



Multistakeholder partnerships after a decade of sustainable development goals: synergies, effectiveness, legitimacy and the future of sustainability governance

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1 Introduction: MSPs and the global politics of sustainable development

The adoption of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 marked a significant shift in global governance. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) institutionalized a vision of sustainable development as integrated, universal, and transformative. The 2030 Agenda also reaffirmed multistakeholder partnerships (MSPs) as central implementation mechanisms (UN General Assembly, 2015; Bäckstrand et al., 2022; Higham et al., 2024), not only through SDG 17, but also through the broader “whole-of-society” approach embedded throughout the Agenda. Partnerships between governments, international organizations, businesses, civil society, scientific actors, and local communities were expected to bridge governance gaps, mobilize resources, foster innovation, and address the complex interdependencies among social, economic, and environmental goals, while improving legitimacy and justice.

This Special Issue emerges at a critical moment for global sustainability governance. More than ten years after the adoption of the SDGs, implementation is significantly off track (Pattberg & Bäckstrand, 2023). The 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report docu-

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mented widespread stagnation and reversal across several goals (United Nations, 2023), while geopolitical fragmentation, war, climate emergencies, democratic backsliding, and economic crises have created a context increasingly described as a “poly-crisis”. This is understood as the interaction and mutual amplification of multiple crises across climate change, geopolitics, economics, and democratic governance (Lawrence et al., 2024; Brosig, 2025). In parallel, support for multilateralism and the UN order has weakened, while political backlash against climate policy and the 2030 Agenda have intensified in several regions, reflecting broader contestations of liberal multilateralism and global governance authority (Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Zürn, 2018). The return of the Trump administration has further intensified skepticism toward multilateral cooperation and the SDGs, including explicit criticism of the 2030 Agenda and UN-centered governance initiatives (Taggart & Faude, 2025). This editorial argues that understanding the future of MSPs requires moving beyond the study of individual partnerships toward analyzing their role within increasingly contested, hybrid and polycentric systems of global sustainability governance.

Against this backdrop, the articles in this Special Issue critically examine whether and how MSPs can contribute to transformative governance for sustainable development and accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The issue builds on the Transformative Partnerships research project (2020–2026), which investigated the synergies, effectiveness, and legitimacy of MSPs across diverse governance domains and SDGs.¹ The project plan was written in relatively calm waters compared to the extraordinary period from 2020 onwards, marked by turbulence: the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating geopolitical conflict, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the wars in the Middle East, the global energy crisis, recession and intensified climate impacts. This fundamentally reshaped the political and institutional environment in which partnerships operate (Lawrence et al., 2024; Faude & Karlsrud, 2025). These developments revealed both the potential resilience and the fragility of partnership-based governance in the multilateral system that is under pressure under the current reform agenda of the UN (UN80) and wider debates on institutional reform, legitimacy, and the future relevance of the UN system (Durch et al., 2025; Khan, 2025; Dijkstra et al., 2025; Helgason, 2026). More broadly, these developments reflect a wider transformation of global governance characterized by increasing contestation over the authority, legitimacy, and effectiveness of multilateral institutions. Rather than operating in a stable liberal international order, MSPs now function within an increasingly fragmented and politically contested governance landscape, where international organizations themselves face growing pressures to adapt and demonstrate continued relevance (Zürn, 2018; Börzel & Zürn, 2021).

The Special Issue contributes to the long-standing scholarship on MSPs for sustainable development during the past two decades since the adoption of partnerships at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. Earlier generations of partnership research emphasized institutional design, participation, and the ability of partnerships to fill implementation gaps left by states and intergovernmental organizations (Bäckstrand, 2006; Pattberg et al., 2012; Beisheim & Liese, 2014; Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016). More recent research has focused on MSPs as instruments of “governance through goals” (Kanie & Biermann, 2017; Biermann et al., 2022), exploring their capacity to facilitate sustainability transformations, govern SDG interactions, and mobilize cross-sectoral

¹ Transformative partnerships for sustainable development: Assessing synergies, effectiveness, and legitimacy of the UN’s multi-stakeholder partnerships across SDGs to achieve the 2030 Agenda, funded by the Swedish Research Council on Sustainable Development (Formas, 2020–00418).

collaboration. Yet empirical evidence remains mixed. While MSPs are frequently celebrated as flexible and innovative governance arrangements, many studies identify persistent problems related to effectiveness, accountability, fragmentation, and legitimacy.

