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Multi-Sectoral Partnerships and Power

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Acronyms

CBOs	Community-based organizations
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
EFA	Education For All
FTI	Fast Track Initiative
GAVI	Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
IGOs	Intergovernmental organizations
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

Summary

Public-private partnerships are considered critical to implementing the new global 2030 sustainable development agenda. How such partnerships are established and enacted will impact more or less positively on sustainable development for all. Sustainable development problems cannot be defined separately from the system from which they emerge. Public-private partnerships are a complex intervention into that system. This paper advances a systems understanding of the ways in which power relations in specific contexts may shape partnerships, influencing which partners may be included and excluded (elements); how these elements relate to each other (relations); and the partnership that is produced (system). This paper indicates that there is little room for complacency. Transformative development solutions require partnerships to be a crucible for transformation; currently, they are not. However, they can usefully be supported to fulfil their transformative potential. A systems approach, coupled with a keen eye for asymmetries of power, can lead to new ways of mapping and evaluating partnerships for more equitable partnering behaviours.

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Public-Private Partnerships and the SDGs

The head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) described 2015 as a “once-in-a-generation opportunity for global development” (Lagarde 2015). A series of global summits hammered out a number of agreements, including in development financing (July 2015), sustainable development goals (September 2015) and climate change (December 2015). Previously, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) urged governments to do more of the same, that is to bring about a quantitative shift in social policy provision. In contrast, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demand that all economic, environmental and social development partners work toward qualitatively different goals in a qualitatively different way. First, the goals are qualitatively different, in proposing a rebalancing of economic, environmental and social inequalities and in recognizing the systemic links among the 17 goals. Second, diverse development ‘partners’ are urged to work together for a “revitalised Global Partnership ... bringing together Governments, civil society, the private sector, the United Nations system and other actors and mobilizing all available resources” in order to achieve sustainable development for all (UN 2015a: 28/§60).

These inclusive partnerships are assumed to be “built upon principles and values, a shared vision, and shared goals that place people and the planet at the centre, [and] are needed at the global, regional, national and local level” (UN 2015b). Rhetorically this ambition may be justified. Yet it is not rigorous to assume that development goals are shared among diverse partners, much less the principles and values underpinning them. In network terms “each node [or partner] enters the network [or partnership] with a distinct set of goals. Only a portion of these goal sets overlap” (O’Toole and Meier 2004: 684). Equally, different logics, principles and values motivate the reward structures of the diverse sectors to be mobilized in multi-sectoral partnerships (Chowdhury 2012; Thornton and Ocasio 2008).

Thus, more critical analysis is required in order to move beyond partnership remaining no more than “a ‘feel good’ panacea for governance without a pragmatic grasp of what it is and how it differs from business as usual” (Brinkerhoff 2002b: 20). However, nor should such analysis simply dismiss partnerships as ‘business as usual’ under the same master as always. Partnerships have the potential to be significant new crucibles in which development solutions will be forged. Therefore, this paper analyses practices of partnership and considers the potential of a systems approach that “maps, observes, and listens to the system to identify the spaces where change is already happening and try to encourage and nurture them” (Ramalingam 2014).

Changing practices of cooperation and collaboration at global, regional, national and local levels require the consideration of partnership as a new and different phenomenon. The increasing prioritization of multi-sectoral partnerships in policy discourse and also in practice mean they can no longer be disregarded as marginal phenomena (Börzel and Risse 2005). For the purposes of this paper, multi-sectoral partnership is defined as formally including state, business and civil society partners. Equally, there are many ways to categorize multi-sectoral partnerships, such as according to the different purposes they might serve. For example, Bull and McNeill (2007) differentiate among operational

partnerships, advocacy and resource mobilization partnerships, and policy partnerships. Rather than focusing on their stated purpose, this paper examines the ways in which different actors from different sectors may be differently involved inside partnerships, and the potential effects of power outside and within multi-sectoral partnerships on partners, the partnership system, and partnership outcomes.

While many analyses exist of the contributions and roles of states, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), businesses and civil society organizations in development, few studies consider the ways in which actors from these different sectors are formally brought together in multistakeholder partnerships to address a development problem. In the absence of such research, we are left with an inadequate analysis that creates the conditions for ill-informed policy decisions and the perpetuation of extant power hierarchies. Thus, existing analyses cannot illuminate the ways in which organizational actors from within these different sectors interact (more or less formally) with each other, instituting new multi-sectoral global networked structures through these relationships (Reinicke 1999; Stone 2008). Since relations among heterogeneous actors are at the heart of partnership, it is not possible to develop a convincing account of partnerships and development without understanding these relationships and networks. This background paper analyses the relationships and strategies employed by the totality of actors—from many different organizations and sectors—as they interact in multi-sectoral partnerships.

Partnerships and Power: What Do We Know?

Networked partnerships tend to be viewed uncritically, such that Slaughter (2004: 167) assumes that networks possess “general virtues of speed, flexibility, inclusiveness, ability to cut across different jurisdictions, and sustained focus on the specific set of problems”. Furthermore, a technical narrative of more equal reallocation of benefit and risk among private and public sectors dominates.¹ Yet there is mounting evidence that partnerships’ internal dynamics and external impacts contradict these assumptions.² It is impossible to explain these partnership processes and effects without considering questions of power. For the purposes of this review of partnerships and power,³ the partnership literature can be classified into four main schools of thought:

1. Normative: partnerships are ethically appropriate to achieving sustainable development
2. Instrumental: partnerships serve to maximize efficiency
3. Technical monitoring and evaluation of partnerships
4. Instrumental: partnerships legitimate private sector profit-making

The majority of partnership research falls into the first two—optimistic—categories, whereas the last two tend towards pessimism. In all four categories, the treatment of power is problematic.

