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Collaborative governance for the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

The advent of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals has refocused global attention on the roles of business and other nonstate actors in achieving global goals. Often, business involvement takes the form of collaborations with the more traditional actors—governments and non-governmental organizations. Although such partnerships for development have been seen before, the scale and expectations are new. This paper explores how and why these cross-sector collaborations are evolving, and what steps can or should be taken to ensure that partnerships create public and private value. The arguments are illustrated with reference to cases of market-driven partnerships for agriculture in Southeast Asia that are intended to engage marginalized smallholder farmers in global value chains in agriculture. The aims of these cross-sector collaborations coincide with several targets of the Sustainable Development Goals such as poverty alleviation, decreasing environmental impact, and achieving food security. This is a hard case for mechanisms intended to protect public interests, given that the target beneficiaries (low-income smallholder farmers and the environment) are unable to speak effectively for themselves. We find that structures and processes to align interests in ways that protect the public interest are both necessary and feasible, though not easy to achieve.

KEYWORDS
business, collaborative governance, cross-sector partnerships, Southeast Asia, Sustainable Development Goals

1 | INTRODUCTION

When the world's governments adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the United Nations in 2015, they did more than set an agreed agenda to 2030. They opened the door to a massive expansion of a new form of governance that has been growing on the global stage for some two decades. Variously called multistakeholder initiatives, public–private partnerships, or cross-sector collaborations, these partnerships across governments, civil society, and the private sector are changing how we conceive of governance and public policy. Governance—collective action to provide public goods, manage externalities, and set and implement rules—is no longer something that governments do exclusively but now involves nonstate actors working with, or even governing without, governments.

Such collaborations are expected to play a key role in achieving the SDGs. Those ambitious goals aim to eliminate extreme poverty and hunger while making significant progress toward environmental sustainability and broader human well-being. The SDGs also provide a shared vision of how the goals are to be achieved. Goal 17 is a statement of *means*, rather than ends, calling on the world to "strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development." Under the subhead of "multistakeholder partnerships," SDG 17 lays out two targets:

> 17.16: Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multistakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources, to support the achievement of the SDGs in all countries, in particular developing countries.
>
> 17.17: Encourage and promote effective public, public–private, and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships.[1]

To a surprising degree, the SDGs are rapidly becoming a shared language across the sectors, extending beyond the usual development circles to involve notably the private sector. Business, under pressure from investors, employees, consumers, and other stakeholders to become more sustainable, is also starting to recognize the business opportunities inherent in the SDGs, thanks in part to the creation of common reference points in the SDG targets that business can understand (Tett, 2017). With the changing attitudes of at least some parts of the business sector, the partnership approach to development holds promise.

Skeptics would note that we have seen such promises before. Partnerships were also supposed to contribute significantly to the implementation of the SDGs' predecessor, the

[1]United Nations, Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg17, accessed 30 April 2018.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted by the world's governments at the United Nations in 2000 to be achieved by 2015. The World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, focused on MDG achievement, became known as the "partnership summit" for its reliance on cross-sector collaborations (so-called "Type 2" initiatives) rather than intergovernmental ("Type 1") agreements. Nearly 300 were announced at the summit, with many more subsequently registered with the UN.

Yet a follow-up study of the registered partnerships found that all the hoopla did not lead to much.

> *First, on analyzing the sample of 340 partnerships after more than five years since inception, approximately 38 percent show low levels or no measurable output. Moreover, roughly 42 percent (86) of the partnerships with measurable output engage in activities without direct relation to their publicly stated goals and ambitions … Summing up, of these numbers, 211 partnerships are inactive, lack any outputs, or fail to match their stated ambition with their observed activities. (Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016, p. 44)*

Partnerships were thus clearly not the driving force behind whatever outcomes can be attributed to the MDGs. But much has since changed.

