



# Partnerships for Sustainable Development

## An Appraisal Framework

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The Global Governance Project is a joint research programme of eleven European research institutions. It seeks to advance understanding of the new actors, institutions and mechanisms of global governance, especially in the field of sustainable development.

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## Abstract

One remembers the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg today mainly for the promotion of a new form of global governance: the so-called ‘partnerships for sustainable development’. These initiatives typically bring together actors from various sectors—governments, industry, activists, scientists or international organisations—and build on a voluntary agreement to achieve a specific sustainability goal. By July 2007, 331 such multi-stakeholder initiatives have been formally registered with the United Nations, and many similar agreements are in place without having been registered. Most research on these partnerships has so far been conducted in the form of single- or small-n case studies. These case studies have shed some light on singular aspects of partnerships, but failed to advance understanding on the overall phenomenon of transnational public-private partnerships in sustainability governance. In this paper, we thus outline an alternative approach: the construction of a Global Sustainability Partnership Database that is currently undertaken by a team of researchers at the Environmental Policy Analysis Department of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In this database, our team is collecting data on two types of variables: on the influence of transnational public policy partnerships, and on explanatory factors that may account for variation in influence. We provide in this paper a first outline of the database. We review the available literature and describe our general approach and our database project, including the measurement concept for the influence of partnerships and a set of hypotheses.

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## Foreword

This working paper was written as part of the Global Governance Project, a joint research programme of eleven European research institutions that seeks to advance understanding of the new actors, institutions and mechanisms of global governance. While we address the phenomenon of global governance in general, most of our research projects focus on global environmental change and governance for sustainable development. The Project is co-ordinated by the Department of Environmental Policy Analysis of the Institute for Environmental Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and includes associate faculty members and research fellows from eleven European institutions: Science Po Bordeaux, Bremen University, Freie Universität Berlin (Environmental Policy Research Centre), The Fridtjof Nansen Institute Oslo, London School of Economics and Political Science, Lund University, Oldenburg University, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Institute for European Studies) and Wageningen University (Environmental Policy Group).

Analytically, we define global governance by three criteria, which also shape the research groups within the Project. First, we see global governance as characterised by the increasing participation of actors other than states, ranging from private actors such as multinational corporations and (networks of) scientists and environmentalists to public non-state actors such as intergovernmental organisations ('multiactor governance'). These new actors of global governance are the focus of our research group MANUS—Managers of Global Change.

Second, we see global governance as marked by new mechanisms of organisation such as public-private and private-private rule-making and implementation partnerships, alongside the traditional system of legal treaties negotiated by states. This is the focus of our research group MECGLO—New Mechanisms of Global Governance.

Third, we see global governance as characterised by different layers and clusters of rule-making and rule-implementation, both vertically between supranational, international, national and subnational layers of authority ('multilevel governance') and horizontally between different parallel rule-making systems. This stands at the centre of our research group MOSAIC—'Multiple Options, Solutions and Approaches: Institutional Interplay and Conflict'.

Comments on this working paper, as well as on the other activities of the Global Governance Project, are highly welcome. We believe that understanding global governance is only feasible through joint effort of colleagues from various backgrounds and from all regions of the world. We look forward to your response.

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## 1 Introduction

One remembers the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg today mainly for the promotion of a new form of global governance: the so-called ‘partnerships for sustainable development’. These initiatives typically bring together actors from various sectors—governments, industry, activists, scientists or international organisations—and build on a voluntary agreement to achieve a specific sustainability goal. Unlike the traditional venues of international co-operation, such as legally binding agreements or declarations of heads of state and government, these public-private partnerships are also known as the ‘type-II’ outcomes of the Johannesburg summit. They were formally defined, at the fourth preparatory meeting of the summit, as ‘specific commitments by various partners intended to contribute to and reinforce the implementation of the outcomes of intergovernmental negotiations of the WSSD (Programme of Action and the Political Declaration) and to help the further implementation of Agenda 21 and the Millennium Development Goals’ (Kara and Quarless 2002). The United Nations invited such partnerships to register with the secretariat of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), a sub-committee of the UN Economic and Social Council. By July 2007, 331 multi-stakeholder initiatives have been listed in the CSD Partnerships Database.<sup>1</sup> In addition, many similar agreements are in place but have not been formally registered (in general, see Glasbergen, Biermann and Mol 2007).

All partnerships address at least one of the Millennium Development Goals<sup>2</sup> and/or one of the five so-called WEHAB areas (water, energy, health, agriculture, and biodiversity) defined at the Johannesburg Summit. Within this broad framework, the thematic focus of partnerships is quite diverse, ranging from gender equality to climate change. Partnerships also vary in terms of their planned duration and the number and type of partners involved.

