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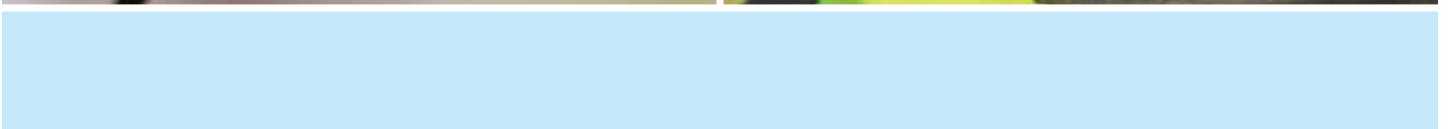
MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY



Beyond Sweet-Talk and Blanket Criticism – Towards Successful Implementation

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CatalySD Sustainability | Communications

June 2015





Note from the authors:

Through this document, we are hoping to catalyse new conversations on multi-stakeholder approaches for sustainability.

The CatalySD Group is interested in deepening our understanding about the way we work together or “engage in partnerships”, how we communicate the process that put them in place and supports them, their contributions and outcomes. Most importantly, we are interested in how stakeholder engagement and communications can reinforce each other for positive and transformational change towards sustainability.

In this paper, we summarize lessons learned in over 50 years of our cumulative experience on sustainable development, communications and multi-stakeholder processes, including first-hand experiences of the processes around them and implementation at local, national, regional and international levels. Yet of course we consider it neither comprehensive nor exhaustive.

It builds on good work that has already been conducted within this field and that is also currently underway. We hope that this paper will open up new topics for discussion not previously touched on, and help draw attention to the important roles of communications and stakeholder engagement in sustainability and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Support and constructive criticism are equally welcomed.

CatalySD believes that investing in high-quality multi-stakeholder engagement and communication is necessary at the programming level when governments convene for the purpose of initiating transformation towards the SDGs, as well as when brokering, creating, and facilitating collaborative initiatives.

The CatalySD Group was founded in recognition of the need for high-quality multi-stakeholder engagement and communications (MSEC) for sustainable development.

We are committed to:

- Action, implementation, and positive change;
- Focussing on quality not quantity; and
- Integrating learning processes in all phases of our work so that experiences can effectively inform policy

In the context of the present paper, CatalySD will:

- Create templates for MSEC processes for implementing the SDGs at local, sub-national, national and international levels, helping practitioners and policy makers to ask the right questions and engage the necessary capacities;
- Support governments and others in communicating and engaging all stakeholders and citizens in implementing the SDGs and in other processes at the international, regional and national level, such as those related to the Green Climate Fund;
- Initiate dialogue among thought leaders in the fields of communications and stakeholder engagement for sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals, and facilitate a series of exchanges, building a network of thought leaders, experienced practitioners, and researchers to foster learning on using MSEC to bring about transformations towards sustainability.

We would like to like to thank Marianne Beisheim, Stephan Contius, Felix Dodds, Helen Marquard, and Jan-Gustav Strandenaes for their invaluable support by sharing their thinking, challenging us with their questions, and providing inputs into previous drafts of this paper.



High-quality multi-stakeholder engagement and communication (MSEC):

- Allows us to effectively initiate transformation processes through convening the necessary actors, develop a shared understanding of the context and the challenges, create strategies and action plans, implement in whatever constellations are appropriate, and learn together what works and what doesn't;
- Allows us to deal with conflicts, including between the goals and targets of different SDGs, and the conflict over natural and financial resources to achieve them, and transform conflict into integration and win-win solutions;
- Increases the quality of decisions through including more knowledge and perspectives;
- Increases the likelihood of effective implementation through outreach and increased ownership;
- Increases the perceived legitimacy of decisions and actions; and
- Accelerates learning among all actors and stakeholders.

Our Understanding of Partnerships for Sustainable Development

In 2003, the 11th Session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development produced the only UN decision to date that is setting an explicit framework for partnerships.

It defines partnerships as “voluntary initiatives undertaken by governments and relevant stakeholders, e.g. major groups and institutional stakeholders”, and it refers to “the preliminary work undertaken on partnerships during the preparatory process for World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), including the Bali Guiding Principles, and General Assembly resolution A/RES/56/76”. It furthermore states that partnerships should “contribute to the implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, and (that partnerships) should not divert from commitments contained in those agreements”.

The decision also emphasises that partnerships “are not intended to substitute commitments made by Governments, but to supplement the implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation”, and that they should deliver a concrete value-add.

It includes reference to the need to deliver to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in the design and implementation of partnerships. Among other specifications, the decision states that partnerships “should be based on predictable and sustained resources for their implementation”, without diverting resources of intergovernmental partner organisations away from their immediate mandates. Partnerships should “be designed and implemented in a transparent and accountable manner” and “publicly announced with the intention of sharing the specific contribution that they make” to the implementation of sustainable development agreements.

Within the context of the SDG process, the term “partnerships” seems to be used mostly as defined by CSD-11.

However, there are a number of additional terms being used that are not only important to broaden, but also to elaborate on in more detail about what is being discussed: the engagement of stakeholders, actors, and citizens in the implementation of sustainable development in general, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular. These include, for example: multi-stakeholder processes, initiatives or platforms, multi-actor collaboration, and cross-sector partnerships, to name but a few.

In our view, these terms cover a variety of ways to communicate with and engage stakeholders in decision-finding, decision-making, joint action, joint learning and review: From mere hearings or consultations, where governments or UN bodies invite stakeholders to share their views, to dialogues where diverse views are being presented and discussed, to creating collaborative efforts where people and organisations from different sectors work together on joint projects, and to joint monitoring, evaluation and learning procedures. At the core it implies an increase of communication and engagement, and a deepening of relationships.

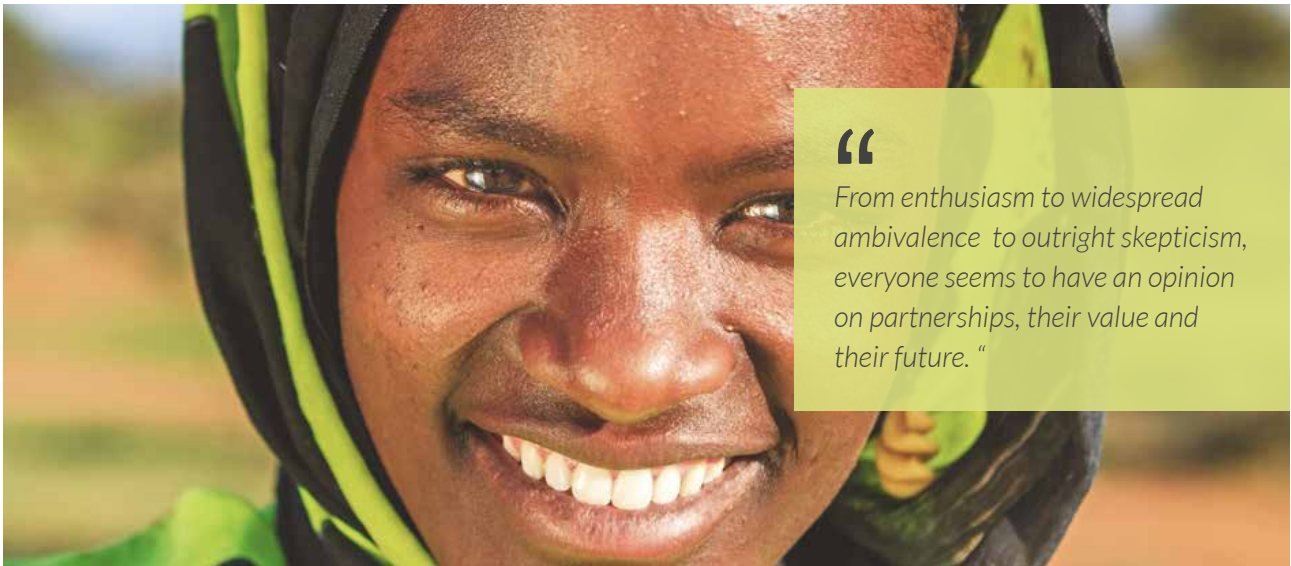
In this paper we therefore begin with a focus on partnerships as defined in the CSD-11 decision. We then subsequently broaden our perspective to include multi-stakeholder processes of communication and engagement that could, for example, be used to initiate, broker, support, guide, and monitor the implementation of the SDGs at local, sub-national, national, and international levels.





THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT THAT PARTNERSHIPS ARE MAKING A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BUT IN THE WORLD OF SUSTAINABILITY MEGA-TRENDS, HAVE PARTNERSHIPS BECOME LITTLE MORE THAN A BUZZWORD THAT HAS LOST MOST OF ITS FIZZ?

We need to re-invigorate the positive excitement about collaboration by re-energizing the movement of multi-stakeholder approaches, integrating meaningful engagement and effective communications that re-enforce each other to fast-track implementation



“

From enthusiasm to widespread ambivalence to outright skepticism, everyone seems to have an opinion on partnerships, their value and their future.”

Multi-stakeholder engagement and communications for sustainability

Beyond Sweet-Talk and Blanket Criticism - Towards Successful Implementation

Minu Hemmati and François Rogers, June 2015

Partnerships for sustainability seem to be everywhere, but are they reaching their full potential or are they merely a convenient and lucrative vehicle for partners to fund their own interests, only with a different façade? Is partnering more than adding logos onto statements, so as to make them appear more powerful than what they are? Are we really scrutinising the range of real partnerships and learning from their experiences? More importantly, can we, with the discourse and structures at our disposal, ensure that the potential of partnerships is effectively used to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

Within the context of the discussions around the SDGs, there is renewed interest in partnerships. As pointed out by Beisheim “undeniably, the deficits in implementation represent the biggest problem the UN faces in the area of sustainable development” (Beisheim 2015, p.7) and partnerships are again being considered as a potential vehicle with which implementation may be taken forward. Publications and conversations are analysing and weighing-up the benefits, risks and opportunities of partnerships and debates are happening increasingly on how partnerships can be used effectively to further the implementation of the upcoming, latest agenda for sustainability. From enthusiasm to widespread ambivalence to outright scepticism, everyone seems to have an opinion on partnerships, their

value and their future. However, at the core of concerns seems to be a disconnect between the rhetoric and expectations on the one hand, and delivery and impact on the other.

UNDESA's recent paper provides an overview and assessment of the evolution of partnerships for sustainability: “Since 2000, there has been a plethora of partnerships within and outside the United Nations, some considered effective and making an impact on development but many falling short of delivering results and incurring high transaction costs.” (Dodds 2015, p.1)

Considering the enthusiasm with which partnerships were embraced during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 (even against the background of geopolitical reasons for pushing them), we need to ask ourselves why, over a period of more than a decade, we have not managed to tap into the full potential of partnerships? What are some of the root causes for this? And what can be done to avoid partnerships suffering the same fate as what typically happens to buzzwords over time: being replaced with new ones, while nothing much really changes on the ground.

PART 1

THE CONTEXT OF PARTNERSHIPS TODAY

The Post-2015 Intergovernmental Negotiations concluded deliberations in New York during the latter part of May 2015. Follow-up and review, or rather review and follow-up, will be a key component of the work plan going forward – and, importantly, of the way in which we will track progress on the SDGs in future years.

A recurring theme throughout the discussions in New York was the monitoring and review of country’s progress, in particular, once the targets have been agreed. In this regard, many countries also highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement at the in-country level to support implementation as an indispensable part of such a process.

Multi-stakeholder engagement and communication (MSEC) is now widely acknowledged as imperative in driving sustainability forward. Especially at the national level, MSEC has become an indispensable

part of the way in which we take action and implement initiatives on sustainable development and also through which we seek to achieve other agreed development goals. In fact, these efforts seem to be everywhere and a common byproduct from them is sustainability partnerships.

If we are going to depend on MSEC and associated partnerships to support our understanding of how countries will make progress on the SDGs, and foresee that it will form the basis through which a great amount of this progress will be achieved – or not, we have to ask the question how effective they have been since we started focusing on them more than a decade ago.

Are these initiatives reaching their full potential?

“A word on words” - Terms used in this paper

The term ‘**partnerships**’ is widely used, including in the UN discourse on sustainable development and the SDGs. The meaning of partnerships is, not always clear. It seems increasingly narrowly defined, and often seems to be associated with negative connotations. Explicitly or implicitly, ‘sustainability partnerships’ often seem to be limited to Public-Private Partnerships, or other constellations necessarily involving business, and sometimes being little more than concession contracts that governments use to outsource certain services.

Our focus, however, is on **using multi-stakeholder engagement and communication** to work towards sustainability – and this can include a whole range of potential activities.

In order to avoid the rather narrow connotations associated with the term ‘partnerships’, we use the term ‘**collaborative initiatives**’ interchangeably, or for short, just ‘**initiatives**’ to refer to activities when stakeholders from different sectors come together to work together towards a common goal.

With the wider term ‘**multi-stakeholder approaches**’, we refer to the mind-set and general way of working in a way that is inclusive, participatory, and interactive, be it when generating ideas, preparing planning, making decisions, or designing learning and knowledge management procedures.

Levels of Stakeholder Engagement – Variations of MSEC

Hearing	One-off Dialogue Event	Regular Dialogue	Dialogue steering implementation	Stakeholder implementation partnership
One-way conversation	Two- or multi-way conversation	Two- or multi-way conversation	Two- or multi-way conversation collaboration	Two- or multi-way collaboration
Convener (e.g. government) receiving input to shape planning, policy, financing mechanisms, research agendas, etc.	Convener receiving input and engaging in exchange: research, planning, policy	Convener receiving input, engaging in exchange over longer period: regular policy review, planning review	Joint responsibility, steering adjustments, steering results e.g. through multi-stakeholder initiative boards	Joint decision-making, implementation planning, activities, monitoring & evaluation
> from event to process >				
> from listening through exchanging, and guidance, to collaboration >				



Question 1: Are we considering multi-stakeholder approaches and partnerships within the right context?

Do we believe that partnerships drive sustainability in and of themselves as catalysts for action on sustainable development, or would it be more useful to view multi-stakeholder engagement and communication (MSEC) as strategic enablers that allow actors to make better contributions to sustainable development?

Using MSEC, we can bring together people and institutions with different backgrounds, knowledge, skills and powers with the aim of achieving a common goal. These elements represent a wide range of human, financial, material, relational, and other resources. It is important and imperative to look at them pragmatically, and not ideologically. We need to reflect on which structures and processes can deliver which outcomes both in the short and in the long term.

It would also seem that all too often we have become fixated on getting the “partnerships speak” right, rather than to focus on the “how”. Would it not be more realistic, and more useful, to rather consider ‘partnerships’ for what they are: a platform for communication and cooperation that can create opportunities for actors to do what they do best? As a result, we define collaborative initiatives pragmatically, and as one instrument within a much larger context of policy-making, implementation, and governance.

Our thinking and the public discourse on collaborative initiatives seem to be stuck in a rut. Since the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 less and less air time has been given to partnerships and in our discussions on sustainable development partnerships we are little further than we were at ten years ago.

It is easy to come to the conclusion that the time for collaborative initiatives has passed - that they have lost their “hot” factor. Was ‘partnerships’ indeed just a buzzword that now has lost most of its fizz? However, the time of multi-stakeholder engagement and communication for sustainability is not over – it is – and should be - now. And there are few opportunities better than the SDG process and the 2015 Development Agenda to prove it.



Question 2: Do our communications around ‘partnerships’ help create a useful context for thinking about them?

We would argue that it does not. Communications about ‘partnerships’ tend to be rather one-sided and polarised: either overly positive, celebrating how wonderful they are supposed to be, or overly negative, focusing exclusively on the risks, and pointing to examples of failure or bad governance.

There is also a serious issue of scale, breadth and depth in our communications about multi-stakeholder approaches to working on sustainable development. Often one or a handful of ‘partnerships’ are held as representative of all such work. In partnership discussions or at partnerships events (fora, fairs, and the like), only small samples of MSEC initiatives gain visibility and are scrutinised. More often than not we preach to the converted.

Too often we still hear “why” we should engage in partnerships and we don’t discuss “how” such engagement should be designed, monitored, financed and implemented.

Moreover, discussions about the mechanics of collaborative initiatives and the way in which they operate were slow to pick up, and the amount of publications with connections to the SDG discourse is limited. It seems that we do not have much to say about the actual implementation of collaborative initiatives and that the discourse remains rather theoretical. Indeed, not many practitioners, or researchers who study ‘partnerships in action’, are engaged in the policy debate. That being said, there are tools that have been offered but unfortunately many of them are rather generic, and few useful, practical guides and services for MSEC related work are available.

