

Multi-stakeholder Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals: The Case of Ireland

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Introduction

The interconnected nature of the 17 sustainable Development Goals of the 2015 UN *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* calls for a ‘whole-of-society’ and a ‘whole-of-government’ approach in implementation within a country (UN 2015). This means that effective partnerships between different state and non-state sectors or the whole of society, and within government departments or the whole government are essential for achieving the 169 targets under SDGs. Such an approach warrants multiple intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral entities to work collaboratively or partnering, co-sharing resources along with expertise and responsibilities to address complex and multifaceted social, economic, and environmental problems of mutual interest.

The concept of partnership is of such critical importance in achieving the SDGs that the UN deems it as one of the “5Ps of sustainable development” along with people, planet, prosperity, and peace. The highly interdependent and interconnected nature of 17 SDGs makes their implementation a complex process requiring an all-out approach involving all sectors of the society to share responsibilities and contribute their unique skills, expertise, and resources. Goal 17 of the SDGs have indicators that also point towards partnerships indicating that ‘a successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society.’ Therefore, one of Goal 17’s quantifiable indicators is ‘the amount of United States dollars committed to public-private and civil society partnerships’ whereas another indicator is related to ‘reporting progress in multi-stakeholder development effectiveness monitoring frameworks that support the achievement of the SDGs’ (UN 2015). These indicators are included to monitor the progress through a partnership approach in signatory countries for SDG implementation by taking stock of the financial resources invested in them along with monitoring the efficiency of these partnerships.

Given this critical importance of different groups of stakeholders to work together in implementing the SDGs, we were interested in studying how non-state actors including civil society groups, trade unions, and the private sector in Ireland perceive the feasibility, opportunities, and challenges of working together with each other along with the government to implement the 17 Goals in Ireland forming multistakeholder partnerships. We took stock of the views of the different stakeholders on how they look at the current landscape of SDG implementation in the country and the viability of an ecosystem of multistakeholder partnership to emerge in the country as envisioned by the UN to be critical for sustainable development. In this paper, we present the results of our empirical research based on the qualitative data we collected through semi-structured interviews with senior members of the stakeholder groups in the past one year since Ireland presented the first Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2018 High-Level Political Forum organized by the UN’s Economic and Social Council. Our research shows that a multistakeholder partnership approach is a complicated process, and our empirical findings align with many of the existing research and opinions of other scholarly experts studying multistakeholder partnerships (MSPs).

The paper is further organized into five sections. In the following section, we briefly introduce the concept of MSP so that there is a clear understanding of the term. Then we also provide a brief background of what is known about the gains and challenges from pursuing MSPs from existing empirical studies and scholarly opinions. In the next section, we provide a brief background of the SDG implementation activities in Ireland, especially what has happened in the country in the past one year since the first VNR. After that, we provide a brief background of the stakeholder groups we interviewed and how they are organized along with the methods of data collection. Then we discuss what we found in our research and comparing our findings with existing empirical research and opinions around MSPs. In the final section, we conclude.

Multistakeholder partnerships: definitions, feasibility conditions and challenges

According to the UNGA (Res 60/214), partnerships are “voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both State and non-State, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and to share risks and responsibilities, resources and benefits.” In somewhat similar lines, scholar defines partnerships in public policy literature as ‘a voluntary cooperative arrangement between organizations from the public, private and/or civil society sectors that have common, non-hierarchical decision-making procedures and share risks and responsibilities and whose purpose is to address a public policy issue’ (Steets 2010, p.6-7). What reflects in both definitions provided above is the presence of a collaborative relationship between the different sectors in the society that wants to address a public policy issue of mutual interest solving, which would benefit all. MSPs are alternatively known as cross-sector partnerships (Parmigiani and Rivera-Santos 2011) or social partnerships when the public policy issue is a social issue that the government either unable or unwilling to solve (Selsky and Parker 2005; Crane 2010). Therefore, by MSPs in this paper, we mean that multiple stakeholders from multiple sectors are collaboratively working to solve a public policy issue critical to the achievement of the SDGs. Selsky and Parker (2005) term these type of partnerships as tri-sector partnerships that are formed to address issues like climate change, poverty alleviation, resource conservation, education, human health or in our understanding most of the issues covered under the 17 SDGs.

