Thinking Globally and Acting Locally: Can the Johannesburg Partnerships Coordinate Action on Sustainable Development?

THOMAS N. HALE
DENISE L. MAUZERALL

At the 2002 UN World Summit on Sustainable Development, a new multistakeholder partnerships initiative was launched. It was hoped that partnerships would catalyze nongovernmental participation in and additional funding of sustainable development projects around the world. The authors find that at present, however, little partnership financing is coming from new sources; most is coming from governments and less than 1% from the private sector. Guided by empirical findings from the partnerships to date, we propose the following to make the partnership program more effective: (a) establishing a learning network; (b) increasing the transparency of partnerships; (c) increasing private sector and small stakeholder participation; (d) establishing an institutional home to support partnerships; and (e) ensuring that the partnerships are consistent with multilateral priorities.

Keywords: *sustainable development; partnership; World Summit on Sustainable Development; Type II; accountability; transparency; international environmental issues*

*E*nvironmentalists have long championed the idea to *think globally, act locally*. However, in a series of global conferences—the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa—the international community has reversed that adage by attempting to take global action on primarily local problems. In this article, we differentiate global issues, which affect all nations, and widespread local issues, which, though prevalent in many parts of the world, have primarily localized causes and effects. Deciphering the differing needs of global and local problems in terms of both responses and incentive structures is a current challenge to the sustainable development community.

This article addresses one widely publicized and controversial outcome of the WSSD that may help to promote global action on local problems—so-called Type II partnerships. These partnerships are voluntary,

non-negotiated, multistakeholder, international, collaborative projects for sustainable development. Partnership members are drawn from governments, international organizations, private corporations, and from civil society. Partnerships are referred to as Type II agreements to distinguish them from the politically negotiated agreements and commitments that were considered the first outcome of the summit. Officially, partnerships are intended to contribute to the implementation of intergovernmental commitments made in Agenda 21, the Program for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (PoI). They are not meant as a substitute for intergovernmental commitments.

The creation of Type II partnerships was contentious, as some feared their existence would reduce pressure on governments to fulfill the commitments they had made in the Johannesburg PoI. Others viewed the partnerships as an opportunity to deliver on those commitments in a new and innovative fashion—indeed, in a way that takes into account the distinction between global problems and widespread local ones.

In this article, we attempt to characterize the strengths and weaknesses of the WSSD Type II program and propose changes to its structure to increase the effectiveness of its partnerships. Section 2 explores how partnerships might provide a mechanism to link global agreements to on-the-ground action. Section 3 examines evidence to date from existing partnerships to determine whether they are in fact assisting in the attainment of the formal outcomes of the WSSD and suggests how the partnership program could be improved to facilitate greater sustainable development. A critical question is whether the partnerships will bring new funding and new sources of funding, such as the private sector, to sustainable development activities. This issue is addressed in Section 4. Section 5 summarizes our recommendations and concludes.

Are Partnerships the Right Balance?

Partnerships may help to bridge the gap between global agreements such as the WSSD PoI and the primarily local problems they seek to address. Global problems such as stratospheric ozone depletion and global climate change are inherently international in both cause and effect. The transboundary qualities of such problems motivate countries to cooperate because each country benefits from their successful solution. Active participation in these agreements is stimulated by a desire to improve the environment for domestic as well as international benefit. The lack of participation of any country can reduce or negate the ability

of other countries to solve the global problem. Hence, solutions to truly global environmental problems are greatly facilitated by, and likely require, multilateral agreements.

It is much less clear that international agreements successfully address the myriad widespread local environmental and development issues facing the developing world. Issues in this category, for which commitments were made in the Johannesburg PoI, include poverty eradication, access to safe drinking water, access to affordable energy, reduction in child mortality rates, and sustainable agriculture, among others (WSSD, 2002 a). Though some of these primarily local issues may also have international consequences that are not immediately apparent—for example, logging can reduce biodiversity, compromising a potential future pharmaceutical resource—rarely do these threats have sufficiently immediate consequences to the wealthy nations to catalyze their assistance. This disconnect at least partially explains why global agreements addressing widespread local problems tend to contain more broad goals than specific commitments to action.

The WSSD Type II partnerships may be an effective way to harness global resources to address widespread local issues. Rooted in global processes, Type II partnerships are connected to international networks of expertise and funding. They can, at least in theory, bring together an optimal coalition of partners from a global pool of development organizations, public and private, national and international. Partnerships focus these global resources on a certain local environmental or developmental goal, shifting the scale of sustainable development activities from a broad commitment (as embodied in the PoI) to a specific project. For example, at the WSSD, the parties agreed generally to increase access to clean energy for the poor. Simultaneously, a Dutch nongovernmental organization (NGO) outlined a Type II proposal to work with rural Kenyan villages to install photovoltaic panels. This specificity clarifies many of the issues general agreements leave undefined, resulting in a greater likelihood of concrete action. Who will be involved in a project, and what resources are available to carry it out, are now specified, and we can develop a concrete benchmark by which to measure success. Furthermore, should a project not live up to its commitments, there are specific actors to hold accountable. By disaggregating general goals into specific projects, the WSSD partnerships program could operate at the right scale to address widespread local issues while helping to mobilize the global community to take action.

