



Unleashing transformation through partnerships – The lost potential of SDG 17

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Introduction

This Policy Brief examines the partnership approach adopted by the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, specifically Sustainable Development Goal 17, ‘Partnership for the Goals’. Drawn from the presentation ‘Goal 17 – Partnerships for the Goals: An Analysis’, which was shared at the 2019 General Assembly Meeting of the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research (16 October 2019, UNDOC Vienna), this approach is analysed in relation to how partnership is understood and promoted in European Union regulations and programmes. The central argument of the brief is that a much deeper understanding of partnership than that presented in SDG 17 is required to meet the transformational ambition of Agenda 2030 in Europe and beyond.

In September 2015, the UN General Assembly presented the UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 to ‘transform our world’.¹ The Agenda encompasses 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that aim to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. Adopted by all UN Member States, the SDGs seek to work across three crosscutting pillars: the economic, the social and the environmental (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The three pillars of the 2030 global goals



¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

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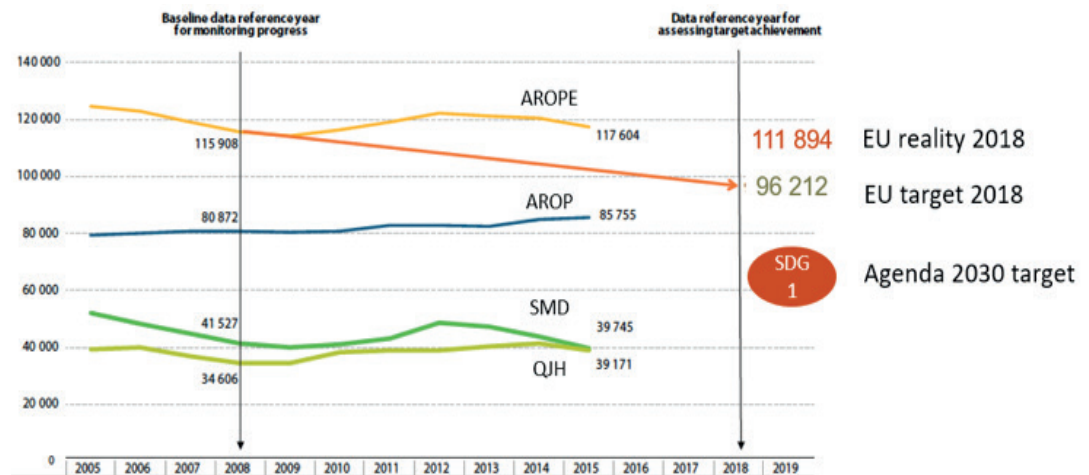
**At current pace,
the world will not
achieve the SDGs**

**Rising inequalities
create economic, social
and political challenges**

**The EU failed to
reach its SDG1 targets
for 2018**

In spite of the positive acceptance by the global community, progress towards achieving the SDGs has so far been disappointing. The 2019 Social Progress Index,² for example, finds that if we continue at the present pace the SDGs will not be achieved until 2073. Nor are we on track for attaining individual goals such as Goal 1 ‘End poverty in all its forms everywhere’ (United Nations, 2019). Although progress to reduce poverty continues, this has decelerated and now jeopardizes the achievement of this Goal. Furthermore, in 2019, 55% of the world’s population still had no access to social protection.³ Even in the relatively wealthy European Union the targets for SDG 1 in 2018 were not met, thus limiting the possibility of reducing the proportion of those living in poverty in all its dimensions by at least half by 2030 (see Figure 2). This breach further reflects a growing divide between rich and poor which threatens solidarity, and social and territorial cohesion (Keeley, 2015).⁴

Figure 2: Progress towards the EU social inclusion target, 2005-2015, EU28, in 1000



Notes: AROPE: At risk of poverty or social exclusion; AROP: At risk of poverty after social transfers; SMD: Severely materially deprived; QJH: (Quasi-)jobless households.

Source: Eurostat, 2019; EU SILC (codes t2020_50, t2020_51, t2020_52, t2020_53).