¹ Forrer et al. 2010; World Bank Institute 2014.

² Faul 2016a; Jomo et al. 2016; Koppenjan and Enserink 2009; Mazzucato 2013; Pishchikova 2014.

³ For this paper I reviewed partnership research carried out in the fields of development studies, international relations, organizational research and evaluation studies. It was beyond the scope of this review to also consider environmental studies, although many environmental case studies were analysed in the partnerships literature reviewed.

The first group of authors construct ‘partnership’ as the most ethically appropriate form of designing and implementing development solutions, and as a development solution in itself. This normative orientation prioritizes the social logic of inclusion and participation of traditionally marginalized social actors in partnerships (Buse and Harmer 2007; Reid et al. 2014). This optimistic view is promulgated mainly by NGOs, multilateral agencies, and partnerships themselves.⁴ Thus, partnership is an extension of “the emergence of a new—still incipient, reality and understanding of ‘public’ and ‘private’ not as incompatible and rival, but as mutually re-enforcing elements” (Kaul and Ryu 2001: 1).

A second group of researchers foregrounds market logics in highlighting the instrumental role for the private sector as an actor in—and partner for—sustainable development. Businesses are seen to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the use of available public resources; the transfer of knowledge; and the design and implementation of development solutions.⁵ Thus, partnerships should efficiently “combine public financing, regulation, and private market participation” (Schmidt-Traub and Sachs 2015: 34).

The third type of analysis tends to examine partnerships and their outcomes as technical issues that require technical solutions that must be measured and reported. This literature focuses on the evaluation of outcomes, usually by external consultants.⁶ These evaluations tend to identify the ways in which the activities and outputs of partnerships are not living up to their promise, with a particular focus on inclusion, fiscal management and efficiency.

Yet inclusion does not guarantee participation; and partnering among such diverse sectors does not only present technical challenges. Thus, a fourth group of authors offer a different—more pessimistic—perspective on partnerships being “viewed somewhat naively as inevitable ‘win-win’ relationships” (Utting 2000: 4). These authors focus on the negative instrumental purposes that partnerships may serve.⁷ Thus, rather than enabling the transformative capacity of partnerships, “the incorporation of civil society actors ... is seen as a necessary condition for the legitimation of the liberalising agenda” (Higgott 2000: 143). ‘Partnership’ can thus be seen as an intervention that changes the context, definition and delivery of what might be considered public services (Brinkerhoff 2002b; Krahnmann 2003).

These four categories can be placed in a matrix showing how optimistic or pessimistic they are against the extent to which they prioritize eco-social or bureaucratic and market logics (figure 1). For the purposes of this review, ‘bureaucratic logic’ comprises approaches put forward by national or international bureaucracies that prioritize technical monitoring and reporting up a hierarchy of accountability. I define ‘market logic’ as prioritizing financial profits that will be created by seeking efficiencies in production and service delivery, often in new markets opened by partnerships.⁸ In this logic, any social and environmental costs that are generated are considered ‘externalities’ rather being internalized onto balance

⁴ GAVI 2015; GPE 2011; OECD-DAC 2015.

⁵ Agranoff 2003, 2007; Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Forrer et al. 2010; Koppenjan and Enserink 2009.

⁶ Bezanson and Isenman 2012; Cambridge Education, Mokoro Ltd., and Oxford Policy Management 2010; World Bank Operations Evaluation Department 2004.

⁷ Beck 1992; Jomo et al. 2016; Mazzucato 2013.

⁸ ‘Market logic’ usually prioritises competition for customers, however this is rarely a feature of development partnerships.

sheets. In contrast, an ‘eco-social logic’ would prioritize achieving social and environmental benefits and minimizing environmental and social costs above maximizing financial profits (Koehler 2016). This eco-social logic would embed economic functioning (and profit-making) within a consideration of what is socially and environmentally appropriate.

Figure 1: Partnership logics and optimism/pessimism

	Eco-social logic	Market or bureaucratic logics
Optimistic	(1) Normative: ethically appropriate form	(2) Instrumental: form that maximizes efficiency
Pessimistic	(4) Instrumental: legitimating device	(3) Evaluation of efficiency: Promise > achievements

Source: Author.

