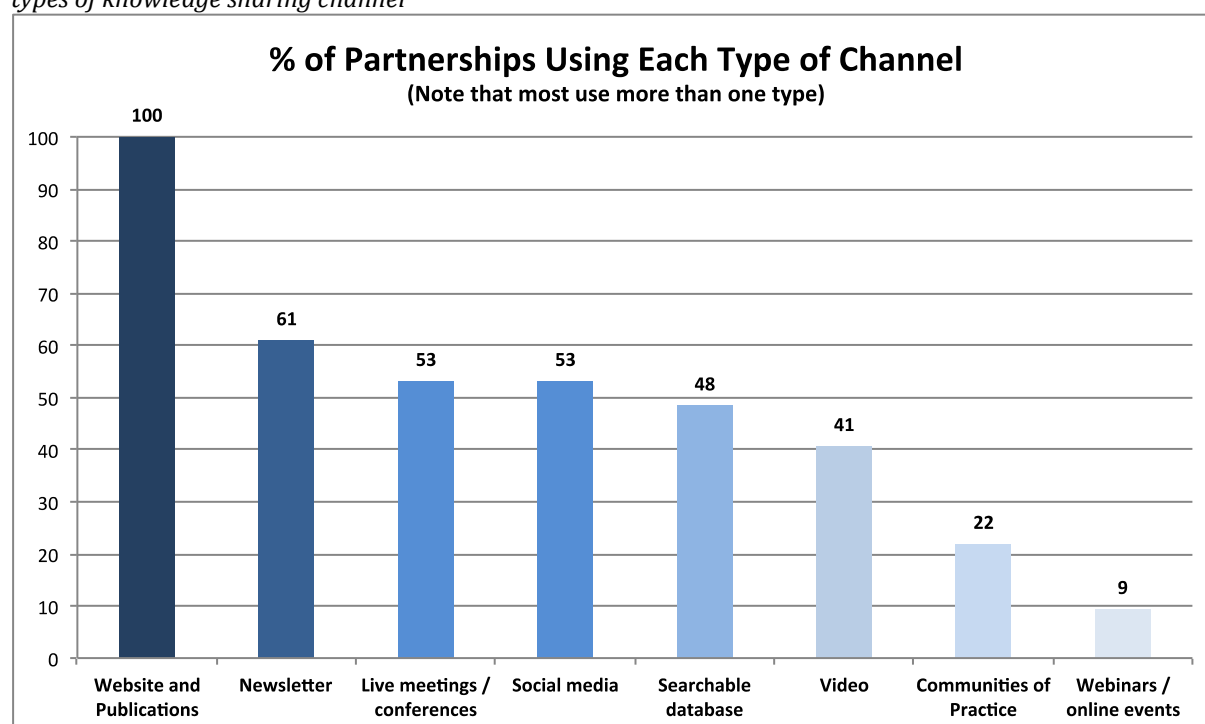
Newsletters, however, do fall into a separate category, because they are an active (or “push”) media, whereas websites and documents are passive. Newsletters today are often published on websites, like documents; but they are distinguished by their frequency and periodicity, and by active campaigning to invite readers to engage with them (through email and social media, more on this below). After the near-universal numbers associated with websites, the use of

¹⁴ In a few cases we attempted to find out about smaller-scale Partnerships that did not have active websites, such as some of the partnerships listed in the SIDS 2014 registry. But when there appeared no Internet-based trace of these entities' activity after the SIDS 2014 meeting, we determined that further information gathering — e.g. via telephone and email — would be too time-consuming and was therefore beyond the scope of this study.

newsletters — the second largest category — marks a significant drop: just 61% of the partnerships in this sample use them.

After this initial drop-off from website usage, the picture diversifies: 53% use **live meetings and conferences**, and a similar 53% appeared to be actively using **social media** services (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn). **Searchable databases**, providing access to a wide variety of different types of static knowledge (such as organizational profiles or project case studies) were available on the websites of 48% of the partnerships we reviewed,¹⁵ while 41% of partnerships make use of **video** as a means of sharing knowledge. Only 22% provide access to facilitated or self-moderated **communities of practice** (ongoing group exchanges among practitioners). Finally, just 9% of partnerships surveyed offered **webinars, online courses, or similar organized learning opportunities**.

Figure 4: An analysis of how many partnerships for Sustainable Development are making use of different types of knowledge sharing channel



3. How knowledge is used

The foregoing focuses on the production and dissemination of knowledge. How is that knowledge actually put to use, both within and among partnerships? Answering this question systematically and comprehensively goes beyond the scope of this review. However, a look at how partnerships report on the usage of the knowledge and information they provide puts the focus on numbers: how many website visitors, document downloads, course participants, Facebook posts and “Likes”, etc. These numbers typically do not differentiate between knowledge users who come from within the partnership, those who come from other partnerships, and the general public. Nor do these usage numbers provide insight on *how* knowledge is used, which would require user surveys, focus group discussions and the like.

¹⁵ Note, however, that some databases are not visible to casual users of a Partnership website who are not logged in to its system as members. We learned about some of these databases from interviews with Partnership administrators, but in other cases we were actively prevented from joining or logging in (even after making a formal request to a system administrator in a presumably public-private Partnership), in order to examine what was available behind a membership login screen. For this reason, we note that further research is necessary to understand this distribution more exactly.

The in-depth general analyses of partnership performance reviewed for this background paper also do not appear to look at knowledge use — which makes this area ripe for further research.¹⁶

C. Trends and best practices in knowledge-sharing mechanisms

Since this study is the first (that we could identify) specifically addressing knowledge sharing in partnerships, it is not possible to make definitive judgments about trends. This paper establishes a first baseline for further and more elaborated study. However, in reviewing the sample partnerships, we looked for uses of innovative current knowledge-sharing tools, and found at least one instance of each of the following, as an indicator of where “best practice” in the field is moving.

Databases of Tools: As distinct from content-based databases, a “Database of Tools” is a collection of aids that can be downloaded and put to practical use by a partnership member or other website visitor. These tools might include (e.g.) workshop manuals, methodology guides, catalogues of resources, and presentation slides that can be downloaded and adapted by the user.

