

Guest Article #65 From PPP to ABC: A New Partnership Approach for the SDGs

posted on: Tuesday, 11 October 2016

at <http://sd.iisd.org/guest-articles/from-ppp-to-abc-a-new-partnership-approach-for-the-sdgs/>



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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for a new partnership approach, or a “revitalized global partnership for sustainable development,” but how this Goal will be achieved is still unclear. Strengthening partnerships is central to the entire implementation approach of the SDGs. [Goal 17](#) includes targets to enhance Global Partnership for Sustainable Development complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships to encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships. The chapter on ‘Means of Implementation’ asserts that the entire 2030 Agenda will be judged on the success of partnership constructs and their implementation of every Goal.

The question we address is whether the envisioned revitalized global partnerships are fundamentally different from the most popular existing arrangement, namely Public-Private Partnerships (PPP). We argue that involving civil society in partnerships between governments and private sector on an equal basis will change not only how partnerships are understood, but also how they are implemented. There is a need to move from PPP to “ABC” partnerships, where Administration, Business and Civil society are partners on equal footing.

PPPs are About Cost-efficiency

A [Public-Private Partnership](#) (PPP) is a contractual collaboration between public and private actors, generally to provide what are traditionally public-sector services. The World Bank has promoted PPPs for more than 30 years. PPPs foster innovation and fill financing gaps for public infrastructure projects. In a PPP, public and private actors are seen as complementing each other, and leading to cost-effective ways to deliver public services.

Closely related to PPPs are Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs), as promoted since the 2002 Johannesburg Summit. While PPPs are contracts between a government and a company, MSPs are voluntary agreements between different stakeholders ([Hemmati & Dodds 2016](#)).

The PPP concept became very popular in the slipstream of the New Public Management (NPM) ideology from the 1980s onwards. The focus on cost-efficiency is important but this is *not* the main objective of the 2030 Agenda's vision of partnership, which emphasizes effectiveness (i.e. reaching the objectives) and inclusiveness. Over the years, PPPs have had successes and failures ([Beisheim et al.2014](#)). However, just “copy-pasting” PPP practice to the 2030 Agenda is no guarantee for success. Also MSPs do not ensure inclusiveness and result-orientation.

From PPP to ABC

The term public-private partnership defines who *owns* the partnership – public actors and private actors – and not what its *purpose* is. Partnerships for the SDGs should instead be described in a way that reflects the actors as well as their purposes.

We propose calling them ‘Administration-Business-Civil society (ABC) Partnerships.’ The administrative partners strive for solutions that serve the commons. The business partners strive to create added value, in a context of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development. Civil society organisations (CSOs) strive to maximize the interests of the groups/people/topics they represent, in a context of social responsibility and sustainable development.

ABC partnerships could be used to address a wide variety of issues, such as administrative decentralization, small-scale and direct democracy, access and participation in a transparent manner, green-growth, steady-state economy and the challenge of the growth paradigm, the implications of the precautionary principle, and the polluter pays principle.

SDG partnerships should have the serious and operational involvement of civil society. ABC partnerships therefore would require a goal-reorientation of all three parties. For administrative partners, the goal could be achieving concrete targets in alliance with societal partners while achieving mutual gains, instead of cost-saving or downsizing government. For business partners, corporate social responsibility could become an integrated objective, in addition to creating added value.

For CSO partners, the goal could be taking co-responsibility for solving societal challenges. Usually, however, CSOs interact with governments and businesses as advocates for

the common good. Advocacy includes lobbying, convincing, fund-raising, campaigning, protesting, as well as being a "watch dog." Engaging in partnerships on equal footing with their classical "opponents" will be a new challenge. CSOs who could see a role for themselves in ABC partnerships should be encouraged to learn from existing good practices in development programmes, where more experience has been gathered than for example in environmental programmes.

PPPs and MSPs have traditionally been implemented on a "North-South axis," within the aid-development paradigm. Dedicated CSOs have been involved in carrying out such "North-South" development projects. However, as the SDGs call for universal application, there is a need to develop a new implementation basis, with a new partnership philosophy and narrative, which will be different than in the past as regards purpose (better, not just cheaper results), vision (keep implementation holistic, inclusive and long-term oriented), scope (not only North-South, but also North-North and South-South), and roles (each of partners could take up a leadership role).

An important question is whether CSOs are interested, willing and capable of taking up new responsibility as actors in ABC partnerships. The challenge of developing CSOs' capacity to engage in ABC partnerships should not be underestimated. On the other hand, the UN Member States have agreed to SDG 17 and other references to partnerships in the 2030 Agenda, including a specific target (17.9) on support for capacity building in developing countries. Should one not expect that means to build capacity for new partnerships will be made available?

Will PPPs Transform into ABCs or Remain a Separate Model?

Unfortunately, several PPPs have left a legacy of large disasters, and these examples may serve to show what should not be repeated. One of the worst PPPs is perhaps the water project in Cochabamba in Bolivia ([Schiffler 2015](#)), where the Bolivian Government and a private company worked together for several years around 2000 to develop infrastructure for water supplies for the public. Partly funded by the World Bank and implemented by a private company more interested in profit than in serving the public, and with little serious support from the authorities, the project inspired large-scale riots followed by police brutality that left several people injured or killed.

Proposals have already been made to alter the use of PPPs in health. [Mininberg \(2016\)](#) analyzed whether stronger accountability measures could make PPPs more in line with the objectives of SDG 17. A case study on infant

feeding indicated that intimate involvement of the private sector is detrimental from the point of view of public health. Based on such examples, the study concluded that a traditional PPP approach to partnerships for the SDGs could undermine the 2030 Agenda. While not overgeneralizing from this conclusion, it is clear that the PPP approach has deficiencies, and should not serve as a blueprint going forward. A key part of the way forward will be to ensure accountability and transparency of all SDG partnerships, including ABCs. [Beisheim & Simon \(2016\)](#) have already drafted detailed proposals on this. In addition, agreement at the UN level on a set of guidelines and criteria will be important ([Beisheim 2012](#), [Beisheim & Simon 2016](#) and [Hemmati & Dodds 2016](#)).

PPPs should be transformed, or a separate type of partnership must be developed. Adding civil society to PPP as an afterthought is not enough: putting wings on a car doesn't ensure that it will fly; it is still a car.

Partnerships for the 2030 Agenda should be inclusive, with in principle an equal weight of CSOs, business and government organisations. ABC partnerships require new roles for each of the three partners, with research and capacity building for all partners to develop these partnerships. Criteria for success and prevention of failure of ABC partnerships could be distilled from existing good practices all-over the world: these practices will constitute the essence or as the English expression goes, the 'ABC' of partnerships for the SDGs.

Opinions in this piece reflect the personal views of the authors.

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