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Foundations of the Partnership Paradigm and Beyond

Pieter Glasbergen

Dear colleagues,

In this presentation I would like to ask you to accompany me on my journey to the foundations of the partnership paradigm, several of its manifestations and some of its implications. During the trip I will regularly stop for some reflection.

When I started my academic journey, somewhere in the seventies of last century, I was teaching a course based on the concept of the Strong State. As sociology and political science students and lecturers we were all social democrats - or worse - and strongly believed that social welfare, improvement of people's livelihood and a fairer society, would be best guaranteed by an institution legitimized by general elections.

At that time, we did not trust businesses, which were blamed for many environmental and social problems. And NGOs were mainly seen as countervailing powers that were strong in campaigning parochial interests. Thus, we drew a clear line between public interests secured by the government and particular interests promoted by businesses and NGOs.

My teaching and research focused on where and why governments failed to deliver their promises. Mainly related to environmental and social issues. And how government policies could be improved.

I was rather persistent in my view, as I embraced the Strong State for about twenty years, till halfway the 1990s, when I replaced this concept by another one: The Strong Society.
Herewith the premise is that progressive societal change takes place in a multi-actor context. Private parties - businesses and NGOs - are in many ways connected to public issues, issues of general interest, and are often able and sometimes willing to take responsibility for them.

With many others, I realized that leading roles in societal progress also had to be sought outside the sphere of governments. The Strong Society concept that I then embraced, referred to a society that is able to mobilize relevant stakeholders in public problems to take collective action.
From then on, I have tried to convince my students of the virtues of a pluralistic way of governing.

This conceptual turn did not imply that I came to see government policies as irrelevant. In fact, I am still often uncertain about the Strong Society and I still see governments as the primary entities responsible for issues that are also taken up by partnerships, such as the protection of vital natural resources, biodiversity, human rights, and securing the ecological and social conditions for economic development.

Sustainable development thus.

Why then replace the Strong State with the Strong Society? The answer should be sought in the combination of characteristics of sustainable development and the position that governments take.

Sustainability issues originate in the ways we organize our societies. Necessary changes to address these issues cannot be reduced to technical ones alone. These changes are not only strongly value-laden, but also bring about redistributions of the costs and benefits of the social contract. Between rich and poor, the current generation and future generations, developed and developing countries, and producers and consumers. Therefore, sustainability issues penetrate deeply into various societal domains. One might question whether governments in a liberal-democratic context are able and willing to take responsibility for the experimental strategic reform program that is necessary for a more sustainable future.

The inability of governments is partly a conscious choice. In the liberal-democratic society governments transferred part of their ‘classic’ governing tasks to the market. Privatization and deregulation have become the new mechanisms for progress. Sustainable development must now be realized in a (global)society within which the market mechanism is the driving force. Governments have accepted the logic of the market and one of their main tasks is to keep the market mechanism working. Choices for investment, consumption and mobility - all of which are drivers of unsustainable development - are hardly constrained in a liberal-democratic society. Corrections are possible, but without jeopardizing the market mechanism.

The inability of governments is also a consequence of major institutional changes. In the process of globalization, businesses have become important centers of power. Many public interests can hardly be realized without multinationals taking some responsibility. Civil society organizations, particularly environmental, social and development NGOs, have become professionalized, internationally oriented, and often also internationally organized. They have also become important links in defining issues of public interest and the implementation of policies. Societies, in other words, have turned into network societies where power is diffused beyond the sphere of governments alone.

It is against this background that we have had to consider new governance arrangements at the interface of state, market and civil society; constellations of public and private, or fully private actors, with an interest in an issue. These partnerships have developed in forestry, fisheries, the production of palm oil and trade in other agricultural commodities, tourism, public health, fairer labor conditions, finance etc.

The ‘partnership society’ (May Seitanidi) has become a fact, particularly in certain issue areas and in some parts of the world.

Together we could speak of the initiation of a partnership paradigm as a new perspective on governing change (Glasbergen, 2007). A paradigm based on the idea that:

- Each of the parties from the public sector, the market, and civil society has an interest in sustainability issues.
- A constructive dialogue among these interests can be convened in a setting that excludes hierarchy and authority.
- Dialogue can produce a shared normative belief that provides a value-based rationale for collective action.
- Collective action based on voluntarism, joint resource commitment, and shared responsibility of all actors for the whole project can serve private interests as well as public interests.
- Collective action can be commercial in nature; the market mechanism can promote more sustainable practices through the leverage and spin-off of private-sector investments.

Particularly in the last two premises we can recognize a reform agenda that fits well in a liberal-democratic ideology. If you want to, you can also see the paradigm as a disguised market model. This indicates why this paradigm was so easily accepted as a managerial response to the general ethical ideal of societal progress in many Western countries and by international organisations, such as the UN institutions.

