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Multistakeholder Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Promises and Pitfalls

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Abstract

This review examines the promises and pitfalls of multistakeholder partnerships (MSPs) for sustainable development. We take stock of the literature on the creation, effectiveness, and legitimacy of MSPs and focus on recent research on MSPs committed to achieving the 2030 Agenda and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda conceives of MSPs as vehicles to achieve large-scale sustainability transformations. Yet, research on MSPs under earlier sustainable development initiatives found that they had limited effectiveness and significant legitimacy deficits. We show that recent research on SDG partnerships suggests they reproduce many of the shortcomings of their predecessors and so are unlikely to foster synergies and minimize trade-offs between areas of sustainable development to deliver transformations on a global scale. We also examine recent research on the prospects of governing MSPs to enhance accountability and ensure better institutional designs for achieving transformations, highlighting challenges arising from international political contestation.

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

Multistakeholder partnerships (MSPs): voluntary agreements between state and/or nonstate actors on a set of governance objectives and norms, rules, practices, or implementation procedures and their attainment across multiple jurisdictions and levels of governance

2030 Agenda: a blueprint adopted by all UN member states in 2015 for sustainability transformations on a global scale, including 17 SDGs, 169 targets, and 247 indicators, of which 92 are environment related

For more than two decades, scholars and policymakers have treated multistakeholder partnerships (MSPs) as important institutions in the global governance of sustainable development (1). In 2015, member states of the United Nations (UN) adopted Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which included 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda aimed to deliver sustainability transformations on a global scale and reinvigorated the significance of MSPs by calling on them to be a key tool for achieving the SDGs. Some scholars have referred to a subsequent proliferation of novel MSPs—and the rebranding or reorientation of existing MSPs committed to working toward the SDGs—as a new generation of partnerships (2–5).

By reasserting the importance of MSPs and designating an explicit role for them in the 2030 Agenda, the UN and its member states raised the stakes for multistakeholderism in sustainable development. MSPs are now expected to scale up and deliver transformations across multiple issue areas: The economic, environmental, and social SDGs are conceived of as "integrated and indivisible" (6, p. 6), requiring stakeholders to strive for synergies and address trade-offs across goals. This vision aligns with the broad international political consensus that integration is critical for sustainability transformations (7). Yet, at the 2023 SDG Summit, which included an interim review of progress at the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda, governments acknowledged that progress toward most SDGs either was moving too slowly or had regressed below the 2015 baseline. Governments at the Summit reaffirmed a central role for nonstate actors in sustainable development and committed to enhancing MSPs at multiple governance levels (8). Such policy rhetoric promoting MSPs does not, however, align with research findings that MSPs have had only limited effectiveness and legitimacy. Based on our review of the extant literature, we argue that the new wave of partnerships is unlikely to be fit for transformation.

Given the importance that practitioners continue to assign to MSPs and the sustained scholarly interest in multistakeholder governance, this review asks: To what extent are MSPs effective,

legitimate, and capable of delivering large-scale sustainability transformations, as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda? We focus primarily on MSPs established in conjunction with UN sustainable development initiatives and review intersecting literatures in international relations, environmental politics, development studies, comparative and international political economy, and public administration. We focus especially on MSPs that align explicitly with achieving the SDGs and compare findings with research on earlier MSPs, especially the first wave of partnerships launched at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. This review is one of the first efforts to draw conclusions from the expanding body of empirical research on MSPs working toward the SDGs. These MSPs provide insights into the wider universe of partnerships for sustainable development because the 2030 Agenda aims to bring together multiple policy sectors that are traditionally siloed in separate institutions. Moreover, much of the empirical material in research on this so-called new generation of MSPs comes from databases that include older MSPs and MSPs established independently of UN initiatives that subsequently committed to the SDGs (9).

We find that extant research provides limited cause for optimism that MSPs are poised to deliver sustainability transformations at scale in line with the 2030 Agenda. More research is needed to understand whether, how, and under what circumstances MSPs can facilitate transformations, but the current body of evidence strongly indicates that SDG partnerships reproduce many of the limitations found in earlier MSPs. Given the urgency of making progress on the SDGs, we also review the burgeoning literature on meta-governance as a means for international organizations (IOs) or other public actors to enhance the performance of MSPs and hold them accountable. We suggest that meta-governance offers potential solutions for ensuring that MSPs attain greater effectiveness and legitimacy. However, developing and implementing suitable meta-governance frameworks face significant obstacles due to international political contestation arising from divergent views among powerful governments and nonstate actors on multistakeholderism as well as on both issue integration and delegation of authority to supranational institutions.

The review is structured as follows. In Section 2, we outline the key concepts scholars use to assess MSPs. In Section 3, we discuss how and why MSPs have proliferated over the past 20 years. In Section 4, we review empirical research on the effectiveness and legitimacy of MSPs, comparing the performance of earlier MSPs with SDG partnerships, paying special attention to their prospects for transformation. In Section 5, we discuss the potential and challenges for global meta-governance to improve the performance of MSPs for achieving sustainability transformations amid political contestation. We conclude in Section 6 with lessons for policymakers and avenues for future research.

2. KEY CONCEPTS

This section identifies and defines the most salient concepts in the literature on MSPs for sustainable development. Scholarship on MSPs has focused primarily on three broad lines of inquiry: their sources, effectiveness, and legitimacy (1). We define partnerships and the concepts of effectiveness and legitimacy, as well as the related concept of accountability. As this review focuses specifically on transformation effects of MSPs, we also define this concept. Finally, we explain the concept of meta-governance and the related concept of orchestration.

Many scholars refer to what we call MSPs as public–private partnerships, which Andonova (10, p. 2) defines as "voluntary agreements between public actors (IOs, states, or substate public authorities) and nonstate actors (nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], companies, foundations, etc.) on a set of governance objectives and norms, rules, practices, or implementation procedures and their attainment across multiple jurisdictions and levels of governance." In this review, we use the term multistakeholder partnerships (MSPs), which has become predominant in UN discourse

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a set of 17 interconnected goals that are included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Transformations: shifts from regimes associated with unsustainable pathways of development to alternative regimes in which development pathways are or are perceived to be sustainable

World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD): an international summit held in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002 that encouraged the launch of public–private partnerships for sustainable development

Meta-governance: practices of coordinating one or more governance modes via different instruments, methods, and strategies to overcome governance failures; also known as the governance of governance

IO: international organization

(11, 12). This usage recognizes that societal stakeholders and nonstate actors play a key role in partnerships (while state actors may not) and that multistakeholderism is the defining element of these initiatives (13). MSPs can also be conceived of as global governance institutions in their own right (10, 14).

Effectiveness and legitimacy are the most salient criteria in scholarly assessments of the performance of MSPs. Such assessments are directly relevant for the interdisciplinary field of sustainability science, which focuses on the practical challenges of sustainable development and especially concerns the effectiveness of governance arrangements for achieving sustainability goals (15). Scholars evaluate the effectiveness of global governance institutions, including MSPs, using criteria such as their ability to solve problems, comply with contractual obligations and commitments, reduce costs, deliver justice, or obtain stated objectives (16). The literature typically differentiates between three main types of effects: outputs (policies), outcomes (behavioral change), and impacts (solutions to problems) (17, 18). Most research on MSP effectiveness concerns outputs in the form of policymaking and outcomes in the form of policy implementation (1).