Bringing together ad hoc coalitions of local and international organizations to implement specific tasks is, of course, what most international development efforts involve. The advantage of casting such projects as partnerships, according to their advocates, is that it connects these dis-

parate activities to a multilateral process. This linkage provides a concrete outlet for the broad agreements reached in international conferences. By bringing together a wide range of organizations, it may also improve the coherence of sustainable development projects, as well as increase their ability to learn from one another (see the Matching Partnerships to Priorities and A Learning Network sections, respectively).

Beyond the potential usefulness of partnerships in resolving the dichotomy between global and widespread local issues, advocates of partnerships point to three additional benefits (Witte, Streck, & Benner, 2003). First, partnerships can be as diverse as the creativity of governments, NGOs, and businesses allows. This gives them an experimental quality that may lead to breakthrough approaches to development problems. Second, governments, NGOs, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and the private sector each bring different strengths to development while facing different challenges. Partnerships recognize the range of activities that affect sustainable development and provide opportunities for the various sectors to pool their assets and thus mitigate individual weaknesses. Last, although negotiated agreements may be slow to be implemented, partnerships are a way to begin immediate implementation of much needed development projects.

The above claims have not gone unchallenged (Bruno, 2002; Friends of the Earth, 2003; Sustainable Development Issues Network, 2002). Critics of partnerships highlight a number of problems partnerships may create. First, partnerships lead to imbalances of power by bringing together large government agencies and small rural villages, transnational corporations and local NGOs. The resource imbalances among such partners may result in the exclusion of the smaller partner's viewpoints or even their cooption by the larger organization. Second, corporations, governments, and IGOs may use partnerships as a showcase of sustainable development to divert attention from their other environmentally and socially unfriendly activities. This problem would be exacerbated by the UN's high-level endorsement of such projects, which would grant a false sense of legitimacy (so-called blue-washing). Moreover, this altruistic grandstanding may reduce political pressure on governments to make binding commitments for sustainable development, providing the illusion of progress when, in fact, urgent needs go unmet. Last, a key question for partnerships is whether they will turn out to be a mechanism by which additional funding is brought to developing countries or if they will essentially redirect existing funds or, worse, existing projects.

Thus, partnerships offer new advantages while raising new concerns. The key question therefore becomes how to maximize the former and minimize the latter.

Making Partnerships Work

The preceding discussion suggests that, on paper, partnerships can fill an important niche in the constellation of sustainable development methods, bringing global resources to bear on the world's widespread but intrinsically local problems and involving a range of actors, international and local, public and private. But although many in the field have waxed poetic about their virtues—the World Resources Institute (2002) hailed them as "the beginnings of a shift from the stiff formal waltz of diplomacy to the jazzier dance of improvisational solution oriented partnerships"—the actual initiatives that emerged from the WSSD present many of the shortcomings critics feared. Below, we study the 255 partnerships registered with the United Nations (UN) as of spring 2003 and outline a number of flaws.

We found that in spite of its theoretical potential, the Johannesburg program remains mired in many of the problems its supporters hoped to avoid, such as North-driven processes and a lack of private sector and grassroots involvement. At the same time, it succumbs to new pitfalls raised by the partnerships structure, such as accountability and transparency concerns. We argue, however, that these are largely problems of implementation and that the WSSD program can be organized to reduce the inherent weaknesses of partnerships and capitalize on their potential strengths. Our recommendations include the development of the following:

- a learning network to share information;
- a transparency-based system to hold partnerships accountable;
- increased private sector participation;
- involvement of small stakeholders;
- an institutional home to support partnerships; and
- adherence to multilateral priorities.

A LEARNING NETWORK

A useful aspect of partnerships is that they serve as a kind of laboratory for development projects. Because they are varied and innovative and often have lower transaction costs than more formal arrangements, partnerships can be a way to experiment with new approaches to sustainable development. Such experimentation is particularly useful when lessons that have been learned can be shared and future projects can be improved based on the findings.

The concept of a *learning network* has already been proposed (Benner, Ivanova, Streck, & Witte, 2003), and some early implementation steps have already been taken. The 11th and 12th Commission on Sustainable

Development (CSD) meetings (April 2003 and April 2004) featured so-called partnerships fairs that allowed partners to showcase their work to the attending delegates. Although a step in the right direction, a venue for partnerships to present their projects will probably not draw out all the lessons partnerships have to offer nor share the knowledge that has been gained with all who might benefit. Partners may not be forthcoming about experiments that did not work—though that information is critical for learning to take place—and information may appear anecdotal. In addition, travel to a foreign location is difficult for many who would benefit from the information exchanged at a partnership fair, and those who are not present are not likely to benefit.