These 331 new initiatives since 2002 seem to be evidence of an impressive progress. They might even give rise to a new paradigm of world politics in which intergovernmental negotiation is replaced by private governance of networks of non-state actors. On the other hand, one needs to question whether these public-private partnerships really offer an effective contribution to solving pressing problems of sustainable development. It remains unclear under what conditions public-private partnerships effectively complement international agreements, and most analyses of partnerships have not addressed the central question of what makes one partnership more effective than others by carefully investigating a range of explanatory factors.

In this paper, we do not offer an answer but an outline of how to study these questions, in particular by means of a Global Sustainability Partnership Database that

<sup>1</sup> <http://webapps01.un.org/dsd/partnerships/public/welcome.do> Last Access: 5 Oct. 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The Millennium Development Goals are: Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education; Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women; Goal 4: Reduce child mortality; Goal 5: Improve maternal health; Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability; and Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development. See the United Nations site for MDG Indicators (<http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/-default.aspx>; last access: 5 Oct. 2006):

we are developing (on first results, see Biermann et al. 2007). To this end, we first review the available literature (*section 2*) and outline then our general approach and especially our database project (*section 3*). Its key elements we describe in the two subsequent sections: our measurement concept for the influence of partnerships (*section 4*), and a set of hypotheses that we test in a larger research effort based on this database (*section 5*).

## **2 Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Current Research**

So far, there is not much consensus, and in fact not much research, on the question of the role and relevance of the ‘Partnerships for Sustainable Development’ agreed around and after the 2002 Johannesburg Summit. Unlike the attention devoted to intergovernmental co-operation on sustainable development in the 1980s and 1990s, the current literature does not shed much light on more than a few aspects of transnational public-private partnerships as a new phenomenon of global governance. Only few scholars have systematically analysed the relevance of partnerships and other forms of private and public-private governance in global sustainability politics (cf. for example Andonova and Levy 2003; Betsill and Bulkeley 2004; Dingwerth 2005; Falkner 2003; Hale and Mauzerall 2004; Ottaway 2001; Weitzner 2002; Witte, Streck, and Benner 2002).

A review of the literature indicates that the study of transnational partnerships is complicated by a number of problems: To begin with, there is no consensus on the definition of the object to be studied (a consensus that had been quite early reached in the literature on intergovernmental regimes with Krasner’s definition of 1982, which allowed for a substantive comparative research programme). The almost 400 partnerships for sustainable development agreed in and after Johannesburg could be conceived of, to name just a few concepts, as global public policy networks (Messner 1997; Thatcher 1998; Reinicke 1998, 1999; Reinicke and Deng 2000), network management (Messner 1995), co-operative management regimes (Meadowcroft 1999), interactive or co-operative environmental management (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 1996), voluntary cross-sectoral collaborations (Tully 2004), environmental NGO-business collaborative partnerships (Stafford, Polonsky, and Hartman 2000), or green alliances (Hartman and Stafford 1997; Arts 2002). All of these terms have been developed for different analytical purposes and are applied to different empirical manifestations. This variety in terminology reflects, on the one hand, the unconsolidated nature of the current partnership research. On the other hand, it puts strict limits on cumulative empirical research and theory building.

This leads to the second problem in the literature: most research is case-study based. Detailed case studies are important for inductively generating hypotheses and deductively testing different propositions. However, a research programme that predominantly builds on case studies is unlikely to generate generalisable knowledge when case studies build on different definitions and when case studies focus on different sec-

tors, both of which complicates the comparison of findings and the accumulation of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Most empirical studies differ, for example, regarding the policy level. Some studies examine partnerships that work at the local level (Bassett 1996; De Rynck and Voets 2006), others those at the national level (Jimenez et al. 1991; Selin 1999), others again transnational partnerships, while only few papers discuss interaction between levels (Börzel 1997). At local and national levels, the focus is on patterns of shifts in governance, namely towards non-regulatory policy instruments and voluntary measures that have emerged with the debate on government-overload in the 1970s. At the level of governance 'beyond the nation state', many studies look at the European Union (Marks 1993; Rhodes, Bache, and George 1996). In these studies, the necessity to research pieces of a complex framework led to a strong emphasis on very specific aspects, such as on notions of centre and periphery (Bomberg 1994); on structural funds (Heinelt and Smith 1996); or on the role of European agencies (Dehousse 1997).

