

Stott, Leda and Murphy, David F. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8416-5627>  
(2025) A principles-based approach for enabling multi-stakeholder collaboration:  
addressing the elusive quest for sustainable development partnership standards.  
Standards, 5 (3). p. 23.

Downloaded from: <https://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/9043/>

***Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.***

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

**provided that**

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
- a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

**You may not**

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing [insight@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:insight@cumbria.ac.uk).

## Perspective

# A Principles-Based Approach for Enabling Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration: Addressing the Elusive Quest for Sustainable Development Partnership Standards

Leda Stott<sup>1</sup> and David F. Murphy<sup>2,\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Innovation and Technology for Development Centre, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (itdUPM), 28040 Madrid, Spain; leda.stott@upm.es

<sup>2</sup> Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS), Institute of Business, Industry and Leadership, University of Cumbria, Ambleside LA22 9BB, UK

\* Correspondence: david.murphy@cumbria.ac.uk

## Abstract

The proliferation of diverse multi-stakeholder partnering arrangements that seek to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has prompted calls for overarching standards to enhance their governance, legitimacy and effectiveness. This conceptual article critically examines the limitations of applying universal partnership standards across complex and context-sensitive collaborative arrangements. Drawing on a purposive sampling of approximately 115 academic, policy-oriented and practitioner sources, identified through targeted database searches, we explore the historical development of sustainability-related partnership norms and identify some of the tensions in their alignment with socio-historic, institutional and relational dynamics. We examine the concept of partnership meta-governance as a way of both ensuring and enabling effective collaborative initiatives working to meet the targets of the 2030 Agenda's 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Using a methodology that combines conceptual analysis with practitioner-tested support mechanisms, we propose a principles-based approach to enrich the enabling dimension of partnership meta-governance by privileging contextual responsiveness, co-creation and relational values over prescriptive compliance. This approach seeks to reinforce the transformational intent of the 2030 Agenda by offering a foundation for more inclusive and adaptive collaboration that supports the long-term aspirations of the United Nations' Pact for the Future.

**Keywords:** partnership; multi-stakeholder partnership; sustainable development; principles; standards; context; collaboration; governance; relational dynamics; transformation



Academic Editor: Peter Glavič

Received: 22 July 2025

Revised: 30 August 2025

Accepted: 3 September 2025

Published: 10 September 2025

**Citation:** Stott, L.; Murphy, D.F. A Principles-Based Approach for Enabling Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration: Addressing the Elusive Quest for Sustainable Development Partnership Standards. *Standards* **2025**, *5*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.3390/standards5030023>

**Copyright:** © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, partnerships have been presented as essential vehicles for achieving sustainable development. Working in multi-stakeholder partnership (MSP) arrangements can, it is argued, mobilize complementary resources, bridge sectoral divides and foster innovative responses to local-to-global sustainability problems [1]. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reinforces the importance of partnership in its framework for planetary progress and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [2]. Central to the success of the SDGs is multi-stakeholder collaboration, captured explicitly in SDG 17, which positions 'Partnerships for the Goals' as the means of implementation for all the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda more widely.

However, despite current prominence, the governance and effectiveness of different forms of SDG-related collaboration remain uneven. The proliferation of diverse partnership arrangements has led to growing calls for overarching standards to steer their formation, implementation and evaluation. Some advocate for a meta-governance approach, proposing universal partnership standards to ensure accountability and impact [3,4]. Yet the highly contextual nature of partnership arrangements and the sociohistoric, cultural, political, economic, thematic and place-based factors that shape them [5,6] raise fundamental questions about whether rigid, one-size-fits-all standards can enhance partnership effectiveness.

This conceptual article critically examines the elusive quest for sustainable development partnership standards. We argue that while standards may offer useful benchmarks and guidelines, their use needs to be complemented by a more adaptable and context-sensitive approach, anchored in co-created principles rather than prescriptive rules, to support meaningful multi-stakeholder collaboration for local-to-global sustainability. Drawing on theoretical and applied insights from the academic and practitioner literature, we look at a range of historical norms that have been posited for partnership processes, governance and management arrangements, and assess some of their limitations. We also explore the more recent positioning of partnership meta-governance as a framework for partnership arrangements that support achievement of the SDGs. With attention to a dual focus on ensuring accountability through systematic oversight of MSP arrangements and the provision of enabling support for them, we suggest that greater consideration needs to be paid to the latter. To do this, we propose a complementary principles-based approach that acknowledges the relational and contextual dimensions of partnerships and other collaborative arrangements.

By focusing on principles, we aim to provide a flexible and inclusive approach that can increase the effectiveness of heterogeneous partnership endeavors operating under the umbrella of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Our approach recognizes that partnership arrangements must be adaptive to different sociohistoric and place-based contexts, enabling them to remain relevant and impactful across diverse settings. Building upon our previous work, we also contend that, to promote transformation, more ambitious, dynamic and trust-based relationships are needed with relational connections and values at their center [1]. In sharing these reflections, we aim to contribute to ongoing discussions about the role of multi-stakeholder collaboration in supporting the long-term aspirations of the United Nations and relevant non-state actors encompassed in the new Pact for the Future [7,8].

Our article begins by setting out why context matters and its influence on how partnership is understood and implemented. Following a brief examination of our methodology and the terminology used in relation to standards, we look at some of the historical efforts to put different norms in place for partnership arrangements focused on sustainability issues, including an overarching meta-governance for partnerships for the SDGs. Arguing that such proposals must grapple with long-standing tensions between universal norms and the situated realities of collaborative practice in diverse sustainable development contexts, the ensuing section sets out an approach that positions agreement on appropriate principles as central to relationships between the individuals and organizations working in partnership, and their operational settings. We conclude with a summary of the article's main arguments and some suggestions for how our approach may be applied and developed further.

## 2. Why Partnership Context Matters

Although the importance of context is increasingly recognized within and across disciplines, its relevance to the success of social interventions has only recently gained proper attention. The term 'context' derives from the Latin *contextus*, meaning 'joining together', a

useful reminder that such initiatives interact with individuals, organizations and wider systems through multi-dimensional connections. Understanding these intricate relationships remains a key challenge for partnership theory, practice and policy development [9].

Context is therefore central to understanding the functioning, performance and potential of multi-stakeholder partnership arrangements (MSPs) for sustainable development. As we have argued elsewhere [1,6], partnership arrangements are not neutral mechanisms but socially constructed groupings that reflect and are molded by the environments in which they are formed. From socio-political dynamics and cultural norms to institutional capacities and issue-specific challenges, contextual variables fundamentally shape how collaboration is conceived, enacted and sustained.

Unpacking context requires attention to relational histories and lived experiences or what Nora Bateson [10] calls the “pre-existing patterns of thought—influenced by culture, education, and economy” that affect partnership choices (p. 159). Early work by Eric C. Poncelet [5] highlights how sociohistoric contexts shape the potential for collaboration by showing how legacies of conflict, stakeholder histories and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion influence trust, legitimacy and process design. Similarly, Philipp Pattberg and Oscar Widerberg [11] identify key enabling conditions for transnational partnerships such as institutional fit, stakeholder alignment and problem structure awareness that hinge on contextually sensitive approaches. These perspectives challenge the notion of a universal formula for partnership success and instead call for norms and practices that are attuned to place, time and purpose.

More recently, empirical research on meta-governance frameworks in Kenya and beyond by Marianne Beisheim et al. [12] and Anne Ellersiek [13] illustrates how donor-led structures often fail to engage with local complexity, reinforcing asymmetries or bypassing critical stakeholders. This is particularly the case where the relational and power dynamics at play are shaped by institutional capacities, cultural values and historic inequalities that must be understood and navigated with care. Standardized approaches to partnership formation and assessment frequently misalign with diverse realities on the ground, weakening legitimacy and impact. The work of these scholars underscores that rigid criteria or top-down designs can stifle innovation, marginalize actors, undermine ownership and disconnect partnership arrangements from the very goals they seek to serve.

Gregory Bateson’s understanding of systems and Nora Bateson’s concept of ‘transcontextuality’ offer further insights that can be applied to sustainable development partnership arrangements. Gregory Bateson [14], in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, argues that meaning emerges not from discrete things but from relationships and the patterns that connect them. Nora Bateson [15], in *Small Arcs of Large Circles*, builds on this by suggesting that even ‘context’ may be too narrow a frame when dealing with living systems. Instead, she calls for transcontextual understanding—an approach that reveals how multiple overlapping and interacting contexts co-produce meaning and action. Bateson insists that “life is not divisible into the departments of a university”, noting that reductionist research often oversimplifies data by isolating them from the relational dynamics that give them vitality (p. 98).

This lens offers a profound challenge to dominant models of partnership design and evaluation. It invites us to view partnership arrangements not as projects bounded by fixed goals and roles but as living processes shaped by intersecting systems—cultural, ecological, institutional, emotional and historical [16]. It further demands what Nora Bateson [15] calls “the warm data of interrelationality”, information that retains its embeddedness in relationships “rather than numbers” (p. 45). Such relational embeddedness requires humility, reflexivity and dialogic exploration with a shift away from rigid, one-size-fits-all standards towards more adaptive, responsive and learning-oriented forms of collaborative governance.

Beyond an instrumental understanding of partnership as a mechanism or vehicle for achieving sustainability goals, Bateson’s perspective echoes views that present partnership as a process of working together (or ‘partnering’) and as an ongoing relational connection that is reinforced by the espousal of values that include respect, reciprocity and mutual benefit [17,18]. These perspectives are prevalent in worldviews and belief systems such as Buddhism and Ubuntu where attention is given to relational and interpersonal values that are intrinsic to partnership [1,17,19]. These different understandings of partnership are captured in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Different understandings of partnership. Source: Adapted from Stott [17].