   A more effective learning network could be modeled after the adaptive management system implemented under the Montreal Protocol (Parson, 2003). The Montreal Protocol required that parties to the treaty support periodic assessments of relevant developments in science, effects of ozone depletion, technology, and economics. Evaluation of new technology was conducted by the Technology and Economics Assessment Panel (TEAP), which included experts from industry, government, and nongovernmental sectors. These experts engaged in extraordinary cooperation to identify technologies and techniques needed to reduce and eliminate emissions of ozone-depleting substances (ODS; Andersen & Sarma, 2003). The suitability of new chemical and technological alternatives to ODS in various applications was described in assessment reports. In light of the findings from these reports, controls on ODS were revised and knowledge of substitutes for ODS were developed and distributed internationally. This type of structured and recurring exchange of relevant and timely information could be used as a template for learning and information exchange among partnerships to address sustainable development problems. Great value could be added to successful partnerships if, following the template used by TEAP, experts from the private, government, and nongovernmental sectors who were engaged in partnerships in a topical area cooperated to identify successful strategies for sustainable development. Although TEAP had subpanels of experts that focused on specific technologies (e.g., refrigeration, foam blowing, and so on), subpanels within a partnership learning network could focus on topical project areas (e.g., biodiversity, technology transfer, and the like). Collaborative topical report writing would then make successful strategies identified within the partnerships known to others. The UN Division for Sustainable Development could facilitate this type of reporting by coordinating a TEAP-like collaborative reporting system, organized by topical issue area (i.e., renewable energy, deforestation, clean water, agriculture, and so forth) or mechanism (i.e., microfinance) that would provide insight into approaches that led to successful implementation of specific sustainable development projects and objectives. These reports could then be made

available on a UN Web site, ideally maintained by the UN Division of Sustainable Development. This approach would encourage the development both of international networks of experts in specific areas of sustainable development and the broader exchange of topical information.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A lack of accountability is a flaw of the WSSD partnerships and is an aspect of the program that has drawn substantial criticism (Bruno, 2002; Friends of the Earth, 2003; Sustainable Development Issues Network, 2002). NGOs and developing countries fear that partnerships will create the illusion of progress, giving corporations and governments positive publicity without resulting in concrete steps toward sustainable development. They are concerned that partnerships may be used to create promising rhetoric with few actual results. These concerns have put other actors, especially the private sector, on the defensive by raising fears of burdensome regulation. Both sides raise legitimate issues. For partnerships to be effective, a balance must be struck that ensures partnerships' quality while encouraging broad participation. We believe such an equilibrium could be attained in the form of a transparency-based system of accountability, which we describe below.

Top-down accountability is neither workable nor desirable for the WSSD partnerships. A centralized agency charged with monitoring and sanctioning deviant partnerships would drain resources from development efforts while undermining the decentralized, flexible spirit that gives partnerships their strength and deterring potential partners from participating. Instead, we propose that partnerships be accountable to the entire range of stakeholders whom they affect, an arrangement sometimes known as *horizontal accountability* (Schmitter, 1999). In a horizontal system, partnerships would be accountable to a broad variety of actors, including NGOs, the media, governments, donors, IGOs, epistemic communities, and even, in some broad sense, the public at large. Organizations that participate in partnerships are susceptible to assaults on their public image. Criticism from the press, other actors—particularly NGOs—and members of epistemic communities can have real consequences for an organization's public standing. This kind of reputational accountability is particularly effective in an information age where credibility is a key power resource (Keohane & Nye, 2001).

Sometimes this reputational damage can have economic effects—what Keohane and Nye (2001) call "market accountability." A loss of credibility may hurt a firm's sales or make it more difficult for an organization to secure funding. These effects may be particularly salient for transnational corporations, which must maintain brand image to remain competitive. However, they also apply to NGOs and even IGOs and

national development agencies, as each of these must seek funding from donors, member states, and national governments, respectively, and benefit from a positive reputation.

These indirect forms of accountability reward good behavior as well as provide a mechanism by which bad behavior can be sanctioned. Partnerships that perform well will receive public relations dividends that will strengthen their credibility and perhaps lead to increased funding or sales. Although many have emphasized the stick as a way to regulate partnerships, we believe the carrot is likely more important, especially as a tool to galvanize participation. The involvement and cooperation of the private sector and government agencies in the rapid identification and development of chemicals and technologies to replace ODS was a critical component in the success of the Montreal Protocol. A key factor mobilizing industry involvement was public relations. Recognition and awards for corporations and individuals who were leaders in phasing out ODS and developing substitutes from government organizations and NGOs served as free advertising, improved corporate reputations, and increased sales (Andersen & Sarma, 2003). Similar benefits could be accrued by members of highly successful partnerships.

