

Reviewing for Results: Preparing for a second generation of Post-2015 Partnerships for Sustainable Development

Marianne Beisheim and SFB700/D1 Project Team¹

Senior Researcher, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin
German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Global Issues Division
SFB700/D1-Project on Partnerships (www.sfb-governance.de/ppp)

ABSTRACT

In the context of negotiations on the Post-2015 Agenda and the process of formulating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations assign an important role to multi-stakeholder partnerships. The UN already started to reform its enabling framework for these initiatives: A new Registry has been established, the UN Secretary General advocates setting up a Partnership Facility, and the mandate of the newly installed High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) calls for a ‘platform for partnerships’.

The academic literature contains a longstanding debate on the merits and pitfalls of transnational partnerships. We argue that they are neither as successful as their proponents claim nor as ineffective as their critics argue (Beisheim and Liese, 2014). Our project finds a remarkably wide variation in their effectiveness. While many partnerships are failure cases, others have developed successful concepts, tools, and projects. To explain this variation, we drew on several strands of literature to identify and explore success factors. We applied a comparative research design to a medium-sized sample of 21 partnerships, building on qualitative material from extensive field work including more than 300 interviews with partnership members and stakeholders and visits at 40 local projects in four countries. We find that institutional design matters for a partnership’s success. A partnership’s ‘best fit’ design needs to be sound – with the right degree of institutionalization and process management for the task – but also reflective and flexible enough to accommodate local needs and circumstances. While rules and services need to be adjusted to specific local conditions, a high level of obligation, precise rules, and monitoring should be maintained.

In order to evaluate what initiatives merit public support for scaling up, partnerships should participate in some form of UN review. Based on our research results, the paper presents first ideas on the design of such a review.

Key Words: partnerships, institutional design, review, UN, sustainable development

¹ This paper draws on research conducted by the SFB700/D1 project team (see www.sfb-governance.de/ppp) and a variety of publications by that team, esp. on Beisheim and Liese, 2014 (sections 1 and 2), and Beisheim, 2012 and 2014 (section 3). Special thanks go to Andrea Liese, Jasmin Lorch und Nils Simon for input and to Lili Mundle for proof reading and copy editing. This paper has been presented at the 2014 ACUNS and 2014 MOPAN annual meeting.

1. Partnerships for Sustainable Development at the United Nations

Public-private or multi-stakeholder partnerships in the area of sustainable development governance have been hailed by some as a 'silver bullet' to promote implementation of international development goals. In this vein, Michael Doyle, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), stated, for example, that "making business and all actors of civil society part of the solution is not only the best chance, it may also be the only chance the UN has to meet its Millennium goals" (Michael Doyle as quoted in Malena, 2004, p. 2). In this field, the UN Global Compact was one of the earliest and most visible partnership initiatives. Partnerships gained further prominence after the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002. In 2012, during the Rio+20 Partnership Forum, the UN Secretary General praised them once again as "a central means of achieving our core mandates" (UN Secretary General as quoted in Chandavarkar and Chaves, 2012).

After the 2002 WSSD in Johannesburg, 348 partnerships for sustainable development were registered in the database of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). Partnerships are now active in most international policy fields (Hale and Held, 2011). They have been promoted as a means to overcome the widespread failure to implement international policies and targets (Nelson, 2002; Reinicke et al., 2000; Witte et al., 2003; Witte and Reinicke, 2005). Many of them work toward the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the WSSD, or other outcomes of global summits. But are they successful?

Various partnerships have been testing and evaluating promising concepts, tools, and pilot projects. The Global Water Partnership (GWP), for example, supports the implementation of integrated water resources management through a tool box and regional or country partnerships. The Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS) develops an international standard on the socially equitable, environmentally sustainable and economically beneficial use of water resources. Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP) has developed and (more or less) successfully implemented locally adapted pilot projects.

So far, however, there have been no systematic and critical evaluation attempts, neither with CSD's database nor at the annual UN Partnership Fair or at Rio+20's Partnership Forum.² Rather, we have seen mainly "show-cases" and the overall promotion of the partnership concept.

In September 2015, the UN General Assembly will be meeting to adopt the Post-2015 Agenda. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon pointed out that the Post-2015 Agenda should have four building blocks: (a) a far-reaching vision of the future; (b) a set of concise goals and targets aimed at realizing the priorities of the agenda; (c) a global partnership for development to mobilize means of implementation; and (d) a participatory monitoring framework for tracking progress and mutual accountability mechanisms for all stakeholders (UNGA 2013a). Partnerships are again seen as means of implementation.

