

# UNITE TO IGNITE

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ACCELERATING THE  
TRANSFORMATIONAL  
POWER OF  
PARTNERSHIPS FOR  
THE SDGS AND BEYOND



SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT  
**GOALS**

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Lorna Benton and Darian Stibbe, The Partnering Initiative; and UN DESA, Partnerships 2030, Global Forum for SDG Advisory Bodies 2023

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## A GLOBAL CALL TO ACTION

*It's time to sound the alarm. At the mid-way point on our way to 2030, the SDGs are in deep trouble.*

**United Nations SDG Progress Report 2023<sup>1</sup>**

Hopes to achieve the SDGs by 2030 have all but slipped away. With progress already struggling in 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic further hindered or even reversed advancement towards the goals. A mid-point assessment shows that of 140 targets with data, only about 12% are on track; more than half are moderately or severely off track and 30% show no change or have regressed below the 2015 baseline<sup>1</sup>.

At the same time, findings published in the 2023 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report stress the urgency of the climate crisis, with human-induced warming hitting 1.1°C and rising fast<sup>2</sup>.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) have a hugely important role in sustainable development. By aligning interests and combining public, private, and people resources and levers for change, they are uniquely placed to find innovative solutions, engage locally, challenge entrenched power, and drive a transformation towards the vision everyone on the planet can get behind: a prosperous economy, thriving society and healthy environment.

**There is no time to waste. We must UNITE TO IGNITE a new wave of multi-stakeholder collaboration and unleash the power of partnership to deliver towards the SDGs and beyond.**

If we are to 'raise the game' and become systematic in delivering far more, and far more effective partnerships, we need to put in place a concerted and targeted effort to build the enabling accelerators for widespread partnering.

The report provides the evidence and clarity on what needs to be done.

It is now up to you, your colleagues, your leaders, to invest in your staff and your organisation, and make it a partnering powerhouse. It is primarily up to governments and the UN to develop the policies and build the platforms for engagement that can unlock all of society's resources. It is up to funders to find new modalities that can far better support collaboration and maximise the transformational impact of their resources. It is up to all of us working collaboratively to ensure our partnerships are inclusive and delivering to the highest standards.

The old African proverb states 'if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together'. It no longer applies. The urgency of the threats to our planet means we must go simultaneously far and fast, and we can only do that if we're smart, prepared, and empowered. Now is the time to invest to make that happen.

**The Partnering Initiative, Partnerships 2030, UN DESA, Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies**

September 2023

<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly Economic and Social Council (2023, p. 2)

<sup>2</sup> IPCC (2023, p. 4)



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UN has issued its 'final warning' on climate at a time when progress on many of the SDGs has stalled or even been reversed by COVID-19.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) have a hugely important role in sustainable development. By aligning interests and combining public, private and people resources and levers for change, they are uniquely placed to find innovative solutions, engage locally, challenge entrenched power, and drive a transformation towards a prosperous economy, thriving society and healthy environment. Yet, critically, MSPs are not happening at anything like the scale required.

### **The study explores the enabling environment for partnership – what's holding back greater collaboration and what needs to happen to unleash partnerships.**

The study is informed by a global survey, interviews, in-person and online roundtables and the academic literature. Focussing on **seven key enabling factors**, it looks at the current state and identifies the necessary actions and investments governments, partnerships, funders, organisations of all kinds need to take to ignite a new, systematic wave of transformational collaboration.

### **1. Individuals with the professional partnering competencies to be able to build effective collaborations**

**91%** of respondents believe it would make a significant difference to their organisation / partnerships' collaborative success if all involved were fully trained in partnering, and shared a common language and approach.

There is strong agreement from all informants that building professional partnering competencies is vital for partnerships to be developed faster, run more effectively, and deliver a stronger return on investment. Nevertheless, very few organisations are currently training all of their partnership-facing staff in partnership, and external training was said to be accessible in only 13% of countries.

Investments are required by all organisations to ensure their staff (or in the case of funders, their staff and grantees) are trained, and by universities and training providers to make courses much more widely available in-country.

### **2. Organisations optimised to be 'fit for partnering' with strategy, systems, competencies and support, partnering culture and network**

**93%** of respondents agree or strongly agree that their organisation would deliver better and faster partnerships if it were to make changes to become optimised for partnering.

The picture is mixed. While many organisations are on a journey to becoming better partners, no organisation in the survey had all the elements of a 'fit for partnering' organisation fully in place. Leadership commitment to collaboration was most common but was in general undermined by unsupportive systems and processes – notably in not giving staff sufficient time or support to develop strong partnerships. There was also often a lack of strategic clarity on how to use partnerships more effectively.

Organisations need to make a significant investment in building pro-partnering strategy, systems and processes, culture and, in particular, give their staff the incentive and time to develop partnerships.

### **3. Partnerships set up to good practice standards with the building blocks for success in place, supported by a process facilitator**

**43%** of partnerships self-reported as highly effective at delivering their goals. We found a strong correlation between these and partnerships having in place a number of key building blocks: such as good governance and/or decision-making.

An additional, very significant determinant of success was having a neutral third-party specialist to provide facilitation and support.

Partnerships with significant support were **2.5 times more likely** to be rated highly successful than those with no support.

Partnerships, supported by funders wanting to secure their ROI, need to invest in the process of partnering, where possible with the support of a neutral specialist, to ensure inclusion, unlock innovation and set the partnership up for success. They should also build in stronger monitoring to demonstrate value creation, measure progress to

allow adaptation, and keep the partnership healthy and effective.

#### **4. Partnership-catalysing mechanisms / platforms in place to systematically convene stakeholders, ideate innovation and facilitate collaboration**

Platforms and similar catalysing mechanisms work best to bring actors together and leverage resources when supported by an enabling policy environment, sufficient resources and formal mechanisms for inclusivity, communication and coordination.

Governments – where applicable, supported by the UN – are urged to set up such platforms to drive collaboration, and are strongly encouraged to ensure they have multi-sectoral representation in governance. All other sectors are encouraged to strongly engage with the platforms.

#### **5. Partnership-supportive national policy to engage stakeholders and encourage and enable multi-sector collaboration**

While hugely varied across regions and individual countries, we found on average low perceived levels of engagement of government with its stakeholders. In many countries, legal constraints, a lack of political will, and no clear policy direction are holding back collaboration.

As a priority, governments need to create policy and regulation that recognises, supports, incentivises and authorises public sector engagement in MSPs. Further, this report recommends decentralised policy frameworks that provide a mandate for collaborative action at sub-national levels.

#### **6. Pro-partnering funding modalities that incorporate the unique needs of partnerships and system transformation approaches**

With some exceptions, funding modalities are currently very poorly set up to support partnerships. A lack of flexibility, short-term funding, criteria that incentivise partnership in name only with little value add, unrealistic reporting requirements etc. all make it difficult for partnerships to thrive.

**96% of respondents agree that adjusting the way funding** is provided could improve the quality and impact of partnerships and help them achieve maximum impact.

Funders are encouraged to adapt their modalities to be far more partnership-friendly – including by supporting early-stage development of partnerships – as well as to change their reporting / accountability requirements to be appropriate to the context of smaller partners on the ground and so encourage greater localisation.

In addition, creative approaches to leveraging private sector finance aligned to SDGs need to become more widespread, for example, through blended finance and social impact investments.

#### **7. Cross-societal trust and shared responsibility to provide collective motivation and the lubricant to help partnerships happen**

Finally, building trust and communication is a priority across all levels of the partnership ecosystem: individuals, organisations, partnerships, platforms and policy. Lack of trust is a significant multisectoral issue between business, government and civil society.

This report stresses that government has an important facilitatory role to play in building trust within and between the state, private sector and civil society, through its design and implementation of policy and regulatory frameworks. More diverse mechanisms for inclusion, transparency and accountability within funded partnerships will enable trust and communication, with clarity of objectives and roles.

### **The time for action is now**

At this mid-point to 2030, the report calls on the UN, governments, business, civil society organisations, funders and individuals to address and prioritise the factors to accelerate multi-stakeholder collaboration for the 2030 Agenda. And, by uniting, to ignite a new wave of collaboration towards the SDGs and beyond.

# KEY FINDINGS

Level	Current state: Global survey findings	Key actions
<p><b>1 INDIVIDUALS WITH PROFESSIONAL PARTNERING COMPETENCIES</b> to be able to build effective collaborations</p>	<p><b>13%</b> Stated that partnering training was readily accessible in their country</p> <p><b>91%</b> Believe training staff would make a significant difference to their partnerships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>All:</b> Integrate professional partnering skills into HR competency frameworks and provide capacity building for your staff and partners</li> <li><b>Funders:</b> support training for grantees</li> <li><b>Universities and training providers:</b> integrate partnering into existing courses and build out new ones</li> </ul>
<p><b>2 ORGANISATIONS OPTIMISED TO BE 'FIT FOR PARTNERING'</b> with strategy, systems, competencies and guidance, partnering culture and network</p>	<p><b>0%</b> Of organisations had all the aspects of 'fit for partnering' optimisation fully in place</p> <p><b>93%</b> Believe they would deliver better and faster partnerships if their organisation was optimised</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>All:</b> Gain strategic clarity of how collaboration can super-charge your mission</li> <li><b>All:</b> Invest in your internal systems, processes and capacities, and build a culture for collaboration</li> <li><b>All:</b> ensure staff have the support, incentives, and 'permission to fail' in developing innovative partnerships</li> </ul>
<p><b>3 PARTNERSHIPS SET UP TO GOOD PRACTICE STANDARDS</b> with the building blocks for success in place, supported by a process facilitator</p>	<p><b>12%</b> Of partnerships had all critical building blocks fully in place</p> <p><b>43%</b> Self-reported their partnership as highly effective</p> <p><b>73%</b> Of partnerships, significantly supported by a neutral specialist, reported high effectiveness, compared with 38% with no support</p>	<p><b>Partnerships and funders:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest in the process of partnering, where possible with the support of a neutral specialist, to develop key building blocks and set the partnership up for success</li> <li>Build in stronger monitoring to demonstrate value creation, measure progress to allow adaptation, and keep the partnership healthy and effective</li> </ul>
<p><b>4 PARTNERSHIP CATALYSING PLATFORMS IN PLACE</b> to systematically convene stakeholders, ideate innovation and facilitate collaboration</p>	<p><b>59%</b> Of respondents have engaged with national platforms for partnership</p> <p><b>93%</b> View platforms or similar mechanisms as essential or significantly useful catalysts of partnerships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Governments:</b> Build engagement opportunities into existing mechanisms</li> <li><b>Governments / UN:</b> Invest in multi-stakeholder partnership platforms, and where civil society is not well-organised, invest in facilitating their engagement</li> <li><b>All:</b> Actively engage in platforms (including as part of the organisation / governance)</li> </ul>
<p><b>5 PARTNERSHIP-SUPPORTIVE NATIONAL POLICY</b> to engage stakeholders, encourage partnerships and authorise public sector participation</p>	<p><b>25%</b> Of respondents reported strong or full engagement and collaboration by government with stakeholders</p> <p> In many countries, legal constraints, a lack of political will, and no clear policy direction is holding back collaboration</p>	<p><b>Governments:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create policy and regulation that recognises, incentivises and authorises public sector engagement in MSPs</li> <li>Mobilise stakeholders at all levels by decentralizing policy frameworks</li> <li>Strengthen communication of SDGs and MSPs as a route to transformational change</li> </ul>
<p><b>6 PRO-PARTNERING FUNDING MODALITIES</b> that incorporate the unique needs of partnerships and system transformation approaches</p>	<p><b>24%</b> Of respondents believe current funding models are fully or strongly effective at maximizing partnership innovation, quality, and impact</p> <p><b>96%</b> Agree that adjusting funding modalities could improve the quality / impact of partnerships and allow greater equity and inclusion</p>	<p><b>Funders:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create pro-partnering modalities including funding and neutral specialist support in the ideation/development stages (also supports inclusion of local partners)</li> <li>For system change initiatives, provide longer-term, adaptable funding</li> <li>Adjust reporting / accountability requirements to the context of local recipients</li> </ul>
<p><b>7 CROSS-SOCIETAL TRUST AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY</b> to provide the incentive and the lubricant to help partnerships happen</p>	<p><b>61%</b> Percentage of countries where trust between government and civil society was rated as 'limited', 'zero' or 'negative' (54% gov with business)</p> <p><b>31%</b> Percentage of people believed to have significant to very strong knowledge and feeling of responsibility towards the SDGs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Governments:</b> Run awareness-raising campaigns for the people, and build trust and give business a stake by engaging in developing national development plans</li> <li><b>Partnerships:</b> Ensure a culture of openness and transparently communicate results</li> </ul>

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Multi-stakeholder Partnership (MSP) implementation in support of the SDGs and beyond

An ‘essential means of implementation’, collaboration across all sectors of society is fundamental to delivering the SDGs and tackling climate change<sup>3</sup>. Only by understanding our shared interest – a prosperous economy, thriving society and healthy environment – and by collectively applying the scale and diversity of resources brought by all societal sectors – from regulation and investment through to capacity development and technical innovation – can we hope to deliver widespread transformation.

