



Expert Group Meeting
**“Multi-stakeholder partnerships on implementing the 2030 Agenda:
Improving accountability and transparency”**
Organized by UNDESA¹
Greentree Foundation, 5-6 February 2016
DRAFT SUMMARY²

1. Overview

UNDESA, with support of the Global Research Institute, University of North Carolina organized an expert group meeting (EGM), from 5-6 February 2016, on the theme: “Multi-stakeholder partnerships on implementing the 2030 Agenda: Improving accountability and transparency”. The objective of the meeting was to develop recommendations relating to transparency, accountability and the role of member states in the review of multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) for the 2030 Agenda in preparation for the 2016 ECOSOC Partnership Forum. The Economic and Social Council was requested by the General Assembly in paragraph 15 of resolution A/RES/70/224 of 22 December 2015 on “Towards Global Partnerships” *to hold during its partnership forum in 2016 a discussion on the best practices and ways to improve, inter alia, transparency, accountability and sharing of experiences of multi-stakeholder partnerships, and on review and monitoring of these partnerships, inter alia, the role of Member States in review and monitoring*”. Participants in the meeting included Member State delegates, partnership specialists from the UN system, and stakeholder experts from NGOs and academia. The EGM was also informed by a draft background paper that is being prepared for the 2016 ECOSOC Partnership Forum.

The EGM reviewed the history of the UN’s involvement in partnerships and the success factors required of partnerships in support the 2030 Agenda, including the benefits of a cross-sectoral integrated approach for advancing the implementation of the SDGs. The EGM also considered possible guidelines and principles for UN-associated partnerships, the role and capacity of the UN system, the contribution of monitoring, review and reporting to improving accountability and transparency as well as options for an architecture for monitoring and review that would give a role to Member States.

2. Reflection on the UN’s previous involvement in MSPs

The UN’s involvement in MSPs, dates back to more than two decades of cooperation with civil society, the private sector, philanthropy and academia. The EGM reflected on various important milestones, beginning with the Earth Summit in 1992, where it could be said that partnerships were first assigned responsibilities within the development process. Subsequent steps included the launch of the UN Global Compact in 2000 and the issuance of the Guidelines on Cooperation between the UN and the Business Community in the same year (updated in 2009 and 2015). Even though the MDGs considered partnerships as primarily between governments, they led to the creation of important initiatives/platforms among

¹ With the support of the Global Research Institute, University of North Carolina

² The summary reflects the outcome of an informal discussion held under the Chatham House Rule. The participants included a mix of representatives of member states delegations, UN system and civil society experts.

which Every Woman Every Child was mentioned as an example. The first General Assembly (GA) resolution on “Towards global partnerships” in 2000, and its evolution on a biennial basis since 2001, also substantially shaped the framework of the UN’s involvement in MSPs. This is very much true also for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and the decision on partnerships at CSD-11, including on guidelines for partnerships that were built on the Bali Principles. Within the last decade, the creation of the United Nations Office of Partnerships (UNOP) in 2006, the ECOSOC Partnership Forum taking place since 2008, the adoption of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights by the Human Rights Council in 2011 and partnerships in the context of Rio+20 were among the most important milestones addressed. Finally, the EGM reflected on recent agreements assigning significant roles to MSPs, including, for example, the SAMOA Pathway and most significantly, the 2030 Agenda.

It was noted that there was substantial ground on which to base future work on partnerships. This could be done by utilizing already existing structures rather than duplicating efforts or creating more bureaucracy. There have however also been major drawbacks that need to be addressed, including inactive partnerships, partnerships not delivering on commitments, a focus on short-term quantifiable results instead of long-term transformative impact, a preponderance of initiatives taking place in developed countries with a corresponding lack of the same in developing countries, especially LDCs, and insufficient intergovernmental guidance and oversight. What is also needed is capacity building support for those partnerships that need it.

With the adoption of the 2030 agenda, the importance and role of MSPs has strengthened in significance and has gained renewed commitment and attention. At the same time, the need for transparency and accountability has been acknowledged. Member States have agreed on the “what” in regard to partnership and share common interests and goals, yet the details on “how” still need to be developed.