First, the practice of cross-sector collaboration is becoming professionalized, as evidenced by the emergence of numerous training programmes from 2-day courses up to and including dedicated masters degrees for partnership practitioners (Florini, forthcoming). Second, the SDGs are far more ambitious than the MDGs, applying to all countries across a much wider range of issues, and thus create more space for the involvement of nonstate actors, including business. Third, the idea that the private sector has both responsibility and commercial incentive to engage has become far more widely accepted, not least by the business community itself (Business and Sustainable Development Commission, 2017a, 2017b). And partnerships are seen as holding promise beyond efficient deployment of additional resources in specific projects, such as their effect in socializing nontraditional actors (such as the private sector) into seeing reasons to take part in the creation of public value (Van Tulder, May Seitanidi, Crane, & Brammer, 2016).

At the same time that these trends are promoting renewed attention to cross-sector collaborative governance, other trends in development thinking and practice are also relevant. In particular, the World Bank (2007) and many others have supported "market-driven" approaches to agricultural development. In these approaches, the agriculture sector as a whole is connected more deeply to the giant agribusiness supply chains that now constitute much of the world's food system.

These trends in cross-sector collaboration for development and market-driven approaches to agriculture come together in the specific form of market-driven cross-sector collaborations for agriculture. As noted below, an exploration of such partnerships provides useful ways to begin an assessment of the conditions under which cross-sector collaboration may contribute to the achievement of the global development agenda.

Our exploration focuses on a set of collaborations in Southeast Asia that are attempting to engage smallholder farmers in the region in transnational agribusiness value chains. The ostensible purpose is increasing the quantity and quality of smallholder production and thereby farmers' incomes, while simultaneously decreasing the negative environmental impact of smallholder agriculture. If successful in meeting all these goals, these collaborations would achieve progress toward several SDGs and also serve agribusiness supply chain needs.

In this paper, we situate the discussion within the broader literature on collaborative governance. We then provide background on the SDGs, and on why collaborative governance/cross-sector partnership features so strongly in discussions of SDG implementation. We discuss the central role of smallholder agriculture in the problems the SDGs are assigned to address. We then illustrate some of the issues that can arise when cross-sector collaborations are "market-driven," which carries the risk of privileging private interests over the creation of public value. To illustrate such risks and one possible means of mitigating that risk, we draw on interviews carried out in 2016 and 2017, part of a larger study focused on collaborations in Southeast Asia in countries as diverse as Indonesia and Vietnam. We explore the utility of mechanisms intended to keep partnership activities aligned with the long-term interests of both the SDGs and participating businesses.

Although the specific question of how to keep partnerships—particularly "market-driven" ones—for the SDGs on track is important on its own merits, it is only one piece of an enormous research agenda emerging out of the explosion of collaborative, cross-sector forms of governance. We thus conclude with a set of questions for future research.

2 | UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE: LITERATURE AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The SDGs' call for multistakeholder partnerships as a key implementation mechanism grows out of an increasingly widespread view that governments alone cannot meet the enormous challenges of the day. Although, as shown above, the specific set of collaborations focused on the MDGs largely failed to live up to expectations, those were a small portion of the thousands of cross-sector partnerships that have emerged in recent decades, addressing everything from energy to climate to health to social issues (Florini, 2017; Forsyth, 2007; Johnston & Finegood, 2015; Pinkse & Kolk, 2012; Selsky & Parker, 2005).[2] The InterSector Project, which focuses on the United States, has detailed case studies on some 40 partnerships.[3] The Cross Sector Social Interactions scholarly community, drawn mostly from business schools, has an Annual Review of Social Partnerships with information on many more.[4]

For this study, we used both existing literature and field research to draw out lessons about the processes needed for successful cross-sector market-driven collaboration. We started with the rich literature that is now available on cross-sector collaboration as a governance approach (Ansell & Gash, 2017; Beisheim, Liese, Janetscheck, & Sarre, 2014; Brockmyer & Fox, 2015; Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2011; Jomo, Chowdhury, Sharma, & Platz, 2016; Marques, 2017; Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016; Torfing, 2016). This literature is situated in part in a wider literature from scholars of international relations and global governance, who have been investigating the conditions under which various actors participate in various networks and other systems

[2]Terms used in the literature to describe the involvement of civil society in the production of public goods include co-production and cogovernance. Ostrom (1996, p. 1073) introduced the concept of co-production, which "implies that citizens can play an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them," such as her examples of urban infrastructure and primary education. Ackerman (2004, p. 447) argues that co-production, social protest, or consultation as "voice" solutions for strengthening government accountability are insufficient and advocates for cogovernance, "which involves inviting social actors to participate in the core activities of the state." We extend these ideas to explore what happens when for-profit nonstate actors are added to the mix.