Visualization Platforms and Knowledge Maps: These platforms include “Kumu,” featured in our sample as a tool for mapping relationships among the institutions in multi-stakeholder partnerships; and “D3” or “Data-Driven Documents,” for producing three-dimensional graphic representations of data on the Internet. (Both websites entered our sample specifically as a result of searches or interviews regarding partnerships and knowledge sharing.) Visualization platforms also bring structure to the items in a knowledge base by illustrating their relationships to each other (or in any other multi-entity context). Visualization accelerates the communication and understanding of such relationships and can also speed up linkages to new sources of knowledge, through clickable interfaces. For a good example of a resulting knowledge map, see the excellent example highlighted in our sample from the International Partnership on Mitigation and Measurement, Reporting and Verification (MRV).¹⁷

Modeling Platforms: These go a step beyond visualization to support the analysis and automated diagramming of important systemic linkages and dynamics. Modeling is a powerful knowledge-sharing tool, especially when it is interactive, because it helps the users or learners to more quickly grasp the cause-and-effect relationships that might be driving the behaviors or trends that the partnership is trying to change or improve. This review process surfaced (and is highlighting) a relatively new, free, online service called “Insight Maker” that might be of particular interest to multi-stakeholder partnerships, which frequently operate on limited budgets (more on this below).

Open Data: Partnerships do appear to be slowly embracing the use of “Open Data” (or also “Linked Open Data”), meaning they make available statistical and other data to all without restriction to promote transparency and citizen engagement. The newer formulation “Linked Open Data” (“LOD”) includes expectations around formatting and contextualizing such information, so that the user can more easily understand what it means, and how it links to

¹⁶ As a typical example, one of the most effective and transparent partnerships analyzed for this paper is REEEP, which focuses extensively on knowledge management and sharing, and publishes a range of evaluative studies on its website. However, its current annual report does not provide systematic analysis of how its extensive knowledge services are being used. An extensive review of partnerships posted on its website from 2010, “The Good, the Bad, and the Even Worse: Explaining Variation in the Performance of Energy Partnerships,” does not consider knowledge sharing and use. This is an under-explored area.

¹⁷ See: <http://www.mitigationpartnership.net/knowledge-map>

other sources of data (which in turns provides a powerful link to modeling, noted above). This review does see the use of “LOD” emerging as a new “best practice,” not least because of the significant attention these programs receive (a prominent example is the International Aid Transparency Initiative, IATI), and because of the excellent resources and technical support that proponents of LOD make available to interested adopters. The review sample does include one private company that has been highlighted as a leader in this area, Socrata. (While not included in this review, one can see an excellent example of Linked Open Data in action, using the Socrata platform, at the website of the State of Hawaii (USA), which presents data related to the achievement of its sustainability goals in a highly transparent and user-friendly manner.)¹⁸

Tagging Applications: Another technical innovation designed to make information more useful is automated tagging, represented in our sample by “Climate Tagger,” an application available from the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP). Applications like this reduce the human labor necessary to go through large amounts of online text and “tag” discrete elements with a keyword for searching purposes. In effect, they convert large “digital piles” of documents into searchable databases of information in a knowledge-sharing context.

Collaboration Platforms: These are Internet-mediated applications specifically designed to facilitate cooperation and collaboration in either a dialogue or a project-management context. While these are now common in organizational life (popular web-based collaboration platforms, such as Basecamp or Projectplace, host hundreds of thousands of organizations) they are apparently not common in the context of partnerships. We saw just a few indicators of their use, usually behind membership login screens. An exception was the “Collaboration for Development” (“C4D”) platform hosted by the World Bank, where dozens of Communities of Practice make use of a collaboration platform called “Jive” to exchange knowledge and work together on initiatives. (Note that UNDP runs a successful collaboration platform called “Teamworks,” but as this is a UNDP program and not explicitly a partnership, it was not covered by this review.)

Document Comparison: Anyone who uses a word processing program knows the value of being able to compare two versions of a document to quickly determine what has been changed, from one version to another. Such features are not common yet on the web, but we found one such use of the function by a partnership worth highlighting — because so many partnerships are engaged in developing standards, promoting agendas, or acting as monitors with regard to other governmental or private sector processes, where such comparison functions can be useful. (The example is from the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative, EITI, which includes such a function as part of its searchable database.)

Since each of these examples was identified as being in use by at least *one* partnership in the sample, they are very likely to be useful (and implementable) by a number of other partnerships.

A summary assessment of current knowledge-sharing practice in partnerships is offered in the next section.

¹⁸ See: <https://dashboard.hawaii.gov/aloha-challenge>

III. Multi-stakeholder partnerships: Sharing and building knowledge and expertise within and among them in light of the SDGs

A. Impact of the Post-2015 development agenda

As of the date of this report, the Post-2015 development agenda is still in negotiation. However, the general outline of that agenda is by now well known, and the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals proposed by the Open Working Group are expected to be formally adopted in September, 2015. What implications does this agenda have for knowledge sharing, both within and among partnerships?

The first point to highlight is the use of the word “among” in the previous sentence (and throughout this paper). Because the Post-2015 agenda focuses on *integration* and on a more systemic approach to sustainable development, there is a growing need to increase the level of knowledge sharing and collaboration not just within partnerships, but *among partnerships working on seemingly different topics*. As partnerships continue to grow and to become more important as knowledge aggregators and disseminators, this “inter-partnership” knowledge sharing will become ever more important. To illustrate:

- The so-called “nexus” of water, energy, and food (many also add in climate change) has already become a widely accepted framework for addressing issues that were previously dealt with separately. Partnerships focused on these topics are increasingly challenged to collaborate and share knowledge.
- The “zero draft” of the Every Woman Every Child “Global Strategy for Women’s and Children’s Health” specifically identifies the need to “coordinate efforts with those working in other sectors to address issues that impact on health, such as sanitation, safe drinking water, malnutrition, gender equality and women’s empowerment.”¹⁹
- Specialized partnerships that nonetheless have broad SD agendas, such as the Mountain Partnership or those related to the Small Island Developing States, are often engaged with essentially *all* of the SDGs. They will increasingly need to access knowledge resources aggregated by other topical partnerships in order advance SDG implementation.²⁰

The new Sustainable Development Goals will also be *universal*, meaning they will apply to all countries and all sectors. Universality means that the knowledge resources aggregated and managed by partnerships also need to be *shared* universally (to the greatest extent possible). The emphasis on universality will also bring a heightened focus on capacity development, information transparency (particular in the context of monitoring and review), and the diffusion of enabling technologies.