However, partnering across societal sectors can be extremely challenging. While there may be thousands of partnerships, these are dwarfed by the scale of action required to deliver the SDGs, tackle climate change and increase resilience. Even where there are partnerships, many are not operating efficiently and effectively or delivering the results they need to.

**Current MSP implementation on SDGs is not happening at the scale or quality necessary to drive the transformative change required.**

### Definition: Multi-stakeholder Partnership

A collaborative relationship between or among organisations from different stakeholder types aligning their interests around a common vision, to maximise value creation and/or deliver transformation towards the Sustainable Development Goals or Climate Action<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2. The urgent need for action

In September 2023, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development under the auspices of the UN General Assembly, convened the second SDG Summit, at the mid-point of implementation.

With progress already struggling in 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic further hindered or even reversed advancement towards the goals. A mid-point

assessment shows that of 140 targets with data, only about 12% are on track; more than half are moderately or severely off track and 30% show no change or have regressed below the 2015 baseline<sup>1</sup>.

*It's time to sound the alarm. At the mid-way point on our way to 2030, the SDGs are in deep trouble.*

**United Nations SDGs Report, Special Edition 2023<sup>5</sup>**

Findings published in the 2023 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report stress the urgency of the climate crisis<sup>6</sup>. Authors report that human-induced warming has already hit 1.1°C, underscoring the fact that there is no time to waste.

MSPs clearly have a hugely important role to play and yet even before the COVID-19 pandemic, far more was needed to move multi-stakeholder action from rhetoric to realisation; for example, while 71% of CEOs reporting to the 2019 UN Global Compact recognised the critical role of businesses in contributing to SDG delivery, only 21% felt they were engaging in this role<sup>7</sup>.

## 1.3. The SDG Partnership Campaign

In the run-up to the SDG Summit, the 2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator (an initiative by UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and The Partnering Initiative), Partnerships2030 (GIZ) and the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies, began a campaign aimed at raising awareness and spurring governments and stakeholders to invest in the partnership enabling factors that will develop, improve and scale up multi-stakeholder partnerships in support of the SDGs and beyond.

**The campaign advocates that if we are to ‘raise the game’ and become systematic in delivering far more, and far more effective partnerships to deliver towards the SDGs and beyond, we need to put in place a concerted and targeted effort to build the enabling accelerators for widespread partnering.**

<sup>3</sup> UN DESA (2013)

<sup>4</sup> Stibbe, D. and Prescott, D. (2020)

<sup>5</sup> UN General Assembly Economic and Social Council (2023)

<sup>6</sup> IPCC (2023)

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Global Compact, 2019



## 1.4. Problem statement: gaps this report addresses

This report offers recommended steps to create an enabling environment for more, and more effective, partnerships. Systemic transformative approaches to societal goals raise two challenges for multi-stakeholder partnerships<sup>8</sup>: how to more systematically identify and then implement effective partnerships at scale.

This study addresses a gap in evidence on what is preventing more partnerships from happening, and what are the necessary ecosystem factors required to enable MSPs. This report summarises the state of partnership-enabling factors globally, including challenges to their incorporation, and what is required to build them.

The study does not aim to repeat others' work making the case for MSPs and we explicitly recognise that multi-stakeholder partnerships are not the right solution to every problem and should be used wisely.

Ultimately, this report seeks to build understanding, provide the evidence and clarity of what needs to happen and inspire investments from all societal sectors to build an enabling environment that can unlock multi-stakeholder collaboration for the 2030 Agenda and beyond.

## 1.5. Methodology

The report draws on results from a multi-lingual (Spanish, French, English) global survey with 260 unique responses, from 20 plus semi-structured expert interviews, from relevant academic literature and from a number of in-person and online roundtables. It includes the views of actors from all societal sectors and from those operating at all geographic levels from global to national to local. The full methodology is in Annex 1.

## 1.6. Companion case studies

In addition to this main report, there is a separate companion document including four short case studies to illustrate and deepen insights<sup>9</sup>.



Image 1: Launch of the SDG Action Weekend, UN General Assembly, September 2023 (Photo: TPI)

<sup>8</sup> Horan, D. (2019)

<sup>9</sup> Available from: <http://partnershipaccelerator.org/campaign>

## 2. STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

### Levels of the enabling environment for collaboration

This report follows a holistic impact framework developed by The Partnering Initiative and UN DESA which identifies different levels of an enabling environment for collaboration that together have the potential to systematically accelerate multi-stakeholder collaboration.

The five levels are:

1. **Individuals** have the right partnership competencies (the mindset, understanding of other sectors, human relationship skills and technical partnership knowledge) to be able to build effective partnerships (section 3.1);
2. **Organisations are ‘fit for partnering’** with the right leadership and strategy, systems and process, staff competencies and support, and the right culture in order to partner with excellence (section 3.2);
3. **Partnerships** are set up to follow best practice to maximise their chances of delivering impact (section 3.3);
4. **An ‘infrastructure’ in place**, including platforms in-country, that can systematically convene the different societal sectors, ideate innovative approaches and broker collaboration (section 3.4)‘
5. **A supportive international and national policy** in place to encourage the use of collaboration and, in the case of government, the regulations and legislation that allows governments to enter and support partnership approaches (section 3.5).

### Cross-cutting elements

This study was designed to better understand perspectives and approaches towards two essential cross-cutting elements that span these levels, actors and geographies:

- **Funding and the way that resources are leveraged:** current funding models for multi-stakeholder partnerships face known

challenges such as inflexibility, a lack of diverse sources, poor accountability and limited consideration for long-term sustainability. This report sought to explore the current state of stakeholder experiences and perspectives on what is needed to reimagine funding models and the distribution of resources that effectively achieve societal goals (section 3.6);

- **Trust between government, business and civil society:** trust is considered the ‘lubricant and glue’ that holds multi-stakeholder partnerships together (Bryson et al., 2006). It creates an environment where collaboration, communication, risk-taking, conflict resolution, and long-term commitment can thrive, leading to effective and sustainable outcomes. This report sought to provide a litmus for current levels of trust and explore what are the enabling factors to build trust across actors and sectors, to enable more, and more effective partnerships (section 3.7).

### Multisector actors in the partnering ecosystem

This report reflects insights and experiences from stakeholders across various sectors, designed to raise awareness of the partnership enabling factors with key decision-makers from governments, donors, business, the UN, and civil society.

Throughout, we include voices from a range of stakeholders affected by this topic of enabling multi-stakeholder partnerships, spanning: the UN, national governments, government development cooperation partners, business and the private sector, NGO or civil society organisations, academia, foundations, independent consultant or other implementers and funders.

Actors will often wear different ‘hats’ when engaging with MSPs. For example, a government can serve as policymaker, partner, implementer and leverager of resources (financial or otherwise). This report is designed so that the reader can move between different and relevant sections that are applicable to their role and interests.

### 3. ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR SYSTEMATIC COLLABORATION



# 1. Individuals

#### 3.1. Individuals need professional partnering capabilities

##### HEADLINES

- 91% of respondents** believe it would make a significant, or very significant, difference to their organisation or partnerships’ collaborative success if all involved were fully trained in partnering, and shared a common language and approach.
- Only 14% of** respondents say their organisation has provided at least a day of formal training to all or nearly all staff involved in partnerships.
- Only 13% are aware of partnership training that is easily available** and accessible to all in their country.

#### What are the capabilities for effective partnering?

We consider a range of professional skills and competencies are needed to develop effective partnerships. These include a collaborative mindset: a humility over one’s own knowledge and capability, an openness to new approaches and co-creation, and working towards the collective benefit of all partners. Additionally, a strong understanding of other societal sectors and how they work is essential, including their thought processes, operational methods, incentives, and communication nuances. Human relationship skills are crucial, including capabilities in value maximisation negotiation, mediation, and facilitation. Finally, a technical knowledge of partnering, including the key building blocks of an effective partnership and good partnering processes is required. See Figure 1 for one formulation of the different competencies required.

The survey set out to explore the degree to which people have had formal partnership training and how available and accessible partnership training is. Interviews further explored what is needed to enable capacity building and individual partnership skills.

#### Findings

##### Partnership skills AND mindset are crucial

‘Individuals represent institutions’ and the ability to partner well is crucial to leadership roles; leaders play a significant role in facilitating partnerships and interviews conveyed the immeasurable value of such skills in building trust and relationships – essential elements of effective partnerships.

The value of a partnership mindset was consistently raised in interviews, seen as a critical enabling factor to manage the complexity of evolving environments, embracing systems thinking approaches, managing relationships and building the adaptive capacity required within organisations or partnerships.



M	U	S	T
Mindset	Understanding of other sectors	Human relationship skills	Technical partnering knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Humility to realise that others may have more appropriate knowledge/resources</li> <li>• Inclination to reach out to work with others</li> <li>• Willingness to give up autonomy of decision-making</li> <li>• (Measured) risk-taking</li> <li>• Creativity and innovation</li> <li>• Empathy / ability to work for the benefit of the partnership as a whole</li> <li>• Tenacity and courage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language</li> <li>• Values and culture</li> <li>• Interests</li> <li>• Motivations and drivers</li> <li>• Resources and capabilities</li> <li>• Systems and processes</li> <li>• Capacity limitations</li> <li>• Legal limitations</li> <li>• AND understanding of your own!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to look from others' perspectives</li> <li>• Networking and connecting</li> <li>• Approaching and engaging potential partners/selling ideas</li> <li>• Relationship/trust building</li> <li>• Value maximisation negotiation</li> <li>• Facilitation</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Managing power dynamics</li> <li>• Mediation / troubleshooting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Context analysis and systems thinking</li> <li>• Key principles, process and Building Blocks</li> <li>• Best practice approaches to setup and governance</li> <li>• Ability to assess critically when and when not to partner</li> <li>• The relationship black box of trust, equity and power</li> <li>• Partnership agreements</li> <li>• Monitoring, evaluation and review</li> <li>• Developing exit plans</li> </ul>

Figure 1: One formulation of the competencies required for effective partnering (Source: TPI)

**Formal training is not widely available, even though most staff feel it would make a significant difference to the success of their organisations and partnerships**

Of the survey respondents, the majority of organisations do provide some training, often through informal or on-the-job training and ongoing professional development. However, the training is generally quite limited, with only 14% of survey participants saying their organisations have formally trained all or almost all partnership-relevant staff.

