ALIANZAS PARA LOS OBJETIVOS: MÁS ALLÁ DEL ODS 17

PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS: BEYOND SDG 17

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RESUMEN

Las alianzas ocupan un papel central para alcanzar las metas fijadas por los diecisiete Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible que componen la Agenda 2030 de las Naciones Unidas cuyo Objetivo 17, 'Alianzas para lograr los Objetivos', suele definirse como esencial para las iniciativas transformadoras que son necesarias para su realización. Teniendo esto en cuenta, resulta decepcionante la visión limitada que ofrece el Objetivo 17 con respecto a las alianzas y a su posible contribución a la consecución de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible. En el presente artículo se sugiere que las alianzas deben ser presentadas como una vía más dinámica al servicio de las transformaciones necesarias para lograr los Objetivos, lo cual exige: reconocer la necesidad de establecer relaciones más profundas a múltiples niveles y entre múltiples actores; promover la responsabilidad colectiva para lograr los ODS; y una base empírica más firme en el diseño y elección de políticas de alianzas con un intercambio mutuo de conocimientos y aprendizaje más sólido.

Palabras clave: Alianzas multi-actor, Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible, ODS 17, Transformación social

ABSTRACT

Partnership is positioned as central to meeting the targets of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals that make up the United Nations Agenda for 2030 with Goal 17, 'Partnerships for the Goals', often described as pivotal to the transformational efforts required for its realisation. In view of this, Goal 17's limited vision of partnership and its potential contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is disappointing. This article suggests that partnership needs to be articulated as a more vibrant vehicle for supporting the transformations needed to

attain the Goals. This requires acknowledgement of the need for deeper multi-level and multi-actor relationships; the promotion of collective accountability for achieving the SDGs; and a stronger evidence base for partnership policymaking with more robust mutual exchange and learning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) Agenda for 2030 and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) continue to promote the global development framework adopted by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) between 2000-15. The SDGs, however, differ from their predecessors in a number of ways: they were developed through an extensive three-year consultation process; they address the three pillars of Sustainable Development; social, environmental and economic, in a more 'profound', 'interconnected' and cohesive manner; and they call for urgent and transformational action by all countries and stakeholders to ensure that 'no one will be left behind' (UN, 2015:1).

SDG 17 - Partnerships for the Goals - is promoted as the driving force for the global engagement and mobilisation of different actors needed to implement the SDGs (ibid: Clause 39). In view of the catalytic role that the Goal is expected to play in meeting the SDG Agenda's transformational ambition, it is disappointing to find that its targets incorporate an anachronistic depiction of international development cooperation with multi-stakeholder partnerships outlined as narrowly defined instruments to support this. The premise of this article is that Agenda 2030 requires a much broader and more vibrant vision of partnership than that afforded by SDG 17, with greater attention to how different collaborative forms and processes might support the systemic change needed to achieve the SDGs.

2. SDG 17: FOCUS AND CONTENT

The emphasis of SDG 17 is on strengthening the means of implementing the SDGs through action in seven areas: finance, technology, trade, capacity building, policy coherence, partnerships and data. Two key forms are posited for this: a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development led by governments to strengthen international cooperation and development assistance and, to complement this, multi-stakeholder partnerships working at global, regional, national or subnational levels in order to 'mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources to support the implementation of the SDGs' (UN, 2015:27). The main focus is on the Global Partnership which calls for support from richer 'developed' countries to 'developing' and 'least developed' countries through increased aid (17.2); assistance with long-term debt (17.4); technology transfer (17.7) and support for a universal, fair and open trading system under the World Trade Organization (17.10). Policy and institutional coherence; multi-stakeholder partnerships; data, monitoring and accountability are grouped together under the umbrella heading of 'systemic issues' that need to be 'enhanced' to support the achievement of the SDGs, particularly in 'developing countries' (17.13-17-19).

3. THE LIMITATIONS OF SDG 17

Despite a call for the SDGs and their means of implementation to be 'universal, indivisible, and interlinked' (UN, 2015: Art 71), SDG 17 centres primarily on the economic pillar of Sustainable Development. As well as marginalising the role that partnerships can play in promoting 'ecologically sustainable and socially just approaches to development' (Schleicher et al. 2018:46), concerns have been raised about the endorsement of a much contested market-based growth model that is likely to deepen rather than reduce social and environmental problems (Schleicher et al., 2018:46). For Weber (2017:402), this is manifested most starkly in SDG 17's call for an open trading system under the purview of the World Trade Organization.