Finally, as emphasized in the Secretary-General’s synthesis report of 2014, the aim of the Post-2015 agenda is not just change, but *transformation*: systemic change to address the roots of global problems and lead more certainly to the desirable outcomes described in the 2012 Rio+20 outcome document, *The Future We Want*. A focus on transformative change increase the need to ensure that knowledge *shared* is also knowledge *used*.

¹⁹ See: http://www.everywomaneverychild.org/images/content/files/global_strategy/full/20100914_gswch_en.pdf

²⁰ See for example “Mountains and Sustainable Development Goals: A Call to Action” (2014), which makes this multi-dimensional set of needs clear. Accessible at the “Policy Briefs” section of <http://www.mountainpartnership.org>

Even this brief characterization of the Post-2015 Development Agenda underscores that *knowledge sharing should assume a more prominent position* in the work of partnerships to support implementation of the SDGs. Partnerships that assume responsibility for the implementation of programs to achieve one or more of the SDGs will need to continuously develop and share knowledge about them. They will also need to:

- **Improve their understanding of systemic linkages** to support *integration* of SD, and help others acquire the knowledge they need to tackle SD issues in a more systemic way.
- **Develop more effective ways of sharing the knowledge they aggregate**, in order to facilitate a more *universal* engagement with SD.
- **Accelerate their knowledge-sharing activity and ensure that knowledge is used**, in order to support rapid learning and a more *transformative* approach to change.

All of this, in turn, argues for general need to **rapidly accelerate the diffusion and adoption of knowledge-sharing best practice** among and within the multi-stakeholder partnerships.

B. Overall assessment of current knowledge-sharing practice in multi-stakeholder partnerships

The analysis of the partnership landscape in the section II coupled with (1) general familiarity with knowledge-sharing practice in other sectors, (2) interviews with experts aware of developments in the partnership field, and (3) the above reflections on emerging needs linked to the Post-2015 agenda — leads to a challenging conclusion: partnerships in the SD arena are not keeping up with this fast-moving field. Best practice in knowledge sharing is leaving behind the world of static publications and websites as core knowledge-management and -sharing strategy, and moving to more differentiated mixes of contemporary tools and approaches (such as social media and communities of practice) that are better able to meet the specific needs of knowledge users.

As a typical example of where partnerships stand today, the 2014 Annual Report of the Mountain Partnership includes the following sentence, which is commendable for its simplicity and accuracy: “Knowledge Management efforts mainly consisted of contributing to and producing publications on [Sustainable Mountain Development].” To be fair, the Mountain Partnership does point to the fact that its members have a wider-ranging communications strategy: “Mountain Partnership members promote a vast range of communications initiatives on issues relating to sustainable mountain development around the world: from books, educational kits and scientific articles to conferences, knowledge portals, videos, online television shows and social media channels.” However, this breadth of approach applies to the partnership’s *members*, and not to the partnership administration itself.²¹

Studies and observers have noted that partnerships are often severely under-funded and understaffed, particularly in relation to the size of their mandates. “They are sometimes created with great excitement,” noted one expert interviewed for this report, “but then become unwieldy” and are sometimes left to languish, in budgetary and resource terms, by the founding partners. Many

²¹ See. <http://www.mountainpartnership.org/>. Note that this reviewer was very positively impressed with the volume and exceptional quality of work produced by the Mountain Partnership. This use of the Partnership as an example is to illustrate that even in the context of such knowledge-development excellence, leading Partnerships are nonetheless lagging behind on knowledge *sharing*.

observers note that while knowledge sharing is widely acknowledged as a critical function in partnerships, it is often very difficult to convince funders to support it.

In short, without a *considerable and targeted effort* to raise partnerships' awareness of current knowledge-sharing practice, but also to provide partnerships with the *necessary resources as well as technical and capacity-building support* to adopt such practices, they will continue to lag behind. This lag in the adoption of more modern knowledge-sharing approaches appears to already be reducing their effectiveness. Given the urgency and stakes embedded in the SDGs, closing (or not closing) that gap could prove to be a decisive factor in whether or not the global community fully achieves its stated objectives.

For all of these reasons, current efforts to bring additional attention to the knowledge-sharing needs and opportunities for partnerships are potentially of the greatest importance.

IV. Designing knowledge-sharing frameworks for multi-stakeholder partnerships in the post-2015 era: empowering stakeholders and improving implementation

To support partnerships in advancing their knowledge-sharing activity — both internally, and in ways that can enhance more integrated cooperation across topic areas — two frameworks are proposed. The first framework focuses on improving knowledge sharing *within* partnerships, and the second focuses on knowledge sharing *among* them.

Before proposing these frameworks, we should consider the design factors that such frameworks need to address. Note that the frameworks only address the *knowledge-sharing dimension*, and do not address issues related to partnership formation, governance, accountability, or other performance issues.

A. Matching type with method: making appropriate use of knowledge sharing

While this review has so far focused on knowledge sharing in partnerships in *general* terms, it is important to be *specific and appropriate* when designing strategies for the development of knowledge programming. For example, global partnerships have different needs from regional or national ones. Partnerships with close links to the United Nations often need to meet criteria that are different than those that form independently. And of course, as previous studies have shown, the function of a partnership also affects what types of knowledge sharing techniques and strategies it should adopt. Finally, all such considerations have to put through a filter of feasibility and capacity to implement, given the resource limits or other constraints that the partnership faces.

For these reasons, the proposed frameworks are *flexible* and are designed to support partnerships in finding the right mix of priorities and approaches to match their profiles.

