Collaborative Efforts for Sustainable Development:
Surveying the Literature on Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives to Realize the Sustainable Development Goals

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**Introduction**

Commissioned by the Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment to help inform its next phase of studies, this literature review explores recent research and debates around the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, partnerships for the goals, and particularly target 17.17, which deals with the “encouragement and promotion of effective public, public-private, and civil society partnership, building on the experience and resourcing strategy of partnerships.” Although this analysis is exploratory in nature and only scratches the surface of the larger discussion on partnering for the SDGs, efforts were made to provide a comprehensive picture of the topics which are prominent in the broader extant literature, with five thematical angles being identified as key areas for investigation.

With that, section 1 unpacks the essentials of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSIs) and their architecture within the 2030 Agenda; section 2 explores the debate around Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) as a possible mechanism for sustainable development; section 3 discusses the complex orchestrating process of MSIs, placing a spotlight on multi-stakeholder dialogic processes and the role of skillful interlocutors; section 4 focuses on issues of inclusion and context in MSIs, speaking to the central position of civil society in helping localize the SDGs; finally, section 5 reviews several frameworks that shed light on some of the opportunities and challenges of MSIs, with insights on conditioning elements and strategies for effective partnering. For each of these thematics discussed, a short list of essential messages to consider is provided. The report concludes with a brief analysis of key takeaways from the larger literature review exercise.

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**About this Literature Review**

There is an opportunity for the Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (Task Team) to undertake another study following successful completion of the Comparative Studies of Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) 2016.

Findings from this initial literature review will be used to inform further debate within the Task Team on knowledge needs and gaps that can be addressed through future in-depth studies. In combination with other ongoing policy-oriented initiatives, this work is intended to help advance the Task Team's mandate on CSO development effectiveness and the CSO enabling environment.

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**Disclaimer**

The conclusions made throughout this report are those of the knowledge professional as drawn from the literature and do not necessarily represent the views of the Task Team and its larger body of constituents.
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1. Multi-stakeholder collaborations and the promise of sustainable development

1.1. The 2030 Agenda and a spotlight on partnerships: the new face of global development

The adoption of the “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and global leaders in September 2015 marked a new era for collaborative efforts advancing the sustainability of our planet and humanity’s prosperity (United Nations, 2015). Representing the cornerstone of international development work until 2030, the ambitious and transformative Agenda consists of 17 sustainable goals and 169 targets that, collectively, bear the enormous responsibility to eradicate poverty in all its forms. It calls upon the international community and all governments to guarantee the interrelated, interdependent, and indivisible human rights of citizens, while promising to strengthen and expand the enabling pathways for individuals and communities around the world to engage in their own development process and reach their full potential (Frey and Sabbatino, 2018; Task Team, 2017; United Nations, 2016). With a commitment to sustainable and inclusive economic growth, social progress, and environmental protection, Agenda 2030 is centered on the so-called five P’s of sustainable development: People, Prosperity, Peace, Planet and Partnerships to lead and sustain implementation globally (Kallon, 2017; United Nations, 2016).

For over 20 years now – particularly since the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), culminated in the Brundtland report “Our Common Future” – sustainable development has been recognized and incorporated into UN’s broader work, but it wasn’t until the more recent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) era that the concept was placed front and center in development-related platforms promoting international debates and national policy-making (Kallon, 2017; Steven and Kashambuzi, 2016; UN, 2012). With its onset in the 2012 Rio+20 Conference, where, building upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) UN Member States committed to taking a more holistic approach to sustainable development (to more comprehensively capture, for example, issues of inclusive growth, environmental sustainability, and enablers of development such as good governance and effective institutions), Agenda 2030 has become the “lingua franca” of international development, galvanizing integrated, adaptive, and systemic responses to complex challenges while opening a new window for effective collaborations at all levels (Freeman, et. al, 2016; Frey and Sabbatino, 2018; Partnering Brokers Association, 2017; Stibbe et. al., 2018; UN, 2012).

The Agenda’s aspirational objective of promoting inclusiveness and leaving no one behind entails a shift in how various actors engage in development efforts, with its democratization contingent upon all countries, stakeholders, and peoples (including the poorest and most vulnerable) taking ownership of SDG-related processes on the ground and benefits being extended to those who need it the most (Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017; PDF, n/d; Pisano and Berger, 2016; Steven and Kashambuzi, 2016). In this sense, the interconnectivity and dynamic nature of the Agenda’s targets require purposed collaborations that convene and align action amongst stakeholders from all societal sectors and development platforms, from governments and businesses, civil society and NGOs, to the wider UN system and donors (Pisano and Berger, 2016; TPI, 2016; United Nations, 2015; Freeman, et. al, 2016).

Within the architecture of the 2030 Agenda, SDG goal 17 is an open call to “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development” based on a spirit of strengthened solidarity; a step recognized as essential to ensure the
fulfillment of the different developmental, environmental, and economic aspects of all goals and its targets (GRI, 2016; Hemmati and Rogers, 2015; United Nations, 2015; Freeman, et. al, 2016). A prominent message conveyed by the high-level policy literature, multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) are at the heart of the realization of every other SDG and clear efforts must be made to mobilize, bolster, and scale them up if transformative action and systematic change are to ensue (Kallon, 2017; PFD, n/d; Steven and Kashambuzi, 2016; TPI, 2016).

While much hope is placed on the potential of partnerships to effectively promote sustainable development, their status being continuously elevated as a central mechanism for the implementation and achievement of the 2030 Agenda, the success and impact of cross-sectoral MSIs will depend, amongst other things, on their capacity to work collaboratively, pool resources, spark innovation, integrate expertise, and share knowledge (Atkisson, 2015; United Nations, 2016). Not to mention, this collaboration process is far from being straightforward and systematic. Given that the SDGs framework strives to be relevant and sensitive to in-country circumstance and realities, governments (in practice) have the sovereignty to choose how to best integrate the Agenda’s goals and targets into existing development strategies and policies, meaning that there is no one-size-fits-all method to carry out the SDGs or to partner in their benefit – which adds complexity to the integration of national responses (for instance, there is a danger that governments might “cherry-pick” goals that align with their priorities) as well as implementation and monitoring efforts (Dattler, 2016, p. 18; Stafford-Smith, 2016, p. 917).

And yet, as umbrella arrangements that are supposed to manifest the interest, willingness, and commitment of governments and other key stakeholders to come together to drive change, proponents of these platforms emphasize their potential to play a catalytic role in international, national, and local development ambitions, with different actors being encouraged to work collaboratively to find solutions to structural and systemic deficits while defining their position, responsibility, and expectations in light of the issue at hand and the outcome they envision (Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017, p. 7; Steven and Kashambuzi, 2016, p. 9; Stibbe et. al., 2018).

1.2. Unpacking multi-stakeholder initiatives for sustainable development: so much potential, too little impact?

Multi-stakeholder arrangements of collaboration (referred to mainly as MSIs throughout this report, but also known interchangeably by other terms including cross-sector partnerships, multi-stakeholder forums, consortia, alliances, networks, amongst others) are voluntary working associations bringing together actors from different sectors (public, private, and non-profit) who combine their human, financial and technical resources, leverage their unique skills and knowledge, and share risks and responsibilities driven by the ambition to achieve a common objective to which all of them have a stake in and can benefit from (Global Development Incubator, 2015; Hemmati and Rogers, 2015; Partnership Brokers Association, 2017; World Vision, 2015).

Generally – and even more so within the scope of sustainable development policy – MSIs are centered around particular social, economic, and/or environmental issues, and are driven by the imperative to provide benefits to the wider community (such as infrastructure, health, and education) rather than solely advance individual interests (Hazlewood, 2016; Skelcher and Sullivan, 2002; Tulder et. al., 2016). That is, these multi-dimensional consortia tend to be established around collective action solutions to overcome broad market failures or governance gaps in different goal areas, from mobilization and optimization of public, private and institutions commitments to act, to standard-setting and service provision and
implementation, to name a few of their diverse functions (Beisheim and Liese, 2014; Carter, 2017; Global Development Incubator, 2015; Nelson, 2017).

In short, as platforms to merge the different core competencies, expertise, and experience stakeholders bring with them to the table, successful partnerships have an instrumental part to play in supporting governments meet their responsibilities and commitments in the context of internationally-agreed development goals (Dodds, 2015, p. 5; Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017). Exhibiting a constellation of partnering possibilities varying in their design, mission, interests, operation, leadership and governance, these initiatives can be global in scope - with intergovernmental bodies such as the UN and the World Bank as initiators and/or driving actors behind it - or operate with little to no UN involvement and in a much smaller scale, both in its geographical reach (global, national, or subnational) and impact ambitions, the latter being harder to locate and follow. Partnerships also display different funding structures (i.e. independent, government, donor-driven) with private foundations (i.e. Bill Melinda Gates, Rockefeller, UN) having supported the start-up of several of them in addition to private sector engagement growing considerably in more recent years (Atkisson, 2015; Fowler and Biekart, 2016; Hazlewood, 2016; Nelson, 2017; Stibbe et. al., 2018).

As for their scope, while efforts have been made to link up cross-sector action networks committed to the realization of the SDGs (notably, the UN platform “Partnership for the SDGs” - a global registry of voluntary commitments and multi-stakeholder partnerships in benefit of the 2030 Agenda - has a total of 3,812 registered commitments to date, 601 of which are connected to SDG goal #17 alone), there is no single or exhaustive database that brings together the likely several hundred multi-stakeholder collaborations functioning at both global and national levels (Nelson, 2017; Steven and Kashambuzi, 2016; UN, 2017). And, although platforms of this kind only capture a fraction of the vast bodies of information on partnerships and are centralized - meaning they are not geographically close to the on the ground initiatives they feature - the literature draws heavily from these registries to inform the debate on partnerships and make conclusions about them (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015, p. 8).

In any case, there are difficulties in keeping up with the proliferation rate of MSIs. According to the Global Development Incubator, since 2002, these collaboration arrangements at the global level have seen a fourfold increase, many of them incorporating country-led implementation bodies and affiliates (Global Development Incubator, 2015; Nelson, 2017, p. 31). Given this array of actors and actions, it is safe to say that there are as many types of partnering arrangements as there are partnerships, which each initiative advancing a collaborative model that is best aligned with its purpose, capacity, and operating context (Partnership Brokers Association, 2017, p. 1). Nevertheless, regardless of their diversity or how they choose to call themselves, MSIs presumably share the common objective of aligning actors across sectors and combining resources, capabilities, and energy in efforts to generate collective solutions for the global public benefit (Global Development Incubator, 2015).

As noted, the 2030 Agenda has placed a spotlight on MSIs and their potential to further implement the SDGs, sparking fervent debates about their benefits, risks, and opportunities - which tend to be dominated by discussions on a handful of initiatives held as reference in the field (despite the complexity and multifaceted nature of collaborative arrangements) and polarized between critics and proponents of these platforms (Beisheim and Simon, 2016; DCF, 2015; Hemmati and Rogers, 2017, p. 7). In short, from the positive spectrum, partnerships are viewed as concrete opportunities to create strong coalitions and win-win alliances that can profit from combined resources, flexibility, decentralization, and innovation (DCF, 2015; Zammit, 2003).
Indeed, according to Beisheim and Simon (2016), there are many case studies illustrating individual MSIs as the providers of original solutions to development issues with an in-depth or broad-scale impact that would not have been unrolled otherwise – although results are dependent on various factors and tend to focus on structures and processes rather than measurable impact. In turn, when it comes to evidence-based impact assessments (which have not received much attention and are far and few to begin with), the general performance of MSIs is rated poorly with little proof of systemic change promotion (Beisheim and Simon, 2016, p. 5; Carter, 2017, p. 4; Stibbe et. al., 2018; Tulder et. al., 2016).

A widely cited study in the literature conducted by the International Civil Society Center in 2014 found that, by and large, MSIs do not live up to their potential, with 38% of the 330 global partnerships sampled in the analysis being inactive or failing to demonstrate a measurable output (DCF, 2015; Dodds, 2015; Pattberg and Widerberg, 2014, p. 16). This may explain why, in general, reports and policy papers produced by the UN system, think-tanks, and organizations of all kinds mainly discuss possible benefits for actors involved in multi-stakeholder arrangements and suggest guidelines and strategies for effective cross-sector partnering for the SDGs, rather than concretely showcasing realized outcomes and impacts, particularly at the country-level.