Empirical studies also differ in terms of the functions of partnerships that are studied. Some partnerships serve as mechanisms of rule and standard setting. An example is the Forest Stewardship Council, in which stakeholders from industry, environmental organisations and local communities set standards for sustainable forest management (cf. Pattberg 2005). Other partnerships serve as mechanisms of rule-implementation and service provision (Börzel and Risse 2005). Again other partnerships function as mechanisms for information provision and dissemination. Tully (2004), for example, suggests that partnerships typically emerge out of operational requirements for information through informal contacts and mature into a formal memorandum of understanding on the conditions of engagement including the use of information. Also Glasbergen and Groenenberg (2001) suggest, in their definition of product-oriented partnerships, that partners mostly focus on exchanging knowledge and information. In any case, it is open for debate whether findings on partnerships in one function can be generalised to other functions.

Empirical studies also differ regarding the policy area in which partnerships operate—ranging from studies in the various fields of sustainable development and environment to a variety of other issues including security (Considine 2002; Krahnmann 2003), economy (Kenis and Schneider 1987; Considine and Lewis 2003), tourism (Selin 1999), or health (Jimenez et al. 1991; Altenstetter 1994). Last but not least, the current case-study approach resulted in an overemphasis in case studies on the most visible, or the most successful, public-private partnerships. Inherently this brought with it a selection bias that painted a universe that is more partnership-dominated than reality may warrant.

In sum, most research has so far been conducted in the form of single- or small-n case studies. We believe that this is insufficient to generate convincing knowledge on the role and relevance of partnerships in local and global politics. The current clusters of case studies suffer from the lack of a consensus definition and are thus difficult to compare in their results. All single and small-n case studies cover only a part of the entire kaleidoscope of partnerships with regard to the level, policy area, and function of

<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge that carefully devised theory-driven study programmes can employ the case study method to a meaningful result.

partnerships. It is unclear whether findings from one level, policy area or function can be extrapolated to a more general understanding of the partnership phenomenon.

We thus propose adding to the current set of studies a large-n research programme that evolves around a Global Sustainability Partnership Database (GSPD). In the remainder of this paper, we elaborate on our approach and explain its general strategy (*section 3*), dependent variables (*section 4*) and independent variables (*section 5*).

### 3 Outline of the Global Sustainability Partnership Database

Taking into account the shortcomings of existing, largely qualitative research programmes summarised above, we argue that the analysis of transnational public policy partnerships could benefit from a parallel programme of quantitative research that would build on a partnership database and would be complementary to, and further complemented by, in-depth case studies. Quantitative studies based on a database have a number of advantages: They allow for a better understanding of the entire phenomenon of transnational governance beyond the restricted look at single cases. They help to understand the relevance of particular partnerships within the community of all partnerships and thus to make sense of individual, possibly intensively studied cases. Likewise, database research can help understand correlation between variables and thus allow for the generation or rough testing of hypotheses that is later complemented by qualitative work.

A first and important step towards such a quantitative study programme has been done by Liliana Andonova Botcheva and Marc A. Levy (2003) with their early analysis of type-2 partnerships as a potentially innovative governance mechanism. However, at that time their work remained limited to only a relatively small set of variables at the level of the partnerships themselves, and it has been largely discontinued after publication of first results, which were at that time based on only roughly half of all partnerships that are now officially in operation. Given the speed of developments in this area, most data in their database is now increasingly outdated. In addition, their work concentrated on the partnerships themselves and hence did not include systematic information on the outcome of partnership policies.

Our approach thus goes beyond the pioneering work by Andonova and Levy in 2003. We build a comprehensive Global Sustainability Partnership Database that includes comprehensive information on both partnerships and their characteristics in a larger context and on the outcome of their policies. We focus initially on partnerships that are registered with the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. However, despite this focus on one politically defined selection of cases, we include also other initiatives that fit our definition, that is, that can be described as being part of the larger political phenomenon of *transnational public-policy networks*:

This concept covers, first, only policy *networks*, that is, horizontally organised governance arrangements as opposed to arrangements that build on hierarchical organisation. Second, our analytical interest is in governance beyond the state. For this reason, we look only at *transnational* networks that bring together actors in at least two countries, and we also exclude purely intergovernmental networks. Third, we focus on networks that aim at pursuing a *public policy* goal, as opposed to networks that re-

late to particularistic interests such as for-profit business co-operation or even crime, as in the case of the mafia. Fourth, in our empirical research strategy we concentrate on transnational public policy networks in the area of sustainable development and exclude all transnational public policy networks in other areas.

Although ‘network’ is the larger analytical category in social science, we have chosen in our writing to adhere to the publicly known term of ‘partnerships’, which is in the area of sustainable development the term more widely accepted and in use for this phenomenon. However, we use the term ‘partnership’ in our work value-neutral. We do not imply the colloquial connotation of partnerships as being marked by a co-operative attitude, a convergence of interests, and a meaningful contribution to public policy. In our research, we see this as a question for scrutiny rather than a justified assumption.

