



# Partnerships and the 2030 Agenda

Time to reconsider their role in implementation

BARBARA ADAMS & JENS MARTENS  
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- „Partnership“ is a misleading term to cover every type of engagement between UN entities and non-State actors.
- It promotes a false sense of equality. Lumping CSOs and corporate actors together according to their non-State status ignores the profound differences in their orientation, interests and accountability.
- Before considering ways to enhance the effectiveness of partnerships between UN entities and non-State actors and establishing a system-wide delivery support, more fundamental questions should be addressed.
- This Background Note poses necessary questions and offers perspectives both from the work of Global Policy Forum as well as from previous proposals on partnerships offered by some Member States.

## 1. The term “partnership” is misleading

The paper of the Independent Team of Advisors on “Partnerships for the UN Development System” states that partnerships will play a crucial role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda “by engaging actors beyond the UN to engage and leverage their resources, capacities and ambitions.” It emphasizes the objective to enhance the effectiveness of current partnership approaches, without differentiating between corporate and civil society partners. We regard this as a wrong starting point.

The **notion of “partnership” is misleading** to cover every type of engagement between UN entities and non-state actors. It promotes a false sense of equality. Lumping CSOs and corporate actors together according to their non-State status ignores the profound differences in their orientation, interests and accountability. Therefore, before considering ways to enhance the effectiveness of partnerships between UN entities and non-State actors and establishing a system-wide delivery support, more fundamental questions should be addressed.

## 2. Previous proposals on partnerships discussed by some Member States

A number of concerns regarding partnership arrangements and activities have made their way onto the UN and Member States agenda in the context of the active promotion by the Secretary-General of his proposal for a Partnership Facility. While this proposal has since been withdrawn, the concerns themselves and the requirements to address them could form the basis for further considerations by the UN and Member States. Proposals discussed by some Member States in this regard include:

- regular reporting to the General Assembly on the activities of partnerships of the United Nations system, including full disclosure of funding and resources raised or pledged, detailed information on projects, and assessments of project implementation and impact;
- a process of consideration and approval of proposals for new multi-stakeholder partnership initiatives;
- full compliance of all partnership initiatives using the UN name, emblem or are in association with it or any

of its agencies, funds and programmes with the UN Charter, mission, principles and mandates adopted by Member States and measures to prevent conflicts of interest;

- ex-ante disclosure/description of financial arrangements for each partnership and of clarification to Member States regarding values involved or contributed to the UN by partnering entities, their source, destination, use and applicable liabilities or responsibilities of respective parties;
- a framework of accountability for partnerships which includes reporting, monitoring and review;
- standard guidelines for partnerships involving the UN system, and articulation that would ensure compliance of partnerships with the UN Charter and relevant mandates, including the regulations and rules of the General Assembly, financial regulations and rules, operational activities for development (OAD) resolutions;
- clarification of the responsibilities of any new partnership entity in the UN secretariat and how they relate to and differ from those of the Global Compact and the UN Office for Partnerships.

## 3. Private resources are procyclical

The emphasis on multi-stakeholder partnerships can be in conflict with strengthening public administration and UN institutions. Not only are private resources procyclical (dependent on the overall economic situation) and generally not made available to support the norm setting, policy and advocacy work of the UN, the use of public resources to secure these partnerships can drain depleted public funds at crucial times.

## 4. High transaction costs

Partnerships can have high transaction costs, resulting from the need to manage the partnership. These costs are generally underestimated and often the adequate recovery of institutional costs associated with partnership activities is not guaranteed.

## 5. Core UN resources

UN Member States should ensure that partnerships with UN involvement are not subsidized by core UN

resources with consequent negative effects on the availability of remaining core resources. Full cost recovery for multilateral management and demonstrable compliance with UN standards must be guaranteed.

## 6. Comprehensive cost-benefit analysis

UN administrations should undertake comprehensive cost-benefit analyses of any individual partnership with UN involvement, taking into account not only the direct costs but also the opportunity costs of its engagement.

## 7. Improved reporting

Improved reporting is needed for funds committed in the context of multi-stakeholder partnerships, such as Every Woman Every Child or Sustainable Energy for All. While these initiatives claim billions of US dollars in pledges and investments, it is usually difficult to assess whether the promised funds have actually been disbursed, whether the funds have been new and additional to existing commitments, where the money has gone and what its impacts have been, particularly as they affect the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

## 8. An intergovernmental framework

An intergovernmental framework should be adopted by the UN General Assembly to set minimum standards for the participation of the UN in global partnerships and for the shape and composition of UN initiatives involving the private sector. These standards should prevent undue corporate influence on UN policies and prevent companies that violate internationally agreed environmental, social and human rights standards or otherwise violate UN principles (via corruption, breaking UN sanctions, lobbying against UN global agreements, evading taxes, etc.) from participation in UN events, participation on expert or high-level panels and from eligibility for UN procurement. There have been a number of initiatives and mandates from the UN Secretariat and Member States to govern UN engagement with the business and corporate sector, such as the recently updated Guidelines on Co-operation between the United Nations and the Business Sector. While they are non-comprehensive and limited in application to many situations, they (and their

implementation and monitoring) provide a starting point for framing this engagement.

## 9. Monitoring and oversight

Setting up standards and guidelines for regulating UN-business interactions and partnerships will be a good step forward but by itself is not enough. The growth in the volume and scope of global partnerships increases the opportunities to offshore governance and by-pass intergovernmental decision-making processes not only for some Member States but also for senior UN officials. Therefore, greater accountability of UN interactions with the private sector and global partnerships requires governments to build the intergovernmental structures for monitoring and oversight within the UN. This is particularly important with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, for which the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) becomes the hub for monitoring and review.

## 10. Capacities of UN secretariat

An institutional framework for partnership accountability will require new and additional capacity in the UN secretariat. Staff is needed for the tasks of screening partnerships, monitoring, evaluation and impact assessments. Minimum standards and guidelines for interaction with corporate actors will remain useless if not systematically implemented. This task should be fulfilled by a new entity established within the UN secretariat. It should carry out its task in a neutral manner instead of acting in a biased way as promoter of partnerships with the corporate sector. Therefore, the UN Office for Partnerships and the Global Compact office would not qualify for this task. Rather their initiatives would be subject to its standards and scrutiny.

## 11. Meaningful engagement

Meaningful engagement with all sectors of society is a pre-requisite for democratic decision-making as well as providing invaluable and essential expertise in the identification of problems and solutions. But, rather than continuing to “innovate” through “outsourcing” tasks to piecemeal partnerships with decision-making structures outside the UN, it is time to call explicitly for the needed political leadership – and to put in place the necessary regulatory and global governance framework.



## About the Authors

**Barbara Adams** is Chair of the Executive Board of Global Policy Forum (New York). She has a distinguished career in international development, having served as Associate Director of the Quaker United Nations Office in New York (1981–1988), as Deputy Coordinator of the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (1988-2003), and as Chief of Strategic Partnerships and Communications for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (2003-2008). She is a member of the Reflection Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Coordinating Committee of Social Watch.

**Jens Martens** is Executive Director of Global Policy Forum (Bonn/New York). Since 2011 he has coordinated the Reflection Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New York  
Bettina Luise Rürup, Executive Director  
747 Third Avenue| Suite 22 B | New York, NY 10017

Tel.: +1-212-687-0208 | Fax: +1-212-687-0261  
<http://www.fes.de/Referatsseite>

For more information contact:  
Sara Burke, Senior Policy Analyst, FES New York  
[sburke@fesny.org](mailto:sburke@fesny.org)