Multi-stakeholder Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Does the Promise Hold?

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Multi-stakeholder Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Does the Promise Hold?

Summary

Multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) have increasingly been accompanied and partially also substituted by other, more flexible instruments to reach the goal of sustainable development. Multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development have even been promoted as an official (type 2) outcome at the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD), suggesting that traditional MEAs (type 1 outcomes) are necessary but insufficient means to achieve sustainable development. Although public-private partnerships in national contexts have been rather common since early 1980s, they are novel governance arrangements in transnational politics. On the other hand, effectiveness of partnerships for sustainable development (for the implementation of MEAs) has rarely been the topic of investigation and most research has been conducted as single case studies, hindering more general understandings of the phenomenon. This paper discusses these multi-stakeholder initiatives and public-private partnerships for sustainable development in the context of global environmental governance, inquiring to what extent they fill the governance deficits. Governance deficits that will be researched in this paper are three-fold: The participation deficit, the implementation deficit, and the regulation deficit. On the one hand partnerships have been introduced with Agenda 21, as early as 1992, as a means to ensure the participation of vulnerable groups (such as women, workers, farmers, etc.) and major stakeholders (businesses, NGOs, etc.) to the decision making process of sustainable development. The extent to which these groups have actually been incorporated to decision-making mechanisms, the distribution of power among different partners, and the extent to which corporations are willing to take part in partnerships would frame the query on the participation deficit. On the other hand, in 2002, the Bali Guidelines and WSSD defined them as implementation mechanisms of inter-governmentally agreed outcomes. To what extent partnerships are able to effectively implement sustainability goals would be the frame of the query on the implementation deficit. Finally, current literature on WSSD partnerships overlooks their interaction with existing regulatory governance institutions (international environmental regimes), and possible repercussions these institutions might have on governance. The issue areas in which partnerships are more numerous, and more effective will be discussed in relation to self-regulation in the international/transnational contexts, to explore if the regulation deficit is addressed. The answers to these questions are explored using statistical analyses of the data from Global Sustainability Partnerships Database (GSPD v.1), as well as other databases on WSSD partnerships.

Keywords: Public-Private Partnerships, Governance Gaps, Sustainable Development

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1 Introduction

Multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development are often hailed as a vital new element of the emerging system of global sustainability governance. In policy and academic debates alike, partnerships are promoted as solution to deadlocked intergovernmental negotiations, to ineffective treaties and overly bureaucratic international organizations, to power-based state policies, corrupt elites and many other real or perceived current problems of the sustainability transition. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are now ubiquitous. They have been promoted in particular at the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, where partnerships became known as "type-2 outcomes" of the summit, along with the traditional outcomes of the intergovernmental diplomatic process. As of December 2006, 321 multi-stakeholder initiatives have been registered with the United Nations (UN 2006). In addition, many similar agreements are in place but not formally registered.

And yet, the role and relevance of these partnerships remains contested. Some observers view the new emphasis on multi-stakeholder partnerships as problematic (Ottaway 2001; Corporate Europe Observatory 2002; IISD 2002; SDIN 2002), since voluntary public-private governance arrangements might privilege more powerful actors, in particular "the North" and "big business," and consolidate the privatization of governance and dominant neo-liberal modes of globalization. Also, some argue that partnerships lack accountability and (democratic) legitimacy. Yet others see multi-stakeholder partnerships as an innovative form of governance that addresses deficits of inter-state politics by bringing together key actors of civil society, governments and business (e.g. Reinicke 1998; Benner et al. 2003; Streck 2004). In this perspective, multi-stakeholder partnerships or similar governance networks for sustainable development are important new mechanisms to help resolve a variety of current governance deficits. Such governance deficits have been discussed from different conceptual perspectives (e.g. Andonova and Levy 2003; Haas 2004; Martens 2007). While some scholars regard governance deficits as a generic phenomenon in international relations (Haas 2004), others focus on a particular governance deficit, for example the democratic deficit and problems of legitimacy (Bäckstrand 2006).

These conflicting expectations regarding the role and relevance of multi-stakeholder partnerships remain open for debate. In this paper, we provide therefore a large-n assessment of whether the entire system of partnerships tends to live up to the positive expectations of their proponents, or whether the evidence supports the arguments of the critics. We focus our analysis on three governance deficits that are repeatedly mentioned in the literature on multi-stakeholder partnerships, and that partnerships are meant to address.

First, partnerships are expected to address a *regulatory deficit* in current sustainability governance. In other words, they are seen as providing avenues for co-operation and joint problem-solving in areas where intergovernmental regulation is largely non-existent. Second, partnerships are believed to fill an *implementation deficit* in sustainability governance, that is, they could help implement intergovernmental regulations that do exist, but that are only poorly implemented, if at all. Third, partnerships are often expected to assist in solving a *participation deficit* in global governance. In this view, intergovernmental negotiations are seen as dominated by powerful governments and international organizations, while partnerships might ensure higher participation of less privileged actors, including voices from the youth, the poor, women, indigenous people and civil society at large. Increased participation from such groups is seen as needed to improve the implementation of international agreements and to strengthen the overall legitimacy, accountability and democratic quality of current governance systems.

