

# Impact and Impact Assessment of Multi-Stakeholder Partnership (MSP) Support Platforms

## Tips and tricks from research and practice

Multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) are recognized as an essential tool to implement the 2030 Agenda. Platforms for MSPs offer support services such as incubating partnerships, facilitating knowledge exchange, peer learning and generally strengthening MSPs. This special role of MSP Support Platforms requires elaborate tools of impact assessment, which differ from those of [MSPs](#) or projects and are still being developed.

In this context, an international group of platform representatives and experts from the field met for a three-day peer learning workshop in November 2019 in Costa Rica, which was hosted by [Partnerships2030](#), the Platform for Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for Implementing the 2030 Agenda and [ALIARSE](#). Based on that workshop, this document summarizes the key issues and offers tips and tricks from research and practice for impact assessment of MSP Support Platforms. The document is structured as follows:

- 1. Distinguishing MSP Support Platforms from MSPs**
- 2. Understanding impact and impact assessment in the context of MSP Support Platforms**
- 3. Impact ideal vs. impact reality of MSP Support Platforms: unfolding the concepts**
- 4. Examples of MSP Support Platform impact assessment**
- 5. Impact assessment challenges**
- 6. Towards a common customizable tool**
- 7. Identifying needs for future research**

## 1. Distinguishing MSP Support Platforms from MSPs

In MSPs as well as MSP Support Platforms complex challenges are addressed through collaboration of multiple stakeholders. However, since both have different purposes and structures, their reasons for impact assessment also differ. Therefore, it is necessary to make a distinction between them. In a broad sense, MSPs usually have a specific mission, with the potential to demonstrate impact in a particular issue area. MSP Support Platforms tend to have a less direct relationship to ultimate impact, as they focus more on creating conditions for multiple MSPs to be effective, each in their particular issue area. MSP Support Platforms support and catalyze collaboration, whereas MSPs deliver collaborative action.

Some commonly used definitions include the following:

MSP Support Platform	Multi-Stakeholder Partnership	Hybrid forms
<p>“[A]n ongoing collaborative relationship between or among organisations from different stakeholder types aligning their interests, combining their complementary resources and competencies and sharing risk, to maximise value creation towards the Sustainable Development Goals and deliver organisational benefit to each of the partners.” (TPI and UNDESA, 2020)</p> <p>“Platforms for Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs) support MSPs by providing good practice on relevant issues for cooperation within an MSP, facilitating knowledge exchange and peer-learning, and generally supporting MSPs at every stage, from incubating new MSPs to support the impact assessment of existing ones.” (GIZ Partnerships2030, 2019)</p>	<p>“A multi-stakeholder partnership is a cooperation arrangement between a variety of actors that jointly engage in a process of dialogue and action to solve a specific problem.” (Vermeulen &amp; Woodhill, 2008)</p> <p>“MSPs ... jointly assum[e] risks and responsibilities ... combining their resources and competencies to achieve common partnership goals.” (TPI, 2016)</p> <p>“A form of cooperation with the following four characteristics: Stakeholders from at least three different sectors (business / civil society / government / academia) ... work together on equal footing... through an organized, and long-term engagement ... in order to contribute to the common good.” (GIZ Partnerships2030, 2015)</p>	<p>There are some forms of collaboration that cannot be categorized into either MSP Support Platform or MSP. These hybrid forms demonstrate characteristics of both.</p>
<p><b>Examples:</b> <a href="#">Partnerships2030</a>, <a href="#">ALIARSE</a></p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> <a href="#">Forum for Sustainable Palm Oil (FONAP)</a>, <a href="#">Alliance for Integrity</a></p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> <a href="#">Grow Africa</a>, <a href="#">IDH The Sustainable Trade Initiative</a></p>

## 2. Understanding impact and impact assessment in the context of MSP Support Platforms

With any initiative in this context there is an objective to bring about change.

**Impact** is the change that happens as a result of an action. A first question MSP Support Platforms therefore need to ask is: What do we aim to change? These changes encompass the positive and negative, direct and indirect, intended and unintended, and long-term effects produced by the platform.

**Impact assessment** assesses the implications of actions and lays out what has been achieved. The processes involve monitoring, evaluating and adapting indicators that have been set in the planning stage.