[3]See http://intersector.com/case-library/, accessed 24 October 2017.

[4]http://www.cssicommunity.org/arsp, accessed 24 October 2017.

for managing large-scale challenges (Avant, Finnemore, & Sell, 2010; Florini, 2017; Kahler, 2009; Slaughter, 2017). It also draws substantially on theories developed in the public administration literature, where policy network theory provides a particularly useful framework, as we discuss below (Howlett, Mukherjee, & Koppenjan, 2017).

We then built on this extensive literature review and dozens of conversations with stakeholders at conferences, workshops, and meetings in Indonesia, the Netherlands, Singapore, and Vietnam, to develop questions for a set of lengthy semistructured interviews with 15 carefully selected representative stakeholders. These more formal and detailed interviews included staff of partnership-convening platforms (drawn from the public, private, and civil society sectors), participating multinational corporations (MNCs), civil society organizations, and farmers' organizations. The interviewees were primarily selected based on their seniority and central roles in existing market-driven partnerships for smallholder agriculture in Southeast Asia. We also interviewed a few nonparticipating stakeholders who provided invaluable third-party perspectives. Most of the interviews were recorded and transcribed under conditions of protected anonymity, then coded using the qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA using both inductive and deductive coding (Kuckartz, 2014).

This pilot study allowed us to better understand numerous questions about the structures, processes, and impacts of these partnerships and their challenges. Our questions addressed such issues as: How were partners chosen and persuaded to engage? How did and how should partnerships cope with asymmetries in power, resources, and knowledge, and in particular how to empower marginalized stakeholders? What structures and individual capacities provide for efficacy, legitimacy, and accountability? Of course, the small N of formal interviewees does not authoritatively answer all these questions. But combined with the literature review and broader conversations, the diversity and seniority of the respondents allow us to draw reasonably well-informed preliminary insights.

3 | COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE AND THE SDGs

Thanks to the United Nations' SDGs, humanity now has a shared global framework of objectives that are intended to build a world of greater well-being and resilience. The UN's *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* defines 17 SDGs and concretizes them in 169 targets, to be achieved by the year 2030. Progress toward the goals is measured through 304 indicators. For example, SDG 2, "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture," has eight concrete targets (such as doubling the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale farmers). The 14 indicators focus on both outputs (such as the total flows into agriculture [2.A.2] and agricultural export subsidies [2.B.2]) and outcomes (such as the prevalence of undernourishment [2.1.1], the average income of small-scale farmers by sex and indigenous status [2.3.2], and the proportion of agricultural area under productive and sustainable agriculture [2.4.1]). Each of the SDGs has its own set of specific targets and of indicators by which progress should be measured.

The call for cross-sector partnerships to help achieve global goals has been building for decades. The outcome document of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, Agenda 21, encouraged the "active involvement of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other groups" (paragraph 1.3) in its implementation. Agenda 21 includes an entire section on "strengthening the role of major groups," including non-governmental organizations and business, in the "effective implementation of the objectives, policies and mechanisms agreed to by Governments in all programme areas of Agenda 21" (chapters 23–32). Ten years later, at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (also known as the Johannesburg Summit or the Earth Summit), this recognition of the need to involve nonstate actors in governance had morphed into a focus on cross-sector partnership as the key means to achieve the MDGs.

It is too early in the life of the SDGs to examine rigorously whether specific partnerships are actually contributing to the achievement of the goals. Nor do we yet have a clear methodology for attributing such success to a specific partnership, especially given that many operate at relatively small scales. Nonetheless, there is much to be learned from an exploration of relevant partnership processes to draw out lessons about how specific structures and approaches to collaborations, especially market-driven ones that depend heavily on private sector involvement, can make it more likely that the public value the partnership intends to create is not lost to competing private interests.

