

# **Multi-stakeholder Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Promises and Pitfalls**

**Ian Higham**

Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, London School of  
Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom

**Email:** [i.g.higham@lse.ac.uk](mailto:i.g.higham@lse.ac.uk)

**ORCID:** 0000-0003-1427-6940

**Karin Bäckstrand**

Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden; Institute for  
Futures Studies, Stockholm, Sweden

**Email:** [karin.backstrand@statsvet.su.se](mailto:karin.backstrand@statsvet.su.se)

**ORCID:** 0000-0002-8608-8888

**Felicitas Fritzsche**

Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

**Email:** [felicitas.fritzsche@statsvet.su.se](mailto:felicitas.fritzsche@statsvet.su.se)

**ORCID:** 0000-0003-0158-5007

**Faradj Koliev**

Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

**Email:** [faradj.koliev@statsvet.su.se](mailto:faradj.koliev@statsvet.su.se)

**ORCID:** 0000-0003-3981-7344

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## **Corresponding author contact information:**

Ian Higham

Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment

London School of Economics and Political Science

Houghton Street

London WC2A 2AE

United Kingdom

[i.g.higham@lse.ac.uk](mailto:i.g.higham@lse.ac.uk)

+44 (0)7564879595

1 **Keywords:** multi-stakeholder partnerships; sustainable development; 2030 Agenda; meta-  
2 governance; transformations; synergies

3

4 **Abstract:** This review examines the promises and pitfalls of multi-stakeholder partnerships  
5 (MSPs) for sustainable development. We take stock of the literature on the creation,  
6 effectiveness, and legitimacy of MSPs and focus on recent research on MSPs committed to  
7 achieving the 2030 Agenda and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The  
8 2030 Agenda conceives of MSPs as vehicles to achieve large-scale sustainability  
9 transformations. Yet, research on MSPs under earlier sustainable development initiatives found  
10 that they had limited effectiveness and significant legitimacy deficits. We show that recent  
11 research on SDG partnerships suggests they reproduce many of the shortcomings of their  
12 predecessors and so are unlikely to foster synergies and minimize trade-offs between areas of  
13 sustainable development to deliver transformations on a global scale. We also examine recent  
14 research on the prospects of governing MSPs to enhance accountability and ensure better  
15 institutional designs for achieving transformations, highlighting challenges arising from  
16 international political contestation.

17

## 18 **1. INTRODUCTION**

19 For more than two decades, scholars and policymakers have treated multi-stakeholder  
20 partnerships (MSPs) as important institutions in the global governance of sustainable  
21 development (1). In 2015, member states of the United Nations (UN) adopted *Transforming*  
22 *our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which included seventeen  
23 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda aimed to deliver sustainability  
24 transformations on a global scale and reinvigorated the significance of MSPs by calling on

25 them to be a key tool for achieving the SDGs. Some scholars have referred to a subsequent  
26 proliferation of novel MSPs – and the rebranding or reorientation of existing MSPs committed  
27 to working towards the SDGs – as a “new generation” of partnerships (2-5).

28 By re-asserting the importance of MSPs and designating an explicit role for them in the  
29 2030 Agenda, the UN and its member states raised the stakes for multi-stakeholderism in  
30 sustainable development. MSPs are now expected to scale up and deliver transformations  
31 across multiple issue area: the economic, environmental, and social SDGs are conceived as  
32 “integrated and indivisible”, requiring stakeholders to strive for synergies and address trade-  
33 offs across goals (6, p. 6). This vision aligns with the broad international political consensus  
34 that integration is critical for sustainability transformations (7). Yet, at the 2023 SDG Summit,  
35 which included an interim review of progress at the half-way point of the 2030 Agenda,  
36 governments acknowledged that progress towards most SDGs was either moving too slowly  
37 or had regressed below the 2015 baseline. Governments at the Summit reaffirmed a central role  
38 for non-state actors in sustainable development and committed to enhancing MSPs at multiple  
39 governance levels (8). Such policy rhetoric promoting MSPs does not, however, align with  
40 research findings that MSPs have had only limited effectiveness and legitimacy. Based on our  
41 review of the extant literature, we argue that the new wave of partnerships is unlikely to be ‘fit  
42 for transformation’.

43 Given the importance practitioners continue assigning to MSPs and the sustained  
44 scholarly interest in multi-stakeholder governance, this review asks: to what extent are MSPs  
45 effective, legitimate, and capable of delivering large-scale sustainability transformations, as  
46 envisioned in the 2030 Agenda? We focus primarily on MSPs established in conjunction with  
47 UN sustainable development initiatives and review intersecting literatures in international  
48 relations (IR), environmental politics, development studies, comparative and international  
49 political economy, and public administration. We particularly focus on MSPs that align

50 explicitly with achieving the SDGs and compare findings with research on earlier MSPs,  
51 especially the first wave of partnerships launched at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable  
52 Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. This review is one of the first efforts to draw  
53 conclusions from the expanding body of empirical research on MSPs working towards the  
54 SDGs. These MSPs provide insights about the wider universe of partnerships for sustainable  
55 development because the 2030 Agenda aims to bring together multiple policy sectors that are  
56 traditionally siloed in separate institutions. Moreover, much of the empirical material in  
57 research on this so-called “new generation” of MSPs comes from databases that include older  
58 MSPs and MSPs established independently of UN initiatives that subsequently committed to  
59 the SDGs (9).

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

73 The review is structured as follows. First, we outline the key concepts scholars use to  
74 assess MSPs. Next, we discuss how and why MSPs have proliferated over the past 20 years.

75 We then review empirical research on the effectiveness and legitimacy of MSPs, comparing  
76 the performance of earlier MSPs with SDG partnerships, paying special attention to their  
77 prospects for transformation. In the last section, we discuss the potential and challenges for  
78 global meta-governance to improve the performance of MSPs for achieving sustainability  
79 transformations amid political contestation. Finally, we conclude with lessons for policymakers  
80 and avenues for future research.

81

## 82 **2. KEY CONCEPTS**

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

89 Many scholars refer to what we call MSPs as ‘public-private partnerships’, which  
90 Andonova (10) defines as “voluntary agreements between public actors (IOs, states, or substate  
91 public authorities) and nonstate actors (nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], companies,  
92 foundations, etc.) on a set of governance objectives and norms, rules, practices, or  
93 implementation procedures and their attainment across multiple jurisdictions and levels of  
94 governance” (p. 2). In this review, we use the term ‘multi-stakeholder’ partnerships, which has  
95 become predominant in UN discourse (11, 12). This usage recognizes that societal stakeholders  
96 and non-state actors play a key role in partnerships (while state actors may not) and that multi-  
97 stakeholderism is the defining element of these initiatives (13). MSPs can also be conceived as  
98 global governance institutions in their own right (10, 14).