3. Key messages emerging from the EGM

3.1 The role of MSP in implementing the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development

Participants agreed that partnerships are a valuable tool for achieving the 2030 Agenda. MSPs need to be encouraged and clearly defined to foster a common understanding. At the same time, the values and principles of the United Nations must be upheld. A balance has to be found between nurturing and monitoring of partnerships.

The overarching goal should be for MSPs to meaningfully contribute to the commitment to a shift to a sustainable and resilient path and ensure that we are leaving no one behind, with a special focus on LDCs and other countries in special situations as well as fragile states.

3.2 Achieving a common understanding of partnerships and defining a general approach

Partnerships can play a key role in complementing national efforts and the work of the UN system. Partnerships should support but not replace the efforts of governments who take the lead in implementing the 2030 agenda. Moreover, they should not be replacing the responsibilities of the UN system. This understanding should be clearly communicated and applied in all decisions made with reference to MSPs.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships consist of a variety of stakeholders and not solely the business sector, which has deservedly received considerable attention. Yet, the focus must be widened on all relevant stakeholders, including philanthropy, NGOs, and academia.

There is a great need to clearly separate multi-stakeholder partnerships from other forms of stakeholder engagement with the SDGs, such as community-level public private partnerships, individual private sector involvement or voluntary initiatives of any kind. It is also necessary to differentiate among partnerships, especially with regards to partnerships in which the UN is directly involved (with a possible differentiation between partnerships in which the UN is a leading entity and such in which it participates with others taking the lead) as opposed to MSPs without UN involvement. This differentiation must be further clarified and made concrete by specific criteria and reflected in all mechanisms covering MSPs, including guidelines, principles and processes of monitoring and review. While there is the need for transparency and accountability for both types of partnerships, the depth and scope of the review will vary considerably between them.

Differentiation is also needed with regards to MSPs operating at the country-level, facing different circumstances than MSPs operating at the global level. It was highlighted that at the country-level, several successful guidelines and monitoring mechanisms have often already been implemented. More focus should be given to the work of MSPs at the country-level, considering their particular realities. Where possible they should link to existing global MSPs where they exist to support knowledge management and lessons learnt.

3.3 Success factors for MSPs

A “learning culture” in our approach to partnerships

MSPs have the potential to be flexible, move quickly, mobilize complementing resources and spur innovation, yet this will require risk-taking that might also include failure of some partnerships. An open learning culture needs to be established, including the creation of “safe spaces”, where failure may be shared and negative results may be reported to define and build on lessons learned. Failure on a scale that could harm the integrity of the UN and thereby of Member States however must be prevented.

Promoting integrated (cross-sectoral or nexus) approaches in MSPs

Multi-stakeholder partnerships should have goals linked to at least one SDG. While there is still a need for focused partnerships, looking at urgent issues and defining clear priorities about central goals, the integrated character of the agenda also calls for a cross-sectoral and a nexus approach in its implementation. Partnerships have a specific potential to complement the efforts of governments in traversing silos. Moving beyond silos should bring all relevant partners working in different sectors for a common purpose on board. Even though requiring significant coordination, cross-sectoral partnerships may thereby solve the issues of partners blaming each other for lack of progress and coherence. The UN should promote cross-sectoral MSPs and provide support in the form of providing cross-sectoral expertise and bringing together key stakeholders from different areas.

Strong and effective leadership

While MSPs should employ a participatory bottom-up approach, develop local ownership and take context-specific realities into account in order to be most effective, it was also mentioned that strong leadership from the top will be necessary in promoting MSPs more generally, including the involvement of the UN Secretary-General and Heads of Governments.

Various other success factors

Other success factors to be mentioned include strong internal governance processes, process management including conflict mediation and institutionalized learning, an independent and well-staffed secretariat, adequate funding and resource management, as well as local capacity development.

