Beyond Pragmatism: Appraising UN-Business Partnerships

In recent years, the United Nations (UN) has emerged as one of the principal proponents of public-private partnerships (PPPs), considered by many to be a key instrument of development and an ideal to be emulated. The authors of this paper argue that idealizing the concept and its normative content, as well as the feel-good discourse that infuses much of the mainstream literature, risk diverting attention away from various tensions and contradictions that characterize UN-business partnerships (UN–BPs) and that raise questions about their contribution to equitable development and democratic governance. Both the theory and practice of partnerships suggest that thinking and policy need to go beyond evidence and assumptions about “good governance” and pragmatism.

The paper identifies key ideational, institutional, political and economic forces that have driven the PPP phenomenon, only some of which are recognized in the mainstream literature. This analysis reveals the multiple, sometimes contradictory agendas and interests involved. The authors argue that if the contribution of UN–BPs to equitable development is to be adequately assessed, these diverse logics underpinning partnerships need to be identified and addressed.

“Partnership” has become an infinitely elastic concept, and the authors suggest that it is essential to unbundle the notion, by analysing the different activities and relationships subsumed under various partnerships in order to reflect on their contribution to equitable development. A review of UN–BPs suggests that, unless the UN’s partnering work is founded on greater conceptual clarity and more robust analytical frameworks, it will be difficult to make useful comparisons or draw practical conclusions.

The paper outlines the growing number of partnerships across the UN spectrum and notes the recent emphasis placed on mainstreaming and scaling up partnership activities in the UN system. The authors argue that the case for scaling-up, and how this should be done, rests on whether it can be plausibly demonstrated that such scaling-up would, in and of itself, have a decisive impact on the problems or issues at stake. Both the theory of partnerships and empirical studies that have been carried out on actual experiences suggest that it is crucial to study the effects of such partnerships from a political economy perspective: will they strengthen local capacities or simply facilitate faster and deeper penetration of foreign capital and globalization; are they really compatible with the nature, mandates and priorities of the UN in general and UN agencies in particular; and how do they affect power relations among different development actors and institutions?

From the above analysis, the authors conclude that there is a need to develop a more active, critical intellectual culture in and around UN partnership activities. This would involve the UN moving beyond the present emphasis on accumulating and showcasing best practice examples of partnerships, and devoting greater resources and energies to developing and applying methodological tools that facilitate ex-ante and ex-post assessments of the immediate or direct development impacts of partnerships, as well as of their wider development implications.

It is essential to devote greater attention to seeing the bigger picture and to take account of key contributions, contradictions and trade-offs. This requires both the development of a panoply of evaluation methods that go beyond some conventional tools, and a broader conceptual framework regarding development than that which currently informs the UN–BP arena. For example, focusing on foreign direct investment, linkages between transnational corporations (TNCs) and small and medium-sized enterprise, among other things, also need to be included in the reckoning.

While impact assessment has not been a priority of UN agencies promoting partnerships, some measures have been taken to reform the operating and normative environment of UN–BPs. The paper pays particular attention to reforms related to accountability, mainly in relation to the United Nations Global Compact, as well as the issues of decentralization and local ownership of partnerships.

The authors emphasize the need to be more selective about which partnerships potentially contribute to the fundamental goals of the UN. Among other criteria, they highlight the principle of “policy coherence” in the sense of avoiding ad hoc interventions where there is a disconnect from core government or agency policy, or a situation where one policy or governance approach contradicts another, as illustrated in the cases of some partnerships associated with water privatization, or global health funds that generate tensions in relation to public health policy.

In spite of the complexity involved, it is incumbent on the UN, as a leading institution in the field of international development, to reflect on how partnerships relate to particular patterns of development. However, critical thinking in the UN on its relationship with the private sector in general, and partnerships with TNCs in particular, has been marginalized in recent years.
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**appraise. Noun. appraisal. Business. Verb.** Examples. The advantages of going beyond single studies to appraise the body of knowledge relevant to a given policy or practice question are palpable. From the Cambridge English Corpus. Consider its application when appraising policy to increase welfare state spending; will this always crowd out voluntary charitable giving? Contents. English American Business Examples Translations. Get our free widgets. Add the power of Cambridge Dictionary to your website using our free search box widgets. Finding the right business partners is a key success factor when setting up business in a new foreign market. Here's what to look for. Business associates with experience in the target country are especially valuable, as an organization can often hear about a potential partner when discussing other matters with a business contact. Initial exploratory meetings with potential partners often produce much better insight into market dynamics, segments, and competitors.

UN-business Partnerships: A Handbook. Acknowledgements This publication was developed by the United Nations Global Compact and GPPi. “Support” defines the opportunities for action, co-operation and engagement beyond the avoidance of harm. There are infinite opportunities to operationalize the concept of “support” and quite often the same means that identify risk and adverse impact – the mirror notion of “respect” – are likely to produce knowledge and practical solutions to do good. UN-business collaboration must strike a balance between promoting “respect” and “support” to ensure partnerships are instilled with undiluted UN values.