<b>Partnership may be understood as follows:</b>
<b>An entity</b> with a clear governance structure and procedures for working in collaboration, and organizational alignment around a common goal
<b>A process</b> of working together that encourages dialogue and consultation, and the participation of different stakeholders
<b>A relationship</b> based on values such as solidarity, empathy and reciprocity in which those involved benefit mutually from their connection

The insights outlined above intersect with a growing recognition that MSP arrangements must evolve as their contexts evolve [17,20]. Partnering phases such as initiation, implementation, strengthening or renewal will also call for different capacities and ways of working. In addition, collaborative arrangements must navigate temporal pressures (e.g., the urgency of climate action), sectoral approaches (e.g., differences between education, health, energy or finance) and the uneven distribution of power and voice among stakeholders [17,21].

Successful partnership arrangements, then, are not those that conform to abstract standards but those that can navigate complexity through relational intelligence, adaptive learning and contextual awareness. Taken together, these insights compel us to rethink what it means to develop standards for sustainable development partnership arrangements. Rather than prescribing universal procedures, we argue instead for a flexible and enabling environment that supports partnership arrangements in navigating their diverse and evolving contexts. Such an approach embraces complexity not as a barrier but as a reality to be engaged with. It values both formal and informal knowledge systems, prioritizes relational over transactional logics and fosters reflexivity over rigid compliance. It is our belief that, without context-sensitive approaches, MSP arrangements risk becoming performative rather than transformative.

3. Our Methodology

This conceptual article draws upon a purposive sampling strategy to explore the evolving discussion about standards, principles, codes and guidelines in multi-stakeholder partnership (MSP) initiatives for sustainable development. As in our earlier work [1], we have not presented new empirical data but have synthesized the existing literature and practitioner insights in order to propose the foundations of a theoretical approach that can be further tested in practice. This methodological approach also enabled us to investigate the breadth and fragmentation of the partnership literature, which spans multiple disciplines including public administration, policy studies, sustainability science, international development, corporate responsibility and collaborative governance, among others.

The review combined academic and practitioner sources to integrate conceptual and applied perspectives. Searches were undertaken using databases such as Google Scholar, ProQuest, ResearchGate, Academia.edu and Scopus. A Boolean search strategy employed

various combinations of the following keywords: *partnership; multi-stakeholder partnership; collaboration; sustainable development; principles; standards; context; governance; relational dynamics; and transformation*.

The initial search returned over 500 results, which were screened for relevance against three inclusion criteria: (1) explicit focus on partnerships or collaborative arrangements linked to sustainable development and related research, policy guidance and practical resources, (2) discussion of collaborative governance, structure, ethics, practice or normative frameworks (standards, principles, codes, guidelines) and (3) contribution to understanding the contextual or relational dimensions of partnership. Sources were mainly excluded if they focused solely on bilateral agreements, short-term project contracts or internal organizational processes without broader implications for sustainable development partnerships. The final selection comprised approximately 115 sources, of which around 45% were peer-reviewed academic articles or scholarly books and some 55% practitioner or policy-oriented outputs, including guidebooks, policy papers and organizational reports.

Although the primary focus was on arrangements developed since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, earlier works from the early 1990s onwards were included to situate current debates within a wider historical context. This facilitated a longitudinal understanding of how ideas about partnership have evolved alongside shifting sustainable development debates, from early calls for voluntary codes of conduct to more recent proposals for partnership meta-governance frameworks.

The purposive nature of the sample means our review is illustrative rather than exhaustive. However, it was designed to capture a diversity of conceptual framings and applied insights that illuminate both the potential and limitations of standardization in complex, context-dependent partnership environments. This approach reflects our broader argument: that meaningful collaboration for sustainable development requires not only technical tools but also contextual awareness, relational insight and normative reflection.

A systematic review methodology, while valuable for narrowly defined research questions, would have excluded many influential practitioner outputs and cross-sector resources that are essential to understanding the applied dimensions of partnership practice. By contrast, purposive sampling allowed us to capture a richer, more representative range of materials across disciplines, sectors and publication types, aligning the review process with our aim of integrating both scholarly research and practitioner insights.

#### 4. Terminology and Standards

The International Standards Organization (ISO) describes a standard as “a document, established by a consensus of subject matter experts and approved by a recognized body that provides guidance on the design, use or performance of materials, products, processes, services, systems or persons” [22]. Standards offer an established framework that assist organizations and their stakeholders to work together through a shared language that results in increased efficiency and trust by verifying compliance with defined requirements. Operating at different levels, standards may encompass international, national and industry-specific norms that cover diverse areas including quality management, environmental impact and social responsibility. It is also important to note that the establishment of a standard requires conformity assessment procedures including inspection, testing and certification to verify product or practice compliance with the standard [23].

The terms ‘standards’, ‘regulations’, ‘rules’, ‘codes’, ‘guidelines’ and ‘principles’ are often used interchangeably. This, coupled with the fact that although many standards are voluntary, they can become regulatory through laws and government enforcement, leads to a lack of clarity regarding their focus, nature and degree of formality. It is therefore difficult to agree on which of these expressions might be most appropriate for sustainable



development partnership arrangements. Table 2 provides definitions for some of the terms that are used interchangeably with ‘standards’ alongside their different levels of formality.

Table 2. Terms and definitions.

Term	Definition	Level of Formality
Principle	A fundamental belief or guiding value that informs decisions, behaviors and relationships.	<div>Informal</div> <div>↑</div> <div>↓</div> <div>Formal</div>
Guidance	Advisory information or recommendations intended to support decision-making or good practice, typically non-binding.	
Guideline	A statement, instruction or recommendation that is intended to assist decision-making or advise on a course of action.	
Norm	A shared expectation or informal rule about appropriate behavior, shaped by social, cultural or professional consensus.	
Code	A systematic collection of principles or rules, often codified to govern conduct within a profession, sector or organization.	
Benchmark	A standard or point of reference against which things may be compared, measured or judged.	
Standard	An agreed benchmark or level of performance used to measure, compare or regulate conduct or outcomes.	
Rule	A clearly defined instruction or directive that prescribes or prohibits specific actions, often within a formal system.	
Regulation	A legally enforceable requirement set by an authority to control or direct specific behaviors, processes or outcomes.	
Protocol	A formal set of rules or procedures that govern conduct and actions in official or structured situations.	
Policy	Authoritative high-level statement(s) guiding decisions, encompassing specific standards and rules.	

The definitions in Table 2 establish important distinctions between the normative and procedural dimensions of formal and informal partnership practice. Such distinctions further correspond to whether working in partnership is mandated by particular policies and institutional arrangements or whether it is a more voluntary or discretionary choice. In both cases, it is important to acknowledge that standards and principles interact with the multiple meanings, structures and processes of partnership. As well as why and by whom partnership is promoted, the application of terms such as ‘norm’, ‘code’ or ‘guidance’ depends significantly on how partnership is understood; whether as a governance mechanism, a collaborative process or a value-based relationship. These varied interpretations underscore the need to move beyond basic definitions to examine how different conceptualizations of partnership shape the development, implementation and contextual relevance of associated standards, guidance and principles.

5. The Historical Context for Partnership Standards

Over the last ten years, the focus of partnership arrangements operating in the field of sustainable development has been linked primarily to the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and achievement of the targets of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [2]. As well as providing an important blueprint for partnership arrangements, the universality of the SDG agenda and its implementation has led to increasing calls for the application of some form of partnership meta-governance [24–26]. Proposals for such meta-governance include general standards and guidelines to assist the building

of collaborative arrangements with respect for international law, integration of the three historical mainstays of sustainable development (economic, environmental and social), the five pillars of people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership outlined in the 2030 Agenda [27], and the promotion of transformation and inclusivity [25,26].

The transformational ambitions of the 2030 Agenda have underlined the need for stronger frameworks for partnership arrangements [28]. Yet the demand for overarching norms in sustainable development partnerships is not new. Earlier attempts to design and implement such norms have consistently faced challenges of legitimacy, compliance and contextual misalignment. To understand these difficulties, it is useful to revisit historical efforts at partnership standard setting, beginning with the Rio Earth Summit in the early 1990s, which positioned partnerships as central to advancing global sustainable development. These initiatives can be broadly grouped into three overlapping phases: (1) legitimizing non-state actors in global governance (1990–2000); (2) strengthening partnership governance and accountability (2000–2015); and (3) developing meta-governance for SDG partnerships (2015 to the present) (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Evolution of partnership standards.