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

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

122 Accountability is a key element of legitimacy in the literature. Accountability "implies  
123 that some actors have the right to hold other actors accountable to a set of standards, to judge

124 whether they have fulfilled their responsibilities in light of these standards, and to impose  
125 sanctions if they determine these standards have not been met” (28, p. 29). For MSPs, the  
126 concept of accountability is more complex than for traditional state-based governance  
127 institutions, as only non-electoral accountability mechanisms tend to be available (29). Absent  
128 more robust mechanisms, scholars have focused on related criteria, especially transparency, to  
129 promote accountability for MSPs (e.g., 30, 31, 32).

130         Research on MSPs has only relatively recently engaged with the concept of  
131 transformation. In UN policy discourse, transformation means delivering the full 2030 Agenda  
132 and achieving the SDGs. The 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report argues that  
133 generating synergies across the goals is therefore critical for transformation (33).  
134 Transformations are defined more generally in the sustainability science literature as “shifts  
135 from regimes associated with unsustainable pathways of development to alternative regimes in  
136 which development pathways are (provisionally thought to be) sustainable” (15, p. 455).  
137 ‘Sustainability transformation’ can have numerous practical meanings in academic research,  
138 and the term is frequently used without connections to real-world examples (34). Scholars have,  
139 however, largely converged around an understanding that integrating economic,  
140 environmental, and social policies is essential for transformation – a consensus shared by  
141 political actors, although there remains limited agreement on what this means in practice or  
142 how to achieve it (7). Clark et al. (15) concluded that, “A research-informed use of the term  
143 sustainable should therefore always – and only – refer to the integrated pathways of  
144 development resulting from nature-society interactions in the Anthropocene System” (p. 337).

145         Increased expectations raise questions of how to govern MSPs to ensure greater  
146 effectiveness and legitimacy. Scholars and practitioners have thus begun to explore the concept  
147 of meta-governance, which is “a practice by (mainly) public authorities that entails the  
148 coordination of one or more governance modes by using different instruments, methods, and

149 strategies to overcome governance failures” (35, p.1771). Meta-governance – or ‘the  
150 governance of governance’ – is relational and can be understood as the principles, rules, and  
151 institutions that govern MSPs (36, 37). Meta-governance can have diverse purposes and  
152 functions, including enhancing accountability, integrating MSPs into existing governance  
153 structures, catalyzing stakeholder participation, or developing performance standards (35).  
154 Meta-governance can be exerted by different actors at different governance levels. At the  
155 international level, it tends to refer to IOs overseeing registration and reporting of MSPs,  
156 providing guidance to MSPs, and monitoring and reviewing progress. At the national level, it  
157 may concern ensuring local ownership (38). While meta-governance is mainly exerted by  
158 public authorities, it can also be based on private authority, usually involving private  
159 governance initiatives coalescing to improve coherence (39). Some scholars connect meta-  
160 governance to orchestration (35), which is defined as governance through intermediaries on a  
161 voluntary basis to catalyze initiatives or steer actors’ behavior (40). Orchestration therefore  
162 concerns promoting the creation of new MSPs, governing existing MSPs, and using MSPs as  
163 intermediaries to influence target actors. While the concepts of orchestration and meta-  
164 governance evolved discretely, orchestration can be understood as a more ‘hands-off’ variant  
165 of meta-governance (41), and meta-governance can be “embedded” in orchestration (38, p.  
166 500).

167

### 168 **3. THE PROLIFERATION OF MSPs FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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



174

### 175 **3.1 The rise of MSPs**

176 The concept of multi-stakeholderism emerged as early as the 1970s in corporate managerial  
177 thinking but was first introduced to the global sustainable development agenda in 1992 (42).  
178 MSPs for sustainable development especially proliferated following several UN innovations,  
179 including the launch of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 and the  
180 establishment of the UN Fund for International Partnerships in 1998, UN Global Compact in  
181 2000, and UN Office for Partnerships in 2006 (11). Most of these MSPs were formally  
182 established in conjunction with international summits – in particular, the WSSD in 2002 and  
183 the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012. Many civil society actors  
184 were highly critical of this embrace of private-public governance, viewing it as the  
185 relinquishing of state authority to corporate power. The UN and its member states, however,  
186 framed the partnership model as participatory and effective, and at Rio+20, they sought to  
187 revitalize and reconceptualize public-private partnerships as “voluntary commitments”,  
188 signaling the demise of WSSD partnerships but perpetuating highly similar initiatives under a  
189 novel framing (43).

190 The UN and its member states again attempted to legitimate this governance model  
191 with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in 2015, now under a mantra of multi-  
192 stakeholderism (44). SDG 17 is designated: “Strengthen the means of implementation and  
193 revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”, and the 2030 Agenda includes  
194 two targets under this goal that call for MSPs to play a role in mobilizing resources (6). The  
195 MDGs – widely seen as top-down and technocratic – conceived of ‘partnership’ as official  
196 development assistance, but the SDGs differ in their definition of partnerships by  
197 institutionalizing a clear role for non-state actors (45-48).

198 Stakeholders appear to have heeded calls to establish MSPs in line with SDG 17. The  
199 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) maintains an online voluntary  
200 registry of both multi-stakeholder and individual initiatives to achieve the SDGs. The SDG  
201 Actions Platform (previously called the ‘Partnership Platform’ until mid-2023), which is used  
202 extensively in large-N research on MSPs (e.g., 2, 3, 9, 49, 50), has grown substantially since  
203 2015. Some initiatives listed in the Platform existed before 2015 but were rebranded or  
204 reconfigured towards achieving the SDGs (9). Some MSPs in the database were unaware they  
205 had been registered at all, possibly because UN DESA combined registries of various initiatives  
206 for sustainable development (50). Nonetheless, scholars argue that the database shows that  
207 MSPs “are proliferating as never before” (2, p. 466). A recent dataset shows that the Platform  
208 contained 6,936 entries by 2022, of which 5,799 were unique. The total number of entries that  
209 are MSPs may be considerably smaller depending on the definition applied (51).

210

### 211 **3.2 Explaining the creation and proliferation of MSPs**

212 The continued growth of MSPs in the global governance of sustainable development is  
213 explained by several competing accounts. Much of the early literature on MSPs offered (neo-  
214 )Gramscian accounts in which MSPs are indicative of corporate hegemony (1). More recent  
215 Gramscian scholarship suggests that MSPs function to co-opt subaltern voices and represent  
216 the “new tyranny” of global development multilateralism by providing a veneer of  
217 inclusiveness while reproducing power hierarchies present in traditional inter-state models for  
218 governing sustainable development (52). From this perspective, multi-stakeholderism is an  
219 international norm that promotes affected stakeholders’ participation in problem-solving, but  
220 which powerful actors leverage to assimilate recalcitrant actors who resist top-down  
221 development models (42).

