



Policy Summary

Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives

Introduction

The concept of multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs, also called multi-stakeholder partnerships, or MSPs) is gaining evermore traction in the field of international development cooperation. Within the framework of the 2030 Agenda, and international development cooperation more broadly, MSIs are regarded as an important implementation mechanism. Meanwhile, inclusive partnerships is also one of the four core principles of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC).

In light of the rising popularity of MSIs, there has been increasing interest in the question of what makes MSIs work well and why. This question formed the basis for *The Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives* (hereafter: the MSI studies).¹ Drawing from seventeen MSI cases in four countries (Costa Rica, Indonesia, Kenya and Kyrgyzstan), the study pointed to various principles that appear to be key to MSI effectiveness.

The MSI studies were commissioned by the Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (hereafter: the Task Team) to guide it in its work in ensuring that international commitments² to enhance civil society contributions to development – whether individually or as part of MSIs – are followed through.

This Policy Summary presents some of the key findings and recommendations on MSI effectiveness, with a particular focus on inclusion and ownership in country-level MSIs.³

¹ The studies were completed in early 2016 under leadership of Prof. Alan Fowler and Dr. Kees Biekart of the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam. References and links to the studies and other sources can be found at the end of this document.

² These international commitments were made at various high-level events in Monterrey (2002), Rome (2003), Paris (2005), Accra (2008), Busan (2011) and Mexico (2014).

³ This Policy Summary is largely based on two blogs on the MSI studies written for the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC).

Key questions

“Bringing to bear the energy and resources of everyone concerned with development – governments at all levels, international organizations, civil society, businesses, foundations, academics and people in all walks of life – is our singular challenge”

– High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda

The value and priority given to MSIs as implementation mechanisms are insufficiently matched by the knowledge and capacities required to make them work well. Additional efforts to learn what makes MSIs effective and why can thus be seen as a valuable contribution to development performance in the years to come. The ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda add urgency to successfully bringing together the resources and value-added of diverse actors. MSPs are envisaged to play a key role in implementing the SDGs, as evidenced in their inclusion under SDG 17 on the means of implementation. Similarly, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda – which addresses the Financing for Development agenda – recognizes that MSPs can play an important role in advancing sustainable development.⁴

To learn what makes country-level MSIs work well and why, the MSI studies asked the following key questions:

1. What country conditions work for and against the effectiveness of MSIs?
 2. What attributes do interlocutors – that can be defined as the entity that hosts or leads an MSI or acts as its secretariat - require and apply to make MSIs successful?
 3. What do stakeholders’ experiences say about improving MSI performance?
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⁴ The Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (2015), para. 76.

Summary of findings and recommendations

In answering the question what makes country-level MSIs work well and why, the MSI studies produced a number of findings and recommendations. These amongst others speak to the need for appropriate and shared definitions for MSIs; the importance of getting the right stakeholders involved, including local actors; the role of context and stakeholder responses; as well as the role of the interlocutor. These are elaborated below.

DEFINING MSIs

Though the concept of MSIs is far from new and has been part of international development cooperation discourse for many years, it is a catch-all term with different understandings or definitions. Yet for policy-makers and practitioners alike, it is important to have a clear definition of MSIs including as regards the stakeholders involved and the *types* of collaboration. Only when stakeholders have a clear view of *what* an MSI is and what its goals are, can they effectively decide *who* (i.e. which stakeholders) should participate and *how* the MSI should operate.

Important to acknowledge is that there are different *types* of MSIs. A distinction can for example be made between multi-stakeholder *dialogue* versus multi-stakeholder *collaboration*. In a collaboration, stakeholders agree to be part of an ongoing process of collaboration. There is shared responsibility and accountability for decision-making and action, as well as a commitment to inter-dependency in order to realize the mutually agreed results. It is recommended to be aware of the different *types* of MSIs and to avoid treating them as one and the same. It is also helpful for participating stakeholders to have a clear idea of the type of MSI they are engaged in. Between the different types, the commitments are different as is the degree of authority over decision-making, with *dialogue* being more open-ended and non-committal compared to *collaborations*. The type of MSI determines to some extent the most appropriate MSI design, including which stakeholders should participate and how the MSI should operate.