Legitimacy can be defined and operationalized in several ways. Normative legitimacy criteria derive from Scharpf's (19, 20) twofold conception of input legitimacy (participation and representation) and output legitimacy (effectiveness, impact, and problem-solving capacity) (21, 22), as well as throughput legitimacy (decision-making procedures) (23). Recently, scholars have turned to focus on the sociological legitimacy of global governance institutions, asking not whether they are legitimate in principle but whether they enjoy legitimacy in practice according to relevant actors and the public (24, 25). Legitimacy is also a key concept in sustainability science, where scholars argue that research users are more likely to trust and act on knowledge that is salient, credible, and legitimate (26). Legitimacy is intertwined with effectiveness in voluntary sustainability governance initiatives because effective institutions may be regarded as more legitimate, and greater legitimacy from trust and transparency enhances institutional effectiveness (27).

Accountability is a key element of legitimacy in the literature. Accountability "implies that some actors have the right to hold other actors accountable to a set of standards, to judge whether they have fulfilled their responsibilities in light of these standards, and to impose sanctions if they determine these standards have not been met" (28, p. 29). For MSPs, the concept of accountability is more complex than for traditional state-based governance institutions, as only nonelectoral accountability mechanisms tend to be available (29). Absent more robust mechanisms, scholars have focused on related criteria, especially transparency, to promote accountability for MSPs (e.g., 30–32).

Research on MSPs has only relatively recently engaged with the concept of transformation. In UN policy discourse, transformation means delivering the full 2030 Agenda and achieving the SDGs. The 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report argues that generating synergies across the goals is therefore critical for transformation (33). Transformations are defined more generally in the sustainability science literature as "shifts from regimes associated with unsustainable pathways of development to alternative regimes in which development pathways are (provisionally thought to be) sustainable" (15, p. 355). The term sustainability transformation can have numerous practical meanings in academic research, and it is frequently used without connections to real-world examples (34). Scholars have, however, largely converged around an understanding that integrating economic, environmental, and social policies is essential for transformation—a consensus shared by political actors, although there remains limited agreement on what this means in practice or how to achieve it (7). Clark & Harley (15, p. 337) concluded that "[a] research-informed use of the term sustainable should therefore always—and only—refer to the integrated pathways of development resulting from nature-society interactions in the Anthropocene System."

Increased expectations raise questions of how to govern MSPs to ensure greater effectiveness and legitimacy. Scholars and practitioners have thus begun to explore the concept of meta-governance, which is "a practice by (mainly) public authorities that entails the coordination of one or more governance modes by using different instruments, methods, and strategies to over-come governance failures" (35, p. 1771). Meta-governance—or the governance of governance—is relational and can be understood as the principles, rules, and institutions that govern MSPs (36, 37). Meta-governance can have diverse purposes and functions, including enhancing accountability, integrating MSPs into existing governance structures, catalyzing stakeholder participation, and developing performance standards (35). Meta-governance can be exerted by different actors at different governance levels. At the international level, it tends to refer to IOs overseeing registration and reporting of MSPs, providing guidance to MSPs, and monitoring and reviewing progress. At the national level, it may concern ensuring local ownership (38). While meta-governance is exerted mainly by public authorities, it can also be based on private authority, usually involving private governance initiatives coalescing to improve coherence (39). Some scholars connect meta-governance to orchestration (35), which is defined as governance through intermediaries on a voluntary basis to catalyze initiatives or steer actors' behavior (40). Orchestration therefore concerns promoting the creation of new MSPs, governing existing MSPs, and using MSPs as intermediaries to influence target actors. While the concepts of orchestration and meta-governance evolved discretely, orchestration can be understood as a more "hands-off" variant of meta-governance (41), and meta-governance can be "embedded" in orchestration (38, p. 500).

3. THE PROLIFERATION OF MULTISTAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

It is not obvious why or how MSPs gained and maintained prominence in global sustainable development initiatives when their effectiveness and legitimacy have been the subject of considerable skepticism. In this section, we provide an overview of the evolution of MSPs for sustainable development over the past two decades and advance competing explanations for their proliferation.

3.1. The Rise of Multistakeholder Partnerships

The concept of multistakeholderism emerged as early as the 1970s in corporate managerial thinking but was first introduced to the global sustainable development agenda in 1992 (42). MSPs for sustainable development especially proliferated following several UN innovations, including the launch of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 and the establishment of the UN Fund for International Partnerships in 1998, UN Global Compact in 2000, and UN Office for Partnerships in 2006 (11). Most of these MSPs were formally established in conjunction with international summits—in particular, the WSSD in 2002 and the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012. Many civil society actors were highly critical of this embrace of public–private governance, viewing it as the relinquishing of state authority to corporate power. The UN and its member states, however, framed the partnership model as participatory and effective, and at Rio+20, they sought to revitalize and reconceptualize public–private partnerships as "voluntary commitments," signaling the demise of WSSD partnerships but perpetuating highly similar initiatives under a novel framing (43).

The UN and its member states again attempted to legitimate this governance model with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in 2015, now under the banner of multistakeholderism (44). SDG 17 is designated: "strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development," and the 2030 Agenda includes two targets under this

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): a set of eight goals launched by the United Nations in 2000 that had a deadline of 2015

goal that call for MSPs to play a role in mobilizing resources (6). The MDGs—widely seen as top down and technocratic—conceived of partnership as official development assistance, but the SDGs differ in their definition of partnerships by institutionalizing a clear role for nonstate actors (45–48).

Stakeholders appear to have heeded calls to establish MSPs in line with SDG 17. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) maintains an online voluntary registry of both multistakeholder and individual initiatives to achieve the SDGs. The SDG Actions Platform (known as the Partnership Platform until mid-2023; see **https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships**), which is used extensively in large-*N* research on MSPs (e.g., 2, 3, 9, 49, 50), has grown substantially since 2015. Some initiatives listed in the Platform existed before 2015 but were rebranded or reconfigured toward achieving the SDGs (9). Some MSPs in the database were unaware that they had been registered at all, possibly because UN DESA combined registries of various initiatives for sustainable development (50). Nonetheless, scholars argue that the database shows that MSPs "are proliferating as never before" (2, p. 466). A recent data set shows that the Platform contained 6,936 entries by 2022, of which 5,799 were unique. The total number of entries that are MSPs may be considerably smaller depending on the definition applied (51).

3.2. Explaining the Creation and Proliferation of Multistakeholder Partnerships

The continued growth of MSPs in the global governance of sustainable development is explained by several competing accounts. Much of the early literature on MSPs offered (neo-)Gramscian accounts in which MSPs are indicative of corporate hegemony (1). More recent Gramscian scholarship suggests that MSPs function to co-opt subaltern voices and represent the "new tyranny" of global development multilateralism in that they provide a veneer of inclusiveness while reproducing power hierarchies present in traditional interstate models for governing sustainable development (52). From this perspective, multistakeholderism is an international norm that promotes affected stakeholders' participation in problem-solving, but which powerful actors leverage to assimilate recalcitrant actors who resist top-down development models (42).

Most other accounts explaining the growth of MSPs are rooted in constructivist theory and various iterations of rational choice theory (1). In early literature on MSPs, constructivists argued that a new global public domain had emerged as a normative structure shaping actors' identities and interests and within which NGOs and businesses accepted responsibility for collective goods provision by creating MSPs (53). Most scholarly attention, however, has been paid to functionalist explanations (1, p. 456), which argue that rational actors, especially governments and IOs, opt to create MSPs to solve complex transboundary problems that they are incapable of effectively addressing. Stakeholders rationally join MSPs when their interests overlap, and each partner anticipates shared benefits (10, 54, 55).