There are widescale barriers to access training, with only 13% of survey respondents aware of partnership training that is both easily available and accessible to all in their country/countries. A further 39% were aware of partnership training but it was not generally affordable, while the majority, 48%, were not at all aware of partnership training being available in their country.

Meanwhile, respondents believe more partnership training would contribute to the success of their organisation or partnerships: 91% of respondents believe it would make a significant, or very significant, difference to their organisation or partnerships' collaborative success if all involved were fully trained in effective partnership development, and shared a common language and approach.

**There is generally insufficient recognition of the time and effort it takes to partner; or that it requires specific professional skills**

One consistent critique is that many organisations depend on a handful of partnership specialists or leaders and do not fully appreciate the amount of time that needs to be assigned to build and manage effective partnerships.

*"There is a need for funding. Everybody I know in the partnership world... we're all stretched... and nearly everybody I know who's working in partnership is doing extras on top of their day job. And I think there's a kind of exhaustion as well. So we have to be quite careful about how we manage this and how we galvanise this without further exhausting people."*

**Academia**

This reliance on individuals leads to risks to the sustainability of partnerships as well as burnout of partnership specialists. This lack of distribution of partnering responsibility is backed up by the fact that only 34% of organisations had trained more than a few of their partnership-facing staff. There was a clear push from interviewees that resources need to be leveraged to better distribute the responsibility of partnership and to better distribute partnering capacity building.



One additional challenge is that in many cases staff are expected to be able to deliver partnerships, without an appreciation that it requires specific skills.

*“Our experience is that there isn’t widespread awareness that partnering requires a specific set of professional competencies just like any other field – particularly within companies. This might be because at its heart, partnering is a base human skill, that we all have some experience of. But partnering with very different types of organisations, with quite different approaches, incentives and languages, while trying to build a common vision that delivers value for all requires discipline and professionalism. Upfront investment in capabilities will lead to a far better return on investment and the avoidance of costly mistakes.”*

**Partnership support organisation**

**✚ Simply building staff partnering competencies is not sufficient**

While important, capacity development of individuals is considered insufficient without wider organisational change. Our survey identified the absence of a pro-partnering supportive environment across many organisations without which even trained staff will not be effective.

*“So there’s the staff competency question. But then there’s the organisational capability question. And they are both very important. What I have seen is that training doesn’t do the job on its own... But if the organisation is seeking to realign to take more strategic partnering approaches, then training can really make a difference.”*

**NGO**

**✚ There are different ways to build partnering capability**

The study did not identify a universally preferred mechanism through which capacity development is delivered. Preferences ranged from improved virtual courses, sharing practices in the form of mentorship, learning from other effective teams, in-person training, play or role modelling, and peer-to-peer learning networks. Many responses urged the sharing of lessons from effective teams, individuals or leaders.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION**

**All organisations**

- Invest in partnership capacity development through training (online and offline), on-the-job coaching and peer-to-peer learning and exchange (e.g. through communities of practice). Rather than risk over-relying on specialist individuals, develop capability widely across teams (including support functions such as legal) to build wider understanding and better share the responsibility of partnership;
- Build partnering skills into HR competency frameworks, job descriptions etc. to support a culture of partnering;
- Instigate pro-partnering organisational change to provide the right institutional culture in which trained staff can thrive (see next section).

**Universities and training providers**

- Integrate key partnering competencies into relevant university courses (e.g. MBAs, public policy etc.) and other relevant training (e.g. around sustainability, infrastructure etc.)
- Develop and offer courses in partnering, building on existing language and approaches to help ensure consistency.



# 2. Organisations

## 3.2. Organisations need to be optimised to be institutionally set up to partner effectively

### HEADLINES

Very few organisations are fully optimised for partnering, with **93% of respondents believing their organisation would deliver better and faster partnerships if it were optimised for collaboration.**

There are **high levels of leadership commitment for MSPs** (72% fully or mostly in place) and strong networking with other stakeholders (66% fully or mostly in place).

**But that commitment is not well supported by** strategic clarity (54% fully or mostly in place), pro-partnering systems and processes (46%), internal guidance (43%), staff with the time and incentives to partner (38%) or staff trained (31%).

### What does it mean for organisations to be 'fit for partnering'?

In order to deliver partnerships optimally, organisations need to be institutionally *fit for partnering*. This includes: **leadership commitment and a clear strategy; sound systems and processes** to be able to take partnerships through their lifecycle from initial identification through due diligence and sign-off, monitoring, reviewing and learning, along with legal agreements suited to partnerships. Organisations must have **skilled staff supported by clear internal guidance**. They must be underpinned by a **pro-partnering culture** that is outward-looking and by nature seeks to collaborate wherever value can be created. And finally, organisations need to **be well connected to their key stakeholders**.

An organisation that is not optimised will inevitably suffer from high internal friction slowing down or even preventing partnering, reduced innovation, and a lower return on investment due to higher transaction costs.

### Findings

**Systems are not generally sufficiently in place to optimise partnering, despite high-level commitment**

We identified high-level commitment from organisations but that commitment is undermined by unsupportive systems. 72% of survey respondents reported their organisations demonstrate a high leadership commitment to collaboration (with it fully or mostly in place). However, only 54% reported having a clear strategy for their partnerships to deliver organisational strategic objectives. Further, pro-partnering systems and processes were fully or mostly present in only 46% of organisations.

While leadership commitment is essential, an oft-repeated complaint is that of 'Davos Syndrome' or



Figure 2: Fit for Partnering framework (TPI)



Figure 3: Degree to which different elements of a 'fit for partnering', partnering-optimized organisation are in place

the tendency for CEOs — such as those who attend the World Economic Forum gatherings in Davos — to announce big partnerships or commitments at flashy events, without clarity on the strategic interest or internal setup to deliver<sup>10</sup>.

Expert interviews strengthened the argument for systematic organisational change alongside building staff partnering capability. Participants argued that systematic change requires leadership commitment, clarity about the value of partnering approaches, and critical thinking about the organisation's role within the ecosystem.

*"Organisational capability and competency are crucial... there's the staff competency question, but then there's the organisational capability question... It's about understanding actual and potential partner role and recognizing, and then valuing them... and being wise and thoughtful about your own limitations."*

INGO

**Staff are not well supported to partner**

A further barrier is a lack of incentives for staff to partner (for example, KPIs) and insufficient time assigned to partner well, both at 38%.

This sentiment was echoed in interviews, who recognised time and capacity as frequent barriers. Interviewees advocated for better time allocation, improved internal incentives and reward systems

(such as pro-partnering KPIs) as well as resources to enable engagement in partnership such as costs of travel to meetings.

*"Manager KPIs are not enough about solving problems ... so the internal reward systems don't actually add up to needing to invest into MSPs."*  
INGO

Internal partnering guidance importantly creates a shared language around partnership, including a clarity of roles and responsibility, but this was fully or mostly available in only 43%.

**Current systems favour more transactional relationships rather than maximising comparative advantage**

In non-partnership-optimised organisations, issues of competition, traditional procurement approaches and a desire to control often result in transactional relationships.

Transactional relationships do not reflect the full potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships to leverage and combine resources to deliver innovatively and transformationally and can limit the range of actors engaged. Interviewees advocated for pro-partnering systems that can deliver genuine partnerships built around a shared and mutually beneficial vision and with a clear purpose, need or a solution-orientated approach.

<sup>10</sup> [A first look at failed Clinton Global Initiative commitments | Devex](#)

**✦ To maintain momentum, more flexibility needs to be embedded in processes**

It is important that new processes are designed to build flexibility for partnerships to adapt and grow.

*"So often you look at what purport to be partnering agreements, and they look much more like transactional contractor agreements.*

**INGO**

Acknowledging that partnerships will often need to develop and iterate their approach, particularly near the beginning, partnerships felt best supported by flexible financing and systems for monitoring or due process that enable adaptation within the partnership. This requires having partnering agreements or contracts that support this approach.

One international NGO, for example, encourages the use of a partnership agreement checklist, rather than a standard agreement template insisted upon by lawyers. This allows the agreement to be co-created by all partners, according to the needs of the partnership, while ensuring it fulfils the requirements of the NGO.

**✦ Organisations need to invest more in building staff capabilities and develop a culture of collaboration and mutual respect, to be ready to engage**

Interviewees stressed the importance of building a culture of collaboration, mutual respect, and co-creation for organisations to engage in successful partnerships. This includes a strong sense of the value of partnering, the value of preparing well for partnership, understanding what other organisations can bring to a partnership, and a reflection on your own limitations.

**✦ There is a growing desire to move beyond the 'usual suspects' as partners. This is challenging for many.**

In order to create more innovative, context-specific solutions, as well as to ensure greater localisation (often encouraged by funders), many international organisations are looking to partner with more geographically diverse and local organisations. In many cases, this requires new approaches to widen an organisation's network beyond its usual connections. It may also mean working with organisations with quite different cultures, processes and accountability mechanisms that will require international organisations (and their funders) to adjust their systems and approaches, and potentially support capacity development of partners.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION**

**All organisations**

Organisations wanting to optimise for partnering and maximise the impact of their collaborations need to invest in organisational change. There are no shortcuts:

- Ensure there is **sufficient leadership commitment** to invest in the organisational change required to become fit for partnering; engage different functions across the organisation – programmes, legal, HR, finance to build understanding and gain buy-in.
- Develop **strategic clarity** of how different forms of partnerships, from implementing partners to multi-stakeholder system change initiatives, can deliver strategic objectives.
- Undertake a **'fit for partnering analysis'** with staff to provide a baseline and determine what elements are currently supporting or impeding effective partnering and what needs to be addressed.
- Build up **pro-partnering policies, systems and processes**, including partnering legal agreements that move beyond the transactional, internal assessment, monitoring and evaluation etc., that enable collaboration rather than stifle it.
- **Support your staff** by providing training, incentives, internal guidance, 'permission to fail' and, crucially, the time to engage fully in partnerships.
- **Allocate sufficient budget** to partnership-building processes; if justified, develop an internal **partnerships unit** with dedicated resources to support collaboration.
- **Build up your networks and connections** beyond the usual suspects.

A short case study of the experiences of World Vision in becoming Fit for Partnering is available in this report's accompanying Case Study document.





# 3. Partnerships

## 3.3. Partnerships need to be set up to good practice standards

### HEADLINES

**43% of participants reported their partnerships as highly effective.** A further 36% said they were somewhat effective.

**Only 12% reported having six critical building blocks (shared vision, clarity of roles, management and communication, monitoring, sufficient or financial resources, governance and decision-making) fully in place** in their partnerships. There is a significant correlation between having key building blocks in place and the reported effectiveness of the partnership.

**Priority factors due to their impact on success** and are particularly lacking from MSPs, are:

- Sufficient financial and other resources: fully in place for only 20% of participants' MSPs;
- Highly effective management and communication: fully in place in just 26% of MSPs; and
- Good governance and decision-making and ongoing monitoring or review of partnership health and progress: each fully in place in 27% of MSPs.

