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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A TIME FOR TRANSFORMATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

*How Multistakeholder Partnerships Can
Accelerate the UN Sustainable Development Goals*



Pioneering Green Partnerships,
Investing in Impact



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FOREWORD BY BAN KI-MOON

On September 25, 2015, I had the distinct privilege to announce that all Member States of the United Nations had agreed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) therein. These SDGs are a global call to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure the well-being of humanity. The nations of the world committed to achieve these goals by 2030.

I believed then, and even more now, that these goals can only be met through multilateral and multisectoral collaboration. This is why SDG 17, which calls for sustainable development through partnerships, is one of the most important of them all.

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates how interconnected we are through travel, trade, and communication. To end this pandemic, we need global cooperation and partnerships to treat the sick, develop the vaccine, and rebuild communities and economies damaged by this deadly virus. Like the pandemic, we know climate change threatens lives and livelihoods as warming temperatures lead to more frequent and severe storms, floods, wildfires, and droughts. The governments, businesses, and civil society organizations of the world must work together with great urgency to address these issues and all SDGs, such as ending poverty and hunger, expanding education and health care for all, increasing gender equality, and supporting sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

The Global Green Growth Institute is proud to collaborate with the World Resources Institute on this report, appropriately titled “A Time for

Transformative Partnerships.” It details how partnerships can accelerate progress on the SDGs by better aligning the visions and designs to the main characteristics of transformative change, and it identifies the key success factors that are common among partnerships with transformation potential.

I encourage you to study this report and use this knowledge to embrace partnerships to achieve the SDGs. We need bold, decisive, and transformative action to ensure a sustainable future for all.



Ban Ki-moon

President and Chair of the Global Green Growth Institute
Eighth Secretary-General of the United Nations



FOREWORD BY ANDREW STEER

We live in a world ripe for transformation. In the midst of this global pandemic and the growing climate change crisis, it is imperative that we address these emergencies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the context of longer-term systems change.

Incremental change is insufficient. Going it alone is inadequate. We need big, bold, and innovative action to tackle our greatest challenges while improving equity and social inclusion in all parts of the world. We need revolutions in green energy, food, transportation, manufacturing, and the built environment to dramatically reduce carbon emissions and ensure a sustainable future for people and the planet.

Attaining these goals requires transformative action that fundamentally shifts global systems, and multistakeholder partnerships can help usher in this critical change. Partnerships are effective when they are clear in their ambitions, are carefully designed to ensure that each member of the partnership contributes an essential element, and when they have a clear and accountable theory of change.

At WRI, partnerships are part of our DNA. We are proud to host P4G (Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030), a platform that funds and supports innovative multistakeholder partnerships working across five SDGs in low-income countries.

This report dives deeply into how these partnerships can—and, indeed, do—make progress where less collaborative efforts might fail. A survey of 41 multistakeholder partnerships that work on the SDGs found four success factors that offer a high potential for transformation: joint agreement on vision and goals; clear articulation

of what policies and relationships need to change; the ability to leverage existing power structures to advocate for change; and strong mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, learning, and reporting.

Thank you to the members and sponsors of the P4G community, the Global Green Growth Institute, and the World Economic Forum for their contributions to this report. Thank you as well to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark for supporting this research. Our hope is that by reading this report, partnership practitioners from all sectors will be more equipped to achieve transformative change and contribute to a more just and sustainable world.



Andrew Steer
President and CEO
World Resources Institute

Highlights

- Partnerships can accelerate SDG action by better aligning their vision and design to the three main characteristics of transformation. Transformation is *systemic*, which represents significant changes to a system such as food, energy, or water; *long-term and sustained*; and *disrupts the status quo*.
- Partnerships pursuing transformation can work along a continuum to change external policies and practices and/or launch commercial products or services that address the SDGs. Understanding these two pathways can help partnerships set a deliberate path forward as they pursue their transformative ambitions.
- Transformative partnerships leverage the contributions of governments, business, and civil society organizations (CSOs). Understanding the drivers of each stakeholder is important for building successful partnerships.
- Out of 14 commonly agreed-upon partnering success factors from the partnership literature, an evaluation of 41 SDG-focused partnerships found that those evaluated to have high transformation potential were especially intentional at four success factors as compared to those with low transformation potential. They are: articulating a clear understanding of the system of interest; agreeing on joint transformation vision, goals, and activities; establishing a strong performance tracking system that integrates system thinking; and leveraging external stakeholders.