Functionalist accounts aligned with prevailing claims that the retreat of state authority created demand for private and hybrid governance, but empirical research did not produce a consensus on whether WSSD partnerships truly facilitated the transfer of authority from states to private actors (21). Governments have played a key role in catalyzing MSPs as institutions to further their preferences; thus, the growth of MSPs may have been driven less by problem-solving efforts and more by rational political interests and opportunity considerations (55). National governments with more robust climate policies, for example, are more likely to orchestrate the creation of MSPs for climate change (56). Research similarly suggests that actors' decisions to create SDG partnerships are determined largely by the political economy of the actor's home state (2). Recent findings, however, suggest that domestic politics explanations lack robust support compared with alternative explanations. Earlier functionalist explanations have resurfaced—in particular, findings that MSPs are created primarily by states that first consider the existing governance architecture

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA): a division of the UN Secretariat that provides analysis and advice to help countries make decisions on development policy

and aim to establish new institutions tailored to solving specific problems while avoiding task duplication (57).

Other scholars argue that there are multiple complex pathways to creating MSPs (58). The increasing autonomy of international secretariats, bureaucracies, and public administrations means that IOs also play a role in the proliferation of MSPs (43, 59, 60). IOs, member states, and nonstate actors may form coalitions to establish MSPs for joint problem-solving (10), but IOs also rationally create or promote MSPs as a legitimation strategy for maintaining their own relevance and may orchestrate the creation of MSPs to improve their own performance (43, 61, 62). Despite the proliferation of MSPs, there remains an overall orchestration deficit, and some scholars argue that IOs have been, on balance, reluctant to embrace MSPs in sustainability governance despite the steady growth of partnerships (63). Other scholars contend that IO engagement with MSPs has reconfigured the nature of multilateralism (44, 64). The UN has actively engaged corporations to increase the number of MSPs involved in sustainable development initiatives (65). The World Bank made a similarly targeted push to partner with private business, as well as NGOs (66), a strategy that resulted from interactions with actors both inside and outside the Bank, who drew on past governance experiments to define development problems and propose stakeholder-based solutions (67).

The growth in MSPs also results from bottom-up and demand-driven efforts from nonstate actors seeking to fill governance gaps where states fail to solve global challenges. Stakeholders may create and experiment with MSPs as an alternative to conventional multilateralism amid gridlock (e.g., 68, 69). Their concerns may also be self-interested and not directly related to problem-solving. Many corporations create or join MSPs to realize low-cost reputational gains from association with institutions like the UN while making only superficial improvements— also known as bluewashing (e.g., 70). Greater business interest in partnering partially explains the growing number of MSPs registered in the SDG Actions Platform (2). MSPs can offer corporate partners significant reputational gains through association with the UN while they carry on with business as usual (71). Companies also partner in precompetitive bids to exceed minimum legal regulations and avoid industry-wide reputational damage from irresponsible companies, although such MSPs may not enforce standards with sufficient stringency to tackle global challenges (27).

In summary, there are multiple competing explanations for the proliferation of MSPs in global sustainability governance, each of which has some merit. The mixed evidence suggests that different actors—states, IOs, and nonstate actors—join or create MSPs with varied motivations.

4. THE EFFECTIVENESS AND LEGITIMACY OF MULTISTAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS

In this section, we take stock of assessments of the effectiveness and legitimacy of MSPs. Beyond simple linear models of effectiveness and conventional normative legitimacy criteria, scholars have recently advanced multiple theoretical and methodological frameworks for assessing MSPs. This research program also includes studies on how MSPs can be scaled up across policy domains to produce synergistic effects for sustainability transformations. We first review empirical assessments of the performance of MSPs launched at the WSSD in 2002, and then we review the literature on SDG partnerships to determine whether these initiatives have improved compared with earlier generations of MSPs.

4.1. Key Frameworks for Assessing the Performance of Multistakeholder Partnerships

Scholars have proposed numerous theoretical and methodological frameworks for studying MSPs, developed and applied in both single case studies and large-*N* quantitative analyses (e.g., 58,

72, 73). Early research on MSPs tended to focus on rule compliance as the key determinant of effectiveness; when this approach did not produce firm conclusions on what explained poor performance, scholars began exploring alternative metrics, and many advocated goal attainment as a more appropriate yardstick than mere rule compliance (1). The evolving research agenda has sought to assess performance more systematically and trace effects from input to output through to impact (74, 75). Pattberg & Widerberg (73), for example, surveyed the literature on MSPs to identify general conditions that could explain effectiveness and legitimacy: optimal partner mix; effective leadership; stringent goal setting; sustained funding; professional process management; regular monitoring, reporting, and evaluation to support organizational learning; active meta-governance; favorable political and social contexts; and fit to problem structure.

Such frameworks functioned mostly to explain output effects in single policy domains, and scholars have recently argued that these earlier approaches operate primarily on a logic of linear progression that overlooks assumptions built into how outputs may (not) lead to outcomes or impacts without necessarily facilitating counterfactual analysis (58). Scholars have now advanced frameworks for assessing MSP performance that emphasize the potential for more complex pathways to effectiveness and look beyond mere rule compliance. Berliner and colleagues (72, 76) analyze indirect pathways for MSPs to influence policy change and emphasize the importance of iterative and participatory processes. Their approach offers a complement to compliance-based approaches by focusing on the effects of processes associated with membership in MSPs independent of specific commitments or rule compliance. Another novel framework, from Andonova & Faul (58), aims to disentangle different effects to identify complex pathways to effectiveness. They intend this framework to be generalizable across multiple issue areas and to enable assessment of not only goal attainment but also MSPs' value creation, productive collaboration, impacts on affected populations, and influence on external institutions. As this framework has enabled insights into effects across integrated issues (77), it holds promise for assessing the performance of MSPs in delivering sustainability transformations.

These frameworks mostly concern effectiveness, but there have also been advances in studying legitimacy. Taggart (52) proposes combining normative and sociological legitimacy into a common theoretical framework to assess MSPs against criteria for input, throughput, and output legitimacy, as well as the perspectives of stakeholders. This framework draws on advances in research on the legitimacy of global governance institutions (78), which embraces a sociological approach that has until very recently remained absent from research on MSPs. In such a multipronged framework, legitimacy is not necessarily a dichotomous variable, and MSPs may be venues in which normative principles of world order are themselves contested and negotiated (52). Sociological legitimacy frameworks remain mostly absent from the MSP literature, but recent research attempts to build theoretical propositions and test them empirically (79).

Growing expectations for MSPs to generate synergies and manage trade-offs between economic, environmental, and social objectives have also required methodological innovation from researchers. Novel methodologies developed to study policy synergies in sustainable development have not yet been applied systematically to MSPs. Nilsson et al. (80) propose a simple seven-point scorecard to assess SDG interactions in policymaking by selecting individual goals and mapping interactions with the other 16 goals. This approach has informed additional innovations, including a cross-impact matrix of interactions for all 2030 Agenda targets (81). Biggeri et al. (82) propose a tailored approach to this method and introduce an index that accounts for trade-offs and synergies between goals and targets across the three domains of sustainable development. These tools could facilitate assessment of the contributions of MSPs specifically; to date, however, empirical research on MSPs and policy synergies remains largely data driven

and focused on either potential synergies, observed in overlapping discursive commitments (e.g., 9, 51), or intended/perceived synergies, observed in survey responses (e.g., 50, 83).

