



Make it or break it: critical barriers to effective multistakeholder partnerships for sustainable transformation

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Abstract

Multistakeholder partnerships (MSPs) are widely recognised as pivotal mechanisms for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, despite many identified drivers for effectiveness, MSPs have yet to live up to expectations in delivering the necessary systemic change. With a novel conceptual framework, we expand the theoretical considerations on drivers and enablers, and shift the focus towards the challenges and barriers that cross-sectoral, collaborative initiatives face. Through the empirical analysis of MSPs dedicated to advancing the sustainability agenda, we explore the perceived drivers and challenges influencing partnership effectiveness and how key challenges turn into critical barriers. Drawing from survey data from a set of transnational cooperative initiatives, we identify the outstanding relational, institutional, and external challenges including resource limitations, political will, and partner inertia. We use rich interview material to detail how the challenges manifest as critical barriers to partnership effectiveness and which strategies have been used in the field to overcome them. This study shows that a more nuanced understanding of conducive and obstructing factors is required, as enablers and barriers are not two sides of the same coin. Our findings and recommendations provide actionable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders, supporting efforts to enhance MSP effectiveness and their role in driving transformative change for sustainable development.

Keywords Multistakeholder partnerships · Barriers to transformation · Partnership effectiveness · Sustainable development goals · Collaborative initiatives

Abbreviations

ASL Amazon sustainable landscapes programme
COP Conference of parties

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EUDR	European union deforestation regulation
EU CSDDD	European union corporate sustainability due diligence directive
GGP	Good growth partnership
HLPF	High-level political forum on sustainable development
MSP	Multistakeholder partnership, in this article interchangeably used with partnership
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SDG	Sustainable development goal
TFA	Tropical forest alliance
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations department of economic and social affairs
UN DSDG	United Nations division for sustainable development goals
UNDP	United Nations development programme
UN ECOSOC	United Nations economic and social council
UNFCCC	United Nations framework convention for climate change
1000L	1000 Landscapes for 1 billion people partnership

1 Introduction

Multistakeholder partnerships (MSPs)¹ are widely recognised by scholars and practitioners as key mechanisms for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and driving large-scale sustainability transformation (Andonova et al., 2022; Higham et al., 2024; Horan, 2019; Leal Filho et al., 2024; Murphy & Stott, 2021). These partnerships are defined as formal or informal voluntary collaborative agreements between actors across public, private, and civil society sectors, working purposefully together toward shared objectives and ideally spanning multiple levels and jurisdictions (Andonova, 2017; Andonova et al., 2022; Wanner, 2025). Their strength lies in bringing together diverse actors with different roles, responsibilities, and resources (Haywood et al., 2019), often referred to as ‘integrated’ or ‘whole-of-society’ approaches which are required for achieving transformation (Andonova et al., 2022; Glass et al., 2023; Horan, 2019; Tengberg & Valencia, 2018). Consequently, they are expected to create “more efficient, effective and inclusive responses to global policy problems” (Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016, p. 42) and address “real or perceived current problems of global governance” (Biermann et al., 2012), such as dead-locked intergovernmental negotiations, power-based state policies, and corrupt elites. This places a ‘heavy burden of expectations’ on the shoulders of MSPs (Wanner & Miljand, 2025). Despite these high hopes and guidebooks based on research providing an extensive set of conducive conditions (Benton & Stibbe, 2023; Brouwer & Woodhill, 2015; Li et al., 2020), partnerships have struggled to contribute substantially to the necessary transformation – namely, large-scale systemic change in line with the SDGs. Scholars have repeatedly criticised their limited impact and effectiveness (Andonova et al., 2022; Higham et al., 2024; Horan, 2019; Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016; Pattberg et al., 2012; Widerberg et al., 2023a).

Thus, arguing to look at the obstructive conditions, we introduce a novel conceptualisation distinguishing between drivers and enablers on the one hand, and challenges and barriers on the other. With this approach, we acknowledge the complexities and challenges that

¹Henceforth, ‘partnership’ is used interchangeably with ‘multistakeholder partnership’ in this article.

partnerships face in their daily operation (Wanner & Miljand, 2025), and propose a shift in focus towards identifying the barriers that ‘make or break’ partnership effectiveness. This leads us to our central research questions: Which challenges represent critical barriers to MSP effectiveness, and how do barriers manifest in the daily work of partnerships?

Through the empirical analysis of a set of partnerships committed to advancing the sustainability agenda, we explore how MSPs navigate challenges in their day-to-day operation. Drawing from survey data from a variety of transnational cooperative initiatives, we investigate which drivers and challenges MSPs and their members identify. We use rich interview material to show how outstanding challenges turn into critical barriers and how partnerships have dealt with them on the ground. Our research provides novel insights into factors and measures that can increase the effectiveness of MSPs aiming at contributions to transformative change aligned with the 2030 Agenda. Thus, we complement the expanding literature on multistakeholder partnerships for sustainable development, effectiveness, and transformative change with an alternative approach to the concepts of enabling factors by focusing on critical barriers (Horan, 2019). The ultimate goal is to better equip and enable partnerships to contribute more effectively to the 2030 Agenda and drive sustainable transformations, thereby increasing their relevance and impact in achieving the SDGs.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we present insights into drivers of partnership effectiveness from existing literature. Then, Sect. 3 provides our conceptual framework including the theoretical reasoning for critical barriers and how the conceptual distinction enables a novel analytical lens. Section 4 details our research design including method, case selection and data collection. We discuss the results of the empirical analysis in Sect. 5, before Sect. 6 concludes with an overview of the contributions and findings, implications and avenues for future research.

2 Drivers of partnership effectiveness

Since the proliferation of MSPs in the wake of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, partnership research has thrived and expanded (Wanner, 2025). SDG 17 Partnerships for the goals has increased attention and scrutiny on MSPs and further contributed to their propagation. Scholars have extensively studied their emergence and formation (Horan, 2019; Pattberg et al., 2012; Schäferhoff et al., 2009), participation and institutional design (Clarke et al., 2023; Glass et al., 2023; MacDonald et al., 2022; Marx, 2019; Newig et al., 2023), accountability and legitimacy (Bäckstrand, 2006; Bexell, 2024; Koliev & Bäckstrand, 2024), effectiveness and impacts (Andonova et al., 2022; Beisheim & Liese, 2014; Biermann et al., 2012; Glasbergen et al., 2007; Higham et al., 2024; Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016; Szulecki et al., 2011), and, more recently, their transformative and problem-solving potential (de Koning et al., 2023; Horan, 2022; Stott, 2022; Wanner & Miljand, 2025; Widerberg et al., 2023a). Against this backdrop, research has identified and expanded a list of conducive conditions and drivers for partnership effectiveness, particularly for implementing the SDGs (Leal Filho et al., 2024), with partnership guidebooks skillfully summarising and presenting these insights (Benton & Stibbe, 2023; Brouwer & Woodhill, 2015; Li et al., 2020). Drivers can broadly be categorised as relational factors such as the composition of the partner mix and existing networks, organisational factors such as the degree of institutionalisation and internal process management aspects, and

external conditions (c.f., Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016). Borders between the categories are fluent and some factors may be considered in several categories.

Existing literature on partnerships and cooperation has widely recognised that relations and partner characteristics, such as partner diversity and inter-partner relations, matter for effective collaboration. Wider representation, stronger responsiveness, along with the combination of resources and the inclusion of marginalised perspectives, contribute to more effective and holistic approaches, which are less prone to overlook weaknesses in policy processes and build for lasting impact (Dryzek & Stevenson, 2011; Horan, 2022; Meadowcroft, 2007; Moreno-Serna et al., 2020; Stringer et al., 2014). However, as Horan points out ‘[t]he more stakeholders that participate in a partnership, often the greater the potential for failing’ (2019), since with an increasing membership it is more difficult to establish trust, a common vision, and good coordination, which are often seen as prerequisites for collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Biermann, Chan, et al., 2007; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Ostrom, 1990; Waddock, 1988). Instead, internal conflicts between partners are likely to occur more often (Burci, 2009; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Schäferhoff et al., 2009; Stadtler & Karakulak, 2020). Partnerships thrive on the networks of their members (Bäckstrand et al., 2022; Bulkeley et al., 2012; Gray, 2007; Stadtler & Lin, 2017), and knowing the right stakeholders and including powerful actors can, thus, enhance partnership effectiveness (Horan, 2022; Szulecki et al., 2011). Transparent communication and well-functioning coordination increase the likelihood of partners working in sync (Horan, 2019; Ostrom, 1990; Stadtler & Karakulak, 2020).

