

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER INITIATIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERLOCUTORS

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SUMMARY

This article argues that the complex multi-stakeholder arrangements anticipated for implementing Sustainable Development Goals call for a distinct type of host: an interlocutor. This central idea arises from new comparative research on multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) undertaken in four countries: Costa Rica, Indonesia, Kenya and Kyrgyzstan. This work adds a detailed dimension to meta-studies on conditions for success and practical guides for establishing and running MSIs. It begins to fill a significant gap in knowledge by analysing the attributes and competencies required for effectively orchestrating MSIs as well as illuminating their relative significance over time. The context is an anticipated expansion in demand for finely tuned and skilled hosting of Sustainable Development Goals-inspired MSIs. This task will probably be more complicated than MSIs associated with climate change and Millennium Development Goals, both of which saw business on the side lines with uneven attention paid to the principle of local ownership. Recognising and investing in interlocation as a pivotal role can increase the performance of internationally inspired MSIs which, to date, have a mixed but generally poor record of effectiveness. © 2017 The Authors Public Administration and Development Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

KEY WORDS—interlocutor; host; multi-stakeholder initiatives; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Costa Rica; Kenya; Indonesia; Kyrgyzstan

INTRODUCTION

Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is set to rely on mechanisms bringing together diverse actors to actively align their efforts towards a shared objective. This article does not take issue with analysts' critically questioning of a pro-multi-stakeholder stance. Their experience cautions against too readily assuming that cross-sector, public–private partnerships and other multiple institutional arrangements are suited to the complex tasks and reconciling contending interests often involved (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011; Brouwer and Woodhill, 2015; Stern *et al.*, 2015; Brockmyer and Fox, 2015). Rather, we critically observe that these and other important works seldom provide detailed information about the actual practice of and responsibility for guiding a multi-stakeholder initiative (MSI) or the competences required to do so, yet this function is vital for effectiveness. Moreover, observations about generally poor performance of MSIs raise worries about the efficacy of existing 'hosting' setups (Isenman *et al.*, 2011; Pattberg and Widerberg, 2014). The more so, given an anticipation of added difficulties in SDG-driven multiple relational engagements required at greater numbers with higher scales of integration as part of an Agenda 2030 institutional ecosystem (Freeman *et al.*, 2016).

This article argues that the competencies of the diverse setups that guide MSIs have received inadequate attention, leading to a central idea or proposition that this function merits recognition as a dedicated, professional role within international aid and development. Findings from recent empirical research are used to explore and understand 'interlocutors' as an umbrella category for the secretariats, focal points, platforms, hosts and other labels for a critical player in making MSIs work well. By its nature, interlocation is an active engagement in 'conversations'

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between parties that, within the context of MSIs, is a role shouldering an intrinsic co-responsibility for collaborative processes involving, inter alia, leadership by exerting influence without authority, multi-actor management, conflict resolution and responsiveness to changing circumstances. In this sense, an interlocutor combines, amongst others, skills and practices associated with facilitation, convening, communications and brokering (Turner *et al.*, 2012; Partnership Brokers Association, 2013) that are reviewed elsewhere (Fowler, 2014). Because of its salience for SDG design and implementation, this article also pays attention to the often neglected interplay between internationally inspired and constructed MSIs and the Paris Declaration's principle of local ownership (OECD, 2005), which functional and power relationships between international and national interlocutors are meant to ensure. This article provides analysis of data and findings from a four-country comparative study of MSIs (Biekart and Fowler, 2016). The article addresses the question: what attributes do MSI interlocutors require to fulfil this role well and what processes of interlocution are involved in their application? The research approach involved three types of comparisons based on empirical diversity. First are comparisons of cases within countries and second across countries to identify salient contextual variables (Fowler and Biekart, 2016b). A third type of comparison was provided by including an international MSI—the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement (SUN)—which is present in each of the countries selected for their geo-historical diversity: Costa Rica, Indonesia, Kenya and Kyrgyzstan (Fowler and Biekart, 2016a).

The central proposition starts, in section two, with a brief discussion on the first-order problem of comparing MSI overview studies. This review is followed by the conceptual grounding for multi-stakeholder approaches to solve social dilemmas that create the need for 'orchestration'. These explanations are followed by the background to and working definitions of interlocutors and interlocution. Section three sets out theories of collective action that give rise to interlocutors as critical role players and perspectives on what they do. Then, three issues are discussed which require continuous attention to ensure that the calculus of collaboration for each stakeholder is not disrupted to the extent that the interlocution process flounders. An enhanced demand on interlocutor performance under increasing conditions of uncertainty makes the function particularly challenging and is more likely to be so in the future.