4 | SMALLHOLDER AGRICULTURE AND THE SDGs

We focus on smallholders because significant improvements in smallholder agriculture are necessary to achieve many of the SDGs. The elimination of extreme poverty (SDG 1) and the elimination of hunger (SDG 2) cannot be achieved without attention to the 1.5 billion people who live in smallholder households (FAO, 2012) and who constitute many of the world's poorest and hungriest (Kharas, 2015). Often working tiny plots of land,[5] they produce around 80% of the food supply in developing countries and cultivate about 80% of farmland in Asia and Africa (Gibbon, 2012). The Gender Equality goal (SDG 5) is also highly relevant. Women constitute 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations asserts that women in agriculture are "especially disadvantaged, with fewer endowments and entitlements than men, even more limited access to information and services, gender-determined household responsibilities, and increasingly heavy agricultural workloads owing to male out-migration" (FAO, 2016, p. xii).

Development specialists have long recognized the importance of targeting smallholder farming to reduce poverty. Lipton (2005, p. viii) argues that since 1700 mass poverty reduction always started with "sharp rises in employment and self-employment income due to higher productivity in small family farms." And as Birner and Resnick (2010, p. 1442) point out, "implementing policies to support the economic development of small farmers has proven to be a particularly successful strategy to reduce rural poverty."

The connection between relatively unproductive smallholder agriculture and poverty is thus clear. Less well known is the relationship between agriculture, including smallholder farming, and environmental degradation. Smallholder farming contributes one third of greenhouse gas emissions in agriculture. In developing countries, which make up four fifths of global agricultural, smallholder farming accounts for 41%. Nearly all the emissions due to land use change, such as net forest removals attributed to agriculture, take place in developing countries, with one-third due to smallholder farming (Vermeulen & Wollenberg, 2017, p. 2).

[5]Most farms worldwide are less than 1 hectare (72%), another 12% are between 1 and 2 hectares (Lowder, Skoet, & Raney, 2016, 23, 26).

The risks of climate change and other environmental pressures now constrain how agricultural productivity can be improved. Agriculture production practices must change dramatically from current resource-intensive, soil stripping processes that waste enormous quantities of water and severely disrupt global carbon and nitrogen cycles. The Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that "feeding a world population of 9.1 billion people in 2050 would require raising overall food production by some 70 percent between 2005/07 and 2050. Production in the developing countries would need to almost double" with some 90% of the increase to come from higher yields, given that most arable land in the world is already in use (FAO, 2009). Such productivity growth cannot continue on the usual path of significant greenhouse gas emissions and fertilizer use (FAO, 2016), both of which are pushing the world far beyond the planetary boundaries for a safely sustainable future (Steffen et al., 2015).

5 | MARKET-DRIVEN PARTNERSHIPS FOR AGRICULTURE

In response to all these pressures, numerous governments, development agencies, and other organizations have been experimenting with what the World Bank (2007) refers to as "market-driven" approaches to agriculture—but with a twist. It has long been well understood that market forces on their own will not overcome the multiple forms of market failures that smallholder agriculture is prone to (Birner & Resnick, 2010; Timmer, 1991). Part of the explanation is poverty—the smallholders of concern in this paper are usually too poor to pay for the agricultural inputs that would raise their productivity and incomes, so market forces do not apply. Another part is the knowledge gap—smallholders may not know what inputs are available that would be useful to them, or how to connect with potential buyers, who may not be aware of what decentralized, small-scale producers could provide.

Thus, these numerous projects and programmes aim to connect not just business and smallholders but also governments (national and local) along with NGOs and an array of others concerned with development processes. Examples include:

- *Better Rice Initiative Asia*, a regional collaboration initiated by the German development agency GIZ (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*) "to foster the cooperation between private and public sector institutions to promote sustainable growth in agricultural production and improved access to nutrition within the food sector in emerging and developing countries" in rice value chains in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.
- *Agriprofocus*, which describes itself as a Dutch-driven "international multi-stakeholder network in the agri-food sector consisting of farmer entrepreneurs, private sector enterprises, governments, knowledge institutions and civil society organisations" operating in Africa and Southeast Asia.
- *Grow Asia*, a Southeast Asia regional initiative launched by the World Economic Forum under its *New Vision for Agriculture* in partnership with the ASEAN Secretariat.