In order to evaluate what partnership initiatives merit public support for scaling up, partnerships should be required to participate in a review process (see section 3). This review should incentivise and reward frontrunners and should pay specific attention to a suitable 'best fit' institutional design of partnerships which we found to be a major success factor for partnerships (see section 2).

² See UNGA resolution A/60/214, August 2005: "Currently, there is no system in place that would allow for a systematic impact assessment of partnerships." The author participated in the Rio+20 Partnership Forum in June 2012 and interviewed UN staff on this issue, for example, Patricia Chaves, former Head of Partnerships Programme at UNDESA.

2. Findings of SFB700/D1-Project on Transnational Partnerships

2.1 Partnerships in areas of limited statehood: Conditions of success (2006-2013)

Partnerships have become not only a hot topic in international politics but also a heavily debated issue in the governance literature, reflecting the debate between proponents and critics of partnerships (see, for example, Andonova, 2006; Bäckstrand, 2006a, 2006b; Bailes, 2004; Börzel and Risse, 2005; Brühl, 2007; Bull and McNeill, 2007; Glasbergen et al., 2007; Pattberg et al., 2012; Ottaway, 2001; Wolf, 2006, 2008; Vaillancourt Rosenau, 2000; see also the literature as discussed in Schäferhoff et al. 2009). We argue that partnerships are neither as successful as their proponents claim nor as dysfunctional as their critics argue. Indeed, we observe remarkably wide variation in the effectiveness of their work, especially in areas of limited statehood.

From 2006 to 2013, we investigated the effectiveness of transnational partnerships for sustainable development. This project is part of an ongoing collaborative research center on governance in areas of limited statehood. 21 different transnational partnerships in diverse issue areas such as health, water and sanitation, food, sustainable energy, and social rights were investigated and 40 of their local-level projects in areas of limited statehood in Kenya, Uganda, India, Bangladesh, and Somalia were assessed (Beisheim and Liese, 2014). We find that *institutional design matters*. In particular, precise and obligatory rules and independent monitoring are necessary to ensure that standards are set and met, and that services are planned and made available. In addition, partnerships need what we call good process management to accommodate the interests of the heterogeneous actors involved and to adapt to local and regional specificities where necessary. In particular, it is important for an institutional structure to strike a balance among precise and obligatory rules, independent supervision, and sufficiently flexible and adaptive strategies. In the context of limited statehood, we find that partnerships have to win local support to be effective, for example, by including community organizations and by taking local habits and customs into account. These findings allow us to re-examine and challenge commonly held assumptions and to create a more nuanced picture of what is still a new tool of development policy.

We find effectiveness to be influenced most strongly by the *degree of institutionalization* (Abbott et al., 2000) and *process management*, with other factors showing occasional influence: The effect of these factors matters to different extents for the different types of partnerships. We differentiate three types of partnerships by their core functions (see Liese and Beisheim, 2011): Standard-setting partnerships focus on establishing rules, for example, by drafting a voluntary code of conduct together with a verification or certification scheme; service-providing partnerships focus on the distribution of resources and provision of services; and knowledge-transferring partnerships generate new expertise, engage in agenda setting, and provide a forum for the exchange and dissemination of best practices. We find the degree of institutionalization to be highly relevant for standard-setting and service-providing partnerships, yet almost entirely irrelevant for knowledge partnerships. Good process management increases the effectiveness of all three types of partnerships, while capacity building enhances only the effectiveness of standard-setting partnerships in the phase of standard implementation. Moreover, legitimacy as a compliance pull increases the effectiveness of standard setters. Institutionalized learning affects effectiveness indirectly, as it can lead to a more adequate institutional design with regard to the other factors mentioned above. In that context, we would highlight as a crucial factor in partnership success the managerial ability of partnerships to learn and to adapt their governance structures and management procedures after problems have been identified. We find that many successful transnational partnerships have undergone substantial changes in their institutional structure and work flows due to problems or shifting expectations they encountered in their environments. Their ability to cope with such challenges – a process

referred to in economics as 'change management' – has clearly influenced their performance record.