With role and challenges explained, section four introduces information about the country context and the cases providing the empirical evidence on which new research is based. The problems of drawing on similar studies are pointed out, as are the difficulties faced in data collection about interlocutor behaviour. As the substantive empirical contribution, the article then unpacks the attributes and activities that interlocutors undertake and how this evolves as MSIs unfold. Concluding section five argues the merits of treating interlocution as a professional field. Reflecting on the generally disappointing experience of MSI performance, hosting SDGs will demand quantitative growth and qualitative improvement, where dedicated investment and local ownership will be critical for effective implementation.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER INITIATIVES

With various labels, MSIs have gained popularity as mechanisms to address complex societal problems whose causes span diverse institutions and whose resolution requires the alignment and application of different competencies and locations of authority and power. Inclusion of many 'sector' actors to pursue the SDGs can be taken as an article of implementing faith (Dodds, 2015). This motivation does not imply consensus on what qualifies as an MSI, which are sometimes distinguished between intermittent dialogues and practical long term-collaborations (Bosco and Guénéheux, 2015; Hemmati and Rogers, 2015: 6). But, whatever the case, MSIs need to be 'orchestrated' into being and then guided to achieve what is intended. Deploying comparative analysis to understand this task is problematic.

Studying multi-stakeholder initiatives comparatively

Comparing MSIs is not straight forward. This section discusses difficulties faced by analysts as a backdrop to locating the significance of MSI orchestration.

As a subject of study, MSIs are highly dependent on the point of departure applied for categorisation, analysis and interpretation. The initial perspective pre-determines criteria for MSI definition and inclusion in comparative work. In terms of past approaches, some studies extract and provide an overview of MSI lessons learned in terms, for example, of their political and operating principles as well as probable limitations (World Bank, 2014). Alternatively, MSI overviews, such as OECD (2015) and Stern *et al.* (2015), can interrogate a critical theme, such as partnership, disaggregating factors such as their scale and objectives. A narrow focus on a specific international initiative can be seen in an MSI promoting the transparency of extractive industries (Aaronson, 2011; Rich and Moberg, 2015), the promotion of social accountability (Brockmyer and Fox, 2015) and the issue of their governance (Isenman *et al.*, 2011). Another point of entry is MSIs aligned around a particular area of development intervention, such as agriculture and natural resource management (Brouwer and Woodhill, 2015).

These variations show that MSIs are poorly defined, as are the labels applied. For example, in describing the concept and practical expressions of MSIs, Brouwer and Woodhill (2015: 14) note some 20 plus labels, while Stern *et al.* (2015) identify 15. This type of meta-analysis illustrates a complicating influence of framing which rely on poorly or non-defined analytic categories. This condition makes comparisons of similar terms and labels highly problematic, for example when the same case, such as the *Global Alliance for Vaccines Initiative* is placed in different MSI typologies seen in Stern *et al.* (2015: 13) and Isenman *et al.* (2011: 11).

Together, the diversity of understanding MSIs poses difficulties when applying comparative analysis across studies starting from ostensibly similar, but actually different, perspectives and purposes. Addressing these types of problem will be seen when it comes to unpacking hosting arrangements while clearly specifying the functionality and attributes of interlocutors. We proceed towards the technical features of hosting by first interrogating the call for better ‘orchestration’ of the expansion of development actors identified in relation to aid resourcing that feeds though into SDG implementation via MSIs.

Orchestration of developmental multi-stakeholder initiatives and beyond

In their prospective view on international aid financing, from the Paris Declaration onwards, and using the *Global Alliance for Vaccines Initiative* as an example, Severino and Ray (2010: 6, 43) speak of ‘the birth of hyper collective action’ as a necessity to address the world’s complex or ‘wicked’ problems. In relation to the question: who should take on responsibility for moving in this direction, their proposal is:

These reflections lead us to suggest a new ambition for multilateral organizations—becoming the agents of effective hypercollective action (Severino and Ray, 2010: 2).

A comparative study of five global MSIs suggests that a multilateral organisation is allocated an orchestration function in relation to each of the Sustainable Development Goals, where ECOSOC is possibly mandated with oversight (Dodds, 2015: 11, 14). A paper by Klingebiel and Paulo (2015) also deploys the term ‘Orchestration Instrument’ to describe the sort of initiative required:

Orchestration is a mode of governance by which an “orchestrator” enables other actors (the “intermediaries”) to cooperate and achieve common goals. The orchestrator has no direct control over the intermediaries but exerts influence through facilitative measures (Klingebiel and Paulo, 2015: 3).

In their proposal, the role of an orchestrator is also placed with governments or official international organisations rather than other institutional options and locations.

However, the importance of collective action—hyper or otherwise—is not limited to aided change and the SDGs. Across societies collaborations are being crafted to deal with the complex problems they face, spawning an organisational evolution with entities that are tailored for an ‘orchestration’ function at multiple socio-political levels and economic scales (Fowler and Biekart, 2016c). An evolution of this role player in societies generally is set to continue, a topic beyond the development cooperation scope of this article.