While these claims of multi-stakeholder partnerships as solutions to perceived regulation, implementation and participation deficits in sustainability governance are frequently made, there is surprisingly little systematic research in their support. Evidence for the actual role and relevance of partnerships concerning the three governance deficits is scarce and inconclusive. This lacuna impairs a better understanding of multi-stakeholder partnerships in global governance. Are partnerships a sign of a new model of world politics in which intergovernmental negotiations are complemented and sometimes even replaced by networked governance of non-state actors? Or is the contribution of partnerships rather limited? To what extent, if at all, are partnerships superior to traditional ways of international cooperation, such as the negotiation of legally binding agreements among governments and their subsequent national implementation?

The current literature on public-private governance in general, and on multi-stakeholder partnerships in particular, is still not sufficiently evolved both theoretically and empirically to answer these questions, even though important pioneering work has been done (Witte et al. 2002; Andonova and Levy 2003; Falkner 2003; Betsill and Bulkeley 2004; Hale and Mauzerall 2004; Dingwerth 2005; Bäckstrand 2006). Yet the literature continues to be hampered by fragmented research agendas, inconsistent conceptualizations across different studies, and the absence of large-n studies. Most analyses differ regarding the policy level they address, ranging from studies that focus on local partnerships (Bassett 1996; De Rynck and Voets 2006) to the analysis of nation-wide arrangements (Jimenez et al. 1991; Selin 1999), European partnerships (Marks 1993; Bomberg 1994; Heinelt and Smith 1996; Rhodes et al. 1996; Dehousse 1997), or transnational partnerships (Börzel 1997). Empirical studies also focus on different partnership functions, that is, whether partnerships serve as mechanisms of rule and standard setting (Pattberg 2005), of rule implementation (Börzel and Risse 2005), or for information provision and dissemination (Glasbergen and Groenenberg 2001; Tully 2004). It is open to debate to what extent one can generalize empirical findings on one partnership type to other types. Studies also differ regarding the policy area in which partnerships operate—ranging from studies on sustainable development and environment to a variety of other issues including security (Considine 2002; Krahmann 2003), economy (Kenis and Schneider 1987; Considine and Lewis 2003), tourism (Selin 1999), or health (Jimenez et al. 1991; Altenstetter 1994). The predominant case-study approach often results in a bias towards the most visible and most successful public-private partnerships, which tends to paint a universe that is more partnership-dominated than reality may warrant. Overall, current research on partnerships falls short of placing these governance arrangements in a wider context.

In order to improve understanding of the role and relevance of partnerships concerning the three governance deficits identified above, this paper offers therefore a first large-n empirical assessment of the entire system of multi-stakeholder partnerships five years after they were institutionalized at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. We draw on three data sources: first, a meta-analysis of existing empirical studies of the performance of partnerships for sustainable development; second, the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) database on partnerships (a basic inventory of registered partnerships based on self-reporting); and finally, on data from the first version of the Global Sustainability Partnership Database that is currently developed by our project team. The Global Sustainability Partnership Database covers all partnerships that have been formally registered with the United Nations, and will later also include non-registered partnerships.

The remainder of our paper is organized around the three governance deficits that we have outlined above and that partnerships are believed to resolve: the regulation deficit, the implementation deficit, and the participation deficit.

2. Partnerships and the Regulation Deficit

One core claim in support of multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development is that they function where governments fail. When governments cannot agree on effective international agreements, or when these agreements are too general to elicit any meaningful action, civil society steps in with the creation of multi-stakeholder partnerships. One can reformulate this claim in two hypotheses. First, if partnerships fill a regulatory deficit, they will be more prominent in areas where public regulation is largely non-existent. That is, there would be a negative correlation between the frequency of partnerships in a given issue area and public regulation of the area. Alternatively, if this were not the case, then partnerships would at least be spread rather equally over a wide range of problems, instead of focusing on the densely institutionalized environments.

The evidence is inconclusive, but hardly supportive of either hypothesis. Partnerships are indeed unequally spread over issue areas, with some areas, such as water (75 partnerships), energy (55), and natural resource management (52), receiving most attention (based on data on their self-declared primary theme when registering with the United Nations, excluding "cross-cutting issues"). From these areas with highest partnership density, at least energy and natural resource management are densely regulated at the national level, and by a large measure also internationally, for example through the climate regime and the biodiversity protection regime. Other areas of equal importance for global environmental change—mining (6), desertification (11), drought (12) or toxic chemicals (4)—are relatively neglected by partnership initiatives (see UN 2006).

A systematic comparison of the distribution of partnerships with that of multilateral environmental agreements per issue area, through an online treaty locator (CIESIN 2007), suggests that issues that are less regulated or unregulated (like mining) also attract very few partnerships. Relatively more partnerships exist in areas that are heavily regulated, such as marine resources, oceans and seas. This hypothesis has also been analyzed by Liliana Andonova (2006, p. 48) based on older data sets from 2003. Both Andonova's and our investigations seem to contradict the regulation deficit hypothesis. It seems that a fair degree of institutionalization and a relatively high density of intergovernmental agreements facilitate partnership entrepreneurship, whereas areas with obvious governance gaps have been less popular for partnerships.