That being said, it is important to note that the conceptual variety (or vagueness) of partnerships, amongst other factors – such as their dynamic and evolving nature and the lack of a precise unit of analysis – add real methodological complexities to assessing their performance (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011, p. 31; Tulder et. al., 2016, p. 4). As will be further discussed later, the effectiveness of MSIs in multiplying impact and accelerating change in highly disputed, but that is only one of the main critics around these platforms (Atkisson, 2015, p. 5). For example, there are concerns that partnerships may act as parallel structures that weaken country’s ownership of their own development process, or that they are merely convenient and lucrative platforms for partners and stakeholders, particularly private companies, to advance their own interests and improve their public image under the frontage of UN-supported “collaborations for sustainability” (Berliner and Prashak, 2015; Carter, 2017; Hemmati and Rogers, 2015, p. 5; Zammit, 2003).

What becomes clear from reviewing the related literature is that, in addition to MSI’s weak track record of delivering collective good, often times, discussions revolve around reasons why actors should engage in partnerships and less so on the mechanisms of collaboration, such as designing, monitoring, financing, and implementation. There is a need to understand the operational stages of collaborations after they are set in motion, as much can be learned from MSIs who did not live up to initial expectations and, instead, swiveled on their mission and focus. That is, in order to get a realistic view on the opportunities and constraints of MSIs and the dynamics of effectiveness led by “champions,” we may have to look more closely into the “losers” of this process (Beisheim and Simon, 2016; Biekart, 2018; Hemmati and Rogers, 2015, p. 7).

A consensus is that further work must be done in support of partnerships, including the advancement of systemic, informed, and contextualized analysis that can deepen our understanding of these collaborative constructs, how they operate, how to best leverage them, and what kind of approaches can potentially be taken to strengthen their meaningful and sustainable impact (World Bank, 2014, p. 2). In addition to unpacking levels of development within different sectors and the multitude of actors with various interests that shape MSIs, efforts in monitoring and evaluation is another source of important evidence that can speak to collaboration’s attribution, value-added, constraints, and effectiveness (Carter, 2017; Task Team, 2016; Westcott and Wellsel, 2014).
Against this backdrop, caution is necessary when exploring the potential of MSIs to act as a valuable tool for driving sustainable change. That is, although MSIs that are well-designed and enjoy adequate resources can indeed offer a number of benefits – including, as per reviews of global MSI experiences and lessons, the capacity to advance more integrated, scalable, and comprehensive approaches to sustainable development, the ability to promote more integrated, efficient, and effective approaches to financing, as well as the possibility to serve as a platforms for global advocacy and mobilization of civil society around sustainable development priorities (Hazlewood, 2016, p. 4) – the broader literature advises that it is crucial to take a step back and evaluate whether these collaborations are the proper course of action to take in the first place. Despite their prominence as of late and increased high-level discussions on their potential for future impact, it should not be assumed that MSIs are the most effective or the best way to address complex challenges and bring together in collaboration stakeholders with different interests (Carter, 2017; p. 4; Mendoza, 2015; Nelson, 2017; Stibbe et. al., 2018).

As The Partnering Initiative notes, partnerships are just “a tool in the toolbox” and it is wise to consider them for what they can and cannot do (as well as other collaboration instruments and pathways). These cross-sector arrangements tend to be complex, slow at delivering results, display substantial associating costs and are, overall, difficult to build and to sustain, requiring will, persistence, patience, and a long-term commitment from all actors involved (The Partnering Initiative, 2016, p. 5; Nelson, 2017, p. 8; Stibbe et. al., 2018). Additionally, there is a real possibility that their outcomes may not live up to expectations. For instance, 30 interviewees of a 2015 study promoted by the Global Development Incubator gave, on average, a C grade to MSI performance relative to founding objectives (Global Development Incubator, 2015). That said, actors interested in initiating an MSI should balance all associating challenges, costs, and risks.

And even then, after much thought and consideration, if partnerships are indeed deemed an appropriate instrument to adopt, attention must be paid not to overlap or duplicate existing in-country structures, as disregard to the landscape of ongoing partnering platforms and systems can lead to delay and the inefficient use of resources; thus, asking questions around the need to either join, build, or adapt are essential in the initial phases of MSI planning (Stibbe et. al., 2018; The Partnering Initiative, 2016). In sum, MSIs have the potential to support collective action internationally and globally, but they are by no means a remedy for all development maladies, their success being contingent on an enabling environment and the existence of a set of conditions (which will be further discussed later) to actualize and sustain their flourishing (Global Development Incubator, 2015; Nelson, 2017).

**Key messages**

- MSIs are being actively promoted as a central mechanism for the realization of the SDGs, although serious investments must be made to mobilize, bolster, and scale them up if these collaborative arrangements are to truly play their part in transformative action at a local scale;

- As diverse platforms displaying different players, objectives, organizational mechanisms and operating contexts, there is no one-size-fits-all template for MSIs, and it is important that they adapt to local conditions and demands;

- MSIs exhibit a constellation of partnering possibilities and, although information is limited, they are believed to exist on the thousands both at national and global levels – a conceptual and action array that gives room to functional vagueness;
Key messages

The broader literature on MSIs largely point up reasons for partnering and suggest guidelines for going about it, rather than showcasing realized outcomes and providing empirically-based evidence on the limitations and opportunities of these platforms, particularly at the country level.

2. Scaling up public-private partnerships for the 2030 Agenda

2.1. Private sector engagement in the SDGs era: shifting business models for sustainable development

In the post-2015 development era, alike MSIs, Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have drawn much attention and are expected to play an increasingly important role in contributing financial mechanisms to support the SDGs. Notably, targets 17.17 of SDG 17 explicitly targets these cross-sector constructs through a framework that seeks to “encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships” (UN, 2015). Paragraph 67 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges that business activities, investments, and innovations, whether promoted by micro-enterprises or multinationals, are major drivers of productivity, inclusive economic growth, and job creation, and call upon all businesses to use their creativity and innovation skills to help find sustainable development solutions to solve society’s most pressing challenges (UN, 2015).

The rapid change in the overall landscape of partnerships within the international development architecture unfolding in the past decade has sparked a realignment in the roles between the state, private and third sectors, with PPPs being placed at a center stage as targeted and resource-efficient mechanisms for addressing inequalities in the provision and access to public services (Gideon and Unterhalter, 2017, p. 136). Although there is no single definition of PPPs and related frameworks – the term being applied loosely to a wide range of arrangements across different sectors varying in their objectives, scope, participant base, governance models, activities, and level of engagement – a common feature is that of a certain degree of shared financial and governance arrangements between the state sector (mainly financed by revenue and, to a lesser extent, aid) and private sectors (which rely on local or global capital) (Gideon and Unterhalter, 2017, p. 136; IMF, 2004; OECD, 2012; Nelson, 2017).

Originally used to describe contract-based and mainly infrastructure-focused agreements between governments and businesses as a response to the growing demand for public services, in the context of the Agenda 2030, the concept of PPPs refers to more general and voluntary cross-sector partnerships involving actors from these sectors as well as civil society (Gideon and Unterhalter, 2017, p. 137; World Vision, 2015). They can also operate at multiple scales, from locally and nationally to regionally and globally, and target either a particular sector, such as The Global Alliance on Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), or focus in cross-cutting themes, like the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) (Hazlewood, 2015, p. 3).

Business engagement in partnerships and coalitions dedicated to sustainable development have a long-standing tradition. For over two decades now, in line with advancements made during UN high-level conferences where the role of the private sector as a development actor was highlighted (Rio 1992, Johannesburg 2002, and Rio 2012), the establishment of the UN Global Compact (UNGC) in 2000 marked a high point in the promotion of responsible business practices (Adams and Mills, 2018; Frey and Sabbatino, 2018; Nelson, 2017; UN, 2002). The
world’s largest voluntary corporate sustainability initiative with a participation of over 8,000 corporations and 4,000 non-business actors across 160 countries, the UNGP is centered around 10 universally-accepted principles related to human rights, labour, environment, and anti-corruption, to which affiliated companies commit to aligning their operations and strategies (Dodds, 2015). The unanimous endorsement of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011 represents another important milestone in the evolving engagement of business in matters of sustainable development (Frey and Sabbatino, 2018, p. 196).

To help meet the promise of the 2030 Agenda, companies everywhere are being called upon to take action towards advancing the SDGs through investments, solutions, and business practices that can contribute positively to the current sustainable development strategy while reducing negative impacts – and expectations are high that they will play their part (Frey and Sabbatino, 2018; Stibbe et. al., 2018). With the private sector delivering nearly 60% of worldwide GDP, many have stressed the fact that a large share of resources needed to realize the new goals will come from businesses, foundations, and private investors (either indirectly via taxes or directly), meaning that, realistically, the delivery of the SDGs will most likely not to be possible without their alignment and support (Frey and Sabbatino, 2018, p. 199; Kallon, 2017). In addition to serving as a channel for funding, the private sector possesses many strengths, such as resources, innovation, efficiency, operative potency, and leadership, that can help materialize and accelerate SDG processes and activities on the ground (Adams and Mills, 2018; Frey and Sabbatino, 2018, p. 197).

Such an approach expands the contribution of the businesses in sustainable development practice from the traditional stances of philanthropy and corporate social responsibility (which are still extremely relevant and vital), to include a more holistic understanding of the role of the private sector itself, with a focus on a fundamental shift towards inclusive and sustainable business models (Kallon, 2017). In this sense, the private sector is expected to make use of their innovation and creativity to find more sustainable ways to conduct business, adapting and aligning their strategies, models, and actions to more effectively incorporate efforts for job creation, economic growth, basic service delivery, and environmental protection. A clear challenge of this renewed responsibility is how to successfully reconcile sustainable development and profitability, with the strengthening of one of these targets not automatically leading to the weakening of the other (Kallon, 2017).

That is, as the core of most business activities, ensuring profit motivation is essential, but it does not need to take place at the expense of long-term social, economic, and environmental progress. It is noted that the private sector has, in fact, much to gain from sustainable development, as business depends on a healthy, well-educated, and skilled workforce ready to take up production as well as a strong supply of natural resources – elements which failed societies cannot secure and/or promote effectively (Frey and Sabbatino, 2018; Kallon, 2017). From innovation and market development (businesses can create new products and services based on development gaps identified by governments – although that should not be driven solely by market profitability), to reputation management (companies which take up the call to engage in more responsible business practices move towards sustaining stakeholder and societal trust), to name a few benefits, the private sector has much to gain from joining the global movement for the SDGs as frontrunners (Frey and Sabbatino, 2018, p. 199).

Aligned with efforts to scale up PPPs for the 2030 Agenda, businesses, from multi-national corporations (MNCs) to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), are expected to expand their role as development actors not only by transforming their core activities, but also by engaging in cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder arrangements (Frey and Sabbatino, 2018;
World Vision, 2015). And there are many avenues for the business sector to drive change from these platforms, including in more challenging environments. World Vision points out that companies can maximize the impact of their development activities upon vulnerable populations by, for instance, directing philanthropic investment, supporting infrastructure projects and capacity-building strategies in benefit of these groups, in addition to advocating for pro-poor government policies while setting an example of their own, all which are activities that can be promoted through cross-sector platforms (although it is noted, some level of subsidy to offset market entry and development costs is required to attract companies to these ventures) (Freeman, et al., 2016, p. 23).

Equally important as the UN embrace of PPPs and the vast possibilities for action, different stakeholders have begun to appreciate the potential of cross-sector engagement. Governments are increasingly recognizing these collaborations as innovative platforms for producing public good in cooperation with firms, but also civil society organizations (CSOs), who, from their end, are starting to turn to PPPs for their promise of effectiveness and fresh solutions instead of taking a confrontational stance – although that is not the case across the board (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011; Tulder, et al., 2016, p. 2). Finally, companies themselves now place a strong value on sustainable development efforts. A 2016 study by Accenture and the UN Global Impact – which was based on over 1,000 survey responses and 50 interviews with CEOs from 150 countries representing 30 industry sectors – found that 87% of CEOs see the SDGs as an opportunity to rethink and reset business approaches to sustainable development and 85% believe cross-sector coalitions to be essential in accelerating transformation for the SDGs, particularly in what relates to improving collaboration arrangements with governments (Frey and Sabbatino, 2018, p. 200; Nelson, 2017, p. 14).