The key question that we plan to investigate with the Global Sustainability Partnership Database and related research is the *influence* of transnational public policy partnerships on sustainable development. For this purpose, we collect data on two types of variables: measures of the influence of transnational public policy partnerships (*section 4*), and possible explanatory factors (*section 5*).

## 4 Measuring the Influence of Partnerships

Studies that measure influence of partnerships, or even single categories of influence, have been scarce. This relates to the fact that there are very few analytical frameworks developed for this purpose. Jennifer Brinkerhoff (2002) proposed a framework for assessing partnerships in which the standard against which the object is measured is flexible. The proposed assessment method is interesting for micro-level analyses, particularly for parties to partnerships who want to know how to improve their performance. However, the method only applies within one partnership, and not across partnerships. There are no established measurement concepts for a cross-case analysis of partnership influence. In this section, therefore, we define, discuss and demarcate influence of transnational public policy partnerships as the dependent variable of our theoretical framework, as we operationalise it for the Global Sustainability Partnership Database.

### *Concepts of Influence and Methods of Measurement*

Although in international relations research (particularly in international regime literature) the term ‘effectiveness’ has been widely used to assess the performance of a particular organisation, policy or institution, we focus in our work on *influence*, which is a concept less restrictive when it comes to the degree and direction of effects. It broadens the scope of analysis to observations that go beyond mere goal attainment and problem solving, and leaves the standard of reference open. We define influence as the sum of all effects of a partnership in its organisational, institutional and policy functions. We classify three categories of effects: output, outcome and impact. These distinctions have proven to be useful in other studies, such as on the effects of international institutions (Underdal 2002) or the influence of international bureaucracies (Biermann and Bauer 2005), and essentially date back to Easton’s work (1965).

In our research design, *output* refers to the actual activity of organisations and institutions, such as issuing regulations, producing reports, conducting research or organising meetings. These core functions are similar for a large number of partnerships. Many partnerships offer some funding to target groups. They also provide training, information, or technologies to address core areas of sustainable development. Most of these functions can be operationalised and empirically assessed to measure influence in terms of output. The amount and type of output is not only comparable among partnerships, but can also be measured with indicators such as amount of information published in a given period, or amount of information downloaded from the partnership website. Output is also a simple standard of measurement for assessing the very existence of a partnership that is listed on the UN website. This problem—that a significant number of registered partnerships are in fact not or no longer active—is a very special problem that results from the way partnerships were created and promoted in Johannesburg. One of our pilot studies that assessed the influence of partnerships in Chile (Tondreau 2005) has revealed that for almost a third of all partnerships that claim to be active in Chile no data in the form of a website or contact address could be identified. This makes it likely that these partnerships are not (yet) in existence.

Another measure in policy analysis is *outcome*, that is, observable changes in the behaviour of the actors involved or targeted by a governance arrangement. Outcome is more difficult to operationalise than output. It is difficult to measure in quantitative terms, for example, whether certain training programmes had any impact on those who attended the programmes. However, in many cases output indicators can serve as proxies for relative changes in the behaviour of targeted actors. In other words, one can assume that a series of workshops have been attended and have informed their participants, or that publications have in fact been read and have influenced their readers.

In addition, we measure outcome through qualitative surveys of participants in a partnership, of its target groups, and of independent experts. In particular, we systematically collect data from independent experts according to a questionnaire that solicits coded information on the external perception of partnerships. These data is not available uniformly for all partnerships—some are, for example, rather small so that it is difficult to find many independent experts—but we expect to get soon sufficient information for a large crosscutting assessment of the external performance perception of partnerships.

Finally, a useful measure for the outcome of partnerships—in terms of change in actor behaviour—is direct observation and in-depth case studies. For the purposes of a database, one can generate information of this type through a systematic analysis of existing secondary sources, notably academic papers and books that assess particular partnerships, and through detailed case studies through the project team. The latter is, though only to a limited extent, one source of information that we include in the Global Sustainability Partnership Database, with a particular focus on partnerships active in India and China.

A third measure of policy performance in policy analysis is *impact*, that is, actual improvement in the problem area in the form of tangible changes in economic, social or environmental parameters such as gross domestic product, literacy rate, or atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations. The impact of a partnership is the most difficult to ascertain. However, in certain cases even changes in impact can be measured.

This depends mainly on the extent to which the scale of the issue area and the size of partnership(s) involved match. Such congruence requires the involvement of most stakeholders in the partnership (inclusion or participation). Examples of rule making partnerships such as the Marine Stewardship Council, the Forest Stewardship Council, the World Commission on Dams, or the Global Reporting Initiative influence their particular issue area to such an extent that the background noise and the influence of other variables can be outstripped and their impact can—at least potentially—be measured. The same is possible when partnerships, even those with limited resources, focus on restricted and well-defined policy areas in which there are no other actors involved.