B. Developing ontologies for partnerships: the need for common language

Because partnerships are built on the cooperation of institutions that may be from widely varied sectors, disciplines, countries, etc., the mutual understanding of key concepts should not be considered a given. One intervention that can easily facilitate improved knowledge sharing in partnerships is, therefore, the development of a common *ontology* for all their knowledge-management and knowledge-sharing efforts. “Ontology” is a professional term in data and knowledge management circles meaning, in essence, a lexicon: it is a set of core concepts and definitions that make sure that all members of the partnership know what they are talking about, and are talking about the same things. (In technical circles, it can also refer to the definition of database terms.)²²

For example, one of the more effective partnerships we identified in our review was the International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU), a group of ten very prominent universities that collaborate on a wide variety of issues and common projects, including issues related to sustainable development (principally on their own campuses, but also in some of their common research interests). IARU makes use of traditional web-based knowledge-sharing practices, but it also hosts a lively collection of online Communities of Practice.

²² For a good introduction to the term “ontology” as used in knowledge management and information science, see this Wikipedia article: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontology_\(information_science\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontology_(information_science))

One might assume that research universities all “speak the same language,” but in the case of IARU, that was apparently not the case. To help facilitate their global collaborations, IARU recently published a Lexicon for all members of the partnership to use when communicating with each other on matters related to research collaboration. This is an example of a process to create a common “ontology”: a working set of definitions that reduces the chance of misunderstanding and generally facilitates better communication.²³

Developing a common ontology is particularly important when partnerships involve the crossing of multiple boundaries — national, culture, and especially sectorial and disciplinary. Words that mean something in one context can have other shades or nuances of meaning in another. Technical terms may need to be precisely defined. Ontologies or lexicons can reduce the “friction” that may otherwise derail effective collaboration.

Finally, developing ontologies of a more general kind may also be a critical step in facilitating interchange *among* partnerships. These types of ontologies can make it more possible for partnerships to identify their linkages to other partnerships — for example, by establishing clear terms and definitions that will help them align on specific Sustainable Development Goals and Targets. This will be described in more detail below.

C. Building “learning loops” into the partnership knowledge-sharing process

A focused attention on “learning loops” — a concept from systems thinking referring information flows that accelerate feedback from experience back into organizational decision-making — is becoming increasingly common in institutional life, and is a staple of knowledge management practice. While “learning from experience” is a commonplace, a learning loop involves the creation of a more intentional and frequent process of review, absorption of learning, and adjustment of course. While learning loops are also linked to formal monitoring and evaluation procedures, best practice involves decoupling learning loops from an exclusive dependence on these formal processes. In an ever faster-moving world, challenges and learning moments often occur with greater frequency than an annual (or sometimes even less frequent) review process.

Partnerships for SD must be especially responsive to fast-changing conditions. However, for most of them, their predominantly static knowledge-sharing strategies are far too slow. (Only about half of those reviewed in our sample appear to use more active and contemporary approaches such as social media, as noted above.) Static approaches also lack the dynamism and energy that keep participants engaged, and keep the partnership moving forward with purpose and enthusiasm.

For this reason, the Framework proposes a prominent role for the inclusion of learning loops as an essential feature for partnerships especially — with the specific techniques employed adjusted and adapted to the type of partnership.

D. Introducing TOLKA: A framework for improving knowledge-sharing within partnerships

This first draft framework, focused on knowledge sharing *within* multi-stakeholder partnerships, involves five key elements:

²³ IARU Lexicon of Research Terms, IARU Research Administrators Network, February 2015, downloadable here: http://www.iaruni.org/images/stories/pdf/LexiconResearchTerms_2015.pdf

1. Determining the **Type** of the partnership, in order to match its form, purpose, and function to the appropriate mix of knowledge sharing processes, tools and techniques;
2. Developing the **Ontology** of the knowledge to be shared by the partnership, so that new information or skillsets can be quickly placed in context, communicated, and adopted;
3. Identifying the critical **Learning Loops** that need to be embedded in the work of the partnership;
4. Setting up the **Knowledge-Sharing Processes** that will provide the optimal mix to meet that partnership's objectives and help it contribute to its part of the SD vision; and finally
5. **Activating** the institutions and individuals involved (including funders), so that the processes are well-resourced and are used effectively.

The proposed acronym for the communication of this framework is “**TOLKA**” (which by chance is also a Swedish word meaning “to translate or interpret”).

The TOLKA framework is a five-step sequential process (with other steps embedded within those five) to support the design or review of a partnership's knowledge-sharing strategy and programming. The output from each step becomes an input to the step after it, as described below.

“T”: *Type the partnership*²⁴

“Typing” the partnership means analyzing it to understand its essential characteristics, which are highly likely to affect the approach to knowledge sharing. Key factors can include:

- The nature of the *goals* around which the partnership is focused (on a spectrum from “broad” to “focused”);
- The nature of the partnership's *governance* (partnerships with many decision-makers face different challenges than those with fewer);
- The importance of the *need for clarity and mutual understanding* on key concept and terms (different Types of partnerships appear to have stronger needs than others, partly dependent on their topic, scope, and scale, but also depending on the factors noted above).

Table 3 in Annex 1 describes an array of potential partnership Types, and some of the essential characteristics related to those Types, using the example descriptors above. The Table suggests the logical consequences for knowledge sharing related to each Type. These Typing conclusions then feed forward into the later steps in the process.

Note that this initial step could be further elaborated with other parameters, such as the *composition* of the partnership — for example, a partnership dominated by civil society NGOs will have significantly different needs than one where business organizations are the dominant actors.

²⁴ For clarity, it should be noted that “Type” in this case bears no relationship to the original “Type 2” designation for voluntary multi-stakeholder partnerships used in the aftermath of WSSD in 2002.

“O”: Develop the partnership’s *Ontology*

The second step involves determining how much attention and effort should be directed to the issue of the partnership’s lexicon of commonly used terms — its ontology. The form of the ontology can range in complexity from a simple word list with basic definitions, to a technical manual that provides more detailed definitions as well as specifications for how and when to use such terms. The level of effort and detail needed is determined by the *risk attached to mutual misunderstanding*.

For example, in a Grand Global Partnership where there is high consensus on a very broad set of goals, there may be relatively low levels of risk associated with using terms and phrases in somewhat varying ways, so long as all the engaged parties are aiming for the same goals. Achieving consensus on a detailed ontology may also be challenging, especially if there are many decision-makers (e.g., many different institutions) involved. Furthermore, a small secretariat may be over-burdened by the task of trying to bring everyone to agreement on a highly defined lexicon of terms. In those cases, ontology development would be lower priority and/or restricted to basic definitions.