3.4 Architecture for Accountability, Transparency, Due Diligence, Monitoring and Review

Accountability and transparency

The need to uphold UN's reputation and values was considered to be fundamental in any discussion on partnerships. For this reason, the importance of accountability, transparency and proper due diligence with regards to partnerships is central to building trust and confidence. Most participants agreed that partners should be held accountable but the question is how this should be done and who should be doing it? Member States, the UN or independent review/audit processes?

Roles of intergovernmental bodies, the UN system and other fora

The role of the General Assembly (GA), ECOSOC and the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) were taken as a given, drawing on the Charter and the mandates already defined. While the GA is the body to set broad policies, ECOSOC is mandated with review and implementation, and the HLPF with ensuring implementation is taking place in line with the 2030 Agenda.

With respect to partnerships, the General Assembly would continue to have broad oversight over partnerships that are linked to the United Nations through the agenda item, "Towards Global Partnerships". ECOSOC, because of its coordination mandate is uniquely situated to review partnership initiatives or commitments as well as guidelines and principles for those partnerships in which the UN system is involved. It can also be the place for a discussion of areas requiring policy guidance, including outcomes of a genuine lessons learned exercise that would include failures.

The HLPF was given the task by GA resolution 67/290 to serve as a platform for partnerships, including the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders. As such, the HLPF could consider reports on partnerships, including those at the national level, linked to annual thematic reviews.

These intergovernmental fora can and should complement each other and apply a holistic approach, rather than creating parallel structures.

The trade-off between creating more bureaucracy and allowing Member States to have all their concerns addressed needed to be kept in mind. The need to potentially create and draw upon the expertise of independent or expert bodies, inspired by ones such as the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) or the Joint Inspection Unit, was raised.

Additionally, the role of major groups and other stakeholders in helping to promote accountability and transparency was recognized. This role needs to be further defined and agreed upon.

UN system coordination

A network of focal points within the UN could improve knowledge management, information sharing and scale up already existing efforts. A network of multi-stakeholder focal points, building on already existing structures, such as the Compact's private sector focal points network, could be established across the UN system in order to promote more effective coordination. It was proposed that this Network could be useful in preparing the ECOSOC Partnership Forum.

Principles, Guidelines, and Due diligence

Member States have a very important role with respect to setting up principles and guidelines and the General Assembly the starting point for providing overarching recommendations and setting policies at the global level.

At the national level, some Member States may not have the capacity to effectively monitor individual partnerships based on global or national guidelines, since assessing what happens to the multitude of partnerships at the country-level is too time-consuming and complex.

The UN system therefore has an important role to play in ensuring that principles and guidelines established at the global level are respected. Reference was made to the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) as a tool that could be used to set a minimum set of guidelines for the UN's engagement with partners at the national level, even though it was also seen as potentially narrowly focused.

A distinction has to be made between guidelines and principles. Principles are not negotiable, whereas guidelines provide a general framework for engagement with partners and can differ depending on the scope and purpose of the partnership.

It was agreed that the Resolution on "Towards Global Partnerships" could be broadened beyond consideration of partnerships with the private sector, to also include partnerships with academia, NGOs and philanthropy and other stakeholders that can support the 2030 Agenda.

While it was considered important to operationalize and implement existing guidelines for the UN's engagement in MSPs, a possible model for better and stronger due diligence processes, going beyond the very broad guidelines currently in place was also proposed.

A first layer of this due diligence procedure would be a set of updated, overarching and normative guidelines for partnerships, endorsed centrally throughout the system and potentially via an inter-governmental decision. These should differ in scope and rigor, relative to the different types of partnerships. Regarding the content of these guidelines, it was stated that these should in general build on already existing guidelines, draw upon the language of the latest GA resolution A/RES/70/224 on "Towards global partnership" and incorporate the integrated, participatory and inclusive approach of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Specifically, one suggestion was to consider that signing onto the Global Compact principles should be a minimum pre-requisite for a private company's engagement with the United Nations. In a second layer, these guidelines should then be complemented by issue-specific guidelines with specialized agencies and programmes taking the lead in formulating them.

Monitoring and Mapping

Participants agreed that monitoring and evaluation need to be an integral part of partnerships from the start. It was further stressed that it was important to ensure that partnerships can deliver concrete actions with strong results.

