Taking the first steps in multi-stakeholder partnerships: practical tips

Complex challenges relating to the 2030 Agenda often require a cooperative approach in which various stakeholders work together. Initiating and implementing multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) can be a complex process, however. At the halfway mark of the 2030 Agenda, it is clear that all stakeholder groups need to pull together as partners to find a way of overcoming the multiple challenges. As emphasised in Unite to Ignite, a report published in connection with the 2023 SDG Summit, cooperating as partners is the right way to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

These guidelines provide practical recommendations and tips for taking the first steps in MSPs. During the first phase of an MSP, the initiation phase, the focus is on developing an understanding of the problem, getting stakeholders involved and outlining the approach. Relevant success factors include good cooperation management and a comprehensive context analysis. The guidelines address the following key questions: What is the best way to start a partnership, and what points need to be considered when doing so?

1.
POTENTIAL FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE
cross-sectoral societal problem

2.
CONTEXT ANALYSIS
idea/motivation to tackle the challenge

3.
STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT
Networking and exchange between potential

4.
SPECIFYING THE GOALS AND INTENTIONS
Content work and structure of organisation

5.
TRANSITION TO THE SECOND MSP PHASE

1. Potential for transformative change

As a format, MSPs have the potential to initiate transformative change and to help overcome development challenges together in a sustainable manner. Adopting a cooperative approach and including relevant stakeholders from various fields are the key to success. However, MSPs are not always the preferred format, as they may require a great deal of time and resources.

The idea of starting a new partnership or cooperation may be motivated by various factors. The most important thing at the beginning, however, is to explore the potential for initiating an MSP and to carry out the necessary preparatory work for the process of setting up this kind of partnership. An MSP may be prompted by political, social, or economic interest in a topic. For example, existing pressure to act generates political momentum, a high level of media and political interest and a willingness to enter into

a partnership with other stakeholders. A precondition is that stakeholders must be unable to address a complex challenge on their own and must see distinct added value in cooperating with stakeholders from various fields. An initial positive response indicating a shared understanding of the objective, or the problem is also very important in initiating an MSP successfully.

Partnerships can be initiated by individuals, organisations, or companies. The Partnership for Sustainable Textiles was initiated by stakeholders from the public sector in response to an acute crisis, for example, and the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI) emerged from a scientific study combined with general interest in the topic, while the German Initiative on Sustainable Cocoa and the Forum for Sustainable Palm Oil were formed as a result of companies' economic interests. Existing partnerships address topics

such as the unsustainable extraction of and manufacturing of products or aim to tackle corruption, a lack of transparency in supply chains and human rights violations.

Practical advice

- Weighing up whether an MSP would be suitable: Is setting up an MSP the right way to achieve this goal? (Page 20, MSP Guide)

2. Context analysis

A context analysis is used to explore the environment in which a potential new MSP might operate. This involves researching which MSP approaches or initiatives already exist. The aim is to understand the context and to examine whether and how the MSP would be compatible with existing structures. This is important in order to avoid creating duplicate structures or rival initiatives. Activities by other stakeholders in the sector and relevant general conditions can be researched and evaluated. Particular attention should be devoted to any general obstacles that might stand in the way of cooperation between various stakeholders.

Context analyses are an important step before systematically addressing potential partners, but they should be supplemented by ongoing talks and exchanges with these stakeholders.

Practical advice

- Clarifying the context of a new partnership: What general conditions do stakeholders need to be aware of and take into account? Is there already a partnership working on this topic? Does it make sense to set up another partnership?

> **Tool**
> - Acquiring a better understanding of the complex situation: Tool 3

3. Stakeholder management

3.1 Stakeholder analysis

The aim of a stakeholder analysis is to identify relevant actors in the private sector, public sector, civil society and academia in the relevant field at global and/or national level. Relevant stakeholders can be (1) identified and (2) prioritised and a suggestion can be drawn up regarding (3) the number, sequence and method of future talks. The stakeholder analysis is validated by the initiators as a team and may be conducted in the form of desk research. In addition, it may be supplemented by the findings of the talks and interviews scheduled to take place with stakeholders, the mobilisation of existing networks or open exchange between potential partners.