To scale up and strengthen PPPs, there needs to be a more clear understanding of their ultimate purpose and capacity (for instance, to what extent do they add value for money in improving the access and quality of a particular service to the public?) as well as the existence of in-country institutional resources, strategies, and mechanisms to create, manage, and evaluate them effectively (Kwame Sundaran et al., 2016, p. 22). Private sector leadership is important, but it is not enough to drive and sustain transformative and systemic change for the SDGs; a change of course and strategic approach to partnerships in itself is essential. Approaching cross-sector collaborations between companies, government, and CSOs for their potential and limitations entails asking hard questions around how appropriate, relevant, reliable, and durable their contributions really are. In this regard, the willingness of the private sector to embrace this new era of collaboration for sustainable development, anticipate its exigencies, and align their activities to it, will walk hand in hand with their capacity to increase business benefits which also bear potential for broader societal impact and relevance (Kallon, 2017; Nelson, 2017, p. 5).

2.2. The intricacies of public-private collaborations: can the overall promise overcome the pitfalls?

The position of private businesses at the development table is thought to be essential, but still, complex and serious challenges often surround these collaborations, hampering their promise and progress (TPI, 2016). Although in the current sustainable development architecture, PPPs – and overall multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs), for that, matter – are being advanced as inclusive, transparent, accountable cross-sector platforms for action, where elements of mutual trust, country ownership, and joint-decision-making are present, there is a real danger that “sustainable partnerships” involving the private sector will be used solely as platforms to further advance concession contracts and the (part-) privatization of public assets and services with a strong private finance first attitude, the interests behind their set
up sitting miles away from a “spirit of global solidarity” (Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017, p. 7; Hemmati and Rogers, 2015; Social Watch, 2018; United Nations, 2016). That is, the term may evolve into a catch-all label for all possible new or known forms of partnering within a constellation of collaborative possibilities involving the private sector, with not enough attention paid to whether or not different initiatives actually bring benefits to the public (Kwame Sundaram et. al., 2016).

As discussed earlier, while businesses have grown more welcoming of MSIs, other groups, particularly some CSOs, vehemently criticize them (Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017). The CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE), for instance, calls attention to the dangers of the over-reliance on private finance under the current development cooperation landscape, which shifts the focus from public investment and weakens government’s role – working together with citizens – as the primary duty bearers of local development processes, threatening democratic country ownership (CPDE, 2016; Whitfield, 2010). As part of a “welfare pluralism” wave with private financing and provision facilitating increased space for multinational companies to enter public service markets, critics argue that PPPs have pushed for the redesigning of public policies according to the interests and objectives of the private sector rather than public needs (Adams and Martens, 2015; Adams and Mills, 2018; Beisheim and Simon, 2016; Gideon and Unterhalter, 2017, p. 137).

A central argument for PPPs, especially those with a global status, is that they have strengthened funding mechanisms beyond national revenue collection or aid budgets in benefit of important social development areas such as health and education interventions. Nonetheless, this is also where one of the main arguments against these collaborations lie, as the financialization of these key sectors may skew the direction of policy and practice towards profit enhancement for large corporations instead of advancing significant engagement with social development and equalities (Gideon and Unterhalter, 2017, pp. 136-137). Undoubtedly, in the context of democratic systems and open markets, the private sector is a vital actor that must support change processes, but their undue influence in collaborative initiatives – based on the promise of investment, growth, and/or legitimacy, for instance – is a clear governance challenge PPPs must grapple with (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015, p. 5). There is much concern around the power (in) balance and accountability of PPP arrangements (Gideon and Unterhalter, 2017).

From critics who denounce the use of collaborative platforms by global level donor partners to impose their agendas on recipient countries, undermining national priorities and the voices of diverse stakeholders (Buse and Harmer, 2007; Koivusalo and Mackintosh, 2011), to partnering skeptics who believe that private corporations’ main goal to maximize profit is incompatible with ensuring environmental protection and access to quality public services for all (Hall, 2015), there is a general understanding that the risks of these platforms must be acknowledged and balanced at all times, and that PPPs are not a silver bullet to eliminate the enormous financial gaps in infrastructure and social investments (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015; Kwame Sundaram et. al., 2016, p. 2). As private sector actors are generally not bound by national policies, the international community has a responsibility to help ensure that businesses are held accountable for their development initiatives (CPDE, 2016). Starting with the negotiations leading up to the SDGs and remaining today, development experts and critical NGOs have continuously called for consistent due-diligence to guarantee that companies taking part in PPPs comply with fundamental normative rules of international labor, human rights, social and environmental standards, and demonstrate whether their advantages to impacted populations are substantial and verifiable (CPDE, 2016; Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017, pp. 11-12).
A reflection of these demands, the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA), for instance, highlights the need for private and public partners to be thorough in the design and implementation of PPPs, particularly in light of the challenging SDGs (Kwame Sundaran et al., 2016), and while the UN lacks a consistent and coherent implementation process for partnerships with the private sector with a set of rules valid for the entire system (Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017, p. 11), the UNGC guidelines provides a framework on a common and systemic approach to partnerships between the UN and the business sector, with a focus on transparency, coherence, impact, accountability and due diligence (UN, 2015). The framework is, however, not without limitations and criticism. The high-profile corporate governance partnership has been repeatedly accused of blue washing, meaning that businesses sign up to a number of principles they intend not to follow and make use of UN’s prestige and good name solely for reputation and economic gain (Bruno and Karliner, 2000; Pattberg and Widerberg, 2015, p. 44). There are also concerns that UN-sponsored partnerships with the private sector act as platforms to promote special interests at the UN-level and boost corporatism (Pattberg and Widerberg, 2015).

Furthermore, and perhaps most relevantly, despite the proclaimed recognition of their social contribution, PPPs have left much to be desired in terms of meeting their effectiveness expectations. Not only is the nature of the literature considering the impact of sectoral, cross-sectoral, and regional PPPs patchy, but, (like the general MSI relevant works) much writing has focused on the presumed benefits and limitations of private sector engagement in collaborative arrangements for sustainable development, with few studies managing to provide supporting evidence on PPPs’ impact on public finances and its contributions to reducing poverty and inequalities (Gideon and Unterhalter, 2017, p. 137; Trebilcock and Rosenstock, 2015; UN DESA, 2016). Recently, over 150 organizations from the civil society signed an open letter to World Bank executives in which, on top of criticizing the Bank’s role in promoting PPP contracts with little concern for its negative associated consequences, the group also cautioned that these collaborations continue to be energetically pursued despite the lack of robust evidence on its performance and the risks it represents to developing countries (Social Watch, 2018).

That is, PPPs should result in an improvement in the quality and efficiency of a given service to citizens while attracting private resources in benefit of public service, helping alleviate pressures on public financing so more money can be redirected to critical areas in need of investment. Yet, so far, realized gains have painted a different picture, with evidence suggesting that PPPs tend to have higher costs than the alternative of public procurement and, in many instances, have failed to generate new resources and increase efficiency, coverage, and development impact of public service provision, falling short on their “value for money” promise (Kwame Sundaran et al., 2016, p. 22; Languille, 2017). Another limitation has to do with the extent to which conclusions can be drawn from studies on PPP effectiveness, with the performance and viability of these initiatives varying greatly across activities and sectors (Kwame Sundaran et al., 2016, p. 12).

The literature indicates a tendency to confine research to sector-specific silos, which overlooks the incorporation of important cross-sectoral linkages and insights, constraining PPP evaluations to general claims of efficacy (Gideon and Unterhalter, 2017, p. 137). For example, building from an in-depth review of PPPs in the health and education sectors in the Global South, Languille (2017) found that – in addition to assumed benefits of cost-efficiency for improved social service delivery for the poor being hardly delivered in practice – PPPs’ policy models and practical arrangements often repose on a narrow conception of the sectors they hope to impact and fail to take into account the broader social dimensions and the complexities
of processes of change in the spaces where they operate (Gideon and Unterhalter, 2017; Languille, 2017).

In all, increasing the number of PPPs working towards delivering on global visions such as the SDGs – or continuing to push for them blindly with no serious consideration as to their pitfalls – won’t amount to much unless there is also a focus on effectiveness, legitimacy, and accountability (Adams and Mills, 2018; Nelson, 2017). The ability of the business sector to promote responsible practices and deliver market-based solutions aligned with global commitments is, as noted, undermined by enormous challenges – but they are not unavoidable. Opportunities for the private sector to have more impact in their growing engagement with the 2030 Agenda are extant and useful lessons of good practice are slowly but surely emerging.

A study recently published by the Corporate Responsibility Initiative from the Harvard Kennedy School along with the Business and Sustainable Development Commission suggests four imperative areas businesses can focus on to overcome some of the obstacles in their involvement in sustainable development, being: 1) to improve the impact of their activities to support growth that is more responsible, inclusive, and sustainable; 2) to increase the level of overall investment and innovation in sustainable development; 3) to work towards achieving systematic transformation of markets so it is more beneficial to people and the environment; and finally, 4) to build mutual trust accountability, and a new social contract between them, governments and NGOs (Nelson, 2017, p. 5). In sum, they believe that private investment and business activities can be improved if companies make efforts towards identifying the SDG-related risks and opportunities which are most relevant to them and their stakeholders, while implementing clear policies and shared strategies that can help minimize risks and maximize opportunities – all from an approach that promotes the utmost respect for human rights (Nelson, 2017, p. 10).

Along these lines, Frey and Sabbatino (2018) point out that companies (requiring SMEs to also be on board) must find a way to align their business strategies with the 2030 Agenda, with a reorientation aimed at creating value not only for stakeholders but also for society, in addition to investing in defining reliable measuring and reporting mechanisms that can speak to their contributions (Frey and Sabbatino, 2018, p. 201). A 2016 paper by the UN DESA on public-private partnerships and the 2030 Agenda also emphasizes the capacity to create, manage, evaluate and monitor PPPs as key components of establishing an enabling institutional environment for these collaborative arrangements to thrive. In the case of many developing countries, however, establishing such legal, regulatory, and monitoring frameworks will require the assistance of the international community in, for instance, capacity building and technical support (Adams and Mills, 2018; Kwame Sundaram et. al., 2016, p. 12).

The added-value of cross-sector partnerships to sustainable development efforts lies in their potential to circumvent market failures, governance gaps, and trust deficits between governments, businesses, and civil society to drive novel change towards more responsible, inclusive and sustainable growth. As innovative, shared, and resource pooling platforms, they present an opportunity to convene and coordinate the different interests, functions, and actions of diverse stakeholders, while building reinforcing linkages between different sectors and the 2030 Agenda (Nelson, 2017, pp. 8-12). And yet, unless enabling institutional arrangements are straightened and transparency efforts with an eye to safeguarding the public interest are widened – which can also serve to reinforce democratic accountability and improve popular opinion about PPPs – the challenges will stand in the way of promise. As the IMF notes, until a common international accounting standard for PPPs emerge, there is a risk
that the value for money alleged quality of these ventures will overrun other important considerations (IMF, 2004; Kwame Sundaran et. al., p. 19).

Key messages

- Changes in the landscape of effective partnering for sustainable development has placed a particular focus on PPPs as targeted and resource-efficient mechanisms for addressing inequalities in the provision and access to public services, although, like MSIs, they display a weak effectiveness record;

- A prominent message in the SDG era, in addition to serving as a channel for funding, the private sector is expected to take part in development beyond the traditional stances of philanthropy and corporate social responsibility and – making use of its resources, innovation, leadership, and operative potency – realign its role and activities with a focus on building inclusive and sustainable business models which can help reduce social inequalities;

- Surrounding private sector engagement in SDG-related partnerships are key issues of power (in) balance, skewed policy/practice directions, and “blue washing,” reflecting concerns that PPPs may act as parallel structures weakening government’s ownership of their own development process and serve as a platform to promote the interests, profit margins, and image of large corporations under the frontage of UN-supported collaborations for sustainable development;

- In keeping with accountability demands, the international community has a responsibility to help ensure that businesses comply with fundamental normative rules of international labor, human rights, social and environmental standards in their development initiatives, and that they clearly demonstrate how their involvement in PPPs can offer advantages to impacted populations.