### *Standards of Reference*

The question then arises against which standard to measure the output, outcome and impact of a transnational public policy partnership.

There are at least three appropriate standards against which influence can be measured: (1) goal attainment or compliance, (2) a hypothetical no-partnership counterfactual to measure behavioural change, and (3) a hypothetical collective optimum to measure the extent to which a problem is solved.

Goal attainment and compliance have often featured as dependent variable in studies on international regimes (Mitchell 1994; Haas 1989), partially because they are relatively easy to measure. However, formulated goals and compliance with a policy are subject to the level of ambition, which induces a tautological argument: the more ambitious a goal is, the less influence is empirically identifiable. Nonetheless, for many transnational public policy partnerships, goal attainment may be a first, yet eventually insufficient indicator of their overall influence on sustainable development.

The no-partnership counterfactual standard refers to a hypothetical state in which a partnership does not exist (for regimes, cf. Miles et al. 2002). This standard raises the question of relative change: to what degree can we assert that certain behavioural parameters have changed over time by the partnership as compared to a counterfactual situation in which the partnership would not have existed? Since this standard is a hypothetical state, it is difficult to determine, because differences of opinion can emerge on ‘what would have been’.

A third choice for a standard of reference is the collective optimum, referring to a hypothetical state *when the perceived problem is solved*. This standard has hardly ever been applied, although it has been proposed in theoretical frameworks for the measurement of intergovernmental regimes (Sprinz and Helm 1999; Hovi, Sprinz, and Underdal 2003). The definition of an optimum is even more problematic in the case of relatively smaller partnerships than in the case of larger intergovernmental regimes. Another reason that complicates the use of a collective optimum is that one measures absolute changes, that is, the actual performance at changing problem parameters as compared to the ideal situation without that problem. Absolute change is only visible in cases where a partnership addresses a well-defined and limited problem that matches the size of a partnership, which is usually not the case. For instance, a single partnership could aim at reducing carbon dioxide emissions, but the absolute change as a result of its activities would be indistinguishable against the problem of global climate change. Even if one could define collective optima in some areas, this concept hardly lends itself to comparisons across cases or issue areas. In addition, the framing of the

problem matters. In the case of the Forest Stewardship Council, for example, if ‘problem solving’ refers to the global forest crisis, influence measures may be poor. However, if ‘problem solving’ refers to creating demand for, and supply of, some amount of certified timber, influence measures are comparatively high.

In general, relative change—as in the case of counterfactual reasoning—is better observable than absolute change, since it focuses on the behaviour of actors rather than a whole problem area that is hard to demarcate and includes many parameters. A focus on actor behaviour, rather than a focus on problem areas, also makes comparisons across cases possible, even when partnerships are active in very different problem areas. The concept of no-partnership counterfactual therefore remains the most promising avenue for the comparative study of relative behavioural changes.

An intricate problem with both the counterfactual and collective optimum approaches remains the question of attribution. In other words, has the observed effect been caused by a transnational partnership or by other factors that increase the correlation coefficient? This problem needs to be addressed through large and wide-ranging quantitative research and statistical tools and, in particular, through more detailed qualitative studies in different sectors and issue areas that allow for the tracing of causal pathways that link potential explanatory factors with influence.

## 5 Explanatory Variables

This section identifies a number of possible explanatory factors and hypotheses that could account for the influence of transnational public policy partnerships. We derive these factors and hypotheses from meta-theories in the study of international relations, namely state centrism, pluralism and critical theories; from institutional theories that focus on institutional design, the problem area in which partnerships are active and the types of countries they target; and from organisation theories that focus on the role of entrepreneurial leadership and the embeddedness of partnerships. We believe, at this stage, that these explanations are complementary rather than competing.

### *Type of Actors*

First, it is likely that the type of actors that is involved in a partnership has some relevance for its overall influence.

This relates, first, to the involvement of states.

(1) According to scholars in the state-centrist perspective in international relations research, private governance without any governments is not likely to make a significant difference in world politics. In this view, governments are the key actors in world politics, as the only agents that can engage in legally binding agreements with other governments and as the only agents that can enforce agreements within their jurisdiction. For state centrists, in the end it is not possible to reach meaningful progress on sustainable development unless states, and in particular the most powerful ones, are part of the process and are lending their full support to achieving results.

State-centrists fall into two larger camps: those in the tradition of political realism deny all influence to private actors and private institutions, since only states count

in the end (e.g. Waltz 1979). State centrist institutionalists (e.g. Krasner 2001), however, would not deny all relevance of partnerships: they would expect, however, that transnational public policy partnerships function only through the delegated authority lent to them by governments. Yet also for institutionalist state centrists, autonomous private governance is not likely, and all private activity—despite its undeniable visibility after the Johannesburg Summit—would rely on the shadow of governments and of intergovernmental co-operation.