However, for partnerships to be rewarded or held accountable through reputational or market-based means, their activities must be known. Both reputational and market accountability hinge on access to information, or transparency.

Unfortunately, most partnerships lack sufficient transparency guarantees. We assessed the 250 partnerships for three different transparency criteria: a Web site, a reporting system, and a monitoring mechanism.[1] A reporting system was defined as an institutionalized way of informing the CSD or the public at large about the partnership's progress, for example, an annual report, a newsletter, or some other physical or digital publication, or an oral report to the CSD. A monitoring mechanism was defined as an established means of measuring progress on the partnership's goals, which, ideally, specified indicators and measurement methodologies (e.g., a water quality partnership stated it would chemically test drinking water in target communities).

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1. We analyze the data provided by the partnerships to the United Nations (UN), current as of February 20, 2004. These data are not independently verified and were reported by the partnerships themselves. The results are consistent with two earlier empirical analyses (Andonova & Levy, 2003; Ivanova, 2003). The methodologies employed in each study differed slightly. Ivanova studied 32 partnerships, Andonova and Levy studied 231, and the present article studied 250 (this difference is partially attributable to the changing number of partnerships registered with the UN). Also, this study counts so-called bundled partnerships as one project, whereas others appear to have counted each subinitiative as a separate partnership. Nonetheless, each group identified the same overall trends. No other analyses have come to our attention.
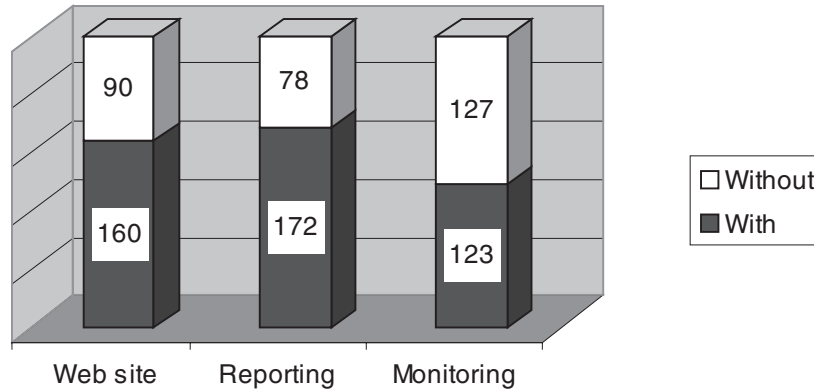
Figure 1:   Number of Partnerships With and Without Each Transparency Criterion
Source: United Nations (2003). This data was taken from the United Nations database of partnerships on file at the UN in spring 2003. The database has been updated since then and the current database is available in the United Nations (2004b) reference.

Sixty-four percent of the partnerships have Web sites, 69% of partnerships have some reporting system, and fewer than 50% of the partnerships have a monitoring mechanism (see Figure 1). Adequate transparency is achieved when a partnership combines an effective reporting system with an effective monitoring mechanism. This information is most helpful when made available on the Internet. Although almost 90% of the partnerships have at least one of the criteria, only 35% both monitor and report and only 27% monitor, report, and post progress on a Web site.[2]

The majority of the WSSD partnerships are not sufficiently transparent, probably in large part because they are not required to be. At its 11th session, the CSD marginally strengthened the weak reporting guidelines it had established for partnerships in Johannesburg and at a WSSD preparatory meeting in Bali. It now suggests that partnerships submit a biennial report and exchange relevant information with other stakeholders (CSD, 2003). Stronger guarantees of transparency should be established, and partnerships that fail to meet these could, after a grace period, be removed from the partnerships program.

Our learning network proposal, which establishes thematic committees to gather and share information among similar partnerships, is a step in this direction. Expert reports on partnership activities would not only be beneficial for learning, capacity building, and scaling up but

2. If only 35% of partnerships both monitor and report, yet 69% report, approximately 35% of the partnerships report but do not monitor. One might ask what is the use of reporting if there is no monitoring system to give substance to the report.

would also provide a measure of transparency, and thus accountability. The publicity gained through such reports would help effective partnerships attract new partners and resources or expand into new areas. Their methodologies could be adopted by other organizations and countries as new projects are initiated or small projects are scaled up. Although many partnerships already issue reports, institutionalizing the process would ensure widespread compliance while centralizing valuable data that could be used in the development of the TEAP-like collaborative reports described in the previous section. We suggest that after an initial organizational period, partners send reports to the UN partnership office to be published on their Web site. If certain material is of a proprietary or commercially valuable nature, it could be kept confidential.[3]

A reporting system needs a monitoring element to verify the substance of the report. Monitoring must be sufficiently flexible to both accurately measure each individual project's progress and not exceed or overly burden the institutional capacities of the partners. The thematic communities discussed above, by sharing information among themselves, could play a key role in developing a functional and generally acceptable monitoring system for their community's type of partnerships. As long as the exact methodology is made public, there is no need for an internationally uniform monitoring process.