In sum, it is not just the terrain of international aid that requires better orchestration or hosting: there are societal problems spawning new organisational types tuned to assembling, guiding and bringing MSIs to fruition. This actor category we refer to as an interlocutor.

Multi-stakeholder initiative hosting: interlocutors and interlocution

An earlier study to address problems of gaining collective action across diverse stakeholders (Fowler, 2014) expanded and applied the concept of interlocutor. Fletcher Tembo (2013) had identified this function as critical in promoting micro-level social accountability. His descriptions of interlocution and an interlocutor (Tembo, 2013: 7–8) are associated with collaborative processes intended to change institutionalised ‘rules of the game’ by organisations or individuals embodying characteristics that are tailored to context and the collective-action problem. Tembo makes the point that because purposes and situations co-determine what an interlocutor and interlocution look like, it is not possible to provide a generic specification or definition.

In the context of aid, the current system is populated with entities designed to fulfil an Interlocutor function that are accorded a wide variety of names: Host, Secretariat, Focal Point, Platform, Facilitator, Node, Orchestrator and so on. In this article, the term interlocutor is a label covering a wide array of names for entities that fulfil a collaboration function for MSIs. At issue for effectiveness is how interlocutors go about their role. Our research was designed to investigate this dimension of MSIs.

Case studies sought to answer three principle questions. (i) What country conditions work for and against the effectiveness of MSIs? (ii) What attributes do interlocutors require and apply to make MSIs successful? (iii) What do stakeholders’ experiences say about improving MSI performance? This article concentrates on the second

Table 1. Comparison of country cases

Country	Case	Brief description
Costa Rica	MSC—SUN	Scaling up Nutrition—International Initiative Commencing 2014.
	MSD—Diversity Movement	MSI directed at policy reform to afford equal access to medical services and health insurance for LGBTI.
	MSD—ANDA	A participatory citizen-inspired process for new legislation on the country’s water resources.
	MSC—Western Forum	Citizen action to alter the country’s approach to investment in public infrastructure—starting with the San Jose highway.
	MSC—Grupo RBA	Business-led collaboration with public institutions, foundations and communal organisations to develop local eco-tourism.
Indonesia	MSC—SUN	Scaling up Nutrition—International Initiative Commencing 2011.
	MSD—AMAN	Alliance for legislation to protect the rights of indigenous people.
	MSC—KPAM	Re-launch of the national AIDS Commission.
Kenya	MSC—SAPA	CSO-led coalition for poverty alleviation.
	MSC—SUN	Scaling up Nutrition—International Initiative Commencing 2012.
	MSD—CSO Ref. Group	CSO-led coalition to prevent new amendments to the Public Benefit Organisations Act that will restrict civic space.
	MSD—Usalama Reforms	CSO-led dialogue to reform Kenya’s policing and the security sector.
	MSC—Agr. Sector Dev Support	Multi-actor collaboration to commercialise agriculture through value chains in each of the 47 counties.
Kyrgyzstan	MSC—SUN	Scaling up Nutrition—International Initiative Commencing 2011.
	MSD—Foreign Agents	Initiative to counter the re-introduction of a bill labelling some CSOs as ‘foreign agents’.
	MSC—Public Councils	MSI to monitor, set standards, open up information, improve accountability and annually assess the performance of ministries.
	MSC—Regional Human. Forum	From a post ethnic violence humanitarian MSC to a Social Development MSD in the city of Osh.

Source: Biekart and Fowler (2016: 52).

question. The nature of gaps in existing literature pointed to the value of applying the principles of grounded theory to provide a diverse set of conditions as a broad basis for analysis and reduction of bias. Following a scoping exercise, 17 cases (see Table 1) provided empirical data in four countries—Costa Rica, Indonesia, Kenya and Kyrgyzstan—with diverse histories and operating conditions. Document study and interviews with some 130 participants followed an agreed protocol that allowed local adaptations as practical conditions demanded (Biekart and Fowler, 2016; Fowler and Biekart, 2016b).

To assist in unpacking context, as a heuristic exercise, a range of available indices are used to ‘calculate’ a country’s pre-disposition for or against the collaboration required for an MSI (Fowler and Biekart, 2016b: Part 1). Based on their salience with respect to theories of collaborative action discussed below, six characteristics were identified for which country comparative indices are available. These are: (i) *culture* in terms of, for example, acceptance or otherwise of power differences; (ii) *social development measures*, such as Human Development Indices; (iii) *economic development metrics*, including inequality, ease of doing business, poverty head count, GDP per capita and so on; (iv) *citizen associational and activism*; (v) *the relationship between public administration and politics*; and (vi) *the quality of governance*, including trust, social fragmentation and freedom of information. This method was triangulated by means of comparisons with ranking data from the *Index of Social Development* (Van Staveren, 2015). A tentative conclusion from this information, supplemented by interviews, is that, of the four countries, Kenya was the least amenable to multi-institutional collaboration. More dedicated work will be required to determine the extent to which an assessment of collaborative pre-dispositions will be a useful guide when working on MSI/SDG strategies.