The paradigm has also introduced a new research agenda, of which we as a community are the live expression.

In this presentation I will further reflect on the partnership paradigm as a reform agenda and the challenges it generates. I base my research, and also my reflections today, on a governance/political science perspective on partnerships. The concept of ‘governance’refers to a body of research that analyzes the process in which regulatory authority has become at least partly detached from governments. Governing authority is conceptualized as being dispersed, diffused and dislocated among mulitple public and private actors.

From a governance perspecive (at least) three interrelated themes have our attention.

First, a focus on the process of partnering. This perspective shares an interest with management and organization theory in mutual problem-solving and the development of collaborative action.

Second, a focus on partnerships as a new mode of socio-political management of societies. This perspective addresses the regulatory capacity of partnerships as tools for oriented social change and their potential as catalysts of sustainable change.

Third, a focus on partnerships as parts of a larger governance system and their contribution to the governability of issue areas or sectors in the political-economy.

Partnerships as collaborative arrangements
At the heart of the partnership paradigm is the framing of partnerships as collaborative arrangements: stakeholders in an issue, who are used to or inclined to act independently, must be stimulated to take part in a shared commitment and concerted action. In partnership research, partnerships are often considered successful if the participants are able to mobilize and utilize complementary resources and capabilities to address issues that they would not be able to deal with individually. Although this is a rather restrictive view on success, as I will clarify later, we know a lot about how shared value can be created in different phases of collaboration, while there also are many lists of success factors.

In my research I have looked at collaboration as a process that includes dialogue and negotiation. Through dialogue the actors can learn from each other. Negotiations make transactions possible. The extent to which this is successful depends on the creation of trust and collaborative advantage, mediated by boundary-spanning leadership.

Trust particularly encapsulates the emotional argument: the reduction of feelings of risk and vulnerability in the partnering process. Trust builds on confidence in the positive intentions of the partners, but also on their competences and predictability of their behavior. Participants need to be heard despite differences in status or power, respected and treated with dignity.

Trust alone, however, is not enough. Partnerships should not be idealized. At the end of the day partnering is about doing business in another way. A partnership is a contractual arrangement as many other political and economic arrangements within which participants have a dual identity: the need to find a balance between their self-interest and a potential common interest.

This is captured by a second prerequisite: the concept of collaborative advantage. Collaborative advantage encapsulates the synergy argument. In other words, potential partners will only collaborate structurally if each of them is convinced that they gain from the partnership and the distribution of benefits and costs among the partners is considered a fair one.

Partnerships are probably most effective if they do not aim for a compromise but pool the strengths of the participants in such a way that each of them becomes stronger out of the process (Rob van Tulder).

Trust and collaborative advantage will not be created spontaneously but must be managed in a cyclical and iterative process. This attributes an important role to boundary spanning leadership. Boundary-spanning leadership is, in my view, not an individual quality of one of the actors in a partnerhip, but a function that should be fulfilled. It encompasses the ability to identify and combine sources of information, widen the alternatives available, and link different framings of the problem and solutions. In different phases and related to different aspects, different actors can fulfill such a role.

Morever, such leadership necessarily changes when partnerships further institutionalize. In their early phases partnerhips need a moral leadership that fulfills a brokering role; a leadership that is enthousiastic, able to inspire others and to unify actors in a specific discourse. Later on, to become effective in their issue field, partnerships need a more entrepeneurial leadership; such a leadership is more formalized, more vertically integrated in the arrangement, and able to represent the partnership in the outside world. This often goes together with a shift from rather loose participatory involvement of actors to more binding membership as co-owner of the partnership.

Partnerships are probably most effective if they do not aim for a compromise but pool the strengths of the participants in such a way that each of them becomes stronger out of the process (Rob van Tulder). But this is all rather abstract - there are of course many other factors that play a role and the reality is much more complex, as I will show in a further reflection on the partnership paradigm.

Empowering partnerships

Our research has shown that the most successful partnerships are able to: (1) realize inclusiveness, in the sense that they bring in the most important stakeholders in an issue field; (2) strengthen their legitimacy through a balanced, open, and accountable decision-making process; (3) keep an open line to and involve scientists working in the issue field, and (4) develop strategic thinking, which, amongst others, includes a strong feeling for networking and the active development of working relationships with relevant actors at all levels.

In my view, we can take these factors as point for possible improvement/empowerment, but we should be careful evaluating partnerships against these criteria. Sometimes I have the feeling that we expect too much of partnerships. This is visible in some additional conceptualizations.