The proposed system has limits. First, it is unlikely that many organizations, especially the relatively resource-poor NGOs that are most inclined to monitor, will be able to invest substantial resources in regularly examining the proposed partnerships. This problem will become exacerbated as the number of partnerships grows. Because the proposed regime only establishes the possibility of enforcement, accountability may remain problematic. It is hoped, however, that the mere possibility of being held accountable will provide incentives for most partnerships to work to fulfill the objectives for which they were formed.

INVOLVING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Although accountability has been a leading concern of the WSSD partnerships, the lack of private sector involvement is equally challenging. Private investment in the developing world exceeds official development aid by a factor of 30, meaning that corporations have enormous potential to play a leading role in sustainable development activities (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001). Beyond financial resources, corporations also possess a wealth of tech-

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3. Allowing partnerships to keep some information private is important to encourage broad participation. Corporations in particular fear that they may be forced to reveal economically valuable information.
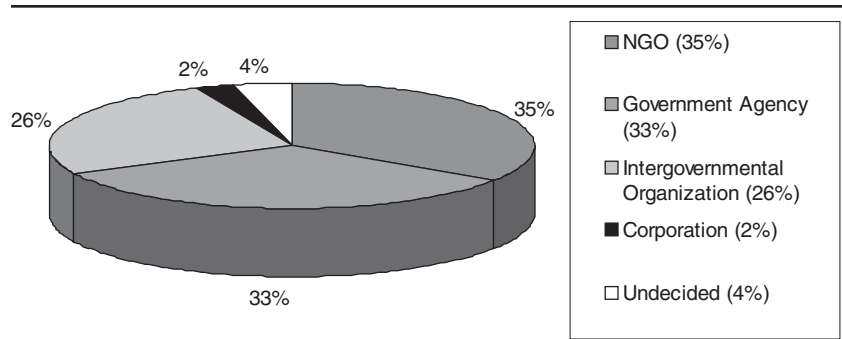
Figure 2:   Leading Partners by Sectors
Source: United Nations (2003). This data was taken from the United Nations database of partnerships on file at the UN in spring 2003. The database has been updated since then and the current database is available in the United Nations (2004b) reference.
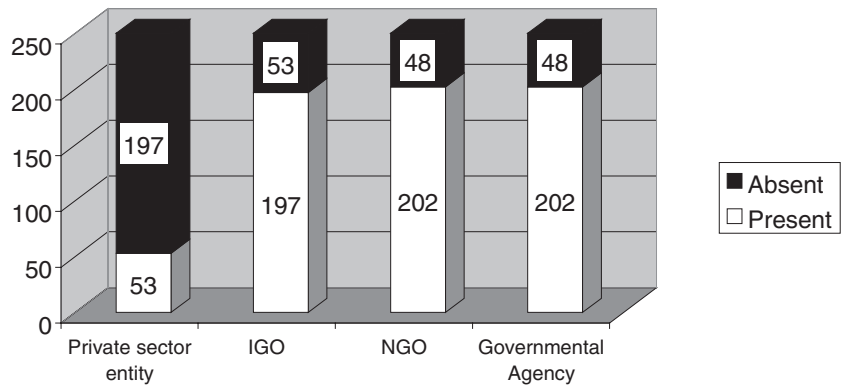Note: NGO = nongovernmental organization.

Figure 3:   Number of Partnerships Including at Least One Member of Each Category
Source: United Nations (2003). This data was taken from the United Nations database of partnerships on file at the UN in spring 2003. The database has been updated since then and the current database is available in the United Nations (2004b) reference.
Note: IGO = intergovernmental organization; NGO = nongovernmental organization.

nology and knowledge that can be of enormous use in sustainable development activities.

Our review of CSD documents shows that although NGOs, IGOs, and governments each act as leading partner (the partner identified by the CSD secretariat as responsible for organizing and directing the partnership) for roughly one third of the partnerships, the private sector leads less than 2% of the total (see Figure 2). Furthermore, private sector entities are involved in any capacity in only 53 partnerships, less than 20% of the total (see Figure 3). In comparison, IGOs, NGOs, and government

agencies are each involved in some capacity in about 200 partnerships, close to 80% (Figure 3). In monetary terms, corporations account for less than 1% of the partnerships' funding (see the Mobilizing Resources section). The lack of private sector involvement in the partnerships program seriously undermines efforts to channel the strengths of all sectors to sustainable development activities.

Corporations were among the most vocal supporters of partnerships in Johannesburg but have since been much less enthusiastic about participating. There are two possible explanations for this reticence. First, it is possible that many corporations were never serious about partnerships in the first place and merely used the WSSD as a venue for positive publicity. Second, corporations may be unwilling to participate in a process that presents unpredictable regulatory consequences for them.