A Time for Transformation

As a global community of nations and some 8 billion people, we share in the desire to achieve the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—goals that call for no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, reduced inequality, and climate action, among others. The last of the 17 goals is sustainable development through partnerships, the topic of this report.

Since the SDGs were adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015, there have been literally thousands of multistakeholder partnerships created among governments, businesses, civil society, and other organizations. The work of some of these partnerships and other initiatives has helped contribute to progress on many of the SDGs. For example, sub-Saharan Africa, the world's poorest region, continues to make great strides in poverty reduction. The global population without access to electricity has declined by over 30 percent in the last decade, and maternal and child mortality has dropped dramatically.

Yet, great challenges remain to meeting all the goals. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic, a global recession, and the climate change crisis are a triple threat that can reverse progress made on reducing poverty and hunger and other important goals.

At this critical time, this report provides a valuable road map to help governments, businesses, and civil society organizations (CSOs) assess their role in multistakeholder partnerships and how these partnerships can contribute to transformative change and progress on the SDGs. Although there may always be needs for new partnerships, the real opportunity is how to improve the effectiveness of existing and new partnerships, as they address SDGs, address the urgency for climate action, and ensure greater equity and justice in our world.

About This Report

This report, authored by World Resources Institute (WRI), details how partnerships with transformative ambitions can maximize their effectiveness toward driving SDG action. The findings and recommendations presented in this report reflect nearly two years of research; interviews with 41 multistakeholder partnerships and over three dozen government experts, business sustainability leaders, and civil society leaders; as well as contributions from Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030 (P4G), hosted by WRI, the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) and the World Economic Forum (WEF).

This report, funded by the government of Denmark, offers extensive research findings coupled with practical guidance and recommendations for partnership practitioners, governments, businesses, and CSOs working on the SDGs. The report differs from past partnership research in its focus on transformation. This report starts with the premise that partnerships can accelerate transformative SDG action, and much of the content presented here studies partnership formation and effectiveness. Throughout this report, we present dozens of mission-driven partnerships—both those surveyed and beyond—working on issues such as improving health outcomes, reducing global poverty and hunger, and advancing clean energy and water. We adapt the United Nations definition of multistakeholder partnership and define a multistakeholder partnership as a voluntary collaboration between two or more stakeholders whereby stakeholders are committed through a formal agreement to share resources, accountability, risks, leadership, and benefits to meet a specific SDG-related objective (UN 2015).

In this report, we do not explicitly discuss the transformation impacts of partnerships since most are early in their partnership journey, nor do we set out to highlight failed partnerships. We do, however, discuss partnerships' progress toward transformation goals, discuss partnership challenges, and provide recommendations for improving partnership resilience.



Key Findings and Recommendations

Partnerships can accelerate SDG action by better aligning their vision and design to the three main characteristics of transformation:

- **Transformation is systemic.** It helps to first break down the meaning of a system, which is broadly a construct comprising elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose (Meadows 2008). The sustainability of a system is influenced by underlying problems kept in place by certain conditions or barriers like inefficient policies, practices, or power dynamics. Partnerships operate within a system (e.g., energy, water, or food) and operate to address a complex issue underlying the system. Transformation occurs when changes or shifts to system conditions have altered the interrelationships and interdependencies of the system to set it on a sustainable development pathway.