We can neither support nor dismiss the praise of partnerships as a new panacea for the longstanding and as yet unresolved challenges to sustainable development in areas of limited statehood. Our research has found that partnerships can successfully implement programs under certain conditions (both internal and external to the partnerships and their projects, see Fig. 1). As regards the overall effectiveness of transnational partnerships, a high degree of institutionalization and good process management correlates strongly with a high degree of effectiveness. For partnership projects in areas of limited statehood, it is the interplay or rather the optimal match ('best fit') between project design and the specific conditions in these areas that matters most for project success. This does not mean that external conditions have to be favorable prior to the initiation of a project. Rather, a partnership's ability to assess, adapt to, and deal with unexpected challenges in these areas is decisive for the project's ultimate success and its future replication, scale up, and, consequently, its broader impact. Whenever, for example, there are security problems in an area, the partnership needs both to mobilize the support of local authorities and to secure additional resources to safeguard its work. The less a community is mobilized and organized and the more limited its capacities, the more the partnership needs to incorporate appropriate capacity-building measures into the project design to be successful.

Some partnerships do extremely well in developing a business case when designing and implementing their programs and projects. They focus on the financial viability of projects, to encourage local entrepreneurs to take up the project idea. Their business plans not only consider the expected profits, costs, and risks, we find successful partnerships to also reflect on incentives and benefits for local partners. Partnerships often aim at creating a win-win solution for all stakeholders, especially local service providers and customers. If feasible, such an approach helps to achieve sustained service provision, even after the project funding ends. In areas of limited statehood, however, with their limited local capacities and budgets, partnerships struggle to create such win-win situations.

Of course, partnerships do not enter a void when they start working in areas of limited statehood. Next to local governmental authorities, there is competition from other actors, not only other bilateral or multilateral donors or NGOs but also formal and informal local service providers. This also underscores the potential impacts of partnership projects on existing clientelistic networks. Hence, conflicts are to be expected and, as our own results confirm, *politics matters* in areas of limited statehood (Allès, 2012). Thus, we would support the assertion that it is important to "embrace the political in the design and implementation of development interventions" (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2010, p. 112).

Moreover, we find that, during implementation at the local level, partnerships face the same problems as traditional donors or project implementers. Only a few of the partnerships in our sample have national offices with their own staff. So they depend to a greater or lesser degree on the capacities and willingness of *local or national partners* when implementing projects.

Partnerships struggle in particular to achieve a broad, long-term *impact*. We have observed in numerous cases that even if good output and outcome are achieved, projects often prove to be unsustainable once funding has ended, or they fail to be successfully replicated or scaled up in other areas. In areas of limited statehood, the replication and scaling up of pilot projects often proves to be much more difficult and costly than expected. Nevertheless, as stated above, our findings highlight that some partnerships are very innovative and indeed excel in developing promising pilot projects. We assume that scaling up could bring positive results. Yet partnerships like WSUP do not have the resources to scale up projects themselves. Recently, some partnerships are focusing more explicitly in their project

proposals on the scaling up of interventions or business models. As local contexts in areas of limited statehood tend to be disparate and volatile, however, partnerships should concentrate less on the mere *replication* of projects and more on learning to *adjust and adapt* their partnership processes (see also Huntjens et al., 2012; Rein and Stott, 2009). If partnerships invest more resources in evaluating their institutional design, they are more likely to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. In addition to developing their own institutional design and skills, partnerships will also need to invest more in local capacity development to achieve reliable long-term results.

Figure 1: Conditions for the success of development partnerships

To ensure (long-term and broad-scale) effectiveness:

Institutional arrangements

- Partnership projects must have a local presence and an adaptive design that allows them to respond and adapt to the conditions, local interests, and values in areas of limited statehood (degree of obligation, monitoring, and precision of norms should be kept consistently high);
- *Learning outcomes* must be reflected and institutionalized in the multilevel structure of the partnership.

Incentives and win-win situations

- Project partnerships must create win-win situations by providing incentives not only for transnational partners but also for local actors in areas of limited statehood. Otherwise, at the transnational level, the partners' individual interests could stand in the way of cooperation. At the local level, veto players could block implementation, and incentives that would enable the project to continue on autonomously after financing has run out would be lacking.
- Replication or upscaling of partnership pilot projects must ensure profitability at least in the medium term. If partnerships are not successful in achieving this—due to the problems that continually arise in areas of limited statehood, thereby increasing costs—it becomes difficult for them to achieve success on a broad scale.