Institutional factors refer to the organisational setup and structural conditions in which partnerships operate. A high degree of institutionalisation has been long acknowledged as a crucial factor for successful partnerships (Bäckstrand et al., 2022; Glass et al., 2023; Szulecki et al., 2011). This includes sophisticated contracting between partners and legal structure (Andonova & Faul, 2022; Beisheim & Campe, 2012; Piselli & Andonova, 2025), elaborate governance structures and clearly defined roles and responsibilities (Beisheim & Liese, 2014; Buse & Harmer, 2007; Gutner & Thompson, 2010; Ostrom, 1990), professional process management, open and transparent communication, accountability, regular monitoring and evaluation, and reflexive organisational learning (Gray, 2007; Higham et al., 2024; Horan, 2019; Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016; Pfisterer & Van Tulder, 2020; Sondermann & Ulbert, 2021; Szulecki et al., 2011). In addition, leadership (Abbott et al., 2000; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bäckstrand, 2006; Keohane & Victor, 2011), sustained funding and committed resources (Andonova & Faul, 2022; Buse & Harmer, 2007; Gutner & Thompson, 2010; Reinicke et al., 2000; Szulecki et al., 2011) have been highlighted as important factors for effectiveness.

Scholars have also repeatedly highlighted the importance of external factors for effective and successful partnerships. This includes the social and political context on all levels, the fit to the problem structure, and external shocks. Particularly, political will is a key enabler for SDG implementation through partnerships (Beisheim et al., 2025; Hickmann et al., 2023). On a global level, orchestration and meta-governance of partnerships can be conducive by providing funding, frames, regulations, or platforms enabling knowledge exchange, access, resources, and monitoring mechanisms (Bäckstrand et al., 2022; Beisheim & Fritzsche, 2022; Bexell & Jönsson, 2021; Biermann et al., 2009, 2017; Derx & Glasbergen, 2014; Higham et al., 2024; Mawdsley, 2021; Meadowcroft, 2007; Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016; Stringer et al., 2014). Complementarily, the social and political contexts on national

and subnational levels can facilitate partnership work on the ground. Governmental actors can support partnerships with endorsements, institutional frameworks, resources, access, and networks, or even safeguard wide representation and a fair process (Biermann, Mol, et al., 2007; Gray, 2007). Similarly, buy-in from and receptiveness of communities and the population can strengthen the position of partnerships or ease implementation processes (Stringer et al., 2014; Sun, 2022). Disruptive events or external shocks can create similarly conducive environments for partnerships by opening so-called ‘windows of opportunities’, which enable the replacement of entrenched or outdated practices and mindsets leading to paradigm shifts (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991; Birkland, 1997; Birkmann et al., 2010; Kingdon, 1995; Stark, 2018).

3 Conceptual framework: challenges and critical barriers

While all the aforementioned factors can be drivers conducive to effective and successful partnerships, there is little evidence that they are enablers, i.e. determinants of success regardless of other conditions or factors. Instead, research has shown that all these drivers are similarly appreciated among partnership participants. Thus, scholars remain divided on which singular or set of factors are the most important and can universally and consistently deliver success.

At the same time, each driver can be inverted into a challenge, representing a potential barrier. For instance, just as trust facilitates collaboration between partners, mistrust can undermine it. The lack or absence of leadership can affect effectiveness negatively. Thus, inversion provides for the study of challenges and, in turn, the identification of critical barriers to partnership effectiveness and success. While these terms have been used interchangeably with obstacles, constraints and hurdles in the past (e.g., Eisenack et al., 2014), a qualitative differentiation between the concepts enables an important analytical dimension.

We argue for a theoretical distinction between challenges and critical barriers (see Fig. 1). On the one hand, we understand challenges as the absence of conducive conditions or the presence of smaller disturbances of the everyday operation, which can either be addressed

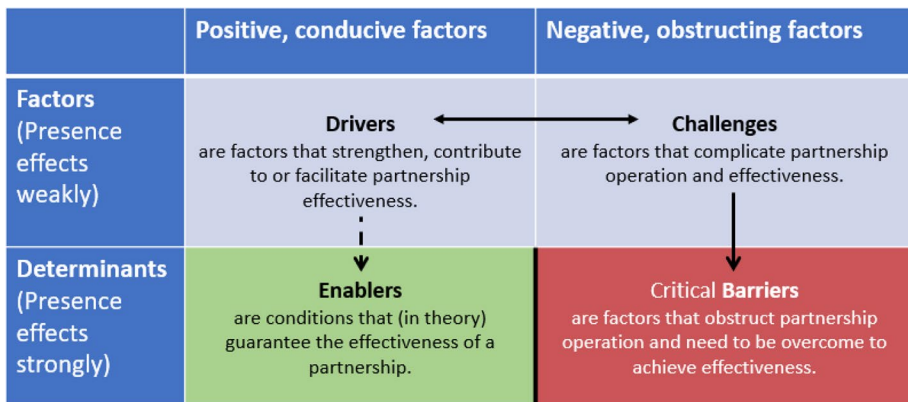


Fig. 1 Conceptualisation of the distinction between conducive and obstructing factors. Drivers can be enablers and challenges can be barriers, but while drivers and challenges can be inverted, enablers and barriers cannot. The authors

or worked around in the day-to-day business. Critical barriers, on the other hand, are deeply obstructive and prevent partnerships from making progress, even in otherwise favourable conditions. While challenges can be perceived as ‘bumps in the road’, barriers need to “be overcome with concerted effort, creative management, change of thinking, prioritization, and related shifts in resources, land uses, institutions, etc.” (Moser & Ekstrom, 2010, p. 22,027). We understand critical barriers, thus, as obstructing factors that can singlehandedly block the effective operation of a partnership.

Importantly, while drivers can be inverted into challenges, barriers cannot be inverted into enablers. This asymmetry is crucial: removing a barrier may be essential for partnership effectiveness, but it does not automatically lead to success. For instance, government opposition may critically obstruct a partnership’s effectiveness, yet government support alone does not ensure high performance. Similarly, eliminating corruption removes an obstacle but does not inherently enable effectiveness. By recognizing this asymmetry, we move beyond a simplistic binary of “factors that help” versus “factors that hurt” and develop a more nuanced understanding of what truly shapes partnership outcomes.

As a consequence of the distinction of drivers, challenges, and barriers, we are able to formulate distinct expectations. While we expect strong support for all the drivers among partnership members, we expect a larger variation in the perception of challenges. Research has shown the enormous amount of drivers that ‘are good to have’, and, thus, appreciated within a partnership. In contrast, we expect partners and individuals in partnerships to identify more specific issues that hinder the success of their specific MSP. We seek to identify common critical barriers that obstruct partnership success. By adopting this perspective, we acknowledge the complexities and challenges that partnerships face in their daily operation and propose a shift in focus towards identifying the barriers that make or break partnership effectiveness. This leads us to our central research questions: Which challenges represent critical barriers to MSP effectiveness, and how do they manifest in their daily work?

Thus, this study employs an analytical framework that conceptualises challenges to effective MSPs as the absence or inversion of drivers of partnership effectiveness. Critical barriers are then the challenges that are the main factors that prevent MSPs from contributing effectively to the SDGs. The framework acknowledges that factors external and internal to partnerships strongly affect the effectiveness of an MSP (Andonova & Faul, 2022; Westwintner, 2021; Young, 2011). Drawing from the broad literature on partnership effectiveness and institutional design, we classify the challenges into three categories: relational (internal), institutional (internal), and external (see Table 1).