In order to address the situation, António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), stresses that, “The coming years will be a vital period to save the planet and to achieve sustainable, inclusive human development”. The effort required for this will entail concerted action from diverse academic disciplines and fields of study. Within this context, social policy research can play an important role in supporting the achievement of the goals and contributing to unleashing transformation by providing policy-makers with a strong evidence base upon which to make decisions. As well as promoting the use of broader indicators to capture multi-faceted change,⁵ social policy research can also assist in recommending appropriate actions to change our systems and processes.

2 <https://www.socialprogress.org/>

3 https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_601903/lang--en/index.htm

4 <https://www.oecd.org/social/inequality-and-poverty.htm>

5 With regard to SDG 1 (End poverty in all its forms everywhere), for instance, recent research findings suggest that quantitative figures alone often fail to capture the multi-faceted phenomenon of poverty in a complete sense (Gaisbauer, 2020; Schleicher et al., 2018).

In this regard, suggestions for improving the way that different actors work together in a more inclusive and holistic manner at multiple levels in order to support the SDGs, are crucial.

Understanding SDG 17

The Sustainable Development Goals can only be met if we work together

The UN states that the Sustainable Development Global Goals can only be met if we work together at multiple levels: “International investments and support are needed to ensure innovative technological development, fair trade and market access, especially for developing countries. To build a better world, we need to be supportive, empathetic, inventive, passionate, and above all, cooperative.”⁶ In line with this call, the EU and its Member States are committed to working in collaboration to achieve the targets of the SDGs (European Union, 2019).⁷ Improving the way that actors work together in a more inclusive and holistic manner, and linking local, national and international efforts to do this can be promoted through partnerships.

SDG 17, ‘Partnerships for the Goals’, is theoretically committed to inclusive partnerships that are “built upon principles and values, a shared vision, and shared goals that place people and the planet at the centre”⁸ at global, regional, national and local levels. The goal promotes a global partnership for sustainable development that is complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships which mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support the achievement of SDGs in all countries, particularly ‘developing countries’ (Target 17.16).⁹ The goal further highlights the importance of global macro-economic stability and the need to mobilise financial resources for developing countries from international sources as well as through strengthened domestic capacities for revenue collection (European Commission, 2019b). Meanwhile, a framework based on achieving a series of indicators has been established to monitor progress against the SDGs. In the case of SDG 17, the indicator used to monitor progress is based on increases in Official Development Assistance (ODA) and net private grants as a percentage of Gross National Income (GNI).¹⁰

6 <https://www.globalgoals.org/17-partnerships-for-the-goals>

7 https://ec.europa.eu/environment/sustainable-development/SDGs/implementation/index_en.htm

8 <https://academicimpact.un.org/content/revitalize-global-partnership-sustainable-development-0>

9 <https://indicators.report/targets/17-16/>

10 <https://indicators.report/targets/17-16/>

The EU's partnership approach

Vast experiences are gained by the partnership approach adopted within the EU

Partnership in the EU is generally understood as a sound policy tool. Based on the premise that issues such as employment and social inclusion are too complex for single institutions to address alone, the EU's 'partnership principle' promotes connections between public authorities and social partners, non-governmental and civil society organisations, and individual citizens (Scoppetta, 2015). By engaging with a broad range of stakeholders, partnership is also viewed as a vehicle for promoting democracy and for assisting policy coherence through alignment of objectives between different levels of governance (Stott, 2017).

Applied within the EU since the 1980s, expertise in working with partnership has been gained in many EU countries through a series of national and EU-wide programmes such as EQUAL and Territorial Employment Pacts (TEPs). The partnership principle was central to the EQUAL Community Initiative,¹¹ a programme financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) and co-funded by the EU Member States between 2000-6. The initiative focused on supporting innovative, transnational projects aimed at finding new ways of fighting discrimination and inequality within and beyond the labour market. The TEP programme, meanwhile, was an initiative of the European Commission that was co-funded by EU Member States. The Programme promoted area-based partnerships (pacts) to increase the efficiency of labour market policy delivery and coordinate policy measures among regional and local actors.¹² In total, 89 TEPs were established within the EU.

Partnerships thus have also emerged as an important governance tool in programmes for rural, local community and economic development, and for employment and social inclusion (OECD, 2007; Scoppetta, 2015). The added value of these collaborative initiatives has been explored in evaluations that use groupings of available indicators to capture change processes holistically.¹³ A central finding from this process is that partnerships have been an important anchor point for initiating socially innovative actions within the EU.