Statehood and other external conditions

- Partnership projects must be fundamentally feasible and not, due to major problems with security, capacities, or other context factors, difficult or almost impossible to implement without great effort.
- State authorities must at least allow and not sabotage partnership activities.
- Deficits in local statehood must be compensated for through supplementary capacity-building efforts or through the help of capable local partners.
- Partnership activities must be aimed at having local actors take over responsibility in the long term.

Empirical legitimacy

- Service partnerships must build trust and legitimacy (ownership) in the target areas, both locally, e.g., by involving recipient/user groups or community-based organization (CBO), and at the state level, e.g., through cooperation and capacity-building measures.
- In the process of developing standards, standard-setting partnerships must bring in those who their standards are designed for as well as other relevant stakeholders to increase later voluntary compliance with the standards.
- Knowledge partnerships must bring in recognized experts and provide space for open dialogue to validate their claim to produce established and consensual knowledge.

2.2 Partnerships for sustainable development: meta-governance (2014-17)

Our current research focuses on the potential role of *meta-governance* for the next generation of partnerships (Abbott, 2012; Glasbergen, 2011; Hoxtell et al., 2010, p. 18; Wolf, 2008) – that is, the “regulation of self-regulation” (Sørensen, 2006, p. 98) or the “organization of self-organization” (Jessop, 1998, p. 42, 2009). This entails, for instance, research on *national* legal frameworks and accountability institutions that regulate and monitor partnership activities in areas of limited statehood (Franceys and Gerlach, 2010; Winters, 2010). *Internationally*, the UN has set up a new registry for partnerships and plans to complement this with a new Partnership Facility and a voluntary accountability framework (UNDESA, 2013). This could be carried further by creating a more comprehensive review mechanism within the new High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF, the successor of the CSD), with more rigid rules for reporting and possibly minimum criteria for the institutional design of partnerships (Beisheim, 2012, 2014).

Most partnerships for sustainable development were launched under the WSSD (see Brinkerhoff, 2002; Nelson, 2002; Tesner, 2000). Starting in 2004, these have been registered in the database of the CSD (see Bäckstrand et al., 2012). However, other than very general guidelines, there have never been tough rules for or a review of partnerships (Beisheim, 2012). A good ten years later, the question arises: What consequences have UN actors drawn from their assessments of the partnerships’ impacts and chances of success? One strand of the literature maintains that partnerships ultimately lead to “neo-liberal corporate globalisation” (Utting and Zammit, 2009) and an economically oriented “market-multilateralism” (Bull, 2010, p. 493; Bull and McNeill, 2007). What is needed then, according to this perspective, is a realistic view of the distribution of roles and responsibilities (Bull, 2010, p. 492) and an expansion of international ‘meta-governance’ into partnerships. If international organizations are working with partnerships and are able to actively steer them by using conditionalities and other mechanisms, one could describe this as a kind of “orchestration” by which control is exerted towards actors and institutions despite lacking formal authority (Abbott and Snidal, 2010; Abbott et al., 2011; Abbott and Bernstein, 2014). Meta-governance could also be used to enhance “interplay management” and to better coordinate the various partnerships (Glasbergen, 2011; Oberthür, 2009; Oberthür and Gehring, 2011).

Up to now, this kind of targeted steering of partnerships has rarely taken place – if at all (Abbott, 2012, p. 563; Beisheim, 2012). In recent years, international organizations and donor institutions have been placing a stronger focus on monitoring and producing measurable results with a widespread impact. This idea has also been discussed repeatedly in the context of partnerships but has never yet been put into practice. As early as 2005, the Resolution of the UN General Assembly ‘Towards Global Partnerships’ made explicit reference to the necessity for partnerships to be developed further in the direction of sustainable impact and criticized the lack of a functioning mechanism for impact assessment.

