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# Managing Multi-Stakeholder Partnership (MSP) in Higher Education: Challenges, Opportunities and Implications for Sustainable Development by Kebede Kassa Tsegaye, PhD<sup>39</sup>, Director, Research & Knowledge Management Office, St. Mary's University

## Abstract

*Higher education, by its very nature, is a collaborative enterprise. It involves partnerships between different actors and stakeholders: policy/decision-makers, educators, researchers, curriculum designers, university leaders, the community and the labor market. While there is an increasing volume of work on public-private partnership, there is much to be desired in the sphere of multi-stakeholder partnership (MSP) in higher education in general and the significance of MSP for sustainable development, in particular. This presentation attempts to assess the role of multi-stakeholders in higher education for sustainable development.*

*The principal objective of the study is to outline the essential features, opportunities and challenges related to MSPs that can have considerable bearing on the quality, relevance and contributions of tertiary education to the implementation of national regional and international instruments or commitments including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The paper is based on a desk review of the literature. The method of analysis is qualitative interpretation. The primary focus of the study is to pin-point areas of future empirical studies on MSPs and their role in strengthen higher education in both the public and private higher sectors.*

Key words: multi-stakeholder partnership, stakeholders, higher education, SDGs, cooperation

## Introduction

International and bilateral cooperation have existed for centuries. However, the quest for sustainable development through multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) began to receive greater attention since the early 1990s. More specifically, the concepts of multilateral and public private partnerships were seen as critical tools for the implementation of the outcomes of major international Conferences of the UN, notably the Rio Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development (UNCED) in 1992, the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), and the Copenhagen World Summit on Social Development. For example, Agenda 21 of the UNCED stressed, the need for global partnership for sustainable development. Further emphasis on multi-stakeholder partnership has been articulated in subsequent conferences including the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002; the Rio+20 Summit in 2012; and Agenda 2063 of the African Union, the *Africa We Want* (see, *van der Molen and Stel, 2013; ICSC, 2014; Hemmati, et al, 2016; AU, 2013*).

The significance attached to MSPs in sustainable development is based on the realization that they can help build consensus, mobilize needed resources, pull ideas, experiences and expertise

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together and achieve collective goals set by regional and international communities. In this regard, the last two and half decades have witnessed remarkable level of interaction and collaboration in different sectors of development. Despite discrepancies in the implementation of commitments by the developed nations, MSPs have enabled several developing countries, especially those in Africa, to benefit from increased flow of resources, technical know-how and technological transfer. This has been facilitated by the increasing pace of globalization particularly advances in the information and communication technologies. In addition to this, the emergence and expansion of non-state actors, namely, NGOs, civil society organizations, grassroots institutions, and faith-based initiatives have contributed to the diversification of and demand for MSPs in Africa.

## Definition and Typology of MSP

The concept of multistakeholder partnership has been evolving and closely associated with the concept of sustainable development (Hemmati, et al, 2002). Hemmati, et al, consider sustainable development and MSPs as interconnected processes involving a number of actors and stakeholders. They observe that “Sustainable development is a process, and multi-stakeholder processes are one of the tools that can help us to achieve a more sustainable future.” Accordingly, Hemmati, et al, (2002:23) further opine that “MSPs cover a wide spectrum of structures and levels of engagement. They can comprise dialogues on policy or grow to include consensus-building, decision-making and implementation of practical solutions. The exact nature of any such process will depend on the issues, its objectives, participants, scope and timelines, among other factors.” Gerda Ferburg, UN Chair of the Committee on Food Security (cited in Brouwer, et al, 2015) describes MSPs as follows:

MSPs range from short consultation processes to multi-year engagements that may evolve through many phases. Some MSPs may be very structured and backed by formal organisational arrangements. Others may be much more ad hoc and fluid. Different groups will take the lead in initiating MSPs. Governments may initiate a stakeholder consultation process for assessing new policy directions. NGOs may work to bring business and government together around an environmental or social concern. Business may realise they need to partner with government and NGOs to create new market opportunities and to manage their operations in ways that create shared value and give them a ‘licence to operate’.

