# ANALYSING SDG 17, A CRITICAL APPROACH

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## ABSTRACT

*This article presents a brief critical analysis of Sustainable Development Goal 17, which pursues the formation of global alliances for the greater good. Although SDG 17 looks very good on paper, the question arises as to how to best promote collaborations across all societal sectors and levels. Other questions that arise include: how will it be possible to ensure that very varied stakeholders work together systematically delivering the shared vision of the SDGs? How will this new way of working become a new normality. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly had an impact on the development of multi-stakeholder partnerships, and countries have also had to adapt their processes to this context. The pandemic is an example of how a complex context can evolve unpredictably, which can affect and create changes in the power structures and relationships, and in this regard changes in the multistakeholder partnership scenario to work toward solutions in favour of the achievement of the SDGs. Although the SDG 17 is a remarkable target for countries and government to strive toward, it does bring with it a number of necessary requirements, amongst these: the need for metrics to better measure the impact of these alliances, highlighting to a greater extent the social and environmental pillars in the work that is undertaken and the necessity for greater transparency and communication towards and between decision-makers so as to make them aware that considerable work still needs to be accomplished in this respect.*

**Keywords:** Agenda 2030, Sustainable Development Goal 17, Multistakeholder partnerships, Global alliances

## INTRODUCTION

Alliances play a central role to reach the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations. SDG 17. The SDGs came into effect in 2015. There were seventeen goals and 169 targets, and they were part of a document entitled Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The seventeen SDGs were developed with goals at the country level, therefore, the strategies developed vary according to the priorities of each State. Like the MDGs, the SDGs were a statement of aspirations, a voluntary agreement beyond a binding treaty (Pogge and Sengupta, 2015).

The Sustainable Development Goals shed a new light on sustainable development. As shown, they undertook a more systemic and holistic approach than the Millennium Goals, involving all sectors of society and trying to ensure well-being between business, society, and the environment. The 2030 Agenda represents a fundamental shift in international development and the adoption of a new way of working, requiring unprecedented levels of cooperation and unprecedented collaboration between a multitude of stakeholders, some of them being civil society, business, the government, NGOs, foundations and academia. The situation is therefore changing through the increasing participation of a range of different stakeholders, and therefore no one domain of governance is the preserve of solely one actor (Newell & Pattberg, 2012; Newell, 2000; Bets & Correll, 2008). The MDGs focused more on bringing value to project beneficiaries, which contrasts sharply with the 2030 Agenda, where all stakeholders are partners and beneficiaries. The type of development promoted by the

SDGs is described as "transformational development", which requires the participation of all, including the State, the market and civil society. There are examples of multi-actor arrangements that range from non-state actor initiatives to certification projects (i.e., for timber, mining, or sustainable tourism, just to name a few examples).

According to the SDG Partnership Guidebook 2020, sustainable development can only happen if business, civil society and governments work together. Currently the resources of our planet are limited, whether they are economic, technological, natural, or anthropogenic, which requires their optimization for the benefit of all, for which the development of alliances is essential to ensure the alignment of interests between those resource suppliers to promote the maximum impact. These partnerships should include the widest spectrum of stakeholders to potentially include NGOs, and universities, among others.

The SDGs therefore constitute a set of global priorities that need to be undertaken via a multi-actor approach. This perspective is promoted by SDG 17, "Partnerships for the Goals", whose goal is to "strengthen the means of the implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development" is an example of a multi-actor type of governance" (United Nations, 2021).

## SDG 17

It is worth mentioning that the different SDGs are remarkably interconnected with each other and need to be addressed together to solve problems such as malnutrition and sanitation. Only then can the impact of the different initiatives be maximized. Therefore, it is essential that a holistic management approach is undertaken to address sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 17 is about building global alliances for development. It makes specific reference to multi-stakeholder collaboration between all sectors of society.