Relational challenges stem from within the partnership and focus on relationships, processes, and internal dynamics, such as trust deficits, partner inertia, diverging visions, weak social capital, and internal conflicts that hinder collaborative dynamics internal to the partnership. Institutional challenges relate to the governance and operational framework of the partnership, comprising unclear roles, weak institutionalisation, lack of leadership, and resource shortages. External challenges arise from conditions outside the partnership, including governmental support and political will stemming from shifts in government priorities, societal buy-in and capacity, and external shocks (Andonova & Faul, 2022). In this study, we focus less on external shocks, i.e., disruptive events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as their effects are heavily discussed in the literature on the pandemic and disasters, often using the lens of Penetrated Equilibrium Theory. Table 1 summarises the challenges in each category and provides our operationalisation.

Table 1 Categories of challenges to partnership effectiveness

Category	Challenge	Empirical indicator
Relational challenges	Trust deficit	Mentions of mistrust between members and perceived unpredictability of actors
	Diverging vision	References to different motivations and goals of members or a potentially competitive mindset
	Weak social capital	Mentions of a lack of networks and connections or missing partners
	Partner inertia	Reports of low engagement or challenges in maintaining momentum, free-riding on member benefits
	Internal conflicts	Indications of conflicts between members, potentially related to internal accountability
Institutional challenges	Lack of leadership	References to lack of guidance and absence of a leading actor
	Unclear roles	References to confusion about roles or responsibilities
	Poor institutionalisation	Indications of the inadequacy or a lack of formal processes or the defined governance structure (incl. adaptability, inflexibility, monitoring, evaluation, learning)
	Poor communication and coordination	Reports of misalignments of actions and misunderstandings or indications of the absence of transparency
	Resource shortages	Frequent mentions of financial, material or human resource limitations
External challenges	Political opposition and lacking political will	Mentions of government opposition or shifting government priorities at the national or subnational level
	Lack of societal buy-in and capacity	Indications of limited community support or local resistance, or mentions of missing local capacity
	External shocks	References to disruptive events and global trends such as regime change or a pandemic

4 Methods

To contribute to the existing scholarship on the effectiveness and success of multistakeholder partnerships working towards sustainable development, this study investigates the drivers, challenges, and how the latter manifests as barriers that hinder these collaborations from effectively performing and successfully contributing to the SDGs. Through surveys and interviews, we combine deductive and inductive approaches in our data collection, asking partnership practitioners for their appreciation of drivers, perception of challenges and barriers, and strategies to address them. Drawing from survey data from a variety of MSPs, we explore the variation of the perception of factors and identify the outstanding relational, institutional, and external challenges. We, then, use rich interview material to detail how the challenges manifest as critical barriers to partnership effectiveness and which strategies have been used to address them.

Data collection consisted of two rounds of surveys and interviews. In the survey, we asked respondents to reflect on drivers of and challenges for partnership effectiveness and barriers that hindered the partnership’s contribution to the SDGs (see Appendix B). The multiple-choice questions draw from previous research on drivers and challenges while allowing respondents to add other items. In the interviews, we employed a more inductive and explorative approach asking participants what had gone well and less well and why. We followed up with questions on how effective the partnership had been and what would

be needed to improve the partnership's effectiveness. Answers were coded according to the analytical framework, with the possibility of heuristically extending it.

The first round of surveys targeted various MSPs from the Transform 2030 data set (Widerberg et al., 2023c), which are in turn derived from the SDG Actions Platform managed by the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) in the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). The SDG Actions Platform² is a voluntary global registry of policies, commitments, multistakeholder partnerships and other initiatives with the aim of accelerating progress toward the SDGs. The Transform 2030 data set consists of a subset of entries that can be classified as transnational MSPs involving actors from different sectors that combine several SDGs (Widerberg et al., 2023b). We conducted follow-up interviews with survey respondents who indicated willingness to participate.

In the second round of surveys, we targeted four large-scale transnational partnerships active in the same field to enable comparison. We chose MSPs that combat deforestation, a focus area intricately connected with global supply chains with an impact on many SDGs and under scrutiny due to recent policy developments such as the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) (Raman et al., 2023; Schilling-Vacaflor, 2023). We selected partnerships with lead organisations connecting to different sectors, since the type of lead organisation may affect the effectiveness and perceived challenges (De Donà et al., 2024; Newig et al., 2023). For instance, state actors follow other rules than non-state actors; international organisations may be well-connected and adhere to yet different rules; ties to the private sector are said to enable financial flows; while NGOs bring various forms of social capital (Newell et al., 2012). In addition, we ensured that the cases fulfilled further selection criteria, including activity, institutionalisation, resources, and theory of change (see Table 2 for an overview of the selection criteria). We selected two transnational MSPs listed on or associated with entries in the SDG Actions Platform: the Amazon Sustainable Landscapes Programme (ASL)³ led by the World Bank and the 1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People partnership (1000L)⁴ convened by the NGO EcoAgriculture Partners and co-led by partners from diverse sectors. To broaden the comparison, we further included two transnational MSPs with similar goals but different lead actors: the Good Growth Partnership (GGP) under the auspices of UNDP and the Tropical Forest Alliance (TFA) hosted by the World Economic Forum and stronger ties to the private sector (see Appendix C for case descriptions).

For the four targeted MSPs, we recruited interviewees through survey follow-ups, direct targeting, and referrals. Our aim was to engage representatives from partner organisations across different sectors and levels within each partnership to capture diverse perspectives. However, responsiveness was significantly higher among non-governmental organisations, international organisations, and partnerships compared to government organisations, funders, and the private sector. As a result, we acknowledge that some perspectives are more thoroughly represented than others, while interviewees provided critical and varied perspectives of the partnership efforts, drivers and challenges. In total, we collected 49 survey responses and conducted 28 semi-structured interviews (mean: 60 min) across 15

²Previously called SDG Partnership Platform.

³Entry #2319 in the Transform 2030 data set is part of ASL and refers to the ASL website.

⁴Entry #1348 is associated with 1000L.

Table 2 Case selection criteria for targeted MSPs in the second round

Criteria	Description	Evidence
Field of activity	MSP aims to mitigate deforestation through a systemic approach	A clear mission statement on addressing deforestation through an integrated approach
Activity	MSP is still active or recently concluded	Documented evidence of activity such as events, reports, newsletters or posts on social media
Institutionalisation	MSP has some organisational structure	Documentation of the structure of the MSP in statutes, annual reports or similar
Scale	MSP aims at systemic change and operates transnationally	Documented activity in multiple countries and beyond the local level
Resources	MSP has sufficient and dedicated resources (financial, human, social, etc.) over an extended period of time to achieve its aim	Statement on funding that covers the activities of the MSP over time or extensive documentation of activities over an extended period of time
Theory of change	MSP has a clear intention of contributing to transformation in line with the SDGs	Clearly stated theory of change or similar that lays out the pathways of how the outputs translate into impact
Lead organisation	Each MSP is led by an actor connected to a different sector	Statement or documentation of leading actor and organisation

MSPs (see Appendix A for more information on the data collection including a full list of the interviews). All study participants, including survey respondents and interviewees, received prior information, ensuring that informed written or recorded consent was obtained before study participation.

5 Results: drivers, challenges and barriers

5.1 Drivers

The survey results mirror our expectations. Figure 2 shows that respondents across all MSPs highly appreciate the drivers identified in the literature.⁵ The heatmap of Fig. 3 provides further insights into the limited variation between the factors for all MSPs, for each of the groups (the four targeted deforestation MSPs and other MSPs), and for each of the separate deforestation MSPs (ASL, GGP, TFA, and 1000L). The colour intensity in the heatmap represents the strength of the perceived positive effect. Several drivers can be highlighted since there is either collective consensus on their importance (above-total mean appreciation) or, even though limited, cross-partnership disagreement (some variation in appreciation across MSPs).

While all factors gather substantial support across all partnerships, the factors perceived as the strongest contributors to effectiveness are a common vision, a clear problem definition, defined targets and goals, and trust. Even leadership is an emphasised factor among all partnerships except 1000L. Generally, respondents from TFA and 1000L were the most selective in their appreciation of drivers.

Political and social context is the factor with the largest variation across partnerships. The appreciation is particularly lower among deforestation MSPs than other MSPs, but

⁵ Only the factor of Institutionalisation remains far from the mean. However, survey respondents expressed difficulties in grasping the meaning of the factor. Thus, Institutionalisation will be disregarded in the analysis.