4.2. Earlier Generations of Multistakeholder Partnerships

Most research on MSPs indicates that key determinants of their effectiveness and legitimacy are inclusiveness and representation; implementation and goal attainment; accountability; and transparency, monitoring and review. Empirical assessments of earlier MSPs suggest that they tended to fall short of these criteria by most measures, resulting in limited effectiveness and significant legitimacy shortcomings (e.g., 21, 29, 54, 73).

Research has repeatedly shown that inclusiveness is important for effective policy outputs. Incorporation of a broad range of stakeholders in an MSP can provide combinations of expertise from multiple sectors, thereby increasing the effectiveness of transnational rulemaking and inducing compliance by creating issue ownership (1). Inclusiveness and representation are also key criteria for legitimacy because they are often essential for accountability (66, 84). While broad inclusiveness appeared to improve the relative effectiveness of MSPs, early findings did not provide a conclusive answer to whether actor diversification in decision-making fosters better policy outputs compared with state-centric modes of governance or, conversely, led to inadequate, lowest-common-denominator solutions (1). Many policymakers nonetheless maintained a win-win narrative that stakeholder diversity enhances the effectiveness and legitimacy of sustainability governance by pooling resources from various sectors to justify their turn toward multistakeholderism (43).

There is no simple causal relationship between inclusion and effectiveness; rather, the quality, type, and form of representation and participation are critical. Inclusiveness that does not address power asymmetries, skewed representation, or dominance by certain partners affects trust building negatively and increases conflict within MSPs, hindering their effectiveness (85). Balancing participation among actors—for example, by addressing North–South geographic imbalances or the dominance of public over private partners—appears to improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of MSPs (30, 86, 87). Previous generations of MSPs mostly failed to strike these balances. World Bank partnerships in the 1990s and 2000s, for example, had institutional designs that failed to promote inclusiveness or empower stakeholders and thus demonstrated significant legitimacy shortcomings (88). WSSD partnerships also broadly failed to secure the inclusion and participation of marginalized groups (89). The quality of inclusiveness in MSPs is thus partially contingent on institutional design, which determines the scope of input legitimacy and the extent to which diverse partners have access to meaningful participation.

Other aspects of institutional design are important for MSP effectiveness, especially under governance by goal setting. Formulating and progressing toward clear goals when determining the design of MSPs are central to monitoring and evaluating performance. Institutional design was essential to the ability of MSPs to advance progress toward the MDGs (74). Fewer than one-third of WSSD partnerships actually focused on environmental impacts, because they had no clear, quantifiable goals against which to measure their performance. Lacking such targets, they were not designed with appropriate implementation review mechanisms for reporting, monitoring, or control, which limited their accountability and rendered them less effective and legitimate (90).

It is challenging to establish institutional accountability for MSPs, and few options are available for externally imposing sanctions. MSPs registered with the UN could be removed from online registries, but there is little obvious cost to such penalties. This challenge of designing or enforcing accountability may explain why WSSD partnerships exhibited chronic legitimacy deficits (54, 84). These partnerships had unclear guidelines and no mandatory reporting requirements, which

corresponded with a lack of transparency, monitoring, and review and thus limited accountability (21, 31). More than two-thirds of WSSD partnerships lacked any form of transparency mechanism (i.e., having a website, reporting system, or monitoring system), and more than half had no mechanism for monitoring effectiveness or tracking progress (30). In the absence of a centralized UN agency to oversee goal attainment and progress tracking for MSPs, the UN General Assembly tasked the former Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) with overseeing WSSD partnerships, but the CSD lacked the mandate and resources to enforce reporting or review rules that might have improved accountability (84). Overall, the evidence shows that earlier MSPs had limited effectiveness and significant legitimacy challenges, and these problems persisted in the absence of more robust accountability mechanisms.

4.3. Multistakeholder Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals

Recent empirical scholarship on MSPs for sustainable development focuses primarily on those MSPs that have committed to achieving the SDGs. Large-*N* studies generally draw on the SDG Actions Platform, although much of the empirical literature is qualitative, descriptive, and focused on case studies of MSPs that have a commitment to the SDGs but may or may not be registered on the Platform. In this section, we review this growing body of research to assess whether these MSPs are any more effective and legitimate than earlier MSPs, and whether they show promise for delivering sustainability transformations on a global scale. We argue that despite indications of modest improvements, effectiveness and legitimacy remain limited in this new generation of MSPs, casting doubt on their prospects for delivering transformative change.

4.3.1. General effectiveness and legitimacy. Policymakers have sounded alarms that MSPs are not meeting their full potential to contribute to the 2030 Agenda. Several UN reports present evidence of the persistent legitimacy challenges and limited effectiveness of MSPs (91–93). One report noted that, 2 years after the 2030 Agenda was launched, "overall, partnership efforts remain fragmented and overly focused on 'projectized' activities—an approach that is unlikely to generate results on the scale required" (91, p. 32). The UN Office of Internal Oversight Services stated in 2019 that the lack of a system-wide definition of effective partnerships made it difficult to even evaluate how well MSPs were performing, but evidence pointed to inefficiencies and risks of greater ineffectiveness (92, p. 18). Most recently, a report from the UN Secretary-General on the 2023 SDG Summit stated that multistakeholder collaboration among subnational governments remained underresourced, hindering effectiveness, while private sector actors involved in SDG initiatives needed to be held more accountable and remained engaged in "rampant greenwashing and Goals-washing" (93, p. 28).

These reports strongly suggest that SDG partnerships continue to exhibit shortcomings in both effectiveness and legitimacy, but scholarly research indicates that there have been some improvements. MSPs have become more inclusive since the early days of multistakeholderism in sustainability governance. MSPs registered in the SDG Actions Platform showed substantial increases in business participation compared with WSSD partnerships (2, 3). They were also more likely than WSSD partnerships to have NGOs as lead partners: NGOs led 21% of MSPs addressing environmental SDGs but only 3% of those launched under the WSSD (3). Widerberg et al. (9), however, found that IOs and national governments remained the most common partners in a sample of these MSPs, with both actor types represented in approximately two-thirds of partnerships. A survey study found considerable differences in participation in SDG partnerships compared with WSSD partnerships. The study differentiated between intrasectoral MSPs (all partners are the same actor type) and cross-sectoral MSPs (partners represent more than one actor type). While not necessarily representative of all MSPs, the study showed that from 2006

to 2022 there was a relative decline of state actor participation by 21% and an increase of NGO and business participation by 15% and 8%, respectively. NGOs were the most heavily represented partners in cross-sectoral MSPs, while intrasectoral partnerships skewed heavily toward business. These MSPs were relatively evenly distributed worldwide, but many involved only a small number of partners (50). These findings suggest that inclusiveness has indeed improved.

There are, however, strong indications that contemporary MSPs persist in reproducing institutional design flaws found in earlier MSPs. MSPs may not be able to efficiently manage diverse preferences when they become more inclusive without remedying design flaws that do not accommodate partner heterogeneity, limiting throughput legitimacy and the potential for greater effectiveness. The deliberative-democratic structures of SDG partnerships and their prioritization of governance outcomes over processes may thereby close spaces for the type of learning needed to deliver transformations, especially where membership is highly heterogeneous (94). Such findings highlight the importance of process-oriented designs that focus on producing effects beyond policy outcomes (72, 76). They also lend support to claims that institutional arrangements in SDG partnerships continue to privilege certain actors' participation over others (95). Where MSPs exhibit greater inclusiveness, it may be more or less meaningful depending on who selects partners and how formalized membership is, especially where partners neglect marginalized stakeholders (96).