- **Transformation is long-term and sustained.** Transitions are not immediate. Given its complexities, transformation takes time and patience. Transformative changes must also be lasting if true transformation is to have occurred.
- **Transformation disrupts the status quo.** Inherent to transformation is a new way of doing things, such as a different approach that improves upon an existing state, an innovative technology that brings about unexpected change, or a shift in ideology that represents a new framing for action.

Partnerships with transformative ambitions can work toward changing external policies and practices and/or launching commercial products or services that address the SDGs. We propose a continuum on which partnerships with transformation potential exist. While we recognize that it is challenging—or perhaps even impossible—to develop the perfect framework to capture every transformative partnership out there, our hope is that this continuum, based on our research and observations, can help partnerships mark where they are on their transformation journeys and think about potential pathways of transformation as they mature. The continuum broadly features two types of partnerships:

BOX ES-1 | A Transformative Partnership

Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, founded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the World Bank, brings together private-sector vaccine manufacturers, local governments, and civil society actors to provide equitable access to vaccines in emerging countries. By pooling vaccine demand, Gavi disrupted the status quo by removing commercial risks that typically prevent vaccine manufacturers from serving low-income countries. The partnership takes a systemic approach, addressing issues throughout the vaccine life cycle that contribute to low vaccination rates. Gavi works with countries to strengthen local health care systems, engage local communities, and address mental models affecting vaccine access. The partnership's market-shaping activities are intended to be long term. Nearly all countries that have transitioned out of Gavi support continue to purchase vaccines at the same price negotiated by the partnership.

Source: Gavi 2020.

- **Enabling Partnerships.** These partnerships strive to shift policies and practices to move actors more quickly to a sustainable development pathway. To do so, they may form roundtables or voluntary commitments to set sustainability standards; they may focus on sharing knowledge or advice; or they may look to create market conditions such that commercial investments are feasible in the future. These partnerships fall toward the left of the continuum illustrated in Figure ES-1.
- **Market-Driven Partnerships.** These partnerships use the power of market signals and forces to drive sustainable change by launching a commercially viable product or service. Although these partnerships are often motivated by matters beyond making profit (e.g., strengthening relationships with other stakeholders, helping a local community, etc.), these partnerships ultimately strive to develop a model that launches a commercial new

Figure ES-1 | Transformative Partnership Continuum



Source: WRI Authors.

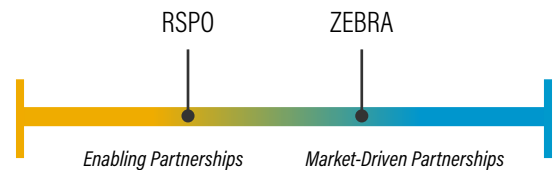
product or service and are often reliant on innovative policies or concessions or innovative combinations of both. These partnerships fall toward the right of Figure ES-1.

Partnerships can move along the continuum, or they might remain static. In Box ES-2, we describe two partnerships and where they fall along this continuum.

It is critical for stakeholders to understand why others want to partner with them. This can help to facilitate a smooth relationship among partners, and also ensure that partners are properly sourced. With a clear understanding of what each stakeholder brings to the table, partnership practitioners will be able to better align on a united vision—a critical success factor for transformative partnerships. Figure ES-2 identifies the typical contributions of the stakeholders—governments, businesses, and CSOs—in multistakeholder partnerships. These contributions reflect findings from a detailed review of published academic literature, as well as dozens of conversations with government policy and climate experts and sustainability and partnership leaders in businesses and CSOs. Although the lists may not be all-inclusive, they do provide a helpful starter framing for partnership practitioners looking to better understand one another.