A mapping of partnerships needs to be undertaken to identify which SDGs are being promoted by multi-stakeholder partnerships and to identify gaps. Mapping should take into account the various contributions of MSPs on a local, national, regional and global level and towards specific SDGs as well as cross-sectoral contributions. The important contribution of data was mentioned in this respect.

It was suggested that UNDESA could play a leading role in mapping of MSPs, aggregating various existing partnerships initiatives, possibly with the assistance of the Global Compact. It was however pointed out that capacity might be an issue with regards to ambitious mapping processes. The “Partnerships for SDGs” platform, also under DESA, provides an important initiative with respect to mapping of partnerships. The platform, however, could be improved with respect to search functions and updated on a regular basis to achieve credibility and transparency.

In order to encourage effective MSPs activity, a proposal was made to identify and put forward “Champion” partnerships at the ECOSOC Partnership Forum as examples for others to follow.

Reporting

It is critically important to ensure partnership initiatives are impactful and this could be done through reporting procedures. To ensure multi-stakeholder partnerships actually deliver on their commitments, internal milestones should be developed between now and 2030, possibly coordinated among partnerships working on the same SDGs or thematic areas.

Some multi-stakeholder partnerships already have monitoring, reporting and review mechanisms but for many they must be improved to ensure proper transparency and accountability. Ensuring the integrity of multi-stakeholder partnerships is critical despite the high cost of monitoring, reporting and review.

At present, there exists no coherent reporting system, with different reporting mechanisms in place, ranging from self-reporting to non-published reporting to donors. It was therefore considered important to establish a central reporting mechanism which could consolidate what the UN is doing in the area of partnerships, possibly building on a “gold standard” for reporting in the UN system that needs to be identified and possibly replicated. In this context, there should however be a distinction in reporting requirements for UN-led partnerships versus all the others, since the UN-led ones need more scrutiny in order to ensure they reflect the values and goals of the UN. The existing reporting requirements could be aligned with guidelines and principles and there should be transparent access to such reports.

The various executive boards of funds and programmes could fulfil a major role in reporting on MSPs. It was felt that they could draw on existing language from resolution A/RES/70/224, in particular paras 13 and 14, to use as a template for reporting. In discussing the role of the various executive boards, it was proposed that the quadrennial comprehensive policy review (QCPR) could be the framework through which guidance is provided to the funds, programmes and agencies on how to manage partnerships at the country level.

As for mega partnerships, it was observed that they often already had internal monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place. For such mega partnerships with UN involvement, these internal mechanisms could be complemented by independent reviews/audits.

As for partnerships registered on the “Partnerships for SDGs” online platform, a lighter reporting process could be established and partnerships failing to report could be removed from the platform. Off-line resources would be needed to screen, review and follow-up on partnerships listed on the online platform.

The Global Compact's communication on progress reporting requirements could be revised to align with the SDGs. It was suggested that it might be interesting to have a discussion on this issue at the ECOSOC Partnership Forum.

Review

Participants agreed that reports should not be produced for the sake of producing them but for effective review processes. In light of the sheer multitude of MSPs, it was proposed that a process of coherent review be put in place, based on the various suggestions for mapping and reporting, leading up to the HLPF.

It was suggested by one participant that Member States could employ integrity measures to ensure the values and principles of the UN are preserved. However, concerns were raised about whether or not the UN system had the capacity to perform effective risk management. The establishment of a "Chief Risk Manager" was proposed, but it was felt that respective executive heads already performed this function to a sufficient degree.