Dates and Focus	Global Framework	Approach	Examples
<b>1990–2000</b> <b>Legitimization of role of non-state actors in global governance</b>	Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 (1992)	Promotion of guidelines, norms, codes and principles for participation of non-state actors, particularly the private sector.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CSR guidelines and individual principles</li> <li>• UN and NGO cooperation standards and guidelines for working with business</li> <li>• Collective business principles and business–NGO certification schemes</li> </ul>
<b>2000–2015</b> <b>Strengthening partnership governance and accountability</b>	Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals (2000) WSSD Type II partnerships (2002)	Emphasis on cross-sector standards and rules for ensuring partnership governance and accountability, often via international accreditation bodies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stronger cross-sector schemes, codes and principles</li> <li>• Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS)</li> <li>• Accountability standards</li> <li>• Partnership principles</li> </ul>
<b>2015 to date</b> <b>Meta-governance for SDG partnerships</b>	Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (2015)	Focus on ensuring and enabling with the use of both formal and informal norms to support multi-stakeholder partnerships working towards achievement of SDG goals and targets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adhesion to global frameworks</li> <li>• Partnership standards and principles</li> <li>• Practitioner support and guidelines</li> </ul>

### 5.1. Legitimization of Non-State Actors in Global Governance (1990–2000)

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro (Rio Earth Summit) in 1992 called for “new levels of cooperation among states, key sectors of societies and people” to support “the global environmental and developmental system” [29] p. 1. The Summit’s action plan, Agenda 21, further sought to promote collaborative action at global, national and local levels in order to achieve global sustainable development by 2000 [30]. The ensuing plethora of initiatives between different social actors led to requests for collective standards and guidance on how non-governmental organizations, businesses and governments should work together in practice. While varied in their nature and levels of formality, the “highly visible principles, standards, and codes” [31] p. 90 that emerged from the early 1990s into the first decade of the millennium



shared a common aim of seeking to clarify the goals and boundaries of multi-stakeholder relationships for partners, wider stakeholders and the public [32].

Many early calls for partnership standards reflected concerns about the involvement of the private sector, chiefly large multi-national companies, in collaborative arrangements. In response to fears that corporate participation in partnership arrangements could be used to avoid negative publicity [33], circumvent state regulations [34] and allow business to influence the decision-making processes of governments and international organizations [35,36], demands were made for adherence to norms that would protect the public interest and ensure genuine stakeholder participation [37].

At the same time and coinciding with the widespread development of corporate social responsibility programs, a number of private sector partners signed up to business-centered accountability norms, particularly for collaboration with NGOs [38]. These included guidelines and principles espoused by individual companies on the values that they would sign up to as corporate citizens. The Body Shop, for example, had from the mid-1980s “publicly professed values of environmental care, concern for human rights and opposition to animal exploitation” and a decade later, its *Values Report 1995* was ranked first in a SustainAbility/UNEP benchmarking survey of company environmental reporting [39] p. 238. Another notable case was Shell, which in 1997 revised its General Business Principles “to better accommodate emerging concepts of sustainable development and human rights and to provide narrative examples” of how the company was changing in response to major environmental and community relations controversies [39] p. 239. Meanwhile, collective business principles and codes such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) [40], which was launched in 1997, set out canons for promoting transparency in sustainably reporting with the first version of what was then known as the GRI Guidelines (G1) published in 2000. In the same year, the United Nations (UN) Global Compact [41] introduced ten principles for business in the fields of human rights, labor, environment and anti-corruption.

In response to concerns about the credibility and effectiveness of the codes and standards that were being developed, cross-sector initiatives such as the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) [42] and the Fair Labor Association [43] sought to firm up the implementation of codes of labor practice and promote fair working conditions. Market-based certification schemes, including Fairtrade [44], Rainforest Alliance [45] and Forest Stewardship Council [46], were also developed to measure and improve environmental, social and economic aspects of organizational performance. In parallel, and often in response to anxieties about collaboration with the private sector, both public and non-profit organizations began to develop their own guidelines for partnering with business [47–49].

## 5.2. Strengthening Partnership Governance and Accountability (2000–2015)

The start of the twenty-first century has been described as a turning point in cooperation between governments, intergovernmental bodies and non-state actors working together [50,51]. Noting the importance of the Millennium Declaration [52], Jane Nelson observed that increasing global interdependence demonstrated the need for multi-stakeholder approaches to support good governance, fair and efficient markets and civic engagement [51]. This focus was endorsed by the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) [53] approved by world governments, one of which, MDG8, called for ‘A Global Partnership for Development’ with targets for creating a fairer trading and economic system, and enhanced cooperation with the private sector. Two years later, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, emphasis was placed on the positive role that business could play in supporting sustainable development. Here, alongside Type I partnerships involving legally binding commitments to sustainable development goals

by governments, Type II partnerships involving public, private and civil society actors working together in a voluntary manner to address specific goals were proposed [54].

As well as heightened efforts to make business a more legitimate and committed development partner [55], attention now centered upon improving the governance and accountability of arrangements that integrated different constellations of partners through standards promoted by international bodies, including the UN [11,25,26]. From 2001, repeated UN resolutions on global partnerships called for multi-stakeholder partnerships to adhere to international standards and the core values and principles of the United Nations while demonstrating consistency with national laws, development strategies and plans [56]. Insisting on the importance of not “imposing undue rigidity in partnership agreements”, the first UN resolution emphasized the importance of transparency, mutual benefit, mutual respect and accountability [56] p. 2. At the same time, joint codes for partnerships working in different thematic areas that complied with universal treaties and norms in fields such as human rights, humanitarian relief and aid effectiveness were developed. The Global Humanitarian Forum’s principles [57] or the Voluntary Principles Initiative [58] are examples of this.

Both the GRI and the Global Compact were strengthened during this period. Following publications of the first GRI Guidelines (G1) in 2000, the GRI was established in 2001 as an independent, non-profit institution. New versions of its guidelines were released in 2002 (G2), 2006 (G3) and 2013 (G4) [59]. Meanwhile, the Global Compact’s work to enhance corporate responsibility saw the development of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) as a framework for assessing business impact [60].

This period also witnessed further adhesion to collective Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) that sought to minimize the negative impact of business processes and products. Working within specific economic sectors and groups, a variety of environmental and social factors were proposed for collaborative arrangements, including, more recently, those that support the SDGs [61,62]. Relying substantially on stakeholder input for their legitimacy [63], these schemes increasingly worked in a cross-sector manner to provide shared benchmarks for diverse actors to coordinate their sustainability efforts via third-party assessment and labeling systems. Other instruments prioritizing the importance of partnership accountability and sustainability management included AccountAbility’s AA1000 standards for businesses, governments and other organizations [64]. These standards have undergone various iterations and incorporate principles that assist the navigation of sustainability challenges in order to improve long-term performance [65].

At the intergovernmental level, meanwhile, the 2014 European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP) was approved as a delegated regulatory act for recipients of grants from European Structural and Investment Funds [66]. The ECCP stipulates the need for representativeness of partners; transparency of information and documentation; the ongoing involvement of partners throughout partnership program cycles; capacity building for partners with financial or human resource constraints; participatory monitoring and evaluation; and the sharing of lessons learned.

Towards the end of this period, increased attention to partnership governance, some of it in response to evaluations of WSSD Type II partnership arrangements, was manifested in calls for clear goal setting; careful partner selection; clarity around roles and responsibilities; attention to process management; adequate resources; and monitoring and reporting processes [11,26]. These demands reinforced the idea that partners themselves should sign up to ground rules or principles for working together. Building upon Ros Tennyson’s [67] tenets of equity, transparency and mutual benefit, the Partnership Brokers Association [68], for example, stressed the importance of a principled form of partnering based on the valuing of diversity, equity, openness, mutual benefit and courage [69].

These ethical principles, which will be discussed in more detail later in this article, may be linked directly to an understanding of partnership as a relational connection that depends upon shared values. Such a view implies that, beyond standards and regulatory norms, multi-stakeholder collaboration may support a vision of sustainable development that is based upon individual and collective ideals that seek interconnected social, economic and environmental well-being.

### *5.3. Meta-Governance for SDG Partnerships (2015 to Date)*

Luc Fransen and Ans Kolk note that “the development of multi-stakeholder standards is very dynamic, subject to rapid changes, with newly emerging issues and events feeding into the process” [70] p. 680. This swiftly changing panorama is manifested clearly in relation to the goals and targets outlined in the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the heightened expectations of the partnership arrangements required to support them.

Partnership arrangements have been promoted as essential for the achievement of the United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (Transforming Our World) and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [2]. The Agenda calls for a “collective journey” that embraces “bold and transformative steps” to create a more resilient and sustainable world (ibid, p. 1). To support the transformational ambition of the 2030 Agenda, the final goal, SDG 17, proposes a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development between countries alongside multi-stakeholder partnerships that “mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources to support the implementation of the SDGs” (ibid, p. 27). In response to this call, a vast range of MSP arrangements have been developed to address the targets of the different SDGs in diverse locations and among a variety of partners [71]. Disquiet about the quality and impact of these initiatives has created growing pressure for assurances that collaborative or multi-level governance approaches and avenues for active stakeholder involvement that support the SDGs are accountable, transparent and legitimate [72].

Against this background, as well as attention to broader and more diverse partnership arrangements, including those that do not involve the private sector [73], there have been changes in the kind of standards promoted for more complex collaborative relationships with business [74,75]. The International Organization for Standardization’s, ISO 44,001 ‘Collaborative Business Relationship Management Systems’, for example, aims to facilitate collaborative business relationships within and between organizations via a life-cycle-based structured approach combining formal management systems with behavioral aspects [76].

Some have argued that Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) can play an important role as “enforcement mechanisms” for the achievement of specific SDG targets [77] p. 95. The United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) has, for instance, suggested that VSS may be developed “by individual businesses, business associations, environmental or social non-governmental organizations or governments, or through multistakeholder initiatives that attempt to balance the interests of a range of interested parties and stakeholders” [62] p. 4. However, as well as an absence of the necessary design elements to handle the complex and often unbalanced nature of multi-stakeholder arrangements, there is acknowledgement that VSS may lack credibility, effectiveness and coordination across SDG themes and goals [77]. In this regard, and in line with the focus of the UN 2030 Agenda, a key question is how far MSP arrangements supporting the SDGs are “effective, inclusive, and transformative” [13] p. 5.