Multiple authors have pointed towards a plethora of benefits associated with partnerships between different societal sectors either based on their empirical research findings or opinions based on observations of partnerships. Scholars are of the view that MSPs in the public policy sector fills up a void created due to the inability of the government to reach specific segments of the society due to either unwillingness or resource-crunch (Kolk et al. 2008). When different sectors collaborate, scholars have found that partnerships have improved efficiency, cost reduction, and innovation (Steijn et al. 2011); accessing new resources and opportunities (Austin and Seitanidi 2012); co-learning (Austin and Seitanidi 2012; Munoz-Erickson et al. 2010); co-sharing benefits and risks (Gray and Stites 2013); and co-building relationships of trusts, reputation and legitimacy (Austin and Seitanidi 2012; Munoz-Erickson et al. 2010).

With the various benefits of forming MSPs to tackle specific public policy issues, it is far from the novelty that UN espouses partnerships as critical to sustainable development especially fulfilling the 17 SDGs as achieving many of the targets are beyond the scope, resources, and the ability of the government alone to achieve. However, MSPs are not easy to form, maintain in the long-run, or provide effective results. There is considerable amount of work that concentrates on what are the internal conditions within the partnerships and the external conditions or within the socio-economic space in which the partnership operates is critical to their success (please see Worley and Mirvis 2013; Kuenkel and Aitkin 2015) or the specificity of the problems or public policy issue that brings the different stakeholders together (Walden and Brown 1997). To address public policy issues for the SDGs can

consist of both highly specific tasks (like education for all) or less specific tasks like all the sectors agreeing to follow principles of sustainable development in all activities in spirit and vision. Moreover, the success of MSPs (though understudied) depends on diversity and inclusion, where even multiple actors of multiple stakeholder groups participate in an MSP (Backstrand and Kylsater 2014). Broad participation of a diverse group of stakeholders is critical to partnerships for SDGs to ensure a ‘whole-of-society’ approach is which ‘no-one-is-left-behind’ and to reach ‘the-furthest-behind-first’ as such arrangements can provide. However, at times in such significant partnerships, individual partners may need to partnership goals over their individual organizational goals, thus offending critical players invested in the operation of the partner (Worley and Mirvis 2013). Participating in partnerships would also require resources and capacities within each stakeholder group that would focus primarily on the reporting and monitoring partnership related work, which in turn can be expensive (Frisby et al. 2004).

It is clear from the above discussion that though MSPs can fit well in many of the execution plans for achieving SDGs, they are far from being the panacea for all implementation-related problems. In the remaining sections of the paper, we would provide an example of how the different non-state stakeholder groups in Ireland perceive the MSPs.

Sustainable Development Goals in Ireland

The Government of Ireland presented the first VNR to the HLPF in 2018 after publishing the SDG National Implementation Plan (SDG NIP) in 2018. In the Irish VNR, engaging stakeholders find repeated mention and is one of the top five countries that have the highest mentions of the word ‘stakeholder’ or ‘stakeholders’ in their VNRs. However, mention of multistakeholder partnerships in both the VNR and the SDG National Implementation Plan is very few, and we found that there are no specific plans from the government to encourage and promote MSPs for SDGs in Ireland. Through stakeholder consultation and engagement has been repeatedly mentioned in both documents, it is not clear what the role of the stakeholders would be as a partner in the process of SDG implementation.

In line with providing stakeholders opportunities to engage with the government in SDG implementation, an SDG Stakeholder Forum is being organized by the Department of Communication, Climate Action and the Environment (DCCAE) responsible for SDG implementation in Ireland) in every quarter since the presentation of the VNR in 2018. Plans to form this Forum can be found in the SDG NIP of 2018 with the intent of providing a platform where the stakeholders can interact with the government on the progress of the SDGs. Following the conditions of a forum, the Stakeholder Forum is open to all stakeholder groups representing the different interest of citizen groups. The DCCAE convenes and chair Forum meetings advertising on their website for interested stakeholder representatives to register *a priori* for participation. The DCCAE publishes a draft agenda is published before the meeting giving the participants to prepare themselves for useful deliberations and posts a summary report on their website for every Forum that can be accessed online openly for anyone interested to track the discussions in the Forum. Table 1. Shows how the Forum participation of different stakeholder groups has evolved.

Table 1.