For example, when partnerships are conceptualized as *deliberative arena's*. This framing assumes that under fair conditions, and an expectation that the results of deliberation will regulate subsequent behavior, participants will tend to drive arguments and actions in directions that advance more general interests. Evaluation criteria of relevance for these deliberative arenas include inclusiveness, authenticity, and consequentiality. Criteria on which traditional government policies also often fall short.

Or when partnerships are conceptualized as *boundary organizations* that intertwine stakeholders from different domains of society, representatives of politics, and scientists to jointly produce knowledge for action. Although there is not much empirical research available on knowledge production in partnerships, there are some first indications that expert knowledge plays a dominant role, at the expense of local and practitioner knowledge, and management of knowledge production in (global) partnerships seems to be underdeveloped.

An interesting example of partnerships wherein boundary work plays a dominant role are current experimental local partnerships where action research is connected to transdisciplinary learning. These so-called real-world laboratories, living labs or urban labs bring together scientists, citizens, organized stakeholders and government officials to provide knowledge for collective action. They explicitly aim to be problem-focused, solutions-oriented and integrative in terms of sources of knowledge. The partnerships are co-designed by various stakeholders; formulate explicit learning goals to focus the participants on strategic learning; institutionalize regular reflection and evaluation of learning to capture the lessons learned; and aim to integrate lessons learned in local governance. Such partnerships have been applied to, amongst others, local energy transformations, urban nature, and primary public health problems. Main problems seem to be realizing a balanced participation of actors with a shared focus, making strategic learning explicit, and linking results to government policies.

The stakes are also high when we question the *legitimacy* of partnerships. Different from governments, partnerships lack an a priory mechanism of legitimacy, such as general elections. Legitimacy is construed by (1) creating a sense of legality through the application of specific procedural requirements, such as accountability, transparency and functional representation, and (2) exploring support for their standards in such a way that they become accepted as authoritative norms in their issue field.

In a study of frontrunner global partnerships, I recognized that it does not make much sense to assess the degree of legitimacy; creating legitimacy is a dynamic social change process, with different legitimacy challenges dependent on the functions the partnerships aim to fulfill and the phase of development they are in. For example, the legitimacy challenges of a corporation that aims to make a business case of a more sustainable product are three-fold (1) to make it a prospective business case that is accepted within the corporation; (2) to make it a credible sustainability claim for consumers, which may require partnering with an NGO with a reliable and consumer-accepted certification scheme; and (3) to secure supply, which requires making it an interesting business case for producers as well, which may require training them in new practices.

Not all partnerships are possible

Next, we should realize that, although partnerships are omnipresent in issue areas where sustainability is discussed, the partnership paradigm is not always applicable. Decisive are the characteristics of the problem, particularly the stakeholder configuration it constitutes, and how controversial an issue is.

In public-private partnerships with a restricted territorial scope, such as regional development, landscape, watershed or natural resource protection partnerships, the question of who the stakeholders are is often rather easy to answer. To bring them to the table, it is important to define the objective in such a way that each of them recognizes their own interests in it.

For example, in a Dutch regional development partnership in an agricultural region (the Gelre Valley), where farmers were hardly able to survive economically, where there was a very fragmented landscape, and nearby nature reserves were threatened by pollution, the objective was described as follows:

“developing an economically sound agriculture, reduction of the environmental load, and renewing the fragmented landscape”

This objective brought together national, regional and local governments, several representive farmer organizations, a waterboard, nature conservation and environmental organizations, and a bank. Together they were able to develop a long-term vision on the future of the region to which each actor contributed. In other reginal development partnerships, for example around the development of a harbour, other interests are connected in the definition of the objective in such a way that each relevant stakeholder could recognise the importance to participate.

Such clarity is much more difficult to realize in global partnerships that deal with a controversial topic. Busnesses are not interested in the peace building activities that the Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) promotes. Even some governments take a hostile stance. Businessess are, generally speaking, also not interested in global biodiversity protection issues, which are dealt with in many partnerhips of UN organizations, governments, foundations, and NGOs. Biodiversity conservation is not a topic of commercial interest; it only becomes one if biodiversity products are marketable. Businesses that have close contacts with consumers, and are therefore vulnerable to consumer protests and campaigns, seem to be the frontrunners in value chain partnerships. Unilever is one of them, participating in a leading role in many intersectoral partnerships. In contrast, a global multi-actor arrangement like the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, can be very successful because accepting sustainability reporting is an innocent issue as it does not direcly influence the sales of businesses. Regarding global public health partnerships it is interesting to see that foundations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, play an initiating role with several of the UN organizations.