3.2 Setting up the core group

A core group comprises stakeholders who are particularly interested and committed, have a vision and are very keen to initiate and activate an MSP. It is often vital to find stakeholders such as these to ensure that an MSP is successful, so this needs to already be considered during the stakeholder analysis and should be systematically incorporated into the subsequent discussions.

Building trust is particularly important when dealing with stakeholders and potential partners. Focusing on trust and transparency and showing respect for one another are fundamental elements of a future partnership in which compromises are reached, decisions are taken, and all stakeholders are happy to cooperate voluntarily. Consciously dealing with power imbalances helps ensure that potential cooperation takes the form of a constructive partnership between equals.

Practical advice

- Stakeholder mapping: Which stakeholders are interested/relevant in the area concerned? What existing networks can be mobilised?

- Setting up a core group: Which stakeholders are key actors? Who should definitely express their support?

- Early and ongoing stakeholder analysis: Which other stakeholders/partners are there? How can further stakeholders join the partnership (with examination of due diligence)?

- An MSP can also be set up with just a few partners to allow it to begin work sooner. More partners can join them later.

- Recruit (prominent and high-ranking) advocates of the partnership in order to enhance its profile and make it more attractive.

- Develop, strengthen and continually ensure trust, credibility and transparency. Arrange discussions and meetings (both formal and informal) in person with a view to fostering exchange, building trust and providing a forum for facilitation and mediation.

Tools
- Stakeholder mapping: Tools 5, 12
- Understanding for stakeholder groups: Tool 2
- Different roles within the group: Tools 11, 27, 29, 35
- Relations and mood within the group: Tools 30, 42
- Keeping stakeholders involved: Tools 50, 59

4. Specifying the goals and intentions

An MSP's potential depends on the extent to which the identified stakeholders exhibit a willingness to cooperate and and agree on a common direction. There needs to be a shared understanding of the transformative change that an MSP is designed to initiate. Talks or interviews with relevant stakeholders from the private sector, civil society, the public sector and academia enable the stakeholders' needs to be recorded, their different ways of working to be understood, further partners for the potential MSP to be identified and possible activities under an MSP to be outlined in more detail.

These talks can also be used to secure support from relevant stakeholders and to attract stakeholders as members of the core group. The focus here is on establishing relations, initiating ownership and trust, and raising awareness about the MSP approach.

More specifically, steps need to be taken to establish whether there is any interest in an MSP in the area; for which specific ideas and possible activities there is seen to be a need to initiate an MSP; what the added value would be for the different stakeholder groups if they took part in the MSP; what contributions the individual stakeholders could make (including expertise, networks, knowledge, financial resources, time, inputs in kind). Interview guidelines by way of example (see under Tools) can provide a guide for these kinds of questions.

Potential for further initiation of an MSP exists, if relevant stakeholders can agree on objectives, a vision and basic activities.

Practical advice

- Specifying the potential of an MSP: What shared vision do the stake-holders have? What do they hope to achieve through this partnership?
- Outlining cooperation: What topics could the partners work on? What approach would be possible?
- Manage the expectations of the stakeholders taking part.
- It takes time and patience: take your time (as little as possible but as much as necessary).
- Red lines: Individual stakeholders define what they can and will agree to do and communicate this as transparently as possible.

Tools
- Interview guidelines providing examples for talks with stakeholders
- Defining the problem: Tools 1, 8, 14
- Defining the goal: see Tool 41
- Managing expectations: Tool 38
- Reflection: Tools 56, 57, 60
- Communication: Tool 37

5. Transition to phase 2 (Design)

During phase 2 (Design), the focus is on designing the vision and reaching initial agreements. The partners agree on objectives, roles and performance indicators. Finally, agreements are drawn up in writing, for example in the form of a memorandum of understanding, and formal structures are specified for management, decision-making and communication processes. Important success factors are related to a common strategy and planning for the future and to process management.

Ideally, the stakeholders should already agree on working modes at this stage, too, which will accompany and shape cooperation. Answering the key questions 'What shape will cooperation take?' and 'How will decisions be taken?' will help to determine initial structures on which the content of the MSP can be based on.