	Stakeholder Forum		
	Jun-18	Oct-18	Jan-18
Civil Society	80%	46%	45%
Government	7%	16%	22%
Academia	3%	18%	16%

Private Sector	10%	7%	12%
Other (including trade unions)	2%	13%	5%

Source: Personal communication and NSF 2018, 2019

Table 1 shows that apart from civil society, other stakeholders recognized as the MGoS are low and especially the representation from the private sector, farmers, trade unions, women groups, and minority groups. In other words, many of the stakeholders required to build multistakeholder partnerships that are based on diversity and inclusion is not participating in the Stakeholder Forum which is the one of the most important regular effort of the Government of Ireland to continuously engage with stakeholder groups on SDGs.

What we see from the stakeholders attending the Stakeholder Forum organized by the DCCAE is that the Forum is mainly for the civil society groups interested in SDGs in Ireland. Parallel to the National Stakeholder Forum organized by the DCCAE, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation of Ireland organizes the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Stakeholder Forum which is created under the *Towards Responsible Business: Ireland's 2nd National Plan on Corporate Social Responsibility 2017-2020 (TRB 2017)* that includes that the businesses operating in Ireland should align their CSR activities with the SDGs and work closely with the government to develop ethical and environmentally friendly business in Ireland (TRB 2017). In this Plan, suggestions are being made for businesses to partner with community and equality/social justice groups to increase community engagement and hold consultation processes with local stakeholders for biodiversity conservation (TRB 2017).

The above information provides a brief background to provide a context for our research findings. In the following section, we will explain in detail the methods and materials we have used in conducting our research. In doing so, we will also explain the composition of the stakeholder groups whose senior members or members in a leadership role we have interviewed to understand their perspective on MSPs for SDGs in Ireland.

Materials and methods

We conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with senior members of different civil society umbrella organizations, environmental groups, trade unions, and organizations that promote the interest of the business in the local communities in Ireland. Most of the representatives of the organizations we covered during our interviews also were regular attendees of the Stakeholder Forum organized by the DCCAE that shows their awareness and willingness to engage with the SDGs. Others though were aware of the SDGs did not participate in aligning their work with the SDGs through operating in multiple areas covered under the Goals. Though we would not divulge the details as in the names of the organizations whose members we interviewed for research ethics to maintain the privacy of the interviewees, in the following paragraphs we further provide adequate details of how we chose our interviewees.

The nationally active grassroots environmental NGOs in Ireland is organized under an umbrella organization that has around 35,000 active members that work on environmental issues ranging from biodiversity conservation to climate change. This umbrella organization also works carefully to create and promote sustainability-related policies in Ireland and provides a channel through which the government and other social partners can engage with environmental causes. It also creates a link between the grassroots organizations in Ireland and international environmental organizations by being members of international

environmental networks. Similarly, we interviewed a senior member of Ireland's environmental education network that works closely with the youth in the country mainly in the area of environmental education and awareness and is linked with international organizations like the UNESCO and Youth and Environment Europe.

We also interviewed senior members of other such umbrella organizations working the areas of watershed management, wildlife conservation, sustainable and community forestry initiatives. A member of an organization working with community-led efforts in building sustainable and resilient communities was also included. For non-environmental organization, a senior member of the association of community and voluntary organizations, charities, and social enterprises was interviewed. Additionally, another member of one of the largest volunteer-driven faith-based charitable organization was also interviewed. Apart from the civil society, members of the two of the largest trade union umbrella organization that represents many small trade unions of workers in both public and the private sector were also included in our interviews. Lastly, senior members of an umbrella organization that promotes business interest for small, medium, and large businesses in Ireland was included to understand the perspective of the private sector on MSPs. Some of the interviewees previously provided their inputs in the 2018 Irish VNR. Mostly, they were aware of the SDGs. Though 14 interviewees may seem like a small number, we covered all types of groups that are involved in the SDGs in Ireland. Given the size of the country and how civil society organizations and business are represented under umbrella organizations that represent them, we are confident that we were able to capture the broadest range of perspective possible in our research.

Before conducting our research, we took approval for ethical research and maintained the required rules and guidelines. Interviewees were asked the same sets of questions as per a protocol after verbally reading out their rights as an interviewee and how we would maintain their privacy and strictly use the data for academic purposes only. Each interview was audio-recorded with the prior permission of the interviewee and was transcribed, coded, and analyzed according to the themes of the interview questions. The themes of the questions asked during our interviews emerged mainly from the existing scholarly literature on the multistakeholder partnership, discussions with experts on the SDG process in Ireland and a pilot in-depth interview with first interviewee representing environmental stakeholders' groups in Ireland.