**Neutral specialist support makes a major difference:** 73% of partnerships that received significant support reported high effectiveness, compared with 29% that received no support. However, only 30% of survey participants reported significant facilitation support, with 38% receiving no support at all.

### What are good practice standards for partnerships?

While every partnership is unique, there are a range of key success factors and building blocks that together can deliver effective, efficient collaboration. These building blocks can be explicitly and deliberately developed to good practice standards through a well-designed, co-creative partnering process, often supported by a neutral partnership specialist. While there are different formulations for the building blocks, they will usually encompass:

- 1) **Fundamentals:** having alignment and a shared vision that delivers on all partners' mandates; sufficient compatibility of partners; significant value creation (i.e. delivers more than the sum of its parts);
- 2) **Relationship among the partners:** transparency and trust; equity; mutual benefit; strong partnering culture;
- 3) **Structure and set-up:** Effective, flexible and adaptive governance, management and operational structures; sufficient funding and other resources available; clarity of roles and responsibilities;
- 4) **Management and leadership:** ongoing monitoring and review (including checking the 'health' of the partnership) and adaptation / iteration of the partnership; shared 'collaborative leadership'; communications etc.



Figure 4: Building blocks of effective partnership (Source: SDG Partnership Guidebook)

## Findings

### MSPs are generally delivering positive results, but there’s a distance to go before they are maximizing their impact

Less than half (43%) of partnerships were self-reported to be highly effective at meeting their intended contributions to the SDGs or climate goals. A further 38% rated themselves as somewhat effective. Only 8% believed their partnership was ineffective, with the remainder being ‘too early to say’.

These results are consistent with a global survey of 192 MSPs registered on the United Nations Partnership Platform, which documented self-reported effectiveness as a 39% - 51% range for very successful MSPs, 40 – 42% reporting as somewhat successful and 9 -19% reporting as hardly successful <sup>11</sup>.

### The building blocks necessary for effective partnerships are not sufficiently in place for most MSPs

A very high number, 75%, of survey participants somewhat or strongly agreed that their MSP explicitly and fully followed ‘best partnering practice’ in its development and implementation.

However, to see the degree to which this led to the partnerships being set up for success, we asked participants to rate six key building blocks from 0 (not at all) to 5 (fully in place):

- 1) clear vision with all partners fully aligned
- 2) complete clarity of roles and responsibilities, strong, trusting, equitable relationship

- 3) highly effective management and communication
- 4) ongoing monitoring or review of partnership health and progress
- 5) sufficient financial and other resources
- 6) good governance and decision-making

**Only 12% of partnerships stated that they had all the building blocks fully in place.** The percentage of partnerships with specific individual building blocks fully in place varied from around 20% (sufficient financial resources) to 34% (clear vision, aligned partners).

To support prioritisation, factors that appear most absent from partnerships, according to survey self-reports are:

- **Sufficient financial and other resources:** fully in place for only 20% of participants’ MSPs. Moreover, 13% of respondents stated this building block was not at all available, compared to just 3% to 4% for other factors.
- **Highly effective management and communication:** fully in place in just 26% of MSPs.
- **Good governance and decision-making and ongoing monitoring or review of partnership health and progress:** each fully in place in 27% of MSPs.

### There is a direct correlation between certain ‘priority’ building blocks and partnership effectiveness

In the analysis, we explored what is likely to be most effective to shift MSPs from ‘somewhat’ to ‘highly’

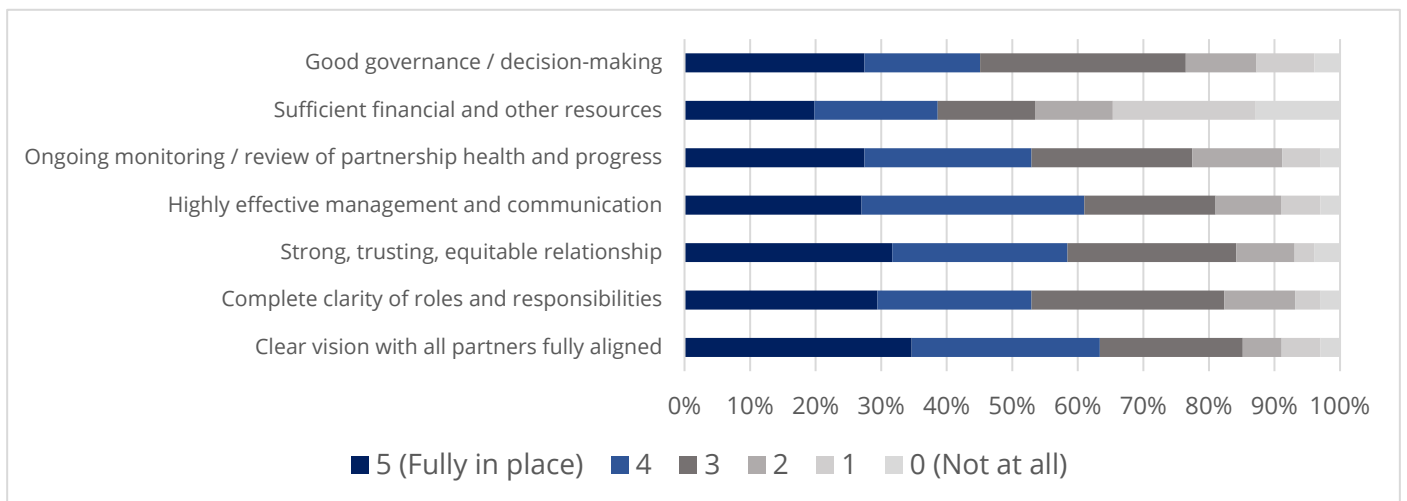


Figure 5: Degree to which key partnership building blocks are in place for specific MSPs

<sup>11</sup> Glass, L.M., Newig, J. and Ruf, S. (2023)

effective. To do this, we tested for associations between the rating of each building block against the rating of the MSP’s effectiveness.

The following table demonstrates the strong correlation between many of the building blocks and effectiveness. For each building block that is mostly or fully in place, it shows the proportion of MSPs reported as being either highly or somewhat effective.

BUILDING BLOCKS AND EFFECTIVENESS		
Building block fully/mostly in place	Highly effective	Somewhat effective
Good governance and decision-making	76%	24%
Sufficient financial and other resources	69%	31%
Ongoing monitoring or review of partnership health and progress	69%	31%
Complete clarity of roles and responsibilities	68%	32%
Highly effective management and communication	64%	36%

The results demonstrate that where the building block is in place, partnerships are around twice as likely to be highly effective.

The study of the 192 UN-registered MSPs examined organisational and institutional characteristics and found regular communication and monitoring, as well as the lead partner type, to be positively associated with self-reported effectiveness.

**Neutral specialist facilitation / support makes a significant difference to the success of a partnership, but its use is far from widespread**

The provision of neutral specialist support<sup>12</sup> was associated with higher effectiveness in MSPs meeting their intended contributions to the SDGs or climate: 73% of partnerships that received significant support reported high effectiveness. For those that received no support, only 29% reported high effectiveness.

Despite the difference that support makes, only 30% of survey participants reported significant facilitation support for their MSP, with 38% receiving no support at all.

Specialist support had a particularly strong impact on the following building blocks:

- clarity of roles and responsibilities;
- a clear vision with all partners fully aligned, and;
- good governance and decision-making in place.

79% believed having a neutral specialist could make a moderate to significant difference in creating a faster process and a better, healthier, more successful partnership.

**More deliberate design is necessary, especially as MSPs form and scale**

Interviews highlighted the need for existing or new partnerships to scale beyond the ‘typical network’ of partners, including shifting from bilateral to multi-partner arrangements and engaging with non-traditional actors across sectors and geographies if SDGs are to be localised. This will require better-designed processes.

*“One lesson that we’ve learned for more effective partnering... [is] to keep it focused on a single issue. Get the ‘right people’ in the room around a particular theme. Don’t try and partner on too many things with too many people at once. Either partner on a theme, like water or energy or jobs, or partner in space around placemaking. For either a theme-based partnership or an areas-based partnership, decide who needs to work together to make things happen.”*

**Expert**

*“We have to be deliberate in how we formulate our partnerships. A successful partnership, I think, starts at the design level. Having that common understanding of the purpose of the partnership that you want to create, and understanding the capacities of the partners, and what it is that they bring to the table. Sometimes we have unrealistic expectations in partnerships. And so, our partnerships fail, because we don’t understand the differences in capacities that various partners might bring to the table.”*

**Government**

<sup>12</sup> Partnership process facilitators are specialists who accompany and support a group of partners to build equitable, effective and robust partnerships that can achieve breakthrough results and

deliver for all. The experiences of the Partnership Brokers Association can be found in this report’s accompanying case studies: [partnershipaccelerator.org/campaign](https://partnershipaccelerator.org/campaign)

**✚ Better monitoring and evaluation of partnerships is needed to improve performance, accountability, transparency, visibility and knowledge sharing**

Good practice partnering recommends monitoring a partnership in three ways:

- 1) Regularly reviewing the ongoing health of a partnership (the degree to which the building blocks are in place) in order to make improvements in the efficiency and sustainability of a partnership and provide assurance to funders and partners;
- 2) Monitoring the delivery of the implementation plan and measuring outcomes and impact along the theory of

change to determine where adjustments need to be made and ensure accountability;

- 3) Evaluating the impact of the partnership and in particular how the partnership is creating added value compared with non-partnering solutions, to ensure transparency, demonstrate success and the return on investment and draw out knowledge.

A recent detailed study<sup>13</sup> of MSPs found that not only did the studied partnerships not have in place appropriate monitoring and evaluation systems, they did not even have a robust theory of change against which to measure success. Anecdotally, this remains a major challenge within many, possibly the majority of partnerships.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION**

**All partnerships and funders**

- **Invest in the process of partnering and in building the partnering competencies of partners**, in order to ensure that partnerships are built to good practice standards with the necessary building blocks.
- For more complex partnerships or where power imbalances need special attention, **engage a specialist external partnership process manager** to take partners through a tailored, structured process to ensure it is set up for success. The reduced transaction costs, smoother running of the partnerships and increased impact will pay back the initial investment.
- Build in **stronger monitoring of partnerships** both to measure implementation and success along the theory of change to allow them to quickly adjust and iterate in complex situations, and to keep the partnership itself as healthy as possible.
- **Evaluate and draw out learning from partnerships** to improve knowledge sharing, visibility, transparency and accountability.



Image 2: Launch of the report, APCO Worldwide, New York, September 2023, in the margins of the UN General Assembly

<sup>13</sup> Thorpe et al, 2021





# 4. Platforms

## 3.4. Platforms need to be in place to systematically engage stakeholders and catalyse collaboration

### HEADLINES

**93% of respondents view platforms or similar mechanisms as essential or significantly useful** catalysts of partnerships for the SDGs and climate targets.

**59% of respondents report having engaged with national platforms for partnership.**

**Just over half (53%) think that platforms should be operated by a multi-stakeholder combination** of government, NGO, civil society, and private sector, with little desire for platforms to be solely government (3%), business (4%) or UN (11%) led.

### What are platforms?

We define a partnership platform as an ongoing, dedicated mechanism to catalyse and support multi-stakeholder partnerships. They may be government-led – e.g., national platforms to engage stakeholders in the SDGs – or they may be led by NGOs, the UN system, or social enterprises. For example, the Zambia Business in Development Facility systematically brought together stakeholders from all sectors around specific development issues, and facilitated multi-stakeholder partnerships in areas of agriculture, tourism and job creation.