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

231 Functionalist accounts aligned with prevailing claims that the retreat of state authority  
232 created demand for private and hybrid governance, but empirical research did not produce a  
233 consensus on whether WSSD partnerships truly facilitated the transfer of authority from states  
234 to private actors (21). Governments have played a key role in catalyzing MSPs as institutions  
235 to further their preferences; thus, the growth of MSPs may have been driven less by problem-  
236 solving efforts and more by rational political interests and opportunity considerations (55).  
237 National governments with more robust climate policies, for example, are more likely to  
238 orchestrate the creation of MSPs for climate change (56). Research similarly suggests that  
239 actors' decisions to create SDG partnerships is largely determined by the political economy of  
240 the actor's home state (2). Recent findings, however, suggest that domestic politics  
241 explanations lack robust support compared to alternative explanations. Earlier functionalist  
242 explanations have resurfaced – in particular, findings that MSPs are primarily created by states  
243 that first consider the existing governance architecture and aim to establish new institutions  
244 tailored to solving specific problems while avoiding task duplication (57).

245 Other scholars argue that there are multiple complex pathways to creating MSPs (58).  
246 The increasing autonomy of international secretariats, bureaucracies, and public

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

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

271 irresponsible companies, although such MSPs may not enforce standards with sufficient  
272 stringency to tackle global challenges (27).

273 In sum, there are multiple competing explanations for the proliferation of MSPs in  
274 global sustainability governance, each of which has some merit. The mixed evidence suggests  
275 that different actors – states, IOs, and non-state actors – join or create MSPs with varied  
276 motivations.

277

#### 278 **4. THE EFFECTIVENESS AND LEGITIMACY OF MSPs**

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

287

#### 288 **4.1 Key frameworks for assessing the performance of MSPs**

289 Scholars have proposed numerous theoretical and methodological frameworks for studying  
290 MSPs, developed and applied in both single case studies and large-N quantitative analysis (e.g.,  
291 58, 72, 73). Early research on MSPs tended to focus on rule compliance as the key determinant  
292 of effectiveness; when this approach did not produce firm conclusions on what explained poor  
293 performance, scholars began exploring alternative metrics, and many advocated goal  
294 attainment as a more appropriate yardstick than mere rule compliance (1). The evolving  
295 research agenda has sought to assess performance more systematically and trace effects from

296 input to output through to impact (74, 75). Pattberg & Widerberg (73), for example, surveyed  
297 the literature on MSPs to identify general conditions that could explain effectiveness and  
298 legitimacy: optimal partner mix; effective leadership; stringent goal-setting; sustained funding;  
299 professional process management; regular monitoring, reporting, and evaluation to support  
300 organizational learning; active meta-governance; favorable political and social contexts; and  
301 fit to problem structure.

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

319         These frameworks mostly concern effectiveness, but there have also been advances in  
320 studying legitimacy. Taggart (52) proposes combining normative and sociological legitimacy

321 into a common theoretical framework to assess MSPs against criteria for input, throughput, and  
322 output legitimacy, as well as the perspectives of stakeholders. This framework draws on  
323 advances in research on the legitimacy of global governance institutions (78), which embraces  
324 a sociological approach that has until very recently remained absent from research on MSPs.  
325 In such a multi-pronged framework, legitimacy is not necessarily a dichotomous variable, and  
326 MSPs may be venues in which normative principles of world order are themselves contested  
327 and negotiated (52). Sociological legitimacy frameworks remain mostly absent from the MSP  
328 literature, but recent research attempts to build theoretical propositions and test them  
329 empirically (79).

330         Growing expectations for MSPs to generate synergies and manage trade-offs between  
331 economic, environmental, and social objectives has also required methodological innovation  
332 from researchers. Novel methodologies developed to study policy synergies in sustainable  
333 development have not yet been applied systematically to MSPs. Nilsson et al. (80) propose a  
334 simple seven-point scorecard to assess SDG interactions in policymaking by selecting  
335 individual goals and mapping interactions with the other 16 goals. This approach has informed  
336 additional innovations, including a cross-impact matrix of interactions for all 2030 Agenda  
337 targets (81). Biggeri et al. (82) propose a tailored approach to this method and introduced an  
338 index that accounts for trade-offs and synergies between goals and targets across the three  
339 domains of sustainable development. These tools could facilitate assessment of the  
340 contributions of MSPs specifically; to date, however, empirical research on MSPs and policy  
341 synergies remains largely data-driven and focused either on potential synergies, observed in  
342 overlapping discursive commitments (e.g., 9, 51) or intended/perceived synergies observed in  
343 survey responses (e.g., 50, 83).

344

#### 345 **4.2 Earlier generations of MSPs**

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

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

363 There is no simple causal relationship between inclusion and effectiveness; rather, the  
364 quality, type, and form of representation and participation are critical. Inclusiveness that does  
365 not address power asymmetries, skewed representation, or dominance by certain partners  
366 affects trust-building negatively and increases conflict within MSPs, hindering their  
367 effectiveness (85). Balancing participation among actors – for example, by addressing North-  
368 South geographic imbalances or the dominance of public over private partners – appears to  
369 improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of MSPs (30, 86, 87). Previous generations of MSPs  
370 mostly failed to strike these balances. World Bank partnerships in the 1990s and 2000s, for



371 example, had institutional designs that failed to promote inclusiveness or empower  
372 stakeholders and thus demonstrated significant legitimacy shortcomings (88). WSSD  
373 partnerships also broadly failed to secure the inclusion and participation of marginalized groups  
374 (89). The quality of inclusiveness in MSPs is thus partially contingent on institutional design,  
375 which determines the scope of input legitimacy and the extent to which diverse partners have  
376 access to meaningful participation.

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

386 It is challenging to establish institutional accountability for MSPs, and there are few  
387 options available for externally imposing sanctions. MSPs registered with the UN could be  
388 removed from online registries, but there is little obvious cost to such penalties. This challenge  
389 of designing or enforcing accountability may explain why WSSD partnerships exhibited  
390 chronic legitimacy deficits (54, 84). These partnerships had unclear guidelines and no  
391 mandatory reporting requirements, which corresponded with a lack of transparency,  
392 monitoring, and review and thus limited accountability (21, 31). More than two-thirds of  
393 WSSD partnerships lacked any form of transparency mechanism (i.e., having a website,  
394 reporting system, or monitoring system), and more than half had no mechanism for monitoring  
395 effectiveness or tracking progress (30). In the absence of a centralized UN agency to oversee

396 goal attainment and progress-tracking for MSPs, the UN General Assembly tasked the former  
397 Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) with overseeing WSSD partnerships, but the  
398 CSD lacked the mandate and resources to enforce reporting or review rules that might have  
399 improved accountability (84). Overall, the evidence shows that earlier MSPs had limited  
400 effectiveness and significant legitimacy challenges, and these problems persisted in the absence  
401 of more robust accountability mechanisms.

