Task Team
CSO Development Effectiveness
and Enabling Environment

Report Summary

Collaborative Efforts for
Sustainable Development:

Surveying the Literature on
Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives to
Realize the SDGs

Introduction

Meant to serve as a short informational tool, this summary provides a snapshot of the full literature review report on Multi-stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commissioned by the Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment, which draws from the work of many different authors and studies. The following highlights key takeaways from the larger literature review and provides a concise list of essential messages by thematical area examined. For a more comprehensive view of the analysis and a complete bibliography, please see the full literature review.

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.

Summary

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. Despite the proclaimed recognition of their potential for social contribution and their growing popularity, 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. More often than not, when the experiences of individual MSIs are indeed presented, a handful of initiatives are held as reference in the field, selected cases may just be presented briefly, or the analysis may rely on self-reported data provided by initiatives themselves.

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-intense, 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.

Key messages from the literature review

Multi-stakeholder collaborations and the promise of sustainable development

→ 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;

→ 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.

Scaling up public-private partnerships for the 2030 Agenda

→ 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.

Orchestrating MSI initiatives: Dialogic processes and the role of champions

→ 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.

Localizing MSIs for the SDGs: The importance of local voices and context

➜ 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

Opportunities and challenges of multi-stakeholder collaborations for sustainable development

➜ 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.

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 studies and the full literature review report, please visit our website.

About the international Institute of Social Studies

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.

For more information
www.iss.nl