Not all MSPs committed to the SDGs have become sufficiently more inclusive, even if they generally improve upon WSSD partnerships. Scholars have still not fully explained how to identify strategic losers to ensure they are included in decision-making processes to cultivate issue ownership, possibly leaving MSPs unequipped to achieve the SDGs (46). Powerful, more institutionalized actors continue to be disproportionately represented in SDG partnerships, while more vulnerable and marginalized actors—including women, youth, and Indigenous Peoples—remain systematically underrepresented. Global North actors also dominate as lead partners despite most initiatives targeting the Global South (3). One sample from the SDG Actions Platform showed that the vast majority of registered MSPs included partners based only in one country, primarily in the Global North. Even among Global South partners, the poorest countries remain disproportionately underrepresented. Stakeholders from low-income states participate in far fewer MSPs than stakeholders from states in all other World Bank country income categories. These disparities matter because studies show that the focus of MSPs varies with geographic representation: Those MSPs with partners from low-income countries were much more likely to focus on SDGs 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), 5 (gender equality), and 7 (affordable and clean energy) but less likely to focus on SDG 14 (life below water). MSPs with partners from middle-income countries were more likely to focus on SDG 4 (quality education) (97). SDG implementation may therefore be uneven, and greater inclusiveness remains important for ensuring that no goal is neglected.

SDG partnerships also exhibit persistent shortcomings on other elements of institutional design and governance functionality. Many of these MSPs lack sufficient resources to deliver on their commitments (3). MSPs with greater resources are more likely to be transparent in their efforts to achieve the SDGs, which enhances their legitimacy (98), although MSPs with larger budgets do not necessarily perceive themselves as more effective (50). It appears that the majority of SDG partnerships were designed only to engage in soft governance functions—such as knowledge dissemination, technology transfer, and capacity building—which scholars suggest may be less effective and less urgently needed than other functions like service provision and development financing (9).

Few studies have evaluated whether SDG partnerships achieve their objectives, and persistent transparency shortcomings inhibit sufficient data collection. A systematic review of literature on

the contributions of voluntary initiatives in the coffee sector to achieving the SDGs found that most results were insignificant, largely because these initiatives are insufficiently transparent and do not follow common standards for data sharing and reporting (99). Knowledge and information exchange and coordination mechanisms between MSPs could also enhance their effectiveness at achieving certain SDGs, but stakeholder demand for these types of institutional interactions has gone unmet (100). In SDG partnerships' own assessments of their effectiveness, cross-sectoral MSPs are much more likely to rate themselves as effective than intrasectoral MSPs, especially when led by IO partners. MSPs that remain active also self-evaluate as much more successful than those that have already concluded activities (50).

Findings on limited transparency point to an overall lack of accountability. SDG partnerships exhibit diffused responsibility, limited answerability, and weak enforceability; they have weak reporting habits and tend to lack monitoring and review mechanisms (101). One study found that only 16% of environmentally focused SDG partnerships had issued progress reports, typically only one (3). MSPs that self-report having greater effectiveness also tend to engage in more regular monitoring and communication of progress, although reporting frequency may not directly influence results (50). Scholarly analyses indicate that these are typical challenges for MSPs and highlight the need for combined approaches of upward accountability and horizontal learning and exchange despite power differentials and governance tensions (102, 103). Notably, some scholars imply that accountability for these MSPs could be inherently difficult to achieve due to the nature of the 2030 Agenda. Finnemore & Jurkovich (104) argue that the lofty, transformative aims of the SDGs endow the goals with an aspirational quality that is unconducive to establishing accountability mechanisms. They anticipate that the various actors committed to the goals will receive praise for making at least partial progress and cannot be easily held accountable because the 2030 Agenda does not prescribe sufficiently specific behaviors for clearly identifiable actors. While these expectations are partially contested in relation to environmental goals (I. Higham, manuscript in review), accountability may remain elusive.

4.3.2. Effectiveness in generating sustainability transformations.

The research reviewed above mostly concerns whether MSPs meet general criteria for effectiveness and legitimacy and whether they achieve their own objectives. It is a different question whether they are capable of and successful at achieving transformation effects, understood as producing synergies across environmental, social, and economic goals at scale, and creating learning spaces to that effect (94). Most research on SDG synergies focuses on whether synergies happen generally without specific attention to the role of MSPs. Methodological innovations for assessing SDG synergies have been applied in general empirical studies (see **https://www.sdgsynergies.org**), but research on SDG interactions has largely failed to account for actor interactions (105). Some scholars have offered conceptual analyses of the potential of MSPs to produce transformative effects through synergies (46), while others explore models for collaborative governance, finding that forging MSPs across sectors to produce synergies requires partners to learn specific new skills and to understand the integrative structure of the SDGs and the nature of cross-sectoral incentives and practices (106).

Although limited, there is a growing body of research on synergistic effects from MSPs. Membership structure appears to be an important determinant of synergistic effects. Scholars have argued that particular constellations both of MSPs and of partners within MSPs are important for transformations (41, 46, 107). This conceptual argument is increasingly supported by empirical results. Heterogeneous combinations of partners combining diverse skills, resources, and knowledge tend to have a stronger "nexus-orientation" (50, p. 15), as illustrated by the 59% of cross-sectoral MSPs responding to a survey that reported addressing multiple SDGs, compared with 42% of

intrasectoral MSPs. In a larger sample of SDG partnerships, responses showed that 83% of MSPs perceived themselves to be pursuing synergies across SDGs, while only 26% claimed to have observed trade-offs (83). Additionally, Hedlund et al. (108) found that actors at the local level avoid collaboration in water governance where issues offer synergies, and they ignore potential trade-offs altogether. These findings could collectively indicate that many MSPs do not engage with trade-off risks, potentially where membership is insufficiently diverse.

It should matter which synergies MSPs pursue (or not) in their work—and which trade-offs they (fail to) address. Research shows that MSPs do not focus equally on all SDGs, which could have implications for their ability to deliver transformations. Long & Clough's (83) survey showed that SDG 4 had the highest percentage (61%) of MSPs pursuing synergies, followed by SDG 13 (climate action; 58%) and SDG 1 (57%). The SDGs for which MSPs were least likely to pursue synergies were SDG 14 (life below water), 15 (life on land), 7 (industry), 9 (innovation and infrastructure), and 12 (responsible consumption and production). SDG 13 also saw the biggest trade-offs—53% of MSPs identified trade-offs with SDG 13, while SDGs 12 and 14 had the lowest number of observed trade-offs with other goals. These survey results largely corroborate findings from studies that attempt to map SDG synergies in MSPs, although to date such studies have only presented findings on goal linkages, not necessarily synergies (i.e., goals that MSPs address in tandem but that do not necessarily get integrated in practice to successfully produce synergistic effects). Glass et al. (50) found that MSPs most frequently address SDGs 13 and 17 in combination, which the authors suggest may be because climate action is an area where state-based efforts are especially insufficient. Another study found that beyond SDG 13, climate-focused MSPs most frequently work on SDGs 7, 9, and 12 (109). Glass et al. (50) also found that SDG 13 is frequently addressed in combination with SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), and MSPs regularly address SDGs 4 and 5 in combination with other goals. Other methods show SDGs 3 and 4 to be the most connected by MSPs, followed by SDGs 13 and 15, while the least connected goal was SDG 12 (51). Glass et al. (50) found that SDGs 12 and 10 (reduced inequalities) are the SDGs that MSPs least frequently addressed jointly. **Figure 1** shows a heat map of SDG linkages using data from Koliev & Bäckstrand (98). Among MSPs that address at least one environmental SDG, the most linkages are found between SDGs 13 and 14, while SDGs 10 (reduced inequalities) and 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) are linked much less frequently with other goals—and notably may be perceived as less directly relevant to environmental issues.