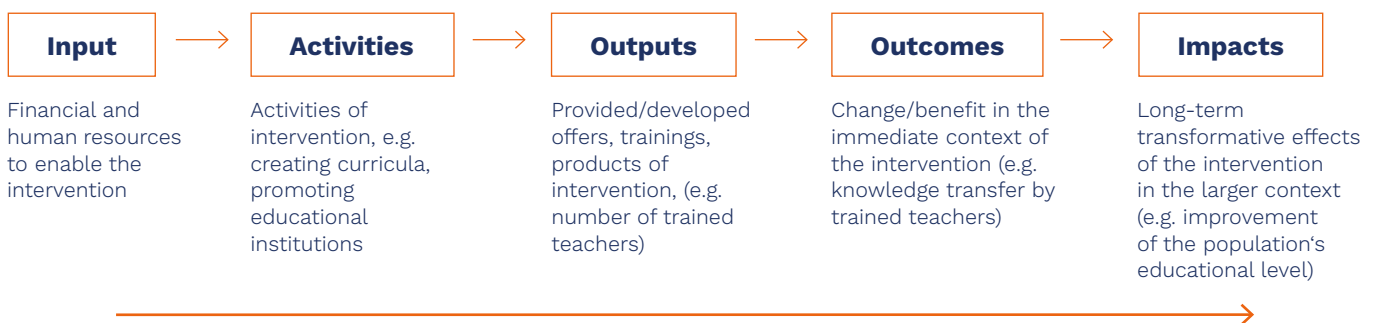
**Systemic change:** The world functions in systems with several interrelated sub-systems that are dynamic, complex and follow a non-linear logic. To understand such systems, they have to be regarded as one but at the same time taking into account the sub-systems and their effects and interrelations. Systemic change happens when the entire system is affected by reformation and transformation on every individual level. Systems change involves shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place – instead of approaching the problem with a single solution.

There are various forms to assess impact. For instance, through numerical measures. An example is counting the amount of trees that have been planted through an initiative or the clicks per newsletter when assessing who has read specific information. Yet, not all impact can be quantified. Therefore, a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators is usually necessary. In fact, impact can, for example, also be the level of trust improved in a community of practice.

These different approaches point to a theoretical divide between naturalist thinking vs. complexity/systems thinking. The definition of impact is quite abstract and presupposes a linear model. However, due to the complexity of systems and the interrelatedness of surrounding factors, impacts are often non-linear, which impedes accurate numerical impact assessment. According to the OECD, impact goes beyond numerical indices. It addresses the significance of an intervention, and what happens as a result of it, perhaps even supporting transformative effects. Therefore, and due to its meta-level function, MSP Support Platforms' impact can be better captured on the systems level by combining a naturalist and a systems approach. MSP Partnership Support Platforms might develop SDG (Sustainable Development Goals)-related impact indirectly through the MSPs they support. Numerous factors may influence the effectiveness and impact of MSPs that are beyond the sphere of influence of the platform.

### Understanding impact: the OECD/DAC impact chain

A tool that can be used to consider impact is the impact chain by the OECD/DAC. It is relevant to understand that impacts differ from outputs and outcomes.



### 3. Impact ideal vs. impact reality of MSP Support Platforms: unfolding the concepts

Why is it necessary to assess impact at all? Due to organizational structures and requirements (e.g. project-based public funding) and the need to provide evidence for results, impact assessment has to be done in order for initiatives to be assessable and accountable. In addition to that, it has a learning function. Reasons and motivations (why) to assess impact vary and influence what is measured and how it is measured.

In an ideal world impact assessment would closely align with the efforts undertaken to reach the ultimate goal of an initiative, involve detailed assessment schemes and enough human capacity to monitor and evaluate all pertinent information, and capture all that is needed to accurately demonstrate the impact of an initiative. In addition, assessing impact should serve the dual purposes of learning and accountability, as for continued improvement of an initiative, systematized learning is necessary.