If the first explanation is true, increased corporate involvement will occur only with visionary CEOs and possibly with outside pressure from advocacy groups and shareholders. The development of partnerships that, although meeting sustainable development goals, are also designed as profitable business endeavors could increase private sector participation as well. However, to the extent that the second explanation is true, a transparency-based regulatory regime such as the one proposed above could be, counterintuitively, an incentive for corporate involvement. Transparency could give corporations that pursue sustainable development activities a strong defense against charges of greenwashing; interested parties would be able to review hard evidence of the corporation's sincerity. This would significantly reinforce the image benefits a corporation receives from sustainable development activities. Therefore, companies serious about sustainable development should welcome, not fear, a transparency-based accountability system.

REACHING THE GRASSROOTS

Partnerships are heralded as a way to connect what occurs at international summits like those in Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg to real people and places in the field. In practice, however, it is wealthy governments, large NGOs, IGOs, and transnational corporations that account for most partnership activity. Six countries—Australia, France, Indonesia, the United States, Italy, and Japan—represent about 70% of the partnerships led by governments. The first four each lead about seven partnerships, the last two about twice that many. Of the close to 200 governments represented in Johannesburg, only a handful of the largest and richest have taken an active lead in promoting partnerships. Additionally, most of the NGO partners are large, Northern organizations. Small businesses are completely absent from leading roles. This distribution would be improved by greater involvement of smaller organizations that are more familiar with local development issues. The decen-

tralized nature of partnerships makes them ideal for smaller entities—local communities, small businesses, small NGOs—which typically lack access to the traditional development structure. Unfortunately, this potential has not been realized.

There are two immediately obvious barriers to grassroots involvement. First, national governments and IGOs have not taken adequate steps to inform smaller entities of the possibility of participating in the WSSD partnerships. If the UN joined with national governments to make subnational and local leaders aware of the WSSD process, their involvement would likely be greater and more focused on local sustainable development goals. Such an effort could be modeled after the UN Development Programme's current campaign to raise awareness of the Millennium Development Goals.

The second barrier to grassroots involvement is a lack of economic resources and human capacity. Those communities and organizations that would most benefit from partnerships are, more often than not, precisely those without the ability to participate. It thus becomes the responsibility of resource- and capacity-rich nations, IGOs, NGOs, and corporations to involve their less affluent partners. This means including, and possibly funding, the participation of poorer partners in developing, planning, and leading partnerships.

If these two barriers can be overcome, the WSSD partnerships program could become a more vibrant forum that brings together the needs and capabilities of a range of actors from large corporations to remote villages.

A HOME FOR PARTNERSHIPS

The partnerships program needs an institutional home to ensure longevity. One possibility is within the UN Division for Sustainable Development. Currently, staff from the division's parent department (the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs) provides the administrative and logistical support that keeps the program running. A permanent partnerships office could perform these functions while championing the program, recruiting and helping to develop new partnerships, providing a point of information exchange for the learning network, and creating institutional memory. Although it is important to keep the partnerships program decentralized and nonbureaucratic, many of the reforms we discuss, as well as the program's day-to-day activities, would benefit from a minimal level of institutional support.

MATCHING PARTNERSHIPS TO PRIORITIES

In a world of pressing priorities and limited resources, sustainable development goals must be prioritized. Indeed, a large part of the CSD's
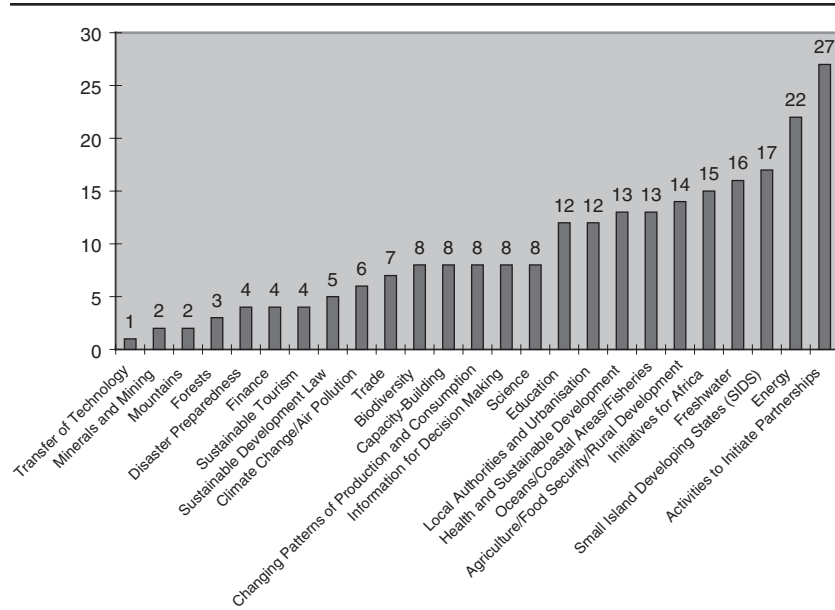
Figure 4:   Number of Partnerships by Issue Area
Source: United Nations (2003). This data was taken from the United Nations database of partnerships on file at the UN in spring 2003. The database has been updated since then and the current database is available in the United Nations (2004b) reference.