While MSPs appear to aim for synergies, these findings bolster concerns that MSPs are not addressing trade-offs. Scholars have argued that SDG 1 has the most synergistic relationship with other goals generally, while SDG 12 is the goal most associated with trade-offs (110). In light of these synergistic goal relationships, Glass et al. (50) interpret their empirical findings as showing that MSPs avoid issues that involve many trade-offs. Although climate-focused MSPs do tend to address SDG 12 (109), other MSPs do not. This could explain why climate action (SDG 13) is among the goals with the largest number of observed trade-offs, while responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) is among the least: MSPs tend to focus on issues where trade-offs are less likely, and the goals that most risk generating trade-offs end up neglected. The current body of research thus leads to the preliminary conclusion that the prospects of MSPs for delivering sustainability transformations are limited: Even if many MSPs nominally pursue synergies, they may fail to realize synergies if they do not engage with trade-offs—and synergies may be unevenly spread between particular goals, while others are neglected. Note, however, that for methodological reasons, research on goal linkages almost exclusively concerns discursive overlaps and, at most, policy output synergies. There is virtually no extant research on whether MSPs generate synergistic outcomes and impacts.
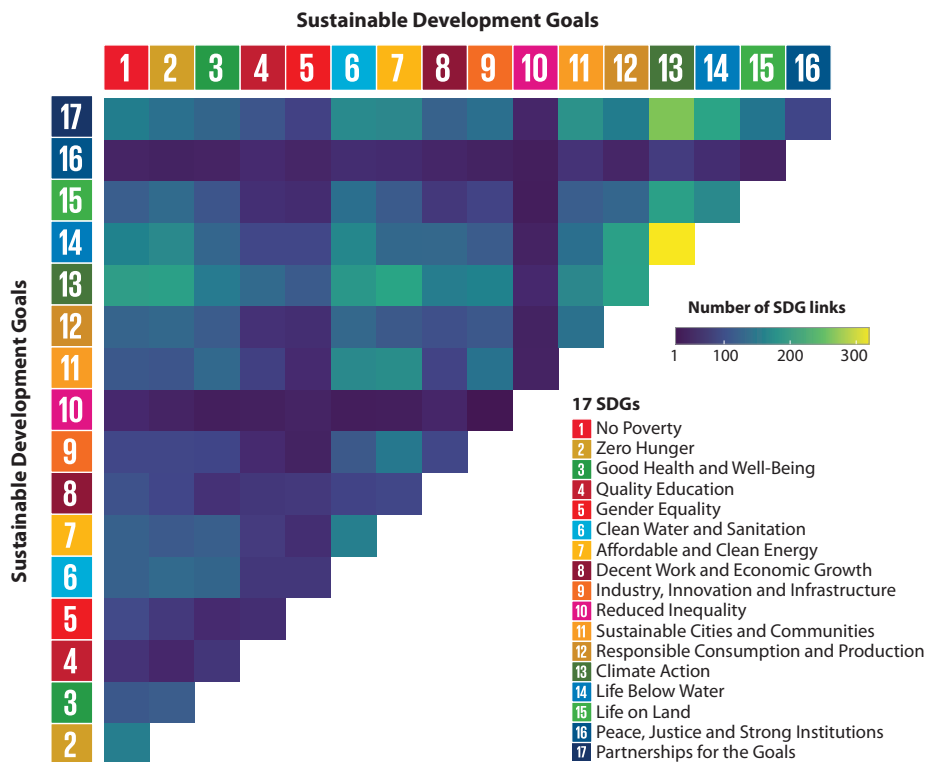
Figure 1

This heat map shows the prevalence of linkages between Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in multistakeholder partnerships that address at least one environmental goal, as registered on the SDG Actions Platform. Each axis lists the SDGs, with each cell representing the frequency of partnerships that link the corresponding goals. The data used to generate this heat map are from Koliev & Bäckstrand (98).

5. GOVERNING TRANSFORMATIVE MULTISTAKEHOLDER GOVERNANCE

The correlation of persistent shortcomings and rising expectations of MSPs for sustainable development raises the question of how to ensure their effectiveness and legitimacy. Many scholars and policymakers have emphasized the potential importance of meta-governance: MSPs produce governance for sustainable development, but perhaps they need to be governed in turn. Meta-governance may serve to limit problems arising from the fragmentation of global sustainability governance (35), which the proliferation of MSPs has exacerbated and which risks generating interinstitutional conflict (14). However, meta-governance can also be detrimental to the effectiveness and legitimacy of MSPs, and it is prone to the same challenges of contestation and gridlock that may be inherent to all forms of global governance (111). Meta-governance is likely to remain elusive or insufficient while governments contest the very nature of multistakeholderism in general and policy synergies for sustainability transformations in particular. In this section, we review the literature on meta-governance, focusing especially on IOs, as scholars have frequently suggested these institutions as the primary candidates for (meta-)governing transnational MSPs for sustainable development, especially in relation to the 2030 Agenda and SDGs (9, 38, 73, 112, 113). We situate these findings in the context of global political contestation to highlight the limitations that multilateral gridlock poses for advancing meta-governance through IOs.

5.1. In Search of Meta-Governance Frameworks

Scholars have called for a greater understanding of how meta-governance of MSPs can be designed to ensure SDG integration for transformations (9), but there remains a paucity of research. Limited responsibility taking and insufficiently inclusive institutional designs have led to calls for greater top-down oversight and public accountability of MSPs (46, 101). Many actors see the UN in particular as a key (potential) meta-governor of MSPs, especially for transnational MSPs committed to achieving the SDGs (38). Yet, given the prospect that "novel partnerships around the SDGs" will "repeat the mistakes" of WSSD partnerships, scholars have argued that the lack of mandate or resources for UN bodies to review the progress of MSPs toward the SDGs is a significant pitfall for achieving the goals (45, p. 28).

Real-world occurrences of robust meta-governance remain scarce, limiting data collection for empirical research. The CSD never had real authority to oversee MSPs, and international bureaucrats continue to lament the absence of coherent meta-governance frameworks within the UN system, which may be the result of political contestation and sovereignty concerns, as discussed below. An internal evaluation criticized the failure to translate the 2030 Agenda's commitment to MSPs into a "comprehensive, detailed framework for the UN system," exacerbating risks of ineffectiveness and inefficiencies (92, pp. 16–18). The UN Secretary-General stated in 2017 that SDG partnerships lack support from a "policy backbone" and committed to "adopting a system-wide approach to partnerships" (114, p. 11). Separately, he pledged that "measures will be put in place to ensure the full transparency and accountability of United Nations partnership engagements" (91, p. 32). These sentiments are echoed by the President of the UN Economic and Social Council, who has called for a more coherent review mechanism for MSPs (115). Despite this consensus among practitioners on the need for more advanced meta-governance to promote accountability for MSPs, extant research has not established how accountability mechanisms could be designed to ensure transformations. A systematic review found virtually no research explaining what accountability means in relation to SDG integration and whether it is even feasible (105).