In contrast, in a Specialized Global Partnership focused on a very technical outcome, spending time and effort on developing a common ontology is often essential. Consider, for example, health-related partnerships: an up-front investment to ensure that all partners are defining disease and wellness in the same way, and sharing technical information and knowledge in comparable formats, will not only save time later; it will probably save lives, by avoiding confusion, delays, or mistakes.

Table 4 in Annex 1 describes a sample set of partnership Types, the impacts on Ontology development related to those Types, and the recommended actions for the partnership administrator who may be designing or reviewing a knowledge sharing program or strategy. Once again, these examples can also be expanded or revised to consider other parameters. These differences in ontology development then have logical consequences for later steps in the knowledge-sharing design and review process.

“L”: Identify the Critical *Learning Loops*

A learning loop is a structure built into the knowledge development, management, and sharing cycle that brings feedback into the management of a system about what is working or not working, or on what novel elements may need to be added to the knowledge flow, on a timely basis. Because partnerships are usually built as a kind of “superstructure” that floats above many participating organizations, they often lack the learning loops that their constituent organizations often do have. These loops need to be intentionally added to the partnership, and they need to be built in ways that can successfully bridge across the many types of organizations (and people) involved.

It is difficult to capture this step, “Identify the Critical Learning Loops,” in a formula or table, because so many factors come into play. Also, explaining this step necessarily draws us into reflecting about the following one: setting up the appropriate Knowledge-Sharing Processes to make the loop work. The best way to proceed here is by case study.

For example, in a *Grand Global* partnership, the key learning loops may involve rapid sharing of knowledge about “what is working” (and also, critically, what is *not* working) — not just in terms of the *topic* (e.g. advances in local affordable energy provision in the SE4All partnerships) but also in terms of the *process of sharing knowledge* (e.g. what kinds of information-sharing or capacity-building strategies are working). The partnership administrators need to catalog these

needs, and then build in feedback loops that can accelerate the cyclical flow of knowledge *back* to them, using the appropriate tools.

In these broad partnerships, where expectations for progress and results are high, there are usually multiple initiatives at play at the same time where getting rapid feedback on what is working is essential — both to support course-correction but also to support similar programs operating in other contexts (such as other regions or linguistic groups). However, levels of higher education and access to Internet services may be relatively low. The critical learning loop is the rapid feedback on “what is working.” The establishment of that loop (which actually moves us into the next step in the TOLKA process) might need to focus on sharing knowledge through low-bandwidth social media (like Twitter), and then *actively soliciting and gathering feedback* in the same way. The solicitation of feedback can include questions about whether the knowledge-sharing strategies themselves are working and what needs to be improved about them. Waiting for an annual monitoring and review process, where key actors ultimately download a complex report from a website, would be insufficient.

To provide one addition case study of a different kind, an *Independent Global* partnership comprised largely of working professionals (in both developed and developing countries) who are already very busy might need to build a learning loop that accelerates the use of both topical knowledge and news from the partnership members. It may need to gather feedback on the *quality* and *usefulness* of the knowledge being shared, so that the partnership can adjust its filters and broadcasts accordingly. This circular flow of knowledge is the critical learning loop. To establish that loop, the partnership administrators then look at the appropriate Knowledge-Sharing Processes that can best achieve it. For example, they may consider making use of relatively frequent and targeted emails linked to short surveys, LinkedIn group discussions (as a substitute for a more time-intensive community of practice), or similar processes that provide rapid evaluative feedback — as well as providing a steady inflow of knowledge from partnership members that can feed the outflow pipeline.

See Annex 1, Figure 5 for a diagram illustrating the addition of Learning Loops to a typical knowledge sharing cycle.

“K”: Set Up the Knowledge-Sharing Processes

The next step in this framework is the design and implementation of the actual knowledge-sharing program, as alluded to in the foregoing case studies. The point of the first three steps in the TOLKA framework is to ensure that the partnership — which is likely to have limited resources, as noted earlier — matches the use of those resources to the greatest need and potential impact. Having *Typed* the partnership, developed its *Ontology* to the necessary level of clarity and detail, and identified the critical *Learning Loops* that are important to speeding up correction and improvement, the partnership administrator can then sit down with a list of its additional, more specific needs and choose the appropriate *channels* and *types of knowledge* to prioritize.

To support that process, a simple checklist may suffice (as illustrated below in Table 2); or a more formal needs assessment may need to be performed, coupled with a feasibility review and other steps. The critical point here is to purposefully and strategically *choose the knowledge-sharing processes* that best meet *all* those identified needs.

Table 2: A template checklist for matching knowledge sharing channels and tools with the needs of a partnership

	Essential	Valuable	Nice to have	Not necessary
Website and publications				
Newsletter				
Live meetings / conferences				
Social media				
Searchable database				
Video				
Communities of practice				
Webinars / online events				
Databases of tools				
Visualization platform				
Modeling platform				
Open data				
Tagging application				
Knowledge map				
Collaboration platform				
Document comparison				
Other				

“A”: Activate the Stakeholders

The final step is the most important: ensuring that all the stakeholders in the partnership — including everyone from those involved in funding and governance, to those engaged in on-the-ground implementation — are actively using the knowledge-sharing processes, as well as the actual knowledge that is being shared. “Activate” has many meanings in this context, depending on the various roles people have in partnerships. *Funders* need to mobilize resources to support this critical activity. *Managers and administrators* need to keep the flow going, so that the knowledge-sharing process is continuously alive and substantive. *Governance bodies* need to monitor the knowledge flow carefully, to understand what is happening, and especially to determine whether the knowledge is being used to achieve the intended impact. And of course, *knowledge users* of all kinds need to be activated not just to use the knowledge, but to *feed back information about the system* through the learning loops that have been established.

The proposed TOLKA framework can obviously be adjusted — expanded, contracted, simplified or added to — depending on the partnership in question. Readers of this paper are invited to propose amendments, additions, or improvements, based on their own knowledge and experience.

E. An initial framework for addressing knowledge sharing among partnerships

While knowledge sharing within partnerships is under-researched, knowledge sharing *among* them — that is, designing purposeful strategies to promote inter-partnership exchange and knowledge use, in order to advance a more integrated approach to sustainable development — has not yet been systematically studied (though it is beginning to happen, as noted in Section III(A) above). Inter-partnership knowledge sharing is also necessary to meet the systemic challenge of implementing the SDGs.