3. Orchestrating multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs): Dialogic processes and the role of interlocutors

3.1. Strengthening collaboration through effective communication: the framework of Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues (MSDs)

Being that good dialogue is a precursor to collaborative action, it is essential that platforms for multi-stakeholder engagement invest heavily in strategies to foster high-quality communication (TPI, 2016). From the dissemination of public information campaigns about important issues, including the 2030 Agenda, to the promotion of professionally facilitated dialogue sessions to guide transformation processes and investments in building individual capacities for listening and speaking, the quality of conversation amongst MSI stakeholders is thought to be key – and so it how effectively they manage to communicate with their public of interest (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015). The broader framework of multi-stakeholder dialogue (MSD) is recognized as an essential tool in driving action and initiatives for sustainable development. It builds from foundational elements of MSIs such as the objective to bring together peoples and institutions from different backgrounds to share knowledge, skills, and resources to find solutions around a common challenge while placing focus on the actual dialogic processes sustaining those platforms (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015).

As defined by CIVICUS, MSDs are “long-term structured conversations between several actors aimed at initiating and sustaining constructive relationships and collaborations driven by a shared vision of an ideal future” (CIVICUS, 2015, p. 10). To them, locally-initiated MSDs offer
a good option to address and drive systemic change, with the following three factors being essential in their flourishing: first, players involved must be willing and ready to work together in a long-term process meant to create a shared plan of action; second, activities carried out and participation must be adaptive and interactive, moving away from pre-packaged processes and pre-determined groups of stakeholders; and finally, conflict and tension are approached as a creative force enriching dialogue rather than as an obstacle (CIVICUS, 2010, p. 10). The central objective of MSDs is, therefore, to improve the level of trust between different stakeholders leading to a propitious environment for informational and institutional knowledge sharing where solutions and good practices can be generated. Such framework departs from the understanding that the experiences and competencies of every actor involved has value and can improve the decision-making process, an approach that promotes equity and accountability in communication practices (Dodds and Benson, 2015).

MSDs come in all shapes, forms and sizes, their flexibility allowing for its application to different contexts and geographical levels, from international to national and sub-national. They can operate with a small group of people representing different areas of expertise or display a broader set of stakeholders with an extensive associated network of global constituents and communities (Dodds and Benson, 2015). MSDs also work towards a range of different purposes, from stakeholders coming together to explore different topics of interest, create a policy document, or strategize over how to implement initiatives on the ground. Activities associated with these processes include not only meetings but also events, individual conversations, consultations, information-gathering exercises, site visits and presentations, amongst others (CIVICUS, 2015; Dodds and Benson, 2015). Despite their diverse nature, there are several characteristics these collaborations often share in relation to their model of operation.

CIVICUS notes that, although there is not one-size-fits-all approach, MSD processes generally involve a preparation period in which stakeholders define their position in relation to the issue to be pursued and consult their constituents, a meeting (preferably in person) where all participant actors discuss, analyze, and share perspectives on the issue, and the co-production of a policy report or summary with a set of key topics that can stimulate further discussion and/or decision-making initiatives. In sum, MSDs comprise a five-step process of initiation, mapping of key issues and actors, dialogue preparation, realization, and follow-up. This entire venture is overseen by a facilitating agent (also known as host, interlocutor, orchestrator, or broker) who is responsible for convening and guiding the dialogue, ensuring that all stakeholders can contribute equally and have their voices heard. As will be discussed, the function of these actors should not be taken lightly as they play an essential role in making multi-stakeholder arrangements work well (Dodds and Benson, n.d.; Fowler and Biekart, 2017).

It is important to note that some authors take the framework of MSDs further, presenting these as more flexible arrangements distinct to more formal platforms that are also focused on communication efforts. For instance, Biekart and Fowler (2016) distinguish between multi-stakeholder dialogues (MSD) and multi-stakeholder collaborations (MSC), pointing out that both processes are driven by different commitments and seek out different results. In short, MSDs involve different stakeholders agreeing to meet and discuss an issue of shared interest, however, in their view, these interactions are not necessarily bound by formal agreements on collaborative action, decision making, accountability, and transparency processes. On the other hand, MSCs are set up as formal co-operation and founded upon expectations of shared responsibility to achieve mutually agreed results, and although all parties enter the initiative on a voluntary basis, there is an applied level of self-constraint in making decisions that affect others (Biekart and Fowler, 2016).
This more in-depth understanding of dialogic processes in collaborations highlight the fact that gathering people around a table to enter a fruitful dialogue is not an easy task, but getting them to provide resources and agree on a common goal to pursue is even more complicated – meaning that, when it comes to exploring MSI effectiveness, it is important to avoid mixing up the two (Biekart and Fowler, 2016). That is, although dialogues do not necessarily lead to collaborations involving multiple stakeholders, they have the capacity to bring different stakeholders such as governments and CSOs together, and that in itself can be perceived as a positive outcome (Biekart and Fowler, 2016). In the SDGs era, there is increasingly more interest in exploring ways to strengthen dialogic processes in the context of multi-stakeholder arrangements with an understanding of its complexities and orchestration mechanisms. Notably, the framework of Multi-Stakeholder Engagement and Communication processes (MSEC) proposed by Hemmati and Rogers is an attempt to connect the individual, institutional, relational and cultural dimensions of the MSI experience, with the attitudes and aptitudes of individuals (and the institutions they work within) to drive and sustain effective and engaging communication taking center stage.

Another relevant framework is CIVICUS’ four building blocks (with possible steps introduced alongside them) to promote MSD processes specifically designed to affect socio-political change, which involves stakeholders being able to identify the added value of working together (scoping, identifying, engaging, and resourcing), co-create a vision, establish shared priorities, and imagine new scenarios (initiating, planning, and managing), engage in action, adopting collective and individual initiatives (implementing, institutionalizing, sustaining or terminating), and finally, monitoring the process and learning along the way (reviewing) (CIVICUS, 2015, p. 23). In all, MSDs are valuable resources in collaborative efforts as they provide a unique space for problem-solving and can trigger positive dynamics amongst stakeholders and new ways of working together to achieve a shared goal (CIVICUS, 2015, p. 12; Dodds and Benson, n.d.).

Having discussed their nature and potential benefits, it should be said that, like any multi-stakeholder process, MSDs are not easy or straightforward endeavors, requiring time (at least six months for the initial preparation process, according to CIVICUS) and the availability of several conditions that can guarantee its success, such as long-term stakeholder commitment, start-up and continuous investment, resources, and a supporting staff (Stibbe et. al., 2018; TPI, 2016). Given that these platforms can be complex and messy as they involve various individuals, interest groups, and perspectives, the difficulty lies not only in setting them up and maintaining them but also in advancing process of facilitation and evaluation (CIVICUS, 2015, p. 12). Amongst their many challenges, it can be hard to link decision-making processes directly to MSDs, which means that, effectively, their concrete progress can be far and few (Dodds and Benson, n.d.). Also, if MSD processes are not well considered and not enough attention is paid to issues of power, ownership, and inclusiveness (including, for example, the initiative operating under an unbalanced foundation with some actors having more say than others, or failing to include grassroots civil society groups with a stake in the issue) it can lead to frustration, withdrawal or conflict, damaging stakeholder relationship and the reputation of the platform (CIVICUS, 2015, p. 12).

With that in mind, perhaps the central aspect of MSDs, the values they are built upon, and the level of collective strategizing and action they hope to achieve is the element of confidence between different players. In the “Towards New Social Contracts” study promoted by CIVICUS, the majority of stakeholders surveyed indicated trust and trustworthiness as being key ingredients of MSDs, not only because they are inherently connected to the future and level of success of these arrangements, but also because, it can be argued, most people want to
work alongside others who demonstrate quality such as openness, transparency, and respect (CIVICUS, 2015, p. 28). A trusting relationship is, however, something that evolves over time, and improving the level of communication, knowledge, and understanding across stakeholders is crucial to nurturing such connection – which are central objectives of dialogic processes. In sum, trust, but also context, time, resources and capacity, are important elements which need to be taken into careful consideration when embarking on MSD platforms, with the prospect that partners embrace principles of inclusiveness, responsiveness, and accountability to citizens while agreeing to re-evaluate their initial positions, expectations, and conditions in favor of strengthening a more collective approach to decision-making (CIVICUS, 2015, pp. 12-28).

3.2. Leadership to move collaborative processes forward: interlocutors as consolidating actors

As discussed, multi-stakeholder collaborations come in all shapes and sizes, their operational design and infrastructure including distinct (and complex) phases of dialogue and negotiation, formalization, implementation and continuous improvement (Huijstee, 2012). The enabling environment for multi-stakeholder platforms is, however, not yet fully conducive to accommodate such challenges especially in bureaucracies, meaning that a maze of challenges stands before the effective facilitation of internal cooperation amongst different partners. Importantly, to overcome some of the challenges of setting up the kind of multiple relational engagement that is necessary to realize the SDGs, with different actors coming together to achieve a shared goal, MSIs are expected to come up with new and more efficient ways of collaborating and bridge traditional boundaries – a task that calls for the innovative and skilled management of these collaborative processes (Partnering Brokers Association website).

Given this context, it is now widely acknowledged that the dedication and commitment of certain individuals is key to keeping these multi-stakeholder arrangements on track (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015, p. 9; Huijstee, 2012; Biekart and Fowler, 2016). Strong and visionary leadership is a foundational element in the effective development of MSIs, with interlocutors being as essential to these platforms as engaging and recruiting the right stakeholders, having access to the necessary resources, and designing governance and operational structures to support their progress (Freeman et. al., 2016). Although documentation of interlocution processes and functions is still limited (Biekart and Fowler, 2016), the literature expands on broader frameworks of competencies and skills needed for the role with some more in-depth studies offering important lessons on the complexity and essentiality of interlocutors in context and in relation to MSI effectiveness.

In short, at the level of the individual, those managing multi-stakeholder collaborations must possess specific competencies to set up and run these platforms well, including, but not limited to, communication, negotiation, coordination, facilitation, diplomacy, and networking skills (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015, p. 17). In addition to being committed to helping stakeholders build their own capacities to partner well and to lead by example, demonstrating a collaborative attitude themselves, these actors need to be trustworthy, show awareness of the constituents involved in the process and of the issue at hand, have the capacity to understand and navigate power dynamics as well as synthesize and communicate complex information, and enjoy the adequate mandate to be a real player in the platforms and express their voice (CIVICUS, 2015; Fowler and Biekart, 2016; Partnership Brokers Association, 2017). Interlocutors who are committed to making use of such communication and management abilities to improve the MSI process and performance help enable learning, creativity, and conflict resolution practices, creating an environment that is encouraging of negotiation trade-offs and shared benefits (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015, p. 17). When it comes to stakeholders more broadly, MSI processes benefit from having a core number of champions representing
different participant groups (which should be balanced in terms of actors, sectors, and interests) who are passionate about the initiative, can drive change within their communities, and have the potential to bring the most relevant actors to be table (in terms of their skills, knowledge, credibility and authority), facilitating the right relationships, conditions, and spaces for MSIs to work (CIVICUS, 2015, pp. 13-14).

To provide a more detailed analysis, as part of a larger multi-case study of MSIs, Biekart and Fowler (2016) explored the role of interlocutors in making these collaborations work well and the kind of attributes they require to fulfil their function (seven pre-defined attributes, including leadership and conflict management, trustworthiness and system sensitivity, were used to collect data to approach this question). Aligned with the literature just mentioned, the study found that individual attributes, social capital, and soft skills (such as sensitivity and context adaptability) are important assets that interlocutors bring with them to MSI arrangements, improving their potential for effectiveness. In addition, they point out that these actors are an essential force in efforts to maximize the scope for action of MSIs given the acting environment, as interlocutors must be able to successfully navigate the wider system of MSIs, which tends to be complex and prone to instability. One of the key messages of the study is that context matters a lot, but so does how interlocutors respond to it – meaning also that the context-specific nature of the interlocution process precludes generic specifications as to what interlocutors should do and how they should act. In that sense, interlocutors are keen observers who can shed light on the complications of partnering mechanisms depending on different contextual-settings (Marhubi et. al., 2016).