From this perspective of state centrism, a number of hypotheses for the analysis of transnational public policy partnerships can be derived. State centrists, for example would expect that the influence of partnerships increases with the degree of involvement of governments. In this view, the more of the larger states are participating in partnerships, the more effective these partnerships eventually would be. Likewise, partnerships initiated by powerful states are more likely to reach their goals than other partnerships that have been initiated by corporations, environmentalist organisations or international bureaucracies because they are backed by powerful interest and material resources. On the other hand, state centrists would assume that partnerships that have no, or almost no, participation of states would be either unable to fulfil their promises or irrelevant and ignorable as their issue areas and effects are miniscule.

(2) A second perspective in the theory of international relations is global pluralism (Wapner 1997; Lipschutz 1996). For pluralists, world politics is no longer defined by states only. Instead, in the last decades a world civic society has emerged, consisting of global networks of non-state actors that include major corporations, business federations, associations of scientists, large environmentalist organisations, the media, religious groups, and intergovernmental bureaucracies. Pluralists do not deny that governments still have an important role to play in global governance. Yet in this perspective, the power, interests and activities of governments count increasingly less. It is not merely governments, but rather the plurality of actors that one needs to take into account for the explanation of the outcomes of world politics—especially of global sustainability politics.

The core hypothesis from the pluralist perspective is the opposite from the state centrist view. Pluralists expect no bias in the influence of partnerships towards the involvement of states, and no correlation between influence and state involvement. Some strands of pluralist theory expect even a negative correlation between state involvement and the influence of partnerships (Wapner 1996). In this view, non-state actors are better able to achieve progress towards sustainable development, because they are more efficient, less bureaucratic, more flexible, less corrupt, and better informed about the actual problems and the most promising solutions. Private co-operation and governance is, in this perspective, more likely to effectively implement global programmes for sustainable development.

(3) A third view is what we label the critical perspective on transnational public policy partnerships. Critical theories have been substantiated in International Relations in, for instance, neo-Gramscian analyses (e.g. Cox 1987). The core assumption is that partnerships are not devoid of power, but rather are loci of power conflicts and even instruments of power politics. In this perspective, transnational public policy partnerships can have effects in world politics, yet merely as tools, and in accordance with the core interests, of the most powerful actors in the global political system. These can be—in the more state-centrist version of the critical view—the most powerful states, notably

the major industrialised countries in the North. These can also be—in a less state centrist version—the major business actors, namely the largest corporations and other civil society actors. In either way, in this view major actors in the North initiate or participate in transnational public policy partnerships to enforce their interests upon less powerful actors, namely the developing countries. Accordingly, private co-operation between Northern business corporations and Northern activists undermines state authority in the South. Private governance is then seen as an instrument of a creeping emasculation of the state in the South, as a domination of Southern civil society through more powerful groups of the North, and in its most radical formulation, as a creeping re-colonisation of Africa and parts of Asia and Latin America.

In operational terms, the critical perspective would expect effective transnational public policy partnerships to be reflective of the core interests, discourses and debates of hegemonic networks that are located predominantly, but not exclusively, in the North. It would be likely that the interests and framings of Southern actors—both public and private—are less represented, possibly with the counterfactual of intergovernmental co-operation in the UN system, in which Southern governments usually have a larger voice. In the critical perspective, effective partnerships are more likely to have been initiated, and are more likely to be supported, by Northern actors. They would also be more likely to benefit Northern actors or to mirror Northern frames, discourses and interests, and would be more likely to emerge in areas in which intergovernmental co-operation has failed because of a North-South conflict of interest.

In sum, partnerships differ with regard to the involvement of governmental actors. Some partnerships are characterised by a high level of government involvement; for instance the Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) Initiative: People Shaping their Sustainable Futures.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, other partnerships do not involve any significant contribution by public actors. For instance, the Total Water Programme brings together only nongovernmental organisations from Europe and Africa.<sup>5</sup> All else being equal, state centrists would thus expect the SARD Initiative to be more influential than the Total Water Programme, while moderate pluralists would expect both partnerships to do more or less equally well while radical pluralists would expect the latter, entirely non-state partnership to be more influential.