### Findings

#### ✦ **More shared platforms or mechanisms for engagement are required**

Our survey found that 93% of respondents view platforms or similar mechanisms as essential or significantly useful catalysts of partnerships for the SDGs and climate targets.

The importance of such mechanisms was further backed up by the interviews. However, it is worth noting that not all interviewees called directly for new platforms, but rather emphasised a need for more shared spaces for engagement and partnering through existing policy or legislation frameworks.

*“If you have multi-stakeholder bodies, and you don't have effective coordination, what you find is that you have duplications, that lead to inefficiencies within the system. You need to have an effective mechanism for coordination, to ensure that you have a well-defined process that is leading towards the objectives that you desire.” - **Government***

*“It's always important, I think, to have the common platform to facilitate partnerships, whatever that common platform looks like. The National Development Plan has been that common platform for us.” - **Government***

For example, in Jamaica, the 2030 National Development Plan was devolved into municipal strategies for implementation through a common framework for participation, effectively facilitating local collaboration across sectors and communities. By developing local sector plans and inclusive mechanisms for engagement, the government enabled wide, multi-sectoral involvement that increased ownership and optimised delivery.

#### ✦ **While the role of government is key, platforms should be explicitly multi-sectoral**

Respondents generally considered it the role of governments to organise platforms, partnerships, or working groups that bring together different stakeholders, including business communities, CSOs,

and international partners. These platforms serve as forums for dialogue, joint problem-solving, and knowledge sharing, promoting collaboration and fostering shared ownership of initiatives.

However, there was little desire for platforms to be solely government (3%) or UN (11%)-led. Just over half (53%) think that platforms should be operated by a multi-stakeholder combination of government, NGO, civil society, and private sector. Very few (4%) believed platforms should be operated by business organisations alone.

#### **✚ Platforms should be organised around specific areas for transformative change**

Insights from established platforms across multiple country contexts advise organizing around specific areas for transformative change and involving representatives from all sectors across that system. The latter point requires design for consistent and/or formalised communication channels, including strategic leaders and technical experts, to enhance collaboration.

#### **✚ Five key enablers of platforms**

When asked what is needed to increase the provision of effective platforms that catalyse and manage partnerships towards the 2030 Agenda, survey and interview respondents identified five key themes.

##### **1. An enabling policy environment**

Governance and policy frameworks need to be in place, to encourage partnership-building and citizen-based action (see next section).

##### **2. Sufficient resources readily available, including through alternative funding modalities**

More resources and funding need to be leveraged to create catalytic platforms that facilitate information exchange and learning, and provide adequate resourcing for effective partnerships, through sustainable financing models.

*"I think we've got to be much more imaginative about how we perceive funding... there are also other resources that can be used... in order to promote these platforms and communities of practice that could galvanize the partnership agenda."*

**Academia**

##### **3. Well-organised civil society and business**

The level of civil society and business organisation can play a critical role in societal readiness to engage in platforms.

In Germany, for example, civil society / NGOs are effectively organised into umbrella institutions, to facilitate representation and engage with the available platforms. Without similar organisation, such engagement is not easily replicable. Instead, governments may need to allocate resources and support facilitation to strengthen civil society voices.

##### **4. Capacity building**

Capacity building is needed across all sectors, for stakeholders to enhance their understanding and implementation of effective partnership mechanisms.

Capacity building to enable better partnering is not just the concern of individual institutions, but the whole of society.

*"When we talk about building state capabilities, or a capable state, it's not just about government administration and civil servants and politicians, it's also about them in relationship to their communities. How do we build capacity of society, of communities, of citizens, to engage with the state?"*

**Expert**

##### **5. Communication and awareness including through social media, allowing for linguistic diversity**

A cultural change in appreciation for the value of MSPs to deliver on societal goals is needed, while cultivating humility and promoting downward accountability.

*"Ultimately, I think it's the enabling environment policy matters. I think culture is that slippery thing; 80% of it is hidden and I think unless some of those cultural things are addressed, then we're not going to make as much progress as we need to. And two of those big things are about humility and downward accountability."*

**INGO**

A short case study of the Government of Jamaica's approach is available in this report's accompanying Case Study document.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Available from: <http://partnershipsaccelerator.org/campaign>



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

### Governments and the UN

- Build multi-stakeholder, multi-sector engagement into existing mechanisms (e.g. creation of National Development Plans; policy development);
- Financially support and/or lead the development of, and play an active role in, multi-stakeholder partnership platforms that can catalyse collaboration at national down to local levels; where appropriate, the UN Resident Coordinator Office should play a supporting role;
- Where civil society is not well organised, provide support / facilitation to redouble engagement and ensure the voices of the most vulnerable are heard.

### All societal sectors

- Actively engage in platforms for partnership (including as part of the organisation / governance), as well as any opportunities to engage collaboratively with government on policy or development plans.



Image 3: The Zambia Business in Development Facility was a multistakeholder platform supporting the development of agricultural supply chains, tourism and job creation



# 5. Policy

## 3.5. Supportive national policy and government engagement in place to encourage collaboration

### HEADLINES

**With significant regional variation, only 25% reported strong or full engagement and collaboration by government with stakeholders;** 28% reported very limited to no engagement;

While highly variable from country to country, **in many places legal constraints, a lack of political will, and no clear policy direction are holding back collaboration.**

**Stronger government regulation and policy alignment is needed to enable voluntary collaboration,** and to build alignment or find connections between private sector priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals.

### What are supportive policies?

Governments can have a critical role to play both through their policies which can help to enable collaboration, and in their actions to engage with stakeholders. This section considers that a range of policy tools, such as cash transfers, regulation and public investment can be used to incentivise MSPs that are strategically needed.

Innovative applications of policy tools can help to incentivise long-term partnerships, and the inclusion of actors that may face costs of transformative change: for example, the use of regulation and investment to incentivise smallholder farmers to improve animal husbandry practices and reduce prophylactic antibiotic use.

### Findings

#### ✚ **Policies and regulation can both incentivise and authorise government engagement in MSPs**

An assortment of policy instruments are available to governments to better enable implementation on SDGs through multi-stakeholder partnerships and to ensure greater policy coherence. Their design and application each depend on the country context, intended outcome and audience. In summary:

- **Laws and anti-corruption measures** can create an authorising environment for government, business and civil society actors to actively engage in partnerships – and for multi-stakeholder partnerships to emerge and scale<sup>15</sup>. When in place, these factors can create an attractive environment for business and encourage further investment<sup>16</sup>. This includes Legislation or Acts of Parliament (see section 4 – ‘In Practice’).
- **Standards** can establish a collective vision for progress. For example, Canada’s Code of Conduct for Procurement is designed to reform procurement and ensure greater

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Prof. Andrew Boraine, Partnering and Systems Change Practitioner, Cape Town.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SDG-Partnership-Guidebook-1.0.pdf>



transparency accountability, and ethical conduct<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) sets rules for products and services globally e.g., the Net Zero Guidelines tool launched at COP27<sup>18</sup>. However, Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) have emerged as a dominant mechanism for social and environmental regulation, driven by private sector stakeholders and representing more than 600 product groups<sup>19</sup>. These include MSPs such as the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

- **Regulation** creates frameworks through which the law is applied. It can incentivise engagement in MSPs and promote accountability. For example, the European Union’s Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive will require a far higher level of reporting of environmental and social impact across a company’s value chain.

Stronger Government regulation and policy alignment is needed to enable voluntary collaboration, and to build alignment or find connections between private sector priorities and the Sustainable Development goals.

#### **✚ Levels of government engagement with stakeholders towards the SDGs are generally poor but vary significantly across and within regions.**

Only 25% reported strong or full engagement with stakeholders (e.g. civil society, business etc.) towards the SDGs; 44% reported some level, and 28% of survey recipients reported very limited to no engagement or collaboration. While we did identify a significant difference in reported government engagement by geographical region, figures were very small at this level of analysis and it is therefore difficult to draw country-by-country conclusions.

#### **✚ Barriers to active government engagement in MSPs delivering on societal goals persist**

Key challenges to government collaboration with other stakeholders identified in the survey and by interview respondents are summarised below.

### **A lack of capacity and investment for SDG implementation**

Governmental siloes often limit administrative capacity for funding and partnership. In some settings, domestic support for the SDGs was viewed as tokenistic, attributed to limited technical and financial support for implementation.

This view is aligned with findings from a study of 192 UN platform-listed MSPs, which found a relative decline in participation by national governments of 21% in partnerships on sustainable development since 2006<sup>20</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused many governments to rapidly and decisively re-deploy funding and resources, meaning that the SDGs are perceived to have lost political priority in some settings.

### **A general lack of awareness of the role of MSPs**

One outcome of COVID-19, however, was the spurring of new MSPs in countries around the world. The level of threat and urgency meant that all societal sectors assumed agency regularly working together in MSPs from community-level partnerships to deliver food to vulnerable people, to international collaboration to rapidly develop and regulate vaccines<sup>21</sup>.

However, in general, there is still a lack of understanding of the role of MSPs in leveraging resources to deliver towards SDGs.

*“Very regularly when I would talk about the possibility of partnering with business, ministers would immediately assume the model they were familiar with, and which had a bad reputation – that of regulated PPPs to deliver public infrastructure or services.”*

**Partnership Specialist**

In this context, building a collective understanding and cultural change could better enable government engagement. Limited societal awareness about the SDGs or the added value of MSPs to drive transformational change was identified as a contributing factor to a lack of urgency on SDG implementation, as it restricts inclusivity of civil society and bottom-up approaches.

Interviews called for active government participation in MSPs and recognised that consistent capacity-

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/app-acq/cndt-cndct/contexte-context-eng.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.iso.org/netzero>

<sup>19</sup> Schleifer, P., et al. (2022)

<sup>20</sup> Glass, L.M., Newig, J. and Ruf, S. (2023)

<sup>21</sup> COVID-19: Seven lessons we have learnt about the present and future of partnering – The Partnering Initiative

building efforts are required within governments to ensure continuous knowledge transfer and embed an institutional culture of partnering. Suggestions include short accessible training programs that are tailored to the specific needs of policymakers, taking into account language barriers and their evolving context.

### **Lack of trust between government, business and civil society**

Distrust between sectors contributes to poor communication between actors across various systems. Despite survey respondents arguing for this as a key role, governments do not consistently unite stakeholder groups. Governments need to more actively engage with both business and civil society, at national and sub-national levels.

This may require policy frameworks that better recognise and include civil society and business as key stakeholders in SDG processes along with the mechanisms for the necessary engagement and dialogue.

### **Lack of policy or regulatory frameworks**

Governments are seen as driving actors in enabling multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs). They have the power and responsibility to create an enabling environment for MSPs by establishing facilitatory systems, policies, and legislation. Governments themselves should also be legally permitted to participate and engage as active partners. While there are multiple examples of policies around the engagement of business and other stakeholders in the prioritisation and delivery of development priorities, we are yet to come across regulatory provisions providing guidance to and authorizing governments to enter into partnerships with the private sector<sup>22</sup>.

*" When we're talking about enabling factors, the existence of the correct regulatory frameworks, I think, is something that is at the foundation of the pyramid. It won't work if you don't have that... The first thing you need is an enabling and effective law. Otherwise, the public sector will be inhibited from partnering... right now in Costa Rica, it seems that we are working on the edge of insufficient and dispersed regulations. So, that doesn't help with the trust, scale, and impact. We need a forward-thinking framework " -*

**Partnership Specialist NGO**

Certain policy environments actively encourage partnership for implementation, either through legislation or other incentives; for example, INGOs cannot implement directly in Nepal but must go through local organisations. In Kenya, clear strategic frameworks and devolution of power to county parliaments have supported World Vision International to better engage in local partnerships at provincial level.

