



The **2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator webinar series** are short online workshops aimed at demonstrating how partnerships are critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The workshops are open to all stakeholders.

Stakeholder engagement and partnerships during and beyond COVID-19

3 May 2021, 07.30 – 08.45 AM (EST)

Summary

Background

On 3 May 2021, a webinar on “**Stakeholder engagement and partnerships during and beyond COVID-19**” was organized by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), as part of the 2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator webinar series.

As a result of a broad survey with governments and stakeholders, UN DESA has recently launched a report on [The Impacts of COVID-19 on Stakeholder Engagement for the SDGs](#), which presents new data on the impacts that COVID-19 has had on stakeholder engagement in the implementation, follow up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at national, regional and sub-national levels. The report sought to catalogue important effects, highlight challenges, and present good practices and innovation for stakeholder engagement.

In addition, UN DESA has undertaken a study on [Partnerships in response to COVID-19 - Building back better together](#) to inform the work of the 2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator. The study aims to identify and address the following: typology of partnerships forged during COVID-19, impact, partnership development process, enabling conditions that allowed partnerships to develop, challenges and success factors, and any lessons around partnerships’ response to other crises, i.e., climate change, ocean protection, etc.

Both the stakeholder report and the partnership study were presented during the webinar, which was organized in the margins of the 2021 ECOSOC Partnership Forum and the Multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs. The webinar also included a panel to explore what impact COVID-19 has had on stakeholder engagement, how partnerships have formed a critical response to the pandemic and addressed what lessons can be learned moving forward.

Opening

Ms. Lotta Tähtinen (Chief, Outreach and Partnerships, Division for SDGs, UN DESA) opened the webinar by highlighting that the importance of participation by all actors is emphasized throughout the 2030 Agenda. Delivering the SDGs in the next decade will demand ambition, decisiveness, and a sense of urgency. It will require different sectors and actors working together in an integrated manner by pooling financial resources, knowledge and expertise. Cross-sectorial and innovative multi-stakeholder partnerships play a crucial role in getting us to where we need by the year 2030.

Stakeholder engagement and partnerships are closely intertwined – they are two sides of the same coin. Without meaningful engagement of all stakeholders, we cannot form meaningful and sustainable partnerships. Ms. Tähtinen also highlighted this year’s ECOSOC Partnership Forum on the theme *“Partnerships as Game Changer for a Sustainable Recovery from COVID-19”* and the sixth annual Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs which are taking place this week. These forums serve as key stepping-stones towards this year’s High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, which is scheduled for 6-15 July 2021.

Kick-off presentations

Dr. Emily Clough and Dr. Graham Long, New Castle University, presented their study on [the Impact of COVID-19 on stakeholder engagement](#). The study is based on two surveys with 478 stakeholders and 41 governments from those participating in the Voluntary National Reviews in 2020 or 2021.

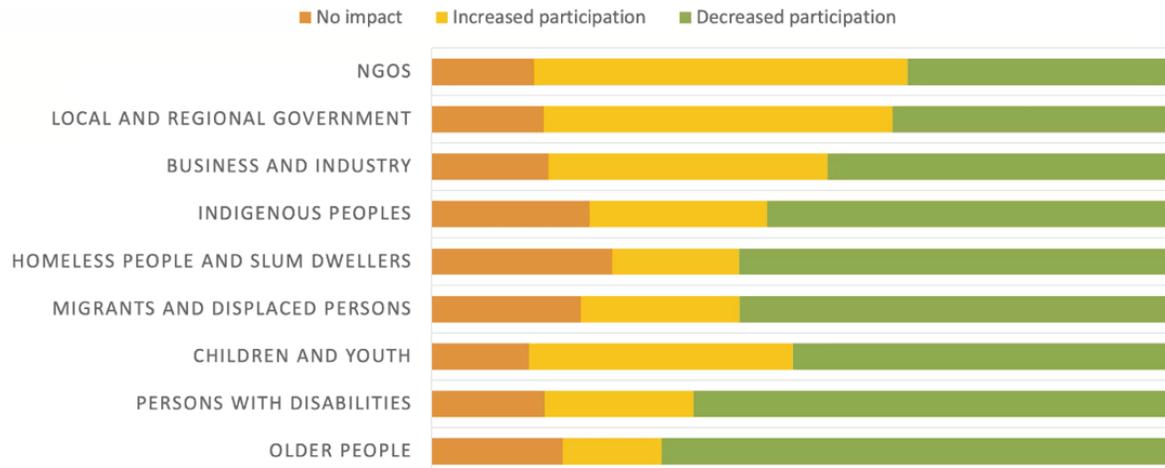
One of the main takeaways is that 68% of government respondents perceived that the need for stakeholder engagement in implementing the SDGs will increase during recovery from COVID-19. At the same time, there was a tension between the increased need for stakeholder engagement and the increased challenges that stakeholders are facing in capacity. Contributions of stakeholders included facilitating access to particular local populations, the delivery of services, supporting the engagement of marginalized groups and providing financial resources, and knowledge and expertise.