4. Summary of key ideas and proposals

The below summarizes the key proposals emerging from the compiled messages above:

- **A nexus approach should be promoted by the UN and applied by MSPs, reflecting the cross-sectoral nature of the 2030 Agenda.**
- **More focus is needed on MSPs at the country-level and MSPs in LDCs and other countries in special situation need to be encouraged.**
- **UNDESA could take the lead in mapping partnership initiatives, supported by the Global Compact. The online platform "Partnerships for SDGs" should be improved, including search functions and regular updates. There might however be an issue of capacity.**
- **The differentiation between different types of partnerships needs to be further defined and clarified as a first step. It must reflect that partnerships do not only include business, but all relevant stakeholders including philanthropy, NGOs and academia.**
- **The GA resolution on "Towards Global Partnerships" could broaden its focus beyond partnerships with the private sector to also include academia, NGOs, philanthropy and other stakeholders.**
- **More coordination across the UN system is necessary. A network of multi-stakeholder focal points could be established and could be involved in the preparation of the ECOSOC Partnership Forum.**

- The UN system needs to ensure that principles and guidelines established are respected. There might be a role for the QCPR to set a minimum set of guidelines for the UN's engagement with partners at the national level.
- A coherent and strengthened due diligence procedure should be established. A first layer could be to centrally endorse throughout the system a set of overarching guidelines for partnerships, building on already existing guidelines and language from A/RES/70/224. It could specifically also make signing onto the Global Compact principles a requirement for business engagement with the UN. A second layer could complement these guidelines by sector specific guidelines endorsed by specialized agencies.
- Intergovernmental fora can and should complement each other and apply a holistic approach, rather than creating parallel structures. There should be specific and complementing roles for the GA, ECOSOC and the HLPF as reflected by existing mandates. The various executive boards of funds and programmes could also play a role in providing guidance on MSPs involving the UN organizations over which they have oversight.
- Leading to the HLPF, a coherent process of review should be put in place, based on the suggestions for monitoring and review. ECOSOC should lead this process.
- A central reporting mechanism could be established, distinguishing between different types of partnership, with distinct requirements for UN-led partnerships. Reporting should be aligned with guidelines and principles. For mega partnerships, internal monitoring and review mechanisms could be complemented by independent reviews/audits. For partnerships registered on the "Partnerships for SDGs" platform, a lighter reporting process should be put in place, with the option to follow-up and review the listing, but this might require off-line resources.
- A role for independent or expert bodies should be considered in providing expertise and assistance to intergovernmental fora or the UN system in their monitoring and review of MSPs.
- Major groups and other stakeholders should have a role in promoting transparency and accountability.
- A proposal was made to showcase "Champion" partnerships at the ECOSOC Partnership Forum as positive examples for other MSPs. It was also felt that there is a need to establish "safe spaces" for sharing negative results and to promote learning from failure. The Partnership Forum could also be that space. It could also be a creative space to explore new ideas and trends in MSPs.
- The Global Compact's communication on progress reporting requirements could be further aligned with the SDGs and discussed at the Partnership Forum.

5. The way forward

Participants stressed that preserving the integrity of the United Nations, encouraging the collective efforts of all stakeholders to effectively support national priorities, and ensuring that the partnerships involving the United Nations are inclusive, transparent and accountable, must be a priority going forward.

The most important and timely next step will be the upcoming ECOSOC Partnership Forum that will take place on 31 March 2016. The outcome of the EGM will inform the deliberations of the Partnership Forum, both the discussion of an integrated approach through cross-sectoral partnerships for promoting multiple SDGs, and also the discussion on improving accountability and transparency of multi-stakeholder partnerships supporting the 2030 Agenda, including the role of Member States. It was felt that the ECOSOC Partnership Forum should deliver concrete actions on the way forward.

The summary of the upcoming ECOSOC partnership forum's deliberations should be shared with the High Level Political Forum and the high-level segment of the Council. Additionally, the ECOSOC Dialogue on the Longer-term Positioning of the UN Development System could benefit from discussions held during the ECOSOC partnership forum.

It was further proposed that there might be a role for the Friends of Governance for Sustainable Development in engaging and coordinating various stakeholders in their engagement on the question of the accountability and transparency of MSPs.

A follow-up EGM was considered useful to review progress made on the various areas addressed. Many expressed the view that the EGM was a positive experience for participants and benefitted especially from exchanges between Member States, academic experts, representatives of civil society, as well as UN officials. It was felt that it would be important to include a wider range of stakeholders in future deliberations on the role of MSPs in implementing the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.