Localising SDG policy involves innovation and collaboration with different stakeholders to define priorities. Decentralised implementation guided by frameworks and strategies, would better enable relevant community actors and leverage local resources, while considering local needs. The Government of Jamaica designed a regulatory environment to decentralise long-term implementation of the Jamaican 2030 National Development Plan at subnational level; the Local Governance Act creates a framework for local participation and coordination to strengthen multi-stakeholder involvement in development.

A short case study of the Government of Jamaica's approach is available in this report's accompanying Case Study document.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Outside of regulated public-private partnerships for the delivery of public infrastructure / services which follow a set procurement procedure and are not voluntary partnerships. See the SDG

Partnership Guidebook for definitions of different forms of partnership with business.

<sup>23</sup> Available from: <http://partnershipsaccelerator.org/campaign>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

### Governments (with support from the UN where appropriate)

- **Create policy frameworks that build an enabling environment** to initiate and sustain partnerships. Encourage collaboration with stakeholders and ensure that collaboration is institutionalised and consistently practised.
- **Mobilise stakeholders at all levels.** Decentralise policy frameworks to sub-national levels. Prioritise building relationships and trust with stakeholders to enhance cooperation, facilitate knowledge exchange, and promote shared responsibility.
- **Create inclusive mechanisms for multi-sector engagement:** unite all stakeholders and do it consistently. **Leverage resources, directly or through partnerships.** Provide funding and financial instruments to support collaboration and partnership initiatives that incentivise collaboration and help stakeholders implement their ideas and projects. Engage partners that can leverage funding for priority projects.
- **Build transparency and trust, and constructively engage.** Establish review mechanisms to assess progress, evaluate outcomes, and identify areas for improvement. Invest in projects and systems that drive cultural change and downward accountability.
- **Consistent capacity-building efforts are required,** especially within governments, to address the turnover of staff and ensure continuous knowledge transfer.
- **Create societal awareness.** Strengthen communication and visibility of SDGs and partnerships as a route to transformational change, utilise social media and push for sustainable development in the whole of society.



Image 4: By employing the levers and resources of public, private and people, partnerships have the power to transform

**CHECKLIST: HOW NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS CAN PROMOTE PARTNERSHIPS**

Global Forum for



The following checklist pulls together a comprehensive range of suggestions made by those consulted for the research, including members of the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies. The checklist reflects the members’ experience promoting national-level multi-stakeholder engagement in government planning, implementation and reporting of the SDGs.

	<b>What?</b>	<b>How?</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Build relationships with, and actively engage, representatives from across societal sectors at all levels from national to local, to input into National / Local Development Plans</b>	Parliamentary groups, round tables, commissions, expert panels, platforms and working groups; promote localisation by focusing on issues that are relevant to everyday lives; make the SDGs relatable and tangible so that citizens can better understand and connect with the broader sustainability agenda
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Involve non-state actors in decision-making processes, promote shared responsibility for achieving the development outcomes, and be open to constructive comment and course adjustment</b>	Project reviews, consultation meetings, workshops, policy consultation processes and input on key questions; collaborative review mechanisms to assess and evaluate progress and identify areas for improvement; use technology to facilitate engagement, enable efficient data collection and monitoring, and support communication and collaboration among different stakeholders
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Encourage and incentivise multi-stakeholder collaboration</b>	Directives, circulars and active communication about the added value of MSPs; provide funding for MSPs and participate in public-private partnerships; set standards for MSPs to ensure that collaboration is consistently practised
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Sustain public engagement of other sectors beyond short-term reporting cycles such as VNRs</b>	Institutionalise or mandate permanent mechanisms for multi-stakeholder advisory partnerships; encourage MSPs to focus on issues where consensus is needed for transformational change; enable a unit of government to play an ongoing convening and communication role between stakeholder and other parts of government
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Build trust in public/private partnering mechanisms through appropriate measures in legislation and regulation</b>	State clearly that the government is able to work in partnership; ensure that regulation enables a mix of financing for projects with government able to put in resources alongside other stakeholders; make funding available to support these mechanisms; avoid excessive complexity in the partnering process
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Build and maintain partnering skills and capacity within the public sector and beyond</b>	Build an internal culture of partnership and mutual accountability; strengthen internal partnering and policy coordination; put systems in place for continuous knowledge transfer of partnerships as staff move between roles; implement training programmes for staff and for partners





# CROSS-CUTTING

# 6. Funding

### 3.6. Pro-partnering funding modalities that incorporate the unique needs of partnerships and system transformation approaches

#### HEADLINES

**The way that partnerships are funded needs to change to be longer-term, more flexible, and support partnerships from earlier stages.**

**Only 24% of respondents state that current funding models are fully or strongly effective** at maximizing partnership innovation, quality, and impact.

**96% of respondents agree that adjusting funding modalities** could improve the quality and impact of partnerships and allow greater equity and inclusion.

**Funder desires for localisation are undermined by reporting and accountability requirements that are not fit for purpose.**

**New types of public/private innovative funding are still in their infancy and not well adopted.**

#### What are partnership-supportive funding modalities?

In most cases, multi-stakeholder partnerships need external funding. The policies, modalities and rules of how, when and to whom it is given, can make a considerable difference to the quality, innovation, equity and inclusion of a partnership, and therefore the level of impact the partnership is likely to have.

#### Findings

**Traditional funding models are not effectively maximizing impact**

When asked about the effectiveness of current funding models to maximise partnership innovation, quality and impact, only 15% of survey respondents believe current funding models to be *fully effective*, compared to *strongly* (10%), *somewhat* (38%), *minimally* (22%), or *not at all* (12%), with 4% answering 'Don't know'.

Furthermore, 96% of respondents agree that adjusting the way funding is provided could improve

the quality and impact of partnerships. Specifically, 59% believed this would be essential for partnerships to achieve their maximum impact.

**The problems with current funding arrangements are manifold**

In a multiple-response question, survey respondents ranked the following challenges relatively evenly, in the following order:

1. Insufficient financial or other support provided to support the process of building a new partnership to the point of a full application for funding (68%)
2. Funding is for too short a period of time to deliver real impact or transformation (65%)
3. Funding applications require too great a level of detail, and too much pre-design, preventing the partnership from learning and evolving (63%)
4. Insufficient time given to properly develop a partnership before needing to submit a proposal (63%)

5. Funding modality encourages partners to work in parallel doing their own thing, rather than delivering something more innovative together (59%)
6. Requiring a lead partner for funding and accountability creates a hierarchy which challenges equitable partnership (51%)

**✚ Funder expectations can play an important role in encouraging MSPs**

By making partnerships a qualifying criterion for funding, funders can force the development of partnerships.

*“Let’s be honest. Most NGOs would far rather just be given funding to deliver their programmes and avoid the complication of having to partner and risk getting less money!”*

**Partnership support NGO**

*“What helps in establishing a non multi-stakeholder partnership? So very clearly, donor expectation. Not to beat around the bush but when donors expect and put explicit pressure to partner, then it’s much more likely to happen.”*

**INGO**

However, unless accompanied by other requirements and support, this can result in partnerships in name only where the funding is simply split among partners, each delivering their own business-as-usual programmes within a funding umbrella and with no value-add generated (i.e., the partnership does not deliver more than the sum of its parts).

**✚ The process of partnering has significant costs to partners which need to be funded, to help ensure inclusion and local ownership**

Every stage of multi-stakeholder partnership development can take significant time and financial resources. For example, the initial scoping and building phase may include undertaking a landscape mapping of the issues and key stakeholders, running multi-stakeholder dialogues and roundtables to fully understand the context system, build engagement, and identify partners. The process of partnership development may then take place over many months, with facilitation costs, travel and venue costs and, the time required from all partners. The latter can be challenging for any NGO with significant core funding, but smaller, local NGOs in particular will often simply not be able to make that investment without their costs being covered.

Funding the earliest stages of partnerships is therefore essential to ensure inclusion of the right

voices at the table and full participation. It is also needed to ensure the partnership goes through a full and proper partnering process which will lead to greater innovation, better buy-in and solutions based on the knowledge of those on the ground.

It is important to appreciate that not all partnership development processes will end up in a partnership. Indeed, it is good partnering practice to collectively agree NOT to partner where, for example, it becomes clear that partners’ interests are insufficiently aligned, or there is not enough certainty that the partnership will deliver significant added value.

*“In my opinion, the main difficulty is that resources are most needed during the establishment phase of the organisation – which is also when the organisation is least able to secure or administer any third-party funding. It would help to have mechanisms, like an MSP incubator to provide such structures that support partnerships in the start-up phase and it would be interesting to explore if government funding could be made available for this purpose.”*

**Multistakeholder organisation**

One approach is to split up funding for a partnership into several stages, with the amount of effort required to apply commensurate with the amount of funding. For example, modest grants could be provided relatively easily by funders with simplified paperwork for the first stage of ideation and development. The large grants needed for implementation would require a more rigorous process and be based on a fully worked-through partnership plan.

One organisation responding to this survey created a light-touch grant application process that requires at least two organisations to apply jointly, with minimal requirements for applying and reporting results, to release funds quickly.

**✚ To deliver transformational change, funding models need to shift from short-term to longer-term investment**

If system transformation is the aim, longer-term, sustainable and flexible investment is required.

Firstly, by their very nature, system change inevitably takes time. All but the simplest of systems are non-linear, meaning it is impossible at the beginning to predict the precise theory of change. System change initiatives inevitably require testing and adaptation, continuously developing more and more understanding of the system, iterating and adding

additional activities when assumptions (hidden or explicit) prove to be incorrect.

Further, in order to ensure sustainability, not only will multiple elements of a system directly influenced and supported by the partnership need to change, but the surrounding system elements (from behaviours to business investments) need time to adjust to, and help reinforce, the new reality. Without the continued pressure holding the newly transformed system in place for sufficient time for it to 'stick', it may simply shift back to the historical norm over time.

Funding needs to be flexible to be able to properly support initiatives as they adapt and change, and needs to be longer term to allow the time to deliver the desired impact. Shorter-term funding often leads to unsustainable pilot projects or programmes that are simply unable to scale.

*"Frequently, projects are funded for a one or two-year pilot or more rarely, a 3-5 year agreement, but SDGs often require long-term systems change. Funding in the 10-year range is critical to support strong SDG partnerships, allow for significant progress, and make the impact the world needs."*

INGO

#### **✦ Funder demands for localisation are undermined by their demands for traditional reporting and accountability**

Multi-stakeholder partnerships delivering social or environmental impact in-country, in most cases need to be built from the ground upwards, fully taking into account the needs and understanding of lived experiences of those on the ground, and engaging those that might previously be described as 'beneficiaries', instead as part of the system, and so partners in the initiative.

This inevitably means working with, and directing funding to, smaller organisations on the ground, many of whom for cultural, resource, capacity or logistical reasons may be unable to provide the reporting for traditional accountability mechanisms that many funders have in place. This can include an over-reliance by donors on log frames in a way that measures the success of a programme on whether the originally designed activities have been implemented and reported on (which does not take into account the need for iteration), rather than on the impact a programme is delivering.