402

### 403 **4.3 MSPs for the SDGs**

404 Recent empirical scholarship on MSPs for sustainable development focuses primarily on those  
405 MSPs that have committed to achieving the SDGs. Large-N studies generally draw on the SDG  
406 Actions Platform (<https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships>), although much of the empirical literature  
407 is qualitative, descriptive, and focused on case studies of MSPs that have a commitment to the  
408 SDGs but may or may not be registered on the Platform. In this section, we review this growing  
409 body of research to assess whether these MSPs are any more effective and legitimate than  
410 earlier MSPs, and whether they show promise for delivering sustainability transformations on  
411 a global scale. We argue that despite indications of modest improvements, effectiveness and  
412 legitimacy remain limited in this “new generation” of MSPs, casting doubt on their prospects  
413 for delivering transformative change.

414

#### 415 **4.3.1 General effectiveness and legitimacy**

416 Policymakers have sounded alarms that MSPs are not meeting their full potential to contribute  
417 to the 2030 Agenda. Several UN reports present evidence of the persistent legitimacy  
418 challenges and limited effectiveness of MSPs (91-93). One report noted that two years after  
419 launching the 2030 Agenda, “Overall, partnership efforts remain fragmented and overly  
420 focused on ‘projectized’ activities – an approach that is unlikely to generate results on the scale

421 required” (91, p. 32). The UN Office of Internal Oversight Services stated in 2019 that the lack  
422 of a system-wide definition of “effective partnerships” made it difficult to even evaluate how  
423 well MSPs were performing, but evidence pointed to inefficiencies and risks of greater  
424 ineffectiveness (92, p. 18). Most recently, a report from the UN Secretary-General on the 2023  
425 SDG Summit stated that multi-stakeholder collaboration among sub-national governments  
426 remained under-resourced, hindering effectiveness, while private sector actors involved in  
427 SDG initiatives needed to be held more accountable and remained engaged in “rampant  
428 greenwashing and Goals-washing” (93, p. 28).

429         These reports strongly suggest that SDG partnerships continue to exhibit shortcomings  
430 in both effectiveness and legitimacy, but scholarly research indicates that there have been some  
431 improvements. MSPs have become more inclusive since the early days of multi-stakeholderism  
432 in sustainability governance. MSPs registered in the SDG Actions Platform showed substantial  
433 increases in business participation compared to WSSD partnerships (2, 3). They were also more  
434 likely than WSSD partnerships to have NGOs as lead partners: NGOs led 21% of MSPs  
435 addressing environmental SDGs but only 3% of those launched under the WSSD (3).  
436 Widerberg et al. (9) found, however, that IOs and national governments remained the most  
437 common partners in a sample of these MSPs, with both actor types represented in  
438 approximately two-thirds of partnerships. A survey study found considerable differences in  
439 participation in SDG partnerships compared to WSSD partnerships. The study differentiated  
440 between intra-sectoral MSPs (all partners are the same actor type) and cross-sectoral MSPs  
441 (partners represent more than one actor type). While not necessarily representative of all MSPs,  
442 the study showed that from 2006-2022 there was a relative decline of state actor participation  
443 by 21% and an increase of NGO and business participation by 15% and 8%, respectively.  
444 NGOs were the most heavily represented partners in cross-sectoral MSPs, while intra-sectoral  
445 partnerships skewed heavily towards business. These MSPs were relatively evenly distributed

446 worldwide, but many involved only a small number of partners (50). These findings suggest  
447 that inclusiveness has indeed improved.

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

461         Not all MSPs committed to the SDGs have anyway become sufficiently more inclusive,  
462 even if they generally improve upon WSSD partnerships. Scholars have still not fully explained  
463 how to identify strategic losers to ensure they are included in decision-making processes to  
464 cultivate issue ownership, possibly leaving MSPs unequipped to achieve the SDGs (46).  
465 Powerful, more institutionalized actors continue to be disproportionately represented in SDG  
466 partnerships, while more vulnerable and marginalized actors – including women, youth, and  
467 Indigenous Peoples – remain systematically underrepresented. Global North actors also  
468 dominate as lead partners despite most initiatives’ targeting the Global South (3). One sample  
469 from the SDG Actions Platform showed that the vast majority of registered MSPs included  
470 partners based only in one country, primarily in the Global North. Even among Global South

471 partners, the poorest countries remain disproportionately under-represented. Stakeholders from  
472 low-income states participate in far fewer MSPs than stakeholders from states in all other World  
473 Bank country income categories. These disparities matter because studies show that the focus  
474 of MSPs varies with geographic representation: those MSPs with partners from low-income  
475 countries were much more likely to focus on SDGs 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good  
476 health and well-being), 5 (gender equality), and 7 (affordable and clean energy), but less likely  
477 to focus on SDG 14 (life below water). MSPs with partners from middle-income countries were  
478 more likely to focus on SDG 4 (quality education) (97). SDG implementation may therefore  
479 be uneven, and greater inclusiveness remains important for ensuring no goal is neglected.

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

489         Few studies have evaluated whether SDG partnerships achieve their objectives, and  
490 persistent transparency shortcomings inhibit sufficient data collection. A systematic review of  
491 literature on the contributions of voluntary initiatives in the coffee sector to achieving the SDGs  
492 found that most results were insignificant, largely because these initiatives are insufficiently  
493 transparent and do not follow common standards for data-sharing and reporting (99).  
494 Knowledge and information exchange and coordination mechanisms between MSPs could also  
495 enhance their effectiveness at achieving certain SDGs, but stakeholder demand for these types

496 of institutional interactions has gone unmet (100). In SDG partnerships' own assessments of  
497 their effectiveness, cross-sectoral MSPs are much more likely to rate themselves as effective  
498 than intra-sectoral MSPs, especially when led by IO partners. MSPs that remain active also  
499 self-evaluate as much more successful than those that have already concluded activities (50).