In order to better address the quality of sustainable development partnerships involving multiple and diverse partners, meta-governance has been put forward to provide “all the overarching rules intended to guide, accompany and evaluate [the] governance work

of partnerships” [24] p. 9, see also [13,25,26]. Rather than individual organizations and partners developing and signing up to different partnership standards, meta-governance includes collective norms that provide “boundary conditions and rules that both support and monitor partnerships” [13] p. 7.

Proposals for partnership meta-governance focus on both the quality of governance (accountability) and the quality of stakeholder engagement (inclusion) at multiple levels [13]. These two strands are captured in a call for “higher-level rules” [3] p. 8 that include principles and norms, as well as institutions, that might guide, steer and coordinate “the partnership system” [28] p. 4 and support local-level ownership [12,13]. Here, there has been debate around whether this should be a role for governments under the auspices of the UN or a coalition of governments and other stakeholders [26,28]. Meanwhile, tailor-made approaches with non-governmental and civil society organizations, collaborative networks, communities of practice and social movements have also been mooted as options for holding governments to account for delivery on the SDGs [72,78].

Beisheim and Simon [3,25,26] note that partnership meta-governance embraces elements that both ensure and enable. Ensuring meta-governance implies systematic oversight of partnership arrangements so that they are formalized and accountable with “binding rules of conduct” [25] p. 500, a strong partnership registration system such as UN DESA’s SDG Actions Platform, ref [71], and regular reporting processes [25,26]. Enabling meta-governance, meanwhile, is about supporting and encouraging partnership arrangements through knowledge sharing, capacity building and access to different resources, including funding and networks. These two approaches may be described as one that “steers” and one that “facilitates” partnership initiatives [17] p. 180.

Despite a dual focus on ensuring and enabling meta-governance, we believe that an emphasis on ensuring aspects such as legally binding rules, regulations and stringent monitoring conditions, particularly by government actors, may limit attention to enabling and supporting diverse forms and understandings of partnership [17]. This concern may be further linked to the importance of more deeply acknowledging contextual and relational issues, and how partnership meta-governance frameworks might accommodate *different* collaborative pathways in diverse operational settings [1,17,79].

The variety of standards, guidelines, codes and principles that have been put forward for sustainable development partnership arrangements since the 1990s demonstrates some of the tensions inherent in seeking to apply universal standards to different understandings of partnership in diverse situations and against a shifting global context. Our historical overview also shows that as multi-stakeholder partnership arrangements have gained experience and momentum, there has been a move away from sector-specific standards, particularly for relationships with business, to systems and procedures for ensuring the governance and accountability of partnership arrangements involving multiple partners, some of which do not involve the private sector. This has been accompanied by greater attention to how partners are guided and supported to work together effectively to meet their goals, the importance of taking different operational contexts into consideration and ensuring local ownership.

Throughout this evolution, a major concern has been the voluntary nature of adhesion to partnership standards, rules and principles, and the absence of adequate mechanisms for ensuring compliance [70,80,81]. Enforcing partnership standards is complicated by the lack of a common yardstick, as the criteria used to assess partner performance are diverse and context-dependent. Furthermore, while the threat of sanctions may be useful in ensuring compliance, it may also stifle the risk-taking needed to address problems in an innovative manner [82]. According to Julia Steets [82], efforts may thus be better placed in defining clear partnership goals and targets as well as incentivizing and monitoring to promote

improvement. The importance of awareness-raising, transparent communication and the establishment of ongoing partnership review systems has also been noted [83]. Within such approaches, special emphasis is placed upon “arguing, learning and persuasion” while encouraging a “degree of internalization” within the organizations and individuals involved [84] p. 7.

Our historical overview of partnership standards reveals a predominantly instrumental understanding of partnership as a vehicle for achieving sustainability goals and as a means to an end (see Table 1). However, we believe that the emergence of supportive partnership approaches reinforces the importance of co-creation and learning, and consideration of the process and relational connections that inform this way of working. In our view, omission of these more intrinsic collaborative linkages, which are cemented by the individuals who represent partners and manage and develop partnering relationships, restricts opportunities to fully explore the kind of support that is required to augment the transformational potential of different forms of partnership. We argue that “personal and organizational relationships are integrally related to the wider geographic, sociohistoric, cultural political and institutional settings in which [partnership arrangements] operate, and that there will be a complex and changing interplay between these different contextual layers throughout the lifetime of a partnership or other form of collaboration” [1] p. 89. These connections and the use of partnership principles to enable them are outlined in the next section.

## 6. Beyond Standards: A Principles-Based Partnership Approach

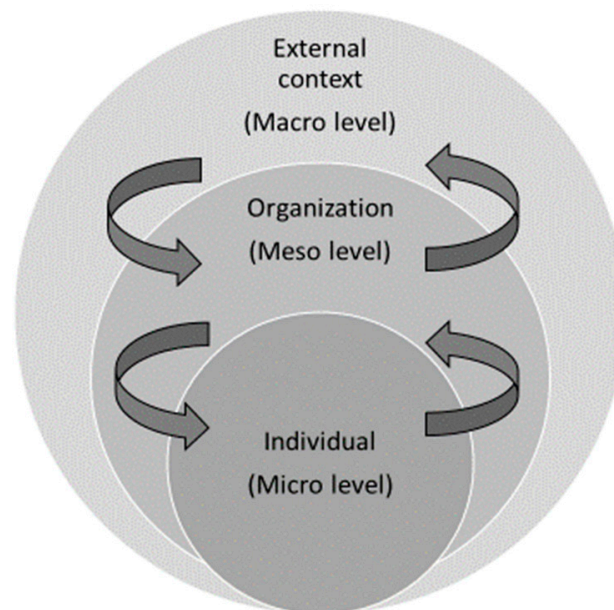
We contend that the centrality of people and interpersonal relationships in partnership arrangements demands greater attention to the enabling focus of the partnership meta-governance outlined by Beisheim and Simon [3,25,26]. While partnership meta-governance incorporates technocratic or instrumental elements that ensure adherence to clearly defined norms and measurable outputs, including standards, we suggest that its enabling facet may be strengthened through greater acknowledgement and support for the relational connections between individuals that represent partner organizations. This incorporates the cultivation of trust, mutual recognition and spaces for iterative dialogue among partners to co-develop and refine shared sustainability goals and expected outcomes [1,17].

Both the instrumental and relational components of partnership are intimately related to the operational contexts in which partnership arrangements are built and maintained. In previous work [1,17], we have suggested that partnership context may be understood in relation to three interconnected levels: the external, macro or societal and setting in which a partnership arrangement operates; the organizational or meso context of different partners, including organizational norms and cultures; and the individual or micro level context in which those representing partner organizations relate to one another, which are influenced by personal characters, beliefs and behaviors (see Figure 1).

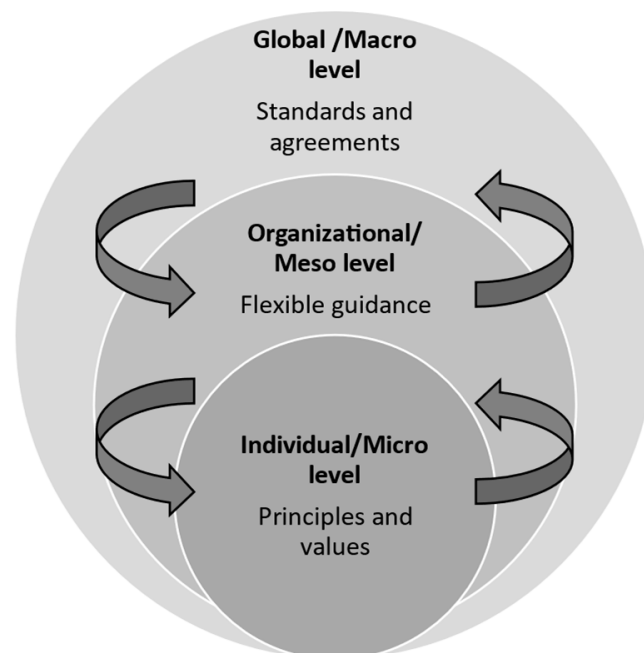
Based on this understanding and noting that these contextual layers are dynamic and mutually reinforcing, we propose a principles-based partnership approach to enable and nurture meaningful MSP arrangements. The approach is based on the premise that robust partnership processes and results are more likely to emerge when attention is paid to the contextual grounding of global drivers through appropriate standards and agreements; to organizational relationships that are cultivated with flexible support and guidance; and, crucially, to interpersonal connections that are reinforced through co-created principles and attention to values (see Figure 2). In this approach, personal relationships and dynamics, and the values and principles espoused at this micro level, are viewed as having the potential to create shifts in individual and organizational behaviors and



enhance possibilities for achieving the systemic change at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and beyond [1].



**Figure 1.** Contextual interactions that impact partnership arrangements. Source: Stott & Murphy [1].



**Figure 2.** Partnership principles in context. Source: Adapted from Stott & Murphy [1].

Frameworks that enable inner-, group- and governance-level applications of normative aims are not new to contemporary development contexts such as the SDG Agenda. In examining the social theory of the Victorian educator and reformist, Charlotte Mason (1842–1923), Joanna Stanberry [85] notes that the distilling of Mason’s 20 educational principles into the motto, ‘I am, I can, I ought, I will,’ embraces a sense of personal identity and values, capability, moral responsibility and the will to act that provides an inner, ethical architecture that can animate and sustain commitment to initiatives that promote the public good. The Partnership Brokers Association positions principles shared by the



individual intermediaries who shape and support partnership arrangements as having a direct impact on partnership outcomes [68,69]. These examples demonstrate how a principles-based approach that is co-developed and internalized can ground universal norms within the individual conscience, making them actionable across organizational and governance levels.

