Beyond the “Partnerships” Approach: Corporate Accountability Post-2015

The United Nations is inching closer to defining the post-2015 development agenda, as the second session of the High-Level Political Forum on sustainable development concluded and the thirteenth and final meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals begin. So far neither of these two fundamental processes has begun to define how powerful actors, including transnational corporations, will be held to account for their contributions — or damage — to sustainable development or to the lives and livelihoods of the people claimed to be at its center. The ongoing discussions on “means of implementation” so far fail to address systemic issues of the global financial, lending, and trade architecture structured to benefit powerful States and their interests, while the agenda of big business is made manifest in the emphasis on voluntary, “multi-stakeholder” partnership initiatives that characterize the post-2015 debate.

In this second installment of our new briefing series on Corporate Influence, Global Policy Forum is pleased to share specific questions and recommendations related to the HLPF as the locus of accountability for the post-2015 agenda, for both States and their “partners” in sustainable development initiatives.

GPF Analysis of Current OWG Zero Draft Related to Partnerships

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<th>OWG Zero Draft as of 30 June</th>
<th>Problems resulting from this approach</th>
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<td>Multi-stakeholder partnerships</td>
<td>The inclusion of these targets indicates the degree of influence exerted by big business and its affiliates in promoting the central role of the private sector, through voluntary and non-binding commitments, and a shift in the understanding of sustainable development. The role of the State as primary duty-bearer for guaranteeing the human rights of its citizens and ensuring sustainable development is lost through this approach. Several member states have challenged the legitimacy of UN-led partnership initiatives such as SE4All and EWEC, which are Secretariat-led “matchmaking” services for corporations and NGOs to implement sustainable development objectives, with a lack of transparency about how much funding is really raised, who actually benefits, and how much oversight the UN has.</td>
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<td>17.13 support current broad-based multi-stakeholder partnerships and encourage new ones that mobilize knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support the achievement of sustainable development goals in all countries, particularly developing countries</td>
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<td>17.14 encourage and promote public, public-private, and private special funds and foundations, building on the experience and re-sourcing strategies of partnerships such as GFATM, GEF, GAVI, BMGF, SE4All, EWEC</td>
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<td>Data, monitoring and accountability</td>
<td>The inclusion of the word “voluntary” within this target negates any potential to hold “multi-stakeholder” partnerships to account. Rather than providing for effective regulation of corporations by States, this approach relies on the willingness of large corporations to report on their impact and voluntary commitments.</td>
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<td>17.16 undertake regular voluntary monitoring and reporting of progress on SDGs, led by governments, within a shared accountability framework, including means of implementation, the global partnership among Member States and multi-stakeholder initiatives and partnerships.</td>
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<td>Attain healthy lives for all</td>
<td>While mentioning the major obstacles to developing countries’ access to essential medicines to prevent and treat diseases, this target fails to specify how TRIPS flexibilities should be used by developing countries to facilitate their own production of vaccines and essential medicines, or to build capacity and lessen dependence on foreign technology. It refers only to States’ trade commitments and does not address the role of transnational pharmaceutical corporations in keeping medicines and R&amp;D inaccessible and unaffordable for developing countries.</td>
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<td>3.b support research and development of vaccines and medicines for the communicable diseases that primarily affect developing countries, provide access to affordable essential medicines, and support developing countries’ use of TRIPS flexibilities.</td>
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Problems resulting from this approach

Promote sustainable consumption and production patterns

- 12.5 increase the share of private sector actors incorporating sustainable development principles in their business practices, and by 2030 increase substantially the number of companies, especially large companies, that report on corporate social and environmental responsibility, including through integrated reporting.

This target is limited to reporting and even within this limited scope leaves it up to companies to report on the social and environmental impact of their activities without any mandatory requirements. “Increase the share” and “increase substantially” are vague suggestions towards what should be legally binding and go far beyond reporting to cover, inter alia, redress and remedy, in accordance with the Rio principles.

What should be done?

HLPF

- Challenge the current set-up of the HLPF as a “talkshop” without a meaningful outcome, including through recalling the HLPF’s establishing resolution, to re-structure it as a meaningful locus for accountability of both States and their corporate “partners.” House a monitoring and oversight hub for “partnerships” within a strong and effective HLPF.

- Build an intergovernmental accountability framework for the entirety of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda, housed in the HLPF, with government-adopted guidelines and government monitoring. It is essential to create a robust and truly universal accountability mechanism that upholds the values of the UN system in accordance with the international human rights framework and existing obligations related all three dimensions – social, economic, and environmental – of sustainable development.

Civil Society

- As the post-2015 process continues, including through intergovernmental negotiations beginning in early 2015, challenge the post-2015 partnership euphoria, by problematizing the growing business influence in political discourse and agenda-setting.

- Highlight and publicize problems with the partnerships approach: the increasing fragmentation of global governance; the weakening of representative democracy and institutions; the unpredictable, insufficient financing of public goods; and the lack of an effective monitoring and accountability mechanism.

- Evaluate and reconsider their involvement in partnerships with corporations that rely on a voluntary, multi-stakeholder approach and further consolidate corporate influence in the UN and other global governance settings.

- Ensure better linkages between organizations on the ground and those promoting corporate accountability at the UN. Encourage evidence-based advocacy and expose corporate behavior that contradicts commitments that corporations make at the UN.

- Undertake and promote evidence-based research on the outcomes of public-private partnerships; undertake further research and general conclusions on the political economy of UN-business interactions.

- Advocate for proper regular, public funding of UN programs.

“Accountability is only meaningful if it includes the powerful… In today’s world the powerful are the rich countries, the intergovernmental institutions (particularly those dealing with trade and finances), transnational corporations and even some huge foundations and NGOs with budgets of billions of dollars.” [Prologue, Means and Ends: Social Watch Report 2014]

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