This editorial advances four main arguments. First, MSPs remain highly heterogeneous governance arrangements whose capacities depend strongly on political context, institutional capacity, organizational design, and the governance levels they operate on. Second, the transformative promise of MSPs often exceeds their actual capacity to govern SDG interactions and produce systemic change toward sustainability transformations. Third, legitimacy remains a central and unresolved challenge for MSPs, especially in an era characterized by growing contestation over expertise, representation, and corporate influence in global governance and increasing contestation over authority in international institutions (Zürn, 2018; Börzel & Zürn, 2021). Fourth, the future role of MSPs will depend less on whether they can complement or replace states or multilateral institutions, and more on whether they have the capacity to effectively solve problems and operate as legitimate and accountable governance mechanisms within an increasingly fragmented international order.

The articles collected in this Special Issue examine these themes across different SDGs and diverse policy contexts, including climate governance, Pacific Small Island States, water governance, sustainable aquaculture, UN summit diplomacy, and transnational cooperative initiatives. Collectively, they provide a nuanced and critical assessment of the promises and pitfalls of MSPs in the implementation of the SDGs. Beyond the scholarly contribution, this assessment also aims to inform ongoing policy discussions about the future of the SDGs post-2030 and the role that partnerships and cooperation can play in accelerating the sustainability transition.

2 State of the art: MSPs, SDG governance, and transformative ambitions

The literature on MSPs has evolved considerably over the past two decades. The rise of partnerships was closely linked to the broader transformation from state-based to transnational governance in global politics (Schäfferhoff et al. 2009; Bäckstrand et al., 2012; Pattberg et al., 2012; Andonova, 2017). Partnerships emerged as flexible and voluntary governance arrangements capable of mobilizing actors across public and private spheres. The 2002 WSSD institutionalized partnerships as a core governance mechanism for sustainable development, and the 2030 Agenda further consolidated this model (Bäckstrand & Kylsäter, 2014; Widerberg et al., 2023; Higham et al., 2024) by embedding MSPs directly into SDG17 and the broader implementation architecture of the SDGs.

The SDGs - more than the MDGs - emphasize that sustainable development challenges are deeply interconnected. Progress in one area can generate positive spillovers and synergies across other goals, while policy interventions may also create trade-offs and unintended consequences (Nilsson et al., 2016; Weitz et al., 2018; Stafford-Smith et al., 2017). MSPs have therefore increasingly been framed as governance mechanisms capable of addressing these interdependencies by bringing together actors with diverse expertise, resources, and capacities (Widerberg et al., 2023).

However, scholarship has also identified important limitations. Research on earlier generations of partnerships frequently found weak institutionalization (Bäckstrand, 2006;

Bexell and Mörtz, 2010; Beisheim & Liese, 2014; Higham et al., 2024), limited accountability, low participation from marginalized groups, and unclear effectiveness and performance. Recent scholarship suggests that many of the newer SDG partnerships reproduce these shortcomings. Higham et al. (2024) argue that MSPs remain unlikely to deliver the large-scale transformations envisioned by the 2030 Agenda unless stronger forms of meta-governance, accountability, and orchestration are developed to reform of multilateralism under conditions of geopolitical turbulence.

Against this background, three broad debates dominate current scholarship. The first concerns synergies and SDG interactions: whether MSPs can genuinely transcend siloed governance and manage trade-offs across interconnected goals. The second concerns effectiveness: whether MSPs generate measurable outputs, outcomes, and transformative change beyond symbolic commitments and “SDG washing,” where actors strategically align with SDG rhetoric without fundamentally changing underlying mindsets, practices or governance structures (Bull & McNeill, 2019; Marx, 2019). The third concerns legitimacy: whether MSPs possess sufficient accountability, inclusiveness, transparency, output and public support to act as credible governance mechanisms.

This Special Issue engages directly with these three debates. The articles critically examine the conditions under which partnerships succeed, fail, adapt, or become contested. Importantly, the issue also moves beyond generalized evaluations of MSPs by emphasizing heterogeneity. MSPs vary significantly in organizational structure, sectoral composition, governance level, resources, and political environment. Some operate primarily as knowledge-sharing networks, others as implementation mechanisms, convening platforms, or orchestration arrangements. Consequently, expectations regarding what MSPs can and should achieve must remain context-sensitive. Rather than treating MSPs as isolated governance arrangements, this Special Issue conceptualizes them as components of a broader institutional ecology of global sustainability governance. This perspective resonates with recent work on hybrid institutional complexes, which argues that the implementation of the SDGs increasingly depends on interactions among formal international organizations, informal institutions, public-private partnerships, transnational initiatives, and private governance mechanisms (Taggart & Faude, 2025).