*"While we [international NGO staff] were on a per diem, our local partner had to provide receipts for every dollar they spent. Not only was this a colossal waste of time, in many cases – such as local taxi rides – it simply wasn't possible. In the end, they ended up unable to claim for quite a lot of money made up of many, many small transactions. The partner most unable to afford it in effect was subsidizing the initiative because the system wasn't fit for purpose."*

INGO

There is a growing appreciation that the solution to this problem is not about building the capacity of smaller organisations to change their working practice, use new financial systems (that may be entirely inappropriate within the context), or deliver programmes using traditional aid approaches that suit powerful funders' systems. Instead, the solution is funders and grantees working together to find ways to adjust funder accountability requirements and processes to be appropriate to the grantees' contexts, while still ensuring accountability to the funders.

#### **✦ Innovative public / private financing is not yet well understood or being utilised at scale**

There is a significant shift in thinking in international development from the concept of 'funding' the SDGs (i.e. funding of traditional development actors such as the UN, NGOs and governments to deliver programmes contributing towards the SDGs) to 'financing': structuring different financial flows from public, private, domestic and international finance in an investment model that can achieve collective, transformative, sustainable development.

For example, a review by OECD identified two innovative financing approaches that can increase engagement by the private sector and multilateral action, to mobilise and leverage finance where needs are greatest, blended finance and social impact investments (SII):

**Blended Finance:** where different financial instruments are utilised to balance high-risk investments by private investors. Despite growing interest, blended finance is not being leveraged to its full extent in low-income settings or towards certain SDGs like water and sanitation and education<sup>24</sup>. Instruments include: guarantees; grants; technical assistance; first loss investments; credit lines; and bonds.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, R. (2021)



**Social Impact Investments:** where private financing is mobilised towards innovative solutions on social issues, for example:

- **SDG bonds:** the Government of Uzbekistan Sovereign SDG Bond for impact investors and institutional buyers was issued to identify eligible projects aligned to seven SDG areas, including a regional water infrastructure project.
- **Development impacts bonds:** partnerships between an outcome payer (which may include government, a bilateral donor or a philanthropic foundation), a service provider and an investor aimed at improving social outcomes for service users. The service will

only be paid for if and when outcomes are achieved.<sup>25</sup>

- **Green bonds:** the Government of Colombia developed a sovereign green bond framework and issued bonds of COP 1.5 Trillion (approximately \$400M) to finance local green projects to enable low-carbon growth.<sup>26</sup>

While there is growing utilisation of innovative finance, and potential for more, it is also the case that increasing the amount of such funding will not be enough without also addressing multiple other constraints which prevent funding of the SDGs at project and enterprise level. One of the most significant constraints is the lack of ‘bankable’ projects compared to the amount of funds available.<sup>27</sup>



Image 5: Green bonds are an example of innovative finance unlocking private investment

<sup>25</sup> <https://golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/the-basics/social-impact-bonds/>

<sup>26</sup> [Colombia Sovereign Green Bond Framework](#)

<sup>27</sup> Carter, P., (2015)



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

### Funders

- **Create pro-partnering funding mechanisms, including providing financial support to the crucial ideation and development stages of partnerships**
  - Create criteria for funding to maximise partnership value creation (i.e. deliver more than the sum of its parts) and avoid partnerships in name only;
  - Support inclusion, local buy-in and higher quality partnerships by enabling the full engagement of (local) NGO / civil society / academic partners through grants to cover their time, travel and translation costs where needed;
  - To increase return on investment, directly provide or financially support a neutral partnership specialist that can facilitate a structured process to build partnerships that are inclusive, equitable and set up for success;
- **Where system transformation is the goal, create longer-term, flexible funding** that supports the time, testing and iteration required to deliver sustainable change;
- **In order to help ensure inclusion and localisation**, prioritise local partners and develop with them reporting and accountability mechanisms that are based on local realities, rather than traditional international practices that are inappropriate in the field;
- **Explore new forms of innovative finance to leverage private investment through MSPs for the SDGs;**
- **Support partnerships to develop a clear theory of change and implement monitoring, review and evaluation systems** that continually optimise partnership delivery and allow an analysis of the return on investment.

### Grant recipients

- **Work with your funders** to build their understanding of the importance of pro-partnering funding modalities;
- **Work with other grantee organisations in a spirit of collaboration**, not competition, to take joint proposals demonstrating clear added value to funders and break out of a zero-sum-game mentality;
- **Larger NGOs subgranting to smaller NGOs on the ground**, push back against your funder's demands for traditional reporting and accountability that are unfitting to local context, and facilitate a discussion with the local NGOs to develop appropriate approaches.



# CROSS-CUTTING

## 7. Trust & societal responsibility

### 3.7. Collective societal responsibility and cross-societal trust to provide shared motivation and the lubricant to help partnerships happen.

#### HEADLINES

**With strong regional variations, multi-stakeholder partnerships are in general hampered by a lack of trust across societal sectors.**

**Level of trust was rated as either 'limited', 'zero' or 'negative' between:** government and civil society (61%), government and business (54%) and business and civil society (61%).

There are huge variations in familiarity with the SDGs across countries and therefore the degree to which different sectors feel responsibility to contribute varies wildly.

#### What is the importance of trust and collective responsibility?

Trust is a well-established success factor for collaboration and a lack of trust can restrict the outcome of any partnership. While it is important to appreciate that partnerships might not start with significant trust among partners (trust being built up over time through working together), having a trust deficit is a significant barrier to partnership. Trust deficits might be caused by a history of bad experiences or competition, suspicion caused by a lack of transparency, or simply not feeling that you're on the same side or 'in it together'.

In order to provide a strong motivation to enter into MSPs, organisations and individuals need an awareness of the SDGs (or a partnership goal that contributes to the SDGs) as well as feeling a level of collective responsibility to contribute to delivery.

#### Findings

##### ✦ **Different societal sectors do not necessarily feel they are on the same side**

In the survey, we explored perceptions of trust between different sectors: government and civil society, government and business, and business and civil society. While there is significant variation country by country, on average we found a minority of respondents reported significant to complete trust (37%, 39% and 34% respectively). 'Limited to negative' trust appeared consistent between civil society and business (61%) and civil society and government (61%), but also between government and business (54%).

While sampling across different countries, the results are generally in alignment with the findings of the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report, which looked at 28 countries<sup>28</sup>.

Of note, in the Edelman Report, business was considered the most trusted institution for the 3<sup>rd</sup> year in a row, taking over from NGOs which held the accolade for the first 19 years of the survey. The

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>

report highlights that increasing global distrust of government has led to growing expectations of the private sector as a leader of sustainable development. It also highlights a growing polarisation in societies. While Covid caused a temporary communion, in general people feel less and less that they are ‘in it together’.

Respondents to our study re-iterate the need for more transparency, trust and tolerance, and the need for far stronger communication and action to actively build trust.

Our findings echo those of recent reports that emphasise the importance and fragility of trust in enabling multi-stakeholder partnerships.

The Dasgupta (2021) Review identifies trust as a critical factor for effective cooperation between state institutions on the protection of biodiversity. By example, they draw a parallel between growing mutual distrust and the erosion of collective management of Common Pool Resources (CPRs) – shared public and private goods with a finite supply, such as water, fuelwood, medicines and fish, that can be spatially confined and locally managed.

**Building trust is an active process**

Trust can often be perceived as an element that many know is needed, but do not invest time and resources into building. Overcoming a lack of trust or suspicion requires facilitation and engagement efforts, as well as improved transparency and accountability.

Mechanisms for inclusion that can help to build trust and institutionalise informality, through consultation, feedback, the translation of documents into different

languages and creating spaces for partners to meet outside of formal settings.

In the Project Lead Global Shield/InsuResilience Partnership, they built trust through several processes that took time and required patience, by: i) facilitating language translation for better understanding and accessibility; ii) having a consultation period to engage with partners and act upon feedback; iii) moving at their partners' pace; and iv) hosting in-person meetings.

**Negative stereotypes need to be overcome**

Overcoming mistrust across sectors requires building understanding of the value of other sectors' contributions, while addressing existing perceptions and stereotypes.

For example, government might be considered restrictive, bureaucratic, slow or overly political. The flip side is that engaging with government might be the only way to achieve scale or long-term sustainability and it is entirely appropriate to go through a bureaucratic process for government to commit significant public resources and ensure good governance.

Equally, businesses might be seen as profit-motivated which, while true, misses the point that business can deliver profit while positively contributing to social and environmental impacts. Indeed, bringing in a commercial case can lead to scalable, self-funding solutions, for example, the sale of solar panels through a network of village entrepreneurs.

Transparency over motivations and the public and private benefit that is expected to be gained is essential.

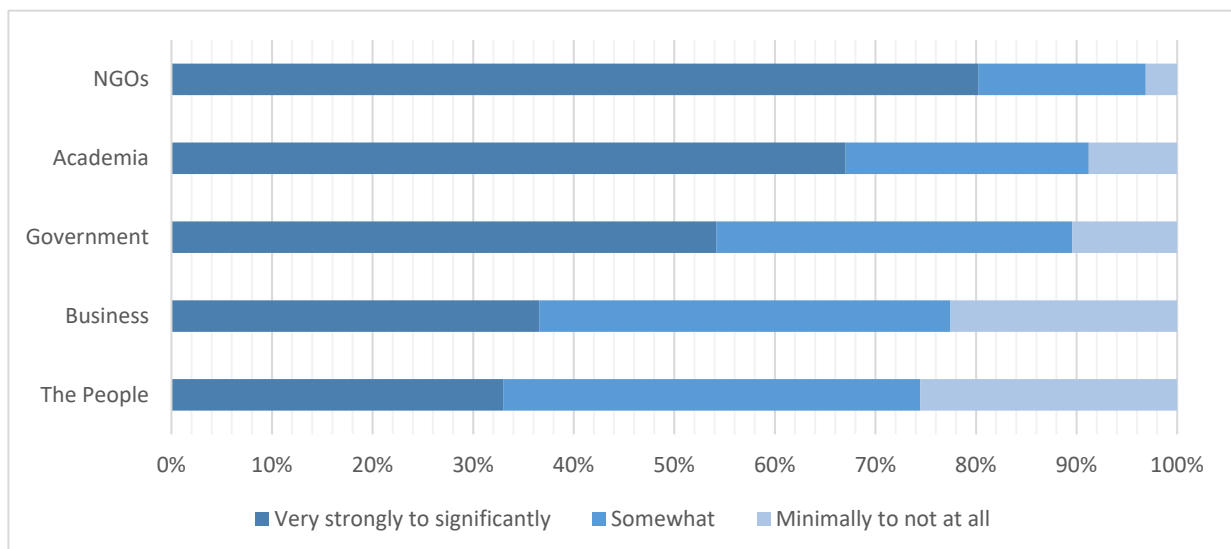


Figure 6: “In the country in which you are based, to what extent do you feel the following sectors are aware of, and feel a responsibility to contribute to climate / SDG action?”

*“Usually, I would say there's a lot of mistrust between private sector and civil society, with private sector only being interested in greenwashing. But I do feel that transparent reporting standards are our way out of this duality or this conflict between the two stakeholder groups.”*

**Policy**

Transparency supports building trust in both the concept as well as results of multi-stakeholder partnerships. Communication and visibility about partnership processes and progress need to be openly available to all. These perspectives recognise that accountability is a fundamental concept in corporate and legislative processes<sup>29</sup>

**Societal responsibility towards climate / SDG action is not perceived as evenly distributed**

When ranked by sectors, the people and the private sector were seen to be less aware of, or hold a lesser sense of responsibility towards, climate and SDG action than other actors (see Figure 6).