To reiterate the point made earlier, maximizing the potential for action to happen at scale within MSIs requires both individuals and organizations at all levels – from government ministries to businesses and NGOs – to act as ambassadors for the platforms, promote its vision, and encourage other players to join forces and efforts (World Vision and TPI, 2016). This framework, however, begs the question of who gets to act as a champion in the first place. As for individual players, according to the Partnering Brokers Association – an organization that provides training to partnership brokers-to-be – these actors can be located within the partner organization (internal) or get called in to provide special support to oversee the collaborative process (external) (Partnership Brokers Association website). They note that while external brokers offer a combination of professional skills and attributes and provide support to the initiative as needed acting as independent specialists, brokers working internally are more likely to stay in the process for the long haul. Another advantage of having an internal broker is that being familiar with the aspirations of the stakeholders and the partnership operating context, this person may be better suited to steer activities and bring about incremental changes within the existing system (Partnership Brokers Association, 2017, p. 2).

Having those who are close to – and knowledgeable of – the operating context of MSIs leading the collaborative process is a position shared by several experts in the literature. Considering broader interlocution processes, World Vision and the Partnering Initiative, for instance, call for more individuals and organizations to act as champions particularly at the national level, indicating that these actors can leverage their personal networks and have the potential to take big-picture, systems view of their environments, and use that to formulate innovative collaborations with their immediate communities as well as different types of organizations and sectors (World Vision and TPI, 2016, p. 30). As for where interlocution roles should be located within sectors, there is much debate around whether the leadership model for these platforms should be single sector or cross-sector, as well as discussions on the opportunities and constraints of different stakeholder groups taking the lead. For instance, in single-sector leadership, the sector “championing” the MSI (such as the government actor) could come to
dominate the discussion, while cross-sector arrangements, although messier, may provide a better platform to manage conflicts of interest and stimulate greater participation from under-represented groups in collaboration efforts, particularly in the case of civil society (and, arguably, business) (Freeman et. al., 2016; World Vision and TPI, 2016).

To cite Biekart and Fowler once again, their MSI analysis highlight that more – and, preferably, civil society-oriented – representation is needed in interlocution processes. Giving the example of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement – whose activities were compared comparatively across five countries for the study – they reveal that most interlocutor positions in terms of institutional location or focal point are found within the government, such as particular ministries which then work with other stakeholders from civil society, UN agencies, donors, etc. An issue here is that political actors and heads of national NGO networks possessing the social and cultural capital to guide the interlocution process, for example, may become the “drivers” of MSI at an artificial level, or just enough to gain political influence, without truly impact local development processes. A recommendation made is to locate interlocutors within CSOs and non-state platforms, which can expand the feeling of ownership by these organizations in the MSI process and limit negative effects of democratic disruption – a factor that can slow the progress of government-affiliated interlocutors.

Finally, the more evidence connecting the success of partnerships to the skills, knowledge, and competencies of individuals building and running them emerges, more support goes to the idea that interlocutors should be a professionalized role (Biekart and Fowler, 2016; Marhubi et. al., 2016; Nelson, 2017). One does not need to be identified specifically as an interlocutor to perform its associating functions, but, at the very least, there is a strong case for defining and acknowledging the importance of the role (Partnership Brokers Association, 2017, p. 2). To foster the kind of collaborative partnerships and processes that can help move essential components of sustainable development forward, the skilled management of multi-stakeholder platforms and those taking part in those ventures is essential (Partnership Brokers Association, 2017). That is, there is now a clear understanding that “a substantial increase in capacity building is needed to develop the individual and institutional partnering skills required for the future” (Nelson, 2017, p. 37).

This new drive is reflected in the growing number of frameworks and strategies helping identify, develop, and disseminate partnering tools and providing training programs for actors across government, business, and civil society so they can more effectively manage multi-stakeholder arrangements (Nelson, 2017, p. 37). The Partner Brokers Association mentioned earlier, for instance, approaches the partnership process manager (or partnership broker, as they call it) as an active and skilled go-between actor whose job is to support stakeholders in navigating the collaborative platform, from helping them co-create a map and plan the most appropriate course of action, to advising whenever a change of direction may be necessary.

In the case of broker training, however, it is safe to say that improving individual’s professional skills and personal attributes tailored for partnering is not an easy task (particularly traits such as empathy for different perspectives and values, good judgment, and confidence to hold a space for difficult conversations to ensue) (Fowler and Biekart, 2016; Partnership Brokers Association, 2017). Also, it is important to keep in mind that too much focus on the professionalization of the broker function (requiring formal training and a certificate, for example) present dangers of “creating a demand for the product,” which would advance private interests and limit champion inclusiveness, especially within more grassroots segments of civil society. In all, private support mechanisms for MSIs, whether in brokering training or meta-governance, can provide effective and innovative support to advance these platforms,
but their financial, accountability, contribution, and influence limitations should be taken into full consideration when exploring their position in opening pathways for MSI effectiveness.

**Key messages**

- Focused on improving trust amongst stakeholders, MSDs seek to create a propitious environment for informational and institutional knowledge sharing where solutions and good practices can be generated, a facilitated dialogic process that generally involves a five-step process of initiation, mapping of key issues and actors, dialogue preparation, realization, and follow-up;

- Alike MSIs, MSDs are not easy or straightforward endeavors, requiring time and the availability of several conditions that can guarantee its success, including steady financial investment, various resources, a supporting staff, and stakeholders committed to stay in for the long run, build trust, and embrace principles of inclusiveness, responsiveness, and accountability in the work promoted through the platform;

- Strong and visionary leadership provided by skillful interlocutors is a key element to improve MSI process and performance as these actors make use of various communication and management abilities to help create an environment that is encouraging of negotiation trade-offs and shared benefits – meaning that an increase in their capacity building is essential in the effective development of these platforms;

- MSI processes benefit from having a core number of champions located at all levels (from government ministries to businesses and NGOs) who are passionate about the initiative, can drive change within their communities, and have the potential to bring the most relevant actors to be table facilitating the right relationships, conditions, and spaces for MSIs to work.

4. Localizing multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) for the sustainable development goals (SDGs): the importance of local voices and context

4.1. The essence of development: exploring the role of civil society in helping realize the SDGs

Regardless of the in-country approach chosen to implement the ambitious 2030 Agenda, it is essential that provisions be made for the further and meaningful engagement of civil society (Datler, 2016). These groups played a key role in the consultative process leading up to the SDGs through, for example, feeding into the high-level discussions from a perspective grounded in (and demanding of) human rights principles, providing key context-relevant information ahead of and during negotiation sessions that captured the aspirations of their constituents on the ground (including groups of women, young people, the disabled, marginalized communities, etc.) and engaging in advocacy efforts to influence government’s positions (Bhargava et. al., 2016; Datler, 2016; Kallon, 2017). Throughout this process, civil society groups worked in coalition across sectors, countries, and regions, which not only served to strengthen the impact of their advocacy efforts calling for the creation of a set of goals relevant to the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development but also showed their ability to work well through multi-stakeholder platforms and manage complex and multi-thematic political mechanisms (Datler, 2016, p. 8).

Indeed, the 2030 Agenda is regarded as an agenda “of the people, by the people, and for the people” precisely because of the intense engagement of civil society during its development. However, to realize its proclaimed human-centered essence, as the CPDE notes, the SDGs
must go beyond simply mentioning civil society and other people-led organizations in their related documents as partners in inclusive institutions and in fact reinvigorate strategies and policies to further institutionalize spaces at all levels so these actors can participate actively in sustainable development (CPDE, 2016). In other words, there is a need to translate advisory presence and institutional recognition into actual participation in implementing the SDGs through a more enabling environment that can enhance CSO engagement, impact, and effectiveness in development processes while helping build democratic country ownership (ACSC, 2016; CPDE, 2016; Kallon, 2017).

Civil society networks and movements are not only numerous but also tend to be extremely diverse in their purposes, interests, and scopes of action, playing multiple roles as drivers of development in their own right. While their capacities and potential vary greatly across countries, broadly speaking, they are key players in driving development programs and policy-making both nationally and globally, working together with governments and other stakeholders (including donors and the private sector) in efforts to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities, promote social and economic empowerment, and guarantee fundamental human rights, amongst other priorities (Bhargava et. al., 2016, p. 23; Dodds and Benson, n.d.). In what relates to helping realize the SDGs, there are many ways civil society groups can help spur action. Following is a few examples from the literature expanding on their potential for action in sustainable development and some of the reasons why investing in them is so crucial.

During a speech about the importance of partnerships for the SDGs, Edward Kallon, UNDP Representative in Nigeria, identified four key areas where civil society can help drive the 2030 Agenda forward – many which are also reflected in the broader literature (Bhargava et. al., 2016; CPDE, 2016; Datler, 2016). First, CSOs are important change-makers at the community level providing critical social services particularly in remote and hard-to-reach localities, often times through innovative mechanisms and cost-effective solutions. Second, they have a strong capacity to mobilize communities and other stakeholders at the local level, facilitating consultative processes for project identification and prioritization, knowledge sharing, and participatory program evaluation. Third, CSOs help give voice to the poorest citizens of society and are crucial in capturing their needs and realities, feeding those essential perspectives into developing discourses and decision-making processes in policy planning and making. Finally, civil society groups can support data collection efforts, helping bridge the information and knowledge gap between the various layers of governance, from national to international and local communities (Kallon, 2017).

Along these lines, now from the perspective of a civil society organization, the African Civil Society Circle (ACSC) stresses that CSOs must be at the forefront of fostering advocacy and mediation in policy development, identifying development priorities, recommending realistic solutions based on their knowledge of the operating context, and being critics of impractical or problematic courses of action. The organization proposes that civil society groups help localize these goals mainly in four areas. The first involves representing the interests of the most marginalized populations under a human rights lens of analysis, by, for example, creating opportunities, spaces, and platforms to engage with citizens so dialogues and strong relationships can be built, making sure to translate their voices into strong arguments that are acknowledge in local decision-making, as well as working collaboratively with other CSOs interacting with the same constituents to help strengthen mobilization and advocacy efforts. Second, CSOs must act as agents of accountability, working towards making sure that the responsibilities of governments in relations to the SDGs are clearly defined, and that they meet the answerability and enforceability dimensions of their roles (ACSC, 2016, p. 4-8).
The third area addresses CSOs position as agents of service delivery and providers of innovative alternatives to development, calling for their continuous involvement in shaping demand, helping develop state policies, and providing assistance, especially in areas of conflict and situations where governments lack the capacity (or will) to do so effectively – although caution is raised in relation to their over-dependency on international donors (UNCDF, 2010). The fourth and final aspect of CSOs engagement in SDG-related strategies as proposed by ACSC involves efforts in data collection and monitoring aligned with the 2030 Agenda’s call for a “data revolution” and the building of data collection systems and tools that are low-cost, reliable, accurate, timely, and readily available for consultation. In this sense, along with making efforts in analysis and reporting mechanisms, CSOs are expected to encourage and support the use of these new platforms to gather data – with an understanding of the “how know” and technology access limitations of more excluded segments of the population and how this framework may marginalize them further – and directly monitor SDG implementation at the local level (ACSC, 2016, p. 4-8).

Finally, to present a framework more relevant to the general CSO architecture, a study conducted by the Partnership for Transparency Fund highlights six global trends that demonstrate civil society’s central role in development, along with implications and opportunities for the 2030 Agenda. A point made earlier, the first trend considers the growing influence and position of CSOs as key and independent partners in development efforts, with these groups being more diverse and numerous as ever and advancing contributions on many fronts, from leading innovations in core development sectors such as health and education to raising private funding and transferring it to their countries, or influencing the global development policy agenda inspired by citizens’ voices and demands (Bhargava et. al., 2016, pp. x-viii).

Briefly, the second trend has to do with the evolution of international initiatives bringing to focus CSOs and their essential participation in partnerships for development (Accra 2008, Busan 2011, SDGs 2015), while trends three and four speak to the changing dynamics of funding mechanisms, with a growth in private development assistance benefiting CSOs, and their increased professionalization enhancing their own accountability and governance mechanisms. Despite this overall scenario of progress, trends five and six highlight several disabling conditions, calling attention to the fact that the space for civil society engagement in development policies vary greatly between countries and sectors - with over 50 nations still placing restrictions of CSOs’ operating space, according to estimates from the International Center on Not-for-Profit-Law (ICNL) – and that future funding is a major source of concern, especially in countries that tend to restrict foreign support (Bhargava et. al., 2016, pp. x-viii).