3 Synergies, trade-offs, and the governance of SDG interactions

A defining feature of the 2030 Agenda is its emphasis on integration and indivisibility and whole-of-society approach. The SDGs are intended to be pursued simultaneously rather than sequentially or in isolation. This places considerable governance demands on states, international organizations, and partnerships alike to identify connections between SDGs and design appropriate answers. Even if a division of labor is needed, MSPs are often expected by policy actors to bridge institutional silos and foster synergies across sectors, scales, and issue areas (Horan, 2019; Murphy et al., 2022; Widerberg et al., 2023).

Several contributions in this Special Issue critically evaluate whether MSPs are equipped to fulfill these expectations. Widerberg and colleagues examine how SDGs are linked and prioritized through governance (Widerberg et al., 2026), showing that MSPs often perform better in generating synergies than in managing trade-offs. Yet their analysis also demonstrates the practical and political difficulties of integrated governance. Since no actor can

address all SDGs simultaneously, prioritization inevitably emerges through bottom-up processes shaped by power, institutional capacity, and political interests. The findings suggest that symptoms rather than roots of problems are addressed through MSPs, for example by focusing on climate change, poverty, education and biodiversity, rather than unsustainable consumption and production.

Horan's article on MSPs in Pacific Small Island Developing States (Horan, 2026) offers an important empirical assessment of SDG nexus governance. Analyzing partnerships registered on the SIDS Action Platform, the study finds that MSPs clustered around a relatively narrow set of climate-ocean synergies while paying less attention to climate-development nexuses related to poverty, inequality, infrastructure, and social resilience. This reveals a significant mismatch between governance demand and partnership supply. The findings also highlight how funding patterns, donor priorities, and international agendas shape which SDG interactions receive attention and which remain neglected.

Miljand and Wanner compare MSPs with single-sector partnerships in climate governance (Miljand & Wanner, 2026) and challenge assumptions about the inherent superiority of MSPs. Their comparative analysis demonstrates that transformative and synergistic capacity is often shaped more strongly by thematic area than by partnership composition alone. While MSPs sometimes demonstrate broader transformative ambitions, single-sector initiatives can also produce significant normative and behavioral change. The study finds that integration across economic, social, and environmental dimensions is often stronger in partnership visions than in actual outputs or outcomes.

Fast's contribution extends these debates by examining MSPs through the lens of governance-through-goals and aspirational politics (Fast, 2026; Finnemore & Jurkovich, 2020). MSPs frequently operate through lofty and ambiguous sustainability goals rather than precise and measurable targets. Fast critically analyses the implications of lofty goals and argues that this ambiguity may enable broad participation and mobilization, but also complicates accountability and effectiveness, reflecting a trade-off between inclusiveness and stringency. Partnerships may therefore possess high symbolic ambition while lacking sufficient mechanisms to translate broad aspirations into concrete action.

Collectively, the articles reveal an important tension at the center of the 2030 Agenda. MSPs are expected to foster integrated governance precisely because the existing multilateral system remains fragmented, contested and siloed. Yet, MSPs themselves often reproduce these same institutional silos, funding dependencies, and political constraints that states and intergovernmental organizations face in an era of poly-crisis amplified with the US retreat from major international organizations and multilateral frameworks, including climate and development institutions (Faude & Karlsrud, 2025). These findings reflect a broader characteristic of contemporary global governance. Institutional fragmentation is not unique to partnerships but increasingly characterizes the wider multilateral system, where overlapping institutions, competing mandates, and fragmented authority complicate policy coordination across issue areas (Marx et al., 2025). The expectation that MSPs should overcome structural fragmentation is therefore unrealistic.

At the same time, the articles also demonstrate that MSPs can create important forms of coordination, learning, and agenda-setting. Rather than asking whether individual partnerships can single-handedly deliver transformation, a more fruitful perspective may involve examining how the broader landscape of partnerships collectively contributes to governance capacity across SDGs within increasingly dense and hybrid governance architectures (Tag-

gart & Faude, 2025). This shifts attention from the partnership level to the system level, from individual partnership performance to questions of the merits of polycentricity, and the potential for orchestration, coordination, and meta-governance in the partnership universe and the institutional complexity surrounding SDG implementation (Marx et al., 2025).