Take actors – rather than sectors – as the units of analysis in MSIs

As regards stakeholders involved in MSIs, the acronym MSI has often been used to signify multi-sector, with a tri-sector approach involving government, business and civil society. Yet the two terms are not synonymous. In today's increasingly complex aid and development architecture - with greater numbers and diversity of state and non-state actors – such a tri-sector approach no longer suffices. Each sector comprises a multitude of actors and interests, working at different levels of development. Unpacking these sectors and looking at the various actors within them can contribute to a better understanding of MSIs and their effectiveness. The government sector, for example, comprises a multitude of separate departments and units within ministries, multiple levels of government, regulatory and parastatal bodies, parliamentary committees and so on. The MSI studies found that a lack of coordination and coherence between government entities can reduce the effectiveness of an MSI. If one or more government entities that have power to influence the success of an MSI is not at the table, the initiative may not reach its goals. This does not apply only to government. The same can be said of civil society, media and business sectors. Civil society for example includes community-based entities, faith-based entities, NGOs dedicated to service delivery, NGOs dedicated to advocacy, social movements, etc. In each of these sectors a diversity of views and niche areas are represented. It is important to be aware of and acknowledge this heterogeneity within various sectors. If there is no coordination or key actors are not at the table, the MSI may be in dire straits.

INCLUSION

Inclusion – like MSIs – has gained increasing attention in international discourse. The 2030 Agenda calls for collaborative partnerships. Inclusive partnership is also one of the four core principles of the GPEDC. One of the key issues for MSIs is the question of who to include. Having the right stakeholders is a critical factor for MSI effectiveness.

Get inclusion right

Unfortunately, there is no template for the 'right' mix of stakeholders to be included in an MSI. The most suitable composition for an MSI depends on the type

of MSI, its objectives and its plans to realize these objectives. As such, stakeholder profiles need to be carefully examined to determine which stakeholders should be at the table to give an MSI the right mix of interests and skills to increase its chances of success.

A good starting point is to have a number of committed representatives from different stakeholder groups, who share common areas of concern and goals around the table to initiate an MSI. A central premise of MSIs is that stakeholders are motivated to engage their time, resources and efforts to reach a shared negotiated goal. However, for some stakeholders motivation to engage might not be immediately apparent. Within the framework of international development cooperation, the private sector is a case in point. Identifying incentives that these stakeholders might respond to, can help in the development of appropriate value propositions to encourage their engagement. It is important to bear in mind that a stakeholder's willingness to engage might not be matched by a capacity to engage. Awareness of a stakeholder's (relative) capabilities can be useful in identifying proper incentives for engagement.

GETTING THE RIGHT STAKEHOLDERS: *The most appropriate configuration for an MSI is in part determined by the issue the MSI is concerned with. For example in Costa Rica, an MSI around a Water Law – an economic issue – involved different business groups, five parts of government and two NGO platforms. Meanwhile for an MSI on LGBTI legislation – a social issue – the MSI involved six NGOs, various government actors, as well as parliamentarians. (MSI Studies, Volume I: Synthesis Report, p. 21)*

The various attributes that an individual brings to an MSI, not just an organizational affiliation, can also be crucial for an MSI's effectiveness. Though organizations come together around a shared interest in an MSI, the right people need to be at the table.

In several cases, MSIs greatly benefited from the skills, competencies, social capital and reputation of particular individuals ('champions'). In fact, the study found that individuals can be more significant for MSI effectiveness than formal designs and 'ideal' models of collaboration. Amongst the particularly useful skills are soft skills, such as stakeholder sensitivity and ability to adjust to the context.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL: *In Indonesia, a deputy minister and minister were key champions and main drivers of an MSI. "Under their leadership, their respective institutions gained trust and credibility from other stakeholders." (MSI Studies, Volume III: Indonesia Country Report, p. 24)*

Engage local actors

Though there is no template for the right mix of stakeholders for an MSI, the MSI studies did find that MSIs can be weakened by the absence of local actors, be they government or non-state actors. This is further elaborated upon below.

CONTEXT

The MSI studies also looked at how context influences the effectiveness of MSIs. Conventional wisdom is that processes of development and change are highly context specific. Less well understood is what it is about context that different stakeholders are sensitive to. The MSI studies found that not only country context matters. How stakeholders respond to and try to shape a context is equally important.

Country conditions

Particular country and partnership conditions can affect – either positively or negatively – the effectiveness of MSIs. One of these factors is **democratic disruption**. Countries have varying democratic political systems in which power is distributed differently across major institutions of the state and society. These systems and power relations are not static. By way of example, where state officials are involved in an MSI, elections can bring about smaller or larger shifts in the individuals involved and the approaches used. This can slow down an MSI, or create new opportunities for progress: MSIs that have lost momentum can for example be reinvigorated and useful institutions rediscovered. Democratic disruptions thus do not necessarily have negative effects. MSIs are recommended not to assume that continuity is a given, and to anticipate, be prepared for, and be able to take advantage of disruptions that democratic processes and related changes bring.