Partnerships may create battlefields

We should also realize that partnering is in a different way risky for different actors. A government participating in a partnership with businessess or NGOs necessarily needs to act on an equal bassis, just as one of the interest groups. However, a government cannot dissociate itself from its institutional position as democratically legitimized actor. Sharing responsibility for actions is not only constitutionally risky for them but takes place in the wake that they will ultimately be hold responsible by the public if the partnership is not successful. For businesses, participation in public-private or private partnerships is interesting as part of their reputation management strategy and to open new niche markets. For businesses in value chain partnerships, partnering is really doing business in another way. But again, not without risks. Unilever, for example, one of the founders of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm (RSPO), ran into problems when Greenpeace showed treachery behavior by two suppliers, members of the RSPO, whose plantations contributed to the destruction of high-conservation-value forests and expanded into peat land. Non-governmental organizations can scale up their work and scope in partnerships. They can also secure a better funding base. Next to an idealistic interest they may have an economic interest. Interesting is that when I first interviewed WWF, around 2000, they said that out of principle they do not accept money from business partners. When one of my PhDs interviewed them some 10 years later they said that they always seek financial compensation – of course. NGOs also take the risk that they are used as a cheap marketing tool for a private interest; they can easily lose their organizational identity and therefore their relationship with their constituencies. For them partnering is probably most risky.

As a new mode of socio-political management the partnership paradigm may create its own battlefields. Not all NGOs seem to be strategically positioned to participate in partnerships. In one of my first partnership projects I compared local partnerships of businesses with WWF and Greenpeace. I concluded that partnerships with WWF were much more successful than with Greenpeace. Representatives of WWF spoke the language of business, behaved like them, and even looked like business people. Greenpeace was perceived to be rather unpredictable and not reliable as a partner, because it was not inclined to keep up with the partnership agreements when it recognized other, and better opportunities to reach its ambitions.

Battles over partnerships are often frictions between reformist NGOs and those that take a more radical stance. An interesting example I was confronted with was a big clash in the aquaculture dialogues between NGOs that participated in a partnership with businesses (IUCN, WWF, and OXFAM), and a group of seventy grassroot NGOs that called themselves the Critical Outsiders. The fight was about standards and certification of farmed shrimp. Particularly the position of OXFAM was difficult, as it tried to mediate between the partnership and the Critical Outsiders. OXFAM regarded certification as a tool to improve the livelihood of small farmers; a tool that can always be improved, and the organization was certain the Crtitical Outsiders would share its Theory of Change. However, the Critical Outsiders continued blaming OXFAM for participating in the partnership instead of sustaining a boycott of farmed shrimp.

Although in this case reformist and campaiging NGOs were not on speaking terms anymore in the end, I have often seen that partnerships become more stringent in their ambitions with the countervailing powers of confrontational NGOs. They keep the partnering process attentive about the standards and their implementation, and often strengthen the position of the NGOs participating in the partnerships. Thus, we can say that we need both types of NGOs for meaningful partnerships. To combine a confrontational, campaigning strategy and a more consensual collaborative strategy at the same time seems to be problematic as this will generally make the NGO unreliable for governments or business partners

On the 'context-contingency' (Greetje Schouten and Verena Bitzer) of partnerships
In my research I observed that contextual factors ouside the influence of the partners are often more important drivers of effectiveness than all the effort put in the development of a partnership. Partnerships as tools for oriented societal change flourish best in a liberal-democratic context with the ailability and acceptance of strong countervailing powers. I became aware of that when I presented the Gelre Valley case in Poland. This partnership developed one of the most interesting designs I have ever seen. The partnership put three clusters of activities simultaneously in motion:

- A line of thought
    - studies set up by members of the committee
    - results defended by members of the committee

- A line of actions
    - carrying out projects before a broader development plan is finished
    - adaptation of projects by committee members

- A line of communications
    - meeting in public at different locations
    - newspaper, films, brochures, information

I presented this kind of partnership in Poland when I was asked to talk about new ways of regional planning after the communist regime fell down. My idea, in hindsight rather naive, was that in that situation, with the need to build up the economy while also solving big environmental and social problems, such a regional partnership approach might be valuable.

The reaction I got was the following. Yes, Professor Glasbergen, we should do it like that. But we cannot. We do not have a basic foundation of well functioning environmental laws, we do not have competent civil servants, we do not have well-functioning civil society organizations (they were forbidden in the past), and we do not have any experience with public participation.

Incidentally, later on the Dutch case also ran into problems because of animal disseases such as swine fever, bird flu, and new EU regulations on groundwater pollution. These external influences necessitated a top down regulatory intervention in the partnership by the Dutch national government.

On the power dimensions of partnerships

Conceptualizing partnerships as collaborative arrangements does not imply that we should neglect the power dimensions inherent of the partnership paradigm. An interesting phenomenon is that the power possessed by certain partners (e.g. lead firms in value chains) is often the reason other actors want to partner with them in the first place.

Remarkable is also that almost all partnerships that I have studied are rather able to equalize power differentials *inside* their arrangement. But this may give a false impression of power-neutrality.