As a result, our discourse has a distinct lack of thought leadership around multi-stakeholder engagement and communication for sustainable development.

The nature of collaborative initiatives is as diverse and challenging as the goals and objectives they pursue. Perhaps the complexity of the sustainable development landscape also impacts on our ability to focus our dialogue and understanding of the collaborative initiatives that operate within it.

Communications around sustainability partnerships are generally rather weak and, especially where budgets are smaller and capacity less, often donor driven. Planned, integrated and pro-active communications are extremely important for all MSEC activities. On the one hand it can provide support for an initiative to achieve its strategic objectives, communicating the progress and value-add, it assists in keeping the wider network informed, engaged and committed and can assist greatly with reporting requirements. On the other hand, thought-through and innovative communications can also play a very strategic role. It can frame global issues within a local context, bringing a “face” to work of an initiative, and it can effectively support meaningful participation, engagement and learning.

CatalySD believes that maximum sustainability and impact can only be achieved when the two mutually reinforcing pillars of engagement and communications are employed in tandem.

This means to promote and drive meaningful engagement through communications, engaging stakeholders in the process and capturing the experience and learning, and then disseminating these more widely through innovative and smart communication products that, in turn, lift the audience, conversation and participation in the process.



Question 3: Do we really know what we are talking about?

By and large, **the partnership databases, platforms and networking resources** we have put in place to support our thinking and learning about multi-stakeholder approaches only capture a fraction of the relevant information about the respective initiatives. Yet, often we are drawing extensive conclusions on the basis of the information collected from these.

It would require tremendous resources to ensure that such datasets are fit-for-use. Taking into consideration that most partnerships databases are centralised and not in close proximity to any of the initiatives themselves geographically, and that there are no supporting resources for providing data and exchanging lessons learned it is highly questionable that this situation would change anytime soon.

Reliable, up-to-date, representative, accessible and useful data on partnerships remain very scattered and limited. Centralised databases also tend to duplicate work, having to copy, download, format and explain it every time the data need to be used. Data is also often out of date, as different partners use different variations of it and these are not always the same. Partners who are required to hand the information over also have reservations – often serious – around ownership and information they want to keep confidential for various reasons.

And if centralisation is not the answer, decentralisation is not a panacea either. Even decentralised databases suffer serious constraints: Agreements have to be put in place (invariably on a one-on-one basis) with each data provider, and importantly not the partnership as a whole, allowing the use of the data and setting standards for data quality, etc. Where the responsibility for updating of data rests directly with nodes in a dispersed network, these, in turn, require dedicated support for the network to function effectively, often coupled with a considerable amount of training on new data tools, network coordination and IT architecture in order for the decentralised nodes to function optimally. Huge effort goes into maintaining the dispersed network effectively.

Two examples of these include the UNEP Database on Migratory Species (GROMS) and the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF), the first capturing data centrally and as result suffering constraints in resources and quality, whilst the latter has a continual struggle from the Global Secretariat to ensure effective functioning and inputs from country focal points, especially in less developed countries where resource constraints (human, financial and other) and infrastructure challenges are at the order of the day.

In her paper Beisheim notes that “some new UN approaches to partnerships and other non-governmental initiatives for sustainable development are already beginning to take shape” and that “the secretariat has established specific criteria for inclusion in its new sustainable development knowledge platform SD in Action, a comprehensive registry of both partnerships and Rio+20 voluntary commitments” (Beisheim 2015, p.32). She notes that initiatives are asked to (i) insert at least one tangible deliverable upon registration and subsequently (ii) to provide voluntarily updates, including through biennial reports. Beisheim concludes that the latter obligation is largely ignored by partnerships with no repercussions and that the situation should change, possibly through a system that includes submission of two-yearly activity reports by the partnerships where non-compliance would result in exclusion from the registry altogether.

Whilst the reasons for this recommendation are understandable, we take a different view. In relation to the vast universe of MSEC activities out there, and the limited capacity and resources many – if not most of them – suffer, it is questionable whether such a punitive approach would be constructive, and whether it would not only lead to the already limited sample of registered partnerships becoming even smaller? Surely the objective should be to make it easier for collaborative initiatives stay inside the system, rather than making it easy for them to drop out? These are voluntary, after all, and as such, incentives that take into account their particular circumstances and capacities and are seen as supporting the partnership and not constraining it, might serve this purpose better.

We need to find a **balance** between necessary monitoring and control mechanisms for anyone and anything associating them with the UN on the one hand, and an enabling approach that allows collaborative initiatives to engage meaningfully in the process, including in data gathering and analysis, on the other.

Perhaps these limitations form part of the reason why we are not getting any further traction on collaborative initiatives? What we discuss seems somewhat out of touch with the realities of the work on the ground. As a result, do we intuitively feel uncomfortable with the level of discourse and, therefore, do not give it the priority it deserves? Whatever way we look at it, when it comes to ‘partnerships’, things have become a little stale and many seem to be disengaging from the discussions around them.

Whilst collaborative initiatives are at the core of our work on sustainability, they are not core sustainability work and, therefore, invariably play second fiddle to what many organisations perceive as the “real” and more important priorities to deal with.



Question 4: Are we creating an enabling environment for collaborative initiatives to thrive? Do many of the partnerships we are seeing even deserve the name “partnerships”?

On either account our answer would be no, definitely not. The operational infrastructure that we use for the implementation of collaborative initiatives is seriously limiting the potential of such initiatives to deliver. Our current development

infrastructure is simply just not set up to accommodate collaborative initiatives of various shapes and forms. Neither at the level of the frameworks we use to put MSEC in place, nor at the level of the individual, where collaboration often succeed against considerable odds, solely as result of the unwavering dedication of individuals who take on numerous challenges at huge personal cost to make an initiative work. Because the environment for collaborative initiatives in bureaucracies, in particular, is not conducive, focal points end up traversing a maze of challenges and oftentimes swim upstream to facilitate internal cooperation of the partner, especially when financial contributions are required.

The Agreement Amongst Partners

The format for agreements amongst partners, especially at the global / multinational level, and typically between the fiduciary agency and the partners themselves focuses on the bilateral relationship between the said parties, and not on the collaborative initiative as a whole. This is because there simply is not a structure available that fully captures the essence of such initiatives, whilst still answering in the need of internal controls, rules and regulations.

By far the most commonly used ‘partnership agreement’ is essentially a linear “**contributor-implementer**” agreement, undertaken by the fiduciary agent and with each partner on a one-on-one basis. While the reasons for this are understandable, it has unintended consequences on collaborative initiatives.

Although often the fiduciary agency itself is a “partner” in the project, legally and through these arrangements, they are pretty much the same as the relationship between a donor and an implementing organisation. This situation creates several challenges: First, a distorted, top-down and undesirable power structure is established in an environment where the power should be shared equally so that the collaborative initiatives can function effectively. Typically, the fiduciary agent should be “in service” of the initiative, managing the administration and finances on behalf of the partners and, oftentimes, charging and receiving overheads for this role. Especially within larger organisations, fiduciary partners in effect assume the role of the donor, in many cases dictating the terms of the initiative and placing partners under reporting pressures that suit their internal governance and management rather than that of the initiative itself. In extreme cases, and where relationships have turned sour, it has even been observed that audit processes are used to discredit and negatively impact a particular partner as a result of this skewed relationship.

This is extremely worrying and can – and does – place enormous strain on the capacity of smaller partners that need to adhere to the rules and regulations of larger organisations with capacity that is far superior. Due to high transaction costs, most contributing governments are streamlining their official development assistance through key partners, typically UN-type organisations with which they also have other agreements. They are disbursing increasingly larger amounts of funding through identified, large implementing agencies and less and less to small organisations, often with the unintended result of higher bureaucracy, and leaving collaborative initiatives skewed. Invariably this leads to an imbalance in power causing a level of vulnerability and exposure of smaller partners that is not optimal. In effect, smaller organisations are likely to refrain from entering such agreements, or regard – and implement – them as traditional donor-grantee- or consultancy agreements.

Semantics and the legal definition of “**partnerships**” or “**partner**” are also problematic. Despite our progressive thinking on the subject, the legal definition is still framed by that of “traditional business partnerships”.