Practical advice

- Define and communicate the roles and needs of each stakeholder clearly.
- Designing decision-making structures: possibly set them out in writing in a code of conduct; take account of long decision-making processes when planning a partnership.
- Specify communication channels, particularly for internal discussions; communicate small 'milestones' and progress internally, but avoid premature external communication of results before they are definite.
- Define milestones and interim goals.
- Engage in regular and self-critical reflection, even during the process and the other initial steps. even during the process and the other initial steps.
- Keep the area of action and work as small and specific as possible.
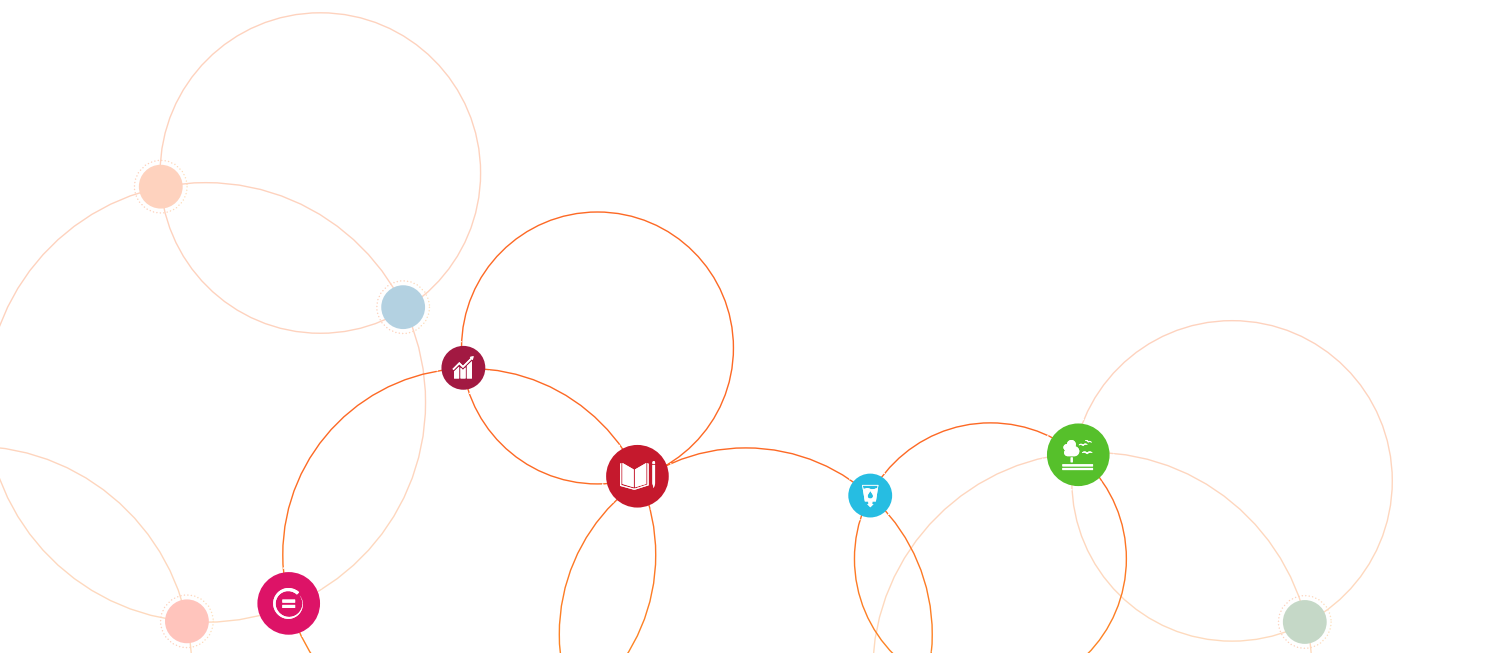- Define responsibilities clearly: Who owns what?

Tools
- Lay down rules: Tools 9, 22
- Carry out, extend and communicate decision-making processes: Tools 28, 44, 46

6. Challenges across different phases

Initiating and implementing an MSP can give rise to challenges that are best addressed in a creative and agile way, with an open mind and a bold approach. Here are a few examples:

- **Resources:** Where do the financial resources, time and staff come from to launch a partnership? See Financing MSPs

- **Impacts:** How can an MSP generate and demonstrate impacts? See Impacts of MSPs

- **Institutionalisation:** How will cooperation be structured and organised? See Institutionalisation

- **Equal participation:** Do all the stakeholders have an equal say in the partnership? How are decisions taken? See Decision-making

- **Building trust:** How can the stakeholders develop mutual trust? How can misunderstandings and prejudices be overcome? See Conflicts in MSPs