THE INTERLOCUTION FUNCTION: THEORIES AND CHALLENGES

The performance of MSIs raises concerns about their efficacy when it comes to operationalising the SDGs which, inter alia, will make heavier demands on participation by businesses which have been notable by their general absence (Pattberg and Widerberg, 2014; Reid *et al.*, 2014). More complicated future operating conditions increase the importance of understanding what interlocution entails in order to bring about systematic investment in the competencies called for. This section begins by setting out the theoretical groundings that are applied to MSIs which can act as a guide to interlocutor tasks and competencies. This step is followed by issues that are likely to make SDG-related MSIs even more difficult to accomplish. Complicating factors include diversification of resource providers, gaining substantive engagement by businesses—for example in blended financing arrangements—as well as a growing polycentricity of authority.

Interlocution in theory

Theory indicates that the primary task of interlocutors and interlocution processes is straightforward. It is to reach a relational condition where multiple stakeholders are prepared to accept sub-optimal solutions for themselves when set against optimising collective action for addressing a shared social dilemma. Free-riding is ‘negotiated’ out of play. The reason that such situations are dilemmas is that at least one outcome yields higher returns for all participants, but rational participants making independent choices are not predicted to achieve this outcome. Social dilemmas thus involve a conflict between individual rationality and optimal outcomes for a group Even if some individuals cooperate, the others are predicted to “free-ride” on the contributions of the cooperators (Ostrom, 2005: 3–5).

Theories about how this mutually optimal condition between stakeholders with their contending logics, issues, performance metrics, time frames and so on can be achieved offer less consensus. One approach to this issue is attracted by theories of group and organisational psychology leading to participants’ establishment of a collective MSI identity (Haslam, 2001) with ‘hybrid’ characteristics, where inclusion, trust building and communications (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015) play critical roles. Alternatively, the pursuit of organisational interests, associated for example with corporate strategic alliances, reflects utilitarian theories of resource dependency (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) operating as a selective instrument in organisational ecology by combining entities that have useful

comparative advantages that aid a firms' sustainability (NBS, 2013). Collaboration, then, is also about managing external relations and reputation (Freeman, 1984). A third theoretical orientation for MSI framing and formation of collaborative process is informed by power differentiation in relation to social interventions (Mitroff, 1983). With human rights as a common theoretical grounding, here interlocution is seen as a task of recognising and reconciling the numerous power asymmetries involved in pursuing collaboration towards the creation of public goods (Menocal, 2014).

These theories point to the type of competencies or functional attributes that interlocution calls for. Specifically, is an ability to establish group dynamic processes which mediate contending interests consistent with the principle of voluntary participation: alternative dispute resolution practices and conflict management systems are illustrations of what is required (Rahim, 2001; Kriesberg, 2009). Generally framed, inter-personal skills and abilities to orchestrate 'affinities across differences' are likely to predominate, allied to a style of leadership that cannot rely on coercion.

It can be argued that expectations of MSIs associated with SDG implementation will reflect some or all of these theoretical orientations, making the interlocution function deeply complex and difficult to do well. It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising, that from a detailed analysis of past MSI performance, Pattberg and Widerberg (2016: 50) find:

While bottom-up transnational multi-stakeholder arrangements are widely perceived as a potential contribution to addressing global change, *recent studies find little evidence for positive performance*. This poses an urgent and important challenge for researchers and practitioners to understand and improve the effectiveness of partnerships, in particular, since their popularity only seems to increase despite their mixed track record. It is also a particularly timely quest given that the year 2015 comprises high-profile negotiations taking place on the post-2015 development. (emphasis added).

Our research offered perspectives on what MSIs might face in the Agenda 2030 of international development.

Multi-stakeholder initiative into the future

Future scenarios for operationalising MSIs in relation to SDGs, and more widely in terms, for example of climate change, suggest greater rather than lesser challenges for an interlocutors' work. First, global governance is in a state of flux as power shifts from West to East while at the same time problems such as global warming and economic volatility call for concerted and resolute collective action. The necessary restructuring of governance is one source of uncertainty in international relations likely to permeate SDGs (Kanie *et al.*, 2012; WEF, 2014).