In our approach, at the macro or global level, overarching frameworks such as the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [2], the Paris Climate Agreement [86] and the Addis Ababa Agenda on Financing for Development [87] provide common goals that can inspire and legitimize partnership arrangements. These global accords often set the normative direction for partnership-based collaboration while also encouraging alignment across sectors and geographies. However, translating such universal agendas into meaningful practice requires adaptation to specific settings. Our approach responds to this challenge by advocating for guidance that can be locally interpreted and co-developed at the organizational (meso) and interpersonal (micro) levels.

At the meso level, organizations are encouraged to tailor global principles in ways that reflect their sectoral priorities, institutional cultures and geographic realities. Practitioner-developed tools and guidance frameworks can support this adaptation process, offering flexible templates for aligning values, responsibilities and procedures; see, for example, [20,67,88–95]. Beisheim and Simon [25] also note that many principles and guidelines exist for multi-stakeholder partnerships working with the United Nations system, including the UN Secretary General’s Guidelines on a Principle-based Approach to the Cooperation between the United Nations and the Business Sector [96].

At the micro level, the success of partnership arrangements ultimately depends on the individuals who represent and animate them. As well as a deep understanding of the external and organizational contexts in which a partnership operates, this level requires attention to trust building, ethical conduct and relational accountability. Endorsing shared values and ethical principles such as humility, reciprocity and care can help to strengthen interpersonal commitments and, in turn, build resilient organizational connections capable of delivering on partnership ambitions and positively influencing the broader external context.

A variety of different principles have been put forward for partnerships, including several specifically developed for multi-stakeholder arrangements that support the SDGs; see, for example, [94,97,98]. Many of these principles have been developed by practitioners and ‘tested’ in action. *The Partnering Toolkit*, for example, highlights the importance of equity and respect for the added value each partner brings to the relationship; transparency because it encourages trusting relationships and a willingness to innovate and take risks; and mutual benefit, which promotes engagement and commitment over time [67]. These principles have been extended by the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA), to include diversity, whereby partners come together to address problems that they are unable to solve by themselves with acknowledgement that their diverse strengths, experiences and approaches can complement one another; and courage, which inspires partners to confront rather than evade difficult challenges and to experiment with new ways of doing things [69].

In reviewing the PBA’s approach to partnership principles, Julie Mundy [69] explores the development and application of UNICEF’s 11 guiding principles for working with civil society organizations. Developed internally, these principles embrace a mutual focus on delivering results for women and children, especially the most disadvantaged; commitment to the core values of the Convention on the rights of the child; equity, integrity and independence of partners among all partners; cost-effectiveness of the partnership; and, crucially, contextually appropriate forms of cooperation. Mundy also looks at the principles of the Australian Government’s Business Partnerships Platform, which were developed by

partners with the assistance of a partnership broker. They include a shared long-term goal, respect for diversity, openness and trust and willingness to adapt and change.

Nigel Ball and Michael Gibson [99] offer further practical insights from Oxford University's Government Outcomes Lab, which advocates principles for relational contracting—an approach that places trust, collaboration and shared values as central to public service delivery. Unlike traditional transactional contracts focused on risk avoidance and compliance, relational contracting supports adaptability and co-production, especially in complex and changing contexts. A review of principles, strategies, outcomes and impacts of research partnerships [100] revealed the top three most frequently identified overarching principles as follows: (1) relationship building based on trust, credibility, respect, dignity and transparency; (2) ongoing knowledge co-production and meaningful stakeholder engagement and (3) flexibility and creativity in collaborative methods and activities.

Gerard George et al. [101] identify a set of core design principles critical to the success of public–private collaborations (PPCs) addressing grand challenges that are characterized by complexity, uncertainty, divergent stakeholder interests and long-term impact. Rather than prescribing universal models, the authors advocate flexible, iterative and context-sensitive approaches to partnership design. Key partnering principles include the following: (1) clear division of labor based on comparative advantage and emergent learning; (2) robust mechanisms for the coordination and integration of effort across diverse actors; (3) trust building through a balance of formal contracts and relational governance; and (4) inclusive and adaptive governance that can respond to institutional voids or weaknesses. These principles are intended to resolve persistent managerial problems such as valuation, communication, coordination, access and institutional legitimacy by aligning public purpose with private capabilities. In this context, partnerships are positioned not as static structures but as evolving systems that require continual negotiation of roles, responsibilities and values to sustain collaborative action for complex societal outcomes. The Zero Carbon Cumbria Partnership (ZCCP) in North West England offers a practical example of such flexible, context-sensitive design [102]. Its governance framework is deliberately inclusive, with multiple entry points for potential partners ranging from small community groups and micro-businesses to large public institutions. By differentiating between Supporter, Pledge and Strategic partners, the ZCCP reflects the varied capacities, resources and influence of participating organizations while maintaining a shared commitment to net-zero goals. In this way, the partnership positions itself not as a static structure but as an evolving system that continually negotiates roles, responsibilities and values to sustain collaborative action for complex societal outcomes.

The dynamic nature of partnership is well encapsulated in the seven principles for effective MSPs put forward by Herman Brouwer et al. [97], which include calls to (1) embrace systemic change in all its complexity; (2) transform institutions and the 'rules of the game'; (3) work with power in order to address power differences and abuses that stand in the way of change; (4) deal with and address conflict; (5) communicate effectively in an open, respectful, honest, empathetic and critical way; (6) promote collaborative leadership so that responsibilities are shared; and (7) foster participatory learning so that different stakeholders learn together from their collective experience. The principles proposed by Brouwer et al. [97] helpfully reinforce the transformational focus of the UN's 2030 Agenda. This emphasis is endorsed by the principles of the Alianza Shire, a Spanish humanitarian partnership established in 2014 to provide access to energy in refugee camps and host communities in the Shire region of northern Ethiopia [103]. With a focus on supporting successful achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDG7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and SDG17 (Partnership for the Goals), as well as positioning the importance of prototyping

and providing grounded solutions, the Alianza Shire's principles specifically include a transformational mindset that recognizes the added value of co-creation.

In order to further situate the contextual and relational elements central to systems change, partnership principles may be further complemented by those recently put forward for transforming the global economic system. Mariana Mazzucatto's four principles for an inclusive and sustainable global economy [104], for example, emphasize the importance of reinforcing climate and development goals by embedding and aligning them at policy level; driving transformation by combining resources; working across all levels of government, capacity building civil services and building "symbiotic public-private partnerships that share both risks and rewards"; and "forging inclusive and fair coalitions" that strengthen multilateralism (p. 2). In a more reflective vein, the "ten ecological, social, political economy and holistic principles" put forward by Jasper O. Kenter et al. [105] "for transforming economics in a time of global crises" call for the following: (1) social-ecological embeddedness and holistic well-being; (2) interdisciplinarity and complexity thinking; (3) limits to growth; (4) limited substitutability of natural capital; (5) regenerative design; (6) holistic perspectives of people and values; (7) equity, equality and justice; (8) relationality and social enfranchisement; (9) participation, deliberation and cooperation; and (10) post-capitalism and decolonization. Both these sets of principles provide a helpful overarching context for discussion and debate around appropriate collaborative principles that might support sustainability transformations in diverse settings.

We have attempted to group together some of the core relational elements from the different sets of principles outlined above into seven broad categories. These are as follows:

- **Connectedness:** The promotion of linkages across different disciplines, sectors, levels of operation, sustainable development pillars and themes by adopting a systems perspective that incorporates these interconnections.
- **Engagement:** The active involvement of all partners in different phases and processes of partnering as well as those stakeholders who influence or may be influenced by a partnership arrangement.
- **Fairness:** Ensuring that no partner dominates, that all contributions are valued equitably and that all partners gain something positive from the relationship.
- **Respect:** Acceptance of difference and reinforcement of the importance of embracing diverse viewpoints.
- **Transparency:** Openness and clarity around how partners work together.
- **Bravery:** The courage to seek meaningful change by inquiring, testing, learning and sharing from different partnership experiences.
- **Transformation:** Dedication to the idea of consolidating both partnership results and processes so that they promote change as they become embedded within partner organizations and institutional and policy frameworks.

Endorsing the idea that principles developed at global level can only be made relevant at local level if they are contextualized [84] and that individual action can reinforce global norms, Table 4 offers a menu of possible principles for debate and discussion by partner representatives with a view to agreeing on those most relevant for their specific partnership arrangements.

As well as assessing suitability for new partnership arrangements, the information in Table 4 is designed to promote conversation regarding the most appropriate terminology for selected principles and whether the manner in which they are expressed may need to be adjusted in response to different contextual circumstances. In addition to new partnership initiatives, those that have already adopted principles may use Table 4 to monitor, debate and reflect on the usefulness of existing principles. Partners may discuss, for example, whether other principles may be more pertinent, whether those selected are still fit for

purpose and whether changes need to be made in order to adapt to changing circumstances related to different contextual levels.