In the process of implementing the resolutions of the Rio+20 conference, the UN Secretary-General intends to establish a *UN Partnership Facility* that will provide more extensive support to partnerships. The new online *SD in Action registry* has already been created. At the Rio+20 conference in 2012, further reforms of the UN sustainability institutions were adopted that will also affect how partnerships are dealt with at the international level (Beisheim, 2012; Beisheim et al., 2012). The future review process at the HLPF is mandated to offer “a platform for partnerships” (UNGA, 2013c, Para 8c; see also below). In the current project phase, we further investigate these plans. We will also ask whether evaluation criteria and conditions for success are being affected by this process: Does meta-governance intensify the (inter-) national “shadow of hierarchy”, monitoring, and potentially also sanctioning, institutional learning, and partnerships’ orientation towards sustainability

(on a similar note, see Abbott, 2012)? Are there guidelines for institutional design – for example, regarding transparency, participation, or accountability (Conzelmann and Wolf, 2008)? Are concrete incentives, guidelines and support being offered for activities in areas of limited statehood?

The partnership actors themselves are struggling, on the one hand, to meet growing demands from their partners and donors for rapidly visible results and, on the other hand, to cope with time-consuming start-up processes in areas of limited statehood. Partnerships are also operating based on an assumed win-win situation, which limits the motivation of participating partners to allocate resources for local capacity building before the initial successes and outputs have been achieved. For that reason, profit-oriented enterprises have gradually reduced their involvement in many partnership projects over time (see also Bull, 2010; Hale and Mauzerall, 2004). Many had to realize that the business case in areas of limited statehood was much harder to build than originally hoped. In response, the secretariats of the respective partnerships have had to mobilize public funds to build local capacities, the lack of which was impeding rapid project success. How do the actors in partnerships assess the role of meta-governance in this context? How could meta-governance be helpful, and how might it be harmful? Would specific guidelines make sense for different types of partnerships to achieve their desired impacts (OECD, 2008)? How effective are private approaches to meta-governance such as the Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards of the ISEAL Alliance or the guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative (see Glasbergen, 2011)? A recent study by Derkx and Glasbergen (2014: 49) found that private meta-governance has indeed “some potential to address the ‘orchestration deficit’”. One could further investigate the key resources private actors need to have at their disposal if they intend to engage in meta-governance (Sørensen, 2006) and also think about whether there are negative side-effects that come along with the rise of an “evaluation industry” (Utting and Zammit, 2009).

While the scenario of an evolving private meta-governance follows the optimistic assumption that partnerships want to develop further in the future and will continue to improve their institutional design and, hence, their performance, one should also consider the *limits* of the partnership approach (Utting and Zammit, 2009; Thalwitz, 2012). Partnerships might be better suited for some tasks and areas than for others. We find that fragile security situations and poor local infrastructures, for example, dampen the investment spirits of business partners (Beisheim and Liese, 2014). Which of these problems can be compensated for with better meta-governance, an adaptive institutional design and capacity development measures – and what are the limits of such an approach? A comprehensive review of partnership activities could also help to assess such questions.

3. Reviewing Partnerships for Sustainable Development at the UN HLPF

3.1 The HLPF: a new institution to foster and review implementation

At the Rio+20 Conference in July 2012, the decision was made to create a new High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF). Its aim would be to provide political leadership and guidance and a dynamic platform for regular dialogue, stocktaking, and agenda-setting – all to advance sustainable development. In September 2013, the HLPF was convened for the first time (replacing the CSD). The HLPF will meet annually at the ministerial level under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and, to enhance the political stature of the forum, will also be convened every four years for a period of two days at the level of the heads of state and government under the auspices of the General Assembly. In contrast to the CSD, membership in the HLPF is universal, which means that all Member States in the UN and its specialized agencies can participate.

According to its mandate, the HLPF is to provide “political leadership, guidance and recommendations” and to “follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments” (UNGA, 2013c, Para 2). But how should it go about playing this role – and how could it do so more effectively than the CSD? An important element of its work will be the voluntary review process envisioned by the HLPF mandate, starting in 2016. The precise structure of the follow-up process, however, is still not clear. Some of the wording in UN documents suggests that the eight days of meetings under the auspices of the ECOSOC might be used primarily for the review.