500 Findings on limited transparency point to an overall lack of accountability. SDG  
501 partnerships exhibit diffused responsibility, limited answerability, and weak enforceability;  
502 they have weak reporting habits and tend to lack monitoring and review mechanisms (101).  
503 One study found that only 16% of environmentally-focused SDG partnerships had issued  
504 progress reports, and typically only one report (3). MSPs that self-report having greater  
505 effectiveness also tend to engage in more regular monitoring and communication of progress,  
506 although reporting frequency may not directly influence results (50). Scholarly analyses  
507 indicate that these are typical challenges for MSPs and highlight the need for combined  
508 approaches of upward accountability and horizontal learning and exchange despite power  
509 differentials and governance tensions (102, 103). Notably, some scholars imply that  
510 accountability for these MSPs could be inherently difficult to achieve due to the nature of the  
511 2030 Agenda. Finnemore & Jurkovich (104) argue that the lofty, transformative aims of the  
512 SDGs endow the goals with an aspirational quality that is un conducive to establishing  
513 accountability mechanisms. They anticipate that the various actors committed to the goals will  
514 receive praise for making at least partial progress and cannot be easily held accountable because  
515 the 2030 Agenda does not prescribe sufficiently specific behaviors for clearly identifiable  
516 actors. While these expectations are partially contested in relation to environmental goals (I.  
517 Higham, manuscript in review), accountability may remain elusive.

518

519 **4.3.2 Effectiveness in generating sustainability transformations**

520 The research reviewed above mostly concerns whether MSPs meet general criteria for  
521 effectiveness and legitimacy and whether they achieve their own objectives. It is a different  
522 question whether they are capable of and successful at achieving transformation effects,  
523 understood as producing synergies across environmental, social, and economic goals at scale,  
524 and creating learning spaces to that effect (94). Most research on SDG synergies focuses on  
525 whether synergies happen generally without specific attention to the role of MSPs.  
526 Methodological innovations for assessing SDG synergies have been applied in general  
527 empirical studies (105), but research on SDG interactions has largely failed to account for actor  
528 interactions (106). Some scholars have offered conceptual analyses of the potential of MSPs to  
529 produce transformative effects through synergies (46), while others explore models for  
530 collaborative governance, finding that forging MSPs across sectors to produce synergies  
531 requires partners to learn specific new skills and to understand the integrative structure of the  
532 SDGs and the nature of cross-sectoral incentives and practices (107).

533         Although limited, there is a growing body of research on synergistic effects from MSPs.  
534 Membership structure appears to be an important determinant of synergistic effects. Scholars  
535 have argued that particular constellations both of MSPs and of partners within MSPs are  
536 important for transformations (41, 46, 108). This conceptual argument is increasingly  
537 supported by empirical results. Heterogenous combinations of partners combining diverse  
538 skills, resources, and knowledge tend to have a stronger “nexus-orientation”, as illustrated by  
539 the 59% of cross-sectoral MSPs responding to a survey that reported addressing multiple  
540 SDGs, compared to 42% of intra-sectoral MSPs (50). In a larger sample of SDG partnerships,  
541 responses showed that 83% of MSPs perceived themselves to be pursuing synergies across  
542 SDGs, while only 26% claimed to have observed trade-offs (83). Additionally, Hedlund et al.  
543 (109) found that actors at the local level avoid collaboration in water governance where issues  
544 offer synergies, and they ignore potential trade-offs altogether. These findings could

545 collectively indicate that many MSPs do not engage with trade-off risks, potentially where  
546 membership is insufficiently diverse.

547           It should matter which synergies MSPs pursue (or not) in their work – and which trade-  
548 offs they (fail to) address. Research shows that MSPs do not focus equally on all SDGs, which  
549 could have implications for their ability to deliver transformations. Long & Clough’s (83)  
550 survey showed that SDG 4 had the highest percentage (61%) of MSPs pursuing synergies,  
551 followed by SDG 13 (climate action; 58%) and SDG 1 (57%). The SDGs for which MSPs were  
552 least likely to pursue synergies were SDG 14, followed by SDG 15 (life on land) and SDGs 7,  
553 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), and 12 (responsible consumption and production).  
554 SDG 13 also saw the biggest trade-offs – 53% of MSPs identifying trade-offs with SDG 13,  
555 while SDGs 12 and 14 had the lowest number of observed trade-offs with other goals. These  
556 survey results largely corroborate studies that attempt to map SDG synergies in MSPs, although  
557 to date such studies only present findings on goal linkages, not necessarily synergies – i.e.,  
558 goals that MSPs address in tandem but that do not necessarily get integrated in practice to  
559 successfully produce synergistic effects. Glass et al. (50) found that MSPs most frequently  
560 address SDGs 13 and 17 in combination, which the authors suggest may be because climate  
561 action is an area where state-based efforts are especially insufficient. Another study found that  
562 beyond SDG 13, climate-focused MSPs most frequently work on SDGs 9, 7, and 12 (110).  
563 Glass et al. (50) also found that SDG 13 is frequently addressed in combination with SDG 11  
564 (sustainable cities and communities), and MSPs regularly address SDGs 4 and 5 in combination  
565 with other goals. Other methods show SDGs 3 and 4 to be the most connected by MSPs,  
566 followed by SDGs 13 and 15, while the least connected goal was SDG 12 (51). Glass et al. (50)  
567 found that SDG 12 and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) were the SDGs that MSPs least  
568 frequently addressed jointly. Figure 1 shows a heat map of SDG linkages using data from  
569 Koliev & Bäckstrand (98). Among MSPs that address at least one environmental SDG, the



570 most linkages are found between SDGs 13 and 14, focusing on climate change and marine life,  
571 while SDGs 10 and 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) were linked particularly less  
572 frequently with other goals – and notably may be perceived as less directly relevant to  
573 environmental issues.

574 [Figure 1]

575 While MSPs appear to aim for synergies, these findings bolster concerns that MSPs are  
576 not addressing trade-offs. Scholars have argued that SDG 1 has the most synergistic  
577 relationship with other goals generally, while SDG 12 is the goal most associated with trade-  
578 offs (111). In light of these synergistic goal relationships, Glass et al. (50) suggest that their  
579 empirical findings show MSPs avoid issues that involve many trade-offs. Although climate-  
580 focused MSPs do tend to address SDG 12 (110), other MSPs do not. This could explain why  
581 climate action is among the goals with the largest number of observed trade-offs, while  
582 responsible consumption and production is among the least: MSPs tend to focus on issues  
583 where trade-offs are less likely, and the goals that most risk generating trade-offs end up  
584 neglected. The current body of research thus leads to the preliminary conclusion that the  
585 prospects of MSPs for delivering sustainability transformations are limited: even if many MSPs  
586 nominally pursue synergies, they may fail to realize synergies if they do not engage with trade-  
587 offs – and synergies may be unevenly spread between particular goals, while others are  
588 neglected. It is important to note, however, that for methodological reasons, research on goal  
589 linkages almost exclusively concerns discursive overlaps and, at most, policy output synergies.  
590 There is virtually no extant research on whether MSPs generate synergistic outcomes and  
591 impacts.