Molen and Stel (2013:1) “... define MSPs as cooperation between different stakeholders that have an interest in a problem and together engage in a process of dialogue and cooperative action to address this problem”. These authors argue that “... MSPs can be seen as extended versions of, or related to, public–private partnerships (PPPs).” However, there are essential differences between PPPs and MSPs since the later encompasses a much broader aspect of co-action or collaboration.

For the purpose of this paper, MSPs are conceived as one or more stakeholders involved in joint activities or supporting programs with common interest or goals to achieve desired objectives. The partners may decide to work together as co-actors, facilitators, sponsors, or clients and service providers. The members of the partnership could be private operators, public or state institutions, non-governmental or civil societies, or a blend of all of these in the form of bilateral and multilateral arrangements.

With regard to higher education institutions, MSPs may be established between two or more educational or research establishments either on their own or through the involvement of other

stakeholders. For example, two institutions of higher learning may come together to accomplish a certain project with the help of one or more funding partners. The latter may consist of several donors and facilitators of programs with mutually agreed targets. Broadly speaking, MSPs in higher education can be broken down into six types of partnerships that involve a wide-range of actors. These include:

*Type 1:* Multidisciplinary approach (partnership between academics and researchers engaged in the various disciplines). This is often referred to intra-university (Curtin University, 2014) intra- and inter-departmental or inter-collegial collaboration;

*Type 2:* Partnership between two or more private institutions of higher learning or private-private partnerships (p2pp);

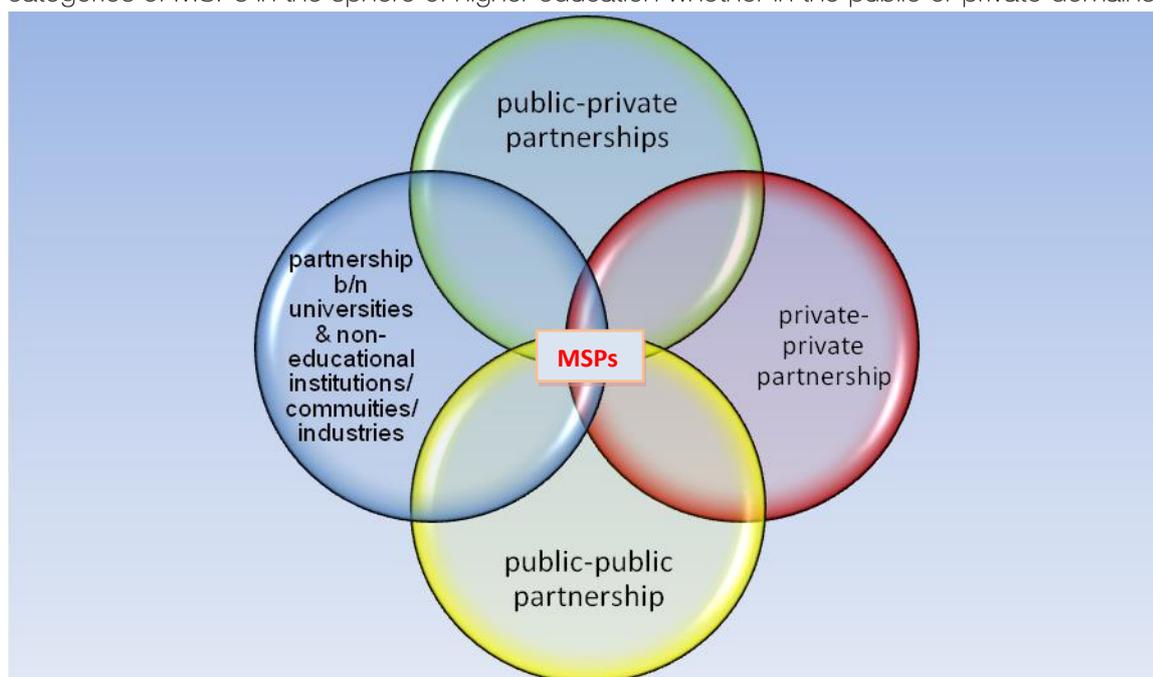
*Type 3:* Partnership between public and private institutions (PPP);

*Type 4:* Partnership between one or more private institutions and public institutions;

*Type 5:* Partnership between private and public institutions and one or more non-state institutions; and

*Type 6:* Partnership between private, public, non-state institutions of higher learning with multiple non-academic national, regional or continental governmental, nongovernmental or intergovernmental institutions;

However, some of these partnerships overlap and can be summarized into four interrelated categories of MSPs in the sphere of higher education whether in the public or private domains.