How should partnerships approach this challenge? How should the institutions charged with supporting partnerships facilitate this new demand?

An initial framework (described below) for responding to these questions considers them from two perspectives:

1. The **technical** challenge of making knowledge available (as well as actively communicating it) in ways that are useful to people working in other partnerships.
2. The **social** challenge of establishing new patterns of behavior so that inter-partnership knowledge sharing becomes part of standard practice in partnership management.

1. Assess inter-partnership knowledge needs

The first step involves stepping back from one's own knowledge domain, and trying to understand that domain from the perspective of those not directly engaged in that partnership. This step especially can benefit from the use of inter-partnership dialogue at an early stage. Guiding questions for knowledge managers to consider at this step include:

- What do people working on other topics most need to know about our knowledge domain, in order to interact with us successfully?
- What do need to know about other domains, in order to pursue our goals successfully? Which domains are most important?
- How can we identify, communicate, and assess the critical systemic linkages between our knowledge domain, and the domains of others?

2. Establish critical knowledge-sharing relationships

This step involves establishing person-to-person (or department-to-department, or secretariat-to-secretariat) linkages between people. Since everyone cannot be related to everyone, this step also involves acting on priorities established in the first step.

For example, in the case of “Every Woman Every Child” cited earlier, knowledge managers in that partnership might establish prioritized communications linkages with their counterparts in partnerships working on those issues that are tightly linked to the realization of their own goals: that is, partnerships working on “safe drinking water, malnutrition, gender equality and women’s empowerment.”

Because knowledge sharing between disciplines is always challenging, one cannot overstate the importance of establishing *personal, human connections* between representatives of these partnerships. Such connections can be established virtually if travel is not possible, but they should be *human* connections initially (not merely administrative, not limited to email and other written communication), to help establish a basis of trust and mutual familiarity on which the technical process of knowledge exchange — which often includes a great deal of translation, and which always requires patience when working across disciplines — can be built.

3. Identify the appropriate mechanism (or mechanisms) for inter-partnership knowledge sharing, and put those mechanisms to use

This step echoes the “K” and “A” steps in the TOLKA framework: identifying appropriate knowledge processes based on the foregoing analysis, and then activating stakeholders appropriately. Examples of such mechanisms could include:

- Building in news from each others' knowledge bases or information streams into newsletters, Twitter feeds, course offerings, and other mechanisms.
- Adopting standardized tagging conventions, with the SDGs as the basis, so that new postings in Internet-based media can be more easily discovered.
- Running joint capacity-building programs, so that participants in those programs are exposed to more integrated sets of knowledge at a formative point in their professional development.

The appropriate mechanisms, which have both social and technical components, would similarly be varied depending on the types of partnerships involved and their constituent parts.

Given the need for human connection highlighted above, the role of live meetings is highlighted for knowledge sharing *among* partnerships, more strongly than it is when considering knowledge sharing *within* partnerships. (For this reason, Section V includes a specific recommendation related to live conferencing.)

4. Translate the knowledge as necessary

The challenge of inter-partnership knowledge sharing brings with it a translation dimension that is also part social, part technical. The act of putting knowledge into a format that others can use can take several forms (or combinations of forms), such as:

- **Simplifying and summarizing the knowledge itself**, so that others who are not familiar with the relevant technical language can still understand the essential concepts.
- **Translating data and indicators** into formats that can be understood across professional disciplines and by the general public.
- **Converting information stored in databases** into formats that are portable or even standardized, so that others can make use of them.

Reviewing the experience of the Linked Open Data community can be of great help here. Initiatives such as the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) — which “makes information about aid spending easier to access, use and understand” by publishing aid data in a rigorously standardized common format — and Socrata (mentioned earlier) demonstrate effective efforts to make certain types of knowledge more universally available. In effect, these initiatives perform the kinds of translations described above.²⁵

²⁵ One possibility to consider is the adaptation of the IATI or Socrata approach for the establishment of a “meta-platform” to aggregate knowledge critical to the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. Such an initiative would require careful consideration of the types of knowledge that are truly essential to share, the technical challenges and costs involved, as well as the need to ensure that information, data, and knowledge collected on the meta-platform was comparable to that being gathered for the UNDESA Global Sustainable Development Report, and to that being assembled for SDG monitoring and review generally (at least at the international level). To get a sense of the scope of such a project, consider the open IATI standard, which defines the type and structure of information to be published, as well as the detailed lists of codes, rules, and constraints that publishers using the standard must follow. Given that the information published by IATI is relatively homogenous (it is all related to overseas development aid), it is clear that a similar platform to aggregate information and knowledge related to the full set of SDGs would be an enormous undertaking. However, Wikipedia.org and other crowd-sourced content aggregators do establish that creating such a platform is at least possible.

5. Establish regularity and frequency of exchange

To be effective, inter-partnership knowledge sharing must happen *regularly*. It must become a routine part of everyone's knowledge sharing program. This regularity requires a commitment from all parties involved to invest the necessary time, attention, and resources to set up the necessary processes, to automate them (to the extent possible), maintain them, and continuously improve them.

Finally, inter-partnership knowledge sharing programs — like all knowledge programs — need to be regularly evaluated. Early-feedback learning loops need to be built into the process as well, especially during the initial establishment stages.

See Annex 1, Figure 6, for a diagram illustrating this framework for establishing inter-partnership knowledge sharing.

V. Recommendations

Before offering recommendations for change, it should be noted that this review is not intended to increase a sense of “performance anxiety” among partnerships, or convey the impression that they are not managing knowledge sharing well. This reviewer was consistently impressed with the quality of information and knowledge being offered by partnerships, especially in consideration of their often-limited budgets for knowledge-sharing activities.

What administrators and knowledge managers *can* do to optimize the use of those resources, especially *within* partnerships is the following (noting that these actions are sometimes subject to the approval of funders):

- **Conduct reviews of their knowledge sharing programs**, using the TOLKA framework, and assess their needs with an eye to (1) what they actually need, and (2) the full range of knowledge-sharing tools and resources that are available.
- **Consider whether the partnership needs to invest a bit of up-front time to clarify terms and develop common ontologies**, in order to facilitate communication and make collaboration more efficient and effective.
- **Reallocate resources to a new mix of knowledge processes** that can speed learning and action among partnership members as well as public users of their knowledge resources.