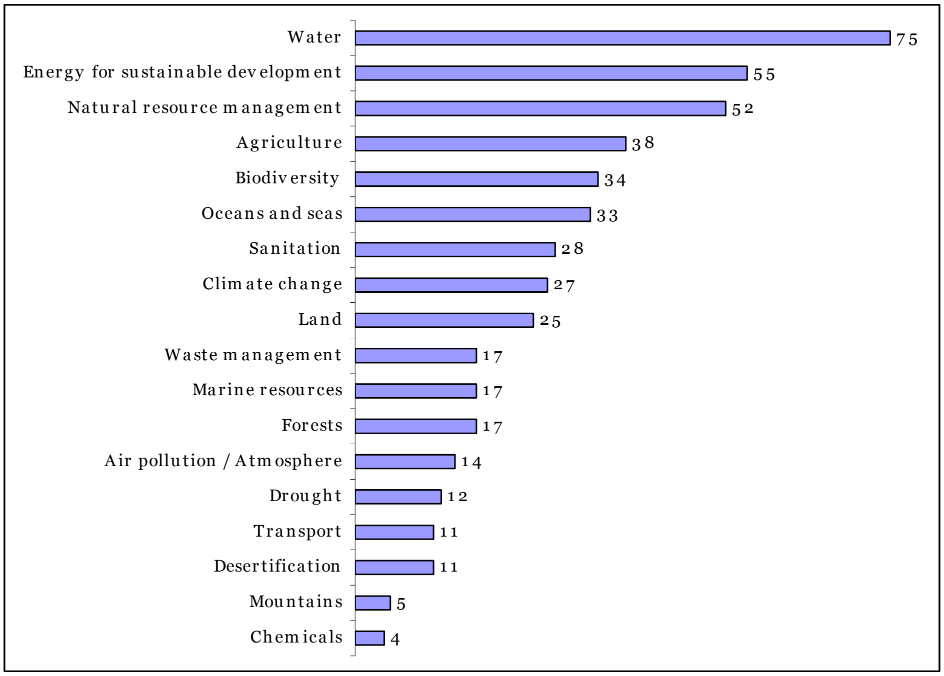
A similar trend emerges from of our country studies, the first of which had focused on all partnerships that claim to work in Chile (Tondreau 2005). Issues addressed by partnerships in Chile were heavily concentrated on more managerial problems, such as sustainable management of forests, improving mapping and citizen information, whereas almost no partnerships existed on issues of major importance but with little international regulation, such as mining or aquaculture.

Thus, while some areas with major international conventions—such as energy and climate change—are heavily populated with partnerships, areas with no strong international agreements, such as forestry, are less covered by partnerships.

Hale and Mauzerall (2004) explain this by the private and voluntary nature of partnerships that prevents them from sharing the macro-perspective of the United Nations and international partnership advocates, so that "some key issues have not received the attention they deserve" (Hale and Mauzerall 2004). This could result in partnerships picking the "low hanging fruit" in highly regulated areas, since they do not necessarily view problems in terms of urgency, but in terms of manageability.

Another important factor that might facilitate partnership agreements—and that also contradicts the regulation deficit hypothesis—is funding. Partnerships tend to emerge in areas that receive abundant funding from governments, and especially from the European Union and the United States in areas such as climate change, air pollution, energy and water. The United States have pledged in the Johannesburg process to invest 970 million US dollar over three years in water and sanitation projects, and the European Union has offered to launch a 700 million US dollar partnership on energy development. Both issue areas are now also most densely populated by partnerships. The pattern of partnerships emerging in areas with such financial priorities points to a conclusion that the emergence of partnerships is rather supply-driven than responsive to governmental incentives and perceived regulation deficits in global governance.

Figure 1: Issue Areas of WSSD Partnerships



Source: Global Sustainability Partnership Database V.1 2007

In sum, multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development do not live up to expectations that they fill regulatory deficits in global governance. While our current analysis and previous studies do not focus on the performance of individual partnerships in a given issue area, we can conclude that partnerships have been created rather unevenly across issues. This uneven spread across areas, however, does not negatively correlate with the regulatory density in an area. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that partnerships emerge in areas where there is already a fair degree of institutionalization.

This is not necessarily a problem—if partnerships serve to contribute to the implementation of existing rules and regulations, it might be more effective for them to flourish in areas with substantial public regulation. However, the underlying question then is whether partnerships in fact contribute to implementation, as we analyze in the following section. In any case, at least the claim that partnerships fill regulatory gaps—where governments fail to agree on taking action—is hardly supported by the evidence.

3. Partnerships and the Implementation Deficit

The second claim in support of partnerships for sustainable development is that they help improve the implementation of intergovernmental treaties, agreements and programs. In the official texts from the World Summit on Sustainable Development, strengthened implementation is generally seen as the most important rationale for partnerships. In Johannesburg, multi-stakeholder partnerships were explicitly defined as "specific commitments by various partners intended to contribute to and reinforce the *implementation* of the outcomes of intergovernmental negotiations of the WSSD [World Summit on Sustainable Development] and to help the further *implementation* of Agenda 21 and the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals]" (Kara and Quarless 2002, emphasis added). The argument for partnerships asserts that international agreements are poorly implemented and that the international community should focus on this implementation deficit through public-private cooperation and voluntary action of environmental leaders (Bruch and Pendergrass 2003).