592

## 593 **5. GOVERNING TRANSFORMATIVE MULTI-STAKEHOLDER GOVERNANCE**

594 The correlation of persistent shortcomings and rising expectations of MSPs for sustainable  
595 development raises the question of how to ensure their effectiveness and legitimacy. Many  
596 scholars and policymakers have emphasized the potential importance of meta-governance:  
597 MSPs produce governance for sustainable development, but perhaps they need to be governed  
598 in turn. Meta-governance may serve to limit problems arising from the fragmentation of global  
599 sustainability governance (35), which the proliferation of MSPs has exacerbated and which  
600 risks generating inter-institutional conflict (14). However, meta-governance can also be  
601 detrimental to the effectiveness and legitimacy of MSPs, and it is prone to the same challenges  
602 of contestation and gridlock that may be inherent to all forms of global governance (112). Meta-  
603 governance is likely to remain elusive or insufficient while governments contest the very nature  
604 of mutli-stakeholderism in general and policy synergies for sustainability transformations in  
605 particular. In this section, we review the literature on meta-governance, focusing especially on  
606 IOs, as scholars have frequently suggested these institutions as the primary candidates for  
607 (meta-)governing transnational MSPs for sustainable development, especially in relation to the  
608 2030 Agenda and SDGs (9, 38, 73, 113, 114). We situate these findings in the context of global  
609 political contestation to highlight the limitations that multilateral gridlock poses for advancing  
610 meta-governance through IOs.

611

## 612 **5.1 In search of meta-governance frameworks**

613 Scholars have called for greater understanding of how meta-governance can be designed to  
614 ensure SDG integration for transformations (9), but there remains a paucity of research.  
615 Limited responsibility-taking and insufficiently inclusive institutional designs have led to calls  
616 for greater top-down oversight and public accountability of MSPs (46, 101). Many actors see  
617 the UN in particular as a key (potential) meta-governor of MSPs, especially for transnational  
618 MSPs committed to achieving the SDGs (38). Yet, given the prospect that “novel partnerships

619 around the SDGs” will “repeat the mistakes” of WSSD partnerships, scholars have argued that  
620 the lack of mandate or resources for UN bodies to review the progress of MSPs towards the  
621 SDGs is a significant pitfall for achieving the goals (45, p. 28).

622 Real-world occurrences of robust meta-governance remain scarce, limiting data  
623 collection for empirical research. The CSD never had real authority to oversee MSPs, and  
624 international bureaucrats continue to lament the absence of coherent meta-governance  
625 frameworks within the UN system, which may be the result of political contestation and  
626 sovereignty concerns, as discussed below. An internal evaluation criticized the failure to  
627 translate the 2030 Agenda’s commitment to MSPs into a “comprehensive, detailed framework  
628 for the UN system”, exacerbating risks of ineffectiveness and inefficiencies (92, pp. 16-18).  
629 The UN Secretary-General stated in 2017 that SDG partnerships lack support from a “policy  
630 backbone” and committed to “adopting a system-wide approach to partnerships” (115, p. 11).  
631 Separately, he pledged that, “Measures will be put in place to ensure the full transparency and  
632 accountability of United Nations partnership engagements” (91, p. 32). These sentiments are  
633 echoed by the President of the UN Economic and Social Council, who has called for a more  
634 coherent review mechanism for MSPs (116). Despite this consensus among practitioners on  
635 the need for more advanced meta-governance to promote accountability for MSPs, extant  
636 research has not established how accountability mechanisms could be designed to ensure  
637 transformations. A systematic review found virtually no research explaining what  
638 accountability means in relation to SDG integration and whether it is even feasible (106).

639 Beyond accountability, states and IOs could also leverage meta-governance for  
640 “strategic ordering” to address complications from institutional fragmentation and intentionally  
641 influence the creation, design, and behavior of MSPs, a function closely linked to orchestration  
642 (14). These public actors can intentionally orchestrate to create the requisite mix of partnerships  
643 for solving particular problems. For example, Horan (41) suggests that UN country offices

644 could assess the types of MSPs needed against the existing MSPs operating in a country and  
645 promote the creation of a “portfolio” of novel MSPs that enhance prospects for policy  
646 integration. UN agencies could facilitate portfolio construction using data and indicators that  
647 identify specific actors’ responsibilities, then bring those actors together in targeted  
648 partnerships (108). UN bodies have previously successfully leveraged data on non-state actor  
649 initiatives to orchestrate global policy outcomes on climate change, indicating the feasibility  
650 of this approach (117). Intentionality is important, as preliminary evidence suggested that the  
651 type of MSPs needed to achieve the SDGs in an integrated manner were unlikely to emerge  
652 organically (46).

653         Top-down approaches, however, are frequently problematic. Meta-governance must  
654 itself meet both legitimacy and effectiveness criteria to be useful for fostering transformation  
655 effects. Both participatory approaches and capacity-building are crucial for generating  
656 transformative effects in the governed entities (118, 119). Meta-governance frameworks often  
657 command popular legitimacy from affected stakeholders while remaining weak in practice (37,  
658 38, 120). IOs’ orchestration efforts can also have significant democratic shortcomings (32).  
659 While meta-governance could provide needed accountability, excessively heavy-handed  
660 oversight may render MSPs less effective if they become subjected to the whims of inefficient  
661 international bureaucracies or are organized under hierarchical delegative relationships (66).  
662 (For more on the performance of IOs and international bureaucracies in general, see 16, 60,  
663 121, 122, 123.)

664         There is a greater amount of extant research on the specific effectiveness of  
665 orchestration. Here, too, the results are mixed. Scholars suggest that high prevalence of IOs in  
666 SDG partnerships that self-report success could indicate they play an effective orchestrating  
667 role (50), but this conjecture has not been demonstrated causally. Orchestration can go awry  
668 and may exacerbate the neglect of underperforming actions and geographical imbalances (124).

669 The efficacy of orchestration appears to depend on thematic focus, and IOs’ summit-based  
670 efforts find the most success where transnational initiatives already have secretariats and  
671 monitoring arrangements (125) – findings that point to the importance of interlocutors, here  
672 referring to a variety of hosting arrangements for MSPs based on secretariats or other platforms  
673 (126). These findings suggest that orchestration approaches to meta-governance would benefit  
674 from strengthening accountability mechanisms, as MSPs that meet certain minimum  
675 international standards for engagement can be more effectively orchestrated.

676         Regarding MSPs for sustainable development, scholars often suggest that UN DESA,  
677 which houses the Secretariat of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development  
678 (HLPF), is one of the most relevant (prospective) meta-governor (38). UN DESA’s autonomous  
679 influence is relatively low (127, 128), but its efforts to govern MSPs keep growing (12).  
680 Disagreement over UN DESA’s appropriate functions resulted in its having limited authority  
681 and few material resources, leaving only softer options like orchestration to influence target  
682 actors (113). Political conflicts and resource scarcity thereby explain the HLPF’s shortcomings  
683 in demonstrating leadership and providing follow-up and review for the 2030 Agenda (129).  
684 Prospects for meta-governance of MSPs may therefore remain limited without greater  
685 advancements in developing appropriate frameworks and enhancing interlocutors’ mandates  
686 and resources. As we discuss in the next section, those advancements may remain elusive, as  
687 they face significant obstacles related to contestation by different actors within the HLPF and  
688 other institutions over the appropriateness of multi-stakeholder governance and the balancing  
689 of synergies and trade-offs in sustainable development.