Yet, the “impact reality” sometimes falls short of the ideal, due to lack of appropriate resources and time. Typically, reasons to assess impact are to

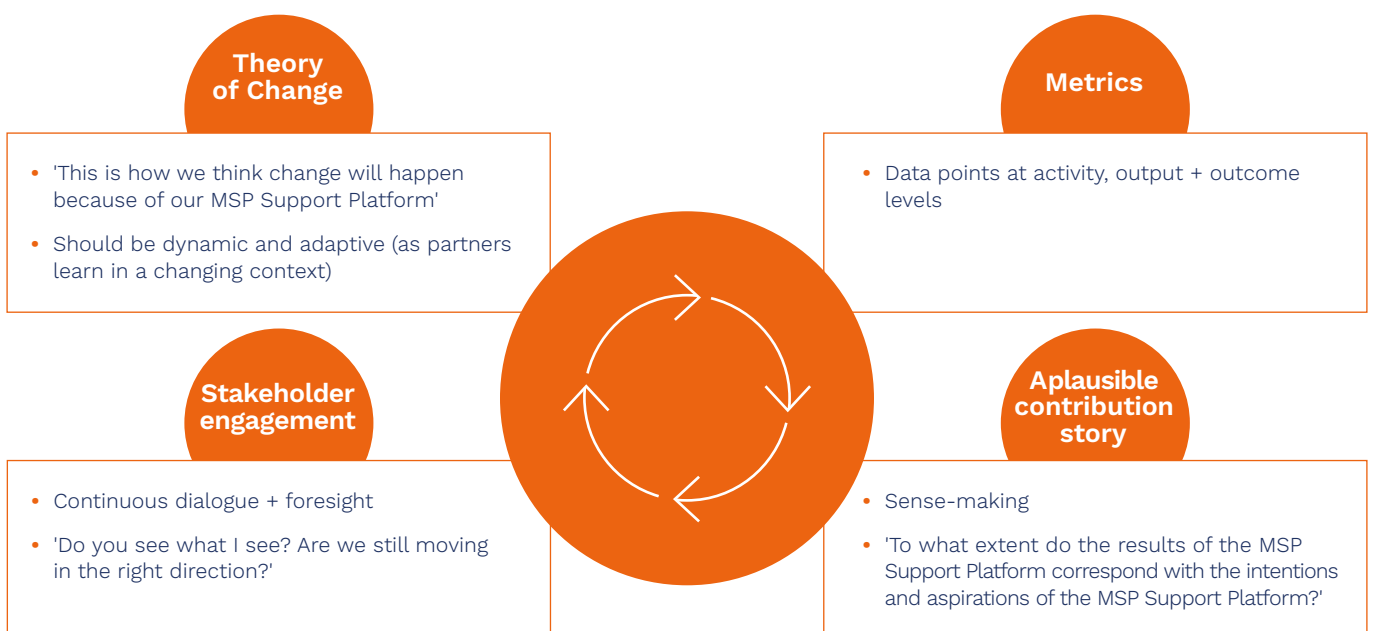
report to donors, members, other users or platform backbone organizations, to increase credibility and/or legitimacy, integrate learning, or improve outputs.

#### Exemplary forms of MSP Support Platform impact assessment:

- **Participative evaluation** with platform partners through quantitative surveys including predetermined criteria.
- **Qualitative interviews** with platform partners as they provide testimonials which can be used for adding a feedback loop to integrate learning as well as communicating impact stories.
- **Quarterly/biannual/annual reviews** of indicators and action and impact categorization.
- **Periodical meetings of stakeholders** to allow feedback and learning in person.