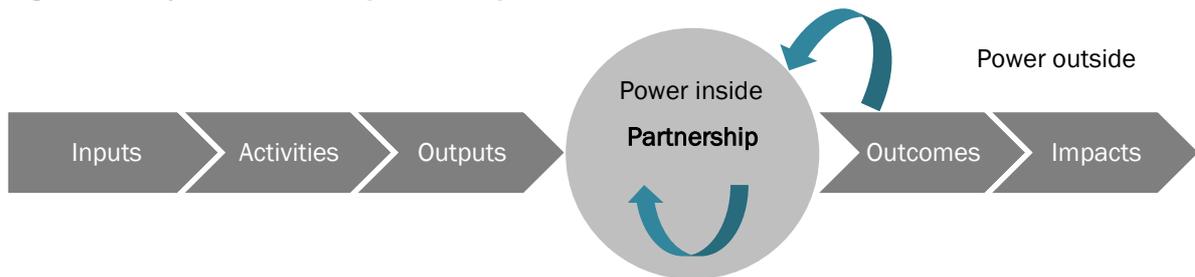
Thus, this review of partnerships literature identified four strands of research: an optimistic view of partnerships as the most ethically appropriate organizational form or as an organizational form that maximizes efficiency and a pessimistic view based on rational evaluations of efficiency or partnerships as legitimating economic liberalization. In all four approaches, the ways in which authors incorporate notions of power is problematic. In the first three, power is absent; in the fourth it is all-encompassing. In contrast, this paper uses a systems approach to consider the different ways in which existing power asymmetries can be reproduced inside partnerships and what actions can increase the potential for transformative change for sustainable development for all.

Partnerships as Systems

In response to widespread mechanistic readings of development interventions converting inputs directly into outcomes, there has been an increased interest and demand for the application of systems thinking in development research and practice.⁹ Systems thinking is recognized as having untapped potential, first in deciphering the complexity of a partnership as a system (figure 2), and then in applying this understanding to design, implement and evaluate partnerships to maximize partnership dynamics and impacts, as I discuss in the recommendations at the end of this paper.

⁹ Adam and de Savigny 2012; Bousquet and Curtis 2011; Clayton 1996; Faul 2016b; Fullan 2010; Gillies 2010; Ramalingam 2014; Ramalingam et al.2014; USAID 2014.

Figure 2: A systems view of partnerships



Source: Adapted by author from Warren (2013) quoted in Ramalingam et al. (2014).

In this view, a partnership is “a complex problem in that progress is highly context specific, is very dynamic as different factors can influence outcomes at any time, and is distinctly non-linear” (Gillies 2010: 31). Partnerships—and systems—are self-organizing and inherently unpredictable. Complex systems can change with or without external shocks, and with no linear or proportional relationship between cause and effects. Partnerships are themselves internally complex and have complex effects on partners, the partnership and the problem they are established to address. Treating partnerships as complex adaptive systems moves beyond counting inputs and outputs to recognize that sustainable development outcomes and impacts are system outcomes; which then affect the internal dynamics of partnerships as they are affected by them. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider system outcomes and impacts; rather, the focus remains on the internal dynamics of partnership systems.

Box 1: Systems thinking enables a more holistic consideration of:

- The **context** of a partnership system
- System **elements**, both material (partners, cash) and intangible (beliefs, information);
- The **relationships** or networks among micro-elements (actors or sub-systems) that enable the linking of relevant micro-elements to the macro-system and the identification of the positive and negative feedback loops and influence pathways in the system;
- The **whole** of the partnership system and sub-systems within it; and
- The **functions** of the system (both formal/stated and informal/in practice).

Source: Author; see for example Boulton et al. (2015); Bousquet and Curtis (2011).

This paper uses a conceptual framework of a partnership as a complex adaptive system to investigate how asymmetries of power in the partnership’s *context* affect the selection of the *elements* in partnerships (partners), the *relations* among partners, and the *partnership* as a whole. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the ways in which asymmetries of power may affect systems outcomes and impacts; this is the focus of future research.

Thus, while many researchers and practitioners assume that multi-sectoral partnerships will or will not function, this paper consider the ways in which heterogeneous elements, playing diverse roles and making different contributions, relate to each other in specific contexts. This analysis reveals the ways in which all of these different categories of actor are relevant in partnerships. It also shows how these heterogeneous elements; the relational practices among them; and the context in which they operate shape partnerships in different ways.

Context: Reproducing or Transforming Power Relations?

Partnerships are considered to have the capacity to design and implement development solutions and to transform partners and their target populations as well as the sectors in which they work. If the partnership is engaged in the reproduction (rather than transformation) of the existing social structuring of power, this would result in “magnifying the tendency toward inequality already present in the social setting” (O’Toole and Meier 2004: 681). This section examines the mechanisms and practices through which partnerships may—or may not—be insulated from asymmetries of power outside the partnership (Johnson 2014; Lewis 2004). This analysis shows that while it is claimed that partnerships are independent of existing asymmetries of power, they are in fact shaped by them in their design and practice.

Sites of protection, or how do power relations outside a partnership matter?

Many researchers and partnering organizations appear to assume that partnerships are independent of exogenous asymmetries of power. In their seminal study on the impacts of networking outside your sector on social outcomes, O’Toole and Meier (2004: 681) concluded that it is likely that “rather than being neutral producers of collective goods while enmeshed in a broader environment, network managers respond to the stronger and more politically powerful elements of their surroundings, thus magnifying the tendency toward inequality already present in the social setting”.