690

## 691 **5.2. Contestation in global politics**

692 This political contestation over the role of UN DESA and the HLPF’s resources illustrates a  
693 central challenge to governing MSPs and contributing to transformations. Meta-governance

694 should be expected to face challenges endemic to global governance, in which actor  
695 pluralization and varying patterns of authority produce conflict, contestation, and resistance –  
696 especially in IOs such as the UN that have near universal membership that exacerbates  
697 preference heterogeneity (112). Diverse actors with divergent preferences may block consensus  
698 on the importance of synergies and trade-offs – and therefore on the appropriate frameworks  
699 for governing MSPs on efforts to deliver them – because sustainability transformations are  
700 embedded in global political contestation (7).

701         As power dynamics shift within global governance, inter-state bargaining is  
702 increasingly relevant for governing MSPs. So-called rising powers previously contested mostly  
703 administrative procedures and institutional rules, but as their influence within IOs has grown,  
704 these states now actively contest normative policy content (see, e.g., 130). China has recently  
705 sought to augment its influence in the UN system especially through strategic funding and  
706 bureaucracy staffing. Although China still holds fewer leadership positions and contributes  
707 fewer staff than Western states, it has rapidly come to prioritize increasing its international  
708 bureaucratic presence (131). It has pursued this strategy especially extensively within UN  
709 DESA, where Chinese expertise in the “low politics” of development attains greater credibility.  
710 China has been at the helm of UN DESA since 2007. Fung & Lam (132) note that some  
711 diplomats now describe UN DESA as a de facto Chinese enterprise that promotes national  
712 interests, and they argue that China has used its influence within UN DESA to link the SDGs  
713 to its own foreign policy objectives. Thus, the institutions in which China is increasingly  
714 influential are those institutions commonly seen as promising meta-governors of MSPs.  
715 China’s divergent preferences on human rights, economic development, and environmental  
716 protection compared to established powers may therefore create intensify contestation over  
717 meta-governance.

718           The meaning of transformation also remains contested, and there is a persistent lack of  
719 consensus on how to achieve sustainability transformations. Governments have not reached an  
720 overarching agreement on what an integrated approach to the 2030 Agenda means (106), and  
721 even the governments of similar states adopt highly distinct approaches to SDG integration  
722 (133). Stakeholders based in BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa –  
723 usually regarded as the rising powers), especially Chinese partners, participate in SDG  
724 partnerships at much higher rates than in earlier MSPs (2), making them increasingly relevant  
725 for the question of transformation. Rising powers’ augmented influence in IOs creates potential  
726 for the construction of norm hierarchies at odds with the supposedly indivisible nature of the  
727 SDGs. BRICS states generally share the view that national sovereignty and the economic ‘right  
728 to development’ take precedence over social and environmental issues (see, e.g., 134, 135).  
729 These dynamics are visible within the HLPF, where these states prioritize economic  
730 development over social and environmental sustainability (136, 137). Russia and the  
731 G77+China (a group of 134 developing states) also vocally opposed NGO efforts to  
732 systematically link the SDGs to the UN human rights system (137), which some scholars  
733 promote as a means of integrating the SDGs and holding actors accountable for their  
734 commitments (138). These developments illustrate how prioritization in the pursuit of  
735 synergies and trade-offs is subjected to conflicting political interests and competing discourses,  
736 raising ensuing legitimacy questions (see 139). Such starkly divergent approaches to both issue  
737 integration and accountability render it difficult for states and IOs to develop suitable meta-  
738 governance frameworks to foster sustainability transformations.

739           It is not only the pathway to transformation that is contested, however, but multi-  
740 stakeholderism itself. Taggart & Abraham (42) argue that multi-stakeholderism has not  
741 supplanted the dominant global governance norm of inter-state multilateralism in the 21<sup>st</sup>  
742 century, and multi-stakeholderism’s influence is intertwined with contemporary hegemony as

743 dominant Global North actors leverage it to advance corporate and state power, which is  
744 resisted by powerful Global South states. Despite increasing participation from BRICS  
745 stakeholders in SDG partnerships, rising powers contest the nature and relevance of multi-  
746 stakeholder governance for global sustainable development (44). Contestation over which  
747 concepts MSPs should address and what role MSPs should play in sustainable development  
748 have inhibited meta-governance reforms for strengthening the effectiveness and legitimacy of  
749 MSPs (38). Indeed, initial negotiations over SDG 17 were highly contested, as the G77+China  
750 sought to advance a conceptualization of partnership based on inter-state commitments (140).  
751 Developed states instead wanted greater private sector involvement and emphasis on diverse  
752 stakeholders (141). SDG 17 therefore came to represent voluntarist, weak, and ambiguous  
753 forms of multi-stakeholderism (46, 142). Paradoxically, states that oppose multi-stakeholder  
754 governance in international debates may support governance initiatives by transnational MSPs  
755 at home. Certain actors within the Chinese state, for example, willingly leverage these  
756 initiatives to achieve their own development goals (143). A range of political actors from both  
757 Global North and South thus leverage the contested concepts of transformation and multi-  
758 stakeholderism to advance their own preferences and adapt the definitions and substantive  
759 content of norms to suit their interests, which does not portend simple solutions to multilateral  
760 gridlock and the imminent advancement of meta-governance.

761

## 762 **6. CONCLUSION**

763 For more than two decades, various actors have promoted MSPs as important tools for  
764 achieving sustainable development. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015 reinvigorated  
765 and further consolidated the partnership model. Yet, as argued in this review, there is reason for  
766 caution in relying on MSPs to deliver sustainability transformations on a global scale.  
767 Compared to MSPs launched at the turn of the millennium, SDG partnerships appear to have



768 made modest improvements in terms of effectiveness and legitimacy. They generally are more  
769 inclusive and consciously strive to generate synergies and minimize trade-offs across issue  
770 areas. At the same time, inclusiveness remains weak in terms of the participation of  
771 marginalized groups, and MSPs may not ensure equity among partners to manage increasingly  
772 heterogenous preferences. MSPs also may not engage substantially with trade-offs across  
773 SDGs, even as they ostensibly work towards synergies. If these MSPs are to become  
774 sufficiently more effective and legitimate than their predecessors, they should be designed to  
775 maximize stakeholder representation and participation and to integrate all three dimensions of  
776 sustainability, as well as be backed by enhanced accountability mechanisms on fulfillment of  
777 their commitments.