### *Type of Institutional Design*

In addition to these macro-perspectives that focus on state-involvement and power structures, other factors are conceivable that may account for variation in the influence of transnational public policy partnerships. In particular, hypotheses can be derived from the large body of regime analysis, which has focussed on the influence of intergovernmental agreements in world politics (for an overview, see Mitchell 2002). While theories and concepts used for the study of intergovernmental agreements cannot be simply transferred to the analysis of transnational public policy networks, they may still serve heuristically as a fertile ground for identifying hypotheses explaining the influence of partnerships.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. <http://webapps01.un.org/dsd/partnerships/public/partnerships/28.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://webapps01.un.org/dsd/partnerships/public/partnerships/1328.html>

Design features include type of membership rules, flexibility, and task division. Membership, for example, can be inclusive or exclusive (Bernauer 1995: 375; Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001: 770). Inclusive membership rules allow for a greater number of actors to be involved, which could lead to more and deeper influence of a partnership. However, it could also complicate decision-making and reaching a consensus, decreasing the influence of a partnership. Moreover, exclusive membership could bring more ambitious actors together who formulate and implement more ambitious programmes. David Victor (2006: 90), for example, argues that Underdal's law of the least ambitious programme (a regime is as effective as the least interested party) can be overcome by variable geometry in number of countries participating. With a similar reasoning, one could assume that partnerships with exclusive membership can perform better in terms of compliance. However, it has also been argued that the more actors the better (Gillies 1998: 101), because better representation facilitates greater impact.

Flexibility refers to the ability to adapt to new situations (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001: 773). Too elaborate and explicit procedures, for example, could complicate a partnership's ability to operate effectively under changing circumstances. Alternatively, the ability of a partnership to revise rules and goals could lead to enhanced effectiveness (Mitchell 2002: 19). In addition, the division of tasks within a partnership could matter: In a multi-stakeholder partnership, different actors draw together different resources and capacities, so that different sectoral backgrounds might affect influence. It could be expected that a division of tasks that fits different capabilities and resources of participants, results in higher influence.

### *Type of Problem*

A third cluster of variables that may account for the influence of partnerships is the type of the problem they address. For example, a problem may be too difficult to solve when it is not understood well enough or when the political stakes are high. Underdal (2002: 20) identifies such problems in the context of intergovernmental regimes as *malign* (an aggregate of incompatibility of values and interests, incongruity of costs and benefits and the strategic game underlying the problem, such as co-ordination versus zero-sum games), suggesting a negative effect on the creation and influence of institutions. In the case of partnerships, the effect might be similar (because *malign* issue areas are difficult to operate in also for partnerships), but could also be entirely different, because *malign* issues are more prone for the influence of transnational partnerships, since there is no intergovernmental agreement. We need to analyse therefore, in particular, whether the absence of intergovernmental regimes stimulates partnerships—especially rule-making partnerships—and whether alternatively implementation partnerships are more influential in concurrence with existing intergovernmental regimes. In addition, one needs to question whether effective partnerships are more likely to emerge in some areas of sustainability than in others, for example when one compares partnerships in the areas of water, energy, health, agriculture or biodiversity.

In sum, similar to the reasoning in the literature on intergovernmental regimes, it is likely that the type of problem affects the influence of partnerships. Yet it is well possible that different problem characteristics are relevant for the influence of partnerships compared with the case of international regimes.

### *Type of Country of Implementation*

It is also likely that characteristics of the countries in which partnerships are active affect their influence. Some scholars have suggested that partnerships most often emerge and are more effective in a liberal democratic setting with a functioning market economy (e.g. Glasbergen 2002). However, no straightforward explanation can be given whether this has to do with e.g. the self-perceived role of a government in a market economy, or whether this is part of a democratisation process, where societal and sectoral actors assume other means of representation, policy formulation and implementation. A cross-country comparison could allow better understanding of domestic economic and political factors to the influence of partnerships. In our research, we focus on an in-depth comparison of the two largest countries, India and China, and of a range of African countries, in both cases in order to assess the role of different political systems and domestic factors for the influence of transnational public policy partnerships.

### *Type of Leadership*

Another perspective on explaining varying influence of partnerships is informed by recent strands of organisational theory. Leadership can be an important explanatory variable affecting the influence of international organisations (Bowers and Seashore 1966; Dunn 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramaniam 1996), regimes (Miles et al. 2002), and bureaucracies (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2007). International regime literature suggests that leadership becomes crucial when the political sensitivity or the lack of definition of a problem require strong leadership to overcome obstacles for collaboration (Underdal 1992). The distinction between strong and weak leadership has also been applied to explain influence of international bureaucracies (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2007). However, leadership as a factor in partnership influence remains unexplored. In policy-oriented and applied research, it has been argued that partnership brokers facilitate different phases of partnership processes (e.g. Warner 2003). Also, the type of leadership in partnerships has been subject to some categorisation (Vangen and Huxham 2003), but this has not yet empirically been related to the influence of partnerships.