### Impact assessment of MSP Support Platforms: Practical Tips

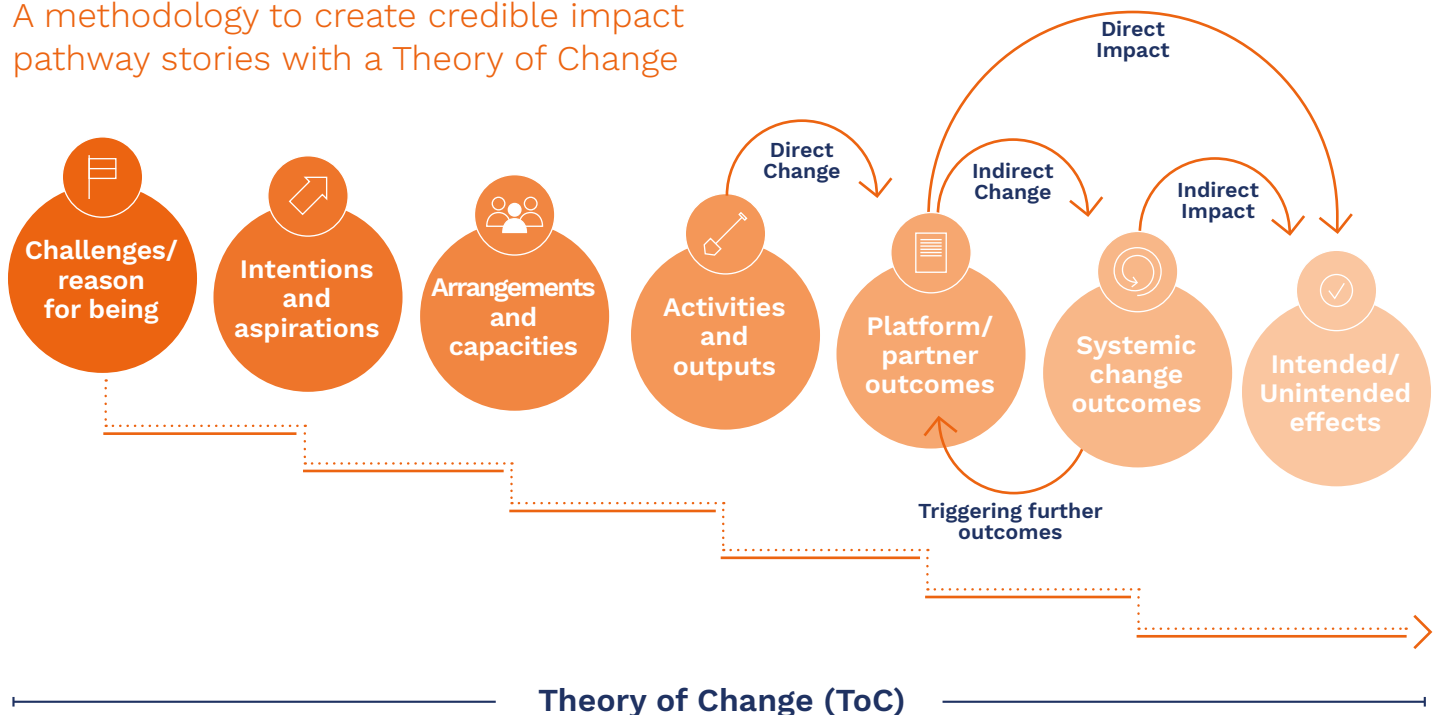
When an MSP Support Platform assesses its impact, it can appear as if a choice has to be made between either the naturalist or the systemic approach. In fact, a combination of both approaches based on a solid Theory of Change (ToC) and embedded in stakeholder engagement is possible.



## Theory of Change

A ToC comprehensively describes how a desired change will happen and what will happen to reach this change through a planned program. It starts with setting a long-term goal and then identifying backwards the necessary causal steps with activities and interventions that have to be fulfilled in order to reach the final goal. It essentially describes the logic of an intervention and links the outcomes to its mission. The [OECD](#) defines it as: “a description of the cascade of cause and effect leading from an intervention to its desired effects”. Designing a meaningful ToC is a vital step in the planning process and can steer the impact of a program or an intervention. The picture below illustrates a Theory of Change and depicts where direct and indirect change and impact occur.

### A methodology to create credible impact pathway stories with a Theory of Change



From Evidence for MSPlatforms in Agrifood (WCDCI, IDS, TPI and others; for Rockefeller Foundation) [www.msplatforms.org](http://www.msplatforms.org)

## Metrics

The metrics for impact assessment are a system of indicators that enables the tracking and evaluation of the change caused by the intervention.

For identifying suitable metrics applying the [CART criteria](#) can be helpful by asking the following questions:

### Is the metric...

- credible — is the outcome a credible reflection of what was intended?
- actionable — is what you measure useful evidence to change course if there is a need?
- responsible — is the extent of your impact assessment program within a reasonable realm?
- transportable — is it understood why an impact was achieved and therefore, can the same indicator be applied in a different context?

Metrics are important, mainly for tracking activities, outputs and outcomes. It is difficult if not impossible to measure impact, which is typically on a systemic level, in a quantitative way. Qualitative information can be helpful for a narrative related to the impact.