Initiatives by the (inter)national business community to become corporate citizens open up greater prospects for their engagement in MSIs, but they are likely to add to demands for managing conflicting interests. For example, at its instigation, the SUN Movement established a conflict of interest resolution mechanism (GSO, 2013). Conflict also involves contentions between stakeholders within an institutional type and across multiple locations of authority. For example, the Ministries of Water, of Agriculture and of the Environment and of Energy in Costa Rica did not see eye to eye on provisions of a new water law (Fowler and Biekart, 2016b: Part II). Partnership for development between government and other actors points to the critical importance of 'unpacking' the administrative state as such, but also in relation to politics. In Kenya, newly formed Counties are in disagreement with central government about accessing resources, such as overseas development assistance (Biekart and Fowler, 2016: 27). Moreover, not all rule-making is in the hands of governments. Multiple sites and layers of governing—national, local, municipal and so on—may be in the hands of different elected parties, as is the case of Western Cape Province in South Africa which is not controlled by the national governing party, the African National Congress.

Another structural issue is increasing asymmetry in (types) of power and capabilities within and between stakeholders associated with growing economic inequality (Stiglitz, 2012). Civil society actors—such as Indigenous People in an Indonesia case—may have the power of numbers on the streets and in the media, but are often less well-endowed when it comes to expert technical knowhow, sustained leverage and financial security for a long MSI process (Fowler and Biekart, 2016b: Part III). Persistent corruption alloys a nexus between political and economic elites where the rules of an MSI game can be pre-determined by the more powerful. Participation can be a

power game in and of itself (Gaventa, 2010) that must be well navigated if illegitimacy, non-accountability and lack of transparency are to be avoided. Creating a fair relational playing field for MSI participants is a pivotal interlocutor task with the 'virtual' power of social media adding complications as it can combine civic agency as well as fragmenting 'followers' into disparate groups (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013).

The SDGs will contain a structural issue of relative power between international interlocutors and their national counterparts. The SUN Movement demonstrates that the choice of institutional location must be tailored to each country context, in part because the voluntary participation called for can be put off when hosted by government (SUN, 2013; Fowler and Biekart, 2016a). Comparison with in-country MSIs highlights the significance of the source and control of resources that an MSI must rely on and deploy. International MSIs that are simultaneously gate keepers to funding face particular relational challenges of not applying top-down prescriptions when it comes to the local power and authority required for country ownership (Biekart and Fowler, 2016: Annex II).

Third, stakeholders are differentially sensitive to changes in their operating environment(s). Where they exist, periodic elections are intended to test the existing regime and, if found wanting, replace it with another. In all of the four countries taking part in the MSI research, an elected change of regime leads to a change in senior civil servants, a 'democratic disruption' of continuity. In Kenya, because of their promotion of the International Criminal Court to try the country's president, the civic human rights community was more affected than business by conditions stemming from electoral violence in 2007. When he was subsequently elected, the actions of civil society are being turned back on them through restrictive legislation (Biekart and Fowler, 2016: 22). Changes to the law in Costa Rica on expanding access to social welfare had most effect on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Intersexual people. Far reaching decentralisation in Indonesia alters the rules of the game and distribution of authority with which citizens and their organisations must interact (Biekart and Fowler, 2016: 21). As a result, interlocutors must be constantly sensitive to the wider systems in which all stakeholders live and interact, with differentiated results on their collaborative motivation and ability.

The general point is that MSIs are subject to disruptive forces altering the calculus of gains and losses for each stakeholder in future scenarios where greater instability is more likely than stability. In sum, interlocutors are often at the nexus of complexity in power relations and change processes described by Ramalingam (2013) and others (Burns and Worsley, 2015) as systemic. What, then, does this imply for the interlocutor function, roles, activities and aptitudes?

INTERLOCUTION: WHAT IS IN THE ROLE?

With a concentration on interlocutors in different operating conditions and with varied objectives, research design allowed comparisons of country-derived MSI with those of the internationally inspired SUN Movement. This setup made it possible to identify similarities and differences when operating across a country-international interface. The approach complements global MSI studies by starting from within rather than starting from without, so to speak, as a way of interrogating the principle of local ownership when a country is left to its own devices. The next section therefore concentrates on detailing the role of interlocutors seen from this original research as well as from other studies.

Guides to making MSIs effective cover evidence from a wide range of cases. The two penned by Stern *et al.* (2015) and Brouwer and Woodhill (2015) are good examples of MSIs spanning multiple types of institutions, while Seitanidi and Ryan (2010) assemble and analyse 'binary' arrangements between civil society organisations and businesses. The former two studies shows how the frame of reference authors' adopt pre-condition the concepts and categories applied to interlocutor roles, tasks and attributes. This problematic reality of MSIs studies requires more analysis before describing how we dealt with this.

Interlocutor function

There is as yet no generally accepted categorisation of the global MSI architecture. Each analyst determines what is appropriate according to an analytic angle that satisfies the reason for the exercise. Consequently, there is little

consensus what terms mean; a function for one may be a task or activity for another. For example, in explaining an interlocutor—in their terminology a facilitator—Brouwer and Woodhill (2015: 124) ascribe three core roles: convening, moderating and catalysing. Isenman *et al.* (2011: 40) put forward the functions of an international secretariat in the following way: a catalytic and facilitative role, avoiding substituting for others; capabilities dedicated to harmonising a countries mobilisation of external financing as part of supporting advocacy, monitoring and national structures; with a limited group of professionals, less as experts than as enablers of peer-to-peer support and learning. Table 2 compares three studies in terms of what an interlocutor should do/provide/collectively achieve.