**Table 4.** Categories of essential partnership principles.

<b>Connectedness</b> Adoption of a systems perspective that promotes multi-level linkages.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interdisciplinarity</li> <li>• Systems focus</li> <li>• Joined-up approaches</li> <li>• Synergy</li> <li>• Integration</li> <li>• Interaction</li> <li>• Holistic perspective</li> <li>• Embracing of complexity</li> </ul>
<b>Engagement</b> Active and continuous involvement of partners and relevant stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusion</li> <li>• Participation</li> <li>• Deliberation</li> <li>• Cooperation</li> <li>• Active involvement</li> <li>• Continuous/ongoing involvement</li> <li>• Co-creation</li> <li>• Co-ownership</li> <li>• Co-responsibility</li> <li>• Collaborative leadership</li> <li>• Horizontal decision-making</li> <li>• Capacity building</li> </ul>
<b>Fairness</b> Attention to power dynamics with equitable valuation of all partner contributions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equity</li> <li>• Equality</li> <li>• Working with power</li> <li>• Representativeness</li> <li>• Complementarity</li> <li>• Mutual benefit</li> <li>• Reciprocity</li> <li>• Balance</li> <li>• Justice</li> <li>• Sharing risk and rewards</li> </ul>
<b>Respect</b> Embracing of diversity and tolerance for different viewpoints.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity</li> <li>• Tolerance</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Compassion</li> <li>• Understanding</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> <li>• Dignity</li> </ul>
<b>Transparency</b> Openness in partnership procedures, processes and relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Openness</li> <li>• Credibility</li> <li>• Honesty</li> <li>• Reliability</li> <li>• Integrity</li> <li>• Trustworthiness</li> <li>• Commitment</li> <li>• Responsiveness</li> </ul>
<b>Bravery</b> Willingness to challenge, test and experiment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambition</li> <li>• Courage</li> <li>• Creativity</li> <li>• Innovation</li> <li>• Meaningful exchange</li> <li>• Experimentation/testing</li> <li>• Learning from ‘failure’</li> </ul>
<b>Transformation</b> Dedication to ensuring meaningful and lasting change at different levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internalization</li> <li>• Mainstreaming</li> <li>• Institutionalization</li> <li>• Embedding</li> <li>• Learning/knowledge sharing</li> <li>• Scaling</li> <li>• Changing systems and rules of game</li> </ul>

The proposal for a discussion process on principles raises questions about how and when conversations should be facilitated and who should lead this process. While co-creation among all partners is emphasized for this, the importance of an intermediary individual, team or organization able to facilitate conversations among different actors is presented by the Partnership Brokers Association [69,90]. This role may be assumed by an internal broker operating from within a partnership arrangement, or an independent external broker contracted on its behalf [90].

Highlighting the importance of “principled partnering” [90] p. 6, Mundy and Tennyson outline the role that partnership brokers can play in guiding partners through early conversations about the principles required for particular partnership arrangements and embedding them in practice. Mundy [69] further argues that a partnership broker can help to make principles part of the DNA of a partnership arrangement by sharing examples of what they might mean in practice and discussing partner expectations in relation to them. This may involve offering and ‘holding’ safe spaces for partners to deal with dilemmas and differences in how principles are understood and practiced, and the generation of new ideas and solutions to challenges.

In order to adapt and sustain the application of partnering principles over time, the need for review and reflection by partners on how a partnership arrangement is working and whether it is providing added value for partners, target groups and wider society is recommended [17,90]. In addition to regular ‘health checks’, more structured options such as learning case studies are proposed as ways of affording opportunities for such reflection. These options are endorsed by the Alianza Shire where, with support from an academic organization acting as a partnership broker, members have integrated findings from health checks in feedback loops to assist the consolidation of internal learning and reinforce the transformational character of the collaboration [103].

The PBA’s approach implies that, rather than the prescriptive and top-down application of universal principles, partners need to spend time co-creating principles that can ground and orientate their work in particular contexts. This, as noted above, requires humility, reflexivity and dialogic exploration. By deliberating in this way, partners can also contribute to more adaptive, responsive and learning-oriented forms of collaborative governance and to a ‘transcontextual’ understanding of partnership in which, as Nora Bateson [14] notes, multiple overlapping and interacting contexts can co-produce meaning and action. As we observed in 2020, this will involve inquiry and dialogue around individual values, motivations and dynamics and how they shape the development, influence and impact of diverse collaborative arrangements [1]. The emphasis on co-creation, critical reflection and iterative learning in the development of partnership principles may also heighten their operational relevance and encourage their internalization in practice.

## 7. Conclusions

While MSP arrangements are crucial to sustainable development, we believe that rigid universal standards are ill-suited to their context- and relational-dependent nature. In this article we have sought to demonstrate how context and the interaction between multiple situational levels, including the interpersonal, profoundly shape how partnership is understood, formed and implemented. We have further noted that terminology matters and that expressions such as standards, norms, codes, principles and guidance will carry different implications and levels of formality in different environments.

By reflecting on historical efforts to establish partnership norms and standards—from Rio 1992 to more recent SDG-era meta-governance initiatives—we have highlighted both their ambitions and limitations. These include challenges of legitimacy, compliance and contextual misalignment. Our analysis shows that any call for partnership standards must

grapple with enduring tensions between universal frameworks and the need for situated, adaptive and relational approaches.

Our proposal is for a flexible principle-based approach that supports the enabling dimension of partnership meta-governance by linking interpersonal and institutional dynamics. Central to such an approach are clusters of shared partnership principles and values that are co-created, prioritized and tailored in relation to specific partnership contexts.

We are aware that our approach is not without its limitations. As a conceptual contribution, this article does not offer empirical findings derived from fieldwork or partnership case studies and therefore its conclusions must be understood as exploratory and indicative rather than definitive. Our analysis is also based on a purposive selection of the literature and practitioner sources, and while we have sought to draw from diverse disciplinary and geographical sources, we recognize that the framework we propose requires application in practice. In this sense, the article offers an initial foundation that can be refined and tested empirically by partnership practitioners.

The principles-based framework we propose emerges from our own longstanding engagement with sustainable development and partnership practice, and is shaped by a normative commitment to relationality, inclusiveness and contextual sensitivity. We recognize that our position as practitioner-academics with wide experience of international development may influence both the interpretive lens we bring to partnership dynamics and the types of knowledge we highlight. Further empirical research, especially grounded in localized partnership settings, will be critical to testing and refining the ideas presented here, particularly in relation to how principles are co-created, contested and internalized across diverse organizational, sectoral and cultural boundaries in different settings.

The new Pact for the Future asserts that, “intergenerational solidarity, as well as intergenerational dialogue, and social cohesion is an indispensable part of the foundation for the prosperity of future generations” [6] p. 53. It is our strong conviction that the collective action needed for this rests ultimately upon concerted efforts to enhance the quality of the contextual and relational connections encompassed within partnership. We hope that this conceptual article contributes to deeper reflection on what is needed to support meaningful sustainable development partnership arrangements that go beyond the achievement of the SDG targets. This includes further engagement with the literature on partnership norms, broader experimentation with enabling meta-governance mechanisms and practical applications of our approach such as the co-creation of partnership principles.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, L.S. and D.F.M.; context and methodology, D.F.M.; formal analysis, L.S. and D.F.M.; resources, L.S. and D.F.M.; visualization, L.S.; writing—original draft preparation, L.S.; writing—review and editing, D.F.M. and L.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to thank the Innovation and Technology for Development Centre, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Atelier itd and the Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS), Institute of Business, Industry and Leadership, University of Cumbria, for encouraging their work.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.



## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ECCP	European Code of Conduct on Partnership
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
MSP	Multi-stakeholder partnership
PBA	Partnership Brokers Association
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
UNFSS	United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards
VSS	Voluntary Sustainability Standard(s)

## References

1. Stott, L.; Murphy, D.F. An inclusive approach to partnerships for the SDGs: Using a relationship lens to explore the potential for transformational collaboration. Special Issue: Partnerships for the SDGs. *Sustainability* **2020**, *12*, 7905. [CrossRef]
2. United Nations. *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*; Resolution 70/1 Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 2015. Available online: [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_70\\_1\\_E.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
3. Beisheim, M.; Simon, N. *Meta-Governance of Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Perspectives on How the UN Could Improve Partnerships' Governance Services in Areas of Limited Statehood*; SFB-Governance Working Paper Series, 68; Collaborative Research Center (SFB): Berlin, Germany, 2015. Available online: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ss0ar-449883> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
4. Sondermann, E.; Ulbert, C. Transformation through 'meaningful' partnership? SDG 17 as metagovernance norm and its global health implementation. *Politics Gov.* **2021**, *9*, 152–163. [CrossRef]
5. Poncelet, E.C. "A kiss here and a kiss there": Conflict and collaboration in environmental partnerships. *Environ. Manag.* **2001**, *27*, 13–25. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
6. Murphy, D.F.; Stott, L. Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 658. [CrossRef]
7. United Nations. *Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations*; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 2024. Available online: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/soft-pact\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_adopted.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/soft-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
8. Desai, B.H. Pact for the Future and Future of the Planet: A Stocktaking. *Environ. Policy Law* **2025**, *54*, 298–305. [CrossRef]
9. Dixon-Woods, M. The problem of context in quality improvement. In *Perspectives on Context*; Health Foundation, Ed.; Health Foundation: London, UK, 2014. Available online: [https://www.health.org.uk/sites/default/files/PerspectivesOnContext\\_fullversion.pdf](https://www.health.org.uk/sites/default/files/PerspectivesOnContext_fullversion.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
10. Bateson, N. *Combining*; Triarchy Press: Axminster, UK, 2023.
11. Pattberg, P.; Widerberg, O. Transnational multistakeholder partnerships for sustainable development: Conditions for success. *Ambio* **2016**, *45*, 42–51. [CrossRef]
12. Beisheim, M.; Ellersiek, A.; Goltermann, L.; Kiamba, P. Meta-Governance of Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Actors' Perspectives from Kenya. *Public Adm. Dev.* **2017**, *38*, 105–119. [CrossRef]
13. Ellersiek, A. *Donors and Funders' Meta-Governance of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships*; SWP Working Paper, 02; Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP): Berlin, Germany, 2018. Available online: [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/Ellersiek\\_FG08\\_Working\\_Paper\\_2018\\_01.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/Ellersiek_FG08_Working_Paper_2018_01.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
14. Bateson, G. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*; Jason Aronson Inc.: London, UK, 1987.
15. Bateson, N. *Small Arcs of Large Circles: Framing Through Other Patterns*; Triarchy Press: Axminster, UK, 2016.
16. Lubell, M. Collaborative partnerships in complex institutional systems. *Curr. Opin. Environ. Sustain.* **2015**, *12*, 41–47. [CrossRef]
17. Stott, L. *Partnership and Transformation: The Promise of Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration in Context*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA; Taylor and Francis: New York, NY, USA, 2023. [CrossRef]
18. Stott, L.; Scoppetta, A. Changing the focus: Towards a new evidence base for SDG 17. In *The Elgar Companion to Data and Indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals, Elgar Companions to the Sustainable Development Goals Series*; Umbach, G., Tkalec, I., Eds.; Edward Elgar Publishing: Cheltenham, UK, 2025; in press.
19. van Norren, D.; Beehner, C. Sustainability leadership, UNESCO competencies for SDGs, and diverse leadership models. *Int. J. Dev. Sustain.* **2021**, *10*, 24–49. Available online: <https://isdsnet.com/ijds-v10n1-03.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).