In light of some of the considerations just discussed in relation to the opportunities and limitations of civil society’s engagement in sustainable development, securing an enabling environment for these actors to expand their influence and scope of action is essential. There is a general recognition that people-led participatory initiatives in the monitoring, evaluation, implementation, and follow-up processes of the SDGs will be central to better capacitate the 2030 Agenda and align its priorities to the realities of communities on the ground (CPDE, 2016). Nonetheless, as has been emphasized, to ensure the meaningful participation of civil society groups in these efforts, involvement cannot be of a merely informal nature, which entails the creation of institutionalized structures and platforms that can help minimize their operational constraints (Datler, 2016).

The expansion of an enabling environment for CSOs includes, amongst other priorities, the official advancement of policies and practices allowing these organizations to enjoy more open legal, regulatory, and political frameworks, and that guarantee their freedom of expression,
association, and assembling (Task Team, 2017). These range from increased CSO access to opportunities for participation and information on implementation measures, to more secure funding and resource availability, and the existence of capacity building measures to strengthen their activities - which is particularly important for organizations representing marginalized and grassroots groups (Datler, 2016, p. 20; GPEDC, 2016). Ultimately, the existence and sustainability of an institutionalized environment for CSOs at the national level (and with international backing) would facilitate the localization of development efforts, with CSOs identifying, bringing attention to, and demanding that governments deliver on the issues that are most pressing to their constituents at the local level. This would help with the immense challenge of aligning the SDGs to the realities of each unique and complex context the framework hopes to impact.

4.1. Bringing the SDGs home: issues of inclusion and context in national multi-stakeholder arrangements

Serving as catalysts of collaborative efforts and innovative solutions to address complex challenges, multi-stakeholder platforms at the national level are an essential mechanism for accomplishing the SDGs (Freeman et al., 2016). The materialization of the universal and ambitious 2030 Agenda requires local authorities and civil society to be included in implementation efforts at all levels, not only nationally, regionally and locally, where actions will be concretized, but also in global discussions and decision-making processes. In this sense, the multi-stakeholder approach must ensure that local realities, conditions, and needs are taken into full account in the dissemination of the new global agenda for sustainable development, with local actors and CSOs taking positions of leadership in helping create more resilient and sustainable societies starting from the work they will advance in their own communities (PDF, n.d.).

Priorities articulated by international frameworks for effective partnering such as the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation – which calls for country ownership, focus on results, inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability in these processes – offer important guidelines to be considered; however, translating these strategies into national and sub-national practices is not an easy task (Freeman et al., 2016). Practitioners and policymakers responsible for advancing multi-stakeholder initiatives at the country and local level – and working to uphold principles of effective partnering – face many issues, including challenges to ensure effective leadership structures (interlocution processes and interlocutors), maximize and integrate national development plans, make sure to deliver to most vulnerable groups, and avoid duplication of existing strategies (Freeman et al., 2016). There are also pressures for these national collaborative platforms to define localized priorities, mobilize resources, and set up cooperation strategies for implementation, follow-up, and evaluation (Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017; PDF, n.d.).

Given this demanding scenario, fostering “meta-governance” at the national and local levels - or “organization of self-organization,” conceptualized by Ellersiek and Beisheim (2017) as the institutionalized regulatory frameworks, such as principles, guidelines, criteria and other standards for partnerships - is crucial to ensuring that accountable public actors and relevant stakeholders can follow and influence the work advanced by national MSIs in a transparent way, while MSI themselves account for their outcomes in the local context (Ellersiek and Beisheim, pp. 9-20). Building such supporting structure, however, would require the UN to support its member states in setting up and strengthening national platforms and accountability mechanisms for the creation of functional and inclusive partnerships, with a particular focus on supporting platforms that address local needs and prioritize the demands of the poor and the marginalized (here, it is important to keep in mind that the tighter embedding of MSIs in government-led processes may bring about issues of inappropriate
political interference and bureaucratic restrictions upon MSIs). And yet, according to Ellersiek and Beisheim, very few meta-governance initiatives, particularly those operating at the national level, in fact, meet these demands. For instance, upon analyzing the voluntary national reports (VNR) submitted by 63 countries to the UN High-Level Public Forum in 2017 expanding on their SDG-related implementation activities, they found references to partnerships as a means of implementation in only six of them, and still those were vague (Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017, pp. 20-24).

This discussion provides a nice transition to the fundamental issue of inclusion in MSIs. In instrumenting the 2030 Agenda, governments must provide for an environment that encourages and allows for meaningful civil society engagement (Dattler, 2016). The people-centered and inclusive multi-stakeholder approaches which are the backbone of the SDGs represent an opportunity not only to overcome the sharp division across public, private and civil society sectors, but also to create new frameworks for context-sensitive action that integrate the diverse needs and concerns of people on the ground – which requires the involvement of people-led organizations and actors “beyond the usual suspects” and the adapting of interaction methods to their needs and realities (CIVICUS, 2015; PDF, n.d.). Leaving no one behind is about making sure that development strategies have positive impacts on the poorest and most marginalized members of society, meaning that in order to localize the SDGs at the local level and ensure that deprived areas are targeted in implementation processes, the “last must come first” (ACSC, 2016, pp. 4-5).

Even though the SDGs framework promises a focus on the most vulnerable (see paragraph 4 of the 2030 Agenda), their full inclusion in the design of multi-stakeholder platforms have not yet materialized – at least that is what dozens of actors across the stakeholder spectrum interviewed for a World Vision study about the current status of in-country multi-stakeholder platforms say (Freeman et. al., 2016, p. 20). To counter this shortcoming, they suggest MSIs take two “first step” strategies. First, there needs to be a clear will and strategy to include vulnerable groups in the platform’s goals, along with increased awareness of their unique characteristics and needs, a recognition of power asymmetries – which may serve to make these actors even more vulnerable – and investment in the capacity of all participant organizations from all sectors to ensure they are fit to partner. Secondly, it is essential that citizen groups, especially the ones at the margins, engage actively in the platform from the get-go, and that their voices are heard directly instead of being accounted for solely through intermediaries. Although that would entail the availability of resources including funding, having representatives of the most vulnerable citizen groups sitting at the table would help address power imbalances and place people at the center of the platform’s development efforts (Freeman et. al., 2016, pp. 20-21).

Along these lines, the CPDE highlights that incorporating human-rights based approaches (HRBA) as operating principles of partnerships would equip governments and other stakeholders to promote actions angled towards empowering the people on the ground, who are supposed to be the direct beneficiaries of the SDGs (CPDE, 2016). Thus, they see inclusion as belonging not only in development initiatives but also processes at all levels, with development cooperation expanding beyond the confines of high-level debates and including the communities and peoples that will, in fact, be directly affected by these decisions. To them, it is essential to approach and value non-state development actors for their interaction and exposure to on-the-ground realities, and their commitment to providing people at the margins with mechanisms not only to survive but also to achieve their full potential (CPDE, 2016). Ultimately, development is about citizens, their needs, potential, aspirations, motivations, and actions, and those precedents should guide and inspire the implementation of the 2030 Agenda above anything else (Bhargava et. al., 2016).
In all, when exploring and advancing the work of MSIs to help realize the SDGs, the voice of local experience (especially those which often go silent) is of paramount importance, as the successful implementation of the new targets of sustainable development at the country level will depend on how well implementation efforts - along with its associating concrete tools, innovations, platforms, and processes - are contextualized to national conditions and local realities (CPDE, 2016; GTF et. al., 2014; Marhubi et. al., 2016). That is, the localization of the 2030 Agenda will require an inclusive approach involving stakeholders from all levels who, collectively and holistically, make use of local knowledge to tailor its ambitions to specific local circumstances (ACSC, 2016, p. 3). With that in mind, there are several examples in the literature of studies that expand on the idea of context as being key to partnerships, shedding light also on some of the complexities which are inherent to efforts to localize MSI processes (Biekart and Fowler, 2016; Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017; Marhubi et. al., 2016).

For example, Ellersiek and Beisheim (2017) found that MSI success conditions depend on stakeholders’ point of departure and task profile, meaning that different expectations and gains must be contextualized. In light of that, it is suggested that respective responsibilities are agreed in detail and that ways of adapting to local conditions are discussed and decided on early in the process. In fragile states, for instance, MSI initiators are advised to consider the security situation beforehand and make every possible effort to engage with local actors, while building and strengthening capacities. The authors highlight that, under these types of difficult contexts, MSIs who manage to work alongside competent local brokers – and who used their support to carry out participatory processes before and during project implementation – tend to show more promise (Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017, pp. 8-9). Moreover, a study exploring emerging partnerships lessons from diverse contexts promoted by the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) and the Promoting Effective Partnering (PEP) revealed that the interplay and overlap of different contextual (and changing factors) around partnerships, whether economic, political, social or cultural, as well as the dynamic-nature of the individuals and organizations involved in them, creates a “nuanced blend in different situations and different times that impacts partnerships and their work” – which means that it is extremely hard to single out factors which have a determinant influence on those platforms as they are processes in themselves (Marhubi et. al., 2016, p. 26).

Finally, a couple of analysis commissioned by the Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (including the multi-case MSI study discussed before and an internal report on country engagement initiatives) provide contextualized and country-sensitive lessons on MSI, civil society, and development – helping paint a picture of complex on-the-ground processes and dynamics. While also covering fruitful grounds for engagement, results show how countries’ structural and social contexts and shifting political conditions can work either as enabling or disabling factors for MSI effectiveness and CSO engagement. Characteristics of the country context that can have debilitating effects range from the state of the political environment for CSOs (in Sudan, for instance, they note that government approach towards CSOs is mixed, as they promote them from one hand and restrict their activities from another) to democratic disruption (the MSI studies found that, overall, shifting political environments – which alter the position and comparative advantage of stakeholders involved in MSIs to push their interests - can have both negative and positive effects), highly decentralized governance structures (in Indonesia, a reshuffling of ministry responsibilities and the fragmentation of power between national and local levels are a few of a set of disabling factors brought about by polycentric governance) and a lack of trust amongst stakeholders (in Kenya, NGOs and the government have historically shared mutual negative perceptions of one another).
These examples help illuminate the fact that, if the local context – along with the limitations and opportunities of each country – are not taken into account, then MSI efforts most likely won’t succeed in closing the wide policy-practice gap in international development, remaining a set of “frameworks and guidance” useful solely to high-level actors and not translating into country-owned and relevant pathways for action. Exploring and, ultimately, addressing the operating country context of MSI and CSOs ownership conditions is, therefore, an important step in ensuring the kind of fruitful environment that will allow both formal and less-formal civil society groups to work alongside other development actors and fulfil their potential as crucial partners for the realization of the SDGs.

Key messages

- Effective initiatives to support the monitoring, evaluation, implementation, and follow-up processes of the SDGs will be central to better capacitate the 2030 Agenda and align its priorities to the realities of communities on the ground, however, the meaningful participation of civil society groups in these efforts is contingent on the creation of institutionalized structures and platforms for engagement;

- The expansion of an enabling environment for CSOs – which includes the advancement of policies and practices promoting more opening in their operating legal, regulatory, and political frameworks, while guaranteeing their freedoms – would facilitate the localization of the SDGs, with CSOs identifying, bringing attention to, and demanding that governments deliver on the issues that are most pressing to their constituents;

- The successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda rests on an inclusive approach involving stakeholders from all levels who, collectively and holistically, must consider local knowledge and demands when tailoring global ambitions to specific in-country circumstances, and while this entails a focus on the most vulnerable, their full inclusion in the design of MSIs for the SDGs have not yet materialized;

- The local context – along with the limitations and opportunities of each country – must be taken into account if the SDGs and related MSI efforts are to succeed in closing the wide policy-practice gap in international development, otherwise, they run the risk of becoming a set of frameworks useful solely to high-level actors and failing to translate into country-owned and relevant pathways for action.