The biggest challenges named by stakeholders were their ability to maintain or create partnerships (57%), ensure the participation of vulnerable or marginalized groups (65%) and to mobilize funds for SDG activities (75%).

Engagement with stakeholders in the COVID-19 context continued. 94% of countries reported increased use of online conferencing. Innovative solutions were used, such as the creation of partnerships across civil society, state and private sector to increase digitalization, as well as to improved access to digital services in Mexico, Finland and Estonia. In Uganda, stakeholders engaged at the regional and local level by translating local ideas and solutions to the national level. The shift to online engagement affected participation of specific groups. Stakeholders that have fewer resources and are more challenging to organize, expected that their participation would decrease.



Who participates? How is COVID-19 affecting participation of these groups?



Looking ahead, the study concluded that the pandemic has been falling heavily on mechanisms for inclusive and meaningful engagement, such as efforts to include left behind groups (77% of stakeholder respondents), mechanisms for partnership (75%) and stakeholder involvement in decision making (75%). On the other hand, it has also become easier to reach certain stakeholders, to hold large events and to share information. Nonetheless, it remains a challenge to involve groups that find online engagement challenging and set up a real dialogue, as well as partnership- and network-building in online settings.

The COVID-19 crisis has had an impact on the so-called partnership 'ecosystem'. Who partners, and on what issues? The usual and traditional partners might have changed, e.g. health, digital services and education were perceived as priority areas for partnerships. The questions remain what issues and which groups and partnerships are left behind by these changes.

Dr. Xiaolan Fu, University of Oxford, presented the findings of the [Partnerships in response to COVID-19: building back better](#) report. Dr. Xiaolan Fu highlighted that despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the international community has made significant efforts to mobilize partnerships to accelerate the global response – providing urgent health and socio-economic responses and supporting communities to live with the pandemic, as well as working towards post-pandemic recovery and ensuring we “build back better”. During COVID-19, partnerships were built up rapidly in just a few weeks or months.

The study explored the typology of the range of partnerships, impact, formation and driving forces, enabling conditions, challenges, success factors and lessons learned. A wide range of partnerships have been formed during the pandemic, most focusing on the immediate response to COVID-19. Partnerships have provided financial support and technical assistance; supported project implementation and delivery; facilitated research, data collection and analytics; and coordinated various response actions. The United Nations, civil society and the private sector are playing a key

role in initiating partnerships. A shared sense of urgency, pre-existing networks, partnership experience, flexibility, and use of digital technologies are key factors that contributed to the speedy formation of partnerships.

Vision, trust, alignment of interests, flexibility, commitment, and adaptive governance structures and leadership are experienced as key success factors. However, major challenges exist too, including communication between partners, access to resources, and uncertainty given the rapidly changing conditions. There is a need to rethink procedures deemed necessary for formalizing partnerships.



Most of the partnerships studied were initiated by the United Nations and the private sector. The rapid partnering was based on 1) the emergency nature of the crisis, 2) the use of technologies to overcome barriers imposed by the crisis, 3) adoption of innovative practices in the partnerships, 4) building partnerships based on trust and existing networks, and 5) flexibility of partners and the partnerships to face crisis uncertainties.

The interviewees were asked if this could be replicated for other global crises or even the SDGs? The urgency of the pandemic, the fact that it directly affects many people’s lives, and the rapid and global spread are unique factors that enable quick action. One interviewee did draw a parallel to climate change: “if its urgency can be raised to this level and achieve wide public consensus, quick partnership development may enable positive actions concerning this, as well other pressing global challenges.”

Success factors for partnerships found in the study are forward planning, trust between partners and existing networks, alignment of interests towards a shared vision, commitment, and governance structure and leadership. The main challenges are crisis uncertainty, access to key resources and communication with partners. Finally, some lessons learned are that some areas of the bureaucracy of organizations can be modified to accelerate the creation of partnerships as well as allowing for flexibility within an organization to fast process and innovate solutions. The help of digital

technologies can play a crucial role in the communication and management of such modern partnerships and create innovative solutions for them.

Dialogue

Moderator: Mr. Ola Goransson, Sustainable Development Officer, Division for SDGs, UN DESA.

Ms. Florence Syevuo (Country Coordinator, SDGs Kenya Forum) highlighted the role of the SDGs Kenya Forum, which is a coalition for engaging stakeholders in the SDG implementation in Kenya. COVID-19 affected Kenya and Africa very hard, especially the poor and small businesses were hit unproportionally. The SDGs Kenya Forum invested in research in order to keep track of what CSOs were doing to help the most marginalized. Many organizations were supporting the production of face masks, medical equipment and delivering water. In addition, an online hub was created for youth and the ones most left behind. An extra space was created when physical engagement was not possible. It also led to creativity, for instance a MoU was signed with a local media house in Kenya to share stories on COVID-19 response and also the Sustainable Development Goals. A big challenge was financial funding, and the main lesson learned is that innovation is key to strengthen stakeholder engagement

Mr. Mohamed Nabil (International Initiative on COVID-19 in Yemen) attested to the role of public-private sector partnerships in mobilizing resources so that Yemen could respond to the pandemic, especially given the longstanding crisis in the region. The International Initiative on COVID-19 in Yemen (ICCY) was able to proactively prepare for the pandemic and the resulting shortages in food, water, and supplies by mobilizing HSA's network of public and private partners in just three weeks. Mr. Nabil calls for decisive and collective leadership in proactive and inclusive approaches to create synergistic action. A focus on local input, know-how, and infrastructure is imperative for international organizations to have more immediate and impactful interventions. Further, transparency, open communication, and an entrepreneurial mindset proved critical components for ICCY's success.