That power is exercised becomes only visible in an indirect way; in the feasible options that are considered for change and in what is not discussed. Particularly regarding business-NGO partnerships we should realize that NGOs are participating to change the practices of businesses, not the other way around. Thereby they often accept a pragmatic way forward, in the hope for more stringent principles later.

In many partnerships that I studied, collaboration was only possible by pragmatically accepting differences, refraining from what might easily turn into an ideological debate on sustainability, and leaving out controversial issues. In the Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS), for example, the debate about genetically modified production was neutralized by excluding it from the standards. Crucial partners in the Kimberley Process refused to discuss human rights infringes, which are regularly connected to the production of rough diamonds in repressive states. In the early Dutch energy partnerships between the national government and all sectors of industry, neutralization of the topic of climate change took place by defining the problem as a problem of energy efficiency, leaving out savings in energy-use and change towards alternatives for fossil-fuel energy.

Partnerships thus tend to take a reformist approach to sustainability, with a weak consensus that is not expected to harm economic interests, instead of a more radical interpretation of sustainability.

Partnerships breed partnerships

My next comment on partnerships as modes of socio-political management regards the confusion that the acceptance of the partnership paradigm has created. Particularly regarding standard-setting and certifying value chain partnerships we can see that the arrangements were initiated ad hoc and expanded ad hoc. Competition, overlapping and duplicated ambitions are omnipresent in, for example, partnerships for more sustainable agricultural production, such as coffee, tea, and cocoa; fair labor standards; protection against deforestation, protection of biodiversity, organic production, and climate adaptation.

Figure: Linkages between cocoa partnerships based on overlapping memberships (Bitzer, Glasbergen, Leroy, 2012)

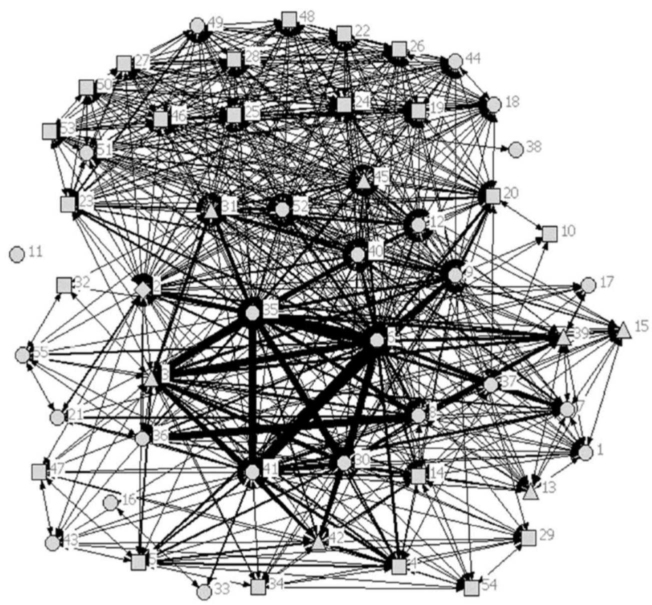
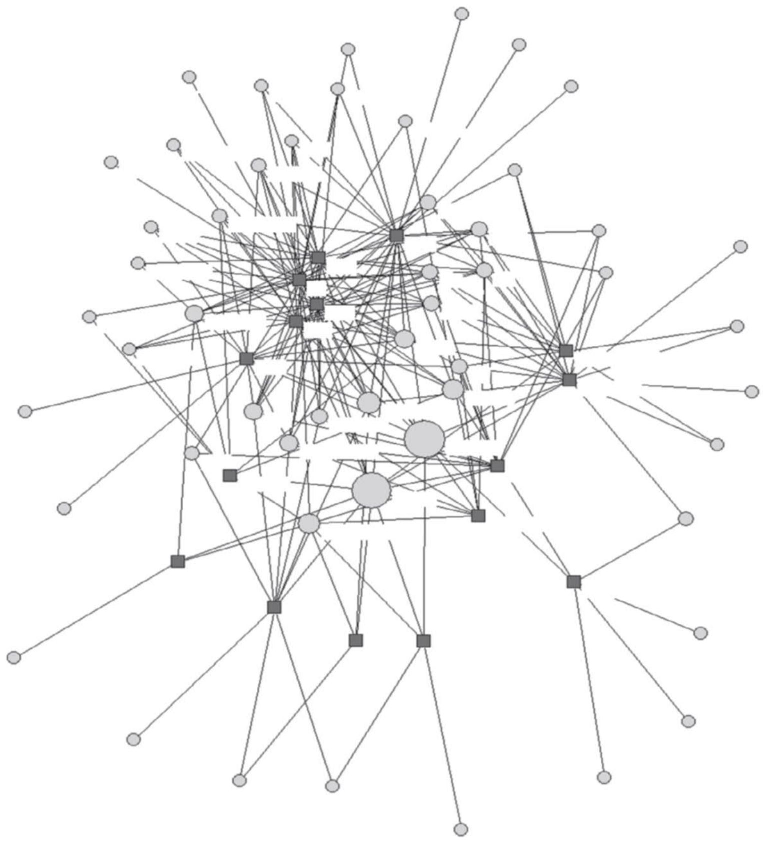


Figure: Partnerships for climate adaptation planning in South East Queensland (McAllister and Taylor, 2015)



Our analysis of 12 of the most important partnerships in the coffee chain showed that they slightly differ in standards and strategies.