In common with many other institutions, partnerships may be more or less *insulated* from exogenous asymmetries of power in their organizational design and practices. Partnerships can be more or less vulnerable to direct external intervention depending on their relative dependence on external financial resources and veto power. Additionally, partnerships can be shaped through the indirect exercise of power in partner selection and agenda-setting. For example, through three different reform processes, the Education For All (EFA) Fast Track Initiative (FTI) became the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), increasing equity by designing its Board to be progressively less insulated from developing country partners and more insulated from donor states.¹⁰ The Fast Track Initiative Steering Committee was comprised of the two co-chairs of the Partnership (one G8 donor and one non-G8 donor); the most recent outgoing chair (from a donor country); and the World Bank (EFA-FTI 2004). When rebranded as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), it changed its Board structure to include equal donor and recipient country partners alongside civil society and a private sector foundation (GPE 2011a). However, inequalities still remain: once a developing country is accepted into the GPE, an in-country donor is considered the primary interlocutor for that country with the global Secretariat and Board. The 2015 evaluation criticized this practice, and reform plans are in development (Universalia and Results for Development 2015). Thus, the extent to which partnerships are insulated from different constituencies shapes the potential of these partnerships to be transformative—or reproductive—of the existing social hierarchy and in the policy solutions they offer.

¹⁰ The extent to which these formal insulation arrangements change informal practices of power requires empirical investigation.

Mechanisms that reproduce (rather than insulate from) exogenous power relations include dependency, oversight and decision making. First, *financial dependency* makes partnerships vulnerable to existing power asymmetries. Thus, a partnership may be dependent on external partners for funding, or certain partners may bring financial resources into the partnership. In both cases, the partners who provide financial resources are likely to be privileged in the existing social structure, and may therefore nudge the partnership away from transformation into social reproduction. Secondly, the *oversight function* gives insights into the extent to which a partnership may be insulated from external power asymmetries, particularly the frequency of oversight and who is involved in it. Thus, frequent oversight of a partnership by external parties would afford less insulation to the partnership from those partners. In the same way, oversight by partners or external bodies who are considered more powerful externally might indicate less insulation of the partnership from exogenous power hierarchies. Thirdly, *decision making* mechanisms that are built into the design of a partnership may insulate more or less from external power symmetries, such that a veto mechanism implies less insulation from external context than internal consensus or majority decision making. Therefore, financial dependency, oversight, and decision making processes can be more or less insulating for a partnership.

The assumption is that the more insulated the partnership from more powerful actors, the more likely it is to produce transformative outcomes. Therefore, mechanisms to insulate partnerships from exogenous power asymmetries could mitigate these types of social reproduction. However, this assumption is not always borne out in practice. The example of developing country feminists making alliances with richer country feminists and international organizations demonstrates that there are issues in which insulation from external contexts would be more retrogressive than transformative. Thus, in addition to formal mechanisms that may be designed into the partnership, there are also practices that partners and partnerships may undertake in order to insulate themselves further from exogenous power asymmetries in three ways. First, partners can strategically *use allies* to increase their insulation from existing hierarchies. Additionally, partnerships can *extend* their existing insulation to additional areas. Finally, partnerships can use their *agenda-setting* capacity to modify their own organizational structure or goals, or to establish new partnerships. For example, Andonova (2013: 506) points to the critical political role of social movements mobilizing “domestic constituencies of global issues”. Thus, partnerships can extend their existing insulation to additional issues; they can strategically use allies to insulate in additional areas; and they can use their agenda-setting capacity to modify their own organizational structure or goals, or to establish new partnerships.

Partnerships therefore have the potential to be sites of protection from exogenous asymmetries of power, however this is far from straightforward. Partnerships may be more able to achieve their transformative potential where they are better insulated from exogenous disparities of power. However, this is a complex, multilevel endeavour, which requires careful consideration of multiple inequalities and hierarchies among different categories of partners as well as within them.

Elements: Who Are Partners?

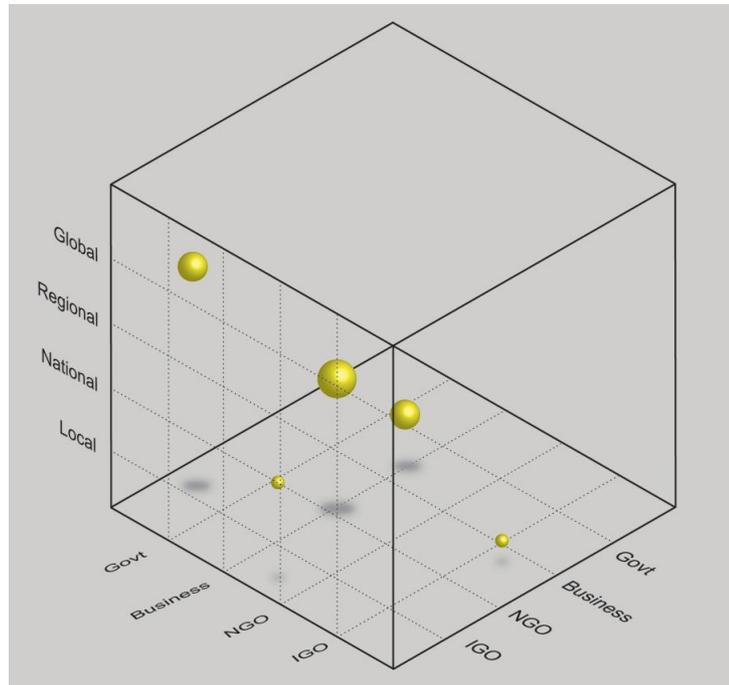
Multi-sectoral partnerships convene heterogeneous partners from private, public and third sectors to solve intractable and complex development problems. The assumption that the inclusion of representatives of marginalized groups will insulate from exogenous power disparities and lead to transformative change requires unpacking. There is diversity—and many different hierarchies of power—among the larger categories that ‘partners’ may fall into and also within them. In this way, formal inclusion of some representatives of marginalized groups may informally exclude others. The tensions resulting from these multi-level asymmetries of power require investigation. Thus, this section first defines the differences among different types of partners within each sector. Then, it examines the differential roles and contributions of these diverse partners.