Partnerships are defined as a relationship in which organisations pool their diverse resources, capitalise on synergies, and share risks and benefits

Partnership as a meaningful policy tool

Partnerships can be defined as relationships in which organisations pool their diverse resources, capitalise on synergies, and share risks and benefits to accomplish something that they could not do alone (Stott, 2017). These

11 https://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal_consolidated/index.html

12 https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/innovation/innovating/pacts/download/pdf/pact-fin_en.pdf

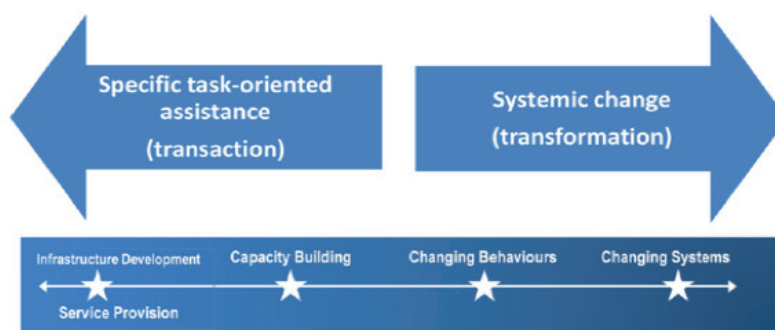
13 https://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal_consolidated/about/evaluation.html

social and institution-based relationships are manifested in different forms that are characterized by joint objective setting and decision-making, shared commitment and responsibility, and collective ownership. Partnerships can also be described as an advanced form of cooperation in which multiple actors join forces to achieve a common goal and, in so doing, offer the possibility of boosting the capacities of different actors and contributing to social change (Scoppetta, 2013; Stott, 2018). Clearly then, partnership is more than just an instrument and can also be considered as a form of social interaction. However, our focus in this context is on partnership as a policy tool.

Partnership has the potential to boost capacities and contribute to systemic change

Partnership objectives can include transactions, such as specific task-orientated assistance, as well as broader aims relating to systemic change (see Figure 3).

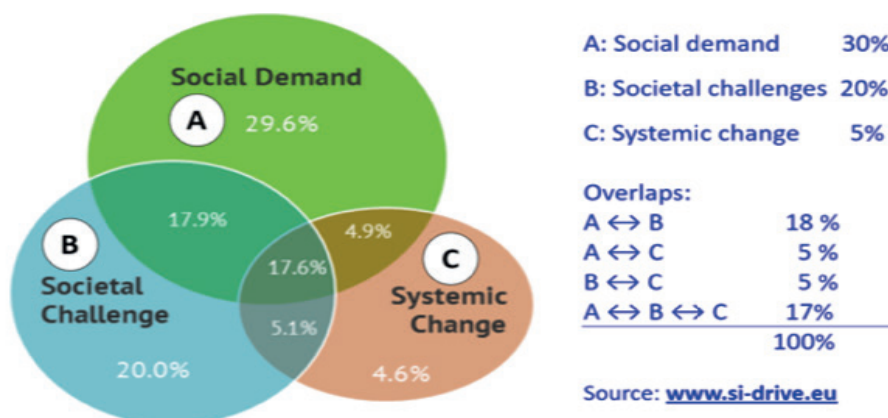
Figure 3: Spectrum of partnership objectives



Source: Caplan and Stott, 2008; Stott, 2017.

Research confirms that a wide range of social innovation objectives build strongly upon partnerships and cooperative behaviour (Scoppetta et al., 2013). These objectives encompass social demand, societal challenges and systemic change (see Figure 4). Encouraging social innovations that build on partnerships thus has the potential to promote systemic change.

Figure 4: Distribution of social innovations according to their objectives



Source: Hochgerner, 2019



The capacity of partnerships to contribute to systemic change is of enormous importance

The capacity of partnerships to contribute to systemic change is of enormous importance for fulfilling the targets of the SDGs and Agenda 2030. While they need time to build up trust and resources to be functional, experience from local partnerships shows that they are especially successful where they have built upon learning from both what works and, crucially, what does not (Stott and Scoppetta, 2011). Beyond the local level, partnerships can also set priorities and work across multi-governance levels thus assisting in policy alignment and the enabling of solutions for problems in different socio-economic contexts (Scoppetta, 2015; Stott, 2017).