Contradictions are also apparent between the SDG Agenda's language of 'transformation', 'universality' and 'partnership' and the promotion of a traditional model of development cooperation that continues to rely upon the delivery of Official Development Assistance from 'providers' to 'recipients' (Mahn:12-13). In addition, the lack of appetite for challenging 'status quo politics and existing power relations' (Gupta and Vegelin, 2016:444) and inadequate mechanisms for holding rich and powerful actors such as governments, large corporations and financial institutions to account for delivery on the targets has been noted (ibid: 440; Bissio, 2019; Schleicher et al., 2018: 46). Finally, while acknowledgement is made of South-South cooperation, a perception that this is viewed primarily from a financial perspective is seen as curbing discussion of more innovative forms of international cooperation (Lopes Corrêa, 2017:3).

Against this background, multi-stakeholder partnerships are reduced to rather dry instrumental mechanisms at the service of donor relationships. The classification of multi-stakeholder partnerships as 'public, public-private and civil society partnerships' presents a restricted view of the vast array of multi-actor and multi-level relationships working towards the achievement of SDG targets. The inclusion of public-private partnership under the umbrella of 'multi-stakeholder partnerships' is particularly problematic. Although conflation of the two forms is common (Pattberg and Widerberg, 2016:43), public-private partnerships are generally understood as arrangements in which businesses are contracted by governments to provide services or construct infrastructure while multi-stakeholder partnerships are more flexible, non-contractual relationships involving actors from a range of different sectors in society (Caplan and Stott, 2008:25). Reinforcing this distinction, Meuleman et al. (2016) observe that the focus of public-private partnerships

is on cost-effectiveness which, while important, '...is *not* the main objective of the 2030 Agenda's vision of partnership, which emphasizes effectiveness (i.e. reaching the objectives) and inclusiveness.' It is also worth noting that public-private partnerships have been much criticised for enabling the private sector to weaken state regulation and public institutions (Miraftab, 2004; Richter, 2004; Utting and Zammit, 2009).

The narrow conceptualisation of partnership in SDG 17 minimises insights into how 'collaborative advantage' may be derived from the process of partnering and the development of relationships (Huxham and Vangen, 2004:200). Evidence suggests that by carefully combining the resources, skills, and competencies of different actors in society, new and innovative ways of addressing complex challenges may be activated (Scoppetta et al., 2013; Stott, 2014; Stott, 2018:3).[1] Multi-stakeholder partnerships have the potential to promote transformations such as the development and endorsement of positive rules, norms and connections at policy level; shifts in individual and organisational behaviours; and the empowerment of vulnerable and marginalised stakeholders (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012:744; Caplan and Stott, 2008: 24; Moreno Serna et al, 2020; Rein and Stott, 2009:85-86). Internalisation of the learning from working in partnership can also encourage improvements in organisational mandates and processes as well as promote a deeper shared understanding of the value and importance of different actors and their roles in society (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012:743; Stott, 2019).

4. ENHANCING 'PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS'

There is increasing awareness that profound structural changes are required to achieve the targets of the SDGs (Sachs et al, 2019:805). To support these 'radical transformations' (Schleicher et al., 2018:46), a richer conceptualisation of partnership that offers insights into how different forms of collaboration might contribute to 'significant economic, social, and environmental value for society, organizations, and individuals' (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012:744) is needed. In addition, the changes in policies, social practices, relationships, routines and values that systems change demands (Abercrombie et al., 2015:9; Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2019:35) will necessitate 'enhanced partnerships' (TWI2050 Report, 2019:23) that are better aligned and guided (Ellersiek, 2017). To meet these requirements, a revitalised vision of 'Partnerships for the Goals' is necessary. Some of the core elements that such a vision might incorporate include:

4.1. MULTI-DIMENSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS THE GOALS

To promote cohesion across the three SDG pillars, partnership arrangements should seek to promote 'relational inclusiveness' (Gupta and Vegelin, 2016:439) through a 'nexus approach' in which policy domains connect (Boas et al. 2016:455). This will require the joining up of collaborations operating at organizational or administrative levels (global, regional, national and local) and networking to connect actors and institutions both horizontally and vertically. Stafford Smith et al. (2017:212) suggest that SDG interconnections should be made across sectors (e.g. finance, agriculture, energy, technology, and transport); across societal actors (local authorities, government agencies, private sector, and civil society); and between and among low, medium, and high-income countries. The promotion of more robust linkages between policy and practice so that collaborative projects, programmes and policies mutually inform one another is also crucial (Stott, 2018:10).