5. Opportunities and challenges of multi-stakeholder collaborations for sustainable development

5.1. The overall constraints and conditioning elements of multi-stakeholder partnerships

Multi-stakeholder platforms of collaboration have grown to become immensely popular models for bringing about transformational and systemic change. However, efforts to understand what makes them fail or succeed – particularly considering their unique context and operating environment as well as trends across countries – are still scarce, and there is a lack of clarity on partnering needs and effective solutions (Global development Incubator, 2015; The Partnering Initiative, 2016). Although they are not always the best choice to address the issue at hand, MSIs are expected to continue to proliferate given their prominence in the 2030 Agenda, which will only intensify existing challenges related to their governance, accountability, power dynamics, and development effectiveness. Furthermore, they are operationally difficult to manage, often requiring a backbone organization or individual (namely interlocutors) to facilitate the process of alignment, mediation, communication and
coordination amongst the many stakeholders involved. That is to say that these platforms are the most challenging types of partnerships to build and sustain – and that should always be at the very center of any discussion about their potential and adoption (CPDE, 2016; Nelson, 2017, p. 31).

Considering issues of power asymmetry, for example, the common “contributor-implementer” partnership agreement behind these platforms can create a distorted top-down power structure in an environment where everyone should be considered equal. Oftentimes, the fiduciary or trustee agent is a stakeholder in the partnership itself, and although their main task is to manage the administration and finances of the platform on behalf of all partners, they may take on a role of donor and attempt to “bureaucratize” the platform, dictating terms, placing reporting pressures, and running the initiative in a way that best suits their international governance and management style – regulations and strategies which can place strains on the participation of smaller partners (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015, pp. 9-10).

In addition, concerns have been expressed in relation to governments trying to assume a position of “first among equals” in collaborative processes (or hinder these platforms through repressive legal and political frameworks conditions or ineffective institutions) and the inappropriate influence that powerful corporations may have in the development of government policy and priorities tied to multi-lateral engagements (Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017; World Vision, 2015, p. 8). Power dynamics and imbalances, in turn, create challenges in terms of accountability and governance, reflecting, for instance, fears that some partners are being motivated solely by self-driven interests, undermining the collective, or that some types of partnership arrangements may undermine the role of the state. Trust gaps of this kind limit the potential and progress of cross-sector partnerships and can only be mitigated through ongoing mechanisms to build and to sustain trust amongst stakeholders (Beisheim and Simon, 2016; Hemmati and Rogers, 2015; Nelson, 2017; World Vision, 2015).

As for their track record on effectiveness, as noted earlier, there has been a boom in the number of operating partnerships but they display mixed results (positive experiences have been marred by significant shortcomings), with many falling short of delivering on anticipated results and incurring high transaction costs (Ellersiek and Beisheim, 2017; Dodds, 2015, p. 3; Dodds, 2018; Pattberg and Widerberg, 2015; UNTT, 2013). Although much more empirical research is needed to understand the singularities and complexities of partnerships, existing evidence laid out in several studies and found in multiple registries and databases give us a glimpse of some of the difficulties these platforms tend to grapple with. A pre-2015 development agenda report by the Center for Global Development exploring the governance of new global partnerships found that, out of the eleven initiatives reviewed, 64% and 55% lacked a clear strategy and transparency, respectively, 45% displayed poor governance mechanisms, and 36% were not financially sustainable in the long term (Bezanson and Isenman, 2012; Carter, 2017, p. 5).

Further, drawing from The International Civil Society Centre (ICSC) review of over 340 global partnerships mentioned earlier – which was based on a registry connected to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and administered by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) – Pattberg and Widerberg (2015) and Dodds (2015) point out that issues of inaction, vagueness in terms of main objectives, lack of appropriate monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and limited measured and/or isolated outputs are central challenges of the MSI experience (Dodds, 2015; Pattberg and Widerberg, 2015). Notably, the analysis of this registry revealed that 38% of partnerships monitored showed little or no measurable output after five years of inception, and amongst those that did, 42% engaged in
activities which were not directly related to their publicly state goals and mission (Pattberg and Widerberg, 2015; Steven and Kashambuzi, 2016).

Similar to this last conclusion, a background study on knowledge sharing in MSIs commissioned by UN DESA found that although platforms may frame themselves as partnerships, have similar profiles or show up online as such, many fail to meet the basic criteria of these arrangements. Amongst the 64 entities reviewed – which were supposed to represent the diversity of the SDG partnering landscape – only a little over half of them, upon closer inspection, were determined to be “true partnerships,” even though 42% were UN-initiated or otherwise closely related to UN processes and programs. Other initiatives outside the partnership spectrum consisted of NGOs acting independently, government initiatives providing little room for organizations to participate as true partners, loose networks with separate goals, program administration, and partnering arrangements, or simply web platforms that appear to be partnerships but do not exhibit organizational activities or governance (Atkisson, 2015, p. 11). Some of these underlying challenges align with findings from an eight-year analysis of MSIs by Beishein and Liese (2014) which found that these platforms’ monitoring systems are often external, not public and not always independent, meaning that the existence of more transparent, accountable, efficient, participatory and qualitative governance structures are essential to increase MSI effectiveness (Beisheim and Liese, 2014).

Importantly, although the multi-stakeholder approach is perceived as being critical for delivering on the promise of the 2030 Agenda, with benefits for actors involved being reported extensively, informed discussions on outcomes, benefits, and impacts drawing from evidence-based, comparative, and peer-reviewed studies are much harder to come around (Fowler and McMahon, 2010; Kolk, 2014). As Tulder et al. notes, lessons from the extant literature indicate existing challenges in the monitoring, reporting, and evaluation of cross-sector partnerships, as well as limitations in research methodologies to explore these processes more comprehensively and help support their credibility and legitimacy, while also determining their restrictions (Tulder et al., 2016, p. 3).

Essentially, and building from a point made earlier, evaluating the value-added of partnerships is a difficult task due to several factors including the lack of a mutual definition across different partnership constellations, their unique operating contexts, their dynamic and evolving nature, weak reporting and monitoring mechanisms, as well as the diversity of the issues they address – which only intensify attribution problems, meaning that it is challenging to isolate impact from other contributing influences (Tulder et al., 2016, p. 4). In sum, and broadly speaking, the motivation to invest in MSIs as a tool to help solve complex issues in a collaborative fashion is mainly driven by perceived or anticipated impact, as analysis on objectively defined outcomes remain limited and evidence on the effectiveness of these platforms are largely anecdotal and/or prescriptive (Tulder et al., 2016, p. 7).

Finally, while it would be very difficult to comprehensively present the conditioning elements of MSIs in a report of this size and scope, the brief discussion that follows provides a glimpse of some of the issues they face drawing from broader challenges frameworks from the literature. As per 30 founders and/or first CEOs of 17 MSIs interviewed for a study by the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA), common struggles in early stages of these platforms include lack of strategy, no established consensus, a premature launch, the involvement of too many players from the start, little guidance on how to get the process moving, and the perpetuation of “zombie” partnerships (in which there is partnering for the sake of partnering despite no real progress) (Dodds, 2018; Global Development Incubator, 2015, p. 8).
In another study, this one in collaboration with the Promoting Effective Partnering (PEP), PBA identified several contextual factors and challenges from within which have most influence on partnering activities, them being, economic, political, societal, cultural, geographical, historical, conflict and crisis factors, as well as challenges related to organizational culture and changes, cross-sector tensions and dependencies, power imbalances, and individual personalities which play a central role in either helping or hindering the work of partnerships (Marhubi et. al., 2016, pp. 13-17). Considering the essential role of interlocutors, the same study also found that practitioners of MSIs are also met with numerous issues, facing cultural differences, historical conflicts leading to confrontation, different forms and expectations of leadership, sectoral hostility and suspiciousness, high expectations that the broker will solve all problems, amongst others (Marhubi et. al., 2016, pp. 22-23).

Moreover, and aligned with some of the points presented above, a report by CATALYSD on multi-stakeholder communication and engagement divide the challenges collaborative initiatives face into four main dimensions, highlighting that such issues must be considered when exploring the quality of MSIs and designing future strategies. These elements are related to the individual (their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral capacities, along with knowledge, skills, and experience fit for partnering), relationships (amongst different stakeholders and organizations involved, with a focus on issues of trust, power imbalances, and self-interest), institutions (namely, structures, systems, and frameworks including mechanisms for accountability, effective communication, transparency, governance and funding), and finally, culture (collective thinking and acting patterns, such as dialogue, collaboration, strategic direction, etc.) (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015, p. 14).

Last but not least, in a review of global MSI experiences particularly related to public-private partnerships, a study by the Independent Research Forum found some particularly detrimental risks associated with these ventures, amongst which are imposed top-down “blueprint” approaches and conditionals (in, for example, priority-setting, strategy, use of funding, etc.), which serves also to undermine country ownership, little investment in building the structures needed to support the complexities of collaboration across geographical regions, the expansion of the role of the private sector with little conformance to rules and regulations that ensure their transparency and accountability, as well as insufficient shared measurement systems, monitoring and impact evaluation efforts, and learning and knowledge-sharing instruments – challenges which have been noted repeatedly across the literature (Hazlewood, 2016, pp. 4-5).

The scenario just presented accentuates the fact that partnerships do not provide easy answers to development problems and that their ambition of facilitating a conducive platform from which collective and innovative solutions to complex issues can emerge is far from simple. Their essential function is, in fact, a very daunting one, as their effectiveness is partially contingent on their capacity to bring together stakeholders coming from various sectors and levels, each one with their own expectations and approaches, and to manage to find an enabling environment (and show its relevance) in countries with different priorities and capacities (Steven and Kashambuzi, 2016).

As noted by Steven and Kashambuzi (2016), to improve the strategic position of partnerships in the SDG era, a common and systematic approach to partnering, along with strong mechanisms of collaboration, are needed. However, to avoid a scenario in which partnerships proliferate despite the quality of their direction, effectiveness, and relevance, the discussion should focus less on the theoretical and perceived role of multi-stakeholder arrangements in relation to the 2030 Agenda, and enter a practical dialogue about the capacity, resources, and will of stakeholders to work collectively to deliver transformational change in light of national policies, priorities, and demands (Steven and Kashambuzi, 2016, p. 39).
5.2. A compilation of guidelines and strategies for effective partnering

Although there is no one-size-fits-all model of approaching or building MSIs, as these are complex organizational structures, one not like the other, whose forms and functions reflect the unique characteristics of its operating environment and features of the development challenges it seeks to address, frameworks on key factors and conditions for effective partnering abound in the literature (Dodds, 2015; Hazlewood, 2015). Before diving into some of these examples, it is important to highlight that issues of knowledge-sharing, along with a strong partnering support system, are featured strongly in the broader discussion. Several high-level documents point out that, despite the effectiveness of MSIs relying on many internal and external factors, their capacity to manage and share knowledge about the issues, processes, and solutions they are promoting is essential to their successful performance (Atkisson, 2015; TPI, 2016; UN DESA, 2015; United Nations, 2016).

Particularly because the SDGs are universal in nature and promote a more systemic and integrated approach to sustainable development, there is a need to increase efforts to share information widely, not only to strengthen collaboration within the partnership itself and its immediate constituents but also to reach beyond and activate a global impact. Knowledge sharing mechanisms range from traditional publications to informational websites, newsletters, registries, knowledge hubs and technology sharing platforms (UN, 2015). As the popularity of MSIs continue to grow, so does their position as key aggregators and disseminators of knowledge, meaning that “inter-partnership” mechanisms for disseminating information on their ambitions, processes, shortcomings, and outcomes will become even more important (Atkisson, 2015; UN DESA, 2015, TPI, 2016). Given that the number of partnerships operating nationally, regionally, and locally far exceed the number of initiatives tied to the UN and its processes, knowledge-sharing frameworks can help unlock the richness and vast potential of these platforms to help shape and impact global development efforts (UN, 2015).

Moreover, partnerships should be designed and implemented with utmost regard to transparency and accountability considerations; it is also important that they are announced and followed-up publicly so the intentions motivating their work and their progress are made clear (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015). Accordingly, there must be improvements in the way partnerships disseminate information to their stakeholders and in the establishment of knowledge-sharing processes amongst partnerships working on different SDGs. That is, knowledge sharing is essential not only to the internal functioning of partnership but also to their profile and impact (Atkisson, 2015, p. 8).