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

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

803 More research is also needed on the politics of global meta-governance of MSPs to  
804 determine whether and to what extent it is possible to develop and achieve effective  
805 frameworks amid contestation over multi-stakeholderism and the meanings and desirability of  
806 global sustainability transformations. Given limited success to date and high political barriers  
807 to actioning significant change, it would also be prudent for researchers to explore and assess  
808 alternative institutional and policy solutions. We have argued that meta-governance needs to  
809 strike a balance between heavy-handed delegation and bottom-up empowerment to maximize  
810 effectiveness in increasingly complex and contested political environments. Meta-governance  
811 may also need to involve public actors intentionally assessing which MSPs are needed where  
812 and stimulating their creation, as well as orchestrated efforts to encourage partners to avoid  
813 shying away from thorny problems that risk trade-offs to ensure no area of sustainability is  
814 neglected in pursuit of synergies for transformation.

815

816 **SUMMARY POINTS**

- 817 1. Actors pursue multi-stakeholder partnerships with various motivations, and  
818 partnerships have increased significantly in number over the past two decades, leading  
819 some scholars to suggest there is a “new generation” of partnerships working to deliver  
820 the 2030 Agenda and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.
- 821 2. Older multi-stakeholder partnerships launched in conjunction with 2002 World Summit  
822 on Sustainable Development exhibited many shortcomings on effectiveness and  
823 legitimacy, largely due to institutional design flaws and limited accountability.
- 824 3. Multi-stakeholder partnerships committed to achieving the Sustainable Development  
825 Goals exhibit notable improvements, including increased stakeholder representation.  
826 Yet, certain marginalized groups remain under-represented, inclusiveness may not be  
827 matched by processes that enable equitable participation, and accountability remains  
828 broadly elusive.
- 829 4. Multi-stakeholder partnerships often strive for synergies across economic,  
830 environmental, and social goals, which are critical for sustainability transformations.  
831 Empirical evidence suggests, however, that they neglect goals with higher risks of  
832 trade-offs and may even ignore trade-offs that arise.
- 833 5. Meta-governance is often touted as a promising avenue for holding partnerships  
834 accountable and catalyzing the partnerships needed to fill persistent governance gaps.  
835 Yet, there is limited real-world evidence of its feasibility and effectiveness on a global  
836 scale, and it is challenging to strike an appropriate balance between hierarchical and  
837 bottom-up approaches to empower stakeholders.
- 838 6. Efforts to develop and apply meta-governance frameworks may be frustrated by  
839 contestation over the meaning of “sustainability transformation” and competing views  
840 on the relevance and appropriateness of multi-stakeholderism in sustainable

841 development. Research should also probe further the feasibility of alternative  
842 institutional and policy solutions.

843

#### 844 **FUTURE ISSUES**

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

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

853 3. More research is needed on the sociological legitimacy of multi-stakeholder  
854 partnerships, including both elite and popular perspectives across different  
855 geographical contexts.

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

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

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

872

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### 889 **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

890 Ian Higham led the writing of the review, collected literature, decided on key themes to cover  
891 and the scope of literature to be reviewed, and drafted the majority of the text. Karin Bäckstrand  
892 provided guidance on the overall direction and structure of the review, contributed extensive  
893 references, and wrote substantial portions of the text. Felicitas Fritzsche contributed references  
894 and wrote portions of the text, focusing especially on meta-governance. Faradj Koliev  
895 contributed references and wrote portions of the text, focusing especially on data and figures.  
896 All authors made edits and revisions to all sections of the text.

897

#### 898 **DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

899 The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

900

#### 901 **DATA ACCESS STATEMENT**

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

905

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## 1273 **TERMS AND DEFINITIONS LIST**

1274 **2030 Agenda** – a blueprint adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015 for  
1275 sustainability transformations on a global scale, including 17 Sustainable Development Goals,  
1276 169 targets, and 247 indicators, of which 92 are environment-related

1277

1278 **accountability** – the ability to judge actors’ fulfilment of responsibilities against a set of  
1279 standards and impose sanctions if the standards have not been met

1280

1281 **BRICS** – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; commonly referred to as the rising  
1282 powers

1283

1284 **G77+China** – the Group of 77; a coalition of 134 developing countries in the United Nations  
1285 system and China, which supports the Group but is not a full member

1286

1287 **HLPF** – High-Level Political Forum; the central United Nations forum for political leadership  
1288 on sustainable development and for global follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs

1289

1290 **IO** – international organization

1291

1292 **MDGs** – Millennium Development Goals; a set of eight goals launched by the United Nations  
1293 in 2000 that had a deadline of 2015

1294

1295 **meta-governance** – practices of coordinating one or more governance modes via different  
1296 instruments, methods, and strategies to overcome governance failures; also known as the  
1297 governance of governance

1298

1299 **MSPs** – multi-stakeholder partnerships; voluntary agreements between state and/or non-state  
1300 actors on a set of governance objectives and norms, rules, practices, or implementation  
1301 procedures and their attainment across multiple jurisdictions and levels of governance

1302

1303 **NGO** – non-governmental organization

1304

1305 **normative legitimacy** – the moral or legal right of political institutions to govern, generally  
1306 operationalized by whether the institution meets specific criteria; often relates to the quality of  
1307 participation in decision-making, the procedures for decision-making, and the effectiveness of  
1308 decision-making

1309

1310 **orchestration** – governance of targets via intermediaries on a voluntary basis; a soft form of  
1311 meta-governance

1312

1313 **SDGs** – Sustainable Development Goals; a set of 17 interconnected goals that are included in  
1314 the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

1315

1316 **sociological legitimacy** – also known as ‘popular’ or ‘public’ legitimacy; refers to beliefs  
1317 among those affected by the governing institution that it is legitimate, often operationalized by  
1318 assessing popular support for the institution and its policy outputs

1319

1320 **transformation** – shifts from regimes associated with unsustainable pathways of development  
1321 to alternative regimes in which development pathways are or are perceived to be sustainable

1322

1323 **UN DESA** – United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; a division of the UN  
1324 Secretariat that provides analysis and advice to help countries make decisions on development  
1325 policy

1326

1327 **WSSD** – World Summit on Sustainable Development; an international summit held in  
1328 Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002 that encouraged the launch of public-private partnerships  
1329 for sustainable development

1330

### 1331 **FIGURE CAPTIONS**

1332 **Figure 1** – Prevalence of linkages between Sustainable Development Goals in multi-  
1333 stakeholder partnerships registered on the SDG Actions Platform that address at least one  
1334 environmental goal. The data used to generate this heat map are from Koliev & Bäckstrand  
1335 (96).

1336