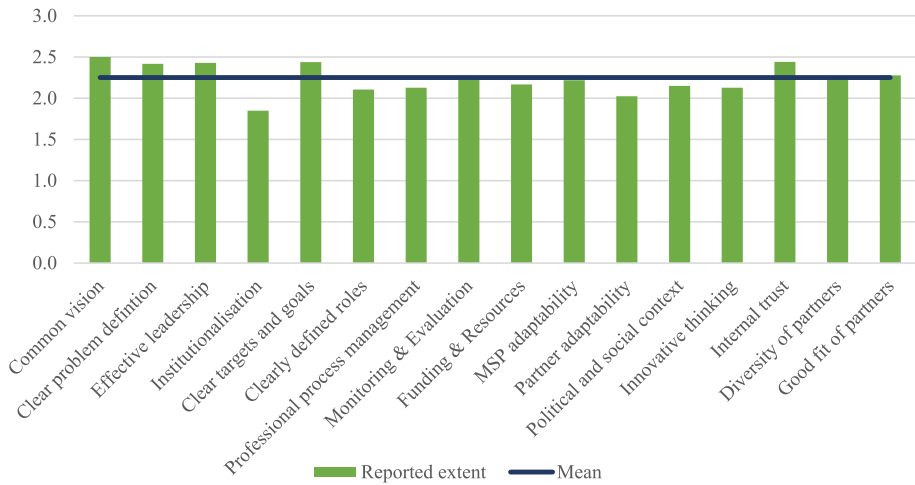


Fig. 2 Perceived drivers of partnership effectiveness. Values represent average scores translated from a 4-point rating scale [0: not at all; 1: little; 2: somewhat; 3: to a large extent]. The line represents the mean of the responses for the different items. The authors

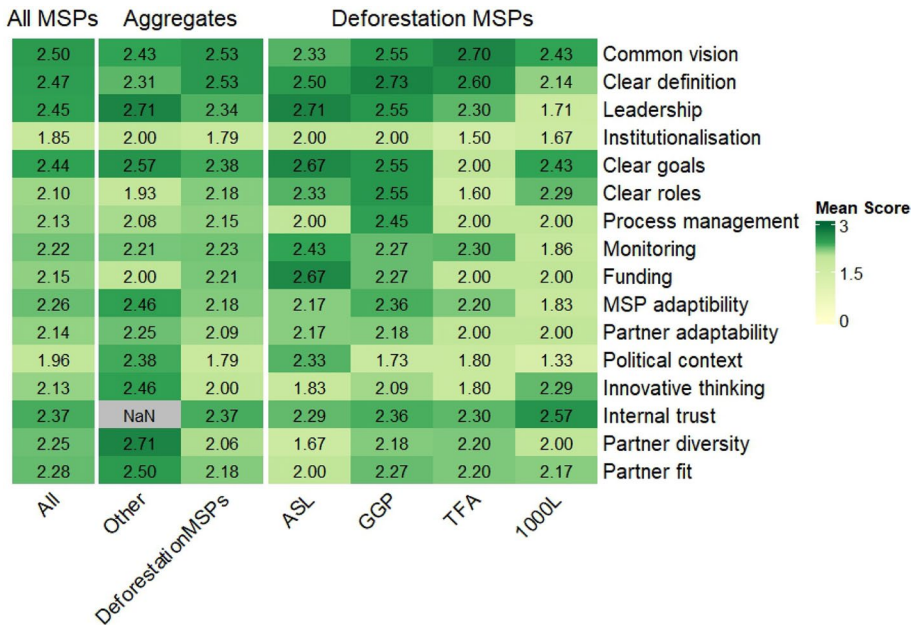


Fig. 3 Heatmap of perceived drivers. Values are the mean scores of agreement from the surveys: from 0 representing “not at all” to 3 “to a large extent” (see survey questions in Appendix B). Colour intensity represents the strength of the perceived positive effect. The authors

even within the deforestation partnerships, there is variation, with the ASL appreciating it the most and 1000L the least. We will come back to this factor in the subsequent sections.

In sum, while there is some limited variation between the perception of drivers of effectiveness across the partnerships, MSPs see all the drivers as contributing and beneficial. Thus, as expected, enablers cannot be identified.

5.2 Challenges

As expected, and in contrast to the drivers, there is a larger variation in the perception of challenges in the survey responses (see Fig. 4), which also results in a lower mean value across factors. Above the mean, and thus perceived as most imposing challenges are resources, government priorities, and partner commitment, whereas international conflicts are perceived as least challenging by a margin.

First, resources, financial or otherwise, are the main challenge according to the respondents, which can be seen in the bar chart and the heatmap, where the darkest colour represents the largest challenges. As the heatmap further details, for each MSP (ASL, GGP, TFA, and 1000L) and both groups (deforestation MSPs and other MSPs from the first round), one of the resource factors represents the main challenge (see Fig. 5). The ASL is the only MSP that identifies financial resources substantially less challenging than other resources.

Second, government priorities at all levels are perceived as major challenges for the MSPs. The four deforestation MSPs encounter difficulties both at the national and local level, while other partnerships find the subnational context less challenging. The issue does not seem to be related to government opposition but rather due to specific priorities.

Third, all MSPs, except for TFA, struggle with partner commitment and inertia. This is striking because of the variety of partnering actors who answered the surveys. This factor is particularly an issue for 1000L, which might be related to its structure as a “radical coalition of change agents” and the limited participation of government and private sector actors.

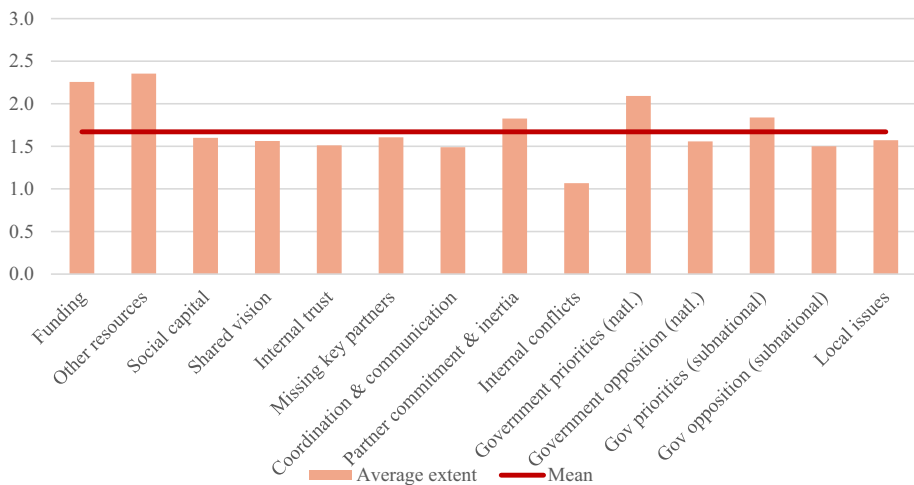


Fig. 4 Perceived challenges to partnership effectiveness. Values represent average scores translated from a 4-point rating scale [0: not at all; 1: little; 2: somewhat; 3: to a large extent]. The line represents the mean of the responses for the different items. The authors