To what extent do partnerships contribute to the implementation of intergovernmental agreements and of global sustainability governance in general? Although some studies have addressed implementation (Witte et al. 2003; Speth 2004; Streck 2004), measuring the effectiveness of the contribution of partnerships towards the implementation of international programs remains difficult. We have analyzed four hypotheses that we derived from the literature on the implementation deficit. We hypothesized that if partnerships are effective in filling the implementation gap, they could be expected: (1) to have the required capacity, and in particular the human and material resources; (2) to create additional sources of funding, on top of what governments and UN agencies were already going to provide; (3) to concentrate on direct policy improvement rather than creating new bureaucratic procedures; and (4) to implement projects in the least developed countries to prioritize the realization of the Millennium Development Goals.

(1) Sufficient capacity of partnerships? Regarding the first hypothesis, there are reasons to doubt that partnerships have the capacity and necessary financial and personnel means to reach their claimed sustainable development goals. For example, 65% of all partnerships registered with the United Nations have declared to be still looking for funds, along with 4-8% of partnerships that search also for additional non-financial resources such as computers or office space. As of 2006, all partnerships together sought additional funding of 710 million US dollar, which equals 55.6% of what they had in funds at that time. The community of more than 300 multi-stakeholder partnerships registered with the United Nations is very diverse, and there are thus several reasons that might explain why the majority of partnerships is still looking for more money: they could plan to expand because they see themselves as rather successful; they could be new and in the formation stage; or unexpected problems could require additional funds. And yet, another—and in our view more convincing—reading is that there is a more general problem and that the vast majority of all partnerships simply lacks the financial means to reach the goals they set for themselves.

(2) New and additional resources? Second, we have analyzed whether partnerships create new sources of funding in addition to what governments and UN agencies were already going to provide. If partnerships generated a substantial amount of new resources, this would be a positive indicator of their effectiveness in implementing the sustainable development goals. At the end of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, all partnerships initiated around the summit had less than 250 million US dollar in resources (Hale and Mauzerall 2004: 235). In the larger context, this sum is a trifle and merely slightly more than the official development assistance of a small country such as Luxemburg. Admittedly, until 2004—in less than two years—funding increased four-fold to 1.02 billion US dollar. However, the main reason for this substantial increase was the reclassification of large intergovernmental programs as multi-stakeholder partnerships, while the programs continue to rely on governmental funding and on existing programs within the United Nations and World Bank programs (Hale and Mauzerall 2004: 235). This is supported by the rather modest increase from 2004 to December 2006 by merely an additional 230 million US dollar, from 1.02 billion to 1.28 billion.

In any case, this sum is still small compared to 78 billion US dollar in overall official development assistance of the OECD countries (OECD 2004). Even in the multi-sectoral partnerships funding remains largely public: business actors account for only 1% of the new funding, almost the same ratio as nongovernmental organizations, which has led Hale and Mauzerall (2004: 235-6) to the conclusion that "partnerships have failed to bring a substantial amount of new, multi-sectoral resources to sustainable development activities." Our more recent analysis indicates that not much has changed.

It is also difficult to estimate the percentage of funds that is genuinely new and that has not been allocated for sustainable development before the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Bäckstrand 2006). Partnerships were often presented to developing country representatives as a more reliable source of funding, as they were not dependent on the uncertain process of negotiations (personal communication with members of government delegations to the World Summit on Sustainable Development and to the fourth Preparatory Committee meeting, January 2007). This partially explains why developing countries agreed to the partnerships regime at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, but also supports suspicions that substantial parts of the partnership funds are in fact reclassified public development assistance.

(3) Focus on direct impact? Third, if multi-stakeholder partnerships contribute to closing an implementation deficit, one could expect that they concentrate on direct environmental impacts. However, in a recent OECD survey (2006), which looks mainly at partnerships registered with the United Nations that have an environmental focus, only 28% of the responding partnerships considered themselves as providing direct environmental benefits. The OECD researchers interpreted this as an overestimate and suggested that at a closer look, it was more likely that "of the 32 partnerships only three or four had direct environmental impact, with the rest facilitating impact further down the line" (OECD 2006: 24). Another critical finding of the survey is that most partnerships identify as main beneficiaries of multi-stakeholder cooperation "the partners themselves" (79%) or "the partners as well as others" (OECD 2006: 24-25). A similar pattern is found among the 321 partnerships registered with the United Nations. For example, 165 partnerships report rather vague objectives as their primary goals, such as "strengthening the means of implementation," "building institutional frameworks," and "supplying information for decision-making." A recent survey by the International Food Policy Research Institute on 124 public-private partnerships in agricultural innovation in nine South American countries concludes that most of the partnerships reviewed "are not based on genuine demand; do not produce the expected synergistic effects from complementary use of resources, co-innovation, and joint learning; and do not respond to common interests" (Hartwich et al. 2005: 30).

Likewise, our 2005 study of partnerships implemented in Chile found that only half of the partnerships list as objective the “actual increase in coverage of services and life quality” and “reduction of environmental impacts.” Instead, most objectives seem to have only a rather indirect impact on actual problems, for example through “improving mapping that helps to take better public decisions,” “access to credits that allow people to improve their quality of life” or “giving consultancy services for better and more sustainable results from agriculture” (Tondreau 2005).