work has been focusing attention on urgent needs. Partnerships, because they are private and voluntary, do not share the CSD's macroperspective. As a result, some key issues have not received the attention they deserve. The CSD has classified partnerships into 25 thematic categories. A few categories have many partnerships; energy, for example, has 22. Others categories have fewer, such as biodiversity, which has only 8, and forests, which has only 3. Remarkably, only one partnership is explicitly focused on the key issue of technology transfer, whereas 27 fall into the field of *activities to initiate partnerships*, the most of any category (see Figure 4). Ironically, a program that emerged in reaction to a process criticized for having committees on committees has created a new example of intergovernmental bureaucratic excess— partnerships on partnerships.

The disparity between the world's priorities (as articulated through the CSD) and the distribution of partnerships shows that the most urgent development needs are not necessarily the ones around which governments, NGOs, IGOs, and the private sector are willing or likely to form partnerships. Indeed, Andonova and Levy's (2003) study shows that partnerships are supply driven, not demand driven. That is, they reflect the capabilities of rich countries and donors rather than the needs of poor countries.

The solution to this imbalance cannot be a top-down system in which the CSD directs the formation of partnerships. Partnerships are voluntary in nature; the idea of officially mandated partnerships is both oxymoronic and infeasible. Instead, we suggest several steps that can be taken to focus partnerships on internationally agreed-on development priorities without unduly constraining them. Here, the UN might play a central role. In its annual report, the partnerships office could evaluate the extent to which the existing partnerships match the negotiated priorities and highlight neglected areas.[4] Such information would guide governments, IGOs, NGOs, businesses, and others of the need to establish future partnerships in neglected areas. Private and public donors could adopt the committee's findings into their own priorities when they consider funding partnerships. International organizations could use their leading role in partnerships to bring other actors, namely, governments, NGOs, and businesses, into these priority areas.

Merely highlighting areas of neglect, however, is unlikely to bring the partnerships fully in line with the negotiated priorities. In many ways, this identifies a central limitation of partnerships—they do not necessarily match the priorities set out in the multilateral process—and reinforces the importance of following through on Type I commitments. Indeed, measuring what issues partnerships do and do not address will teach the international community where more traditional agreements are needed and where alternatives may be viable and desirable.

Mobilizing Resources

Having shown that a reformed partnerships program could be a useful addition to sustainable development activities, we briefly turn to the issue of whether the program will be able to generate sufficient activity to make a significant difference in the quest for sustainable development. This question is not unique to the Johannesburg Type II program; all sustainable development activities struggle to marshal the resources needed to resolve both global and widespread local problems. The matter depends largely on convincing resource and capacity rich actors to address the problems of the poor.

In theory, the partnerships program has two advantages over traditional multilateral agreements in terms of resource mobilization. One, by identifying highly specific problems and solutions, partnerships make sustainable development issues more tangible. A concrete problem is more compelling than an abstract goal and thus may galvanize more action. Two, by including a range of actors, partnerships allow

4. The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) has requested that the UN secretariat produce an annual report on partnerships (UN, 2003).

resources to be drawn from new sources. For these reasons, advocates of partnerships promoted them as a useful way to make progress in a resource-scarce environment.

In practice, however, the partnerships program has not lived up to these hopes. Considering that more than 200 states and regional associates, more than 100 IGOs, and hundreds of NGOs, corporations, and other interested groups—tens of thousands of delegates in total—were at Johannesburg, 255 partnerships as of spring 2003 is a rather small outcome.[5] Worse, the number of partnerships is not growing quickly. Indeed, until the spring of 2004, the number of partnerships actually decreased to an observed low of 232 in February 2004 (UN, 2004a). More encouragingly, as of June 2004, the number of partnerships had grown to 291 (UN, 2004b).[6]

Funding is another concern. After Johannesburg, the UN estimated that the partnerships controlled less than U.S. $250 million in resources (M. Linn, personal communication, March 6, 2003). It was unclear, however, how much of this money was new and how much had already been directed toward sustainable development activities before the WSSD. It was also unclear to what extent these funds had been raised from the nontraditional sources that partnerships were supposed to draw from, such as the private sector.

In June 2004, the 291 partnerships on the UN Web site were listed as controlling a total of U.S. $1.02 billion, which does not include non-monetized in-kind contributions by individual partners (UN, 2004b). Although this fourfold growth is certainly impressive, it remains unclear how much was galvanized by the partnership program itself. Indeed, much seems attributable to the reclassification of several large, ongoing intergovernmental projects, such as the Nile Basin Initiative, which began in the late 1990s (U.S. $182 million), as Type II partnerships (UN, 2004b).

