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Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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In her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood gives voice to the importance of both context and experience in making sense of thought and action: “Context is all; or is it ripeness? One or the other” [1] (p. 192). Similarly, social scientists have long recognised the value of identifying contextual data in the research process. From the reflexive sociologist Alvin Gouldner [2] to the celebrated anthropologist, systems theorist, and philosopher Gregory Bateson [3,4], we are reminded that the significance of words and deeds only emerges by relating them to their contexts. As argued by Gouldner: “the meaning and consequences of a behaviour pattern will vary with the contexts in which it occurs” [2] (p. 12). Or as more evocatively articulated by Bateson: “it is the context that fixes the meaning” [4] (p. 14).

Various contemporary academics and practitioners have emphasised the importance of context in different fields: leadership research [5]; partnership evaluation [6]; resource conservation [7]; business–NGO partnerships [8]; health care quality [9]; HIV/AIDS implementation research [10]; entrepreneurial innovation [11]; corporate social responsibility [12]; and the development of sustainability goals and targets [13].

This Special Issue of *Sustainability* on “Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” brings together ten articles from a diverse range of cross-cutting collaboration contexts. These include individual and organisational contexts such as inter-personal and inter-organisational relationships; alliances, platforms and foundations; private, public and civil society environments; different country settings, from Ireland to Spain, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Germany to Mexico and to Saudi Arabia, as well as local, regional, and global locations that look at partnerships in relation to thematic focus areas such as urban development, coffee certification, inter-organisational learning, and post-COVID scenarios. Implicit in these rich and varied contributions is an acknowledgement that, whatever the context, the complexity of addressing economic, environmental, and social goals through multi-stakeholder arrangements requires more robust mutual exchange and learning about the issues and challenges of working in this way.

We begin the Special Issue with our conceptual article ‘An Inclusive Approach to Partnerships for the SDGs: Using a Relationship Lens to Explore the Potential for Transformational Collaboration’ (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/19/7905>), which explores how terms such as ‘collaboration’, ‘partnership’ and ‘cooperation’ embrace a broad spectrum of personal and organisational interactions within, between and across different sectors, domains, disciplines, and contexts. In order to promote a more inclusive understanding of these collaborative connections, we suggest that exploring them through a relationship lens, with deeper appreciation of the importance of inter-personal connections, may assist partnership arrangements to generate the systemic change that is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Our framing piece is complemented by Tulin Dzhengiz’s article, ‘A Literature Review of Inter-Organizational Sustainability Learning’ (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/12/4876>), which further captures the enormous variety of different collaborative



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arrangements currently pursuing sustainable development goals. Building upon a literature review, Dzenghiz proposes a model for deepening inter-organisational sustainability learning in order to enhance our understanding of the complex processes that underpin the contribution of partnership arrangements to the SDGs.

The complexity of working in collaboration is further explored by Stella Pfisterer and Rob Van Tulder in ‘Navigating Governance Tensions to Enhance the Impact of Partnerships with the Private Sector for the SDGs’ (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/1/111>), an article that looks at how to navigate governance tensions in appraisals of partnership impact for the SDGs. With a special focus on partnerships with the private sector, the authors suggest that partnership impact assessments need to find ways of balancing monitoring and evaluation practices that focus on result-based, upward accountability with those that seek to promote learning, participatory and complexity-based approaches.

Partnership effectiveness and impact are also themes addressed by Jaime Moreno-Serna, Wendy M. Purcell, Teresa Sánchez-Chaparro, Miguel Soberón, Julio Lumbreras and Carlos Mataix in ‘Catalyzing Transformational Partnerships for the SDGs: Effectiveness and Impact of the Multi-Stakeholder Initiative El día después’ (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/17/7189>). Here, the authors consider the transformational potential of the “El día después” (The Day After) partnership, which was established to provide an SDG-oriented collaborative response to the COVID-19 crisis in Spain. In addition to important pointers on early-stage collaboration, the article highlights the importance of organisational facilitators who provide the space for partnerships for the SDGs to incubate and grow in the current context and beyond.

The role played by facilitators or intermediaries in supporting collaborative initiatives is highlighted in two other articles in the Special Issue; the first, by Theresa Gehringer, ‘Corporate Foundations as Partnership Brokers in Supporting the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)’ (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/18/7820>), examines how far corporate foundations may assume this “partnership broker” role and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. Drawing from survey data among corporate foundation managers in Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Germany, Gehringer suggests that corporate foundations could do more to develop their bridge-building capacities, pool resources and initiate partnerships between different sectors for the SDGs. In the second piece on collaborative facilitation in our Special Issue, ‘Cross-Sector Partnerships for Sustainability: How Mission-Driven Conveners Drive Change in National Coffee Platforms’ (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/7/2846>), Iteke van Hille, Frank G.A. de Bakker, Julie E. Ferguson and Peter Groenewegen look at how change is enabled by “mission-driven conveners” in national coffee platforms in six different countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Their findings indicate that certification efforts can be enhanced by working with non-profit organisations (NPOs) that assume this role because of positive cross-level dynamics between international and national actors and the realisation of early outcomes.