BOX ES-2 | Partnerships on the Continuum

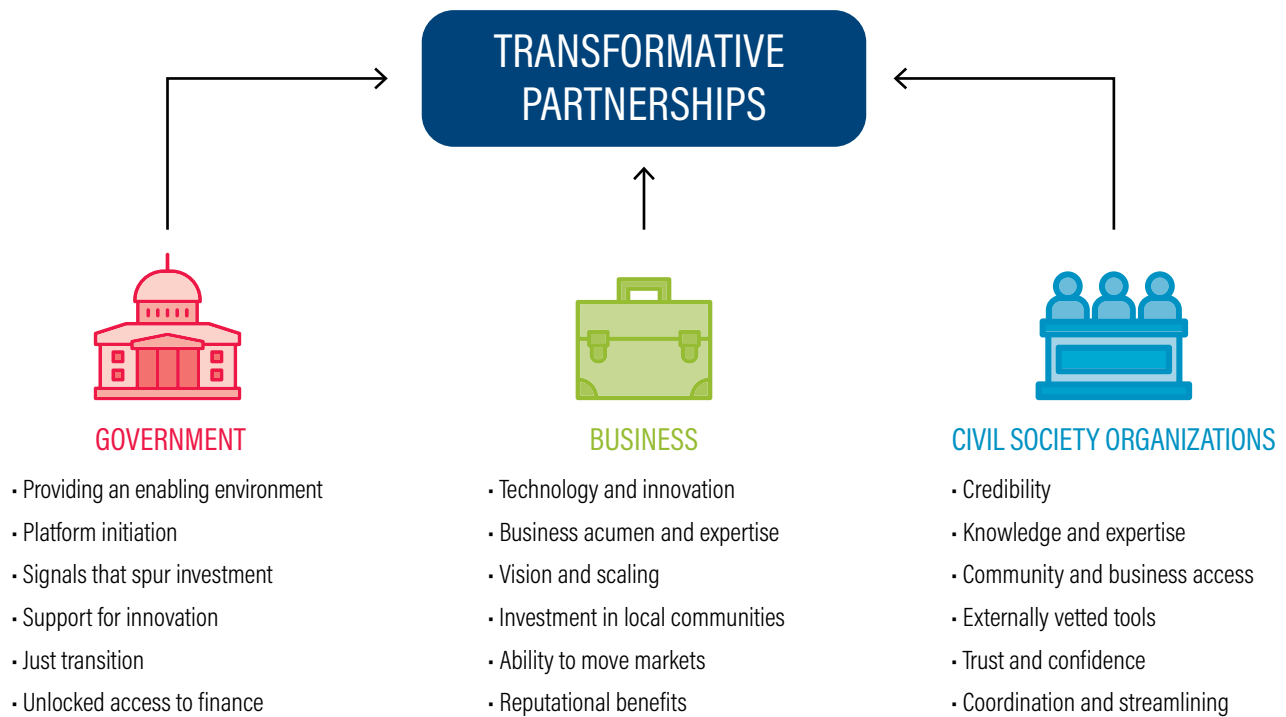
The Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) aims to transform the palm oil market by convening business, government, and civil society stakeholders to set industry standards and create an enabling policy environment for sustainable palm oil production. The partnership now has over 4,000 members across the palm oil supply chain that have committed to produce, source, and use palm oil that complies with RSPO social and environmental criteria. The Zero Emission Rapid Bus-deployment Accelerator (ZEBRA) is working to transform public transportation in Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil by transitioning public bus systems from diesel to electric. ZEBRA started by engaging government actors to address the public policy barriers preventing this transition. As the partnership has progressed toward its end goal of launching a commercial electric bus service, it has engaged private-sector electric bus suppliers, developers, and operators.



Source: RSPO 2020; P4G 2020d.



Figure ES-2 | Stakeholder Contributions in Transformative Partnerships



Sources: Albani and Henderson 2014; Brouwer et al. 2016; Collison et al. 2014; Enright et al. 2018; G20 2015; GCPSE and UNDP n.d.; GGGI 2019; Gomme and Perks 2018; Hofstetter 2019; Horan 2019; Jenkins et al. 2017; Kamphof and Melissen 2017; KPMG International 2016; Melo 2018; Ménascé 2016; Menden et al. 2019; Pattberg and Widerberg 2016; Podder and Singh 2018; PWC 2017; Poret 2014; Seitanidi 2015; Stibbe and Prescott 2017; Stibbe et al. 2018; UN DESA 2019; UNGC 2013; UNGC, WMB and WRI 2018; Urmetzer et al. 2017; USCIB 2015; Van der Vleuten 2019; WBCSD 2016; WBCSD 2020.