20. Brouwer, H.; Woodhill, J.; Hemmati, M.; Verhoosel, K.; van Vugt, S. *The MSP Guide, How to Design and Facilitate Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships*, 3rd ed.; Wageningen University and Research, WCDI: Wageningen, The Netherlands; Practical Action Publishing: Rugby, UK, 2019. Available online: <https://edepot.wur.nl/543151> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
21. Jacklin-Jarvis, C. Collaborating across sector boundaries: A story of tensions and dilemmas. *Volunt. Sect. Rev.* **2015**, *6*, 285–302. [CrossRef]
22. The International Standards Organization (ISO). Consumers and Standards: Partnership for a Better World. Available online: [https://www.iso.org/sites/ConsumersStandards/1\\_standards.html#section1\\_1](https://www.iso.org/sites/ConsumersStandards/1_standards.html#section1_1) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
23. Glavič, P. Feature Papers to Celebrate the Inaugural Issue of Standards. *Standards* **2023**, *3*, 133–135. [CrossRef]
24. Ellersiek, A.; Beisheim, M. *Partnerships for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Transformative, Inclusive and Accountable?* SWP Research Paper 14/2017; Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP): Berlin, Germany, 2017. Available online: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssaoar-55740-7> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
25. Beisheim, M.; Simon, N. Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for Implementing the 2030 Agenda: Improving accountability and transparency. In Proceedings of the Analytical Paper for the 2016 ECOSOC Partnership Forum, New York, NY, USA, 18 March 2016. [CrossRef]
26. Beisheim, M.; Simon, N. Multistakeholder Partnerships for the SDGs: Actors' Views on UN Metagovernance. *Glob. Gov. A Rev. Multilater. Int. Organ.* **2018**, *24*, 497–515. [CrossRef]
27. Tremblay, D.; Fortier, F.; Boucher, J.F.; Riffon, O.; Villeneuve, C. Sustainable development goal interactions: An analysis based on the five pillars of the 2030 agenda. *Sustain. Dev.* **2020**, *28*, 1584–1596. [CrossRef]
28. Horan, D. A new approach to partnerships for SDG transformations. *Sustainability* **2019**, *11*, 4947. [CrossRef]
29. United Nations. *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*; Annex 1, Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, General Assembly, A/CONF.151/26; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 1993; Volume I. Available online: [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_CONF.151\\_26\\_Vol.I\\_Declaration.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
30. United Nations. In Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on Environment & Development, Agenda 21, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3–14 June 1992. Available online: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
31. Waddock, S. Building a new institutional infrastructure for corporate responsibility. *Acad. Manag. Perspect.* **2008**, *22*, 87–108. [CrossRef]
32. Williams, S.; Murphy, D.F. Learning from Each Other: UK Global Businesses, SMEs, CSR and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 4151. [CrossRef]
33. Bruno, K.; Karliner, J. *Earthsummit.biz: The Corporate Takeover of Sustainable Development*; Food First Books & Corp Watch: London, UK, 2002.
34. Richter, J. Codes in Context: TNC Regulation in an Era of Dialogues and Partnerships. In *Corner House Briefing Paper*; Zed Books: London, UK, 2002; No. 26. Available online: <https://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/codes-context> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
35. Utting, P.; Zammit, A. Beyond pragmatism: Appraising UN-business partnerships. In *Market, Business and Regulation Programme Paper, 1*; UNRISD: Geneva, Switzerland, 2006. Available online: <https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/papers/pdf-files/uttzam.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
36. Utting, P.; Zammit, A. United Nations-business partnerships: Good intentions and contradictory agendas. *J. Bus. Ethic* **2009**, *90*, 39–56. [CrossRef]
37. Richter, J. Public-private Partnerships for Health: A trend with no alternatives? *Development* **2004**, *47*, 43–48. [CrossRef]
38. Murphy, D.F.; Bendell, J. *In the Company of Partners: Business, Environmental Groups and Sustainable Development Post-Rio*; The Policy Press: Bristol, UK, 1997.
39. Livesey, S.M.; Kearins, K. Transparent and caring corporations? A study of sustainability reports by The Body Shop and Royal Dutch/Shell. *Organ. Environ.* **2002**, *15*, 233–258. [CrossRef]
40. Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). Available online: <https://www.globalreporting.org/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
41. United Nations Global Compact. Available online: <https://unglobalcompact.org/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
42. Ethical Trading Initiative. Available online: <https://www.ethicaltrade.org/about-eti/who-we-are/etis-origins> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
43. Fair Labor Association. Available online: <https://www.fairlabor.org/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
44. Fairtrade. Available online: <https://www.fairtrade.net/en.html> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
45. Rainforest Alliance. Available online: <https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
46. Forest Stewardship Council. Available online: <https://fsc.org/en> (accessed on 29 August 2025).

47. United Nations. *Guidelines, Cooperation Between the United Nations and the Business Community*; United Nations Secretary General; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 17 July 2000. Available online: [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/lb/g\\_c\\_business\\_communities.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/lb/g_c_business_communities.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
48. CARE USA. *Partnership Manual*; CARE: Atlanta, GA, USA, 1997. Available online: [https://cercl.lu/download/partenariats/cccure\\_partnership\\_manual25-3.pdf](https://cercl.lu/download/partenariats/cccure_partnership_manual25-3.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
49. Austin, J.E.; Reavis, C. Starbucks and Conservation International. In *Harvard Business School Case 303-055*; Harvard Business School: Boston, MA, USA, 2002. Available online: <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=29323> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
50. Austin, J.E. Strategic Collaboration Between Nonprofits and Businesses. *Nonprofit Volunt. Sect. Q.* **2000**, 29 (Suppl. S1), 69–97. [CrossRef]
51. Nelson, J. *Building Partnerships, Cooperation Between the UN System and the Private Sector*; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 2002.
52. United Nations. *United Nations Millennium Declaration*; Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/55/2; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 18 September 2000. Available online: [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_55\\_2.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_55_2.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
53. United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Available online: <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
54. Witte, J.M.; Streck, C.; Benner, T. (Eds.) *Progress or Peril? Partnerships in Global Environmental Governance, The Post-Johannesburg Agenda*; Global Public Policy Institute: Washington, DC, USA, 2003.
55. Zadek, S. Civil Governance and Partnerships. In *Partnership Matters, Current Issues in Cross-Sector Collaboration*; The Partnering Initiative: London, UK, 2004; Issue 2. Available online: <https://archive.thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/PartnershipMatters2.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
56. United Nations. Towards Global Partnerships. In *Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 24 January 2002, Fifty-Sixth Session, Agenda item 39*; United Nations: New York, NY, USA. Available online: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/56/76> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
57. Principles of Partnership. A Statement of Commitment Endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform. Available online: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2021/09/Principles-of-Partnership.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
58. Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights. Available online: <https://www.voluntaryprinciples.org/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
59. GRI, Vision, Mission and History. Available online: <https://www.globalreporting.org/about-gri/mission-history/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
60. 25 Years of the UN Global Compact: A Legacy of Impact and a Call for Bold Action. Available online: <https://unglobalcompact.org/compactjournal/25-years-un-global-compact-legacy-impact-and-call-bold-action> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
61. Kosolapova, E.; Verma, R.; Turley, L.; Wilkings, A. IISD's *State of Sustainability Initiatives Review: Standards and the Sustainable Development Goals: Leveraging Sustainability Standards for Reporting on SDG Progress*; International Institute for Sustainable Development: Winnipeg, MB, Canada, 2023. Available online: <https://www.iisd.org/system/files/2023-05/ssi-review-standards-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
62. United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS). Voluntary Sustainability Standards: Today's Landscape of Issues and Initiatives to Achieve Public Policy Objectives (Part I: Issues). In *1st Flagship Report of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards*; UNFSS: Geneva, Switzerland, 2012. Available online: [https://unfss.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/unfss-report-issues-1\\_draft\\_lores.pdf](https://unfss.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/unfss-report-issues-1_draft_lores.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
63. van der Ven, H. Effects of stakeholder input on voluntary sustainability standards. *Glob. Environ. Change* **2022**, 75. [CrossRef]
64. AccountAbility. 30 Years of Setting the Standard for Sustainability. Available online: <https://www.accountability.org/standards> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
65. AccountAbility. AA1000 AccountAbility Principles. Available online: <https://www.accountability.org/standards/aa1000-accountability-principles> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
66. European Union (EU). *Commission Delegated Regulation (EU), No 240/2014 of 7 January 2014 on the European Code of Conduct on Partnership in the Framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds*; EU: Brussels, Belgium, 2014. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32014R0240> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
67. Tennyson, R. *The Partnering Toolbook*, 4th ed.; The Partnering Initiative: Oxford, UK, 2011. Available online: <https://archive.thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Partnering-Toolbook-en-20113.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
68. Partnership Brokers Association (PBA). Available online: <https://www.partnershipbrokers.org/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
69. Mundy, J. Embedding ethical and principled partnering approaches. In *Shaping Sustainable Change: The role of Partnership Brokering in Optimising Collaborative Action*; Stott, L., Ed.; Greenleaf Publishing, Routledge: London, UK, 2018. [CrossRef]