Beyond accountability, states and IOs could also leverage meta-governance for strategic ordering to address complications from institutional fragmentation and intentionally influence the creation, design, and behavior of MSPs, a function closely linked to orchestration (14). These public actors can intentionally orchestrate to create the requisite mix of partnerships for solving particular problems. For example, Horan (41) suggests that UN country offices could assess the types of MSPs needed against the existing MSPs operating in a country and promote the creation of a portfolio of novel MSPs that enhance prospects for policy integration. UN agencies could facilitate portfolio construction using data and indicators that identify specific actors' responsibilities, then bring those actors together in targeted partnerships (107). UN bodies have already successfully leveraged data on nonstate actor initiatives to orchestrate global policy outcomes on climate change, indicating the feasibility of this approach (116). Intentionality is important, as preliminary evidence suggests that the type of MSPs needed to achieve the SDGs in an integrated manner were unlikely to emerge organically (46).

Top-down approaches, however, are frequently problematic. Meta-governance must itself meet both legitimacy and effectiveness criteria to be useful for fostering transformation effects. Both participatory approaches and capacity building are crucial for generating transformative effects in the governed entities (117, 118). Meta-governance frameworks often command popular legitimacy from affected stakeholders while remaining weak in practice (37, 38, 119). IOs' orchestration efforts can also have significant democratic shortcomings (32). While meta-governance could provide needed accountability, excessively heavy-handed oversight may render MSPs less effective if they become subjected to the whims of inefficient international bureaucracies or are

organized under hierarchical delegative relationships (66). (For more on the performance of IOs and international bureaucracies in general, see References 16, 60, and 120–122.)

More research has been performed on the specific effectiveness of orchestration. Here, too, the results are mixed. Scholars suggest that a high prevalence of IOs in SDG partnerships that self-report success could indicate that they play an effective orchestrating role (50), but this conjecture has not been demonstrated causally. Orchestration can go awry and may exacerbate the neglect of underperforming actions and geographical imbalances (123). The efficacy of orchestration appears to depend on thematic focus, and IOs' summit-based efforts find the most success where transnational initiatives have secretariats and monitoring arrangements (124)—findings that point to the importance of interlocutors, here referring to a variety of hosting arrangements for MSPs based on secretariats or other platforms (125). These findings suggest that orchestration approaches to meta-governance would benefit from strengthening accountability mechanisms, as MSPs that meet certain minimum international standards for engagement can be more effectively orchestrated.

Regarding MSPs for sustainable development, scholars often suggest that UN DESA, which houses the Secretariat of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), is one of the most relevant (prospective) meta-governors (38). UN DESA's autonomous influence is relatively low (126, 127), but its efforts to govern MSPs keep growing (12). Disagreement over the HLPF's appropriate functions resulted in its having limited authority and few material resources, leaving only softer options like orchestration to influence target actors (112). Political conflicts and resource scarcity therefore explain the HLPF's shortcomings in demonstrating leadership and providing follow-up and review for the 2030 Agenda (128). Prospects for meta-governance of MSPs may thus remain limited without greater advancements in developing appropriate frameworks and enhancing interlocutors' mandates and resources. As we discuss in the next section, such advancements may remain elusive, as they face significant obstacles related to contestation by different actors within the HLPF and other institutions over the appropriateness of multistakeholder governance and the balancing of synergies and trade-offs in sustainable development.

5.2. Contestation in Global Politics

This political contestation over the role of UN DESA and the HLPF's resources illustrates a central challenge to governing MSPs and contributing to transformations. Meta-governance should be expected to face challenges endemic to global governance, in which actor pluralization and varying patterns of authority produce conflict, contestation, and resistance—especially in IOs such as the UN that have near-universal membership that exacerbates preference heterogeneity (111). Diverse actors with divergent preferences may block consensus on the importance of synergies and trade-offs—and therefore on the appropriate frameworks for governing MSPs on efforts to deliver them—because sustainability transformations are embedded in global political contestation (7).

As power dynamics shift within global governance, interstate bargaining is increasingly relevant for governing MSPs. So-called rising powers previously contested mostly administrative procedures and institutional rules, but as their influence within IOs has grown, these states now actively contest normative policy content (e.g., 129). China has recently sought to augment its influence in the UN system especially through strategic funding and bureaucracy staffing. Although China still holds fewer leadership positions and contributes fewer staff than Western states, it has rapidly come to prioritize increasing its international bureaucratic presence (130). It has pursued this strategy especially extensively within UN DESA, where Chinese expertise in the "low politics" of development attains greater credibility. China has been at the helm of UN DESA since 2007. Fung & Lam (131) note that some diplomats now describe UN DESA as a

de facto Chinese enterprise that promotes national interests, and they argue that China has used its influence within UN DESA to link the SDGs to its own foreign policy objectives. Thus, the institutions in which China is increasingly influential are those institutions commonly seen as promising meta-governors of MSPs. China's divergent preferences on human rights, economic development, and environmental protection compared with those of established powers may therefore intensify contestation over meta-governance.

The meaning of transformation also remains contested, and there is a persistent lack of consensus on how to achieve sustainability transformations. Governments have not reached an overarching agreement on what an integrated approach to the 2030 Agenda means (105), and even the governments of similar states adopt highly distinct approaches to SDG integration (132). Stakeholders based in BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—usually regarded as the rising powers), especially Chinese partners, participate in SDG partnerships at much higher rates than in earlier MSPs (2), making them increasingly relevant for the question of transformation. Rising powers' augmented influence in IOs creates potential for the construction of norm hierarchies at odds with the supposedly indivisible nature of the SDGs. BRICS states generally share the view that national sovereignty and the economic "right to development" take precedence over social and environmental issues (e.g., 133, 134). These dynamics are visible within the HLPF, where these states prioritize economic development over social and environmental sustainability (135, 136). Russia and the G77+China (a group of 134 developing states) also vocally oppose NGO efforts to systematically link the SDGs to the UN human rights system (136), which some scholars promote as a means of integrating the SDGs and holding actors accountable for their commitments (137). These developments illustrate how prioritization in the pursuit of synergies and trade-offs is subjected to conflicting political interests and competing discourses, raising ensuing legitimacy questions (138). Such starkly divergent approaches to both issue integration and accountability render it difficult for states and IOs to develop suitable meta-governance frameworks to foster sustainability transformations.

It is not only the pathway to transformation that is contested, however, but multistakeholderism itself. Taggart & Abraham (42) argue that multistakeholderism has not supplanted the dominant global governance norm of interstate multilateralism in the twenty-first century, and multistakeholderism's influence is intertwined with contemporary hegemony as dominant Global North actors leverage it to advance corporate and state power, which is resisted by powerful Global South states. Despite increasing participation from BRICS stakeholders in SDG partnerships, rising powers contest the nature and relevance of multistakeholder governance for global sustainable development (44). Contestation over which concepts MSPs should address and what role MSPs should play in sustainable development has inhibited meta-governance reforms for strengthening the effectiveness and legitimacy of MSPs (38). Indeed, initial negotiations over SDG 17 were highly contested, as the G77+China sought to advance a conceptualization of partnership based on interstate commitments (139). Developed states instead wanted greater private sector involvement and emphasis on diverse stakeholders (140). SDG 17 therefore came to represent voluntarist, weak, and ambiguous forms of multistakeholderism (46, 141). Paradoxically, states that oppose multistakeholder governance in international debates may support governance initiatives by transnational MSPs at home. Certain actors within the Chinese state, for example, willingly leverage these initiatives to achieve their own development goals (142). A range of political actors from both the Global North and South thus leverage the contested concepts of transformation and multistakeholderism to advance their own preferences and adapt the definitions and substantive content of norms to suit their interests, which does not portend simple solutions to multilateral gridlock and the imminent advancement of meta-governance.

Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS states): group of countries commonly referred to as the rising powers

G77+China: a coalition of 134 developing countries in the United Nations system plus China, which supports the group but is not a full member

6. CONCLUSION

For more than two decades, various actors have promoted MSPs as important tools for achieving sustainable development. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015 reinvigorated and further consolidated the partnership model. Yet, as argued in this review, there is reason for caution in relying on MSPs to deliver sustainability transformations on a global scale. Compared with MSPs launched at the turn of the millennium, SDG partnerships appear to have made modest improvements in terms of effectiveness and legitimacy. They generally are more inclusive and consciously strive to generate synergies and minimize trade-offs across issue areas. At the same time, inclusiveness remains weak in terms of the participation of marginalized groups, and MSPs may not ensure equity among partners to manage increasingly heterogeneous preferences. MSPs also may not engage substantially with trade-offs across SDGs, even as they ostensibly work toward synergies. If these MSPs are to become sufficiently more effective and legitimate than their predecessors, they should be designed to maximize stakeholder representation and participation and to integrate all three dimensions of sustainability, as well as be backed by enhanced accountability mechanisms on fulfillment of their commitments.

This review points to several avenues for future research, as well as action points for enhancing contributions from MSPs to filling gaps in global sustainability governance, such as those identified by the UN Secretary-General in the lead-up to the 2023 SDG Summit (93). More robust empirical assessment is needed of both MSPs' internal governance structures and the wider global governance context in which they are created and operate, especially in relation to synergies and trade-offs between sustainability policy domains. Whether and how MSPs can help deliver transformative effects on a global scale remain largely open empirical questions. Recent scholarship offers insights into potential synergies by identifying overlapping commitments to multiple SDGs, but there remains a dearth of research on actual synergistic effects. Advancements in theory and methods for assessing MSPs and goal interactions could be useful for both scholars and policymakers. Future research should seek to better explain the determinants of both synergies and trade-offs in different types of effects, from outputs through impacts, across wider and more representative samples of MSPs. To that end, we echo calls for UN DESA to make publicly available the underlying data for the SDG Actions Platform (50), and we suggest building on extant data sets that identify goal linkages.

Future research should also engage more with the legitimacy of MSPs for sustainable development. It is not certain that MSPs can retain normative legitimacy when operating across policy domains and multiple governance levels. Doing so will be necessary for delivering transformations on a global scale, but it requires engagement with eclectic stakeholder groups and fostering agreements amid a cacophony of competing discourses promoted by actors who face different distributional consequences from global challenges such as climate change or food insecurity. There is an urgent need for more research on sociological legitimacy, including how it interacts with normative legitimacy. It is important to understand whether the public trusts, accepts, or is even aware of MSPs and whether their shortcomings risk creating backlash that could derail sustainable development initiatives.

More research is also needed on the politics of global meta-governance of MSPs to determine whether and to what extent it is possible to develop and achieve effective frameworks amid contestation over multistakeholderism and the meanings and desirability of global sustainability transformations. Given the limited success to date and the high political barriers to bringing about significant change, it would also be prudent for researchers to explore and assess alternative institutional and policy solutions. We have argued that meta-governance needs to strike a balance between heavy-handed delegation and bottom-up empowerment to maximize effectiveness

in increasingly complex and contested political environments. Meta-governance may also need to involve public actors intentionally assessing which MSPs are needed where and stimulating their creation, as well as orchestrated efforts to encourage partners to avoid shying away from thorny problems that risk trade-offs so as to ensure no area of sustainability is neglected in pursuit of synergies for transformation.

SUMMARY POINTS

1. Actors pursue multistakeholder partnerships (MSPs) with various motivations, and partnerships have increased significantly in number over the past two decades, leading some scholars to suggest there is a new generation of partnerships working to deliver the 2030 Agenda and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2. Older MSPs launched in conjunction with the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development exhibited many shortcomings on effectiveness and legitimacy, largely due to institutional design flaws and limited accountability.

3. MSPs committed to achieving the SDGs exhibit notable improvements, including increased stakeholder representation. Yet, certain marginalized groups remain under-represented, inclusiveness may not be matched by processes that enable equitable participation, and accountability remains broadly elusive.

4. MSPs often strive for synergies across economic, environmental, and social goals, which are critical for sustainability transformations. Empirical evidence suggests, however, that they neglect goals with higher risks of trade-offs and may even ignore trade-offs that arise.

5. Meta-governance is often touted as a promising avenue for holding partnerships accountable and catalyzing the partnerships needed to fill persistent governance gaps. Yet, there is limited real-world evidence of its feasibility and effectiveness on a global scale, and it is challenging to strike an appropriate balance between hierarchical and bottom-up approaches to empower stakeholders.

6. Efforts to develop and apply meta-governance frameworks may be frustrated by contestation over the meaning of sustainability transformation and competing views on the relevance and appropriateness of multistakeholderism in sustainable development. Research should also further investigate the feasibility of alternative institutional and policy solutions.

FUTURE ISSUES

1. There is a need for more robust empirical assessment of the performance of MSPs for sustainable development employing novel theoretical and methodological frameworks for explaining the determinants of various types of effects, especially in relation to goal synergies and trade-offs.

2. To better understand MSPs' prospects for contributing to sustainability transformations, scholars should assess which stakeholder constellations are most capable of producing synergies and minimizing trade-offs across specific goals.

3. More research is needed on the sociological legitimacy of MSPs, including both elite and popular perspectives across different geographical contexts.

4. To assist international organizations in building portfolios of partnerships needed for specific national contexts, researchers should further explore possibilities to exploit existing data on partnerships across different issue areas to help identify the context-specific partnerships needed for transformative effects.

5. Policymakers need research that informs the development of clearer, more coherent meta-governance frameworks to hold MSPs accountable, scale up their efforts, and promote synergies across issue areas with sensitivity to local contexts. A turn toward sociological legitimacy in the literature could indicate avenues for bringing public pressure to bear on recalcitrant policymakers to develop and implement such institutions.

6. Scholars should continue experimenting with and evaluating proposed pathways out of geopolitical gridlock over the management of global challenges and the evolving international sustainable development agenda. Research could enable a better understanding of the contestation of multistakeholderism and sustainability transformations and contribute to identifying and testing potential policy solutions that appeal to diverse actors with divergent preferences.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

DATA ACCESS STATEMENT

No new data were created for this study. All citations were accurate at the time of writing, and secondary data underlying **Figure 1** are available upon request from the authors of the study cited.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

I.H. led the writing of the review, collected literature, decided on key themes to cover and the scope of literature to be reviewed, and drafted the majority of the text. K.B. provided guidance on the overall direction and structure of the review, contributed extensive references, and wrote substantial portions of the text. F.F. contributed references and wrote portions of the text, focusing especially on meta-governance. F.K. contributed references and wrote portions of the text, focusing especially on data and figures. All authors edited and revised all sections of the text.

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