Out of 14 commonly reported partnership success factors, we identified 4 where partnerships with high transformation potential were especially intentional about their implementation, compared to low transformation-potential partnerships.

We identified the 14 partnership success factors through a detailed review of dozens of published academic and organizational reports on multistakeholder partnerships. Interested as to which of these 14 success factors may better help partnerships achieve their transformation

vision, we surveyed 41 partnerships from the P4G partnership ecosystem, to understand the extent to which they embodied these success factors. We established an evaluation method (that is fully explained in the report) for assessing these partnerships’ transformation potential to see how those with high transformation potential compared to those with low transformation potential in terms of embodying each success factor. Partnerships with high transformation potential were found to be especially intentional about implementing these four success factors:

1. **Clear articulation of the system of interest.** Partnerships with high transformation potential are better able to develop a strong understanding of the system they want to influence and in which they operate, as well as the conditions, such as policies or relationships, that must be shifted to move the needle on the problem. Partnerships with high transformation potential that could articulate their system of interest rated themselves as doing this to a great or very great extent (93 percent) compared to those with low transformation potential (60 percent).

2. **Jointly agreed-upon transformation vision and near-term goals.** Partnerships with higher transformation potential tend to excel at establishing a joint transformation vision and near-term goals that are well aligned with the transformation characteristics, a strong systems understanding, and the SDGs. We found that 71 percent of high transformation potential partnerships scored themselves as excelling at establishing a shared vision and goals, compared to only 27 percent of partnerships with low transformation potential.

BOX ES-3 | IIX Women's Livelihood Bond Series™

The IIX Women's Livelihood Bond Series™ (WLB Series) aims to transform the global financial system by mobilizing capital for women's empowerment through innovative financial instruments. The partnership recognized the importance of developing a holistic understanding of its system from the start and focused on a specific subset of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. This enabled the partnership to create clear boundaries of its activities while ensuring it added value to each market. Initially, WLB Series focused on three South Asian countries. It has since expanded to additional countries and targets specific sectors such as clean energy and sustainable agriculture. The WLB Series successfully closed a US\$8.5 and \$12 million issuance, demonstrating the scalability, replicability, and overall power of investing in women's empowerment.

Source: IIX 2017; IIX 2020.

BOX ES-4 | Africa GreenCo

Africa GreenCo aims to increase private-sector investment in clean energy in sub-Saharan Africa by acting as a creditworthy intermediary to reduce risk and create a more dynamic power market in the region. The partnership has aligned stakeholders across the power systems, from developers and investors to national governments, to define and align on a partnership vision and goals. Through an iterative and participatory process, Africa GreenCo developed a master vision and goals document that captures the partnership strategy. Updating this document regularly enables partnership stakeholders to stay focused and aligned even as market conditions change.^a

Note: ^a Oxby, Cathy. 2020. Interview with WRI authors and Cathy Oxby, Chief Commercial Officer, Africa GreenCo, Surrey, UK. March 3, 2020.

Source: Africa GreenCo 2020.

3. **Strong monitoring, evaluation, learning, and reporting (MELR) mechanisms with systems thinking.** Partnerships with high transformation potential tend to have a robust performance tracking system in place that incorporates systems thinking into MELR. Systems thinking involves adopting practices to help the partnerships understand their influence on system conditions and their contribution to transformation. Not surprisingly, more partnerships with high transformation potential (64 percent) believe that they have strong to very strong MELR systems in place, compared to 47 percent of partnerships with lower transformation potential that hold this opinion.