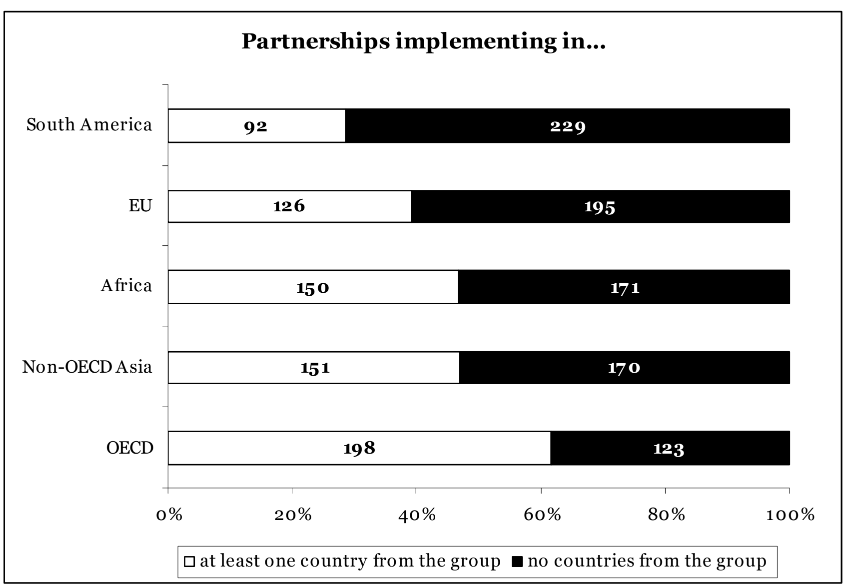
Another proxy for the question of whether partnerships address the implementation deficit is the number of partnerships that monitor their progress in implementing the Millennium Development Goals. In the 250 partnerships that Hale and Mauzerall (2004) studied, only 69% had a reporting system and less than 50% had a monitoring mechanism in place. Because this study was conducted shortly after the initiation of partnerships, monitoring mechanisms might have been created later. However, there is indicative evidence that the lack of monitoring persists. For example, a more recent OECD survey (2006) states that many partnerships that focused on environmental protection had no monitoring mechanism in place. While 81% of the sampled cases planned an evaluation of the effectiveness of the partnership, only 56% declared that they would evaluate “their contribution to the Millennium Development Goals.”

This seems comparable to other multi-stakeholder processes. For example, a 2004 McKinsey report on “intermediate impacts” of the United Nations Global Compact does not find any substantial improvements towards the Compact’s principles five years after its initiation. The results of the survey indicate that the foremost reason to sign the Global Compact for nongovernmental organizations was “to network with other organizations” (64%). Companies most often claimed that they aimed at addressing humanitarian concerns (55% globally) or at becoming familiar with corporate social responsibility (62% in non-OECD countries). However, only 58% of the companies took “any (at least one) action” in support of global compact goals. While 67% of companies indicated that their companies “made changes” to implement the Compact’s principles, only 9% claimed that the Global Compact had a crucial impact on any of these policy changes (McKinsey 2004).

Of course, improving means of implementation or building institutional frameworks are important elements of the larger quest for the transition towards a more sustainable development. Yet, given these data, the suspicion arises that a sizable part of current partnership activity is not implementation per se, but rather the construction of a bureaucratic procedural universe in parallel to the existing intergovernmental processes. These activities may lay the foundation for effective implementation in the future—but this is far from certain.

(4) Focus on least developed regions? Fourth, if partnerships were contributing to filling the implementation deficit, one would expect them to focus in particular on these countries and regions where implementation is most urgently needed. One can analyze this through looking at the designated countries of implementation of partnerships registered with the United Nations. Most previous partnership studies have focused on countries as (lead) partners and neglected the category of country of implementation. This category indicates exclusively the broadness of implementation regardless of which countries the partners come from. Interestingly, we found that it is not the least developed countries but the OECD countries that are the most frequent countries of implementation, followed by Asian countries and Africa. If partnerships exist to further the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, such as bringing food and education to the poorest, it is striking that there is no bias in the partnership universe in favor of least developed countries as countries of implementation.

Figure 2: Countries of Implementation



Source: Global Sustainability Partnership Database V.1 2007

In sum, the general perception of partnerships as a response to the implementation gap seems overly optimistic. A number of indicators—the balance of issue areas and geographical areas, the lack of focus on direct environmental impact, the potential to reach goals and to attract additional funding—all point to the conclusion that the current practice of partnerships does not show strong evidence that they contribute significantly towards filling an implementation gap in global governance.

4. Partnerships and the Participation Deficit

Multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development are often seen as a means to ensure larger participation of all stakeholders. Already Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development stipulated that "environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level," and at the Rio Summit the notion of major groups was introduced to acknowledge the necessity of broad-based participation in decision-making to achieve sustainable development. Thus, the Agenda 21 of 1992 urged governments to retreat "from narrow sectoral approaches" and move towards "full cross-sectoral coordination and cooperation" (UN 1992: 8.12).

There are various arguments that support broader participation. Some argue that ensuring participatory processes is a public good in itself (Stiglitz 2002: 168-171), while others add that participation also increases the effectiveness of projects and of decisions in general, ensures political sustainability, assists in a more acceptable development transformation, and creates more transparent corporate governance (cf. Isham et al. 1995; Isham et al. 1997).