70. Fransen, L.; Kolk, A. Global rule-setting for business: A critical analysis of multi-stakeholder standards. *Organization* **2007**, *14*, 667–684. [CrossRef]
71. United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development. SDG Actions Platform. Available online: <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
72. Stott, L.; Scoppetta, A. Partnerships for the Goals: Beyond SDG 17. In *Revista Diecisiete: Investigación Interdisciplinar Para Los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (Journal Seventeen: Interdisciplinary Research for the SDGs)*; Fundación Acción contra el Hambre: Madrid, Spain, 2020; Volume 2, pp. 29–38. [CrossRef]
73. United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG). *Common Minimum Standards for Multi-Stakeholder Engagement in the UN Development Assistance Framework*; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 2020. Available online: <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/common-minimum-standards-multi-stakeholder-engagement-undaf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
74. Chakkol, M.; Selviaridis, K.; Finne, M. The governance of collaboration in complex projects. *Int. J. Oper. Prod. Manag.* **2018**, *38*, 997–1019. [CrossRef]
75. McLennan, N. *Collaborative Principles for Better Supply Chain Practice: Value Creation up, down and Across Supply Chains*; Kindle Edition; Kogan Page: London, UK, 2018.
76. No. 44001:2017; Collaborative Business Relationship Management Systems—Requirements and Framework. International Organization for Standardization (ISO): Geneva, Switzerland, 2017. Available online: <https://www.iso.org/standard/72798.html> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
77. Marx, A.; Depoorter, C. Achieving the Global 2030 Agenda: What Role for Voluntary Sustainability Standards? In *Transitioning to Strong Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals*; von Schnurbein, G., Ed.; MDPI: Basel, Switzerland, 2020. [CrossRef]
78. Gupta, J.; Vegelin, C. Sustainable development goals and inclusive development. *Int. Environ. Agreem. Politics Law Econ.* **2016**, *16*, 433–448. [CrossRef]
79. Meuleman, L.; Niestroy, I. Common but differentiated governance: A metagovernance approach to make the SDGs work. *Sustainability* **2015**, *7*, 12295–12321. [CrossRef]
80. Reed, D.; Utting, P.; Mukherjee-Reed, A. *Business Regulation and Non-State Actors: Whose Standards? Whose Development?* Routledge: London, UK; Taylor & Francis: New York, NY, USA, 2012. [CrossRef]
81. Stott, L. *Listening to the Critics: Can we Learn from Arguments Against Partnerships with Business?* Research Paper; Building Partnerships for Development (BPD): London, UK, 2005. Available online: [http://www.bpdws.org/web/d/doc\\_46.pdf?statsHandlerDone=1](http://www.bpdws.org/web/d/doc_46.pdf?statsHandlerDone=1) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
82. Steets, J. *Accountability in Public Policy Partnerships*; Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, UK, 2010. [CrossRef]
83. Stott, L. *Review of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP)*; Technical Dossier No.7; DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, EU: Brussels, Belgium, 2018. Available online: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/418803> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
84. Rasche, A.; Waddock, S.; McIntosh, M. The United Nations Global Compact: Retrospect and prospect. *Bus. Soc.* **2012**, *52*, 6–30. [CrossRef]
85. Stanberry, J. I am, I can, I ought, I will: Responsible leadership and the failures of ethics. *Int. J. Ethics Syst.* **2025**, *41*, 705–726. [CrossRef]
86. United Nations. *Paris Agreement*; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 2015. Available online: [https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english\\_paris\\_agreement.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
87. United Nations. *Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development*; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 2015. Available online: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=400&nr=2051&menu=35> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
88. ILO. *A Guide to Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships*; ILO: Geneva, Switzerland, 2023. Available online: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/training-material/guide-multi-stakeholder-partnerships> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
89. The Intersector Project. *The Intersector Toolkit: Tools for Cross-Sector Collaboration*; The Intersector Project: Washington, DC, USA; New York, NY, USA, 2017. Available online: <https://intersector.com/toolkit/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
90. Mundy, J.; Tennyson, R. *Brokering Better Partnerships*; Partnership Brokers Association (PBA): London, UK, 2019. Available online: <https://partnershipbrokers.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Brokering-Better-Partnerships-Handbook.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
91. PBA. *The Remote Partnering Workbook*; Partnership Brokers Association (PBA): London, UK, 2018. Available online: [https://www.remotepartnering.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Remote-Partnering-Work-Book\\_Feb-2018.pdf](https://www.remotepartnering.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Remote-Partnering-Work-Book_Feb-2018.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
92. Reid, S. *The Partnership Culture Navigator: Organisational Cultures and Cross-Sector Partnership*; The Partnering Initiative: Oxford, UK, 2016. Available online: <https://thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Partnership-Culture-Navigator-v1.0.3.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).



93. Stibbe, D.T.; Reid, S.; Gilbert, J. *Maximising the Impact of Partnerships for the SDGs*; The Partnering Initiative and UN DESA: Oxford UK; New York, NY, USA, 2019. Available online: <https://thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Maximising-partnership-value-for-the-SDGs.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
94. Stibbe, D.; Prescott, D. *The SDG Partnership Guidebook: A Practical Guide to Building High-Impact Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals*; The Partnering Initiative: Oxford, UK; UN DESA: New York, NY, USA, 2020. Available online: <https://sdgs.un.org/publications/sdg-partnership-guidebook-24566> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
95. Stott, L. *Guidebook—How ESF Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies Support Partnership*, Revised ed.; DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission: Brussels, Belgium, 2019. Available online: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/946587> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
96. United Nations. *Guidelines on a Principle-Based Approach to the Cooperation Between the United Nations and the Business Sector*; United Nations: New York, NY, USA, 2015. Available online: <https://www.un.org/en/ethics/assets/pdfs/Guidelines-on-Cooperation-with-the-Business-Sector.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
97. Brouwer, H.; Hemmati, M.; Woodhill, J. Seven principles for effective and healthy multi-stakeholder partnerships. *Great Insights* **2019**, *8*, 9–11. Available online: <https://ecdpm.org/great-insights/civil-society-business-same-direction/seven-principles-effective-multi-stakeholder-partnerships/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
98. The MSP Charter Project. *The MSP Charter, Principles of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for Sustainable Development*. MSP Institute, Berlin, Germany & Tellus Institute: Cambridge, MA, USA, December 2018. Available online: <https://msp-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/MSP-Charter-2018.pdf> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
99. Ball, N.; Gibson, M. *Partnerships with Principles: Putting Relationships at the Heart of Public Contracts for Better Social Outcomes*; Government Outcomes Lab, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford: Oxford, UK, 2022. Available online: [https://golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/documents/Partnerships\\_with\\_principles\\_final\\_web.pdf](https://golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/documents/Partnerships_with_principles_final_web.pdf) (accessed on 29 August 2025).
100. Hoekstra, F.; Mrklas, K.J.; Khan, M.; McKay, R.C.; Vis-Dunbar, M.; Sibley, K.M.; Nguyen, T.; Graham, I.D.; SCI Guiding Principles Consensus Panel; Gainforth, H.L. A review of reviews on principles, strategies, outcomes and impacts of research partnerships approaches: A first step in synthesising the research partnership literature. *Health Res. Policy Syst.* **2020**, *18*, 51. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
101. George, G.; Fewer, T.J.; Lazzarini, S.; McGahan, A.M.; Puranam, P. Partnering for grand challenges: A review of organizational design considerations in public–private collaborations. *J. Manag.* **2024**, *50*, 10–40. [CrossRef]
102. Zero Carbon Cumbria. Available online: <https://zerocarboncumbria.co.uk/action/partnership-registration-form/> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
103. Moreno-Serna, J.; Sánchez-Chaparro, T.; Stott, L.; Mazorra, J.; Carrasco-Gallego, R.; Mataix, C. Feedback Loops and Facilitation: Catalyzing Transformational Multi-Stakeholder Refugee Response Partnerships. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 11705. [CrossRef]
104. Mazzucato, M. *Principles for an Inclusive and Sustainable Global Economy: A Discussion Paper for the G20*; University College London (UCL) Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose: London, UK, 2025. Available online: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/ucl-institute-innovation-and-public-purpose/principles-inclusive-and-sustainable-global-economy-discussion-paper-g20> (accessed on 29 August 2025).
105. Kenter, J.O.; Martino, S.; Buckton, S.J.; Waddock, S.; Agarwal, B.; Anger-Kraavi, A.; Costanza, R.; Hejnowicz, A.P.; Jones, P.; Lafayette, J.O.; et al. Ten principles for transforming economics in a time of global crises. *Nat. Sustain.* **2025**, *8*, 837–847. [CrossRef]

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.