4 Effectiveness and the limits of transformative governance

Questions of effectiveness have long occupied the scholarship on partnerships (Andonova et al., 2022; Beisheim & Liese, 2014). MSPs are frequently presented as more flexible, innovative, and implementation-oriented than traditional intergovernmental mechanisms. Yet empirical evidence on effectiveness remains mixed and highly context-dependent.

The article by Wanner-Freyland and Miljand (2026) shifts focus from the conditions that enable partnerships to those that obstruct them. Drawing on survey and interview data from a set of transnational cooperative initiatives, they identify three critical barriers to effectiveness, one in each of their analytical categories: resource limitations, financial and non-financial (institutional); shifting government priorities and weak political will (external); and partner inertia and weak commitment (relational). Their central conceptual contribution is an asymmetry between enabling and obstructing factors. Whereas drivers of effectiveness can be inverted into challenges, critical barriers cannot simply be inverted back into enablers. Removing a barrier, such as government opposition or a funding shortfall, may be necessary for a partnership to function, but does not by itself generate success. Barriers therefore constitute distinct governance problems requiring their own analytical treatment, rather than being read as the mirror image of enabling conditions.

Several contributions highlight the role of orchestration and meta-governance in shaping effectiveness. Fritzsche's analysis of UN summits (Fritzsche, 2026) demonstrates how the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) has attempted to orchestrate initiatives through relatively "thin" forms of governance. While the UN has increasingly relied on partnerships to demonstrate momentum and mobilize participation, institutional constraints and political contestation have limited the development of stronger oversight mechanisms. The study reveals tensions between quantitative expansion - mobilizing large numbers of initiatives - and qualitative coordination aimed at fundamental transformation to sustainability.

Higham and Bäckstrand further develop this theme through their analysis of the UN Secretary-General's High Impact Initiatives (Higham & Bäckstrand, 2026). They conceptualize the HIIs as orchestration mechanisms designed to strengthen oversight and coordination of MSPs in response to mounting concerns about fragmentation and limited SDG progress. Yet the article also shows that orchestration remains politically contested. Member states continue to resist stronger top-down governance arrangements, while the UN system itself faces resource limitations and institutional fragmentation characteristic of contemporary global governance complexes (Abbott et al., 2015; Marx et al., 2025). Similar developments have been observed in transnational climate governance, where orchestration, voluntary commitments and experimental governance have increasingly complemented traditional intergovernmental negotiations. Rather than replacing public authority, these governance arrangements seek to mobilize implementation through coordination, learning, and iterative experimentation (Andonova et al., 2009; Passarelli et al., 2026).

The Special Issue also highlights important differences between outputs, outcomes, and transformative effects and impacts. Many partnerships successfully produce reports, meetings, networks, standards, and policy dialogues. Yet translating these outputs into long-term behavioral, institutional, or systemic change remains considerably more difficult. This distinction is especially important in sustainability governance, where transformations involve deep structural changes in production systems, consumption patterns, infrastructure, and political institutions and industrial structures associated with carbon-intensive development trajectories (Biermann et al., 2022; Stafford-Smith et al., 2017).

Another recurring finding concerns the uneven distribution of effectiveness across issue areas. Partnerships appear more successful in technical domains characterized by lower political conflict and clearer governance tasks. In contrast, highly politicized areas involving redistribution, inequality, or economic restructuring often generate greater contestation and weaker implementation capacity.

The articles therefore caution against overly optimistic assumptions regarding partnership governance. MSPs can facilitate experimentation, coordination, and learning, but they cannot substitute for political leadership, public authority, or re-distributional conflict resolution. Their effectiveness depends heavily on broader political and institutional environments, including state capacity, funding structures, and multilateral cooperation.