We look at three leadership variables:

(1) First, we analyse the internal functioning of leadership within a partnership. This factor has much in common with design as a factor of partnership influence, but is not the same. Whereas institutional design remains stable on the short and mid-term, leadership is more dynamic and can (re-)formulate policies within existing institutional frames any time. Leadership gains importance when institutional design allows for flexibility and provides discretion for leadership action.

(2) Second, we look at the leadership capacity of representatives of the organisations in a partnership. We assume that ability to set the agenda, define a problem, and persuade others, varies among member representatives in a partnership despite formal equality. Leadership capacity depends on a leader's support base and comes thus down to a strategic relation between principal and agent (Shepsle and Bonchek 1997: 381): A representative with a strong support base is probably better able to take decisions that are later followed up, which results in higher influence within the

partnership. One indicator for leadership capacity is the rank and position that a representative of a partnering organisation has in his or her home organisation.

(3) Third, we study the type of leadership. This can relate to the way an actor structures a problem or sets an agenda. An actor can be creative, seeking unconventional solutions, modifying previously accepted ideas, or enabling collaborative arrangements (Dunn 2004: 82). Alternatively, an actor can follow standardised procedures and act reactively (Vangen and Huxham 2003: 70). In practice, probably the leader who is able to combine both types of leadership contributes most to the influence of partnerships.

While the investigation of leadership as a factor for partnership influence is important to gain a full understanding of the influence of partnerships given their non-hierarchical and network character, it is especially this character that poses a special research challenge, since leadership in partnerships is more dispersed than in other institutional arrangements. A systematic coding of this variable is thus not possible throughout the Global Sustainability Partnership Database, but well for well-designed case studies.

#### *Type of Structural Embedding*

Another factor that potentially affects the influence of a partnership is the degree and type of its embedding in a larger context. The concept of embedding has been developed in Social Network Analysis (Granovetter 2002) and been applied mostly in organisational studies and economics. Its assumption is that economic relations are embedded in social ones and relations thus 'need to be seen as organically situated within specific features of social settings' (Clegg, Kronberger, and Pitsis 2005: 496). On the one hand, network embeddedness constrains actors' options through social relations such as formation of trust, construction of reputation and macrocultures, collective sanctions against individual aggressiveness and opportunism (Marsden 1981: 1210; Williamson 1975; Granovetter 2002; Jones 1997). On the other hand, it enables difficult transactions through trust and reputation that emerge in time, as strong ties produce a shared understanding that influences actions (Coleman, Katz, and Menzel 1966). Hence, embeddedness is related to the performance of the networks in question. Therefore, at the partnership level, one can hypothesise that frequent and strong ties between partners, such as joint problem solving mechanisms and increased information exchange, affect the success and longevity of a partnership. According to some scholars, such structural embeddedness resembles social control (Jones, Hesterly, and Borgatti 1997: 922-925; Williamson 1975). Applying this idea to partnerships would necessitate investigating the power relationships among partners at a micro-level, particularly the relations among partners of different policy levels and different resources.

Table 1 summarizes the variables derived from the larger theoretical debates about actors, design, type of the problem, domestic factors, leadership and social embeddedness.

*Table 1: Summary of Explanatory Factors*

Actors	Involvement of (powerful) states Initiation or support by Northern/hegemonic actors
Design	Inclusiveness of membership rules Flexibility Division of tasks based on capabilities
Problem type	Clarity of problem description Compatibility of interest Compatibility of values Equal spread of costs and benefits across network participants
Domestic factors	Democratic political system Liberal market economy
Leadership	Organizational leadership capacity Individual leadership capacity Type of leadership
Embedding	Degree of embeddedness

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have offered a preliminary analytical framework to assess the influence of transnational public policy partnerships on sustainable development, understood as a particular case of transnational public policy networks. Based on a brief discussion of existing research, we have laid out the concept of a Global Sustainability Partnership Database that we are developing. The two main sections of our paper elaborated on the concepts that we intend to use for the measurement of the influence of transnational public policy partnerships and on a set of explanatory factors that we explore with our database along with qualitative in-depth case studies.

We believe that the build-up and subsequent analysis of the Global Sustainability Partnership Database is a crucial task for a number of reasons. First, by the systematic large-n evaluation of influence of partnerships in global sustainability politics we can assess whether partnerships matter. This assessment of the influence of partnerships is central to a critical analysis of new mechanisms of global governance as addi-

tions or even substitutes for intergovernmental policy-making. Second, understanding reasons for variation in the influence of partnerships of different types or in different sectors could result in crucial policy advice. In the end, the Global Sustainability Partnership Database that we have outlined in this paper may not only advance scholarly understanding of whether and how private-public networks matter. It may also offer tools and avenues to improve the performance of this new and emerging type of global governance in daily practice.

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