The objective of SDG 17 is to strengthen the means to implement and revitalize global partnerships for sustainable development in the seven areas of finance, technology, trade, capacity development, policy coherence, partnerships, and data. To achieve the mission of this SDG, two main ways of working have been presented; first through the development of global alliances led by governments to strengthen cooperation and development; and second, complementing the latter with the development of multi-stakeholder associations that work at the global, national, and regional levels to pool knowledge and experiences for the achievement of the remaining sixteen SDGs. The successful implementation of the seventeenth UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 17) will contribute to the implementation and achievement of the other sixteen goals.

While each of the first sixteen SDGs works toward a specific area of action, SDG 17 "Partnership for the Goals" serves as a convener and a facilitator for all the other goals. This last goal opens up the discussion of how the different partnership relationships should best work together to achieve its specific targets. For the Millennium Goals (2000-2015) Goal 8 was the equivalent of SDG 17, however the latter is more universal and applicable to all areas of society including the state, market and civil society. The SDGs encourage collaboration between all sectors of society using a bottom-up approach involving businesses, government, and civil society. They must work together to ensure long-term sustainability (The Partnering Initiative y UNDESA, 2020):

- Businesses need to operate effectively
- Governments need to mandate to deliver
- Civil society needs to act effectively and facilitate achievement

According to the SDG Partnership Guidebook, sustainable development can only happen if these three elements work together. Presently the resources of our planet are

limited, whether they are financial, technological, natural, or anthropogenic, they must be optimised for the mutual benefit of all parties. To achieve successful outcomes, the development of partnerships is essential to ensure that there is alignment of interests among the holders of these resources and maximal operating effectiveness in pursuit of agreed objectives (The Partnering Initiative y UNDESA, 2020). Furthermore, the importance of communication should be consolidated among the different stakeholders, where social dialogue should be a priority, and this should take place in all sectors and at all levels.

It must also be highlighted that the different SDGs are very much interconnected to tackle problems such as malnutrition and sanitation. Only then will impact be maximized. Holistic management approaches should therefore be undertaken to promote sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 17 deals with the creation of global partnerships for development. The 17th SDG makes specific reference to the formation of multi-stakeholder collaboration between all societal sectors. However, although the multi-stakeholder context might look very good on paper, the question and the challenge are how to promote collaboration across these very different societal sectors? How will it be possible to ensure that very varied stakeholders work together systematically delivering the shared vision of the SDGs? How will this new way of working become a new normality?

Von Schnurbein highlights the importance of the concept of co-production that derives from the field of public service to describe the inclusion of ordinary citizens in the delivery of public services (von Schnurbein, 2020). Today the term is present in a wider context such as governance, creation and management of public services. Joshi and Moore (2004) highlight the long-term nature of co-production. The importance of co-production is profound, it entails the development of partnerships between different types of actors, and resources are provided by all parties involved. The concept of co-production is very applicable to the SDG context, while SDG17 postulates that a multi-actor approach is needed in order to generate the financial resources, the access to technology, the increase in production capacities and the global supply logistics, as well as to build on system development.

Adopting a multi-actor governance approach, helps to; (1) ensure stakeholder participation and engagement, (2) identify the barriers that could hinder this engagement, (3) develop a multi-actor network. Achieving all of these will enable a better prioritization of the issues to be dealt with in the project, as well as the development of more efficient strategies on how to integrate and better engage the different stakeholders in the project.

Most public and collective governance initiatives are anchored in facilitating transparency, accountability, and participation (of stakeholders). These three critical ingredients are essential to strengthen governance at all levels. In this respect SDG 17 is useful in promoting global alliances and multi-actor governance in a world that is totally interconnected between national and local governments, companies, civil society, and academia.

Five areas of activity are covered by SDG 17 via its 19 targets
- Finance
- Information and Communication technology
- Capacity building
- Trade
- systemic issues

More specifically, multistakeholder partnerships are reflected in the targets 17.16 and 17.17 (United Nations. 17 Goals to Transform our World, 2021):

"17.16. Enhance the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources, to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in all countries, in particular developing countries.