Results and discussion

The data used in this paper was collected using a list of questions, generally in the area of implementing SDGs in Ireland. Therefore, questions on the MSPs were not only the ones that were asked. This is to say that by the times the interviewees were answering the questions on MSPs, considerable time had passed for them to think about the complexities of the SDGs, their interdependent nature and situate MSPs in that context.

Lack of tri-sectoral or multistakeholder partnerships

The main result that came out of our research that there are no true multistakeholder partnerships in Ireland as per the UN definition of the term for SDGs. However, interviewees provided different examples of how they collaborate with other stakeholder groups like the government or other civil society groups or even in some cases with small and medium enterprises in the community or community voluntary organizations. The civil society organizations collaborate with the business for fundraising activities and in some cases to provide a channel for the employees of corporate organizations to use their volunteering hours as a part of different corporate social responsibility initiatives. In similar ways, the business sector collaborated with the government in public-private partnerships. These

partnerships can be typically defined as dyad partnerships where stakeholders from two different groups collaborate to implement a project. Tri-sector partnerships between the private sector, civil society, and the government were mostly missing. As a result, the benefits from diversity and inclusivity sharing of resources, expertise, and responsibilities that comes along with MSPs may not benefit SDG implementation plans currently.

Due to the lack of tri-sector partnerships, the Stakeholder Forum in Ireland draws significant attention because the Forum provides a unique and novel platform for all stakeholders belonging to multiple sectors to come together on issues related to the SDGs. In other words, if MSPs are indeed to happen in Ireland for SDGs, the Stakeholder Forum has some potential to provide the germinating environment. In the next section, we explain what we found to be the current opportunities and limitations.

The Stakeholder Forum: "it gets people together; it gets people networking" (Interviewee Biz001)

We were interested in understanding how the different stakeholders perceived the Stakeholder Forum, a novel initiative of the government to bring together all stakeholder groups to interact and consult on the SDGs. We found that the perceptions of the Stakeholder Forum and its usefulness were mixed among the interviewees. We also found that not all stakeholder representative knew about the Stakeholder Forum or participated in them. Some of them were of the view like the umbrella organization working with communities on watershed protection that the SDGs have very little for them as there are no specific targets or indicators that require watershed level engagement. Other stakeholder representatives mainly belonging to conservation groups were though aware of the Stakeholder Forum, and the SDG related to biodiversity conservation did not participate in Forum because they mainly worked in remote areas that are richer in biodiversity than the capital city of the country where the meeting is held. Other interviewees pointed out that though some stakeholder groups belonging to the UN Major Groups and other Stakeholders attend the Forum regularly, many have attended none of the meetings like the women groups or the minority and refugee groups. Therefore, even when the Stakeholder Forum provides a networking platform for stakeholders from different groups to attend and begin to know each other, there continue to be lack of representation from all relevant groups identified to be critical to implementing the SDGs.

The stakeholder representatives who attended the Stakeholder Forum regularly had some similar perceptions of the Forum. On the one hand, they pointed out that the Stakeholder Forum did hold some value as a networking place or space for people to come together and know each other who belonged to different sectors and who are interested in the SDGs, a reason why they attend the Forum. Moreover, the quarterly meetings of the Forum also gave stakeholder members to know each other closely as they had a formal opportunity to meet different people multiple times in a year, which is not possible otherwise. A business association representative interviewee pointed out that the Forum helps in dissolving some of the presumptions different sectors have about the others especially the civil society and the private sector and shows that both the sectors have common areas that they can work together, for example, climate change. He pointed out that there is much presupposition in the other sectors that businesses do not want to transition to a more sustainable path, and these Forum meetings can help in clearing such misconceptions.

The interviewees were mostly unsure about the more significant role of the Stakeholder Forum beyond getting people together or networking space. The interviewees were mostly of the view that they were not sure how they would be

engaging with each other and what their roles evolve attending the Forum. One interviewee said:

“... you go to one of these events, you go to one of these Forums, so what? So what’s [sic] going to change and what’s [sic] next? What are we going to do with these information? What is the government going to do with the information? What are the formalized structures that put these information in to work?” (ENGO 001)

The interviewees pointed out that the Stakeholder Forum lacks the sense of round table where they can make something out of it beyond networking. We found that the stakeholders we interviewed were interested in *“leaving the room on something they agree on an issue”* that the government can later use to make their plans.