*Fig 1: Schematic representation of MSPs relevant to higher education institutions: © K.K/SMU*

### Key Elements of Managing MSPs

As pointed out in the preceding sections, MSPs involve various actors, process and contexts. These dynamics are very important in both facilitating and impeding MSPs. Smooth and effective partnership requires visionary leadership, respect for different organizational cultures and sensitivities. It also requires transparency, accountability and shared responsibility. Without the right mix of enabling policy environment, proactive and participatory decision-making processes and demonstrable achievements, it is difficult to engage in productive partnerships. As has been noted earlier, each stakeholder brings its own perspectives, resources, expertise and expectations to the partnership. Effective delivery of services or arriving at mutually agreed goals needs the ability to

envision the world beyond one's own narrow interests and to advance common objectives. In this regard it is essential to use a holistic approach and see from the stand point of the partners. If there is no room for accommodation and common understanding, MSPs remain ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst.

Healthy and productive multi-stakeholder partnerships should take the following interrelated dynamics or “building blocks” (ICSC, 2014) into consideration.

Actors	1. Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create momentum</li> <li>• Guide processes</li> <li>• Foster group cohesion</li> </ul>
	2. partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• combine the right resources and skills</li> <li>• create comparative advantages</li> <li>• prioritize inclusiveness</li> </ul>
Processes	3. goal setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create common vision and goals</li> <li>• Ensure high ambitions and precision</li> <li>• Align with global goals and norms</li> </ul>
	4. Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek innovative funding solutions</li> <li>• Diversify funding sources</li> <li>• Invest in professional fund management</li> </ul>
	5. Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish independent Secretariat</li> <li>• Invest in full-time professional staff</li> <li>• Ensure professional process management</li> </ul>
	6. Monitoring, reporting evaluation and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strive for transparency</li> <li>• Create robust and measurable indicators</li> <li>• Learn from mistakes and adapt behavior</li> </ul>
Context	7. Meta-governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set minimum criteria for partnerships</li> <li>• Entrust institution with vetting procedures</li> <li>• Explore linkages between partnerships</li> </ul>
	8. Problem structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge differences in problems</li> <li>• Adapt expectations</li> <li>• Design according to problem-structure</li> </ul>
	9. Political and social context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify problems (e.g. corruption)</li> <li>• Engage in capacity building</li> <li>• Choose most favorable context</li> </ul>

Table 1: Multiple dynamics of MSPs (Source: Adapted from the International Civil Society Center (2014:14)

Brouwer et al (2015:15) identified the following features of effective MSPs. These are:

- Shared and defined 'problem situation' or opportunity;
- All the key stakeholders are engaged in the partnership;
- Works across different sectors and scales;
- Follows an agreed but dynamic process and timeframe
- Involves stakeholders in establishing their expectations for a good partnership
- Works with power differences and conflicts

- (g) Fosters stakeholder learning
- (h) Balances bottom-up and top-down approaches
- (i) Makes transformative and institutional change possible

In light of the foregoing, it is important to note that effective intra and inter-institutional partnerships needs careful planning, goal-setting, tracking progresses and making timely, participatory and inclusive decisions at all stages of the partnership process.