Heterogeneous elements: Who are partners?

Certain analysts define the private sector in contrast only to the public sector, bundling together for-profit and not-for-profit aspects of non-public life (for example, Andonova 2010; Snidal and Abbott 2015). At a certain level of analysis, this is satisfactory. However, the purpose of multi-sectoral partnerships is to mobilize the comparative advantage offered among diverse stakeholders. Therefore, this binary differentiation may elide what could prove to be significant differences between and within for-profit and not-for-profit private ventures, or different levels of public sector organizations. Multi-sectoral partnerships comprise at least one partner from each of the public sector, private sector (usually characterized as ‘business’), and the third sector (usually non-governmental organizations: NGOs or community-based organizations: CBOs). However, these units of analysis are usually treated as uniform categories, and are rarely disaggregated to reveal the differences within the public, private and third sectors.¹¹ Thus, among the subcategories within each sector can be found a variety of levels of operations (global, regional, national, and subnational); divergent political and ideological affiliations and goals; and different resource capabilities (material and ideational). These differences could manifest within one sector or even inside one organization partnering with others. Thus, “[a]ttention needs to be paid to the distinctive challenges of establishing and sustaining partnerships at the different tiers” (Riggs et al. 2014: 789). Therefore, in addition to partnering among different sectors, it is important to consider which aspects of those sectors are partnering (figure 3).

¹¹ A notable exception to this practice is Andonova (2013: 484) who unpacks the political and administrative elements at the global and national levels, urging researchers “to open the box of the state”.

Figure 3: Partnering with whom; and at which level?



Source: Author.

‘Public’ sector can variously be defined at national and local levels, and different aspects of these levels could collaborate or be in competition with each other. Thus globally, there are differences among states, which could be richer or poorer; stronger or weaker, and their categorization could change over time (Mawdsley 2012). Furthermore, a ‘public’ representative in a partnership could be a politician or civil servant, career paths that bring different skills and experiences. IGOs also fall into the public sector category. IGOs have been constructed as international projections of state power alone (Mearsheimer 1994; Waltz 1979). However, IGOs also matter in that they pursue their own interests and policy preferences (Keohane 1984; Keohane and Nye 2011); as well as in their creation of new multilateral actors and partnerships (Johnson 2014), in addition to promoting partnerships with other development actors (Dingwerth and Pattberg 2009). Thus, there are variations within national political actors and public administrations, to say nothing of lively sub-national and global political and policy landscapes. Actors from any of these levels may participate in multi-sectoral partnerships, and different actors will contribute differently.

There are also many aspects to the private sector, all of which can be ‘partnered’. First, within the for-profit private sector, the Cambridge Institute for Sustainable Leadership (CISL, 2015) deliberately draws a distinction between ‘business’ and ‘finance’ subsectors in order to underline the differential contribution each may make to rewiring the economy for sustainable development outcomes. Then also, each of these subsectors may operate at global, regional, national and subnational levels. Additionally, both of these kinds of private sector actor will comprise a profit-making core, and some may also maintain non-profit-making arms such as foundations or corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments.

Thus, different aspects of the private sector business may enter into a partnership, which may shape the partnership in different ways.

The third sector is also highly differentiated. ‘Third sector’ is usually used to designate not-for-profit non-state actors, or civil society. ‘Civil society’ is a contentious term since it can contain elements that are highly ‘uncivil’ in modern liberal thought, such as groups that espouse violence or seek to constrain liberties (Boyd 2004). However, in most readings, the ‘third sector’ covers non-governmental organizations (NGOs); charities (some of which are NGOs); unions (including trade, finance, and credit unions); community-based organizations (CBOs); a growing number of social enterprises; and faith groups (however disparate), among many others. Furthermore, these categories do not necessarily map onto the organizations that may become partners. For example, a social enterprise may possess features that could classify it as third sector (pursuing social or environmental goals) and also private sector (through profit-making means).¹² Equally, the state-owned enterprises that are common in many Asian countries fulfil criteria for both private and public sector (Steinfeld 2000; Yueh 2011).

Thus, entities within each of these subcategories could partner with others and for different reasons. Taking the Global Fund as an example, its Board is composed of six donor and six recipient constituency representatives; two representatives from the private sector and foundations; two from civil society (one North and one South); and one target community representative, in addition to three non-voting multilateral representatives (Global Fund 2015). However, there is a qualitative difference in terms of the representation within and between different sectors. First, recipient state representatives are mainly Ministers of Health (career politicians) in contrast to donors who are represented by senior civil servants (who specialize in aid effectiveness). By the same token, civil society is represented by advocacy specialists (developed countries) and programme specialists (developing countries). The private sector and foundation representatives are both policy specialists. Thus, within each category of partner, different subcategories are represented, attributes which must be taken into account in any study of partnership.

Thus, in addition to differentiating among the partners involved in multi-sectoral partnerships at the level of ‘sector’, it is important to note the complex layers of heterogeneity beneath the surface of these categories. This matters in that different constituencies and logics are mobilized by these different private, public and third sector partners mobilize; they make different contributions; and may seek to achieve different outcomes. Arguably, different combinations of different types of public, private and third sector partners make for different partnerships. This disaggregation of given categories of public, private and third sector matters in that diversity within these sectors makes a difference to the relative *contributions* that partners may bring (as discussed in the next section) and also to their *partnering* behaviours (discussed in the section after).