Above all, the new review mechanism is supposed to monitor and follow up the implementation of the still-to-be-determined Post-2015 Agenda (to succeed the MDGs) and sustainable development goals (SDGs) which have been debated since the Rio+20 Conference (see UN, 2013).³

The future review process must be carried out in the framework and with the capabilities of the UN system and its members. This means taking into consideration the limited financial as well as temporal resources of the various actors and institutions involved. The existing review process for the MDGs in the ECOSOC, the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR), is considered weak. The same is true of the National Voluntary Presentations (NVPs) from the early phase of the CSD. In the past, some countries had misgivings about stronger accountability mechanisms on the international level. Governments are accountable first and foremost to their own citizens, but they are also accountable to those who are affected by their actions beyond their national boundaries. In order to attain an adequate level of acceptance among the UN Member States and to bring the review process as close as possible to the local implementation level, it should respect national sovereignty as much as possible and also be structured in a subsidiary way, meaning that a problem ought to be handled by the authority that is closest to the local level and capable of addressing that matter effectively. There is no doubt that such a review only has a chance of gaining unanimous support if it is voluntary, which in fact is already ensured by the HLPF mandate. States have to be encouraged and given incentives to participate voluntarily and actively.

The remainder of this paper will discuss how the new HLPF Review might look like and how it might also cover partnerships.

3.2 “Commit and review”: suggestions for the general design of the new HLPF review

Review processes aim to provide transparency, learning, and accountability and to build political will and foster ownership of the implementation process. The process of voluntary regular review in the HLPF should build on the existing AMR (UNGA, 2013c, Para 7a and 8d) and develop it further along the lines of the widely accepted and proven Universal Peer Review (UPR) in the human rights arena (for a more detailed discussion see Beisheim, 2014). It should be a multi-level process, referring to the universal post-2015 goals and calling on all the Member States to report regularly on their implementation to the HLPF, but also being a bottom-up process, taking the national level as its starting point. After global

3 UNGA, A/Res/67/290, Para 8: “Decides that the forum, under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, shall conduct regular reviews, starting in 2016, on the follow-up and implementation of sustainable development commitments and objectives, including those related to the means of implementation, within the context of the post-2015 development agenda (...)” (2013b). John W. Ashe (2013), President of the 68th session of the General Assembly, stated: “The Forum should be the home for concrete guidance in the review of sustainable development goals, their implementation and monitoring”.

goals, targets, and indicators have been set for the post-2015 period, Member States would be asked to develop and submit national commitments (with time-bound targets and measurable indicators) for the implementation of these global goals and targets at the national level. Governments should be urged to formulate their commitments with the broadest possible participation of diverse stakeholder groups in order to ensure an adequate level of societal ownership. Optimally, they should formulate their commitments to fit into national sustainable development strategies (NSDS). Partnerships could be part of such NSDS.

First cycle: reviewing national commitments

In the first five-year cycle (2016-2020), the HLPF could review the national commitments each state is willing to make in the different post-2015 focus areas. Each year, the Member States in one of the five UN regional groups would be invited to present their national commitments. First, the HLPF mutual country review should look at whether the national goals, targets, and timetables (including milestones) are both ambitious and realistic (scoping process, see Riedel et al. 2010). It should also take into account and evaluate whether all the national commitments added together correspond to the global goals and targets and whether the burdens are distributed fairly according to equity indicators, reflecting common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. All countries, especially donor countries, should be called upon at this stage to clearly state their commitments regarding the means of implementation.

Second, the HLPF review should evaluate whether states have the necessary means of implementation at their disposal (UNGA, 2013c, Para 8). The results of the first review cycle should enable the UN system to provide states with targeted support to build and develop the capacity to achieve the transformation towards sustainable development (matching needs and means) — which at the same time would be a key incentive for states to participate in the review process. The review could address this by supporting states in applying for the financial assistance needed or for access to innovative resource-efficient technologies. States should also be given information about best practices, policies, and instruments, for building, for example, a sustainable tax system or effective partnerships.

Second cycle: reviewing the implementation of national commitments

In the second cycle (2021-2025), the mutual country review of the implementation of national commitments would begin. Since national governments are mainly accountable to their own citizens, this review cycle should begin again on the national level, and this immediately after discussion of the national commitments in the HLPF and again with the broadest possible participation of diverse stakeholder groups.

In this context, annual national (progress) reports should be drafted and discussed in, first, *national* consultative dialogues or workshops or in National Councils for Sustainable Development, and later also at *regional* fora. Starting in 2021, the Member States of one of the regional groups would be invited to present their national reports on the implementation of their commitments also during the *global* HLPF review. Reports and presentations should not only describe what progress has been achieved but also discuss gaps and barriers that have prevented implementation. This is the precondition for learning and tailored support on critical issues in the subsequent phase.

