



2016 PARTNERSHIP FORUM

Promoting accountability and transparency of multi-stakeholder partnerships for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

31 March 2016

Dialogue Two (3:00 p.m. – 5:45 p.m.)

ECOSOC CHAMBER, UN Headquarters, New York

ISSUES NOTE

Background

On 22 December 2015, the General Assembly adopted resolution 70/224 on “Towards global partnerships: a principle-based approach to enhanced cooperation between the United Nations and all relevant partners”¹. Recognizing the contribution of partnerships to the realization of the goals and programmes of the Organization, the General Assembly requested the Economic and Social Council to hold during its Partnership Forum to be held 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, including the role of Member States in review and monitoring.

Over the last two decades, partnerships with the private sector, foundations, non-profit, civil society and non-governmental organizations, have increasingly become an integral part of the work of many United Nations organizations. These partnerships have not only complemented the efforts and increase the impact of the United Nations system to achieve its objectives but also contributed to its renewal by introducing new methods of work and renewed engagement approaches as well as cutting-edge expertise and skills. While these partnerships cannot be a substitute for government actions, they continue to be instrumental in facilitating the implementation of the outcomes of the United Nations conferences and summits as well as cultivating the engagement of multiple stakeholders. This also includes the realization of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that were adopted at the UN Summit for Sustainable Development in September 2015.

¹ This resolution was the outcome of negotiations on the agenda item “Toward Global Partnerships” which has been on the agenda of the General Assembly since its fifty-fifth session and is addressed biennially since its fifty-sixth session.

Since 2000, partnerships have been discussed at the United Nations General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council through resolutions and dedicated sessions. The Assembly has addressed the issue of enhancing partnerships between the United Nations and all its relevant partners since 2002. In its resolutions under this item, the General Assembly has encouraged the United Nations system to “continue to find innovative and additional ways to achieve lasting impact by identifying and replicating successful partnership models and pursuing new forms of collaboration”. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development call for a greater use of multi-stakeholder partnerships to help countries achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Over the years, the Council has addressed partnerships for sustainable development, initially through its Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). More than 200 multi-stakeholder partnerships—defined as voluntary initiatives undertaken by governments and relevant stakeholders, such as major groups and institutional stakeholders—were launched during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 with the aim to expedite the implementation of the Summit’s outcome. At the 11th session of CSD in 2003, Member States agreed on criteria and guidelines for these partnerships, including the need to ensure transparency and accountability and an online platform to encourage registration, monitoring and reporting was established. In 2008, the Council itself began its own annual informal discussion of partnerships, through the holding of an annual Partnership Forum, as part of its preparations for the Annual Ministerial Review. The intent was to engage the private sector, foundations, non-profit and civil society organizations in a dialogue on how to accelerate progress in reaching the internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs.

Since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), voluntary multi-stakeholder partnership initiatives have been recognized as complimentary efforts to government-led actions by various conferences and their outcomes, including the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, the fourth UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries, the Second UN Conference on Landlocked Developing Countries, the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States, the Third International Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, and most recently the UN Sustainable Development Summit which adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is also expected that the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in October 2016 will feature multi-stakeholder partnerships as a means of implementation.

United Nations overview of partnerships

Beginning with the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, a number of partnerships for sustainable development were registered, on a voluntary basis, with the Commission on Sustainable Development. Their inclusion into the registry maintained by the UN’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs was determined by their adherence to the Bali Principles, updated by CSD 11 decision². Since 2012, partnerships that register are to adhere to the SMART criteria, namely that they be specific, measurable, achievable and accountable, resource-based and focused on results with timelines for implementation and transparency by all parties.

² https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/dsd/dsd_aofw_par/par_mand_csd11deci.shtml

Guidelines on cooperation between the United Nations and the business sector have been established by the Secretary General of the United Nations since 2000, and were updated in 2009 and again in 2015. They specify that cooperation between the UN and business should be principle-based and that an overall value framework for cooperation is the UN Global Compact. The latest guidelines strengthen transparency by requiring disclosure of partner's contributions and matching funds for all relevant partnerships, including at the country-level". The Guidelines note that UN entities should make this information available on their respective websites, and should also publish such information at the UN-Business Action Hub (business.un.org), which offers a centralized, searchable online platform for system-wide UN-business engagement that can serve as an important facilitator of increased partnership transparency. The Guidelines are also aligned with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which were endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council, and call for robust due diligence. The guidelines also now require that partnership agreements provide for clear and efficient accountability procedures both at the level of each partner and between partners, including, in accordance with the regulations and rules governing each entity, a monitoring and evaluation process. These guidelines are supplemented by individually-established guidelines within several UN agencies.

The Partnerships for SDGs online platform, which was originally developed following a mandate from the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), aims to be a place for sharing knowledge, expertise, technology and progress from all multi-stakeholder partnerships in supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, in line with the 2030 Agenda. The platform has been further aligned with the 17 SDGs and provides access to a range of partnerships initiatives, including commitments from Every Woman Every Child, the Sustainable Energy for All, Global Compact, Partnerships for Small Island Developing States, voluntary commitments from Rio+20, among others.

While these platforms can contribute to the knowledge on existing multi-stakeholder partnerships, improvements are needed to ensure accountability and transparency for partnerships that are led by or associated with the UN.