Scherr & Gregg (2006) refer to the legal definition of “partnerships” in the sustainability context. Whilst first formally recognised at WSSD and defined as “voluntary, cooperative ventures, involving self-selected groups of governments, international agencies, non-governmental organisations, and corporations” they argue that “sustainability partnerships” are different from the normal legal “partnership”, and that this has caused confusion among the legal community. This is still the situation today.

The definition of ‘partnerships’ is being lent from business, which is not very helpful as it implies a somewhat different legal relationship between parties, as Scherr & Gregg (2006) make clear.

Results Framework

Collaborative initiatives are often absorbed in the **fiduciary body’s business plan** – essentially aligning with one partner’s business objective(s) and not perhaps those of others, putting strain on the relationships within the initiative.

Intermediary organisations, often also the fiduciary agents, typically manage several larger grants. At the beginning of an collaborative initiative, when it is still getting off the ground, arrangements seem to be more fluid and enabling for the initiative to thrive as it seeks the best way in which to deliver results.

However, as time passes and the initiative is being institutionalised, especially where second and third rounds of funding are in place, there is a clear trend for the initiative and the reporting by the partners, to follow the Key Performance Framework of the fiduciary agent, rather than a **results framework** that is developed specifically for the collaborative initiative itself.

Perhaps this is why we see such little results communicated from collaborative initiatives: their contributions are often completely taken up by the reporting process of the partners that always seem to want to streamline their reporting to minimise input costs.

Decision-making power

The tension between the rules and regulations of the fiduciary agency and the governance of the collaborative initiative itself brings us to our next question: What real decision-making power do Partnerships Boards have vs. the fiduciary body’s governance guidelines and procedures? To what extent can Partnership Board override the rules and regulations of the fiduciary institution if this is in the interest of the partnership? It is extremely important for the Partnership Board to, at all times, remain at the main decision-making body on the partnership itself.





Question 5: Do some partnerships work better than others?

A delicate balance

Indeed there are. Especially those initiatives where partners indeed use collaboration to their full advantage seem to do better. That means striking the delicate balance between **self-interest and group interest**.

Entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial mindset of individuals are very important elements for sustainability to work. The question we have to ask, though, is where we draw the line between self-interest that is also in the interest of a collaborative initiative and when that self-interest becomes excessive and impacts the initiative negatively? Where collaboration is functioning (to a more or lesser extent), partners are “playing the system” and advancing their own agendas at the same time as they are advancing the partnership as a whole. In some cases, we know that partnering institutions use the collaborative initiatives as platforms for other work, and/or to fundraise for other work that is part of their core activities. Within reason this is surely fine, and to be expected. It can show that the initiative is becoming part and parcel of the organisation in question and in itself adds to the institutionalisation and sustainability of the partner’s work programme, impacting beyond the partnership in a positive and constructive manner.

However, there is a very real and present danger that the results of a collaborative initiative may suffer where such self-interest-driven activities grow out of proportion and are not in the optimal interest of the initiative itself.

Evolution of collaborative initiatives

Businesses survive because they adapt to changing environments, markets, technologies and opportunities. They change their products and services, procedures, incentive systems, and so on, to suit new customer needs and market niches. CSOs also tend to respond to new situations and changing policies. They adapt to their own success, and when some of their work may become less needed, effective CSOs focus their capacities elsewhere.

Collaborative initiatives need to be set up to do the same – within the limits of transparency, good governance, and all involved being comfortable with changes, developments, and their own speed. Building, testing, re-designing and rebuilding is part of business DNA and of many NGO’s DNA, and it needs to be part of partnerships’ DNA as well. **Change and innovation** is much less at the core of

governments’ and bureaucracies’ culture, and these differences are among those that can create real problems when actors from different sectors work together.

Bureaucracies can literally suck up collaborative initiatives: bureaucratic organisations tend to ‘incorporate’ projects and partnerships into their fold of structures, systems, and governance. Once that happens, there is a high likelihood that partnerships lose their flexibility, their capacity to innovate, and their ability to cater to different cultures, needs and interests of the various stakeholders involved.

Collaborative initiatives evolve, and the phases they go through serve different purposes and are associated with specific opportunities and risks. When initiatives get institutionalised, they become more predictable, they provide a number of safe jobs and can deliver steady results. However, they also lose (part of) their flexibility and innovative capacities. It’s the same as with building, and developing, other kinds of institutions: Partnerships also need to be shaken up, or closed down, and something new can be developed that again has the creativity and innovative capacities that are needed when confronting new challenges. Such evolutions are to be expected and embraced rather than denied or avoided so that they can be used to the full advantage of implementing sustainability. However, the societal goal of sustainability – and *transformative change* – can be in conflict with individual interests of job security, or funders’ interests in predictability, for example. It is precisely such conflicts of interest that we need to collectively consider and address so as to create win-win solutions.

Dedicated resources – beyond money

Collaborative initiatives require dedicated resources, effort and strategic management to produce results. It is often mid-career professionals who act as institutional coordinators for such initiatives. Rarely do **senior managers** spend time on developing a partnership and yet, because of their inherent innovation and agility, as well as the level of decision-making required at times as a result of such agility, it is exactly the kind of strategic insight, authority and experience that collaborative initiatives need most to thrive and impact at a broader scale. Where senior managers want to engage, their own **Key Performance Indicators/Areas** do not accommodate for them to spend any significant amount of time on the initiative. In conclusion: partnerships can only be sustainable if all the people who are supposed to work on them are not only asked to do so, but have their work plans and KPIs changed accordingly.

The more partners invest (financially and otherwise), the more outcomes are sought – partners want to see results and be seen to achieve their individual goals through the collaborative initiative. This can impact the initiative negatively, creating a difficult operating environment and impact on outputs.



Organisational vs. individual engagement in collaborative initiatives

Collaborative initiatives are often borne from and linked to political commitment and current thinking. They are in fashion because a manager finds them appealing, or because they relate to a broader political stance. They are also often connected to negotiations as an extension of discussions for output and also because they are more often than not funding dependent, especially from governments. There are, however, exceptions, such as the Sustainable Food Lab, or EcoAgriculture Partners¹ that function independently, although their contributions are also to the larger policy environment on food security, climate change, and other issues, and these are subject of negotiations.

Where managers do not get proper approval from the organisation they represent to engage in a collaborative initiative, this may indeed indicate a lack of **ownership and commitment on the part of the organisation**. Complications are likely to arise, not least as a result of expectations by the other partners. When leadership changes, these changes also may impact the initiative and the importance they subsequently enjoy within the partner organisations and their respective priorities.

¹ See <http://www.sustainablefood.org/> and [www.ecoagriculture.org.](http://www.ecoagriculture.org/) respectively.

Unequal workload

We already mentioned the issue of overheads charged by fiduciary agencies. We do not view this as problematic per se. Fiduciary institutions of collaborative initiatives at times are left disgruntled, as the onus can fall on them to carry the initiative through difficult times. Other partners often (i) do not have the **time or capacity to really make the initiative work**, or (ii) feel that the overheads to the fiduciary partner justifies them carrying a heavier workload and therefore adopt a more hands-off approach.

Open-endedness

Whilst no one knows exactly what may come out of a sustainability activity taking a multi-stakeholder approach, there should also be clear parameters in terms of when outcomes should be achieved. Innovation and business models develop along the way – that's what we call **learning**. It's great and an important element of success for collaborative initiatives! But learning by definition also implies a risk for failure. To what extent are partners, especially governments, prepared to view failure as part of the learning process? Transformation and 'business as unusual' both demand a certain appetite for both learning and failure.

For many donors it is not easy to accommodate that the collaborative initiatives they support change over time.

If focus shifts, an initiative's activities may fall out of the remit of one budget and would need to be shifted into a different department and its budget – which, however, in all likelihood will already be fully committed.

This is just one example of how initiatives that indeed achieve operating as learning processes – and thus optimising their approaches and their potential impacts – pose challenges to the support system as it is.

Do we therefore have to view partners to a project not as "permanent" but transient as the model evolves? And that change in partners is both essential and a matter of course?