## Sense-making

A plausible contribution story of the impact of a platform is necessary. This can help identify the actual change that has been triggered due to your action. It is important to gain clarity in how far this impact can be attributed to a platform’s actions or to something else.

## Stakeholder engagement

MSP Support Platforms typically cooperate with numerous stakeholders. Engaging these stakeholders in impact assessment can be beneficial. As a platform that is supporting MSPs it is important to be in continuous dialogue with stakeholders. This helps MSP Support Platforms to ensure that stakeholders are kept engaged in the impact assessment process. In addition, getting an idea of what MSPs have achieved through platform support and consultation can indicate an indirect impact. Yet, it is difficult to attribute positive effects clearly to the platforms’ support.

Helpful questions to ask:

- What are the changes that could be observed since the implementation of XY?
- Can these, and which of these, changes be attributed to XY?
- Did these changes make a difference? If so, what difference?

## 4. Examples of MSP Support Platform impact assessment

ALIARSE	Grow Africa	Partnerships2030
<p>ALIARSE assesses impact mainly for two reasons: to get inputs for decision-making, as well as a tool for designing the future. They use a mixed method approach of qualitative and quantitative impact assessment and emphasize the aspect of collaborative learning. For qualitative data ALIARSE asks organizations they supported for recorded testimonials, using two key questions: ‘What would you consider is the essential contribution (added value) of an MSP as an instrument for development?’, and: ‘How would you rate ALIARSE’s role in that process?’ The quantitative methods consist of questionnaire application.</p>	<p>Since Grow Africa works with private sector investment in the agricultural sector, the hybrid platform uses Term Sheets to identify and quantify impact areas. A Term Sheet is a document signed between two or more parties that summarizes the principal terms of a proposed investment by a company in a specific country. Further to this, Term Sheets are developed for the purpose of facilitating the required approvals from the government to aid the actualization of the proposed investment. Term Sheets contain information about the involved parties, investment amount and purpose, timing, conditions, obligations, etc. Based on quantitative surveys, reviews and annual progress reports, the impact of said investments is then assessed.</p>	<p>Partnerships2030 uses an impact assessment matrix that is designed according to their project set-up, and matching the project goals, implying module goals within the project timeframe. They use mainly numerical forms of measurement, such as analyzing the increase of newsletter subscriptions, and evaluating surveys, for example, several impact surveys over a period of time after an event.</p>



## 5. Impact assessment challenges

There is no one solution that offers a ‘one size fits all’ method to adequately assess impact, since every MSP Support Platform is different. Synthesis of experiences of impact assessment processes and methods nevertheless helps to increase learning about which methods tend to work best for platform impact assessment. Platforms typically face the following challenges when assessing impact:

- **Attribution problem:** Often certain outcomes are ascribed to certain activities without being able to prove the implied causality.
- **Additionality problem:** Sometimes observed impacts are mistakenly seen as a contribution because of a certain activity. It is therefore important to observe the contribution of the platform to the impact and whether the platform has caused the impact or whether this impact could have been observed anyway.
- **Assessment design:** Impact assessment systems are often designed to provide timely information rather than do rigorous assessments. A key difficulty is to find a balance between the daily tasks, other priorities and the long-term use for good M&E.
- **Standardization issue:** Standardized tools of impact assessment exist but are not sufficiently

adapted for MSP Support Platforms. External experts could be of help to apply standardized tools to non-standard situations.

- **Difficulty of assessing certain variables:** Some variables are inherently difficult to adequately and objectively assess, for example, the culture or trust of collaboration in MSP Support Platforms or the wider stakeholder landscape. It is a challenge to ensure that such factors are included in the impact assessment.
- **Verification issue:** Verifying numbers can be a challenge and double reporting issues can arise.
- **Long chain of evidence:** An increased difficulty lies in the longer chain of evidence for MSP Support Platforms, as they are more detached from the ultimate impact and, therefore, need more elaborate forms of impact assessment.
- **Engagement issue:** For platforms with participative impact assessment a key challenge can be to engage all stakeholders equally in the assessment.

It is best to establish an impact assessment system as early as possible, yet, it is never too late to start.