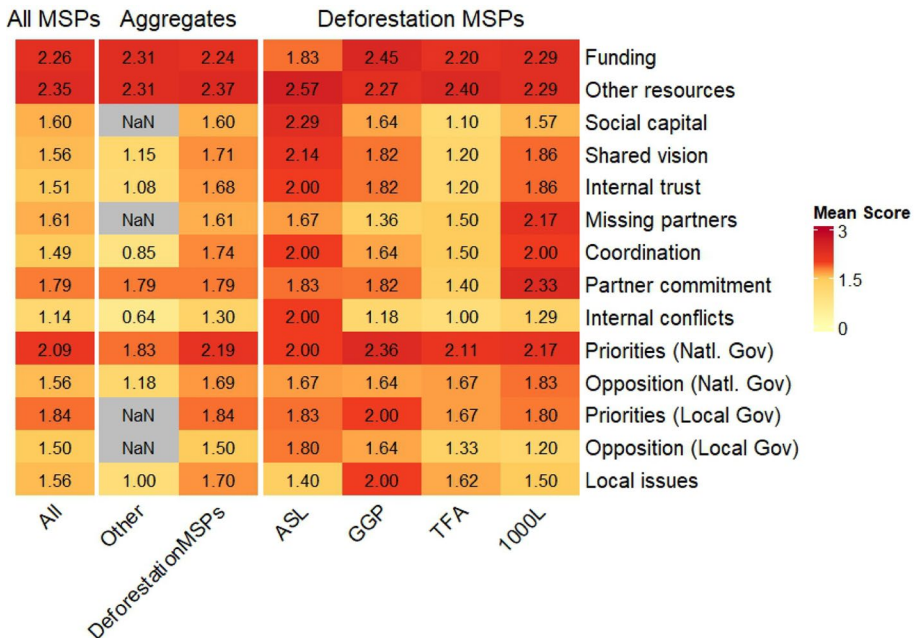


Fig. 5 Heatmap of barriers. Values are the mean scores of agreement from the surveys: from 0 representing “not at all” to 3 “to a large extent” (see survey questions in Appendix B). Colour intensity represents the strength of the perceived negative effect. “NaN” represents not available data. The authors

There are several noteworthy differences between singular and groups of partnerships. Generally, ASL and 1000L respondents perceive factors as more challenging, while TFA respondents highlight only specific challenges to be substantial. Notable differences also manifest between the deforestation partnerships and other MSPs. Among the latter, perceptions of most challenges are substantially less pronounced, except for the three abovementioned factors that stand out across all partnerships. That deforestation partnerships perceive challenges to be more profound speaks to the complexity and difficulty of reducing human impact on forests, which results in less support for the socio-political context as a driver.

Several items in the questions for drivers and challenges refer to the same factors – for instance, common vision, trust, resources, and political and social context. While we see a larger variation in the perception of these factors as challenges, the factors are all similarly appreciated as drivers of effectiveness. Thus, while we can invert the factors conceptually (e.g., trust-mistrust), empirical results (perceived effects of trust and mistrust) vary substantially depending on the conceptual differentiation between drivers and challenges. Consequentially, we can infer that some challenges represent critical barriers that cannot be simply inverted back into enablers.

5.3 Barriers

Three specific factors stand out from the surveys, one from each of the three categories of challenges to successful transformative partnerships: the institutional challenge of resource limitations; the external challenge of shifting government priorities or political will; and

the relational challenge of lacking partner commitment or inertia. Interpreting the survey results and the qualitative interview material, we show how these challenges turn into critical barriers.

5.3.1 Institutional barrier: resources

According to the surveys, the most substantial challenge for all partnerships is the access and availability of resources, financial or otherwise. The interviews elaborate on this institutional barrier and provide nuance on how the constraint affects partnership effectiveness and interacts with other factors. There is broad consensus across the MSPs that funding substantially limits partnership efforts (e.g. I8, I9, I10, I11, I18, I22). “Obviously if we had more resources, we could do more” (I5) summarises the general sentiment, while the following statements from different partnerships emphasise the fundamental character of the lack of resources. Some partners even operate with the “assumption that [they] will never have money” (I13).

First, to really achieve the mandates we were given in the policy goals set out, you need two, three, four times the resources and then you start worrying about the rest. (I1)

I mean, in the Indonesian context, as far as I know, always the issue would be the financing. That’s always there. That’s the first thing. (I9)

Resources are clearly not enough. (I10)

I think the common thing is to say funding. (...) especially considering the level of ambition that the project had. (I7)

However, the cry for more financial support is only the tip of the iceberg, since there “still [is a] need to talk about the quality of the resources, what you are doing and why” (I1). Funding constraints result in a lack of non-financial resources such as knowledge, technology, personnel, and soft skills such as leadership, mediation and negotiation skills, (e.g. I6, I8, I11, I13, I18, I26), as put by one interviewee:

the second thing is technical capacity. (...) We lack, human beings, people that are qualified enough to do technical jobs, but also at a managerial level to deal with highly complex decisions, to create things, and to navigate in these uncertain scenarios that we have.... (I10)

Partnerships and collaborative initiatives mostly finance themselves through grants from donor organisations and leverage these financial means to raise additional funding from actors across sectors, mainly governments. Such grants are often short-term and partnerships find themselves applying for renewals and new grants, which takes substantial administrative effort (I6). As a survey respondent stated: “The environment for resourcing of this type of partnership is getting increasingly tense and justifications for the impact are needed. This requires extensive administrative work, making it difficult to focus on the core sub-

stantive activities.” Financial insecurity also leads to uncertainty for future operations and potential disruptions of activities. For continuity, longer time horizons of funding schemes are crucial to enable the potential of partnerships (e.g., I7, I14, I25). As of now, donor conditionalities are criticised for being too rigid inhibiting adaptive planning and management, thus, not fitting the fast-changing conditions on the ground (I7, I13, I25). As a partnership expert explains, there is a need for adaptive financing.

where 10% of your budget is non-committed (...) I think that should be driven up to 50% or something like that. At the moment with my budgets, it is usually around 2% because they [funders] can't bear this idea that there's any kind of flexibility in that. But we have to have flexibility. If we imagine that the future is anything but complex, then, you know, we're just deluding ourselves. We have to be able to move and manoeuvre as circumstances change. (I13)

However, regardless of the substantial barrier of resources, interviewees repeatedly emphasised that.

We always need more resources to implement. But again, I think, if we have a more favourable institutional political environment and we don't have ideal resources, we can still make it happen. (I7b)

In sum, while the concern that partnerships suffer from severe financial constraints is well known, the interviewees explicate how it affects the operations and where the root causes lie. Continuous grant applications with uncertain outcomes and financial insecurity severely impact everyday operation of the MSP, regardless of the partnership structure. Systemic issues and political will undermine effective contributions of MSPs to the required transformative change and need to be addressed to enable the partnerships to deliver to their full potential.

5.3.2 External barrier: government priorities and political will

Survey results highlight governmental priorities as a notable limiting factor, and the interviews emphasise political will to be even more constraining than resources as “[political will and the political institutions are] the main challenge or barrier that we have” (I7b). The geopolitical and national political context reduces the opportunities and the potential for effective implementation and transformative impact (e.g., I2, I7, I8, I11). For instance, there is a rising concern “whether a lot of the decision-makers in the environmental space at a global level are really serious” (I10) about sustainable development. At the national level, representative of many national contexts, “one of the biggest [barriers] for me in Brazil is, I guess, simply the political will” (I7). Some partnerships struggle even with “political differences with the leadership who does not understand what you are doing in the first place [and] will feel like you are a threat to their political ambitions” (I22), which severely hinders partnership activities.

Particularly, elections are a major concern for partnerships: “In terms of the challenges, I think, from what I saw at least, midway through the project, there were elections in these countries. And I think that it was talked about quite a bit as a major setback” (I25). Due to

the election cycle, “the need to show results in the short term and to solve situations in the short term always is perceived as more important than thinking on the long term” (I10). During election periods, the politicisation of partnerships and their projects increases:

... political interference was very critical, especially when we reached that period that now, you know, in Kenya we have a political cycle of five years. After five years you go back to elections. So during that election period, you cannot differentiate [between] the politics [and] the projects. So there’s a lot of interference and misinformation during that time. It really affected our operations at that point. (I22)

As consequences of elections, changes in government including uncertainty, the staff turnover, and priority shifts represent significant barriers to partnership effectiveness (e.g., I7, I19, I21, I27). “Another uncertainty – and I have to mention this – [is] the new government” (I23), as it can remain a major unknown which can jeopardise operations. “In case of political turnover, [the partners on the ground] had to start again with building a relationship with the new government” (I6), which can result in delays or the need to change implementation strategies. When key contacts are changed, institutional capacity and social capital gained are reduced if not unmade completely.