Figure: Overview coffee partnerships

An analysis of partnerships in the forestry sector showed a wide diversity of sustainability ambitions, with the FSC being the most stringent and inclusive one. Furthermore, not all of them are able to guarantee sustainable forest management. Some partnerships are little more than purely economic reactions to previously established partnerships that are pursuing more ambitious goals. Governments take part in this game: they seek out and stimulate those partnerships that do the most to protect their own markets.

Although almost all value chain partnerships have stimulated a lively debate on sustainable development outside the sphere of government, and their standards cannot be ignored anymore in global trade, their factual impact in their issue fields is still small.

The competition between partnerships might be assessed as a sign of vitality of liberal-democracy, but the result up to now is more product differentiation, attractive niche markets for more sustainable specialties or practices, but not (yet) a fundamental change in the value chain or issue area. Here we see again that partnerships are not neutral tools but are part of the economic struggle for market power.

Only very recently some converging tendencies have become visible, in the sense that partnerships in the same issue area seem to ally in cooperative networks on at least some aspects of their work. Convergence is also visible in the institutionalization of forms of metagovernance, such as the ISEAL Alliance, which mainly aims to harmonize procedural aspects of the partnering process of Business-NGO partnerships in general.

In my view, we have entered a phase in which it is not the individual partnerships that are problematic, but the market of partly overlapping and competing standards that they produce. This is particularly visible in markets where partnerships produce labels for sustainable production processes. When buying sustainable coffee, cocoa or tea, consumers expect to do something good for the environment and the livelihoods of smallholder farmers. However, it has become impossible for the consumers to understand the nuances of the different sustainability claims. Producers, particularly smallholders, also do not understand this diversity of standards anymore.

Whom do we serve with our partnership research?

Most of our partnership research efforts have gone in single or small-N case studies. As a consequence, we know a lot about individual partnerships. But does this help us to better understand the value of the partnership paradigm as a change mechanism for sustainable development? I began to doubt this in my latest research project with four PhD students on the social and economic effects of palm oil, coffee and cocoa standard-setting and certifying partnerships in Indonesia. I struggled with the question whom we serve with our research. I realized that most research aims to answer the question how partnerships are formed and unfold in practice, and to what extent they are able to realize their objectives. Such, what I call, 'managerial' research seems to implicitly accept the problem definitions of the mainly Northern-based initiators of the partnerships. These are external actors to the farmers' specific realities and opportunities, whose daily practices they aim to change. Recommendations for improvements based on this research generally address the question how the partnerships can be improved. The relevance or desirability of partnerships as an instrument for change is therefore hardly scrutinized. In the Indonesian project I became aware that the vital question should not be how to optimize partnerships, but how to realize a sustainable agriculture that improves the livelihoods of farmers (with or without the incentive of partnerships). Such a problem-driven approach would first analyze the problem within the embedded context of the needs, interests and preferences of the farmers involved and then seek to answer the question what partnerships might be able to contribute vis-à-vis other possible interventions. In Indonesia, we found that the smallholder farmers profit least from the extra revenues of a certified product, they hardly understand the Western ideas about sustainability, they see certification primarily as a marketing tool, and the same positive sustainability effects on production can probably also be realized with a better training in Good Agricultural Practices. This research made me aware that economic sustainability needs to be the basis of any sustainable change in value chains. Therefore, we first need incentives that improve farmers' production and income. Better environmental and social conditions contribute to that but are also opportunities that can only be realized with the creation of better economic prospects.

Partnerships and governability

This brings me to my last and related observation regarding the contribution of partnerships to the governability of governance systems. Governability addresses the question of the contribution of partnerships to problem solving in issue areas or economic sectors. The term governance system refers to the set of actors that share a relationship to an issue and each other. Such a system demarcates how rules and policies are made, reformed, interpreted, implemented, and enforced. Framing partnerships as elements in a governance system shifts the focus to their relative contribution to problem solving in relation to and in interaction with other regulatory responses. This also highlights their pathways to impact. Amidst other regulatory interventions partnerships may substitute, complement, reinforce or weaken a governance system. This information may also help us to answer the question of how partnerships can be made an effective part of a larger governance system to enhance sustainable change. Or even to answer the question whether there are not more effective ways to invest in governance capacity than through partnerships.