Many of these various experiments in market-driven collaborations involving smallholders in Southeast Asia claim to simultaneously address productivity, environment, and poverty concerns. They thus provide a useful avenue for exploring whether and under what conditions such partnerships can be expected to contribute to the achievement of the SDG targets to which smallholder farming is relevant.

5.1 | Aligning interests

The first step in the partnering process is to define the stakeholders who have a common interest in a broad problem. In the case of smallholder agriculture, governments have a clear public value interest in ensuring food security, fostering improved living standards for their poorest citizens, and finding efficient and effective means of addressing the negative externalities (soil and water depletion, deforestation, carbon and nitrogen pollution, etc.). Toward these ends, government has several incentives to engage with the private sector.

One rationale is attracting private sector (and especially MNC) investment in agriculture—something traditional donor-driven development projects tend not to do. In part, the drive in the SDGs for cross-sector collaboration reflects the refrain that private sector engagement is essential to meet the financing needs of the SDGs. It is likely that traditional development actors—governments, donors, development NGOs—will want to work more and more with business in SDG implementation: They need business resources. Schmidt-Traub (2015) estimates that the cost of SDG implementation amounts to at least \$1.4 trillion per year (in 2013 US dollars). He asserts that half of it can (and has to) be financed by the private sector. The World Bank (2016, p. 3) estimates that the capital investments needed to achieve merely the water supply, sanitation, and hygiene SDGs (Targets 6.1 and 6.2) total around \$114 billion per year. That is about three times the current investment levels in these areas.

Another rationale is providing a useful framework for facilitating a dialog with the agribusinesses on what good agricultural policy would look like for them. Numerous NGOs years ago shifted from campaigning against businesses to working with them to improve their social and environmental performance (Florini, 2012, 2014).

This is not to say that governments and NGOs are all set to engage in cross-sector partnerships with business. Misunderstandings and misalignments remain common. Our study uncovered a case in which a government tried initially to alter a business-led partnership into an “implementing arm” for the government's development projects. Some NGOs we interviewed refuse to engage in market-driven collaborations. In addition to principled objections, NGOs face practical challenges. Most smaller and medium NGOs have programme-related funding and little capacity to spend time and resources on partnership meetings and activities that might not lead directly to the development results that donors expect.

Nonetheless, given the resource constraints on the traditional providers of public goods, we can expect that both governments and civil society will continue to want to partner with business. But why should business care?

The private sector has two motives for participating in collaborations to implement the SDGs. First, for some decades, business has faced growing challenges to its social license to operate. Those challenges, increasingly prevalent in Asia and the West, include pressures to internalize their negative externalities such as pollution from their activities, and demands to contribute to the social welfare through business models aimed at the public good, not only financial profit (Florini, 2014). The extensive literature suggests several reasons for private firms to participate, such as corporate social responsibility and social license to operate pressures that may affect business planning, reputation and risk management, employee engagement, and improving the performance of supply chains (Zadek, Evans, & Pruzan,

[6]http://www.cssicommunity.org/arsp, accessed 30 April 2018.

2013, see also the various Annual Review of Social Partnership issues[6]). Some business leaders see the SDGs as providing a welcome framework to use in responding to societal pressures (interviews; see also Tett, 2017).

Second, the SDGs provide opportunities for new ways to make profits—lots of profits. In a path-breaking report released at the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos in January 2017, the Business and Sustainable Development Commission has identified $12 trillion in business opportunities in food and agriculture, cities, energy, and health (Business and Sustainable Development Commission, 2017a). And $5 trillion of that $12 trillion is to be found in Asia (Business and Sustainable Development Commission, 2017b). The Commission's membership includes a number of stellar global business leaders, including but not limited to the "usual suspects" of business sustainability leaders such as Unilever's Paul Polman, making it an important and credible source of insight for the global business community.

Yet these opportunities are not easily seized by businesses operating as usual. Building resilient cities, bolstering forest ecosystem services, or fostering improved maternal and child health—to name just three of the 60 specific business opportunities identified by the Commission (2017a, p. 28)—are not tasks that lend themselves to a straightforward business model. Instead, they require the deep involvement of governments, communities, academia, and many others, in addition to the crucial investment and innovations roles of the private sector.