But the main thing is (...) the way [the] government changes the key stakeholders, the key people in each agency (...). So when these people already have been [in charge of] the platform and then the government decides to relocate them to another agency (...) [it is] not easy to find a new one and... training the people like that. But the other thing is, this key person has also engaged with others, with all the other stakeholders in the forum, right? So it’s like we start from the beginning, especially for the key person from the government. (...) when the boss sees, this guy is very clever, charming, he is moved into another [position]. This case sometimes also happens in companies, especially government enterprises and government-owned companies. (...) we have a champion in a government-owned company pretty much for just eight months and then they move to another place. This is hard, but this is the reality that we face. (I18)

Not only do changes in government entail staff turnovers, but they also introduce new ideologies, change priorities, and make planned implementation strategies unfeasible, resulting in major challenges for the partnerships which need to adopt new strategies. However, partnerships are often unable to adjust quickly to the changing political environment because of their organisational planning and structures.

[It] was quite difficult for the project to quickly pivot or think of a new strategic direction when these political changes happened. You know, like the funding was already locked in for a certain workstream or it was just hard, I think, to change direction or think of a new way to do things. (I25)

However, changes in governments can be conducive to partnerships working towards sustainable development, as one interviewee emphasises:

Now we have a government that's more to the left, more left-wing. So there's a more favourable political environment. (...) when you have a government that supports these sorts of policies, then things tend to improve. (I7)

Similar experiences were made in Argentina: "Now with the elections, we are very curious. You might [have] heard about the new government of Argentina. So far we have a very good relation and very good feedback" (I15). Still, some legacies remain even in supportive political contexts because of established institutions:

The institutional environment is very important. So that's a key barrier. (...) Sometimes if it's not favourable, it's very hard for organisations, institutions to implement anything to move forward. But then what we have in (...) the current government, it's the legacy, the political legacy of the previous government. (...) I think this is the main challenge or barrier that we have. (I7)

Furthermore, political priorities change as a result from other external factors and events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which substantially changed the priorities of governments and limited the potential impact of the MSPs (e.g., I7, I16).

To add more nuance, subnational level politics play into the effectiveness of partnerships as they try to circumvent resistance at the national level: "In Brazil, it was very difficult to drive more like major policy changes because our government was not very favourable at that time, but in Tocantins [one region of Brazil] it was fruitful" (I7). However, subnational contexts are not always supportive, since partnerships might encounter "the viciousness of politics at community levels" (I13) or vested interests.

So, I would say, they were very different, the local contexts there, because I feel like in Bahia, in western Bahia, they were very, very, very much connected to the local farmers association there. It's called AIBA. (...) So they are very, like very, conservative. (...) I remember one meeting that we had with the state secretary in Salvador, in the capital of Bahia state. (...) he looked at us and he said, "no, but the ones that rule western Bahia are AIBA, not the state secretary of Bahia". (...) and AIBA was very much aligned with Bolsonaro at the time. So for us, for CI, it was very hard to do work with the farmers in western Bahia. We had some farms there that were partners, but our main partners were in Tocantins, the farmers. (...) No one else gets to say anything (I7).

Partnerships employ several strategies to mitigate these challenges with varying success. Protocols of how to approach newly appointed government staff and routines for keeping tabs on changes in government on relevant levels can provide continuity of engagement (I27). This can be facilitated through national champions.

So we have an orientation package. So it's a formal thing that describes [the partnership] – and of course we have it in all three languages, and it's short so that people

that are very busy and just came to the government don't have time to read a ten-page thing (...). So it's short, sweet, concrete (...). We do have champions in each country. And (...) usually some of the champions are technical people that don't get easily replaced (...) when the governments change. So they're the ones that we tell, "okay, there's a new (...) boss in town. Please find us that invitation or push him to be in the steering committee or give us the email and let's draft together an introduction email." (...) We also rely on the country offices at the [World] Bank. (I27)

The establishment or maintenance of formal spaces and communities of practices is another possible tool to support these efforts (ASL survey). Furthermore, establishing trust and win-win discourses, providing all actors with insights on what the respective partner stands to gain from the collaboration and the common goal, is important to create engagement and commitment (I6, I17, I19, I22, I23). As one interviewee explains, "I think what really matters to be successful is to show a value. So (...) what is the added value that we are generating for the countries? Because, at the end of the day, our clients are the countries" (I27).

In sum, regardless of partnership organisation, the role of governmental actors are perceived as crucial for the effectiveness of such multistakeholder efforts, since these collaborations play out within national – and subnational – borders. Due to the election cycle and the resulting short-term thinking, it is not surprising that political will and priorities manifest as barriers to partnership effectiveness. Stakeholders and partners need to be reminded of the benefits of partnering because human and organisational memory are not as dependable as we would like to believe, particularly given the constant and rapid staff turnovers in both the public and non-state sectors. Continuous engagement and careful routines and protocols can facilitate the process.

5.3.3 Relational barrier: partner commitment and inertia

According to the surveys, inertia and partner commitment form a third outstanding challenge. To understand how this relational challenge manifests as a barrier, we can partially relate to governmental actors that lack the political will or partners with staff changes, but even more so it refers to the fact that partnerships "need to have everybody on board for it to succeed" (I27). For that, a shared language and common ground are crucial but difficult to establish, as one interviewee explains: "I think that the biggest challenge was to try to master the language of the private sector. And the language and the rhythm (I20)". Other interviewees agree that it is challenging to reach consensus: "You have to basically go for unanimity. And that doesn't really work" (I4). They further state that they "really need to stress [that] it's also quite frustrating to have to take that collegial approach, where you cannot... push things more than (...) everyone wants to." Common ground is specifically more difficult to establish between actors across sectors, scales, or governmental silos, or that are normally competing, as expressed in the following responses.

I think the collaboration between the partners, it's like a wedding, (...) an arranged marriage. (...) You don't know each other. You don't have trust in each other. You

actually compete normally. (...) So it was very tough at the beginning, you know, there were tensions, there were misalignments, on language, on approaches, on many, many things. And so I think [what's] required [is] a lot of trust building and processes to do that at the beginning, (...) which included face-to-face planning meetings where we could go into details of our work, our approaches, our language and so on. (I14)

...the project (...) was trying to work with both the more advanced western companies like Unilever and Procter and Gamble, all these big companies that are trying to do a lot around sustainability. And then it was also trying to work with local Indonesian companies, where there was a lot less awareness, a lot less desire to go in a more sustainable direction. There was less pressure on them from the government. The investors didn't care as much about these issues. So that was a key challenge, I think, the local politics, and working with some of the local companies. (I25)

Another interviewee exemplifies that a "lot of these blockages stem from the fact that maybe government ministries don't work with each other, or maybe the government doesn't work so naturally with the private sector" (I5). This may be particularly challenging when facing short-term interests.

...the private sector, maybe the public sector as well, is very short-term focused, you know. So companies and CEOs usually want to show results for this year, for the next year. (...) the need to show results in the short term and to solve situations in the short term always is perceived as more important than thinking in the long term. So we have governments that go for 4 or 5 years in the best cases, we have companies that need to show profitability for your investors in the next year and or in the next following years. We have consumers that want to have as much as they can today or tomorrow. So it's very difficult to make human beings think in the long term. So, I think, that's the main barrier. (I11)

Even when actors seem to be aligned, differences sometimes crystallise only in the process.

when you realize, hey, we might not be fully aligned on our theory of change, or we may not be aligned enough in order to continue. That can be very difficult because both partners might be really enthusiastic about (...) some of the tangible and intangible outcomes of a particular process (I26)

Incentives (and punishment) and showcasing the benefits of sustainable practices can further entice private stakeholders such as smallholder farmers to follow environmental regulations and standards (e.g., I14, I18, I23). One interviewee emphasised this saying, "you cannot have their [smallholders'] willingness to engage until you can show the benefit, especially economic benefit, because oil palm is their source of income and they don't have many options" (I24). Peer-to-peer dialogues and events are often the best means to spread

knowledge and practices, as the process does not impose outsider views (I23). Also, government engagement and leadership may support partner recruitment and participation (I18). At times, strategies and knowledge on how to proceed may be missing.

1000 Landscape is now really focused on how to scale up. But I don't know how, you know. So that 1000 Landscape, I don't know how to do it, to connect with perhaps with agreement or partnership, with key stakeholders in different countries, to expand or scale up. (I8)

Many interviewees trace this barrier of partnership commitment and inertia back to relationships between partners (e.g., I27), which can only be built over time.