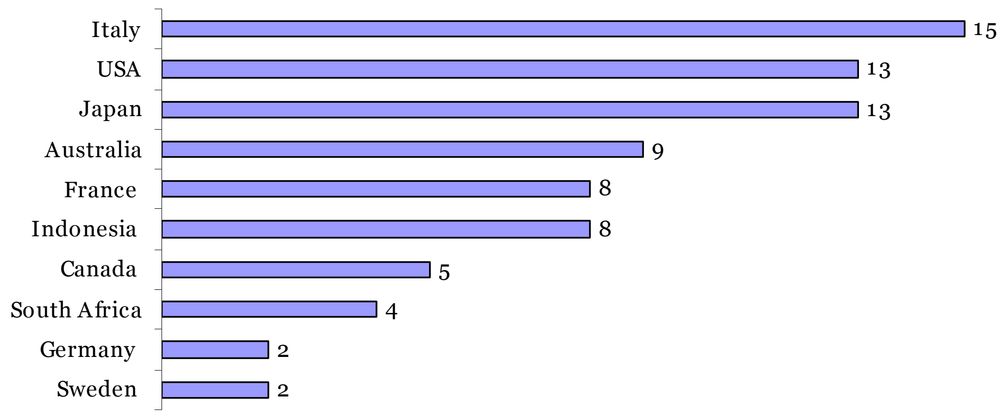
Proponents of multi-stakeholder partnerships as means to increase participation offer three core arguments: First, because national governments and public agencies have limited resources, information and skills, they need to collaborate with other sectors to ensure effective governance (Reinicke and Deng 2000; Ruggie 2002; Streck 2004). Second, partnerships that bring together a variety of sectors in environmental decision-making will decrease the gap between societies and global institutions that emerges from the impossibility of a global democracy. Finally, partnerships are believed to reduce the costs of compliance to international agreements through creating consensus among the major actors (Jobin, forthcoming). Increased participation through partnerships is often related to their assumed bridge-functions between state and non-state actors (Martens 2007: 33). Yet the assumed positive effect of partnerships also relates to their role in bridging the differences of understanding between the global "North" and "South" on environment and development issues.

Does this promise hold, and is the theory met by reality? We have analyzed three hypotheses: We assumed that if partnerships are effective in strengthening participation, they will have: (1) an at least balanced distribution of lead partners from the global North and South and of actors from developing countries in general; (2) an at least balanced distribution of lead partners from state and non-state actors; and (3) a sufficient participation of traditionally marginalized partners.

(1) Balance between North and South. First, regarding overall representation and distribution of leadership roles between North and South, this is hardly balanced among state actors in partnerships for sustainable development. In more than a quarter of all partnerships registered with the United Nations, industrialized countries are the only state partners involved. In 60% of the registered partnerships, at least one OECD state is a partner. Developing countries are underrepresented; 56% of all partnerships have no state partner from the developing world. When we consider countries not as a partner but as the setting for implementation, we observe a similar pattern. 70.4% of partnerships led by industrialized countries have at least one OECD country as their country of implementation. In comparison, 82.6% of the partnerships that are led by developing countries have exclusively developing countries as country of implementation.

The leadership of partnerships lies predominantly with industrialized countries. By the end of 2006, governments that were leading partnerships registered with the United Nations were almost exclusively from the North. The only developing countries among the group of the ten most-often leading governments were the host countries of the last preparatory conference to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Indonesia) and of the Summit itself (South Africa).

Figure 3: Lead partner governments



Source: Global Sustainability Partnership Database V.1 2007

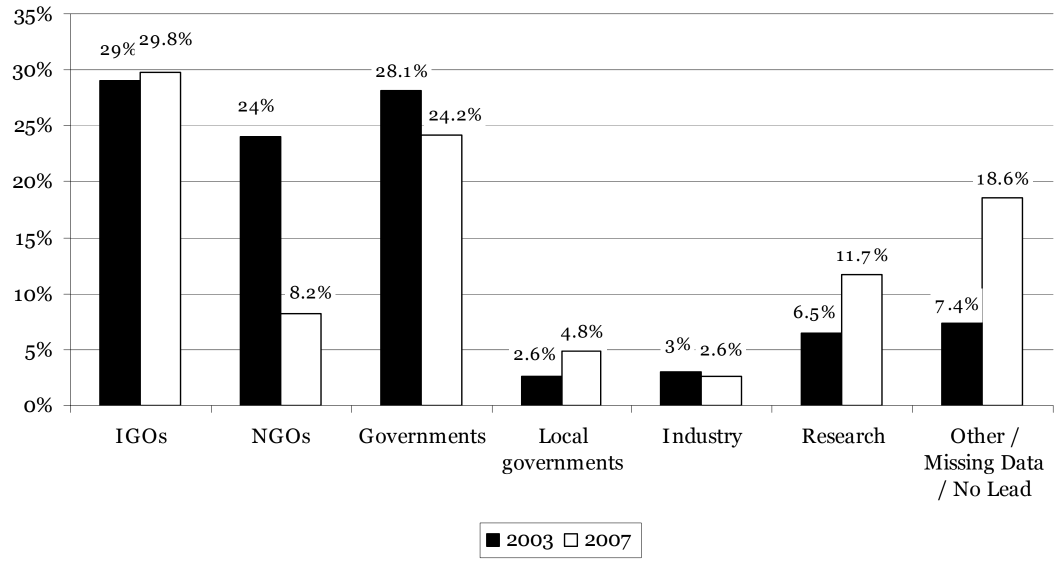
The general trend that Northern actors play a major role in the initiation, funding and operation of private-public governance is supported by sectoral studies as well. For example, Buse (2004) concludes for global health partnerships that the most active governmental partners are the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Canada, with the consequence that Southern governments and nongovernmental organizations are systematically underrepresented in the governing bodies of the partnerships. Even when Southern actors are represented, leadership and initiation might mean that decision-making power remains with more powerful actors. Bartsch (2006) cites global health partnerships as cases in which no real decision-making power is granted to governments and civil society actors from the South even despite their representation.