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[1] In the European Union, for example, programmes such as EQUAL and Territorial Employment Pacts have shown that partnership has the potential to unleash social and economic transformation. See: https://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal_consolidated/ and https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/doc/tep_report1.pdf

4.2. INCLUSION OF MORE DIVERSE ACTORS

As well as ensuring 'collective problem-solving' (GCPSE and UNDP, 2016:2) and reinforcing the 'leave no one behind' principle at the heart of the SDG agenda, the engagement of more diverse actors in multi-stakeholder partnerships can assist in addressing entrenched power relations and integrating the economic, social and environmental pillars of Agenda 2030 (Gupta and Vegelin, 2016:444-5). New ideas and ways of working are likely to be promoted by involving non-traditional stakeholders that may include, among others: academic, research and other educational institutions (SDSN Australia/Pacific, 2017); scientists and representatives from natural and social science institutions (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2019); local governments and minority groups (Latek and Pinchon, 2017:1); 'faith-based organizations, citizens' groups, youth, and other parts of civil society' (Gornitzka and Pipa, 2018); gender equality and non-discrimination bodies (EQUINET, 2019); trade unions (ILO, 2017); and other networks, coalitions and partnerships (Stott, 2018:17). In order to ensure integrated development strategies at local level, place-based participative approaches that include formal and informal groupings of local actors and citizens have also been strongly recommended (Stott, 2018:20-21).[2]

Encouraging the engagement of more diverse actors to achieve the SDGs requires a closer look at the array of different stakeholders that 'sit' under the standard banners of 'government', 'business' and civil society'. In the public sector, for example, attention has been given to the role that national parliaments and local governments can play in supporting the SDGs (UNDP, GOPAC and IDB, 2017; Latek, and Pichon, 2017; Slack, 2015). The importance of including broad representation from civil society organisations to advocate, raise awareness and work in coalitions for SDG action has also been emphasised (Dattler, 2016). Agarwal et al. (2017:15) note, meanwhile, that the business sector encompasses:

> …a constantly shifting mix of publicly listed companies, cooperatives, family-owned businesses, state-owned enterprises, social businesses, foundation-owned models, community-owned enterprises, social enterprises and employee-owned companies - viable alternatives to 'business as usual' that are better suited to serving the needs of all stakeholders and that might help to align business and sustainability concerns.

Dissection of standard 'umbrella' sector groupings can also enable a deeper understanding of the capacities of different groups of actors and appreciation of what they might contribute to partnership arrangements. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the fact that financial resources may be just one of a whole range of possible inputs that partnerships may draw upon, including knowledge, skills, experience, products, venues, networks and political leverage (Caplan and Stott, 2008:30; Moreno-Serna et al. 2020:13). These considerations can help to ensure the relevance, timing and 'fit' of diverse inputs in different contexts so that the right set of stakeholders are engaged for specific issues (Pattberg and Widerberg, 2015:46; Stott, 2018:17).

4.3. PROMOTION OF COLLECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

While strong government leadership is regarded as essential for successful SDG implementation (GCPSE and UNDP, 2016), there is recognition that 'other actors can also be change agents in co-producing

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[2] See, for example, the promotion of Community-led Local Development (CLLD) in the EU:
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/brochures/2014/community-led-local-development

knowledge, solutions and pathways for sustainable development' (Bowen et al., 2017:93). Thus, in addition to a 'whole-of-government' approach that promotes policy coherence for the achievement of the SDGs, Gornitzka and Pipa (2018) call for governments to promote a 'whole of society' approach that encourages active engagement with diverse stakeholders so that they form an integral part of the SDG agenda. Mention has also been made of the role that non-governmental and civil society organisations can play in holding governments to account for delivery on the goals (Bowen, 2017:93; TAP Network, 2019) alongside the mobilisation of other stakeholders such as 'scholarly communities, communities of practice and social movements' (Gupta and Vegelin, 2016:445). True transformation, however, will depend upon different social actors working together to assume 'collective and interlinked accountability' for the SDG Agenda (Mahn, 2017:27-28). Concerted collective action in which all the stakeholders involved are fully confident of progress being made towards a common goal may also minimise free rider problems (Bowen et al., 2017:93).