## Higher Education, MSPs and Sustainable Development

Education in general and higher education in particular contributes to the building of capacity, generating technologies and innovation, and creating wealth. Today's knowledge-based global economy has been achieved through the training and development of requisite human resources through formal education in institutions of higher learning. In the process of cultivating the culture of science and innovation universities and other institutions of learning engage in a range of collaboration and partnerships. As shown in the above typology and diagram, cooperation and partnership take a variety of forms and directions. This view is well captured by the former UNESCO Director General, Kodchiro Matsuura (2005:3), who underlined that "Education – in all its forms and at all levels – is not only an end in itself but is also one of the most powerful instruments we have for bringing about the changes required to achieve sustainable development." Semali, Baker, and Freer (2013) pointed out that "For their role in society, HEIs are considered as a potential catalyst and driving force for bringing the full range of potential stakeholders together." As outlined in the UNESCO's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005-2014, education will contribute to sustainable development when it:

- is based on the principles and values that underlie sustainable development;
- deals with the well-being of all three realms of sustainability – environment, society and economy;
- promotes lifelong learning;
- is locally relevant and culturally appropriate;
- is based on local needs, perceptions and conditions ...;
- engages formal, non-formal and informal education;
- accommodates the evolving nature of the concept of sustainability;
- addresses content, taking into account context, global issues and local priorities;
- builds civil capacity for community-based decision-making, social tolerance, environmental stewardship, adaptable workforce and quality of life;
- is interdisciplinary...;
- uses a variety of pedagogical techniques that promote participatory learning and higher-order thinking skills (UNESCO, 2005:6).

Though these elements of education for sustainable development were elaborated in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), they still remain valid for the era of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is captured by Goal 4. "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" and at all levels. This is also echoed in the AU Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2015-2016.

With respect to MSPs and higher education for sustainable development, a lot remains to be desired as the literature is fairly thin about the interaction between the role of MSPs in higher education, on the one hand, and the nexus between MSPs-higher education and sustainability, on

the other. In other words, higher education is not as visible as it should have been even in major international initiatives such as the MDGs. The latter, for example, focused much attention on universal access to education and to gender equality mostly at basic or primary levels of education. In return, higher education institutions (HEIs) remain less seized with such global initiatives for sustainable development. In this connection, Maldonado-Mendes reports that (2011:2) "HEIs explicit involvement in achievement of the UN campaigns is very low". Despite the limited involvement of higher education institutions in setting as well as implementing global developmental agenda, MSPs continue to be emphasized as essential tools to achieve national, regional and international goals. For example, Goal 17 of the SDGs calls upon the international community to "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development" (UN, 2015). The Goal recognizes multi-stakeholder partnerships as important vehicles for mobilizing resources and sharing knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support the implementation of the SDGs in all countries, particularly in the developing ones.

Similarly, Agenda 2063 of the African Union aspires not only to build effective partnerships with all relevant bodies around the world. It also wants to manage these partnerships effectively for the betterment of live on the continent. Aspiration 7, Paragraph 58 of the Agenda acknowledges that:

Africa is on an upward trend and seeks mutually beneficial relations with other regions and continents. It therefore looks at the nature of partnerships with a view to rationalizing them and enhancing the benefits to its transformation and integration efforts. We shall do so by strengthening our common perspectives on partnerships and by speaking with one voice on priorities and views on global matters (AU, 2013).

This strategic document stresses the need for making partnerships work for Africa and intends to remind the world that the new form of partnership should be guided by Africa's own terms and not be dictated by external forces. This move reflects, at least from the surface, a self assertive Africa which tries to chart a future that is driven by Africans, as has been clearly spelt-out in the Constitutive Act of the Union.

Recognizing the role of MSPs in sustainable development, a number of events and forums are being organized using MSPs as major thematic focus areas. For example, the United Nations reported this that "The theme for the 2016 Partnership Exchange was Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals through multi-stakeholder partnerships - ensuring that no one is left behind" (UN 2016). This was designed to foster "dialogue among multi-stakeholder partnerships and government officials, policy makers, United Nations entities and major groups and other stakeholders, for showcasing the work of multi-stakeholder partnerships in supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, ensuring that no one is left behind in implementation of the 2030 Agenda," (UN, 2016). Likewise, the 14<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Private Higher Education in Africa organized jointly by St. Mary's University, Association African University, African Union Commission, International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa of UNESCO, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the Federal Ministry of Education, Ethiopia, chose as its overarching theme "the role of private higher education in sustainable development" which, among others, articulated on the need for MSPs in using education for sustainable development. Recently a number of conference and programs tend to focus on the linkage between higher education, MSPs and sustainable development around the world. The frequent use of themes linking higher education and sustainable development at national, regional and international fora is a clear indication of the value attached to both higher education and enhanced global multi-stakeholder partnerships as indispensable tools for better and coordinated achievements.