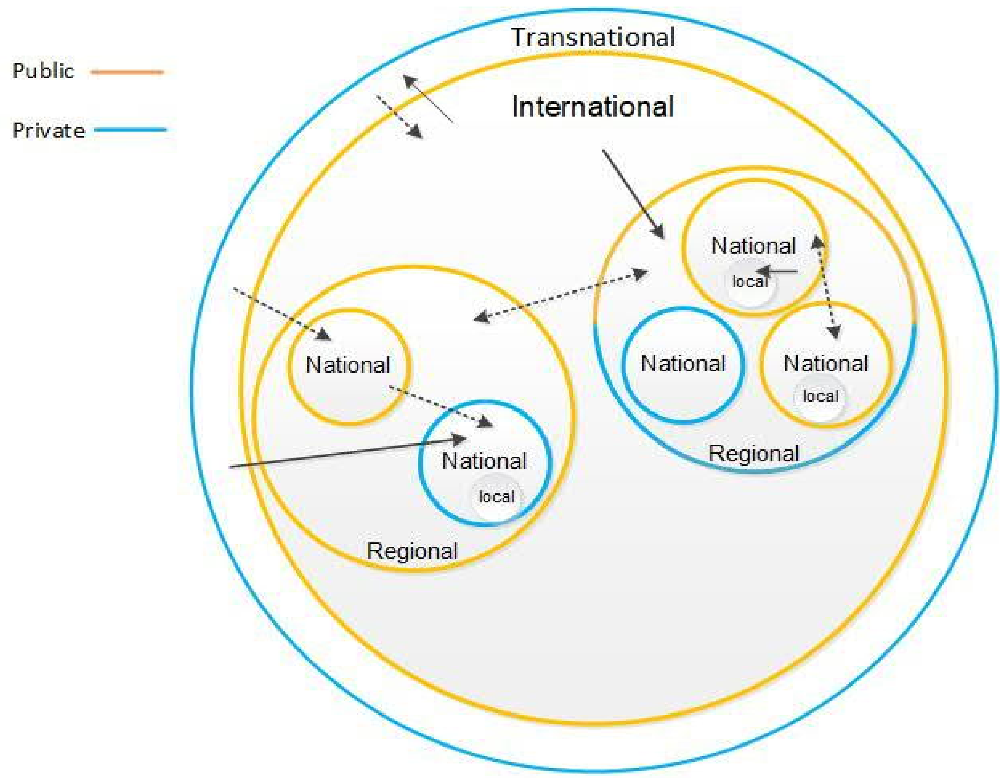
In my research, I observed that partnerships invariably do not replace existing regulatory arrangements but add institutional complexity. They do so in different ways in different governance systems. A governance system analysis may help to unravel the complexities.

Such an analysis would first select the set of actors that share a relationship to an issue and each other. These actors can both be those that affect and those that are affected. The next step would be a combination of a social-organizational and a social-cultural (ideational) analysis of the configuration of relationships. In such an analysis, actors with shared values, norms and goals could be detected. Including alliances that are supportive and unsupportive to change.

The governance system approach can be used both normatively and descriptively. Normatively, for example to support those who have less power in the system, or to detect what potential collaborative relationships are. Which may help to create a platform for collaboration. Descriptively: to analyze the regulatory capacities and to assess the governability of the system.

A look at some stylized governance systems illustrates the governance systems approach.

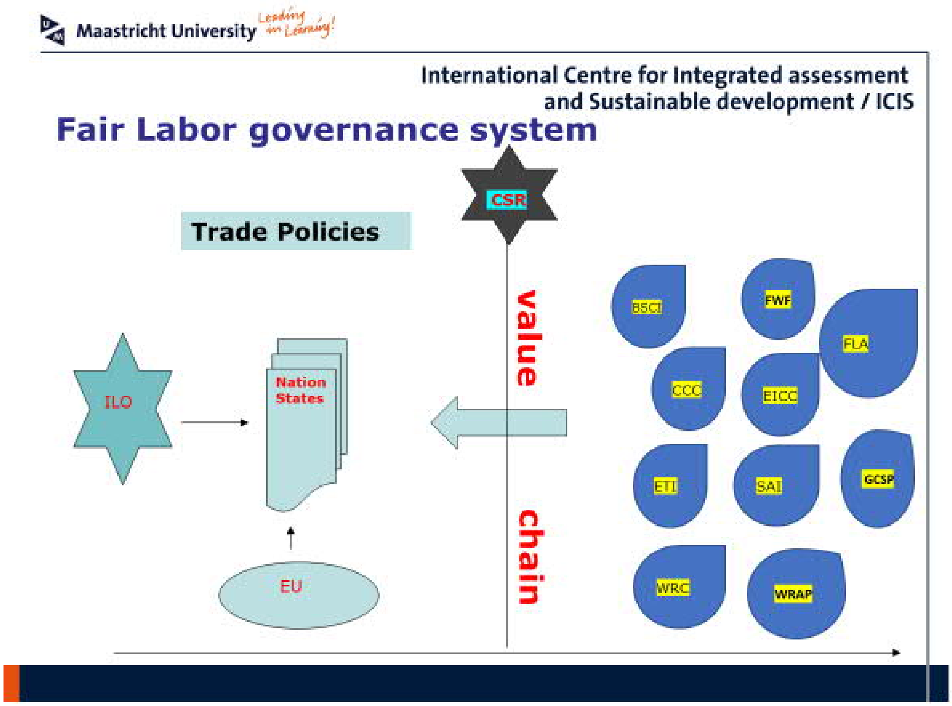
Figure: The governance system of organic agriculture