17.17. Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships"

In 2019 the 2030 Agenda Accelerator was developed by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) as well as the Partnering Initiative in collaboration with several other partners to significantly help accelerate effective partnerships in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (The Partnering Initiative and UNDESA, 2020). A systemic perspective is therefore necessary when developing laws to implement sustainability policies in an effective way. However not only the regulatory authorities are needed to implement change, but the global effort needed extends to everyone, and thereby the need for SDG 17. Nowadays there are sources of governance that had previously tended to be associated with solely one set of actors, but which now are increasingly coproduced and legitimised through the involvement of different actors in their formulation and implementation.

"Multi-stakeholder partnership for the SDGs "An ongoing collaborative relationship among organisations from different stakeholder types aligning their interests around a common vision, combining their complementary resources and competencies and sharing risk, to maximise value creation towards the Sustainable Development Goals and deliver benefit to each of the partners" (The Partnering Initiative and UNDESA 2020, 6).

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs represent a grand change in thinking and the undertaking of a systemic approach in international development, highlighting the interconnectedness between businesses, society and a healthy environment. The 2030 Agenda Accelerator Guidebook recommends that a reflective approach should be adopted throughout the whole of the partnering cycle to ensure that all parties at all levels are represented. "The Agenda requires an unprecedented level of cooperation and collaboration among civil society, business, government, NGOs, foundations, academia and others for its achievement. In other words, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are the result of – and a call for – a new collaborative way of working" (The Partnering Initiative and UNDESA 2020, 10). A very interesting note is highlighted in the Guidebook, which is that according to the 2030 Agenda, we are all developing countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of promoting global collaborations and effective partnerships between all types of different sectors and stakeholders. Multi-stakeholder collaborations are therefore essential mechanisms to tackle the problems and challenges caused by the coronavirus context as societies begin recovering to construct more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive societies. In a recent report developed by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, 68% of government respondents considered that stakeholder engagement and partnership would increase in the wake of COVID-19. "Government respondents, similarly, see the greatest impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic to be on efforts to reach out to marginalised and vulnerable groups (64%% "significant and severe") to make resources available to support participation (64%) and maintain mechanisms for engagement (61%)." (Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, 2021).

COVID-19 has clearly had an impact on the development of multi-stakeholder partnerships, and countries have also had to adapt their processes to this context. The development of potential Covid vaccine treatments clearly shows the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships. An example is the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) initiative, in which it is possible to observe a collaborative scenario between governments, scientists, companies, civil society, philanthropists and global health organizations (Hassoun, 2020; WHO, 2020).

# THE LIMITATIONS OF SDG 17

Although the SDGs undoubtedly represent a step forward, they do have their limitations. Firstly, there is the argument that while SDG 17 strives to address all three pillars of sustainable development in an equitable manner (i.e., the social, environmental and economic pillars), it appears to focus primarily on the economic pillar and therefore it somewhat marginalizes the potential effect that associations between stakeholders can have in promoting ecological and social sustainability (Schleicher et al., 2018).

In addition, the SDGs were developed to broaden the focus of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which was traditionally to provide development aid from "providers" to "recipients", and to promote multi-stakeholder partnerships that do not only involve public-private partnerships, but a broader range of stakeholders. It can also be argued that the focus of the MDGs has not changed much today, even with the development of the SDGs.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships need to be more flexible and not be simply contractual agreements between government and business, and consequently need to involve actors from different sectors of society. The limited context of collaboration that is promoted by SDG 17 perhaps underplays the potential value that could be derived from multi-stakeholder partnerships. If the resource skills and competences of the different social actors were to be combined, new points of view and innovative perspectives could be developed to deal with complex challenges such as those presented by the SDGs themselves (Stott & Scoppetta, 2020).

Multi-stakeholder associations offer the potential of promoting transformations from a political prism, changes in both individual and organizational behaviours, as well as the empowerment of vulnerable and marginalized stakeholders. In addition, the creation of a repository of lessons learned from the work carried out through multi-stakeholder alliances will help to deepen the knowledge and shared understanding of the importance of the different actors in society in promoting change (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Stott, 2019). The exchange of knowledge is therefore essential for the creation of effective global alliances. However, complicated situations may sometimes arise due to the lack of data and information at the national level, leading to data deficiency issues at the regional and global levels (Urcan & Alkan, 2021).