BOX ES-5 | Courtauld Commitment 2025

Courtauld Commitment 2025 is a multistakeholder partnership that has been recognized for its MELR process and success in measurably reducing food loss and waste in the United Kingdom by 20 percent since 2015. Convening stakeholder Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) provides member companies with clear data collection and reporting protocols and has two dedicated analysts who focus on data cleaning, validating, and aggregating reporting data. An external auditor or peer reviewer then verifies progress against the partnership's targets.^a

Note: ^a Swannell, Richard. 2020. Interview with WRI authors and Richard Swannell, Director, WRAP, Oxford, UK. March 5, 2020.

Source: WRAP 2020.

4. **Capacity to engage stakeholders external to the partnership.** Partnerships with high transformation potential are effective at tackling existing power structures and revising them by engaging champions (both internally and externally) and frontline communities to advocate for change. Partnerships with high transformation potential believe they have embodied this success factor to a great or very great extent (64 percent), compared to partnerships with low transformation potential (47 percent).

BOX ES-6 | Energise Africa

Energise Africa, an impact investing platform by Ethex and Lendahand, has cultivated support from stakeholder networks, investors, and other CSOs to provide affordable finance to solar businesses in sub-Saharan Africa and currently serves nearly half a million people. The partnership has cultivated relationships with grassroots CSOs, collaborating on events and enabling Energise Africa to connect with new investor groups. Creating new opportunities for a first point of contact with investors is critical for building trust among new investors and establishing a sustainable investment pipeline. Once people have invested with Energise Africa, the partnership's repeat investment rate is above 90 percent.^a

Note: ^a Mountain, Rachel. 2020. Interview with WRI Authors and Rachel Mountain, Head of Marketing and Communication, Energise Africa, Oxford, UK. March 4, 2020

Source: Energise Africa 2020.

How to Use This Report

The findings and recommendations in this report offer practical and valuable guidance for governments, businesses, and CSOs. We note a few ways to apply this knowledge:

- Study the chapter on transformation to understand how to integrate these concepts better into existing or new partnerships' visions and goals working toward the SDGs.
- Review the chapter on contributions of government, business, and civil society stakeholders to leverage these to better understand one another and to effectively pursue transformative partnerships.
- Explore the seven criteria used to evaluate the transformation potential of a partnership.
- Examine the chapter and appendix on 14 well-established partnership success factors—particularly the four identified as most important for partnerships with transformative ambitions—to maximize operational effectiveness. (We also have provided a section with six guidelines for creating great MELR systems.)
- Learn more about the dozens of partnerships mentioned in this report to see how their work can inform existing and new partnerships with goals to accelerate the SDGs.

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ABOUT WRI

World Resources Institute (WRI) is a global research organization that turns big ideas into action at the nexus of environment, economic opportunity, and human well-being.

Our Challenge

Natural resources are at the foundation of economic opportunity and human well-being. But today, we are depleting Earth's resources at rates that are not sustainable, endangering economies and people's lives. People depend on clean water, fertile land, healthy forests, and a stable climate. Livable cities and clean energy are essential for a sustainable planet. We must address these urgent, global challenges this decade.

Our Vision

We envision an equitable and prosperous planet driven by the wise management of natural resources. We aspire to create a world where the actions of government, business, and communities combine to eliminate poverty and sustain the natural environment for all people.

ABOUT P4G

P4G (Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030) is a global platform accelerating market-based partnerships to build sustainable and resilient economies. P4G bridges the gap between development and investment agendas to deliver inclusive, tangible solutions to meet the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Agreement. P4G provides an action-oriented global ecosystem of business, government, and civil society organizations to unlock opportunities for partnerships working in five SDG areas: food and agriculture, water, energy, cities, and circular economy.

ABOUT WEF

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ABOUT GGGI

The Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) is a treaty-based international, intergovernmental organization dedicated to supporting and promoting strong, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth in developing countries and emerging economies. GGGI supports its member governments in achieving the commitments expressed under the Paris Climate Agreement and their Sustainable Development Goal targets. GGGI is leading the implementation of a new development paradigm, focused on a model of economic growth that is both environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive green growth.

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