Against this background, the Partnering Initiative highlights that, to unleash awareness and engagement beyond the level of specific collaborative project actions – which is essential to maximize learning and connection across sections and areas of work, creating an enabling environment for partnerships in the future – actions must be taken across five integrated levels, them being, individuals, organizations, collaborations, platforms, and systems (Hemmati and Rogers, 2015; TPI, 2016). They note that while most efforts to support MSIs focus on the central element of collaboration, the existence of the multiple levels as a collective and coordinated approach must be addressed or at the very least acknowledged. In all, strengthening partnering support systems – that is, the various formal and informal ways partnering knowledge and expertise in shared to catalyze new collaboration models, while supporting and learning from existing ones – is fundamental to enabling the kind of complex and grand-scale partnering configuration the 2030 Agenda calls for. Briefly, the partnering support system that can contribute to advancing the five integrated levels mentioned includes elements of showcasing, brokering, training, consulting, research, and funding (TPI, 2016, p. 8).
To conclude, the discussion that follows expand on a few of the many guidelines and strategies available exploring aspects of effective partnering. Much like in the case of constraints and conditioning elements, the limited scope of this research exercise allows only for a brief introduction to this much larger aspect of the literature. CIVICUS, for example, draws from the experiences of five global partnering initiatives (amongst them, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization and the Global Polio Eradication Initiative) to present several characteristics and aspects of effective partnering, which revolve around the existence of solid organizational and governance structures displaying clear, well-defined and easily understood objectives, a defined timeline, strong facilitators, as well as secure funding and fairly well-developed monitoring systems allowing for good feedback mechanisms (Dodds, 2015, p. 10). More broadly, the organization suggests that, when assessing partnerships, principles of accountability, transparency, effectiveness, equity, flexibility, inclusiveness, participation and engagement, independence from vested interests, human rights foundations and governance, are taken into consideration (Dodds, 2015, p. 12).

Building from a larger literature comprising over forty academic and practitioner studies on the MSI experience, a recent report by The Harvard Kennedy School Corporate Responsibility Initiative and the Business and Sustainable Development Commission highlight several factors which are essential in making multi-stakeholder platforms work. They are: 1) strong and credible governance (including accountability and transparency mechanisms), 2) a shared vision for change participants can align under, 3) a set of operational principles or guidance which can provide a strong foundation for implementation, 4) country ownership, 5) recognition and leverage of the leadership roles of more senior champions and practitioners, 6) a holistic view of the ecosystem or value chain required for transformation, 7) the existence of common performance and impact metrics and a commitment to independent evaluations, and finally, 8) willingness to invest resources in a backbone organization or secretariat (Nelson, 2017, p. 32).

Another relevant source is Pattberg and Widerberg’s (2014) building blocks for enhancing the performance of MSIs, which are organized around the theematics of actors (including the willingness, capabilities, and resources of the right mix of partners and effective leadership both by individuals and organizations), processes (which involves goal-setting precision, a secure funding system, professional management with a clear division of roles, as well as monitoring, reporting, evaluation and learning efforts) and finally, contexts (incorporating elements of active meta-governance, an enabling and favorable social and political context, as well as partnering structures fit to the problem at hand) (Carter, 2017; Pattberg and Widerberg, 2015, pp. 46-49).

To briefly provide a few more interesting examples, participants from the study conducted by the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) in collaboration with Promoting Effective Partnering (PEP) shared what are, in their opinion, core partnering principles. With trust and transparency topping the list, other principles regarded as important include accountability, identification of a common vision, shared goals and interests, a culture of continuously working towards building stronger relationships, as well as respect for the diversity of culture, values, languages, and contributions that partners bring with them to the process (Marhubi et. al., 2016, p. 20). In an independent study – and building on fifteen years of work in the partnering field – PBA also found the following attributes to be at the heart of effective partnerships: the co-creation of design, decisions, and solutions, commitment to share risks in addition to benefits, resources contribution from every single actor involved (whether tangible or intangible), as well as willingness to share decision-making, leadership, and accountability responsibilities (Partnership Brokers Association, 2017, p. 1).
Lastly, and lined up with many of the success factors that have already been presented, Biekart and Fowler (2016) found that social investments in MSIs are more likely to be effective if the following conditions are present: 1) the leadership conforms to processes which acknowledge the power asymmetries of partnerships, and elements of inclusion and voluntary participation are respected, 2) local actors are valued for their essential position in mediating performance, 3) a shared agenda is created collectively and not imposed, 4) there is a focus on building and maintaining mutual trust, 5) resource commitments by different partners are realistic and followed through, 6) communication runs openly and fluidly, and 7) rules of the game are co-defined and fairly applied through an accountable governance system (Biekart and Fowler, 2016, p. 7; Carter, 2017, pp. 8-9).

It can be said that a better understanding of multi-stakeholder collaborative processes and governance mechanisms, as well as more attuned approaches to funding, monitoring, and evaluation, amongst other key partnering factors and conditions, are badly needed to ensure that systematic and adequate support to these platforms can be realized (Medinilla and Karakai, 2016, p. 1). And although frameworks like the ones presented are extremely helpful in helping create and disseminate general principles around collaborative efforts in international development with basis on concrete experiences and lessons (and an understanding that there is no single template to partnering), it is important to stress the fact that partnerships need more than good intentions and “how to” guides to be successful (Carter, 2017).

As the UN states, the multi-stakeholder approach for the SDGs must be built upon principles of national ownership, rights-based, transparency, mutual trust, and mutual accountability (UN, 2016). The word “mutual” is key here. In order for partnerships to fulfill their potential, they need a solid foundation of trust and a strong commitment towards creating imaginative, fit for purpose, and impactful solutions which would not have been possible without cross-sector collaboration. Partnerships may not be “for the faint of heart,” but with flexibility, much patience, and persistence, it might be possible to navigate their inherent difficulties and complexities to extract the best they have to offer (Marhubi et. al., 2016; Mendoza, 2015).

**Key messages**

- With their impact evidence being largely anecdotal or prescriptive, the motivation to invest in MSIs is mainly driven by perceived or anticipated outcomes, meaning that, to avoid the proliferation of partnerships despite their effectiveness and relevance, a practical dialogue about the capacity, resources, and will of stakeholders to work collectively in light of national conditions and priorities must be advanced;

- MSI constraints and conditioning elements spread across the very core of their foundation and function, from unclear strategies, poor governance, and lack of appropriate monitoring and reporting mechanisms, to financial instability and limited measured outputs, a scenario intensified by broader concerns around uneven power dynamics and limited accountability;

- Frameworks on key factors and conditions for effective partnering abound in the literature, and although they are helpful in the creation and dissemination of general principles around collaborative efforts drawing from experiences and lessons, partnerships require much more than good intentions and “how to” guides in order to be successful;

- A better understanding of multi-stakeholder collaborative processes and governance mechanisms, as well as more attuned approaches to funding, monitoring, and evaluation, amongst other key partnering factors and conditions, are badly needed to ensure that these platforms receive the systematic and adequate support they need to thrive.
Key takeaways

In a context of growing UN-stimulated euphoria around partnerships for sustainable development, the literature features an intense debate on MSIs which tend to be polarized between proponents and critics of these platforms, ranging from overly-positive endorsements, to skeptical (or pessimistic) arguments, and more balanced analysis standing at a middle ground between these two spectrums. With that, the extant literature on partnering for the SDGs tend to be high level and with more prominence in the immediate years following the launch of preparations for the 2030 Agenda. By and large, reports and policy papers produced by the UN system, think-tanks, and organizations of all kinds mainly discuss the potential benefits, risks, and opportunities for actors involved in multi-stakeholder arrangements and suggest guidelines and strategies for effective cross-sector partnering for the SDGs, rather than concretely showcasing realized outcomes, particularly at the country-level.

This limited track record in fact constitutes one of the main critiques of MSIs, meaning that despite the proclaimed recognition of their potential for social contribution and their growing popularity – especially in the context of the 2030 Agenda – they have left much to be desired in terms of meeting their effectiveness expectations, with several studies in the literature providing evidence pointing to such shortcoming, also when it comes to public-private partnerships (which exhibit a set of challenges of their own). Here, it is important to highlight that, due to their diverse nature, there are many methodological issues when it comes to assessing MSI effectiveness and that their performance and viability varies greatly across different contexts, activities, and sectors.

Perhaps as a reflection of this analytical complexity, empirically-based studies exploring the limitations and opportunities of in-country multi-stakeholder arrangements are far and few, and when the experiences of individual MSIs are indeed presented, the following tends to happen: a handful of initiatives are held as reference in the field (such as the ones with a more global profile like GAVI and SUN), selected cases may just be presented briefly, or the analysis may rely on self-reported data provided by initiatives themselves (which is the case of the information used by UN DESA to create its Special Reports on registered partnerships).

A strong message from this broader research exercise is that MSI frameworks and understandings can be positioned fairly distant from what is taking place on the ground, particularly when considering more grassroots and less visible multi-stakeholder arrangements. Related to this, a critique made in the literature is that, although registries like the UN platform Partnership for the SDGs only capture a fraction of existent partnerships and often do not provide substantial information on them, the literature draws heavily from these kinds of platforms to inform debates and to make conclusions about MSIs.
Against this background, several authors emphasize that those interested in starting or getting involved in partnerships must approach them as just “one tool in the toolbox,” while fully considering their pros and cons and whether MSIs are even the best course of action in the first place, as these collaborations tend to be complex, time-consuming, resource-intensive, and challenging platforms to build and to sustain overtime. There is a need, therefore, for the discussion to focus less on the theoretical or perceived benefits of MSIs for the SDGs, and instead advance more practical debates around what makes them fail or succeed, but with a basis in concrete experiences and lessons, and with the understanding that there is no single template to effective partnering. Such efforts will also provide an opportunity to unpack and shed light on important elements around MSI processes and positive performance – such as the key position of champions operating at different levels in making these platforms work – and to adapt MSI investments and practice accordingly.

From this exploratory analysis, it becomes clear that more empirical research is needed to understand the complexities of partnerships considering their unique operating context and environment, which is reflective of local conditions, realities, and needs. Particularly at the country-level, there is a scarcity of contextualized and detailed accounts of MSI limitations and potential as well as information on in-country processes to enable their flourishing, the state of civil society engagement, and the involvement of “unusual suspects,” from marginalized groups to the private sector. Despite this demand, judging by the quality and scope of the information provided to the UN by countries on their VNRs concerning MSIs in particular, it seems that most nations have been slow in promoting and thoroughly documenting cross-sector collaborative practices for the SDGs.

In summary, the overall reflections discussed highlight the need to invest in the promotion of evidence building and informed dialogue which can illustrate the kind of mechanisms and structures that exist at the country level to support MSIs – and, within it, to strengthen the CSO enabling environment – with the potential to contribute important findings to a segment of the policy debate and academic literature that is still very much limited. These efforts stand front and center in the broader debate on partnerships, as understanding the enabling and disabling factors around materializing MSIs at the country level – as well as the perceived versus concrete engagement pathways for civil society participation – is key to understanding their actual potential and capacity to serve as a tool to help actualize the SDGs where it really counts: in national, regional, and local communities and platforms rather than high-level global forums, which can be detached from context-sensitive considerations.
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About this Literature Review
There is an opportunity for the Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (Task Team) to undertake another study following successful completion of the Comparative Studies of Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) 2016.

Findings from this initial literature review will be used to inform further debate within the Task Team on knowledge needs and gaps that can be addressed through future in-depth studies. In combination with other ongoing policy-oriented initiatives, this work is intended to help advance the Task Team’s mandate on CSO development effectiveness and the CSO enabling environment.

This literature review was conducted by Dr. Veriene Melo, with the guidance of Prof. Dr. Alan Fowler and Dr. Kees Biekart of the international Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

For more information on the Task Team and the studies, please visit our website.

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The international Institute of Social Studies (ISS) is a postgraduate school of policy oriented social science whose diverse activities include teaching, interdisciplinary research and advisory work in the field of development studies. Founded by the universities of the Netherlands in 1952, the Institute is one of the world’s leading centres of higher education and research in this field. ISS is part of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

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About the Task Team
The work of the multi-stakeholder Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (Task Team) is concerned with advancing the role of civil society in development, in the context of international commitments on civil society and development as agreed at the 2011 Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness and more recently at the 2014 Mexico High Level Meeting of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation.

The Task Team comprises representatives from three stakeholder groups: the official donor, partner country, and civil society organizations (CSOs) in the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE). It is led by three co-chairs, each representing a stakeholder group.

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