BENEFITING FROM A DEMOCRATIC DISRUPTION: *In Costa Rica, a democratic disruption allowed the reactivation of Secretariat for Food*

and Nutrition Policy - an existing, albeit inactive, political platform that entailed political involvement of the highest authorities of the sector, as well as other state agencies, the private sector and CSOs". (MSI Studies, Volume I: Synthesis Report, p. 26)

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF A DEMOCRATIC DISRUPTION: *In Kenya, a new constitution radically redesigned the country's governance structure with substantial power devolved to 47 counties. This led to a reshuffling of ministry responsibilities that downgraded the influence and status of an MSI focal point." (MSI Studies, Volume 1: Synthesis Report, p. 27)*

Secondly, the MSI studies identified **multi-level governance** as an influential country condition. MSI effectiveness can be affected by vertical relationships and divisions. Local ownership here is key. In a highly decentralized environment, political commitment on the part of local government actors – who have authority to define priorities, develop local regulations and allocate resources – was often essential to achieving the objectives of an MSI. It is therefore recommended to create designated spaces at the table for local development actors, be they from within government, civil society or the private sector. An alternative is to connect multi-level platforms and networks. This could mean in practice, for example, simultaneous discussion of areas of concern at national and sub-national levels by different stakeholders, who are then also associated with each other vertically.

ENGAGING LOCAL ACTORS: *In Kenya, devolution has affected collaborations at county level. There is a difference in leadership between county and national level. "Everyone wants to build their own Kingdom." (MSI Studies, Volume III: Kenya Country Report, p. 18)*

MSIs can also be affected by certain conditions within the partnership. One finding is the positive relationship between effectiveness and degree of trust between the stakeholders in an MSI. When strong trust is in play, transaction costs are reduced, communications are more open and fluid, disagreements and conflicts are easier to resolve and commitments are more likely to be honored. Some of the cases pointed to the importance of trust in individuals, as well as in the capabilities and sensitivities of the institutions to which

they belong. This relates to one of the points raised previously in the section on inclusion, namely that individuals may be more important for MSI effectiveness than formal designs or ideal models for collaboration.

IMPORTANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL: *In Kyrgyzstan, in all four cases studied stakeholders' influence depended on the commitment and leadership of key individuals." (MSI Studies, Volume III: Kyrgyzstan Country Report, p. 18.)*

Another crucial partnership condition relates to a sense of **ownership** by the stakeholders involved. When it comes to MSIs, one of the aims is to extend ownership for an initiative beyond government. Yet in many cases governments play a leading role as *primus inter pares* (first among equals), sometimes at the cost of broader ownership and collective governance. One of the challenges is for government actors to hold back from exercising authority if inclusion and voluntary engagement of non-state actors is to be achieved and sustained. MSI governance requires a deliberate and sensitive approach to equitable collaboration with sincerity towards collaborative purposes. Non-state stakeholders should not be seen as mere supporters of state efforts, but as equal partners that are essential to a genuine collaboration in which each actor brings unique contributions to the MSI.

THE INTERLOCUTOR

A distinctive feature of this study is that it also examined different roles of what the researchers termed the 'interlocutor'. The interlocutor can be best defined as the entity that hosts, facilitates, leads, or acts as a secretariat for an MSI. The MSI studies produced a number of interesting findings as regards the role of the interlocutor in country-owned MSI, drawing from the multilateral Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, an international initiative that is locally implemented in a multi-stakeholder fashion.

An interesting finding from the perspective of ownership is that in some cases there was a need for sensitive prescription. By way of example, actors engaged in an MSI may need guidance on how to initiate a multi-stakeholder process, or welcome a constructive critical assessment of their performance. In the case of SUN, it was noted that respect for ownership should not be seen as excluding a mutual discussion on the

quality of the initiative at a country level. Such discussions should not be part of top-down prescriptions, but rather take the form of peer-to-peer learning which can mitigate feelings of being imposed upon. This suggests that ownership and external guidance are not mutually exclusive. In some cases, a balance needs to be found between ownership with country-level multi-stakeholder steering on the one hand, and a certain level of guidance, sensitive to the importance of country realities, from the interlocutor (in this case an international secretariat) on the other hand. The interlocutor can play an important role in helping provide direction.

Finally, as mentioned above, one of the intents of an MSI is ownership of an initiative beyond government. In light of that, a case can be made to consider placing the interlocutor at arms-length from government. Locating the interlocutor with a non-state actor - for example a CSO - could broaden buy-in and provide a space for wide ownership of an initiative, while it also buffers the risk of democratic disruption.