Where the partners do not change, a collaborative initiative has the potential to become stale. Partnerships that become like bureaucracies will not survive. They need to stay agile and innovative. If they do not, they become an institution like so many others. Where the intention is for an initiative to be permanent, a partnership may not be the best vehicle for it to operate under. In such a case, creating a permanent institution with a multi-stakeholder board may be more suitable

Collaborative initiatives also need servicing, leadership, and intervention mechanisms.

The question is how to deal with these in a manner that is still results-oriented.

Patience versus outcomes is an on-going issue for any collaborative initiative, especially in the early stages of development where participants have the potential to be rather more disparate than later on when when more common ground on fundamental issues has been found.

Partnerships need professional and dedicated process design and facilitation – beyond meeting facilitation.

Governance challenges

Transformation also impacts governance. Collaborative initiatives are sometimes exposed to criticism that they allow undue influence from the private sector in order to grow, or to gain legitimacy².

Still reeling from the aftershock of the recent economic meltdown, governments, in particular, are wary to hand over governance decisions to the private sector that is seen to be more risk prone and not taking decisions in the interest of the public – putting profits before people, and benefitting a few instead of all.

A recent discussion on the establishment of a Private Sector Facility under the Green Climate Fund is a good case in point. We need partnerships to implement the changes we want to see. In democratic systems and open markets, there is no other way. However, we need to manage their risks really well.

SUMMARY OF PART 1

As the discussion of our questions has shown, there are a great number of dimensions and aspects to be considered when discussing partnerships.

We suggest to structure the analysis using a framework developed in the context of philosophy and conflict transformation, looking at four different dimensions of collaborative initiatives. The model seems useful in order to map where challenges or opportunities lie. It can serve as a diagnostic tool, and it can help us think and strategize³.

We suggest using it here to address the question: which dimensions do we need to pay attention to in order to use collaborative initiatives to their full potential towards sustainability?

In the Visual Summary below, we have mapped the challenges of collaborative initiatives that we discussed above into four dimensions: individual, relationships, institutions, and culture. It is clear that there are challenges, and success factors, in all four dimensions.

We believe that all four dimensions need to be considered when analysing collaborative initiatives, diagnosing their quality, and designing their future development strategy.

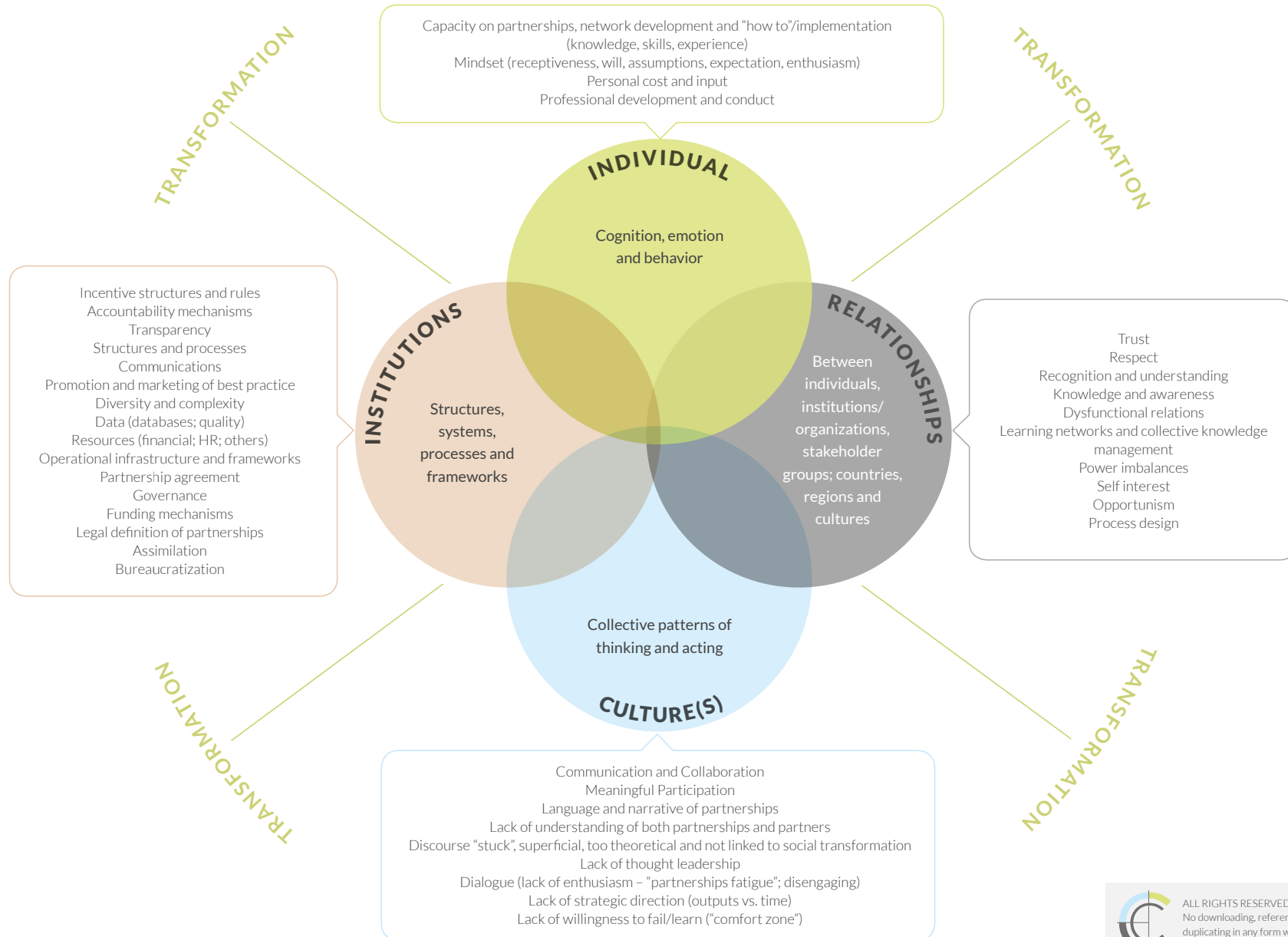
³ We have adapted a framework developed by the Generative Change Community (coordinated P. Thomas, B. Pruitt, M. Hemmati, 2007). It represents an integration of two streams of work: the literature on social conflict and conflict transformation, which identifies four dimensions in which conflict creates change and where change must occur for conflict to be transformed to lasting peace (see Lederach et al 2007) and the four quadrants of Ken Wilber's Integral Theory (see Wilber 2003). Each quadrant represents a distinct approach to change, focusing on changing individuals, relationships, structures, or culture.

² See, for example, Civil Society Reflection Group 2015



DIMENSIONS OF COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES FOR SUSTAINABILITY

MAPPING OF ISSUES/CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED



PART 2

THE WAY FORWARD

Following on our summary of the challenges and issues arising around collaborative initiatives in Part 1, in this section we are presenting some thoughts on the way forward.

In particular, we underline the importance of understanding implementation of the SDGs as a **transformation process** and that such an understanding will, in turn, also determine how action on the SDGs is approached at all levels.

We consider what such processes could look like at the national level, for example, and use the four dimensions of collaborative initiatives to point to a few key elements that make engagement, communications and partnerships work for the SDGs.

In addition, we discuss aspects of **governance processes** (rather than structures) when change occurs while we navigate complex systems, as well as challenges of monitoring, evaluation and learning. We close with a few considerations regarding anchoring sustainability partnerships within the UN system.

Implementing the SDGs implies transformation and, hence forth, an explicit commitment to transformation is also required. It is critically important to understand that transformation is a process. This is a new narrative that is in need of further attention. We need to develop it further, articulate it together, and advocate it.

Understanding SDG action as a system transformation process

Implementing the SDGs can be understood as a **multi-stakeholder system transformation process**, or rather, as a series (or a system) of transformation processes at all levels. The SDGs are part of a process, not an end itself. We need to articulate what kind of transformation process the SDGs are part of and which vehicles we need to put in place to advance them and achieve our goals.

What does that mean?

Transformation implies that fundamental changes need to become possible. We need to consider the system as a whole and effect changes that not just tweak a few variables here and there, but rather fundamentally develop the system by changing the rules and relationships that shape and maintain it.⁴

Thinking and working in processes – rather than in silos, with set structures and rules - implies that professional communications and systems of knowledge management are needed. Professional process design and facilitation is required, within institutions, between them, and of larger platforms bringing all stakeholders together. Every stakeholder needs to be informed and engaged.