The following text box asks guiding questions to consider when initiating or adapting a platforms’ impact assessment system:

### Self-assessment questions to create or adapt impact assessment

#### Why? – Purpose of impact assessment

Reasons for assessing impact include accountability, learning, increased credibility and legitimacy, testing underlying assumptions, exploring scaling potential and understanding how MSP Support Platforms work. Impact assessment can serve various target groups such as members, users, donors or platform backbone organizations.

#### What? – Assessing intended & unintended, positive & negative, direct & indirect impact

Being explicit about the impact of MSP Support Platforms can be challenging. Merely focusing on obvious performance measurement can often disregard unintended, negative and indirect impact. It is important to align form and functionality of impact assessment according to assessment needs. The function (purpose) of impact assessment is usually defined first. The form (how it is done) follows.

**Where? – Capturing impact as synergy at interrelated levels**

Impact can be created at various levels – e.g. changes in the system of society as a result of platform actions, between individual members of the MSP Support Platform or within member organizations through their engagement. This can happen explicitly or implicitly, i.e. an outcome that was not formulated as a goal to be met. But in the attempt to assess impact the focus should rather be on comprehensible and not comprehensive impact assessment.

**When? – Time horizon of impact**

An expected time horizon for the intended impact should be set by the MSP Support Platform and its stakeholders.

**Who? – Participatory approaches and stakeholder engagement in impact assessment**

When deciding on who will do the assessment, a combination of external expert assessment and platform self-assessment can be established. Participative assessment approaches are desirable, but are dependent on the purpose, capacity, availability of tools, role of backbone organization participation and engagement of members and stakeholders as well as the available budget.

**How? – Attribution: being realistic about attributing and aggregating results**

Often, standardized tools are used to assess impact and these tools do not sufficiently recognize the diversity of platforms. Moreover, due to dependency issue of reporting to interested parties, timely information is required which inhibits rigorous assessment. This can lead to attributing impacts to the wrong source. Yet, there is an increasing interest in methods for impact assessment (e.g. impact pathways, process tracing). The key is to put a focus on a combination of approach, process and impact.

**So what? – Contextualising individual impact**

MSP Support Platforms are diverse and aim to reach diverse goals with diverse indicators. Hence, the impact they have is difficult to compare. Therefore, being realistic about attribution claims is important: Clarify what the impact can be attributed to and what the additionality is really about. Rather than making attribution claims, the focus should be on the individual contribution of the platform.

## 6. Towards a common customizable tool

Being clear about the platform's objective and synthesizing it with project indicators is the basis for impact assessment. Yet, MSP Support Platforms are diverse and have different functions. But sometimes platforms occupy a double role as broker of an MSP as well as supporting it and the MSP's environment. With this in mind, it can seem difficult for each platform to find the relevant indicators for impact assessment, and tools to map them that are standardized, yet are able to acknowledge the uniqueness of each platform. While the impact of a platform also includes what an MSP or a hybrid form have achieved through the platform, a useful way to capture this in an interconnected way to think of the systematization as a spectrum that differentiates between three organizational types:

- MSP Support Platforms
- Hybrid Platforms
- MSPs / Collective Impact Partnerships

In doing so, specific needs and focus areas of each become visible, which can help refine impact assessment. Attempting to develop a customizable tool is useful against this background.



The Spectrum of Partnerships and Partnership Support Platforms Self-Assessment<sup>1</sup> depicts a universal approach to impact assessment to identify specific needs depending on the type of organization. The figure below shows an excerpt of the Spectrum. Organizations can situate themselves in the Spectrum. It outlines which types of impacts which type of organization typically aims to achieve and contains several focal points that show their importance depending on the type of organization.