[Y]ou consolidate the relationships with the stakeholders. This is very important in Brazil. If you don't have that, you can't do a project. It's like having this close connection and, you know, the people knowing you. (...) This is the person that was here last year. I talked to them, they went to my house, they had coffee with me. I trust them. And trust is something. Building trust is a process. (I7)

As surveys and interviews confirm, productive collaboration depends on trust, which requires either previous engagement with partners or sufficient time to establish a relationship between partners (e.g., I9, I12, I13, I14, I21). Presently, stakeholder analysis and continuous monitoring and evaluation including self-reflection are the best ways for partnerships to address the issue. Despite the considerable time investment, these are key to strategic partner recruitment, that is, approaching the right stakeholder at the right time in the right way (e.g., I7, I26). Funders and orchestrators can facilitate the exchange of information, provide comprehensive stakeholder analyses, or establish contact points to the private, public and civil society sectors. In all contexts, extensive dialogue between partners facilitates a common vision and continued involvement; this holds even more true for bottom-up partnerships like 1000L. A main takeaway remains that "what really matters to be successful is to show a value" (I27) to individual partners to capture the self-interest, and thus the engagement of the partners. This holds true not only for the public sector but for all partners.

6 Conclusion

Multistakeholder partnerships as means for achieving the SDGs have faced significant criticism for not fulfilling high expectations. Despite the identification of conducive conditions and drivers, MSPs continue to encounter serious challenges inhibiting their potential. Drawing from rich and novel interview and survey data, we demonstrate that drivers and challenges are empirically not two sides of the same coin as they are perceived differently. This finding entails that, likewise, critical barriers are not inverted enablers but provide an

avenue for addressing blockages of partnership effectiveness. With the conceptual distinction between different factors, we contribute to the expanding literature on enabling and obstructing factors for MSP effectiveness. Our conclusions encourage further investigation of the dynamic interactions between these factors.

The analysis identifies three universal critical barriers to partnership effectiveness: the institutional barrier of insufficient financial and non-financial resources, the external barrier of shifting government priorities and the lack of political will, and the relational barrier of the lack of partner commitment and partner inertia. Not only do partnerships require committed resources (Andonova & Faul, 2022; Buse & Harmer, 2007), but funding frameworks need to be reformed to ensure long-term financing with flexibility for adaptive planning. Cross-partnership coordination can create further synergies and save resources. Second, and in line with recent research (Beisheim et al., 2025; Hickmann et al., 2023; Horn & Grugel, 2018), the political will of governments and elites is vital and needs to be reignited in order for governments to prioritise sustainable development over short-term interests. One important finding, and contrary to scholarly expectations (Beisheim et al., 2025), is that elections and the following staff turnover can always affect – disrupt briefly, and delay or spur in the long term – SDG implementation through MSPs because personal relationships need to be re-established. Third, showing the benefits for partners and potential members is key to creating engagement and commitment. Future research can contribute with further insights into ideal partnership compositions, balancing trade-offs between inclusiveness and effectiveness while mitigating risks like conflicts of interest, inertia, and freeriding. Furthermore, the study encourages further research on critical barriers for distinct types of partnerships in different contexts and on the potential existence of critical enablers of partnership effectiveness.

Without identifying and addressing critical barriers head-on, MSPs will continue to fall short of the high expectations they are subject to and the transformative potential they carry (Wanner & Miljand, 2025). If national governments, international organisations, and other non-state actors continue on their current trajectory, we need to acknowledge that there is a lack of resources and will to meet the SDGs in full. With the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, the Second World Summit for Social Development, the Third Ocean Conference coming up in 2025, and the annual ECOSOC Partnership Forum, HLPF and UNFCCC COPs, there are plenty of opportunities to accelerate progress toward achieving the SDGs. The challenges are clear, the stage is set – what remains is the will to act.

Appendix A: Data collection

See Tables 3, 4.

Table 3 Overview of interviews and coding. Organisation type refers to the employer and role of the interviewee: International Organisation (IO), Multistakeholder partnership (MSP), Non-governmental organisation (NGO), government (gov), research institute. Level refers to the interviewee’s role within the MSP

Date	MSP	Organisation type	Organisation role	Level	Code
2023–10-04	Global partnership for effective development Cooperation	IO	Supporting partner	Global	I1
2023–10-06	Global partnership for effective development Cooperation	IO	Secretariat	Global	I2
2023–10-20	Mountain partnership	IO	Secretariat	Global	I3
2023–11-02	Platform on disaster displacement	MSP	Secretariat	Global	I4
2023–11-13	Better than cash alliance	IO	Secretariat	Global	I5
2023–12-19	Good growth partnership	IO	Secretariat	Global, national	I6
2024–01-09	Good growth partnership	NGO	Founding and implementing partner	National	I7
2024–01-23					
2024–01-10	1000 Landscapes for 1 billion people	NGO, MSP	Advisory group member	National, subnational	I8
2024–01-12	Good growth partnership	IO	Implementing partner	National	I9
2024–01-15	Tropical forest alliance	MSP	Beneficiary	subnational	I10
2024–01-16	Tropical forest alliance	MSP	Secretariat, implementing partner	Regional	I11
2024–01-18	Tropical forest alliance	MSP	Secretariat, implementing partner	National	I12
2024–01-19	1000 Landscapes for 1 billion people	Research institute	Support and advisory partner	Global, regional	I13
2024–01-19	Good growth partnership	IO	Lead, secretariat	Global	I14
2024–01-25	Tropical forest alliance	MSP	Secretariat, implementing partner	National	I15
2024–01-30	Good growth partnership	IO	Founding and implementing partner	National, subnational	I16
2024–01-31	Good growth partnership	NGO	Founding and implementing partner	National, subnational	I17
2024–02-01	Good growth partnership	NGO	Implementing partner	National, subnational	I18
2024–02-01	1000 Landscapes for 1 billion people	NGO	Collaborating partner	Subnational	I19
2024–02-01	Tropical forest alliance	IO/NGO	Secretariat	Global	I20
2024–02-05	Amazon sustainable landscapes	gov	Executing partner	National, regional	I21
2024–02-13	1000 Landscapes for 1 billion people	NGO, gov	Collaborating partner	Subnational, national	I22
2024–02-13	Tropical forest alliance	NGO	Collaborating partner	National	I23
2024–02-16	Good growth partnership	Research institute	Support and advisory partner	National, subnational	I24
2024–02-19	Good growth partnership	NGO	Founding and implementing partner	Global	I25
2024–02-26	1000 Landscapes for 1 billion people	NGO	Steering committee partner	Regional, subnational	I26
2024–05-03	Amazon sustainable landscapes	IO	Secretariat, lead	Global, regional	I27

Table 4 Survey responses and interviews conducted per partnership

	Amazon sustainable landscapes programme (ASL)	Good growth partnership (GGP)	Tropical forest alliance (TFA)	1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion people (1000L)	Other MSPs	Total
Survey responses	7	11	10	7	14	49
Interviews	2	10	6	5	5	28

Appendix B: Survey questions

To what extent do you feel the following factors have contributed to the effectiveness of the MSP in terms of fulfillment of the SDGs?

	To a large extent	Somewhat	Little	Not at all	Don't know
Common vision within the MSP	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clear definition of the problem	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Effective leadership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
High degree of institutionalisation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clear targets and goals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clear defined roles of partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Professional process management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Continuous monitoring and evaluation of activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sustained funding and committed resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
MSP's ability to adapt to upcoming situations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Partners' ability to adapt to upcoming situations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Favourable political and social context in the country of implementation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Innovative thinking/innovative solutions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trust between partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Diversity of partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Good fit of partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are there other factors contributing to the achievement of the SDGs that have not been mentioned, if so which?

To what extent have the following barriers hindered the MSPs from contributing to the SDGs?