Implications for the SDG Agenda

Partnership is much more than ‘developed countries’ providing aid to so-called ‘developing countries’

Partnership offers a unique policy tool for promoting and supporting collaboration between governments, the private sector and civil society to help transform our world and work towards the achievement of the SDGs. Unfortunately, however, the focus of partnership in SDG 17 is largely on ensuring that funds from ‘developed countries’ reach ‘developing countries’, using indicators such as ODA and other development grants. The EU itself endorses this approach by tailoring partnerships for the SDGs to so-called ‘developing country’ needs and proudly affirming that it is the “world’s largest provider of Official Development Assistance (ODA), providing €74.4 billion in 2018” (European Commission, 2019a: 15).

As well as promoting an approach that is out of sync with the much deeper conceptualisation of partnership used in EU policies and programmes, linking ‘partnership’ to outdated terms such as ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries renders its usefulness as an effective policy tool increasingly meaningless. In order to ensure that partnership assists economic and social transformation as well as respect for the environment, its central focus should be on linking different actors from diverse geographical and sectoral backgrounds to work in a connected manner across all three pillars of Sustainable Development.

Inadequate attention has been paid to the potential of partnerships to boost capacities and contribute to the transformational change that is central to Agenda 2030. An emphasis on promoting an “overly technocratic approach to achieve an ideal of a universal collective, leaving little space for communities and local groups to have agency as forces of human development” (Schleicher et al., 2018: 45) suggests that Goal 17 may require “reframing” so that partnerships are better harnessed as a meaningful channel for achieving the SDGs. To do this, different forms of collaborative relationships in diverse contexts must be acknowledged and financial means allocated to supporting concerted collective actions that can assist transformation.

Applying an integrative approach: all actors at various geographical scales jointly design social change

It is our strong belief that implementation of the SDGs requires a holistic and integrated approach with partnership at the centre. Responsible social, economic and environmental policies are needed, embedded in a coherent multi-level policy framework which encourages actors to cooperate towards transformations for sustainable development. To do this, Agenda 2030 must place emphasis on the implementation of actions in which all actors at different geographical levels jointly design social change.

Goal 17, as it stands today, does not make use of the broad spectrum of partnership experiences gained in practise. Nor does it build on the know-how gained from the implementation of socially innovative actions. To enhance the contribution that partnerships may offer for promoting economic and social transformation, and respect for the environment, which are at the heart of Agenda 2030, the reframing of Goal 17 is both urgent and necessary.

Conclusion and recommendations

Partnership is key for the successful implementation of Agenda 2030

This Policy Brief has examined and questioned the partnership approach adopted by SDG17 in the UN Agenda 2030. Drawing on lessons from the use of the partnership principle in the European Union, it has stressed the need for a deeper understanding of partnership and positioned its usefulness as a strong policy tool that can assist key actors with different background to work together to successfully achieve the SDGs. To endorse this, a call for the reframing of SDG 17 has been made.

Some of the considerations that are necessary for the reframing of SDG 17 include the need to:

- draw upon different forms of social and institution-based relationships;
- harness partnerships to initiate social change processes and implement socially innovative actions to achieve the SDGs;
- acknowledge different forms of partnership relationships in varying sociohistorical contexts;
- make connections across different levels of governance and ensure that priorities are designed and put in place with actors at local and regional (micro) levels; and,
- allocate financial support for collaborative actions that support sustainable and lasting change.

On a broader level, it is also important to note that achievement of the SDGs requires a shift away from an ‘outdated’ model in which society is regarded as annex to the market and environmental issues are subordinated to economics (Polanyi, 1944/1978). Only a more balanced weighting between the economic, social and the environment pillars can lead to sustainable development. In the current context, as exemplified by the challenges of achieving SDG 1, ‘business as usual’ is not an option. To attain social and economic transformation, and respect for the environment, all actors in society must work together to design social change. By learning and building upon the wealth of experiences in implementing partnerships and social innovations within the EU, we are convinced that the transformational changes required to achieve the SDGs will be enhanced.

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