As a facilitator, administrator, or observer of partnerships, the United Nations has a key role to play in making them more effective, and especially in facilitating knowledge sharing *among* them. In addition to considering the recommendations above — in those instances where a UN body is acting as the coordinator and/or administrator of a partnership — the UN can also:

- **Develop the TOLKA framework further**; recruit relevant experts in the field to critique it and improve it; and publish the result as a set of voluntary guidelines that can be distributed and adopted by partnerships, e.g. in connection with capacity-building activities to support partnership development.
- **Convene a “Conference of Partnerships”** with the express purpose fostering inter-partnership relationships and developing a culture of knowledge sharing *among* partnerships, using the framework presented here as a draft or starting point for designing such a conference. The Conference should meet annually, and should very likely be structured as a partnership itself. The activity linked to the Conference could include an annual assessment of partnership effectiveness, with a special focus on knowledge sharing and on the contribution of partnerships to the realization of the SDGs.
- **Develop a network of knowledge managers** working in partnerships (or their relevant administrative counterparts, as not all partnerships have knowledge managers) and facilitate their ongoing exchange in between meetings of the aforementioned Conference.
- **Continue to encourage studies in the field of partnership**, and collaborate with institutions that have already placed themselves at the forefront of this small-but-growing area of research.

Finally, supporting institutions dedicated to assisting partnerships can also make changes in their approach, in order to support the improvement of knowledge sharing. Specifically, they can:

- **Prioritize knowledge sharing more highly** in their research, knowledge development, and related activity.
- **Participate in the aforementioned Conference on Partnerships**, and generally contribute to the development of frameworks, tools, and methodologies.

Annex 1: Sample Tables and Figures Illustrating the TOLKA Framework

Table 3: Different Types of partnerships and their essential characteristics (from a knowledge-sharing perspective)

Partnership Scale	The Nature of the Goals: Broad or Focused?	Partnership Governance: Many Decision-Makers? or Fewer?	Need for Mutual Understanding: Critical? Important? "Built-in"?
Grand Global Partnerships	The goals are broad and multi-faceted	Tend to have many decision-makers, and weaker central secretariats.	Mutual understanding is <i>important</i> but may not be mission-critical (so long as all partners are pulling in the same general direction).
Specialized Global Partnerships	The goals are more narrowly focused on a theme or issue	Often fewer decision-makers; tend to have small-but-empowered secretariats	Mutual understanding is <i>mission-critical</i> (e.g. technical terms, jargon)
Independent Global Partnerships	Highly varied	Tend toward "many"	Mutual understanding is <i>important</i> when the goals are broad, <i>mission-critical</i> when they are more narrowly focused. If governance is decoupled from formal UN processes (where key terms are often pre-established), defining terms may be an essential first step.
Regional Partnerships	Goals may be broad but are by definition more narrow than in a global partnership	Tend towards "fewer"	Depends on the cultural and political make-up of the region, the nature of the goals, and the governance. Example: highly diverse region + focused goals + many decision-makers = <i>mission critical</i>
National Partnerships	Tend to be more narrowly focused on specific national objectives	Tend towards "fewer"	A level of understanding may be " <i>built in</i> " — that is, cultural and other similarities establish mutual understanding of basic concepts

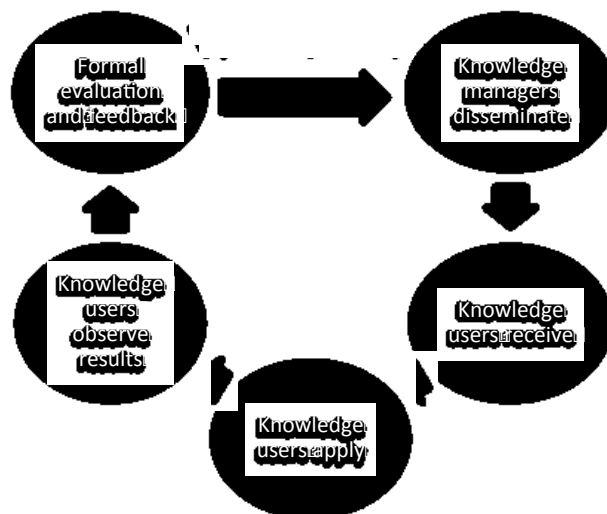
Subnational Partnerships	May be broad (e.g. “sustainable city” partnerships) or narrow (e.g. local health-related partnerships)	Highly varied	Mutual understanding is <i>important</i> if the goals are broad, but may be “ <i>built in</i> ” if more focused — that is, cultural and other similarities may establish mutual understanding of basic concepts (but this is not a given and should be examined carefully)
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Table 4: How the partnership's Type affects the need to develop its Ontology

Mix of Typing Factors	Impact on Ontology Development	Recommended Action
Grand Global Partnership with High Consensus on Goals	Most Partners can be expected to pull in a similar general direction; risk of misunderstanding is lower; spending Partners' time on ontology development may be counter-productive	Ensure that basic terms are widely understood and clearly defined in core documents
Grand Global Partnership with Lower Consensus Levels	Risk of divergence of goals and conflict in the partnership	Invest time defining common frameworks, concepts and terms; ensure agreement on these definitions; document them
Specialized Global Partnerships	Many specialized or technical concepts and terms may come into play; all Partners need to be “fluent” in these concepts; risk of divergence or misunderstanding is high, especially in culturally and politically diverse constellations	Invest time defining common frameworks, concepts and terms; ensure agreement on these definitions; document them
Independent Global Partnerships	Risks related to divergence on concepts and terms may be somewhat lower, but it is still important	Test levels of common understanding in the partnership; if levels are low, invest defining common frameworks, concepts and terms; ensure agreement on these definitions; document them. If levels are relatively high, ensure that basic terms are clearly defined in core documents
Regional Partnerships	Same as above regarding risk assessment in case of divergent understanding. Note that if UN is involved in a coordinating role, it is additionally important to clarify ontologies and ensure that they are harmonized with global norms and agreements	Test levels of common understanding in the partnership; if levels are low, invest defining common frameworks, concepts and terms; ensure agreement on these definitions; document them. If levels are relatively high, ensure that basic terms are clearly defined in core documents
National and Subnational Partnerships	Ontologies may or may not be well defined in a national and	Perform a preliminary assessment; ensure that key

	subnational context; note that spending additional time on clarification may carry its own risks of creating impatience among partners (because of a perceived delay in action)	concepts and terms are well defined in public documents; intervene to develop a formal ontology (e.g. lexicon) only if need arises
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Figure 5: A knowledge sharing cycle, first without additional, early learning loops (the process of evaluation and feedback is itself a learning loop):



The same cycle including three additional learning loops: (1) early feedback from users on the process of dissemination and how effective it is; (2) early feedback on whether and how the knowledge users are applying what they have received; and (3) early informal feedback on results, in advance of formal monitoring and evaluation processes (allowing for faster adaptation and adjustment of the knowledge flow).