¹² Coraggio 2015; Dacheux and Goujon 2011; Laville 2015.

Heterogeneous roles and contributions

Given the disaggregation above, it is clear that some actors could play several *roles* simultaneously. Thus, the national government of India is a donor, lender and investor of funds in multilateral agencies, other national governments and local governments, at the same time as it is a recipient of funds from some of these other actors.¹³ It is an economic competitor to and collaborator with other governments, and the national businesses it supports are competitors and collaborators nationally and globally. It is an advocate for reform in the multilateral system (particularly the UN Security Council and the World Bank/IMF) at the same time as it is lobbied by national and international NGOs on gender equality, labour rights, and social protection. Therefore, in all of these sectors, different entities have the potential to variously play the roles of donor/recipient, investor/invested in, collaborator/competitor, and lobbyist/lobbied.

Additionally, the same partner can play different roles in the same partnerships. For example, WHO and UNICEF held dual roles as both Board members and as recipients in the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI 2010: 23). The World Bank also held a dual role until its legal counsel advised that this constituted a conflict of interest and it chose to forgo GAVI funding for a seat on its Board (Bezanson and Isenman 2012). This decision was based on calculations of advantage that would accrue to the World Bank, as well as on the basis of their contribution to the partnership.

In addition to playing different roles, all of the sectors and actors identified make different *contributions* individually to sustainable development (whether viewed as positive or negative). Held et al. (1999) identify a triple deficit in global governance that can usefully be applied to multi-sectoral partnerships: a deficit in legitimacy (Rueede and Kreutzer 2015), implementation (Jomo et al. 2016), and accountability (Benner et al. 2004). The different sectors included in multi-sectoral partnerships are assumed to contribute to each of these deficits. Thus, businesses are held to contribute to efficiency in implementation, while civil society and states are considered to contribute legitimacy resources through their normative orientation (civil society) and democratic underpinnings (some states). The inclusion of diverse actors is thus considered to enhance the legitimacy of the partnership through representing concerned parties inside the partnership, as well as improving accountability to stakeholders outside the partnership. However, these contributions cannot be assumed; further empirical investigation is required to examine the extent to which these contributions are forthcoming and under what conditions.

Relations: Among Heterogeneous Partners

However, there is more to a partnership than its members. Members, or partners, are joined to each other through *relationships*; the ties that bind partners together into the partnership. The simultaneous consideration of the patterns of relationships and interactions between partners enables the analysis of the *relational structure* within the partnership and therefore the relative *power positions* of partners within that structure. This matters in that

¹³ Eyben and Savage 2012; Mawdsley 2012; Mawdsley et al. 2014; Sumner and Mallett 2012.

“asymmetries in the structures and operations of multi-sectoral partnerships and their boards generally produce strikingly sub-optimal results” (Bezanson and Isenman 2012: 22).

Sandström and Carlsson (2008: 497) claim that more efficient and innovative policy networks are characterized by a “heterogeneous set of actors that are centrally and densely integrated” into a network structure. However, they do not indicate how this integration among heterogeneous actors is to take place. Brinkerhoff (2002a) recognizes that dynamics can be strained due to incompatibilities among heterogeneous partners in the absence of mechanisms to address them. This section deepens the analysis of inclusion and participation to also consider the ways in which the structuring of relationships within a partnership may differently privilege or disadvantage different partners (Faul 2016a). Analysis such as this supports the identification of strategies—and who needs to take them—that could further the aims and capacities of partnerships.

Sites of power, or how do power relations inside a partnership matter?

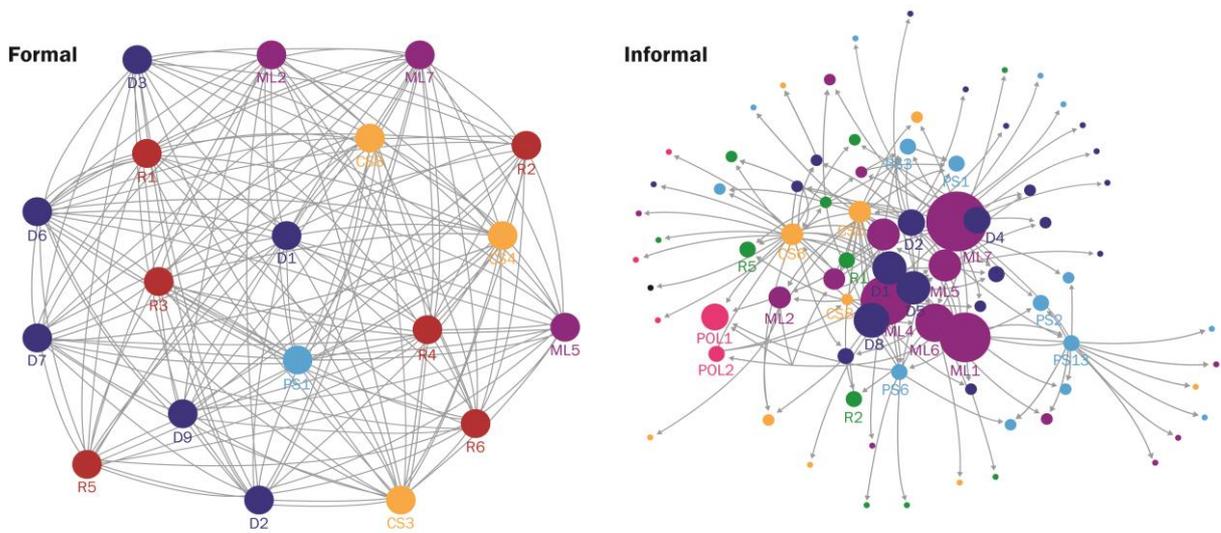
Rather than hierarchical organizational structures, partnerships tend to follow a pattern of networked activities, with individuals who are formally employed by one organization lending their time, expertise and resources to a collaborative endeavour that is characterized by a more or less formal partnership. Theorizations abound of such networks as essentially non-hierarchical structures,¹⁴ such that partnerships are considered to rely on “relations involving mutuality and interdependence as opposed to hierarchy and independence” (Peterson 2003: 1). Yet, alternative—network theoretical—research proposes that networks at best reflect, if not augment, existing asymmetries of power.¹⁵