5 Legitimacy, authority, and accountability in MSP governance

Legitimacy constitutes one of the most persistently contested dimensions of MSP governance (Bäckstrand, 2006). From a broader global governance perspective, legitimacy has become increasingly contested as international organizations, scientific expertise, and multilateral institutions face growing political resistance, nationalist and populist backlash (Zürn, 2018). Partnerships derive authority not primarily from formal democratic mandates, but from perceptions regarding expertise, participation, inclusiveness, flexibility, and effectiveness, transparency, procedural fairness, and public accountability (Koliev & Bäckstrand, 2024; Zürn, 2018). For instance, Koliev and Bäckstrand (2024) broaden studies of legitimacy by examining public perceptions of MSPs through survey experiments conducted in Brazil, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Their findings show that citizens evaluate legitimacy of MSPs based on institutional features such as transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability. Public support cannot therefore be assumed automatically; legitimacy must be continuously earned and maintained. Yet, legitimacy claims remain fragile and frequently contested and knowledge on MSPs among the general public is generally low.

Several contributions in this Special Issue examine how MSPs actively construct and seek legitimacy. De Donà's article on the Climate and Clean Air Coalition (De Donà, 2025) (CCAC) demonstrates how partnerships seek legitimacy through epistemic authority. The CCAC mobilizes scientific expertise and technical knowledge to position itself as a credible governance actor within the broader climate regime. Scientific authority thus becomes a central mechanism through which MSPs justify their governance role. At the same time, epistemic authority alone may not be sufficient. De Donà shows that MSPs operate within highly competitive governance environments characterized by overlapping institutions, political contestation, and shifting authority structures. Legitimacy therefore depends not

only on expertise, but also on broader questions of accountability, representation, and public acceptance.

Jensen and Jönsson examine legitimacy through a different lens (Jensen & Jönsson, 2026) by analyzing the translation of partnership practices across governance levels within the Global Water Partnership. Their study reveals that legitimation is co-produced through partnering practices themselves. The framing of partnerships as “neutral conveners” emerges as a central legitimation strategy both globally and locally. Yet this framing is also fragile and contested, particularly when accountability demands appear or donor priorities shift.

The article by De Donà and Bexell further highlights tensions surrounding business-led MSPs (De Donà & Bexell, 2026). Focusing on the Global Salmon Initiative, the authors examine procedural legitimacy, market legitimacy, and policy output legitimacy. While the partnership demonstrates some strengths regarding transparency and standards development, concerns remain regarding accountability to external stakeholders and limited market coverage. The study underscores broader tensions between sustainability governance and market logics. Partnerships often assume compatibility between profitability and sustainability, but this alignment remains partial and politically contested.

Taken together, the articles suggest that legitimacy is not a fixed attribute but that legitimation is an ongoing process of seeking to justify the exercise of power that transpires from partnerships involvement in sustainability governance. MSPs continuously negotiate legitimacy through participation practices, scientific authority, claims to neutrality, effectiveness narratives, and alignment with broader social norms. In an era marked by distrust in experts, democratic backsliding, polarization, and criticism of corporate influence in governance, these legitimacy struggles are likely to intensify as international institutions face growing scrutiny, populist backlash, and declining trust in multilateralism.

Importantly, effectiveness in terms of policy output and problem-solving is a key source of legitimacy. Partnerships that fail to demonstrate credible outputs risk losing support from donors, states, and publics. Yet, highly effective partnerships may still face legitimacy deficits if they exclude affected stakeholders or reinforce unequal power relations. The governance challenge is therefore not simply to make MSPs more effective, but also more accountable, inclusive, and transparent in politically polarized and institutionally fragmented governance environments.

6 Orchestration and meta-governance in the SDG era

The articles in this Special Issue collectively address important questions around orchestration and meta-governance in global sustainability governance (Abbott et al., 2015; Beisheim & Simon, 2018; Higham et al., 2024). As the number and diversity of MSPs have expanded, questions of coordination, oversight, monitoring, and coherence have become more pressing in increasingly crowded governance landscapes characterized by overlapping mandates, institutional competition, and fragmented authority (Abbott et al., 2015; Marx et al., 2025). An empirical observation is that the UN system has gradually shifted from promoting partnerships primarily as voluntary implementation mechanisms toward developing stronger orchestration capacities. The emergence of the SDG Action Platform, the UN High-Level Political Forum, and the UN Secretary-General’s High Impact Initiatives reflects growing concern with fragmentation and a need for more strategic coordination.

Yet the Special Issue also demonstrates the political limitation of orchestration. Stronger oversight often generates resistance from member states and non-state actors concerned about autonomy and control. Moreover, the UN system itself remains fragmented, under-resourced, and constrained by intergovernmental politics. As Fritzsche shows, orchestration has often remained “thin” precisely because thicker forms of governance would require stronger mandates, resources, and political consensus.