There needs to be investment in **processes that produce outcomes**, rather than pre-set strategies and their letter-by-letter implementation. Literally all aspects of transformation processes develop over time – including goals, objectives, engaged actors, scope, financing and governance, and so on. Transformation processes are journeys that cannot be planned and rolled out, they need to be prepared, and then navigated. Innovation needs the appropriate spaces, including diversity, challenges, and time.

There is a need to develop abilities and willingness to collaborate. The will to transform can develop over time, and this can be supported. In addition, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) has to be part and parcel of the transformation process as well and needs to include quantifiable indicators, as well as qualitative measures of change.

Bringing the SDGs Home and Engaging Everyone in Action

Building on our presentation of the four dimensions of collaborative initiatives (see page 12), we want to illustrate how we can discuss such multi-stakeholder engagement and communication as means of SDG implementation by using the national level as an example and pointing out what needs to be done to communicate the SDGs and engage all actors, all stakeholders, and ultimately all citizens, in realising the Goals.

It is important for governments to share with everyone what obligations they are undertaking on behalf of the citizenry. It is key that when governments sign up to the SDGs – and hopefully even way before – they communicate the goals and targets widely to all citizens, underlining the universality of the goals and how important it is for everybody to engage in the process of implementing them.

⁴ Using different models of transformation processes, this can be said in different ways, for example: in all four dimensions changes need to become possible (individual, relationships, structures / systems, culture) (see page 11). And/or: It needs people to open their minds, open their hearts, and develop their will (Scharmer). And/or: It needs people and institutions to build knowledge, capacities, and will, and the surrounding system to provide the necessary structures and incentives (Kristof), as well as our cultures to serve as the value base of what we need to do.

Governments enjoy the convening power, the legitimacy, and the main role, if not in implementing all the goals and targets themselves (which they cannot), but in bringing about the implementation processes – by creating the right legal and financial frameworks, by negotiating accordingly with other governments, and by convening all actors, stakeholders, and ultimately all citizens.

Governments need to create the spaces for everybody to come together around the SDG issues, enhance the understanding of issues, contexts, actors and possible intervention points, and then to jointly strategize and implement

FOR EXAMPLE...

...if we think about the target of halving food waste⁵, and how to bring it about, we immediately realise this is a complex challenge, and will also be very different in different countries. There cannot be a one-size fits all approach to halving food waste in producer countries vs. importing countries, in hot or cold climates, or relating to different kinds of food.

When we think about halving the waste of mango, for example, in order to develop a viable strategy, we will need to build a full picture of how mango is being produced, harvested, transported, processed, bought and sold, and consumed, and how the inedible remains are treated as well.

Potential actors in the “mango-chain” include governments, producers of mangos, producers of mango growing inputs, dealers, transport and logistics companies, those who work on processing, preserving, packaging, marketing, and selling, as well as consumers themselves – all these and more are part of the mango-chain.

It will be necessary to gather the contributions of many people who are dealing with mango and know about its chain of production and consumption, to get the full picture. If this is done in processes that actually bring these people together, it will be easier, quicker, and more productive to together produce an overview of the mango-chain, so to speak.

Along the way, and at many of the steps, mango might be wasted. We need to understand where, how, how much, and how this can be prevented. Once the overview picture is available, we can analyse it and identify potential points of intervention, and who would need to do what to effect those interventions.

Depending on where along the chain, different actions will need to be taken by different actors. These will need different means to convince, enable or force them to act: regulations, incentives, and so on. Many of the necessary actions will need to be coordinated, if not worked on together very closely. Hence, there will be collaboration of various kinds, where actors along the mango-chain will inform each other, coordinate and work together.

⁵ We wish to thank Prof. Dr. Günther Bachman, General Secretary of the German Government Sustainable Development Council, for inspiring us to use this example.

Initiating transformation

At international, national and subnational levels, initiating transformation towards the SDGs begins with inviting all relevant stakeholders and actors into dialogues on what the contexts of SDGs are – e.g. in a particular region, country, province, or city⁶. To do that, people need to develop a shared understanding of the context, the actors, the needs and opportunities. This is done by getting everyone concerned into the conversation (in various forms and groups), and continuously building the picture of what the current situation is, which changes are needed, which initiatives already exist and can be built on, and which further actions seem feasible.

The necessary integration of different developmental, environmental and economic aspects of goals and targets is greatly helped by bringing people together who primarily work on the different angles. Joint analysis can usefully be guided by understanding sustainable development as a triple helix, integrating the three threads of economic, environmental and social aspects (e.g. UNEP 2011). If we do not achieve building a shared understanding across the borders of stakeholders and sectors working on different aspects of essentially the same issues, we will remain in the silos that work in isolation, being weaker, or even undermining each other’s efforts.

In order to be practical, processes can run parallel streams of dialogues and planning, and existing platforms should be used as much possible. However, a lot of crossing over and getting back together needs to be facilitated, so that people have a chance to continuously understand the big picture while making their specific, targeted contribution. In essence, such sustainability processes will be iterative and complex.

Governments should communicate widely about the SDGs in a manner that is understandable and that provokes interest and by doing so invite everyone to join efforts of implementation by creating such platforms. They can use the traditions of dialogue and deliberation inherent in their

⁶ See, for example, IASS 2015, who advocate national-level multi-stakeholder platforms as the entry point to implementation of the SDGs at the national level.



respective cultures, and combine these with professionally facilitated methods to build wide public conversations and broker collaborative efforts. These discussions should be captured, packaged and communicated effectively in order to support on-going, further engagement.

Not all governments will immediately have the means to convene this way – they would need support through financial, logistical and human resources. However, as this is mostly new to most governments, it is also an important focus of joint review and learning over the coming years. Hence, reviewing the progress made on the SDGs at the international level should include sharing experiences with communication and engagement in multi-stakeholder platforms and partnerships.

When governments initiate SDG action as suggested above, they need to be aware that each process requires a bespoke approach. There is no “one size fits all” solution or standard procedure. Rather, anyone communicating and engaging for the SDGs, should pay attention to the **four dimensions of collaborative initiatives**, i.e. the individual, the relationship, the institutional and the cultural dimensions - each with clear areas where issues currently surface, and where challenges are to be expected.

It is not possible to list all the aspects of the four dimensions in an exhaustive checklist. We can say, however, that investing in all four dimensions will be necessary in order to achieve transformational change – for example:

Individual

Managers of collaborative initiatives require specific and dedicated skills to set up and run them successfully. Individuals working with collaborative initiatives need communication, negotiation, networking, coordination, diplomacy and facilitation skills. Such communication and management competencies help to enable learning, creativity, conflict resolution, and negotiating trade-offs and multi-benefits (between different SDGs, for example).

Individuals also need to be ready and able to deal with complexity and the uncertainty and imponderability of complex system change processes. They need to understand societal processes, and different sectors, and how they work, and be clear about their own role in them. Mind-sets and values of respect for the other and for human diversity are equally important.

Relationships

For successful dialogue and collaboration, relationships of trust and respect are extremely important. At least a minimum ‘seed’ of trust needs to exist between different actors, so that a shared understanding can be built. In the process of working together, trust can grow further. When initiating engagement processes for the SDGs, relationships between different sectors and stakeholders need to be considered: is there a history of dialogue and collaboration? Or has there been no contact, or even conflict between different groups? If relationships are strained or non-existent, a fundament needs to be built – sometimes in many individual steps between small numbers of people – before the work in a plenary of all concerned can begin. Such steps can be used, however, to build shared understanding, and need not hold the process up. The important bit is to consider relationships carefully, and design the process so as to build what is necessary, and use what is there. In order to strengthen relationships and benefit the transformation process as a whole, it is also important to celebrate ‘successes’ explicitly with the whole group of engaged people and organisations – be it a successful meeting, a first joint “picture” of the situation, a refined strategy, or steps of implementation.

Communication and engagement need to be based on key principles such as transparency, accountability, equity, integration of perspectives rather than domination of one; inclusion; trust and trustworthiness; learning; and shared ownership; among others.

Every group has their particular circumstances, set-up, environment, and goals. Every issue has its stakeholders and their history, and their power relations to deal with. Not only need stakeholders to agree on principles, but learn how to work them in their particular case. This is also an important step of building the kind of working relationships that will provide a good fundament for a partnership.