Empirical studies of environmental partnerships have reached similar conclusions. Andonova (2006, p. 44-45) suggests that, "the more countries are involved in foreign aid transactions, the more their governments and development agencies are likely to have interest and political skill to participate in public-private institutions." On the other hand, according to Andonova, environmental stress, level of involvement in international institutions and domestic political environment have no bearing on the state partners involved (with the exception of countries with the largest populations that are more likely to build partnerships, and of the two host countries of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Bali preparatory meeting, South Africa and Indonesia).

(2) Participation of nongovernmental actors. Second, it has been argued that multi-sectoral partnerships would create new opportunities for non-state actors and thus alleviate the participation deficit in global governance. Again, this is hardly supported by data on current partnership practice. Across all issue areas, state actors and intergovernmental organizations dominate the partner population of partnerships for sustainable development. Only 16% of partnerships have no government as a partner. Public actors are more likely to take the lead: national and local governments lead 29% of all partnerships, and the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations another 30%. Taken together, public actors lead almost 60% of all partnerships that have emerged from the Johannesburg process. In contrast, business actors lead only 3% of all partnerships registered with the UN, which is noteworthy given that business actors were highly supportive of the partnership idea during the Johannesburg Summit. Nongovernmental organizations lead an additional 8.2% of all registered partnerships, with research and science organizations and networks (12%) and collective actors such as partnership fora or stakeholder councils, as well as cases of missing data accounting for the rest (18.6%).

Back in 2003, Andonova and Levy (2003: 23) had concluded that partnerships are mainly “supply-driven (by what powerful actors have to offer)”. The current sets of data analyzed for this study show that not much has changed since then. The only major change over the last four years is a sharp decrease in the percentage of NGO-led partnerships and a moderate increase in research and science networks as lead partners. The decrease in the number of NGO-led partnerships is largely attributable to partnerships registering themselves or their previous names as the lead partner with the UN. The research and science networks that take over leading roles, on the other hand, are evenly distributed over issue areas and other basic characteristics of partnerships.

Figure 4: Sectoral distribution of lead partners in 2003 and 2007

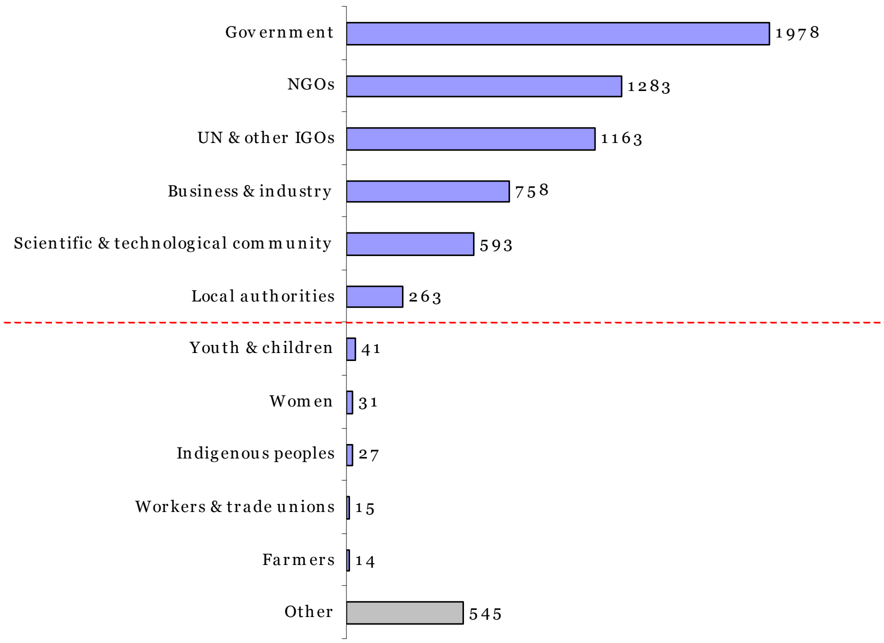


Sources: Andonova and Levy 2003, Global Sustainability Partnership Database V.1 2007

(3) Participation of marginalized groups. Third, also regarding participation of the often-marginalized stakeholders in global politics, the positive expectations for partnerships are not supported by the data. Of all partnerships registered with the United Nations as of December 2006, less than 1% had partners from groups such as farmers, workers and trade unions, indigenous people, women, youth or children. More institutionalized groups are better represented in partnerships, with 9% of all partners coming from the scientific and technological community, 11% from business and industry and 19% from non-governmental organizations. On the other hand, governments make up 30% and intergovernmental organizations 18% of all partners registered with the United Nations.