These findings highlight a broader transformation in global governance. The proliferation of MSPs reflects not simply a retreat of the state, but rather the emergence of complex governance architectures involving states, international organizations, businesses, civil society actors, cities, philanthropic organizations, and scientific networks. Rather than replacing traditional multilateral institutions, partnerships increasingly coexist with them as part of a differentiated governance architecture. Recent scholarship conceptualizes this development as a hybrid institutional complex in which different institutional forms perform complementary - and sometimes competing. governance functions (Taggart & Faude, 2025). Governance increasingly occurs through coordination, persuasion, benchmarking, and network management rather than hierarchical authority. However, the proliferation of actors also generates governance complexity. Partnerships may overlap, compete for resources, duplicate efforts, or privilege easily measurable outputs over structural change. Without effective coordination mechanisms, MSPs risk becoming fragmented characterized by symbolic commitments rather than transformative outcomes.

The Special Issue therefore suggests that future scholarship should increasingly move beyond evaluating individual partnerships in isolation and instead examine the broader governance systems within which MSPs operate. Questions of orchestration, interaction, competition, and fragmentation are becoming central to understanding partnership governance in the SDG era and within broader debates on institutional complexity and contested multilateralism.

7 MSPs after 2030: governance in an era of polycrisis

As the international community approaches the post-2030 period, the future of MSPs will unfold within a profoundly transformed geopolitical context. The optimism surrounding the launch of the SDGs in 2015 has given way to a more fragmented and conflictual global order characterized by geopolitical rivalry, energy insecurity, climate emergencies, democratic backsliding, authoritarian populism, rising inequality, and an attack on multilateral institutions. These developments pose major challenges for MSP governance. First, geopolitical fragmentation undermines the cooperative foundations upon which many partnerships depend. Strategic competition between major powers risks politicizing sustainability governance and weakening international coordination (Faude & Karlsrud, 2025; Passarelli et al., 2026). Second, economic pressures and fiscal constraints may reduce long-term funding for partnerships, particularly in development and climate adaptation sectors. Third, growing political backlash against climate policies and the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development threatens the legitimacy of UN sustainability governance itself.

At the same time, the condition of poly-crisis may also increase demand for flexible and adaptive governance arrangements. MSPs can provide spaces for experimentation, learning, coordination, and coalition-building even when formal intergovernmental negotiations stall.

Cities, subnational governments, civil society organizations, indigenous communities, and scientific networks may become increasingly important governance actors in contexts where interstate cooperation weakens, as increasingly important governance functions shift toward transnational and hybrid governance (Passarelli et al., 2026; Taggart & Faude, 2025).

However, future MSPs are unlikely to succeed simply by reproducing the governance models of the past decade. The findings of this Special Issue suggest several priorities for future partnerships. First, MSPs must move beyond symbolic commitment-making toward more robust accountability mechanisms and clearer theories of change. Partnerships should be evaluated not only based on participation or ambition, but also on whether they produce socially equitable and environmentally meaningful outcomes. Second, greater attention must be paid to power asymmetries and representation. Partnerships that privilege corporate actors or Northern expertise risk reproducing inequalities rather than fostering transformative change. Inclusiveness, procedural fairness, and meaningful participation remain central governance challenges in hybrid governance systems marked by asymmetrical power relations and unequal representation (Zürn, 2018; Marx et al., 2025). Third, MSPs need stronger capacities to govern trade-offs, not only synergies between SDGs. Much sustainability governance continues to emphasize “win-win” narratives while avoiding difficult questions regarding redistribution, consumption reduction, and structural transformation. A win-win rhetoric also hides potentially conflicting interests between diverse partnership members as well as between market profit logics and sustainability norms. Yet climate transitions, biodiversity protection, and social justice increasingly require confronting politically contentious trade-offs associated with decarbonization and green industrial policy (Pradhan et al., 2024; Passarelli et al., 2026). Fourth, orchestration capacities within the UN system and other international institutions will likely become more important. However, orchestration must balance coordination with legitimacy. Stronger oversight mechanisms must avoid reproducing technocratic governance that is disconnected from local contexts and support democratic accountability and legitimacy (Beisheim & Simon, 2018). Finally, future research should further investigate the resilience of MSPs under conditions of crisis and geopolitical turbulence. The COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical conflict, and accelerating climate impacts have demonstrated both the vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities of partnerships. Understanding how MSPs survive, adapt, or collapse under crisis conditions will become increasingly important for sustainability governance scholarship. Emerging debates increasingly suggest that the successor to the SDGs is unlikely to consist simply of another universal goal framework. Instead, future sustainability governance is expected to rely on more adaptive institutional system capable of operating under conditions of geopolitical rivalry, contestation, and recurrent crises. Questions of institutional resilience, legitimacy, and governance capacity are therefore likely to become at least as important as the formulation of new global goals (Durch et al., 2025; Dijkstra et al., 2025; Helgason, 2026).