## Opportunities of MSPs

Several studies suggest that MSPs provide immense opportunities to realize collective goals and aspirations. Some of these opportunities include, enhanced decision or policy-making platforms, successful implementation of joint programs, generating new ideas and innovations, building the capacity of institutions, particularly those in developing countries to bring about socioeconomic transformations; and tracking progresses made or challenges encountered by different partners, in the implementation of global initiatives (see Hemmati, et al, 2002; Brouwer et al, 2015; Martens, 2007). Such opportunities enable partners to contribute their respective share in the realization of regional and international commitments. The outcomes of MSPs will be greater than the sum of individual efforts since some of the tasks would need collaborative activities. As UNESCO (2005) rightly indicates "... no institution, even at a global scale, can manage to achieve the goals of sustainable development on its own. Only united together, from North to South, East to West, can we be sure to build a viable world for us and for generations to come." In the realm of higher institutions of learning, MSPs provide ample opportunities by expanding access, promoting quality and ensuring relevance of education including TVET through joint mobilization, investment in employable skills or capabilities and encouraging entrepreneurship.

## Challenges related to MSPs

Most partnerships are highly demanding in terms of resources and human capacity. In this connection, UNESCO (2005:5) observes that "... fulfilling the promise of multi-stakeholder partnerships is not a simple matter - to work effectively in this form raises issues of shared vision, leadership, trust, partnership design and the extra effort and resource needed to manage the relationship and the range of diverse interests that converge in a multi-stakeholder partnership. When these partnerships occur in development practice, there is even more complexity." Some of the drawbacks of MSPs revolve around unclear, ambiguous, and unachievable goals or lack of the necessary resources to implement agreed targets. In a study conducted by the International Civil Society Center (2014) it was reported that "38 per cent of all partnerships sampled are simply not active or do not have measurable output. 26 per cent of all partnerships show activities but those are not directly related to their publicly stated goals and ambitions". This results in wastage of time and scarce resources. As pointed out by MacDonald (2016), "A major challenge for local governments and partners wishing to implement community sustainability plans through multi-stakeholder partnerships is that individually the partners, including the local government, often lack the appropriate sustainability and collaborative capacity". Addressing key challenges related to MSPs requires joint identification of the bottle-necks, time-bound interventions and collective decision to wards rectifying marked difficulties.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Over the years, MSPs have evolved into an important type of interaction and partnership. They have been designed to bring a wide-range of actors and stakeholder to achieve specific, mutually agreed goals. Their emergence and growth is linked with the sustainable development agenda that dates back to the late 1980s and early 1990s. MSPs play tremendous roles in pulling scarce resources - human, financial, and technical - towards the attainment of internationally adopted instruments. They have also been used to assist developing countries in their efforts towards national growth and transformation plans as well as poverty reduction programs.

In higher education, MSPs take place in different forms and at different stages though they have yet to receive the attention they deserve and theoretical explanation on how they work or do not

work. Broad-based multi-stakeholder partnerships in higher education both in the public and private sectors will be a critical ingredient for sustainable development. For a meaningful and successful partnership in higher education geared towards sustainable development, it is necessary to take into account a number of factors. Chief among these could be adequate resources, time and the capacity to plan, execute and monitor partnership programs. In a key document on ICT for development (ICT4D), UNESCO (2005:9-10) identified seven elements of success in MSPs: *trust, focus, champions, sustainability, balance between demand and supply, networking; and transparency and a sound ethical basis.*

However, there is a lot to learn about MSPs in sustainable development in general and in higher education in particular. As discussed elsewhere, MSPs have both advantages or opportunities and challenges. They will continue to assume these dual features. It is therefore important to do more rigorous empirical and theoretical research on the various aspects of MSPs both in Africa and globally.

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