Mr. Christian Skoog (COVID-19 Women and Children Safe at Hotels in Mexico) noted the significant increase in gender-based violence throughout the pandemic and described the efforts to ensure that gender-based services were classified as essential services (and thus allowed to remain open). Although these efforts were ultimately successful, limitations persisted in deficient resources and capacity as well as the physical proximity of these services to the abusers of these women and girls. The COVID-19 Women and Children Safe at Hotels initiative partnered with UN agencies, NGOs, and the private sector (most notably the hotel chain) to accommodate women and girls in need of a safe place to stay while their cases were studied. The Safe Accommodation Protocol provided psycho-social support, dignity kits, and sanitary materials to the women and girls during their stay and trained over 10,000 employees on the prevention of gender-based violence. This initiative evidenced the success of multisector partnerships and the potential to scale up these initiatives to have a wider reaching impact. Mr. Skoog suggested the potential for agencies to act as a bridge in trust and confidence between public and private sector partnerships.

Ms. Nathalie Strub-Wourgaft (The ANTICOV Clinical Trial) discussed ANTICOV Clinical Trial's mission to identify early COVID-19 treatment to support middle- and low-income countries and also ensure that these healthcare systems were not overwhelmed. The ANTICOV Clinical Trial was

launched as a research project sponsored by multiple stakeholders and involved collaborative efforts with various health ministry's COVID-19 response teams to ensure that objectives corresponded with the needs of various governments and institutions. Decision-making was headed through a joint-authority consortium, which included the coordinated efforts of donors, researchers, and segmented committees. Ms. Strub-Wourgaft suggested that platforms of this nature will be critical not only in crisis management but also to manage fragmentation in research and to ensure solidary and consolidated efforts to advance science and innovation. Early interest from funders proved critical to establishing a highly structured framework and maintaining trust between all stakeholders.

Mr. Ian Macpherson (Global Partnership for Education, GPE's COVID Response) highlighted GPE's response to the educational emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. GPE engaged in a joint initiative between UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank to support a coordinated international response to COVID-19. The main objective of this initiative was to ensure the development, dissemination, and delivery at scale of new and existing global and regional learning continuity approaches in GPE partner countries. These objectives included improved global and regional coordination mechanisms, learning continuity at scale to reach marginalized groups, and monitoring evidence of learning and preparation for future emergencies. The consortium partners found that this integrated approach was a gamechanger for partnerships and informed discussions to restructure the architecture of the global education community and the dialogue between the organizations.

During the Q&A **Mr. Mohamed Nabil** got a question from the audience on what type of support IICY had received from several ministries and NGOs. The objective of the IICY was not to replace the health authorities but to strengthen the work they are doing on the ground. The authorities provided the shortages in the health sector, such as ventilators. The strong collaboration between IICY and health authorities was vital.

Ms. Nathalie Strub-Wourgaft was asked what the impact of the developing medicines and trials was in the region. The real impact is hard to measure, but the existence of new networks which can possibly set the ground for future crises is a direct impact. She further emphasized that in urgent situations, it is easier to get rid of bureaucracy and focus on the essentials.

Closing reflections

Ms. Naiara Costa, Senior Sustainable Development Officer, Division for SDGs, UN DESA concluded that as became very clear in the presentations, stakeholder engagement and partnerships are two sides of the same coin. We have learned that the sense of urgency was the catalyst in a lot of partnerships, as well as more diverse partnerships. In addition, when you have preexisting networks and mechanisms, partnerships are triggered more quickly. We should now all think how we can move from immediate response to long term collaboration. This can be done by registering new solutions, learning from them and creating more capacity. There is a need to develop tools to review the quality of meaningful stakeholder engagement. The [Framework to analyze the Quality of Stakeholder Engagement in implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda](#) can assist in this.

Mr. Darian Stibbe, Executive Director, The Partnering Initiative, shared that his key take-away is optimism. During COVID-19 every sector brought resources to the table and acted through collaboration. As the pandemic transferred the world overnight, there is potential for real

transformation to advance on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals as well. We can cut through the bureaucracy, funding, and develop partnerships faster. There is an old African proverb saying “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together”, and the reality is that we have to do both. Go fast and together.

Mr. Ola Göransson thanked all participants for joining the webinar and highlighted the future work of the 2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator. More information can be found on the [website](#).