For example, sharing risks is an important component of collaborative initiatives – but there are different risks (financial, reputational, and so on), and different partners are exposed to different risks. Negotiating these openly helps to avoid frustrations and feelings of inequity.

Institutions

We need a new legal definition and framework for collaborative initiatives towards sustainability that would differentiate them from traditional business partnerships. We need an agreed mechanism, or contractual vehicle, with which we can institutionalise collaborative initiatives, but maintain the necessary flexibility that would create an enabling environment for them to flourish in.

In government, businesses, NGOs, research institutions, and other sectors, organisations need to adjust KPIs of individuals and departments, and similar instruments, to be able to engage in multi-stakeholder platforms and dialogues, and collaborate effectively. It needs to be beneficial to individual careers to communicate and collaborate effectively across organisational and sectoral borders.

Managers of collaborative initiatives have to be appointed at a level with the desired amount of decision-making and influence.

Structures and systems need to be put in place that enables effective knowledge management, informal cross-departmental exchange, and joint review and learning forums.

Each collaborative initiative has to have in place a bespoke results framework against which it reports. This ensures that the value of the initiative remains optimally visible. It also allows to learn from experience and align implementation as closely as possible to the initiatives strategic objectives, and not being “absorbed” by another entity.

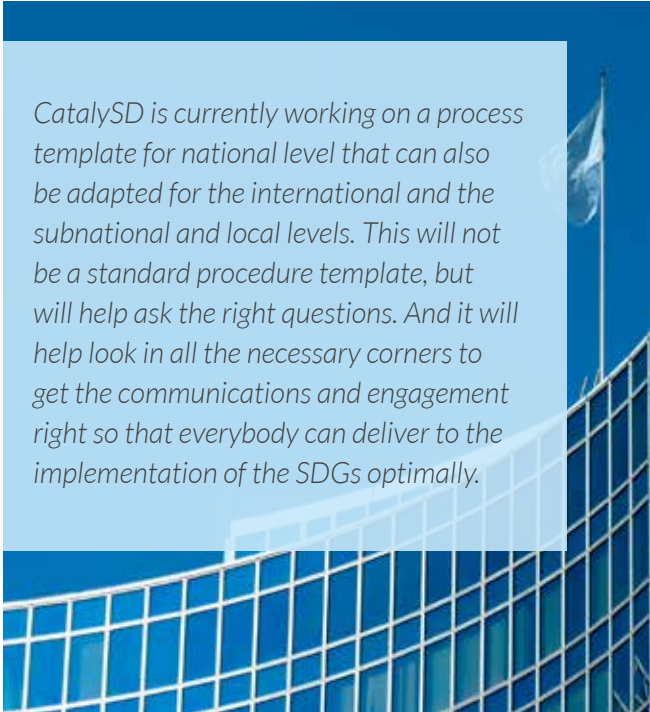
Culture(s)

Our discourse on partnerships needs to take note of new thinking on societal transformation, experiences with high-quality dialogue processes and new participation formats. We have gained knowledge about continuous learning processes, and there is useful research about connections between diversity and innovation.

We also now have more effective communication and communication products at our disposal with which to drive both our understanding and take-up further to various target audiences and demographic groups. All this should be put to use to develop, and advocate, a new narrative about positive change, making communication and engagement of all the new ‘standard’.

The SDGs need to be presented as one strategy, one effort. This will help people understand and engage. When we consider these suggestions, then it will become clear that **collaborative sustainability initiatives** indeed need to be part of **transformational sustainability processes**.

The processes we suggest go beyond the mere issue of sustainability partnerships – we are suggesting **sustainability processes** that use engagement and communications to reinforce each other for positive and transformational change. Such processes include collaborative initiatives as one important strategy and component of implementation.



CatalySD is currently working on a process template for national level that can also be adapted for the international and the subnational and local levels. This will not be a standard procedure template, but will help ask the right questions. And it will help look in all the necessary corners to get the communications and engagement right so that everybody can deliver to the implementation of the SDGs optimally.

Governance

What will happen to our governance systems in the long run, when and if we promote and pursue communication and collaboration across sectors and levels to realise the SDGs?

In order to pursue a transformational agenda, governance will need to ensure fairness and justice for the good of all while navigating a process of complex system change.

Hence, governance structures are likely to evolve ever more into governance processes. These will be highly consultative, transparent, and as flexible as necessary, while staying predictable, and accessible to all that are needed and all you want access to the process.



The question is: How can we design, and use collaborative initiatives in ways that strengthen democracy, inclusion, and justice – at national levels as well as internationally, whilst at the same time strengthening the UN system?

There is little doubt that we need to build processes and institutions of a new nature, and our existing institutions need to be capacitated and equipped to work with partnerships, platforms, initiatives, networks, and communities that range from dialogue to joint action. Our institutions – including the UN – need to be able and prepared to communicate, and to engage.

Building knowledge and promoting successful approaches

There is a lack of **connection between the sectors, on the one hand, and areas of work and experience, on the other** that needs to be addressed if we are to maximise learning and create an enabling environment for partnerships in the future. We need to use the latest theoretical work and empirical research, as well as long-term practical experience from the public, private and civil society sector as well as multi-stakeholder initiatives, in order to optimise our approaches quickly.

The areas of work and the communities of practice that need to connect better include:

- **Policy makers** who frame sustainability policies, goals, indicators and learning systems;
- **Practitioners** from government, business, and civil society NGOs, who are engaged in managing, implementing and overseeing partnerships (PPPs or otherwise; local, national or global in scale; working on any of the SDGs and related issues);
- **Facilitators** who broker, manage, and moderate partnerships, and coach and train leaders and managers of partnerships;
- **Researchers** who study / accompany the policy making arena on sustainability as well as those studying and evaluating partnerships in practice; and
- **Funders** who support system transformation processes and dialogic interventions and systemic approaches, collaborative networks, and/or participatory learning and knowledge management.

Platforms of linkages need to be created for learning and knowledge building purposes, but also for brokering and action planning purposes.

All decisions should be made in consultation.

Governance processes need to abide by certain principles such as transparency, fairness, equity, predictability, etc. At the same time, process principles need to be operationalized specifically in every context, in response to every challenge.

That is an essential balance to achieve: between principles being the steady fundament of our governance processes, and the way we operationalize them walking that principled path with flexible feet.

Because communication and collaboration are absolutely central to governance processes, the **quality of our conversations** is key.

We need to invest in creating high-quality communications, from public information campaigns about issues like the SDGs to professionally facilitating dialogue sessions as part of transformation processes, and building individual capacities for listening and speaking.

Just as we design collaborative initiatives as individual responses to individual situations, so should governance structures and processes also be designed individually to suit particular situations.

If not, we end up in silos and pillars once again, which will neither achieve the integration and synergies we desire, nor will we be able to identify suitable compromises. In other words, by building, maintaining, evaluating and optimising collaborative initiatives we not only implement changes we need to achieve, but also create and effectively test **governance processes for sustainability**.

CatalySD is currently initiating dialogue among thought leaders in these fields, and will facilitate a series of meetings aiming to build a network of thought leaders and provide a space for dialogue, learning and thinking together. We are also creating brokering and action planning platforms on specific issues, bringing stakeholders together to strategize and implement transformation in collaborative initiatives. A suite of innovative and user-friendly communication and outreach products will be developed that will capture and share the experience with others, and in turn, support further dialogue, learning and thought leadership through wider engagement and inputs.

When we think about the implementation of the SDGs, and partnerships, we need to think about how humans, their relations, and their institutions (can) function.

We need to use the potential of high-quality communications and engagement, the potential of relations, networks, growing trust, aligning vision and strategies.

This will increase transformative action and success towards the SDGs.

Part of this is to recognise, and use, the power that is inherent in collaborative initiatives themselves – they can indeed be a greater force than the individual partner organisations represent. And if the partners begin to align, they can also become a weight vis-à-vis the power of those who greedily destroy and exploit.

How to ensure effective Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

How can transformation processes that collaborative initiatives contribute to be monitored in a way that ensures learning and provides strong accountability towards stakeholders (horizontally) as well as towards the system of institutions that needs to gather the data about progress on the SDGs overall (vertically)?

In essence, MEL needs to be designed to serve two goals in parallel:

- 1. Internally:** knowledge management within initiatives; and
- 2. Externally:** reporting to a monitoring body that oversees overall implementation of the respective set of SDGs. Ideally, both goals should be pursued through the same or largely overlapping activities, in essence contributing to the whole – for example, with events that celebrate and invite network building and more action, and at the right level.