Bearing in mind that MSIs rely on voluntary participation, from our research, the following distinctions can be made about interlocutors in terms of: (i) *Function*—an MSI-specific responsibility and mandate as an interlocutor allied to the interlocution processes required. (ii) *Role*—the main behaviours called for by the function, in our cases convenor, mediator, systematiser and communicator. (iii) *Attributes* are the individual and combined skills creating the organisational competences applied to undertake the roles.

From previous work (Fowler and Biekart, 2016b: 10–11), seven types of attributes were provided as an initial guide for interviews about stakeholders' experiences. These are: (i) *Leadership and conflict management*: this attribute calls for a style of leadership that gains respect by exerting influence without having or exercising formal authority, anticipating conflict as a starting condition for collaboration. (ii) *Trustworthiness and trust building*: are essential, both in the integrity and technical competence of the interlocutor as individual and/or as an organisation, as well as to be progressively gained between stakeholders. (iii) *System sensitivity*: almost all intractable problems are local somewhere. Under such conditions, the task of an interlocutor is to unpack and find multi-stakeholder entry points to alter systemic relations. (iv) *Governance awareness*: sensitivity towards game-changing or rule-changing objectives involves a good understanding of existing configurations of power, authority and governance associated with decision making. (v) *Long haul commitment*: to fulfil a role of instigating collective action and bringing it to fruition at scale, interlocutors are unlikely to be detached from the inspirations for and the consequences of results. The professional task calls for an acceptance of 'being implicated' that is belonging to processes and outcomes. (vi) *Polyglot communication*: stakeholder diversity brings multiple jargons and vocabularies where the same words cannot be relied on to mean the same thing to everyone. A competent interlocutor needs attributes of a polyglot, speaking and 'reading' stakeholders' communications which can have multiple meanings. (vii) *Sovereignty*: is an attribute of MSI governance to ensure an interlocutor's behavioural 'sovereignty' and accountability, if not autonomy. By this is meant a clear allocation of decision rights that do not compromise independence of thought and action towards a partisan or prescriptive interpretation. With these definitions in mind, how did interlocution proceed across the 17 cases?

Table 2. Comparative expectations of interlocutor work

SUN stewardship study ¹ (ranked high to low priority)	GDI study ²	MSI guide ³
Global political leadership/energy	Coordinating across sectors	Gaining leadership/political support
Catalyse financial resources	Strengthening industry practices	Gathering and motivating stakeholders
Develop M&E/tracking tools	Reaching scale attracting business	Creating a sense of urgency
Empower and facilitate countries	Build common transparent framework	Delineating roles
Develop advocacy and communications	Sharing knowledge	Aligning goals and expectations
Undertake research	Member services	Trust building and holding
Provide expertise/training	Communities of practice	Encouraging interaction
	Collective advocacy/voice	Capacity building
	Campaign management	Logistical co-ordination
	Fundraising and management	Communication and media support
	Aggregating/dispersing data	Conflict mediation

¹Isenman *et al.*, 2011: 11.

²Stern *et al.*, 2015: 13.

³Brouwer and Woodhill, 2015: 24.

Interlocution processes

Variation in nomenclatures and perspectives is found in analysing MSIs interlocution processes from start to finish. Nevertheless, the basic approach relied on in MSI guides is the same: get the front end right, do not try and predict too much and adjust as you go along. The guide by Stern *et al.* (2015: 20) sets out four stages in MSI early life: initiation, design, launch and start-up. Consistent with a complexity perspective Brouwer and Woodhill (2015) pay detailed attention to the design of MSIs process, relying less on arriving at detailed linear plans than on principles to be adhered to as collaboration and learning unfold. Their interlocution model revolves around: (i) *initiation*; (ii) *adaptive planning*; (iii) *collaborative action*; and (iv) *reflective monitoring* as a form of continual improvement.

Many complex factors feed into uncertainties that work against an over-reliance on planning, so insightful responsiveness is vital. This perspective is consistent with numerous works which point to un-predictability as the norm for development interventions calling for an iterative and reflective practice (Ramalingam *et al.*, 2014).

Our study design portrayed interlocution as a three stage 'AGEing process' of Assembling stakeholders, Guiding collaboration and helping Embed change in society. This basic framework was populated with illustrative tasks to which interviewees could dispute, respond and add. Movement from one stage to the other was not to be predetermined (Biekart and Fowler, 2016: 39–41). This process framework formed the basis of interviews with stakeholders to express their experience by prioritising the seven interlocutor attributes across the three interlocution stages. In other words to answer the question: is there a relative change in weighting of attributes as an MSI progresses?