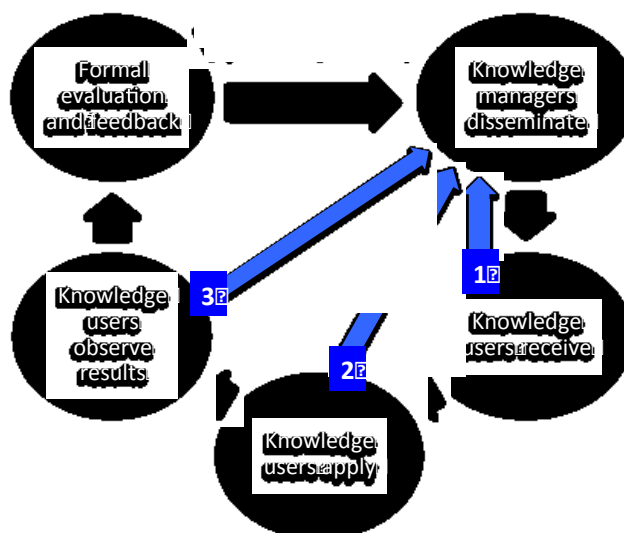
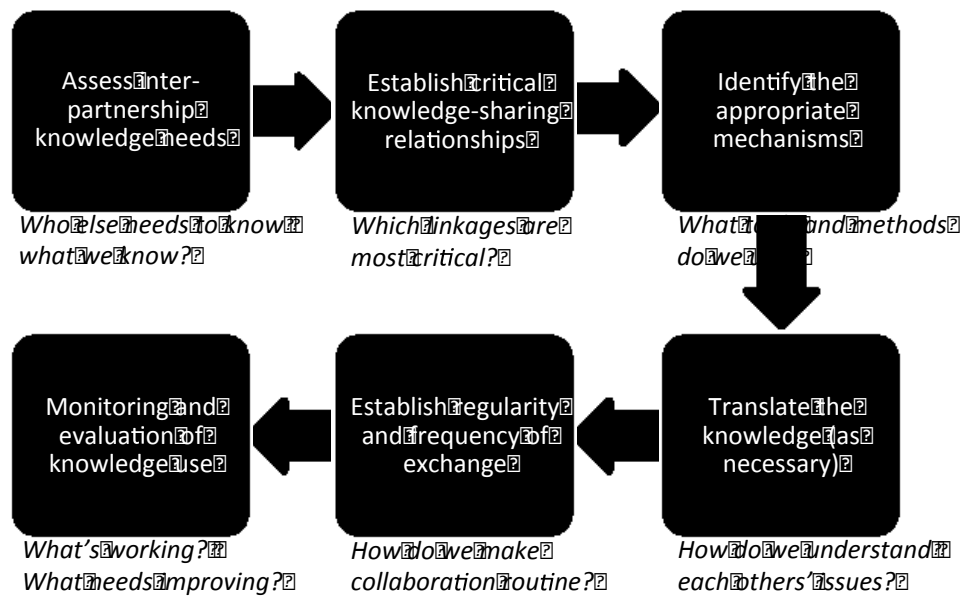
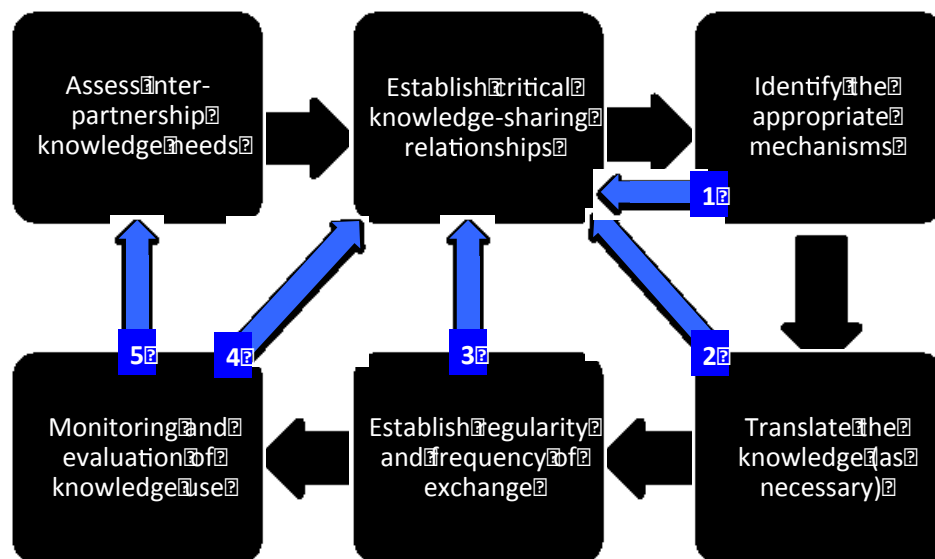


Figure 6: A framework for establishing inter-partnership knowledge sharing:

The same process including an illustration of the learning loops that should also be considered: (1) Feedback to knowledge managers on whether the mechanisms are appropriate and working; (2) feedback on whether the translations are adequate; (3) feedback on whether habits of exchange and use are established; (4) feedback on the process to the knowledge managers; and reassessment of needs if necessary, based on formal M&E results (M&E is also a learning loop).



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Annex 3: Research Database

[A copy of the Excel database used for this analysis has been submitted separately.]