Even if it were assumed that a significant portion of the partnerships' funds were new, a sectoral analysis reveals that very little money is coming from new sources. The vast majority of the partnerships' funds come from governments; only a small fraction, approximately U.S. $7 million, is drawn from private entities (see Figure 5).[7] This finding suggests that partnerships have failed to bring a substantial amount of new, multi-sectoral resources to sustainable development activities.

5. According to the UN, about twice as many proposals were submitted as were accepted to the program. Rejected proposals were not new, not international, or simply poorly written. The UN secretariat made these decisions (M. Linn, personal communication, March 6, 2003).

6. However, only 285 partnerships are listed on the partnership Web site (UN, 2004b).

7. Of the roughly U.S. $1 billion listed on the partnership Web site, about $800 million is attributable to some organization. The remaining U.S. $200 million is either not sourced or the total funds of the partnership are given but not broken down by individual donor (UN, 2004b).
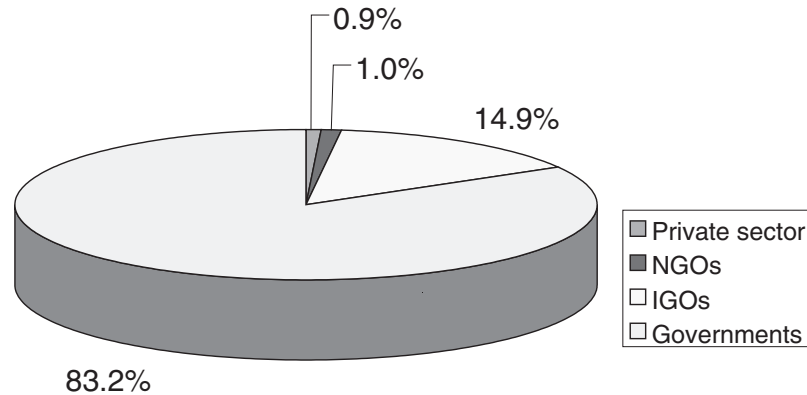
Figure 5:   Funding Sources for Partnerships
Source: United Nations (2004b).
Note: IGO = intergovernmental organization; NGO = nongovernmental organization.

Conclusions

International agreements bring all actors to the table but do not provide the incentive structure needed to reach operational solutions on the ground for the widespread local issues of sustainable development. The use of partnerships may provide an alternative to direct government-to-government agreements to catalyze action in developing countries. However, because they are voluntary and unregulated, they cannot be expected to solve the problems of sustainable development without complementary governmental action. The international community must work through the CSD to ensure that partnerships contribute to, and do not detract from, the vitally important work of sustainable development. Toward this end, we suggest the CSD adopt the following measures to enhance the contribution of the WSSD partnerships to the goal of sustainable development.

1. Using the Montreal Protocol assessment panels as a model, set up a mechanism through which partnerships addressing similar topical issues can exchange and distill information through a collaborative report-writing mechanism. Participation in collaborative report writing would help create a learning network; the publications would provide a vehicle to disseminate information further and could be made widely available via a UN Web site.
2. Make partnerships more transparent by requiring them to monitor progress and submit regular reports, thus allowing partnerships to benefit from the positive publicity that their successes deserve and to be held accountable for their lapses.

3. Establish clear guidelines to increase private sector participation and promote the partnership program at the subnational level to encourage the involvement of small stakeholders.
4. Establish a permanent institutional home for partnerships in the UN secretariat to oversee program logistics.
5. Regularly review and report on the partnerships program to ensure that the partnerships endorsed by the CSD are engaged in activities that are consistent with multilateral priorities.

The question remains, even if the above reforms were enacted, would Type II partnerships represent a better investment of development resources than traditional forms of cooperation? We believe that partnerships' potential to involve new actors such as the private sector and small stakeholders, to refine best practices through experimentation and learning, and to bridge the gap between global conferences like Johannesburg and the local problems they seek to address makes them worthy of continued expenditure and study. At the same time, it is important to remember that Type II partnerships are intended to complement, not replace, traditional agreements. As WSSD Secretary-General Nitin Desai argued in Johannesburg,

> we need to connect what Governments . . . agree on with what can be done by scaling up the wonderful initiatives that have come at the local level and from non-governmental organizations and, in many cases, the business sector. This is where the notion of partnerships comes in. Partnerships basically serve to connect the dynamism that we see at the local level with the commitments that Governments need to make. We need both. Not one or the other—both (WSSD, 2002b).

Partnerships have the potential to be a useful tool in the sustainable development kit. However, it remains to be seen if this potential is realized.

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Thomas N. Hale is a graduate of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and continues there as special assistant to the dean. His primary areas of interest are globalization and global governance.

Denise L. Mauzerall is an assistant professor in the Science, Technology, and Environmental Policy Program at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. Her research and teaching focuses on global environmental issue, including air pollution and its impacts on health and agriculture; energy; climate change; and sustainable development.