	← <b>MSP Support Platform</b>	↔ <b>Hybrid Platform</b> ↔	↔ <b>MSP / Collective Impact Partnership</b> →
<b>Vision / mission</b>	SDG 17: To promote and support partnerships that deliver development impact.	A platform itself has a specific, overarching mission, facilitates a portfolio of partnerships, each with their own sub-goals, towards the mission.	A partnership has a specific mission (e.g. to increase sustainability of a supply chain), delivered collectively by the partners.
<b>Who delivers towards the SDGs?</b>	The catalysed partnerships	Catalysed partnerships plus the secretariat	The partners (often supported by a backbone organization)
<b>Specificity of the ultimate impact</b>	Low	Medium	High
<b>Member engagement level</b>	Low	Medium	High
<b>Impact on enabling environment</b>	High	Medium/high	Medium
<b>Partnership support</b>	High	Medium/high	Low/medium
<b>Directness of final SDG (1-16) impact</b>	Low	Medium	High
<b>Examples</b>	<a href="#">Zambia Business in Development Facility</a>	<a href="#">Grow Africa</a>	<a href="#">Partnership for Sustainable Textiles</a>

<sup>1</sup> The Spectrum is a work in progress and will be further developed by the MSP Support Platforms Community. It includes several more detailed categories under the headings enabling environment and partnership support and can be requested from TPI and Partnerships2030.

### How to read the Spectrum:

- Low** relevance
- Medium** relevance
- High** relevance

#### Vision/mission:

This category states the overall vision or mission of each organisational type.

#### Who delivers towards the SDGs?:

This category points out which stakeholders typically have a direct effect on the SDGs in each organizational type.

#### Specificity of the ultimate impact:

This category classifies how specific the objective of the entity is. Generic SDG 17 Platforms may be SDG-agnostic and will support any partnership, irrespective of their focus (i.e. they do not have their own specific mission). Hybrid platforms will narrow down their mission within one or more SDGs. MSPs or Collective Impact Partnerships will have specific objectives they intend to deliver.

#### Member engagement level:

This category shows the level of engagement of members of each organizational type. MSP Support Platforms engage a variety of stakeholders (their ‘members’) through roundtables, partnership training, ideation labs etc. – i.e. are providing services

to stakeholders, with lower levels of engagement. In MSPs/Collective Impact Partnerships engagement is high, since partners are collectively involved in delivery.

#### Impact on enabling environment:

This category points at the impact on the enabling environment for Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships: the framework that enables and encourages partnering. While MSPs contribute to the enabling environment by operating an MSP, the impact on the enabling environment is even higher for MSP Support Platforms, whose vision/mission directly supports a more enabling environment.

#### Partnership support:

This category states the intensity or level of support provided for partnerships and partnering activities, such as brokering partnerships or accessing financial support.

#### Directness of final SDG (1–16) impact:

This category shows how direct the final impact on the SDG (1–16) is. This is higher for MSPs, as they are directly delivering collaborative action towards the SDGs. MSP Support Platforms, on the other hand, are a step removed: the purpose is to develop MSPs, and those partnerships then deliver the impact.

## 7. Identifying needs for future research

Throughout this document, several discussion points were highlighted that need to be further refined and researched in the context of impact assessment of MSP Support Platforms.

First and foremost, it was suggested in the beginning that the impact of MSP Support Platforms rather happens on the systems level aiming for systemic change. However, based on the state of the art, good practices that can provide evidence for their systemic impact are lacking, and proven methods to monitor and evaluate systemic change have not been published and widely used. In addition to this, guidance tools and indicators for systemic change are missing. Therefore, more research and practical examples are needed to acquire this information.

Still, there are more gaps to be filled with information of what is needed for improved impact assessment:

- Development of M&E systems that imply systemic change indicators
- Case studies on impact assessment of business stakeholders
- Information on how to move from assessing output to assessing impact
- Case studies on impact assessment with public stakeholders (e.g. governments)
- Information on the constituents of impact



The following list presents needs for capacity and skill development for improved impact assessment:

- Human capacity and skills are needed to bring together knowledge and tools
- Capacity needs to be built to be able to combine metrics and apply sense-making methods with anecdotal and contextual evidence
- Technical skills to assess impact need to be improved
- Capacities need to be built to apply different methodologies to assess impact

The MSP Support Platform Community, who contributed to the development of this document, will keep working on the topic of impact and impact assessment of MSP Support Platforms. If you are interested to join, do not hesitate to [contact us](#).

## Further readings

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[www.partnerschaften2030.org](http://www.partnerschaften2030.org)  
[info@partnerschaften2030.de](mailto:info@partnerschaften2030.de)

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For further tips and tricks for MSPs please check:

[First Steps](#), [Institutionalisation](#) and [Impact and Impact Assessment in MSPs](#).