	To a large extent	Somewhat	Little	Not at all	Don't know
Lack of funding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of other resources (staff, tech, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of connections, networks or social capital	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of shared vision	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of trust between partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Missing key partners (specify below)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of internal coordination and/or poor communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inertia and/or lack of commitment of partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internal conflicts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of commitment or other priorities of the national government	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Governmental actors at the national level oppose/ antagonise MSP's activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of commitment or other priorities of local/regional government	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Governmental actors at the local/regional level oppose/ antagonise MSP's activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other issues at the local or national level (specify below)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are there other factors hindering the fulfillment of the SDGs that have not been mentioned, if so which?

Appendix C: Case descriptions (published as appendix of another paper)

Amazon Sustainable Landscapes Programme (ASL): The World Bank-led ASL is one of the largest regional programs under implementation in the Amazon with more than \$200 million in grant funding from the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) over three phases, leveraging more than \$680 million in co-financing investment. Under an integrated regional approach, the ASL includes national projects in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, and Suriname, and a regional project that promotes coordination and knowledge management. Through these efforts, the ASL aims to improve integrated landscape management and ecosystem conservation in priority areas of the Amazon. The ASL has been identified as a unique opportunity to promote collaboration and engagement along key matters that are of common interest between the countries (e.g., freshwater protection, indigenous governance, protected area management and financing, and sustainable and inclusive value chains for land and water natural resources). In the countries, governmental authorities or ministries lead the projects and execute them collaboratively with further public, private and non-governmental entities decided by the lead organisation. The preparation and implementation of national projects are supported and supervised by at least one of the internationally operating organisations involved in the ASL: the World Bank, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Development Bank of Latin America (CAF), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), or International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) Table 5.

Good Growth Partnership (GGP): Launched in 2017 and funded by GEF, GGP is led by UNDP and implemented in partnership with NGOs (Conservation International and WWF) and other international organisations (International Finance Corporation (IFC) and UNEP). With nearly \$500 million in total funding (GEF n.d.), GGP, in partnership with governments, civil society, and major private sector actors, aims to reduce deforestation by “plac[ing] sustainability at the heart of commodity supply chains” (GGP n.d.), particularly on soy, beef, and palm oil production, financing, and demand. GGP has been active in several regions in Brazil, Indonesia, Liberia, and Paraguay, and engaged actors in the USA, Singapore, China, and West Africa. The partnership is organised in supply, demand, finance, and coordination projects led by member organisations. Today, GGP is part of the Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration Impact Program (FOLUR).

Tropical Forest Alliance (TFA): Hosted by the World Economic Forum, TFA is a multistakeholder platform established to support collective action and private-sector commitments to eliminate deforestation from commodity supply chains, including palm oil, beef, soy, and paper (TFA n.d.). TFA was established by the Consumer Goods Forum and the US government in 2012 at the RIO+20 summit and encompasses now more than 170 partners from all sectors (6 international organisations, 19 public, 81 private, and 71 civil society). Operating through regional platforms and teams in Latin America, Southeast Asia, West and Central Africa as well as China, TFA convenes stakeholders to identify challenges, mobilize action, and promote collective supply-chain action, jurisdictional approaches, finance, and demand-side interventions.

1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People (1000L): Convened by the non-profit organisation EcoAgriculture Partners, 1000L calls itself “a radical collaboration of change agents

Table 5 Case comparison

	ASL	GGP	TFA	1000L
Lead organisation	World Bank (IO, state influenced)	UNDP (IO, ties to UN)	Hosted by World Economic Forum (IO, ties to private sector)	Convened by Eco-Agriculture Partners (NGO)
Partner mix	7 supervising partners (NGO, IO) 27 implementing partners (public, NGO) >40 collaborators (public, NGO, private, MSP)	5 co-founders (IO, NGO) 13 implementing partners (IO, NGO, MSP, private) 6 public leads, >60 public partners 7 strategic partners (public, NGO, MSP) 64 collaborators (NGO, academia, MSP, private)	19 public, 81 private, 71 NGO, 6 IO partners	5 co-leads (NGO, IO) 32 partners (NGO, academia, public) 21 supporters (private, NGO, IO) 5 collaborating MSPs
Timeline	Inception: 2015 Starts third phase in 2025	Inception: 2017 Since 2021/2022 part of Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration (FOLUR) Impact Program	Inception: 2012	Inception: 2021
Approach	Collaborative programmatic Integrated landscape management Four pillars: improved sustainable practices, more effective regimes and policies for sustainability, and collaboration and capacity building	Integrated approach “Transformation requires different types of interventions across multiple levels, sectors, and issues simultaneously, addressing supply systems, not just supply chains.” Three pillars: sustainable production, enabling transactions, responsible demand GGP works for clear policies, services and knowledge sharing to improve agricultural practices, and increased market awareness and consumer demand for deforestation-free commodities	Forest-positive collective action The Tropical Forest Alliance catalyzes the power of collective action and responsibility by convening, curating and communicating Four pillars: collective supply chain action, jurisdictional approach, demand side, finance	Integrated landscape management (ILM) radical collaboration of change agents working together to accelerate landscape efforts to sustain and restore ecosystems, build rural prosperity and confront climate change The shared vision of ILM builds on five elements: shared understanding, vision & planning, taking action, learning & impact, landscape partnership Five interconnected services: Terraso Digital Landscape Platform – mobile tool, Community Catalyst – sharing knowledge and building connections, Landscape Capacity Development – mainstreaming landscape thinking and practice, Landscape Finance Solutions, Global Hub – harmonising efforts

Table 5 (continued)

	ASL	GGP	TFA	1000L
Mission statement/goal	Objective: “to improve integrated landscape management and conservation of ecosystems in targeted areas in the Amazon region “	Mission: “The Good Growth Partnership works across numerous initiatives and with hundreds of actors in government, farming, conservation, finance and business to put sustainability at the heart of global commodity supply chains.”	Mission: “The Tropical Forest Alliance catalyses the power of collective action to drive the world’s transition to deforestation-free supply chains, ensuring a forest-positive future.”	Goal: “By 2030, landscape Partnerships are delivering sustainable landscape solutions across 1000 landscapes for 1 billion people—contributing powerfully to Sustainable Development Goals and aligning actions to meet global targets for addressing food and water insecurity, biodiversity loss, land degradation and climate change.”
Institutional structure	Administrative secretariat Supervising partners support national projects led by state actors National public lead chooses collaborators Regional coordination project for support	Steering committee with founders Separate projects for demand, financing, national production projects, and regional coordination	MSP organisation Multistakeholder steering committee Regional platforms And global team	Multistakeholder advisory group, multistakeholder steering committee
Area of operation	Amazon area: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, soon Venezuela Global/Regional: Technical Assistance Project	Countries: Brazil, Indonesia, Liberia, Paraguay Global Responsible Demand project Global: Adaptive Management and Learning Project	Regional platforms: Latin America, Southeast Asia, West and Central Africa, China Countries: Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Paraguay, Indonesia, China	Collaborating partnerships in Kenya, Spain, Colombia
Working principle	National projects led by countries follow national priorities	Three-pronged approach: financing, demand, production	Convenor of parties but everyone does what they want	Enabling change agents and local partnerships

Note: Abbreviations for partners: UN=United Nations, IO=International organisation, NGO=non-governmental organisation

working together to accelerate efforts to sustain and restore ecosystems, build rural prosperity and confront climate change” (EcoAgriculture Partners n.d.). With the co-leading partners from different sectors – Rainforest Alliance, Commonland, Conservation International, UNDP, Landscape Finance Lab and Tech Matters – and more than 20 additional partners sharing technical and financial expertise, 1000L engages globally with landscape

partnerships to facilitate integrated landscape management. Most partners are NGOs, CSOs, research institutions, or networks; few come from the public or private sectors. Advocating for integrated landscape management, the 1000L works towards the goal of enabling landscape partnerships to deliver sustainable landscape solutions, contribute to the SDGs and align actions to meet global targets for addressing food and water insecurity, biodiversity loss, land degradation and climate change (EcoAgriculture Partners n.d.). Focused on financing mechanisms, knowledge dissemination, advocacy, and collaboration, 1000L works with more than a dozen landscape partnerships (for instance in Kenya, Colombia, and Spain) to co-design and test solutions. 1000L has globally engaged with over 250 landscape partnerships.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethical approval All study participants provided informed written or recorded consent prior to study participation.

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