The data resulting from interviews about the application of interlocutor attributes over time require caution. There was inconsistency across countries in how this information was elicited. In some cases, it was more practical to pose questions to a stakeholder group for discussion and rating. In others, individual assessments proved a better approach. To enable a consistent comparison, the country cases ascribed a score for an attribute in each stage of 1 (insignificant) to 4 (very significant). This re-calibration met a second limitation. The age of the cases differed in respect of degrees where 'embedding' was a fact—a change in a law—or hardly in play, for example where the location of the interlocutor was still in negotiation. There are also cases where interlocution is difficult to pin down as each stakeholder group is involved with assembling their constituency.

One explanation for such a state of affairs in this and other countries can be found in a distinction between multi-stakeholder dialogues (MSDs) and multi-stakeholder collaborations (MSCs). If dialogues cannot reach agreement on and mandate an interlocutor, they may never mature into fully fledged collaboration. For example, despite positive cooperation between civil society, communities, the police and security services, concerns about official co-optation has kept Kenya's Usalama Reforms MSI from turning into a fully fledged collaboration: Interlocution remains a shared arrangement (Biekart and Fowler, 2016: 28; Fowler and Biekart, 2016b: IV,10–12). The data collected is to be treated as indicative of an, as yet, poorly researched yet vital feature of interlocution: what demands are placed on an interlocutor's competencies as MSIs proceed?

Table 3. Interlocution processes—attribute significance scores for all cases

Attributes	Interlocution stages		
	Assembly	Guidance	Embedding
Leadership and conflict management	43 (22%)	38 (16%)	36 (15%)
Trustworthiness and trust building	38 (19%)	38 (16%)	42 (17%)
System sensitivity	28 (14%)	27 (11%)	34 (14%)
Governance awareness	15 (8%)	32 (14%)	30 (12%)
Long haul commitment	24 (12%)	31 (13%)	33 (13%)
Polyglot communication	26 (13%)	39 (17%)	43 (17%)
Sovereignty	22 (11%)	31 (13%)	31 (12%)
Total	196 (99%)	236 (100%)	249 (100%)

Scores are additions of stakeholder ratings for each case normalised to a score between 1 and 4.

With this caution in mind, the diversity of empirical cases reduces the probability of purpose-specific bias which makes the analysis of wider potential use. Table 3 is reproduced from Biekart and Fowler (2016: 42), with more detailed interpretations that draw on additional comparative tables to be found in the same publication.

Overall scores indicate that an interlocutor's significance increases as MSI processes unfold. The importance of leadership and conflict resolution aptitudes decreases as negotiations to collaborate produce agreement with conflicts exposed and dealt with. The importance of trust-building remains throughout, as do more or less all other attributes apart from that of governance. This feature of an interlocutor—how the interweaving of relative authority and representation has been designed and played out—takes on greater significance as institutional embedding, i.e. as the rules of the game are altered. Costa Rica illustrates this point when agri-business joined the MSI at the point where the Water Law would go to the legislators with provisions they had not been able to counter through other means. Joining the MSI gave voice and altered governance in ways that eventually created a re-drafted law that all parties could live with. This type of process may also have a bearing on an increase in weighting of the polyglot attribute.

When the data sample is limited to information extracted for the 13 endogenous cases—so excluding the four SUN-related cases—it also shows increasing significance of the interlocutor function over time. In this in-country inspired analysis, standing out are a growth in governance awareness and decrease in demands on leadership from highest significance at the beginning. A critical attribute is to get the right actors at the table at the beginning, expanding sensitively as momentum is gained. The Stern *et al.* (2015) study expresses the convening role within Assembly in this way:

Initiators of MSIs discussed the careful curation approach required to identify the right group of people for the table. (...) Once MSI initiators solidly defined the MSI's problem and established a core group at the table, they slowly added in additional people and institutions that would be critical to achieve the MSI's objective and signal its long-term credibility—in other words, those who needed to be in the tent (Stern *et al.*, 2015: 22).

As can be seen in the citation, the study also speaks of the importance of staying power, or the long haul, which is also seen in the case study data. All other attributes retain a similar weighting over the three stages, which may reflect the broad range of cases and contexts which attenuate an ability to illuminate sharp differentiation.

Institutional location

Comparisons with the SUN movement cases (Biekart and Fowler, 2016: 26–38) introduce a critical dimension: the choice of institutional location, referred to as 'platforms' or 'focal points' (SUN, 2013). Despite having a common agenda, in terms of hosting arrangements, in 17 of 46 signed-up countries, the interlocution function is in a powerful overarching part of the public administration, such as a presidency or Prime Minister's office. Three interlocutors are within entities with government-wide planning or development mandate; 12 are within a particular ministry, typically health or agriculture; four are independent; while 10 were in a planning phase. In almost all countries, stakeholders included civil society, UN agencies and donors, while few had any involvement from the private sector. This feature of who is not at the SUN Movement table is common place (Lazonick and O'Sullivan, 2000).