But the idea that business has an enlightened self-interest in engaging with the SDGs appears to have taken root only at the leadership level. Our interviews at the operational level of agribusinesses engaged in cross-sector value chain partnerships in Southeast Asia revealed little evidence of employee understanding or acceptance of any business role in economic or social development. At this level, employees spoke of reasons for engaging in cross-sector partnerships with governments and NGOs in purely commercial terms—for example, to solidify the supply chain or to create a new market—with little awareness of longer term advantages from risk mitigation or reputation enhancement, much less a business responsibility to achieving the broader goals of building a broadly prosperous and sustainable society.

Indeed, all our respondents stressed that for the market-driven collaborations to succeed, the commercial aspect of it must work. One respondent described an "ideal scenario" being an offtaker that commits to buying all the crops produced in that value chain. Such a commitment reduces the risk of lending to the involved farmers and is hence attractive to banks and microfinance providers. It also leaves the smallholders potentially vulnerable to changes in company strategy or exploitation if the partnership fails to protect their interests.

Ameliorating the risks of smallholder dependence on a single company can be done via partnerships focused on "precompetitive" activities such as farmer training. A real challenge in such partnerships is convincing, for example, an offtaker company to involve another offtaker company. But firms that compete directly are wary of one another. Given how cost- and time-intensive it is to build up a sustainable value chain, this reluctance to "share" a value chain with a direct competitor is not surprising. Our interviews focused on partnerships engaged in single commodities because that is how most market-driven cross-sector partnerships for agriculture are structured. It might be easier to find precompetitive space in cross-cutting issues such as finance or telecommunications technology for smallholder farming, rather than single crops, but these are largely donor-funded projects rather than true cross-sector collaborations exactly because the self-interest of specific companies is less clear.

6 | MAKING THE NETWORK WORK: PARTNERSHIP PLATFORMS AND GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

In light of these challenges to aligning private sector perspectives with SDG goals and targets, what mechanisms could make it possible for cross-sector partnerships to fulfill the hopes of SDG 17? Policy network theory provides guidance about how these complex partnerships for the SDGs might function better in light of the issues uncovered in our preliminary empirical research.

If the overall policy universe consists of the aggregation of all state, private, and social actors at all levels, a "policy subsystem" is the network of all those active in a given issue area (Howlett et al., 2017). A crucial question is how and under what conditions such policy subsystems learn to address the issue areas around which they coalesce. As Howlett et al. (2017) found, one answer is the importance of central "brokers" with strong links to many relevant parts of the policy network. Such brokers, often called "platforms", are found in some of the partnerships we explored. Parties interested in coming together to address market failures and collective action problems via collaboration often create secretariats that are intended to manage the processes but that often end up driving action. Just as intergovernmental organizations often do more than lower the transaction costs of interactions among member states, shaping agendas, and state behaviour (Keohane, 1984), partnership platforms can help to cocreate a shared vision, bring in missing links, share knowledge, and report on progress, in addition to their coordination role. Partnership platforms can function as a safe space for public, private, and civil society actors to engage with each other, most importantly with clearly defined goals, structured, for example, around a small-holder farmer focus.

Such partnership platforms can sometimes meld existing projects of their members under a collective umbrella. In one Southeast Asian value chain platform, two third of its current projects pre-existed its formation. The strength of such partnership platforms lies in the ability to bring together actors from all three sectors and the cross-fertilization that this facilitates. In our case studies, this led to a more "holistic or balanced group of stakeholders" participating in pre-existing projects, as one interviewee noted, once it became apparent what new actors could contribute.

In value chain interventions, this ideally leads to an involvement of actors along the whole chain. Most cross-sector value chain partnerships in Southeast Asia focus exclusively on the farming part of the value chain, even though food conglomerates in the region also operate distribution, processing, manufacturing, and in some cases have direct relations with retailers. Platforms can help to compensate for this tendency to overlook much of the value chain. For example, in one set of cross-sector projects in Indonesia, the brokering of new partnerships by the platform Secretariat brought in an NGO for measurement and evaluation and a bank for farmer financing solutions, in addition to the pre-existing interventions in the input and growing stage.