Conclusion

Overall, what becomes clear from the MSI studies is that there is no one-size-fits all template for undertaking an effective MSI. While from the different MSIs one can identify important conditions for success, ultimately the design of an MSI needs to be tailored to the specific (country) context. Meanwhile MSIs themselves are also not static, and as they shift from a dialogue to a collaboration, or vice versa, another MSI design and "competencies": other may be needed. This is a challenge which development stakeholders will need to face and address as they promote and create various MSIs in support of implementing the SDGs.

Policy recommendations at a glance

On the basis of the MSI studies' findings, the following recommendations can be offered to policy makers and practitioners working with or in an MSI.

DEFINING THE MSI AND ITS STAKEHOLDERS

- **Be clear about the type of MSI.** Distinctions can be made between for instance multi-stakeholder dialogues and collaborations. The commitments are different, as is the effect on relative power, whereby varying degrees of freedom of decision-making are willingly foregone.
- **Unpack major stakeholder categories.** Sectors – government, civil society, business, etc. – are too broad of a framing. Each sector contains a variety of actors and interests that may not share similar positions and perspectives. Actors, rather than sectors, should be the units of analysis.

INCLUSION

- **Get the right actors at the table.** Develop a design that is sensitive to the different interests in a sector and brings together – even from within a sector – the essential actors and various resources (e.g. political, social, etc.) required to get things done.
- **Find individuals that can strengthen the MSI.** Beyond organizational engagement, try to engage individuals - ‘champions’ - with the right skills, competencies and reputation.
- **View inclusion as an iterative process.** Start with a number of committed representatives from different stakeholder groups who share common areas of concern and goals around the table to initiate an MSI. View the MSI as an iterative way of working, with inclusion as a process of expansion of stakeholders over time.
- **Incentivize engagement.** Reflect on incentives that stakeholders might be sensitive to in order to develop appropriate value propositions to encourage engagement.
- **Engage local actors.** MSIs can be weakened by the absence of local actors.

COUNTRY CONDITIONS

- **Do not assume continuity is a given.** Anticipate, be prepared for, and be able to take advantage of disruptions that democratic processes bring.
- **Create designated spaces at the table for local development actors,** be they government, civil society or the private sector.
- **Connect multi-level platforms and networks.** This could mean in practice, for example, simultaneous discussion of areas of concern at national and sub-national levels by different stakeholders, who then also associated with each other vertically.

PARTNERSHIP CONDITIONS

- **Create trust** among the stakeholders involved and their respective organizations.
- **Treat all stakeholders as equal partners.** Use a deliberate and sensitive approach to equitable collaboration: MSI governance is not only about rules, but about fostering sincerity in collective action.

THE INTERLOCUTOR

- **Do not preclude external guidance.** Instead find a balance between ownership and external guidance.
- **Locate the interlocutor at an arms-length distance from government.** Locating the interlocutor with a non-state actor - for example a CSO - could broaden buy-in and provide a space for wide ownership.

Links and references

Fowler, A. and Biekart, K. (2016), *Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives*, Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment, March 2016, available at <https://taskteamcso.com/activities/multi-stakeholder-initiatives-studies/>.

Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (2016), *Going Further Together: Why Inclusion is Important for Effective Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives*, available at <http://effectivecooperation.org/2016/06/going-further-together-why-inclusion-is-important-for-effective-multi-stakeholder-initiatives/>.

Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (2016), *Country Context and Ownership in Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives*, available at <http://effectivecooperation.org/2016/07/case-study-review-country-context-and-ownership-in-multi-stakeholder-initiatives/>.

The Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (2015), available at http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/AAAA_Outcome.pdf

United Nations (2015), *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.

About the Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives (MSI studies)

The MSI studies were conducted with a team of local researchers under leadership of Prof. Dr. Alan Fowler and Dr. Kees Biekart of the international Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

About the international Institute of Social Studies

The international Institute of Social Studies (ISS) is a postgraduate school of policy-oriented social science whose diverse activities include teaching, interdisciplinary research and advisory work in the field of development studies. Founded by the universities of the Netherlands in 1952, the Institute is one of the world's leading centres of higher education and research in this field. ISS is part of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

For more information

www.iss.nl

About the Task Team

The Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (Task Team) is a multi-stakeholder informal network. Its work is concerned with advancing the role of civil society in development, in the context of international commitments on civil society and development as agreed at the 2011 Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness and more recently at the 2014 Mexico High Level Meeting of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation.

Task Team participants come from three stakeholder groups: governments that provide development cooperation; recipient governments; and civil society organizations (CSOs) in the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE). It is led by three co-chairs, each representing a stakeholder group.

For more information

Please visit www.taskteamcso.com and follow us on Twitter @TaskTeamCSO.

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