Noticeable for SUN cases is a growth in demand for 'speaking' multiple stakeholder languages. One explanation is that a starting point within government reduces this requirement until outreach and inclusion are required. Indonesia's cases reflect a 'natural' tendency of a government to involve other parties in order to implement its own policies and plans rather than negotiate them. An eventual decline in system sensitivity may reflect resolution of juggling and claim-making within government to 'host' an internationally inspired initiative with all that may mean in terms of bureaucratic status and relations with United Nations Agencies and foreign donors. In Kyrgyzstan, the SUN Focal point moved from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Agriculture when the World Food Programme gained substantial finance for nutrition activities and took over the donor convening role from UNICEF. This change also meant bringing in WFPs' network of civil society organisations: another reason for growth in the polyglot attribute.

Location within government gives rise to concerns in terms of the extent to which the sovereignty of an interlocutor and MSI decision-making power are in play. In theory at least, government hosting of an interlocutor bodes well for continuity and the long haul. However, all four participating countries show that regime change can shift priorities and interlocutor location and authority for good or ill as a new political-administrative order is established. Whatever the direction, a difference between SUN and the other cases is one where, as initiators and energisers, non-state actors are wary of government co-optation or take over. Interlocutor ‘protection’ from state capture can become an issue.

When it comes to institutional location, both similarity and difference can be observed. It is reasonable to anticipate that government will be *prima inter pares* in internationally conceived and propagated MSIs and host within. However, the SUN Movement indicates that government does not always choose to locate a ‘domestic to international’ interlocutor within the public administration. Foregoing direct sovereignty and control may be offset by the legitimacy of an MSI that is open to wider stakeholder governance. Put another way, when stakeholders are disaggregated into constituent parts, analysis of stakeholder presence and relative significance (Biekart and Fowler, 2016: 21–25) show that government remains the first amongst equals even when hosting is not within a public body.

CONCLUSIONS

This article puts forward a central proposition that a detailed understanding of the role and institutional location of an MSI interlocutor is an essential condition for success. When competently executed, this function increases the probability of SDGs being effectively implemented. Deepening and strengthening this aspect of MSIs is a necessary complement to meta-analyses by Pattberg and Widerberg (2016) and others offering limited and rather general recommendations, such as a good management structure, are related to skilled staff, proper communication and the availability of dispute settlement arrangements. The review of the governance of MSIs by Isenman *et al.* (2011: 3) produced similar generalised lessons which include only one reference to interlocution, namely “providing adequate and predictable funding for secretariats to reduce risk of partnership failure”. Helpful as these meta-analyses are, they frame but do not fill in the mix of organisational competencies that rely on the human, relational and enabling inter-personal qualities required to interlocute well. And the scale of effort called for is daunting. After all, there are 169 sustainable development targets and some 200 countries as jurisdictions collectively and differentially accountable for their implementation. When objectives and contexts are combined, if only one fifth of these are amenable to MSIs, then over 6000 competent interlocutors will be required. Matching this quantitative demand, this article argues that the collective action role to be played is facing qualitative challenges. We argue that the task of interlocution will become more complicated and demanding. For example, active engagement of business by MSIs has little in the way of past success to draw on (Pattberg and Widerberg, 2014), yet it is precisely their perspectives, metrics and skills that are required to improve performance seen in a Costa Rica case study, which is an argument associated with debates about blended finance for the SDGs (Elliott, 2013). In addition, there is criticism of the potential privatisation of development assistance through blending as an SDG financing modality can distort public policy making. Is it desirable that profitable business solutions for those in poverty must rely on risk-compensating finance from governments or philanthropy? (Goldsmith, 2011; Romero, 2015). Getting collective action to be effective is likely to be more contentious and much harder at a larger scale than already in the previous decades.

A related issue is interlocution by government or with government as one stakeholder amongst others, albeit first amongst equals: the issue is one of MSI government ownership as opposed to wider country ownership. This critical perspective is allied to the notion of applying ‘templates’ for MSI arrangements. Both our in-country and cross-country comparisons point to the limits of a template for interlocution as a function or process. While useful as structured distillations of experience, there is little prospect that templates will be the right way to look at satisfying an anticipated growth in demand for this competence. Perforce, an approach to professionalisation of this role player, which is consistent with local ownership, will call for a judicious mix of guiding principles and respect for domestic conditions.

The detailing of interlocutor attributes in our study and analysis is but one step towards a finer grained capacity-building appreciation of what is involved in ensuring that this essential function is both sufficiently available and well executed. We hope that learning about interlocution by those dedicated to this field of applied knowledge will inform how public agents and others can engage with the demands of making MSIs consistently effective.

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