As is the case with every other project or activity, a partnership process begins with certain assumptions on the issues, the context, the actors, and how the process will work. However, we always learn along the way, and our views and expectations change as our understanding deepens. In essence, monitoring and evaluation are about learning, and going about it in a structured and systematic manner.

Often in collaborative initiatives there are no results frameworks that identify activities and targets in advance and the MEL process will help partners to work in an iterative, adaptive way. Involving partners in designing useful MEL procedures creates additional opportunities for partners to build ownership and fosters empowerment. Bringing in external perspectives for evaluation, and reviewing results together can complement this. Thus, MEL serves as a way in which to communicate issues among those involved: it offers opportunities to discuss how things are going. Collective evaluation and self-assessment procedures (e.g., participatory stakeholder surveys and focus groups) can be used to measure a variety of indicators. These include long-term impact and structural changes (including policy changes, incremental institutional change); ideas generated; skills learned, and/or attitudes changed.

Such reviews and learning need to be managed – i.e. documented and made available. The system supporting SDG implementation at the international level could provide simple templates of MEL procedures for collaborative initiatives that can help with internal knowledge management as well as external reporting.

Importantly, reporting needs to be seen as constructive and not punitive: associated with clear and concrete benefits – such as internal knowledge management, membership in useful learning networks, opportunities to participate in exchanges, award schemes celebrating best practice, and the like.



We hope that our first-hand involvement in collaborative initiatives at various levels, our subsequent insight into their challenges, as well as our suggestions on how to think about initiating implementation, can complement the good work of others who have been working on suggestions on how the linkage into the UN system could be set up.

What can be done within the UN system to support multi-stakeholder engagement and communication for the SDGs?

It seems that the current discussion on partnerships in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals is focusing on a few main points:

- Partnerships are identified as an important component of means of implementation and, therefore, need to be anchored in the UN System in some way or the other. This needs to be done in an efficient manner, as resources are scarce and most actors wish to avoid (further) institution building.
- There are discussions about reporting and monitoring mechanisms to help learning and promotion of best practice (e.g. Beisheim 2015; Dodds 2015).
- Partnerships are discussed as part of a review mechanism as they need to be subject of reporting and learning processes within the UN, e.g. partnership related presentations and learning fairs as components of the High Level Political Forum (HLPF). Such mechanisms could greatly steepen learning curves among countries, if re-inventing wheels and duplicating failures could be avoided (e.g. Beisheim 2015).

- Partnerships are very critically viewed by some actors, and are sometimes described as a means by which rich countries may avoid ODA expenses, as a means of business to gain undue access and influence in the UN, as furthering a fragmentation of global governance, and as weakening representative democracy (e.g. Civil Society Reflection Group 2015).

These are all very valid and important points and need to be considered carefully.

The discussion on how collaborative initiatives work, how they can be supported to work, and how they can be attracted to align themselves towards the SDGs, or be created anew to implement the Goals, seems at very early stages.

A few thoughts we wish to share include:

- **The focus of discussions on partnerships** needs to be widened to include all kinds of multi-stakeholder engagement and communication approaches.
- **At international and regional level**, there is a need to create and continuously facilitate learning networks – as exchange platforms coupled with monitoring mechanisms.
- **Intergovernmental institutions** can serve as conveners and facilitators with great legitimacy – but need it needs unbureaucratic mechanisms, or external partners, to help create and facilitate spaces in a flexible and creative manner that enables innovation and learning.
- **Partnership fairs and forums**, such as the ECOSOC Forum on Partnerships, need to become attractive for people to attend to learn, network, find investors or funders, and/or new partners. They need to be able to attract successful collaborative initiatives and their leadership. They also need to facilitate learning between countries and sectors, so that lessons learned can be spread quickly, templates can be developed and disseminated, and ideas can be replicated.
- **Accountability mechanisms** need to be designed so that they also serve the learning, networking, and communications needs of partners and their initiatives so that there are real incentives in place for individuals and institutions to participate and contribute.
- **The HLPF** needs to provide spaces for reporting, exchange, and learning, and it needs to be lengthened in order to fulfil that role: 8 days is simply not enough to allow countries and stakeholders to share experiences, compare lessons learned, and discuss them in depth (see Beisheim 2015).

- **The suggested task manager system** (Dodds 2015, p15) can be a way forward, if equipped and facilitated in the right ways.
- **Within the relevant UN organisations**, people need to have the necessary time, resources, and skills to work with collaborative initiatives, including the ability to handle the complexity and fluidity of such initiatives while keeping focus on effectiveness and deliverables.
- **Departments** need to be equipped to handle the additional work. Informal procedures of interdepartmental exchange will be important so as to allow efficient communication and collaboration.
- **As regards communications** inside and outside the UN system, it will be essential to communicate about the SDGs and how to initiate transformation towards realising them. The UN can play a key role in this regard.
- **UN organisations**, e.g. UNDP country offices and others, can help facilitate donor commitments to supporting transformation processes that are participatory, consultative, flexible, innovative, and systematically use multi-stakeholder approaches, supported by professional, independent facilitation.



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GLOSSARY

Accountability: an organisation can be considered accountable when it accounts to its stakeholders regarding material issues (transparency), responds to stakeholders regarding these issues (responsiveness) on an on-going basis, and complies with standards to which it is voluntarily committed, and with rules and regulations that it must comply with for statutory reasons (compliance) (AccountAbility et al. 2005).

Consultation: The term has been used to refer to a communication situation where an institution, such as a government body, calls for stakeholders to share their views with the institution (similar to hearings). The link of this input into decision-making is loose or remains unclear in many cases.

Debate: The term refers to stakeholders stating their views, both arguing 'their case'. Debates imply a party-political approach and are usually 'won', meaning that they don't lead to an integration of views. Tool in communication processes, particularly in groups of high diversity of language, culture and background.

Dialogue: In a dialogue of stakeholders, representatives not only state their views but listen to each other's views for the purpose of developing mutual understanding, including each other's value-base, interests, goals and concerns. Dialogue requires the willing participation of all participants; even one person whose primary orientation is towards getting her or his way can destroy the dialogue.

Discussion: The term can be used to describe a frank exchange of views, followed by mutual exploration of the benefits and shortcomings of those views. More than 'dialogue', the term 'discussion' recognises the differences between views and people and is less focused on mutual understanding in order to open possibilities to consensus building.

Hearing: The term refers to processes where governments or intergovernmental bodies invite stakeholders to state their views on a particular issue. Listening to stakeholders is meant to provide the decision-making bodies with information that they otherwise might not have. Hearings may or may not allow for questions and answers and discussion following presentations.

Multi-stakeholder processes are processes which: aim to bring together all major stakeholders in a new form of communication, decision-finding (and possibly decision-making) structure on a particular issue; are based on recognition of the importance of achieving equity and accountability in communication between stakeholders; involve equitable representation of three or more stakeholder groups and their views; are based on democratic principles of transparency and participation; and aim to develop partnerships and strengthened networks between and among stakeholders. MSPs cover a wide spectrum of structures and levels of engagement. They can comprise dialogues or grow into processes that encompass consensus-building, decision-making and implementation.

Stakeholders: Stakeholders are those who have an interest in a particular decision, either as individuals or representatives of a group. This includes people who influence a decision, or can influence it, as well as those affected by it.

Stakeholder groups are actors, and their organisations, from different sectors in society, such as public authorities; international agencies; small, medium or large businesses; community-based organisations; non-government organisations; labor unions; women's groups; indigenous peoples organisations; research and academic institutions and foundations.

Win-win, win-lose and all-win: These terms refer to the attitudes that people have towards others when seeking to resolve conflicts, and to the results of conflict resolution. 'Win-win' means that people care about others as well as themselves. They seek to resolve conflicts so that others and themselves 'win' – so, in the case of multiple stakeholders, they seek an 'all-win' resolution. And when all stakeholders achieve what is important to them, those results can be described as 'all-win'. When people care only about themselves and their views, their attitudes are 'win-lose'. They will tend to 'debate' in order to determine who is 'right or wrong'. When right and wrong cannot be determined, – or no one can win the 'fight', people end up with a 'lose-lose' situation where no one achieves what is important to them.