

Beyond Pragmatism

Appraising UN-Business Partnerships

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Acronyms

ABB	Asea Brown Boveri Ltd.
AIDS	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
AMDS	AIDS Medicines and Diagnostics Service
ATCA	Alien Torts Claims Act
BOT	build-operate-transfer
BSR	Business for Social Responsibility
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CSR	corporate social responsibility
DFID	Department for International Development (United Kingdom)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FDI	foreign direct investment
FT	Financial Times
GFATM	Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
GHP	Global Health Partnership
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative
GSP	Growing Sustainable Business
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
ICC	International Chamber of Commerce
ICEM	International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Union
IFI	International Financial Institution
IFPMA	International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ILO	International Labour Organization
IUCN	World Conservation Union
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	non-governmental organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPP	public-private partnership
PPPUE	Public-Private Partnerships for the Urban Environment
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RCS	Resident Coordinator System
R&D	research and development
SEED	Supporting Entrepreneurs for Environment and Development
SME	small and medium-sized enterprise
TB	tuberculosis
TNC	transnational corporation
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UN-BP	United Nations-business partnership
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNEP FI	United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization

UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNFIP	United Nations Fund for International Partnerships
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UNU	United Nations University
US	United States
WBCSD	World Business Council for Sustainable Development
WEF	World Economic Forum
WHO	World Health Organization
WIDER	World Institute for Development Economics Research
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWF	World Wide Fund For Nature

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Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

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, and privatization as an objective or outcome of partnerships, is problematic from the perspective of equitable development. Corporate social and environmental responsibility, net balance-of-payments flows, value added, transfer pricing and the crowding out of domestic competitors, 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.

Given its key roles in promoting partnerships and as a learning forum, it is important for the Global Compact to accelerate its efforts to move beyond best practice learning and embrace “critical thinking”. This would require greater intellectual pluralism and interactions with a wider range of subdisciplines and research institutions, as well as with civil society organizations that are organically linked to social movements. Without this balance of intellectual and social forces, the Global Compact runs the risk of doing as much to legitimize corporate power as promote inclusive and equitable patterns of development.

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Résumé

Ces dernières années, l'Organisation des Nations Unies (ONU) est apparue comme l'un des principaux partisans des partenariats public-privé (PPP), considérés par beaucoup comme un instrument clé du développement et un idéal vers lequel il faut tendre. Les auteurs de ce document font valoir que l'idéalisation de ces concepts et de leur contenu normatif, ainsi que le ton d'autosatisfaction que l'on retrouve dans une bonne part de la littérature dominante, risque de détourner l'attention des tensions et contradictions qui caractérisent les partenariats ONU-entreprises et qui remettent en question leur contribution au développement équitable et à la gouvernance démocratique. La théorie et la pratique des partenariats inclinent à penser que la réflexion et les politiques doivent aller au-delà des preuves et des présupposés sur la “bonne gouvernance” et le pragmatisme.

Les auteurs énumèrent les principales forces—idéelles, institutionnelles, politiques et économiques—qui font que les PPP ont le vent en poupe mais dont quelques-unes seulement sont reconnues par la littérature dominante. Cette analyse révèle la multiplicité et le caractère parfois contradictoire des visées et des intérêts en jeu. Les auteurs font valoir que pour apprécier à sa juste valeur la contribution des partenariats ONU-entreprises au développement équitable, les diverses logiques auxquelles ils obéissent doivent être identifiées et relevées.

Le concept de partenariat est devenu d'une élasticité inouïe, et les auteurs expliquent qu'il est essentiel de décomposer cette notion en analysant les différentes activités et relations classées dans la catégorie “partenariats” pour pouvoir mener une réflexion sur leur contribution au développement équitable. Une étude des partenariats ONU-entreprises laisse à penser que, tant que l'ONU ne fera pas reposer ses relations de partenariat sur des concepts plus clairs et des grilles d'analyse plus rigoureuses, il sera difficile de faire des comparaisons utiles ou de tirer des conclusions pratiques.

Les auteurs présentent dans les grandes lignes les partenariats de plus en plus nombreux conclus par les diverses institutions des Nations Unies et notent l'importance récente accordée à l'intégration et au développement des activités de partenariat dans le système des Nations Unies. Ils expliquent que les arguments en faveur de ce développement et la façon de procéder en la matière reposent sur la question de savoir si l'on peut démontrer de manière plausible que ce développement a en soi et à lui seul une incidence décisive sur les problèmes ou les questions en jeu. Tant la théorie des partenariats que les études empiriques faites sur des expériences actuelles indiquent qu'il est crucial d'étudier les effets de ces partenariats sous l'angle de l'économie politique: renforceront-ils les capacités locales ou favoriseront-ils simplement une pénétration plus rapide et plus profonde des capitaux étrangers et de la mondialisation? Sont-ils vraiment compatibles avec la nature, les mandats et les priorités de l'ONU en général et de ses institutions en particulier? Et dans quel sens influencent-ils les rapports de force entre différents acteurs et institutions du développement?

Les auteurs concluent de l'analyse ci-dessus qu'il faut développer l'activité intellectuelle, en particulier critique, à l'intérieur et autour des activités de partenariat de l'ONU, ce qui supposerait que l'ONU s'attache moins à accumuler et à présenter les pratiques de partenariat exemplaires et consacre davantage de ressources et d'énergie à l'élaboration et à l'emploi d'outils méthodologiques propres à faciliter l'évaluation prospective et rétrospective des retombées immédiates et directes et de l'incidence générale des partenariats sur le développement.

Il est capital de s'employer davantage à élargir son angle de vision et de tenir compte des contributions essentielles des partenariats, de leurs contradictions, de leurs avantages et de leurs inconvénients. Pour ce faire, il faut se doter à la fois d'une panoplie de méthodes d'évaluation plus fines que les outils conventionnels et d'un cadre conceptuel, pour le développement, plus large que celui qui informe actuellement les partenariats ONU-entreprises. Du point de vue du développement équitable, il est problématique, par exemple, de concentrer son attention sur les investissements étrangers directs, les liens entre les sociétés transnationales (STN) et les petites et moyennes entreprises et la privatisation comme objectif ou résultat des partenariats. Il faudrait prendre aussi en considération la responsabilité sociale et environnementale des entreprises, les flux nets de la balance des paiements, la valeur ajoutée, l'établissement des prix de cession interne et l'éviction des concurrents nationaux, entre autres.

Bien que les institutions des Nations Unies qui encouragent les partenariats n'aient pas jugé prioritaire d'en évaluer l'impact, elles ont pris certaines mesures pour réformer l'environnement opérationnel et normatif dans lequel fonctionnent les partenariats ONU-entreprises. Les auteurs du document accordent une attention particulière aux réformes liées à l'obligation de rendre des comptes, principalement dans le cadre du Pacte mondial des Nations Unies, et aux questions liées à la décentralisation et à l'appropriation locale des partenariats.

Les auteurs soulignent la nécessité d'opérer une sélection plus rigoureuse, selon le potentiel qu'a le partenariat de contribuer à la réalisation des objectifs fondamentaux de l'ONU. Ils

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