Partners are organized into *formal*, non-hierarchical relational structures which reflect the stated partnership goals of inclusiveness, equity and shared goals. In addition, partners organize themselves into *informal* relational structures by investing their relational resources in different directions: that is choosing with whom to initiate, maintain or sever ties. The empirical analysis of relational power can reveal the relative distribution of power among partners in a partnership; that is, the structuring of power within a partnership, and also the power positions of individual actors within it relative to others. To illustrate, Faul (2016a) used network mapping and metrics to analyse, visualize and compare the formal, non-hierarchical relative power inside a global partnership with the informal, highly asymmetrical power inside the informal network (figure 4 a and b).

¹⁴ Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Reinicke 1999; Slaughter 2004.

¹⁵ Christopoulos 2008; Knoke and Kuklinski 1982; Scott 2000.

Figure 4: Comparison of (a) formal and (b) informal partnership relationships



Notes: **D** Donor countries; **R** Recipients (in Formal), **R** Researchers (in Informal); **ML** Multilateral agencies; **CS** Civil society; **PS** Private sector/Foundations; **POL** Politicians.

Source: Faul 2016a.

In this case, the structuring of informal relationships indicates that rather than being power-neutral, a hierarchy exists in this partnership in which certain actors are more central than others. The existence of such a hierarchy indicates that formal claims to egalitarian partnership are not practised in this network. These practices stand in contrast to what is discursively constructed as legitimate and appropriate policy- and network making practices.

Thus, network analysis of relative power positions suggests that informal networking practices can undermine norms of partnership, indicating that partnerships may amplify rather than moderate existing power disparities. In addition to comparing formal and informal relative power within partnerships, network methods also allow the analyst—and more importantly, the partners—to understand how micro-level, individual, informal practices are connected to the macro-partnership structure through the relationships in the meso-level network. This analysis demonstrates that the equalization of power requires the exercise of agency in rewiring of the informal professional relationships into which policy actors structure themselves. This is not to say that all networks necessarily increase inequalities. The empirical analysis of specific cases is critical to the development of a credible and complete account of partnerships and their effects. Despite the potential for network analysis to reveal the ways in which exogenous asymmetries of power may affect and be reflected in—or amplified by—partnerships, this is rarely carried out (Faul 2016a; O’Toole and Meier 2004).

This section examined widely held assumptions that partnerships are essentially flat, moderating exogenous power differences. This section demonstrates that the establishment of formal networks alone cannot, as many policymakers assume, rebalance existing hierarchies of power. What is required, therefore are mechanisms and strategies to address these incompatibilities and foster “mutual respect, equal participation in decision making, mutual accountability, and transparency” (Brinkerhoff 2002b: 21).

Delivering on the promise of partnership

Partnership promises to ‘do development differently’, leading to transformative outcomes for society, economy and the environment. However, as emphasized throughout this paper, partnering virtues may exist on paper, and yet not be implemented in practice. The capacity of formal partnership agreements to produce—in practice—meaningful partnerships that co-produce transformative development solutions is tightly bound up with the exercise—and reproduction—of power relations.

Box 2: Example of systems approach in practice

USAID’s *Local Systems Framework* seeks to strengthen local systems for sustained and sustainable development impact. It facilitates local change agents in diagnosing how their local system is malfunctioning (if the desired outcome is poverty reduction) and it supports local actors in planning and prioritizing self-sustaining reforms that they then carry forward.

Sources: USAID 2016; 2014.

Partnerships are assumed to address the complexity of the problem by integrating the capacities of all stakeholders in order to reach innovative, transformative solutions breaking the deadlock of intractability. Yet the examination of existing asymmetries of power outside and inside partnerships indicates that they may currently *reproduce* rather than transform power relations. If a partnership is engaged in the reproduction (rather than transformation) of the existing social structuring of power, this would result in “magnifying the tendency toward inequality already present in the social setting” (O’Toole and Meier 2004: 681). Treating partnership governance and management as a technical challenge obscures the fundamental power issues at their core. The potential for systems approaches to improve the design, implementation and evaluation of partnerships for transformative sustainable development is considered in this final section.