4.4. IMPROVED EVIDENCE BASE FOR PARTNERSHIP POLICYMAKING

Deeper knowledge about how partnerships work in practice can inform policy level decisions relating to the use of partnerships for the achievement of SDG targets. Such information is important for identifying and leveraging synergies across different SDGs, geographic levels, sectors and actors. To do this, as well as a focus on results, partnership monitoring and evaluation systems that capture how partners work together in order to meet their goals are needed (Stott, 2019). The risks and challenges of working collaboratively, and the process solutions for addressing them in specific contexts, also need to be more deeply understood.

Combining diverse organisational approaches, resources and styles can be extremely difficult and requires considerable investment of time and energy (Caplan and Stott, 2008:34; Huxham and Vangen, 2004; Pattberg and Widerberg 2015:48). Some of the key challenges to working in partnership relate to the impact of contextual issues (Pattberg and Widerberg, 2016:48-9; Rein and Stott, 2009:8); inadequate partner selection (Pattberg and Widerberg, 2015:46); failure to appreciate different incentives for partnering (Stott, 2017); poor goal setting, management and monitoring (Pattberg and Widerberg, 2015:47-48); weak governance and accountability (Caplan, 2005), and difficulties related to inclusion and engagement, particularly where stakeholders lack capacity (Gazley, 2010; Huxham and Vangen, 2004:193). Among factors that stimulate effective connections and the development of innovative solutions to challenges, practitioners have noted the importance of respect for different partnership settings; generation of common understanding and agreement on joint goals; clarity around the identity, resources and capacities of different actors and the acquisition of collaborative skills (Scoppetta, 2013). The important convening role played by an intermediary or partnership broker in supporting and shaping partnerships has also been noted (Moreno-Serna et al. 2020; Stott, ed. 2018; Tennyson, 2005).

4.5. MUTUAL EXCHANGE AND LEARNING

To share knowledge about how partnering works in practise in different contexts and explore its potential for contributing to transformational change, more proactive and imaginative partnership information and learning exchanges are needed within, between and across multiple levels, sectors and actors. In addition to avenues such as meetings, networks and online platforms, options such as peer reviews, case studies, flipped learning methodologies and story-telling sessions have been proposed for this kind of interaction (Stott, 2019). To enhance the value of these interactions, the creation of 'safe spaces' that allow for critical debate and reflection on both partnership successes and failures is recommended (Beisheim and Simon, 2016:19; Stott, 2019)

Mutual exchange and learning can also assist in promoting openness around differing stakeholder perspectives. Bowen et al. (2017:91) note that collective action will embrace divergent and often conflicting interests as well as inherent power differences between actors. Acceptance that working in partnership involves tension and disagreement, and a willingness to understand conflicting viewpoints, can assist in developing the stronger and more radical partnership arrangements needed to meet the ambition of the SDG goals. This premise is neatly captured by Sennett (2013) who suggests that by allowing differences to surface through debates that provoke, test and challenge assumptions, stronger and more meaningful cooperation can be generated.

5. CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of the SDG text, Gupta and Vegelin (2016:446) observe that Agenda 2030 offers a 'comprehensive and holistic context' for commitment to the principles of inclusive development. In line with this argument, we argue that while the reductionist vision of partnership outlined in SDG 17 is unsatisfactory, this does not mean that we should dismiss it outright. Rather, the aim should be to reframe it by promoting a more rounded view of the potential that multidimensional and multilevel relationships offer for transformation. An understanding that the *process* of building collaborative relationships may offer lasting benefits for individuals, organisations and society as a whole is central to this. A richer appreciation of both the instrumental and intrinsic value of working in partnership will further assist us to move beyond what **Klein (2014:446) describes as 'linear one-way relationships of pure extraction' to 'systems that are circular and reciprocal'**. To construct and support this vision, it is essential that **ongoing** critical debate is encouraged among multiple stakeholders from diverse backgrounds about how SDG 17 is interpreted, implemented and monitored.

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