Data collection regarding the SDGs has always been a problem and has been exacerbated during the pandemic (Urcan & Alkan, 2021). Recent studies suggest that there is currently a lack of knowledge regarding the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder partnerships and that this may block the progress and transition towards achieving sustainable development (Maltais, et al., 2018).

According to UN statistics, data is available for only 61%. of countries. Part of the reason for this is the closure of many offices during the pandemic. Although there has been a considerable data gap, it would be fair to say that support for the SDGs has been consistent. However, it is important to highlight that the lack of data is a caveat towards obtaining complete information on the associations and possible improvements in arrangements and working practices amongst stakeholders. Accountability is therefore key to being effective in fulfilling the SDGs, and although the goals are laudable in setting out specific objectives, the manner of their implementation is (understandably) very largely unstated, nor therefore do they specify for each of the objectives, the metrics that are going to be used to gauge progress, nor who is supposed to do that necessary monitoring work (Pogge and Sengupta, 2015).

In general, we need more knowledge to be collected and disseminated among decision-makers, as well as the development of policies and procedures on how multi-stakeholder partnerships can help achieve the SDGs. In addition, evaluation and monitoring systems for these partnerships are needed to determine how the different actors can partner

and work together to meet the SDGs (Stott, 2019). Likewise, the risks and challenges associated with the context of working as a team should be understood, such as inappropriately selecting project partners, setting poor objectives, having weak governance and inadequate capacity for accountability (Stott & Scoppetta, 2020). Another challenge to consider lies in the difficulty of combining different organizational approaches and styles of work, something which may require considerable skill and time to achieve. All these actions will lead over time to the development and adoption of more proactive, flexible, imaginative and successful methodologies to comply with the SDGs, as well as a reflection on the failures and successes that the different ones have had and how everything could be improved (Beisheim & Simon, 2016; Stott, 2019).

Therefore, awareness of how the creation and development of associations can add significant economic, social and economic value to society, organizations and individuals is highly necessary, thus fulfilling the three pillars of sustainability. Likewise, collaborations should be promoted both at the administrative and organizational levels (global, regional, national and local), connecting stakeholders both vertically and horizontally, in all sectors (i.e., such as, for example, the agricultural sector, energy, etc.) and stakeholders (i.e., local authorities, government agencies, private sector and civil society) in low, middle- and high-income countries (Stott & Scoppetta, 2020).

Furthermore, innovation is key for these multi-stakeholder partnerships to work, and the involvement of different types of actors is critical to this. This could promote new, less traditional ways of working with a variety of non-traditional stakeholders such as academic institutions and research centres. The co-production of knowledge and solutions to better progress toward achievement of the SDGs is sure to be greater with the participation of a broader range of stakeholders. What is clear is that more proactive and imaginative exchanges of information and learning between different stakeholders are needed. "More effective forms of interaction could help to better understand when and how collaborative processes contribute to the effectiveness and orientation of results around the implementation of the SDGs" (Kuenkel, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Although it is sometimes difficult to define stakeholders in the SDG context, in this respect SDG 17, which encompasses a multi-actor governance approach, helps to; (1) ensure stakeholder participation, (2) identify the barriers that could hinder this engagement, (3) develop a multi-actor network. This approach will enable a better prioritization of the issues to be dealt with in the project, as well as the development of more efficient strategies on how to integrate and better engage the different stakeholders in the project.

Most public collective governance initiatives are anchored in facilitating transparency, accountability, and participation (of stakeholders). These three critical ingredients are essential to strengthen governance at all levels. In this respect SDG 17 is useful in promoting global alliances and multi-actor governance in a world that is totally interconnected between national and local governments, companies, civil society, and academia. Effectively executing the SDGs will bring multiple benefits at many different levels.

The existing literature makes us question the realisable scope of multi-stakeholder partnerships. In addition, it highlights the need for the importance of benchmarking exercises to examine why some multi-stakeholder alliances are more successful than others in achieving the objectives set by the SDGs.

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