Platforms can also provide continuity in the face of personnel changes or wavering commitment among the leadership of participating organizations. Respondents from all sectors highlighted leadership on multiple levels as the most important element of successful partnering. For companies, the senior leadership team needs to "drive the agenda" and ensure that senior commitment translates into appropriate action on the operational level—something more likely to happen if CEOs have made commitments publicly. Staff found personnel changes and wavering commitment—especially from CEOs and Ministers—as the most severe challenge for making partnerships work, requiring constant persuasion. Regular leadership changes are common in the Ministries of Agriculture in the ASEAN countries. For example, Indonesia had four Coordinating Ministers for Economic Affairs (responsible for the ministries of agriculture and environment/forestry) in office between May 2014 and August 2015.

Partnership platforms can help to keep interests aligned and fend off capture by vested interests. The danger can arise from all three sectors. For example, one NGO redefined itself as a profit-oriented consultancy and tried to shape the partnership to enhance its revenue. Most often, however, partnerships are criticized for being too business-dominated (with particular firms seeking to influence government or gain a competitive advantage) or too market-focused, with private sector interests dominating public interests (Grain, 2016). One partnership convenor insisted that for scaling-up development projects and for transforming the way societies work "you are going to have to engage businesses, and you can only start where their starting point is (…) being market-led speaks to a need they see aligned with their own purpose." From that starting point, the platform can help to shift partners to a broader sense of their interests. In one value chain partnership in Indonesia, for example, interviewees pointed to the importance of the regional partnership platform in moving the collaboration in one project from a marketing opportunity for a single corporation to a broader engagement between farmers and multiple corporate suppliers about early flowering technologies. Although a government extension service can provide a neutral channel for farmers training, the company-led approach is "completely biased," as a partnership convenor pointed out. This example of a company attempting to make use of a partnership project for its commercial interest points to the importance of having an overarching organization or platform that can provide some neutrality.

Platforms, however, do not come free. Someone must pay staff and other costs. There are two funding sources: donors (often the traditional development agencies) or partnership members, particularly the corporate members. In our case studies, both sources of funding were often employed simultaneously. Traditional donors paid for the work of initiating and organizing collaborations with businesses but not the implementation of projects on the ground. This mixed funding created challenges. Traditional development agencies often struggled to understand how collaborations differed from conventional projects and wanted standard impact evaluations of business-funded projects, but the firms had little interest in providing such detailed information to actors they considered extraneous to their market-focused value chain projects.

The existence of a platform may be crucial, but it is not enough. The partnership also needs a formal governance model, including a process of revenue collection and membership management—a critical, time-consuming, and delicate challenge. Many models are active in Southeast Asia. One regional platform fostered the creation of national-level secretariats in each country where its partnerships operate, finding that the governance model must consider each country's political, legal, and administrative framework. For example, in Myanmar, one such governance model took the form of a registered not-for-profit, which had a Board with representatives from each state in Myanmar.

The core concern for the formalization of a partnership and the definition of a precompetitive space are the necessary checks and balances and grievance mechanisms that partners can use to report bad behaviour. Furthermore, the misallocation of funds is a potential danger in many countries. Hence, the critical need for transparent accounting, third-party auditing, and financial reporting. Even when all this is done, collaborations are not "finished." Like all institutions, partnerships take a long time to build and nourish, and continually evolve as conditions change. Respondents also pointed out that "failed" partnerships can often be readjusted to learn from their mistakes.

Measuring tangible outputs regarding the formation of partnerships was identified as one of the most challenging aspects by experienced partnership convenors. Although measuring the outputs and effects of partnerships is essential, it can take a long time to convince the nontraditional development stakeholders of the value of such measurement. Companies are, in the perception of stakeholders, not used to measuring or disclosing data on greenhouse gas emissions or the returns on investment in development projects. Partnership participants reported that private sector actors might not have seen much value in having such data but changed their attitude and commitment over time, realizing the communicative power of concrete numbers. In some partnerships, this attitude change was created step by step, starting with qualitative case studies to flesh out success stories. However, the involved businesses were only willing to take the first step, in the form of self-reporting on outputs such as the number of farmers' training conducted and financial data on aggregated investment of all companies integrated into value chain projects.