From our findings, we concluded that as there is a lack of true multistakeholder partnership in the country for the SDGs, the Stakeholder Forum is space provided by the government to bring together various stakeholder groups to interact with them on SDG-related topics. Other than creating a space for networking for the stakeholder groups and government officials, the Forum also helps in the government to fulfill its commitment to engage with stakeholder consultation for the SDGs. However, we found that there is a consensus among the stakeholder groups on the effectiveness of these Forum that would create collaborative opportunities for them to implement the SDGs rather than just providing inputs to the government that they were not sure even would reach the agenda-setting stages of policy-making due to the lack of transparency of what happens with the information they provide. From our research, we also got an idea that the Stakeholder Forum has provided an opportunity for stakeholder groups to identify their mutuality or areas of common concern, and how they can complement each other.

Challenges to form MSPs for SDGs

Some of the interviewees from both the civil society and business association were of the view that the private sector in Ireland is pursuing the SDGs as a part of their CSR responsibility. They were of the view that the SDGs were too complicated that CSR activities will be able to do right justice to them. They were of the view that issues related to human rights that are covered under the SDGs could be dealt with as a CSR responsibility, but other goals are too complex to be covered under CSR projects. However, both business association representatives and members of the civil society organizations that have worked with the private sector made it clear that though sustainable development should be a way for the future for the private sector, yet their engagement is limited due to the current organizational models based on competition, the lack of clear connection of the businesses with the SDG indicators and targets or any tangible benefits they would derive from achieving the SDGs. Therefore, one of the main challenges to the MSPs happening is that there are SDGs do not create manifest incentives for businesses to participate.

Different interviewees saw different roles of the Government in the implementation of the SDGs. Some of the interviewees were of the view that it is first and foremost the Government’s responsibility to achieve the SDGs as *“government is responsible to the United Nations”* (Interviewee ENGO003). Many interviewees were of the view that they found that there is currently a lack of political will or edge in the Government to pursue the SDGs and a *“re-ignition”* is required. One interviewee said, *“... I don’t think that the Government’s [sic] doing enough to put the right tools in place to facilitate businesses”* (Interviewee BIZ001).

Some interviewees also pointed out that engaging in MSPs would also require different stakeholders to arrange for resources that would look into the day to day implementation of the goals of the partnerships which is not always possible especially resource crunched civil society organizations or may not fit in the busy and competitive timelines of the business sector. As the size of the government is shrinking, it may be difficult even for government departments to get resource who would engage in MSPs. Moreover, given some of the Goals would long term planning an execution, continuing partnerships on targets of low specificity may become problematic to sustain.

Problems of trust and legitimacy was also a significant challenge for partnership relationship to evolve, especially between civil society and the private sector. Almost all of the interviewees belonging to the civil society and environmental NGOs were of the view that they would prefer to forego the benefits of MSPs than to partner with private sector entities who do not match with their values or socio-environmental commitments as such partnerships would put their credibility and the position of trust under scrutiny. They also were of the view that the basis of any workable partnership is a well written Memorandum of Understanding between the partners where everyone is aware of their role, what is expected from them and the others, how often they should report and what should they report. Therefore, clarity in understanding the specific roles partners would play and the transparency of the work they were doing while in a partnership were some of the necessary conditions for success.

Conclusion

The UN identifies that multistakeholder participation is critical to the implementation of the SDGs and have set down specific targets so that countries committed to achieving the SDGs take steps to promote and encourage MSPs. However, not all countries engage in MSPs in their development or sustainable development-related activities. In this paper, we discussed how the government of Ireland is currently engaging with different stakeholders and what are the conditions that limit an ecosystem to develop for successful MSPs to materialize. We found that the stakeholders were of the perceptions that a set of very different factors should come together in order to encourage MSPs for SDGs to evolve in Ireland. Further research in the area and on successful MSPs that are formed to implement SDGs would inform what the necessary external conditions that facilitate the formation of MSPs and what are the partner level conditions that helps MSPs to become successful in delivering their task as well as maintaining the relation between multiple actors from multiple stakeholder groups.

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