Going Forward: Partnerships as Complex Adaptive Systems

Transformative development solutions require partnerships to be a transformative crucible. Currently, they are not. However, they are one of the “spaces where change is already happening” (Ramalingam 2014) that can usefully be supported to fulfil their transformative potential. What is required is a deliberate strategy of engagement with the issue of power differentials within a systems framing of partnerships and sustainable development. This would also increase the likelihood that the partnership will capitalize on the diversity among partners and co-produce solutions that are transformational.

Sustainable development problems cannot be defined separately from the system that created them. They emerge from the current system of ordering economic, environmental and social issues. Public-private partnerships are a complex intervention into that system. This requires the use of different—systems—approaches that are able to capture the complexity and dynamism of systems, as summarized in table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of conventional and systems approaches

Conventional approach	Systems approach
<p><i>Static thinking</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on particular events 	<p><i>Dynamic thinking</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem framed as pattern of behaviour over time
<p><i>Systems-as-effect thinking</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewing behaviour generated by a system as driven by external forces 	<p><i>System-as-cause thinking</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placing responsibility for behaviour on internal actors who manage system policies and ‘plumbing’
<p><i>Tree-by-tree thinking</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believing that really knowing something means focusing on the details 	<p><i>Forest thinking</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believing that to know something requires understanding the context of relationships
<p><i>Factors thinking</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listing factors that influence or correlate with some result 	<p><i>Operational thinking</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentrating on causality and understanding how a behaviour is generated
<p><i>Straight-line thinking</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewing causality as running in one direction, ignoring (deliberately or not) interaction between and among causes 	<p><i>Loop thinking</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewing causality as an ongoing process, not a one-time event, with effect feeding back to influence causes and causes affecting each other

Source: Adapted from Adam and de Savigny (2012: iv2).

Designing partnerships

In order to live up to their promise, partnerships need to be more carefully designed. First, partnership *structures* need to be designed to effectively achieve their stated functions. Shared governance is a key feature of self-organizing networks, in which there is high trust among few participants who share similar goals. This means that the need for network-level competencies is low. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are treated as if they were self-organizing. But they are not; they are manufactured, and therefore may require different governance structures (Provan and Kenis 2008). Second, *inclusion* of stakeholders is a systems question: which views are needed to map the system? It is also a question of power: who decides who is included and on what terms? Third, the *rules of engagement* in the design of a partnership must take into account both external and internal power dynamics. New collaborative organizations can be designed to be more insulated from existing power disparities in their environment (Johnson 2014), and informal relationships in a partnership can be rewired to transform rather than reinforce external power asymmetries (Faul 2016a).

Partnering as a behavioural competency

Current approaches to the nominalization ‘partnership’ tend to reinforce the notion that establishing and naming a multi-sectoral endeavour a partnership immediately results in ideal partnering. Rather, implementing partnerships must focus on internal dynamics and partnering processes. Supporting partnering behaviours could be facilitated by using a *broker*, whether from an outside consultancy or an ex-officio chair or critical friend. This broker would bring significant ideational resources; enjoy the respect of the majority of partners; and dedicate time to relationship and consensus building among the partners. Furthermore, *individual partners* would need to recognise and take responsibility for their

power and behaviours. Thus, the process of partnering would need to include processes that enable partners who are considered more powerful to recognize their power and to address it in the frequency and quality of their interactions with less prestigious partners.

Systems evaluations

Despite calls for rigorous evaluations, very few use a comprehensive and holistic approach to assess the impact of interventions with system-wide effects. And yet, the more complex the intervention, the greater the need for systems thinking and a comprehensive assessment of system-wide effects. Few evaluations go beyond the linear log frame (inputs-outputs-outcomes-impacts) to explore the relationships and interconnectedness among the different system elements (Faul 2016a) or other characteristics of complex systems such as non-linearity of effects or time delays (Shiell et al. 2008).

Further research into participatory embedded systems evaluations is required to test the effectiveness of participatory and data-driven approaches to design, monitor and continuously improve systems interventions through tight feedback loops (Doherty et al. 2009; Youngleson et al. 2010). Involving stakeholders early in the design process and engaging them throughout the implementation processes in assessing and solving implementation barriers is at the heart of systems thinking, where the intervention's effects—anticipated or not—can be iteratively explored, and then acted upon.¹⁶ Designing and implementing systems approaches requires resourcing (money and time) to design and implement, and to build demand through educating institutional customers to create the demand for system expertise and evaluations.

Conclusion

The discourse—and desired practices of—partnership have been revitalized in the Sustainable Development Goals. How such partnerships are established and enacted will impact more or less positively on the economic, environmental and social dimensions of development, and therefore on sustainable development for all. This paper indicates that there is little room for complacency. In each of the aspects of power and partnership examined, partnerships have the potential to be transformative, but are not essentially so. This is a pivotal political problem that has significant social consequences, particularly for the most vulnerable members of society.

This paper has sketched out an understanding of the potential pitfalls of the external and internal dynamics of partnerships and how to avoid them. A systems approach, coupled with a keen eye for asymmetries of power, holds promise for mapping and supporting change in partnerships for more equitable partnering processes. Further empirical research on what is happening inside different partnerships is critical in order to raise (and begin to answer) questions that will give a wider view of the production of partnerships that transform (rather than reproducing) existing asymmetries of power in order to co-produce sustainable development solutions.

¹⁶ de Savigny and Adam 2009; USAID 2014, 2016.

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