Changing nature of partnerships

It is generally acknowledged that, going forward, partnerships associated with the UN must be closely aligned with intergovernmentally agreed mandates, in particular the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, if they are to contribute to accelerating progress in achieving and producing more sustainable and transformative impacts. The active engagement and participation of multiple stakeholders, from government, business, non-profits, civil society and others, will be crucial for advancing the deliverability of member states commitments. This will also increase the effectiveness of existing and future development efforts in support of the SDGs.

It is also acknowledged that it is no longer acceptable to simply declare that partnership initiatives contribute to achieving global development goals. A process of review and monitoring is needed to demonstrate in concrete terms how this is being accomplished. There is also emerging consensus in the development community that there should be some attempt to bring coherence to the

proliferation of partnership initiatives associated with the work of the United Nations so as to better assess their effectiveness and impact.³

The capacity of the Organization to carry out these partnerships and to ensure quality and integrity is limited and needs to be improved upon to achieve a more supportive enabling environment for United Nations partnership activity as well as ensuring greater accountability, coherence, and efficiency. Ensuring transparency, accountability and effective monitoring would be particularly challenging in the case of cross-sectoral multi-stakeholder partnerships. Also critical is that partnerships in which the UN system engages respect essential principles such as national ownership and are held accountable on the delivery of commitments they made.

A role for member states in the review and monitoring of multi-stakeholder partnerships

It is clear that a broad role for Member States in review and monitoring of partnerships already exists. Member States of the General Assembly have broad oversight over partnerships linked to the United Nations through the agenda item, “Towards Global Partnerships”. The Member States of ECOSOC have provided views on partnerships through the informal Partnership Forum. This role could be further expanded in view of the Council’s charter mandate to regulate interaction between the United Nations and NGOs which also covers a range of civil society organizations including the private sector, foundations, academia, among others. The Council is also the body that coordinates the activities of the UN system and as such it is uniquely situated to provide guidance on partnership initiatives or commitments in which the UN system is involved. General Assembly resolution 67/290, which established the High Level Political Forum, also gave it the role to provide a platform for partnerships, including the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders.

Principles and guidelines

The General Assembly, in its biennial resolution on “Towards global partnerships: a principle-based approach to enhanced cooperation between the United Nations and all relevant partners” has provided a broad framework for UN’s involvement in partnerships, which is defined as “voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both public and non-public, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and, as mutually agreed, to share risks and responsibilities, resources and benefits”.

Principles and guidelines, that are intergovernmentally endorsed, would be important in ensuring that the values of the United Nations are upheld in multi-stakeholder partnerships that the UN is engaged with. In this regard, the General Assembly could provide broad oversight over partnerships that are linked to the United Nations through the agenda item “Towards Global Partnerships”. While the principles set by Member States would apply to all the United Nations entities forging a multi-stakeholder partnership, different guidelines could be provided depending on the focus and scope of partnerships. These guidelines could build on the existing ones while incorporating the integrated, participatory and inclusive approach of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

³ An existing initiative promoting greater coherence and capacity-building within the Organization on partnerships involving business is the UN Private Sector Focal Points Network. Chaired by the UN Global Compact, the Network involves over 40 UN entities and provides an important forum for the exchange of best practices, lessons learned and innovations in partnerships with the private sector.

Monitoring and review

Given its role as the central mechanism for system-wide coordination in the economic, social and related fields, ECOSOC would be 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 could also be the place for a discussion of areas requiring policy guidance with regard to partnerships' contribution to policy integration towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Partnership Forum could demonstrate how partnerships can respond to the strategic challenges posed by the 2030 agenda, as well as the ways in which they could more effectively demonstrate impact and added value. Such reviews would help promote accountability, build trust and transparency of partnership efforts, while helping to ensure UN's values and mandates are preserved.

The High-Level Political Forum, given its mandate to provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and relevant stakeholders, could consider reports on partnerships, including those at the national level, linked to annual thematic reviews.

Going forward, it will be important to utilize already existing mechanisms and structures rather than duplicating efforts or creating more bureaucracy, including in reporting procedures. The General Assembly, ECOSOC and the High-Level Political Forum could complement each other, rather than creating parallel structures in the review and monitoring of multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Key Questions for Discussion

- How can the UN system strengthen coherence and coordination of UN-led multi-stakeholder partnerships? What are the additional challenges involved in ensuring the transparency and accountability of cross-sectoral multi-stakeholder partnerships, and how can these be addressed?
- How can multi-stakeholder partnerships involving the United Nations be more transparent and accountable?
- How can the UN improve its due diligence, monitoring and review of its partnerships that contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?
- What kind of reporting would be appropriate for different types of partnerships? How can the existing reporting requirements be aligned with UN partnership guidelines and principles?
- What types of partnership models have been successful in establishing clear monitoring and review policies? What are some best practices that can be highlighted?
- How could the role of Member States in reviewing and monitoring multi-stakeholder partnerships implementing the 2030 Agenda be enhanced to ensure the reputational integrity of the United Nations in such partnership initiatives? What could be the division of

labour on the review of partnerships of the General Assembly, ECOSOC and the High-level Political Forum under the auspices ECOSOC and the General Assembly?