The remaining articles in the Special Issue explore perceptions of partnership among non-state actors such as NPOs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private sector partners in partnerships for the SDGs in a selection of different countries and regions. These articles reflect the fact that, although partnerships for the SDGs are positioned as avenues for promoting transformation, the reality is that collaborative initiatives are faced with a range of contextual impediments that are likely to limit this potential. In Ireland, Aparajita Banerjee, Enda Murphy and Patrick Paul Walsh share findings from a study on civil society and private sector perceptions of multi-stakeholder partnerships in ‘Perceptions of Multistakeholder Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals: A Case Study of Irish Non-State Actors’ (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/21/8872>). Among the many challenges encountered, a fragmented understanding of the SDGs, the need for more leadership from government, and an overly goal-based focus on SDG implementation by organisations are highlighted.

Meanwhile in their article ‘The Effects of Organizational Traits on NGO–Business Engagement in Mexico’ (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/23/10108>), Dennis J. Aigner

and Luli Pesqueira, explore organisational traits that might increase NGO engagement with businesses to support the SDGs in Mexico. Their survey work suggests that NGO participation in partnerships with the private sector is influenced by factors such as NGO size and scope, activities, level of professionalisation, the ability to sustain broader stakeholder relationships, and the extent to which transparency about the mission and goals of the NGO is revealed.

In a similar vein, the key characteristics of engagement between Saudi Arabian NPOs and other actors working for the SDGs are investigated by Hazem S. Kassem, Mohammed Aljuaid, Bader Alhafi Alotaibi and Rabab Ghozy in 'Mapping and Analysis of Sustainability-Oriented Partnerships in Non-Profit Organizations: The Case of Saudi Arabia' (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/17/7178>). Their survey of charitable associations in the Riyadh region of the country finds that NPOs mostly engage in partnerships to enhance their financial stability. Rather than the transformational arrangements promoted for the SDGs, the authors suggest that the vast majority of the partnerships they mapped could be described as "transactional partnerships" that focus primarily on philanthropic and social investment issues.

A final article on partnership perceptions comes from the Andalusian region of Spain. In 'Can Differing Opinions Hinder Partnerships for the Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals? Evidence from Marginalized Urban Areas in Andalusia' (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/14/5797>), Antonio Sianes and Rocío Vela-Jiménez focus specifically on disadvantaged urban areas and the extent to which partnerships for the SDGs can build habitable spaces for town dwellers. The authors note that commitment to multi-stakeholder partnerships depends on many factors, including the perceptions that local stakeholders themselves have about their reality and the problems they face. Understanding and engaging with these perceptions is, they believe, a critical starting point for ensuring local collective action and putting people at the centre of the SDG agenda. This argument links neatly back to our framing piece where we emphasise the importance of positioning inclusiveness as central to partnership and collaborative arrangements that seek to meet the transformational ambition of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Context may not be all, but in our efforts to enhance knowledge about partnerships for the SDGs and to strengthen their development and implementation, the exploration of multi-stakeholder collaboration within the contexts they occur is critical. These contexts are, of course, subject to constant evolution and change; something that was manifested most starkly in 2020 with the global impact of COVID-19. While some political leaders have reacted to the pandemic by closing national borders and encouraging xenophobia, both of which undermine two foundational goals of the 2030 Agenda—SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)—many have understood that the achievement of the SDGs and their associated targets cannot be realised without sustained international cooperation. This latter sentiment is captured in the positive and determined call to action offered by The Lancet Public Health in response to COVID-19: "Achieving the transformative vision of the SDGs by 2030 requires a major realignment of most countries' national priorities toward long-term, cooperative, and drastically accelerated action" [14] (p. e4600).

All the contributions to this Special Issue were impacted in one way or another by the COVID-19 pandemic; some as a result of personal and professional challenges which meant that writing and review tasks could not be achieved within expected timeframes; others, in seeking to explore new or different responses to address sustainability issues and concerns; and all with an understanding that, in the face of a common threat that has set us apart physically, collaboration among all actors in society is more important than ever. In the words of *The New Yorker* writer Jia Tolentino, "physical connection could kill us, but civic connection is the only way to survive" [15].

Looking forward, we offer a number of contextual questions and reflections to encourage researchers and practitioners interested in such a process of inquiry. How might a deeper consideration of context add value to our understanding of partnerships for

the SDGs? Why and how might more attention to contextual and relational dimensions of such partnerships strengthen our future research about SDG-related collaboration in diverse situations? For example, this might include taking greater account of contextual complexities and developing explanations about how and why a collaborative arrangement is successful in a specific milieu “by exploring the relationships between context, mechanism and outcome”, and by asking questions such as “how does this intervention make a difference in this particular situation?” (rather than just asking “does it work?”), and “why it might work over here and not over there?” [6] (p. 218).

If the arguments and relationships presented in this Special Issue prompt you to respond, we encourage you to undertake further research in this area. Such explorations might integrate your own or other individual, organisational and/or socio-cultural context into wider efforts to strengthen and implement partnerships for the SDGs and support the broader 2030 Agenda in the face of COVID-19 and beyond. In this spirit, we close with the hopeful reflections of writer, historian, and activist Rebecca Solnit about the diversity of mutual aid and other collaborative responses to the pandemic, particularly in local contexts: “What all these projects around the world tell us is that they can be the foundation for bigger projects, both practically and as the imaginative and ideological basis for something new, based on generosity, abundance, horizontality, mutuality, inclusion” [16] (p. xv). Debates and exchanges between and across global–local partnership learning and research communities are vital to advancing these diverse interactions.

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