8 Conclusion

This Special Issue provides a comprehensive and critical assessment of multistakeholder partnerships in the implementation of the SDGs as part of the 2030 Agenda. The contributions collectively demonstrate that MSPs remain central yet contested governance mechanisms within contemporary sustainability politics in the UN and among states.

The articles challenge simplistic narratives portraying MSPs either as transformative solutions or as mere vehicles for privatization and corporate take-over. Instead, they reveal a highly heterogeneous landscape of partnerships whose capacities depend on institutional design, political context, governance level, and issue area. MSPs can facilitate coordination, learning, agenda-setting, and innovation, but they also face persistent barriers related to fragmentation, legitimacy and accountability gaps, and limited transformative capacity.

The Special Issue also highlights the importance of examining MSPs relationally and systemically. Partnerships do not operate in isolation; they exist within broader global governance system characterized by orchestration, competition, overlapping authority, and institutional complexity associated with fragmented authority structures. Future scholarship and policy debates must therefore move beyond evaluating individual partnerships toward understanding how the tensions of entire partnership ecosystems shape sustainability governance.

Ultimately, the future role of MSPs will depend on their ability to navigate an increasingly turbulent political environment while maintaining legitimacy, inclusiveness, and effectiveness. In a world marked by poly-crisis and contested multilateralism, MSPs are unlikely to provide effective governance solutions on their own (Wiener et al. 2026). Yet, like in the field of climate governance they may still play important roles as adaptive and experimental governance arrangements capable of mobilizing collective action and funding across fragmented political jurisdictions, much like experimental governance arrangements in transnational climate governance (Andonova et al., 2009; Passarelli et al., 2026).

The central question for the post-2030 era is therefore not whether MSPs should exist, but rather what kinds of partnerships are needed, under what conditions, and governed by whom. Addressing this challenge requires continued critical scholarship, institutional experimentation, and renewed political commitment to equitable and transformative sustainability governance in an era marked simultaneously by climate emergency, geopolitical fragmentation, institutional contestation, and uncertainty over the future of multilateral cooperation (Lawrence et al., 2024; Durch et al., 2025).

Emerging scholarship on a global sustainable development agenda beyond 2030 suggests that the next phase of global sustainability governance will unfold under conditions fundamentally different from those that shaped the optimism surrounding the adoption of the SDGs in 2015. Rather than assuming a linear progression toward deeper multilateral cooperation, recent work highlights the growing institutional fragmentation, geopolitical rivalry, and contestation surrounding global governance (Faude & Karlsrud, 2025; Dijkstra et al., 2025; Wiener et al. 2026). At the same time, scholars argue that hybrid institutional complexes combining states, international organizations, partnerships, transnational networks, and private governance mechanisms are likely to remain central to future sustainability governance (Taggart & Faude, 2025). Beyond 2030, governments should exercise meta-governance to ensure that hybrid governance maximizes public value as part of an economics that serves the common good (Fuso Nerini et al., 2024). Contemporary debates surrounding UN80 reforms and the Pact for the Future further underscore that questions regarding institutional adaptation, resilience, and legitimacy will shape the future trajectory of multilateral cooperation beyond the SDGs (Durch et al., 2025; Helgason, 2026). In this context, MSPs may increasingly function not as supplementary governance mechanisms, but as integral components of broader and more contested governance ecosystems beyond 2030. Rather than asking whether multistakeholder partnerships have succeeded

or failed, future scholarship should increasingly investigate how they interact with states, international organizations, cities, private actors, and civil society within increasingly complex governance systems. The post-2030 debate therefore offers an opportunity not only to rethink the future of the SDGs, but also to reconsider the transforming nature of global sustainability governance itself.

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