Following this presentation, an interactive dialogue would take place during which states could ask questions and make recommendations. The state under review would be able to answer and comment on the recommendations. In addition, inspiring examples and other

relevant information gathered during the review process should be made available on a website (to share implementing strategies, policies and best practices). To be successful, the review will require the greatest possible transparency and participation of the Major Groups and other stakeholders (see analysis and recommendations in Strandenaes, 2014). The HLPF mandate allows for their participation in the review (UNGA, 2013c, Para 14 and 15). As with the UPR, their reports and input should be an integral component of the process.

3.3 “Commit and review”: reviewing also partnerships

Such a “commit and review” process could and should also be open for commitments made by non-governmental initiatives, like *partnerships* for sustainable development and Rio+20 *voluntary commitments*.⁴ Promoted by the WSSD 2002 and again at the Rio+20 Conference, multi-stakeholder partnerships and voluntary initiatives are intended to be a flexible and effective way of helping to implement sustainable development. To make this a reality, the UN should systematically evaluate their contributions and define best practice, for example in terms of their institutional design (Beisheim, 2012). The annual CSD Partnership Fair and the Rio+20 Partnership Forum were a disappointment in that respect; instead of systematic and critical evaluations both were merely showcasing alleged successes (see also Bäckstrand and Kylsäter, 2014).

The UN is already implementing a number of reforms with regard to multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development: The Secretary General of the UN has proposed the founding of a new Partnership Facility (UNGA, 2013a, Para 69). Its aim would be to ensure accountability, integrity, and transparency. The new ‘SD in Action Registry’, which contains a cleaned-up list of the Johannesburg Partnerships as well as the Rio+20 voluntary commitments, imposes stricter requirements for registration than the old CSD database did. For example, it asks for periodic self-reporting. UNDESA’s info-note on requirements for registration states: “All commitments to be registered should be specific, measurable, funded, new ... In order to facilitate periodic reporting on progress of implementation, it is important that at least one tangible deliverable is specified, along with the estimated timeline for completion” (UNCSD, 2012).

The UN should indeed go for quality instead of quantity and work with the information contained in the new registry. It should obligate all registered partnerships to submit a report of activities at least once every two years. In principle, this obligation was already contained in the CSD’s 2003 guidelines for partnerships. However, those guidelines were never consistently implemented and were largely ignored by the partnership initiatives, thereby never resulting in any repercussions. This needs to change: Initiatives that fail to submit reports should be reminded, and then if they still fail to respond, excluded from the new Registry. All incoming reports should be published on the ‘SD in Action’ website with a comment function. This would enable stakeholders to visibly scrutinize these reports. Stakeholders could be encouraged to also use their own platforms for review purposes, like the NRDC’s ‘Cloud of Commitments’ (NRDC, 2012). In 2007, for example, the Global Compact, UNOP, UNITAR und UNDP developed a “Partnership Assessment Tool (PAT)... for assessing sustainability and impact” (vgl. UNGC 2007).

4 A Note by the President of the General Assembly states: “Leaders and other participants also recalled the agreement that the high-level political forum should provide, starting in 2016, a transparent, voluntary, State-led *review mechanism open to partnerships* to monitor commitments (...)” (emphasis added), (see UNGA, 2013c, Para 27).

Last but not least, the mandate of the HLPF stipulates that the future HLPF review “shall provide a platform for partnerships” (see UNGA, 2013c, Para 8c). What this precisely means, however, still needs to be specified. Transnational initiatives could apply for review independently, for example, in the context of the thematic review; whereas national initiatives could be reviewed as part of national efforts within the mutual country review (see above). Alternatively, or in addition, the new UN Partnership Facility could review (bi-)annual reports of partnerships and then send the overall assessment to the HLPF for debate. Moreover, UN entities could be asked to review “their” partnerships and report on the results to the HLPF. The HLPF could also commission independent “third-party reviews” (Bernstein, 2013; Bernstein et al., 2014). On this basis, the HLPF could discuss and continue to develop guidelines and criteria for a next generation of post-2015 partnerships. Moreover, at the country level, governments could be encouraged to install a single, enabling multi-stakeholder platform with a build-in accountability mechanism for partnerships (see World Vision, 2014).

We will continue to investigate to what extent such plans are actually realized and whether this contributes to creating effective meta-governance for partnerships (see section 2.2).

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