This picture of partnerships contradicts the optimistic idea that they can serve as a means to ensure the participation of groups that are otherwise marginalized in global politics. Rather, partnerships seem to have created mechanisms to select groups that are already “part of the game,” and to exclude others. As Buse (2004:232) quotes one informant of his research on health partnerships, “[i]f you don’t have some money on the table, some time, and expertise, you are not a partner.”

Figure 5: Number of partners from different sectors and major groups



Source: UN 2006

Comparable imbalances are also found in the Global Compact that the United Nations concluded with a number of actors to improve the environmental, social or human rights performance of companies by bringing them together with UN agencies, civil society and labor unions. The impressive portfolio of the initiative, which attracted some 1,430 small and medium-sized enterprises and 1,615 larger corporations, including 108 of the businesses ranked in FT Global 500, is in stark contrast to low involvement of nongovernmental organizations and lack of consistency in the commitments of business partners. Merely 36 global and 268 local nongovernmental organizations are involved in the Compact, that is, 7% of all participants. Furthermore, 40% of the companies listed on the Compact's database are either inactive or non-communicating participants (most of them being small and medium-sized enterprises). Similar to partnerships for sustainable development, small businesses and civil society have a limited participation in the Global Compact.

In sum, there is empirical support for the claim that partnerships reproduce or even intensify existing relationships in the international system (Martens 2007). This is not restricted to partnerships for sustainable development. Similar patterns are visible in other governance arrangements (e.g. partnerships established through the Global Compact) and other issue areas (e.g. health partnerships). So far, partnerships for sustainable development remain dominated by states and international organizations, and are predominantly led and populated by Northern actors. Participation of "major groups" is limited to stakeholders that have certain competitive advantages or useful resources, and traditional patterns of political exclusion of weaker groups tend to be reproduced at the transnational level of partnerships as well.

5. Conclusion

Two contradictions seem to prevent partnerships from effectively filling the governance deficits observable at the global level. First, there seems to be a contradiction between the tasks of addressing the implementation gap and addressing the participation gap at the same time and to the same degree. Although partnerships are expected to effectively implement sustainable development policies and at the same time to ensure a certain level of participation, this appears difficult within the context of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and its follow-up process. If partnerships are created to fill the implementation gap, this will require like-minded state and non-state actors to form a partnership and implement some or all Millennium Development Goals. Yet if they aim at ensuring broadest possible participation, the chances of effective implementation could be hampered by partners with opposing interests. This contradiction from within the partnership system is reflected in the debate on the "partnership brokers," wherein some argued that "if the partners cannot work out a way to work together and develop mutual trust on their own, then perhaps the partnership should not be formed in the first place" (Warner 2003). It might be, in this case, more realistic and useful for partnerships to focus on implementation, and limit the ambitions with regard to participation.

The second contradiction relates to the regulatory gap, which partnerships fail to fill. Despite the rhetoric about the partnerships being only an additional effort and not a substitute for multilateralism, no intergovernmental environmental agreement has been signed at the Johannesburg Summit. The only significant outcome of this major summit were voluntary partnerships between different sectors, with limited resources and no binding authority. A competitive—as opposed to complementary—element is especially visible in the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate, which has the strong support of two governments that reject the regulatory regime of the Kyoto Protocol and that seek voluntary partnerships as a replacement of multilateral environmental agreements. (For a detailed analysis of complementarity see Mcgee and Taplin 2006).

Surely, the question is not whether one single partnership addresses the three governance deficits of regulation, implementation and participation. The question is about the overall role and relevance of the entire system of the almost 400 partnerships that have emerged in recent years to advance sustainable development in the areas of water, energy, health, agriculture or biodiversity and to contribute to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. Does this entire partnership universe help resolve the three governance deficits? Given the large number and variety of partnerships, an answer to this question is difficult. Our large-n analysis—drawing on existing studies, on UN data and on our own Global Sustainability Partnerships Database—comes to a rather somber conclusion. While some partnerships might have some positive effect on addressing the regulation, implementation, and participation deficits, this does not seem to be the case for the entire system of partnerships. Partnerships are most frequent in those areas that are already heavily institutionalized and regulated. They are predominantly not concerned with implementation but rather with further institution-building, and for many of them it is doubtful whether they have sufficient resources to make any meaningful contribution towards implementation in the first place. Finally, the majority of partnerships strengthens the participation of those that already participate: governments, major international organizations, and those civil society actors that have had a say in global governance already before the partnership phenomenon emerged. The balance of evidence suggests that those that have been marginalized before have also been marginalized in the partnership process.

If the entire system of partnership does not help much in fulfilling the governance gaps analyzed here, what is then their main rationale? Other reasons for partnerships to emerge have been mentioned. Dedeurwaerdere (2005: 4) for instance had suggested that "self-regulatory institutions remain subject to takeover by opportunistic individuals and to potentially perverse dynamics." Some of these subsidiary purposes in partnership building may be self-interest, as both public and private actors can be expected to form a partnership "not necessarily to foster their [partnership's] main rationale, but for a subsidiary purpose" (Broadwater and Kaul 2005: 3). Considering the amount of time and funding invested in each partnership, it seems not surprising that partners themselves tend to be the primary beneficiaries of their partnerships.

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