7 | CONCLUSION AND QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The SDGs provide a globally legitimized benchmark with clear metrics for propoor, sustainable development. The call in the SDGs and other global accords, such as the Paris climate agreement, for collaboration across the sectors with a strong role for nonstate actors both reflects and is likely to accelerate an ever-growing emphasis on cross-sector collaboration as a key mechanism for achieving global goals. Thus, understanding the conditions under which such partnerships are more likely to achieve goals is an important area of research.

We find reason for both hope and caution. On the optimistic side, the extensive global engagement in the formulation of the SDGs leading up to their adoption in 2015 means that they are better known than the MDGs were at a similar stage. The broader relevance of the SDG goals—to all countries, not just developing countries—allows for broader engagement. In addition, there is a much broader array of experience with cross-sector collaboration around the world. And at least some parts of the private sector have come to understand that the broad sustainability agenda is directly relevant to the prospects for profitability.

On the caution side, however, are some serious red flags. We found a considerable gap between business leadership and the operational level in understanding the importance and relevance of the sustainability agenda. We also found a serious flaw in the lack of appropriate metrics, without which business cannot function but which business is reluctant to apply to their partnership activities as they are unwilling to be evaluated by third parties using metrics that are not solely the familiar ones of financial profit.

Our exploration of the operational level of the kinds of partnerships relevant for meeting SDG targets suggests that keeping business interests aligned with the SDGs may require a partnership broker or platform, a central driving force in the network that helps to align and reshape how the various actors define their interests and identities. This is especially true in collaborations that aim to engage smallholder farmers in agribusiness value chains, given the relative lack of power and organizational capacity among many smallholders. Partnership requires a process of management and institutionalization to ensure that the collaboration goes beyond short-term efforts driven by a handful of personal relationships, given the rapid turnover in personnel common in both government and business. It is not clear, however, that the world abounds in people with the expertise needed to run those platforms despite the emergence of a small number of specialized training programmes.

Beyond these immediate findings, the research suggests that attention to the growing role of cross-sector partnerships opens a wealth of relevant research questions, far beyond the scope of any single paper, and crossing numerous scholarly disciplines. The potential topics range from the relatively narrowly focused to broad and sweeping issues. On the more focused side, for example, a key question is the degree to which collaborations can provide public goods across the full range of crops and agricultural support services such as finance. The nature of government–producer interaction varies substantially by commodity (see McMillan and Masters 2000, cited in Birner & Resnick, 2010).

For management scholars, research could focus on the nature of the participating firm. The core companies that drive specific partnerships may vary regarding how they define their incentives and goals in ways that may affect the outcomes of the collaboration. Firms may choose to participate in the partnerships in search of any or all of the following goals: (a) short-term profit; (b) developing a long-term secure supply chain; (c) pleasing the government to continue operating in country (which then requires attention to what firms believe will please the government); (d) market development in country (especially for input providers); and (e) global public relations, especially for firms serving international rather than purely domestic markets (Pope & Meyer, 2015). Firms also vary regarding their levels of participation in cross-border voluntary but quasi-regulatory processes such as codes of conduct and certifications, which may serve as a proxy indicator for the degree to which firms are socialized into a broader sense of corporate responsibility and long-term enlightened self-interest as opposed to shorter term profit-seeking.

A broader set of questions for further research would address the effects of variations in political institutions and political economy on partnership structure or outcomes. Pre-existing state–market relationships could logically lead to quite different partnership practices. In Asia, for example, public–partner partnerships have long been used in infrastructure, particularly in the form of formal contractual Build–Operate–Transfer models. What lessons can be drawn from how these have balanced risk and authority and how—and whether—they have contributed to the public good as well as to private gains? Looking across countries, do variations in state–market relations result in significant differences in the impacts that partnerships have regarding farmer incomes, environmental sustainability, or food security? Does a greater role of the government lead to better outcomes for the farmers? Does a more significant role of MNCs lead to higher farmer income but a smaller environmental improvement?

The SDGs are still less than 3 years old, but already they are becoming a shared framework around which actor expectations and practices are beginning to converge. The existence of such focal points is reinforcing the turn to cross-sector partnerships as an important mechanism for achieving development goals. Thus, scholars of development, governance, collective action, and business strategy all have a stake in contributing to greater understanding of collaborative governance and its implications.

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