- Initiators were farmers and farmers' organizations, later organized in a partnership with public actors and businesses: IFOAM (outer ring).
- On the international level, there are binding instruments that do not specifically detail organic regulations but provide the context in which organic regulations are made (e.g. trade agreements). There are also organic guidelines (Codex guidelines).
- Over 80 countries developed public organic standards, some with connected local private standards. Some countries only have private standards.
- Several countries agreed public equivalency agreements (accepting each other's standards).
- Countries can also have public equivalency agreements (aka treaties) with regional standards (e.g. Canada and EU).
- There are both public (e.g. EU organic regulation) and public-private regional standards (e.g. Pacific Organic Standard). These regional standards apply to all countries within a region and may agree equivalence with other regions.

Thus, we see a still very fragmented system with some tendencies towards cohesion in which a public-private partnership (IFOAM) plays a dominant meta-governance role. IFOAM stimulates coherence in the system and can be regarded the focal global meeting point for organic standards; IFOAM has also developed the Gold Standard to which many others refer.

Figure: Fair labor governance system



Fair labor is transnationally prescribed through several public, private and public-private partnerships.

- On the left side the 'public' standards are defined. The ILO, the only tri-partite UN-institution, is the main global standard-setting institution, but its conventions need to be translated in national laws and regulations. The ILO lacks implementation capacity for its conventions.
- To the right side many private arrangements address supply chain actors to implement fair labor standards.
- The private arrangements mainly promote compliance with the law and international standards and add implementation capacity to the ILO conventions, but the ILO does not sustain the private arrangements (one-way influence).
- Because the private partnerships lack the authority to impose fines or other penalties on violations of labor standards, they are particularly effective in the niche of business sectors that produce consumer products, such as textile and garment, as these sectors are vulnerable to

consumer protests. As voluntary, non-state regulatory mechanisms they are hardly able to rectify power imbalances between workers and employees in other sectors and in repressive states.

- The private arrangements differ in their aims (fostering dialog, creation of standards, certification, accreditation of management systems) and enforcement activities; they underscore their differences and are critical about each other's standards.
- There is a lot of informal contact between the private standards; but a formal collaboration between six focal private arrangements was not successful.
- The many private arrangements for fair labor seem to have divided the issue field in fractions and each of them has developed a vested interest that it defends.

This system clearly lacks coherence and business-NGO partnerships contribute to it. This fragmentation impairs the transformative capacity of the fair labor governance system.

Dear colleagues,

I am well aware that I easily switched from public-private to Business-NGO partnerships and from local to regional and global partnerships. Although I think that some of the aspects I touched upon are omnipresent. You might also think that I am rather critical about the partnership paradigm, but I am not. Generally, I regard partnerships as the most promising mechanisms to bring about sustainable change. Many sustainability partnerships really initiated a process of change. What I put on the table are some of my uncertainties. If there is any message that I want to convey, it is one of our identity as partnership researchers and practitioners. We are particularly robust as social engineers; in creating knowledge about the social technology to build partnership arrangements. Sometimes at the expense of a critical and distanced appraisal. What we need to realize is that the partnership paradigm is both a fact, that we can study and sustain, and an ideology, which can be qualified as functionalistic and pragmatic, that we do not necessarily need to accept uncritically. Accepting the partnership paradigm can easily result in ignorance of the inherent political character of and tensions in strategic decision-making for crucial social problems, of which partnerships are a part. The ultimate question is not how we can improve partnerships, but how we can make societal problems more manageable and solvable by working in and with partnership as one of the crucial strategic choices for progressive change.

Despite all my uncertainties I will close with one certainty.
This regards you: the inspiration of our community of partnership researchers and practitioners.

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