It is important to acknowledge a likely bias towards an NGO perspective in this question. However, interview and survey findings support evidence from the literature suggesting that a fragmented understanding of SDGs serves as one factor, in a medley of barriers to MSP formation<sup>30</sup>.

Our findings reiterate that the SDGs, and the role that MSPs can take in delivering on their implementation, are not universally understood across society. Improved communication remains a continued requirement for partnerships working towards societal goals. Respondents emphasised the value of measuring or evaluating MSP impact against outcomes, to communicate success stories.

*“A key factor [is communication] because it's all about relationships, so on different levels, on the global level, but also on the local level. Constant communication is one of the things that's really important.”*

**Partnership**

A further issue relates to perception when it comes to government partnering with business.

*“There is always tension when you use tax-payers' money in partnership with a company which has a turnover of \$60 million! It's such a grey area that government needs to justify the additionality of the budget in every conversation. But partnering with business could add investment to de-risk or add an additional element to a project which wouldn't happen without private sector engagement. It's a major issue.”*

**Business**

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION**

**Governments**

- **Advocacy and awareness:** Build awareness of the SDGs through: school curricula; media campaigns centred around the ‘People’s Goals’; engaging a champions group of influential people from across business and civil society etc.
- **Build trust with other sectors, and buy-in towards collective action,** by engaging all sectors in the development of national and sub-national development priorities through inclusive and transparent processes (e.g. citizens’ assemblies, regular consultations with business groups and civil society umbrellas etc.).
- **Develop clear regulations** (in consultation with all stakeholder groups) for government engagement in MSPs to ensure transparency and avoid accusations of corruption.

**Partnerships**

- **Ensure a culture of openness and transparency** both internally and externally. Communicate the societal / environmental impact of the MSP along with the economic / private sector benefits to demonstrate the win-win nature of MSPs.

<sup>29</sup> La Torre et al. 2020

<sup>30</sup> Banerjee et al., 2020



## ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY AND INTERVIEWEES

### Approach

This report draws on results from a global survey and expert semi-structured interviews, including representatives that span the levels and spectrum of actors covered by this report. We also draw on relevant literature to interpret results where appropriate and available. Recommendations are based on this data and also draw on the experience of author organisations.

### Global survey

#### Survey design

A global survey was created in Kobo Toolbox for individuals with experience working with multi-stakeholder partnerships. The survey was available in **English, French and Spanish languages** and based on an open invitation, distributed through the networks of the four partner organisations: UN DESA, Partnerships 2030, The Partnering Initiative and the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies.

We designed survey sections and questions in alignment with different levels of the partnership ecosystem, to broadly answer the following questions:

- **Individuals:** How widespread are professional partnering capabilities?
- **Organisations:** How well are organisations set up to be able to partner?
- **Partnerships:** To what extent are partnerships set up to good practice standards?
- **Platforms:** What mechanisms are in place to engage stakeholders and catalyse collaboration?
- **Policy (and trust):** What is the role of government, policies, and the level of trust across societal sectors?
- **Funding:** To what extent are current funding modalities supportive of partnership working?

Participants were invited to respond to as many sections that they are most familiar with but were excluded if they answered 'no experience' to the question 'How would you rate your level of experience working closely with multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs)?'

A total of 322 responses were submitted and 27 duplicates were removed. A further 35 participants were excluded due to having no experience with multi-stakeholder partnerships, **leaving 260 unique responses for analysis.**

#### Respondent characteristics

Respondents reported having notable expertise in the area of MSPs. Most respondents report very considerable experience in multi-stakeholder partnerships (more than 5 years) (44%), followed by *considerable* (2-5 years; 25%), *significant* (1-2 years; 20%) and *limited* (< 1 year; 12%) experience. Furthermore, the majority of respondents reported having a significant role in developing and/or managing partnerships on behalf of their organisation (54%).

Responses to this survey spanned a wide geographical range. By WHO region, this survey reached participants from the African region (37%), Region of the Americas (16%), European Region (14%), Western Pacific Region (10%), South East Asian Region (10%) and the Eastern Mediterranean Region (5%). A further 8% identified as 'Any/International'.

Most responses were from NGO or civil society organisations (57%), with responses from other organisational types ranging between 2 and 7%. Related to this, the survey was completed by national (41%) and international (35%) representatives, with fewer responses from regional (14%) and sub-regional (11%) levels.

We found a range of responses to each of the survey sections between 40% to 62%. Survey participants were most interested in responding to sections on 'Organisations optimised for partnering' (62%) and 'Individuals' partnering skills and competencies' (60%) when compared to sections on Platforms (52%), Partnerships (41%), Funding (40%), and Policy and Trust (40%). Considering the majority of NGO and civil society responses, it is important for interpretation to note that 12% of responses towards the government section are from Government actors and 16% of responses to the funding section are from respondents that identify as 'Government development cooperation partner (funder)' or 'Business' actors. Descriptive statistics will be presented from this survey and Pearson's  $\chi^2$  was used to test for associations using STATA.

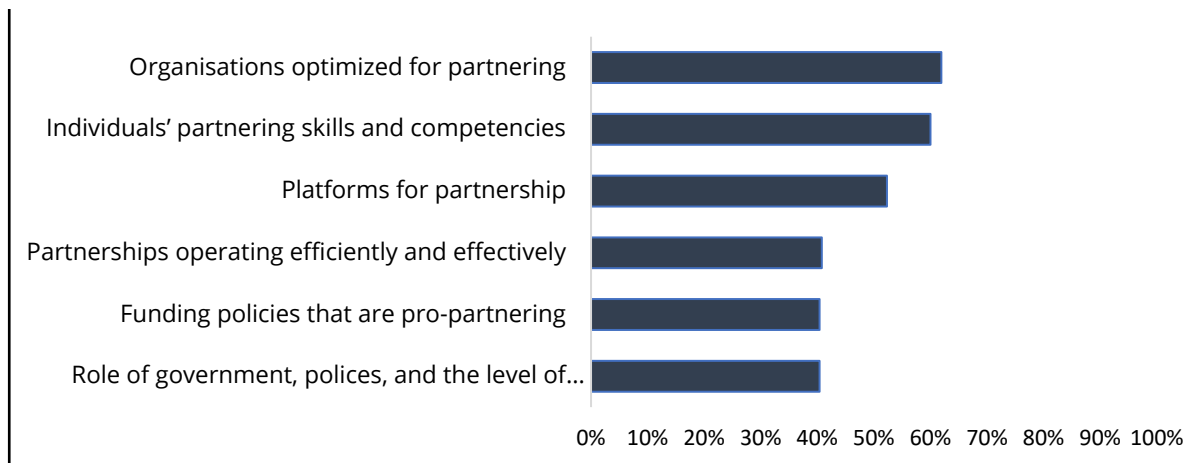


Figure 7: Proportion of survey respondents to each section, reflecting different levels of the partnering ecosystem (%). Responses to multiple sections were permitted.

## Interviews

### Design

We conducted over 20 interviews with representatives from academia, partnerships, government, UN, business, NGO and civil society sectors. Semi-structured interview schedules followed the guiding question "How can we accelerate the use of existing and new MSPs to improve implementation of SDG and climate goals, across sectors and levels, by 2030 and beyond?".

Specific questions reflected the expertise of the participant on broad themes covering: policy frameworks, funding, facilitation, coordination and inclusive mechanisms for engagement, capacity building and evaluation and monitoring. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and then synthesised following the qualitative Framework Analysis principles<sup>31</sup>.

### Participant characteristics

Participants were purposefully identified as experts in the area and interviews were designed to elicit lessons learned and synthesis perspectives on what is needed to create an enabling environment for MSPs in support of the SDGs and beyond. This report represents the interview perspectives of: independent and academic experts (3); policy representatives (6) from the World Health Organisation (WHO), Government of Jamaica, Der Rat fuer Nachhaltige Entwicklung (RNE) - the German Council for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka and Sustainability, Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development and the Nepal SDG Forum; private sector representatives (3) from Unilever, Deutsche Post DHL Group and Mott MacDonald; NGO (3) perspectives from World Vision, ALIARSE (Fundación para la Sostenibilidad y la Equidad / Foundation for sustainability and equity in Costa Rica) and SOS Children's Villages International; and perspectives from specific partnerships (6) listed below.

<sup>31</sup> Ritchie, J., Spencer, L. and O'Connor, W., (2003)

## Partnerships described in interviews:

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- **Global Battery Alliance:** A partnership of 140+ businesses, governments, academics, industry actors, and non-governmental organisations, to ensure that battery production not only supports green energy, but also safeguards human rights and promotes health and environmental sustainability: <https://www.globalbattery.org/>.
- **TRANSFORM** a joint initiative between Unilever, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and EY, to support visionary impact enterprises across Africa, Asia and beyond. They test and scale new solutions that tackle environmental challenges, improve health and wellbeing, and build inclusive economies: <https://www.transform.global/>.
- **'Strengthening Capacities for Policy Planning for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Indonesia and the Global South':** a project commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (GMZ) to reinforce capacities of state and non-state actors in implementing the 2030 Agenda in Indonesia and in Indonesian South-South and Triangular Cooperation: <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/90222.html>.
- **GoTeach Partnership:** SOS Children's Villages International and Deutsche Post DHL Group are partnering to empower young people aged 15-25 from across the world to help them build job skills and get ready for employment or entrepreneurship. The partnership was launched under the umbrella of Deutsche Post DHL Group's 'GoTeach' programme in 2011 and has since been expanded to 53 countries: <https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/our-international-corporate-partners-dpdhl>
- **InsuResilience Global Partnership for Climate and Disaster Risk Finance and Insurance:** a partnership that unites V20 and G20+ countries, civil society, international organisations, the private sector, and academia with more than 120 partners towards a shared vision to strengthen the resilience of developing countries and to protect the lives and livelihoods of poor and vulnerable people from the impacts of climate shocks and disasters by enabling faster, more reliable and cost-effective responses. <https://www.insuresilience.org/about-us/>
- **Fleming Fund on Antimicrobial Resistance:** a UK aid programme supporting up to 25 countries across Africa and Asia to tackle antimicrobial resistance. The Fund is managed by the Department of Health and Social Care and invests in strengthening surveillance systems through a portfolio of country and regional grants, global projects and fellowship schemes. <https://www.flemingfund.org/>

## Limitations to our approach

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This report does not offer a systematic summary of the literature already published. This is partially due to the broad nature of the question posed by the report on a topic that is rapidly evolving. Furthermore, the rationale is to provide an accessible report with recommendations to multiple actors ahead of the UN General Assembly in September 2023. Therefore, the approach taken by this report was informed by the expertise of its co-authors and designed to span multiple perspectives across socio-ecological levels, sectors and geographies.

While broadening reach, we acknowledge that an open invitation to participate in the survey risks respondent bias to those with a prior interest in the topic and known to the distribution networks. In this report, we identify a greater number of NGO responses across all survey sections, creating a probable bias to this perspective. Where relevant, we sought to stratify questions by respondent type or other characteristics by using Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test for categorical variables; however, fewer numbers mean that stratification was not always sufficiently powered and thus not included in this report. We seek to recognise any risk of bias in our interpretation and triangulate survey results with findings from semi-structured interviews.

## Interviewees and contributors

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Image 6: António Guterres, UN Secretary General, speaking at the opening of the SDG Action Weekend September 2023 (Photo credit: TPI)