

Re-conceptualising Commitments to Sustainable Development in the 21st Century – Nurturing Action and Accountability in the Networked World*

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I INTRODUCTION

The 2012 United Nations (UN) Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20, was the largest UN conference in history. The goal of the conference was to renew the political commitment for sustainable development, and to assess remaining gaps in implementation of the outcomes of major summits on sustainable development. Rio+20 sought to produce a focused political document by which world leaders could drive action on “the future we want,” the tagline of the conference. Unlike the original Rio Earth Summit of 1992, no major legally binding treaties were signed and no significant funding mechanisms were mobilised. In the aftermath of the conference, many observers expressed discontent at the lack of an ambitious globally negotiated agreement to catalyse on-the-ground sustainable development results.

Yet such a narrow conception of the conference outcomes misses some of the major shifts and real progress that took place during the Rio+20 process. Heads of state and government from over 80 nations attended the three-day conference, as well as business leaders, mayors, entrepreneurs, academics, and activists. In all, more than 50,000 people participated in over 3,000

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events, with millions more around the world connected electronically. Rio+20 was perhaps the first truly global endeavour by the United Nations, and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described the process as “an undeniable global movement for change”.¹

In fact, while Rio+20 lacked globally negotiated treaties and funds, it produced an abundance of non-globally negotiated commitments and financial promises by cities, corporations, countries, and civil society groups. The UN announced that over 700 “voluntary commitments” worth more than \$500 billion dollars were registered with the Rio+20 Secretariat.² In the intervening months, there are now 1,382 commitments with a total portfolio value of \$636 billion or 1 per cent of world gross domestic product.³ Many of the commitments have the potential to leverage trillions of dollars in additional investments in sustainable energy, transportation, and cities, among other areas. The Secretary-General called the commitments the “bricks and cement” to build on the foundation of the globally negotiated agreement.⁴

There were also several cornerstone commitments that have the potential to be game changers for certain sectors. For example, 400 of the world’s largest companies in the Consumer Goods Forum, as well as the United States government, committed that their supply chains would become net-zero deforestation by 2020. The eight multilateral development banks committed \$175 billion by 2022 to finance sustainable transport, mostly in developing countries. A Higher Education Sustainability Initiative attracted pledges from over 250 universities in 50 countries to holistically integrate sustainability into their curricula and operations. The government of Australia committed to double the size of its marine protected areas, making them the largest network of reserves in the world.

Rio+20 put strong emphasis on the implementation of sustainable development. This paper refers to results-based promises from state, non-state, and various mixes of actors, as “multi-stakeholder commitments”, or simply “commitments”. Multi-stakeholder commitments refer to the variety of non-globally negotiated commitments to concrete deliverables that advance sustainable development results on the ground. Multi-stakeholder commitments come from “... all stakeholders and their networks to implement concrete policies, plans and programmes, projects and actions to promote sustainable development and poverty eradication.”⁵ Commitments are an integral and emerging part of the “means of implementation” (resource

¹ https://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/search_full.asp?statID=1588

² <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&nr=1304&type=230&menu=38>

³ <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2013/envdev1370.doc.htm>

⁴ https://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/search_full.asp?statID=1588

⁵ The Future We Want, United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, 2012, United Nations (2012a).

mobilisation including financial flows, technology transfer, and capacity-building) for sustainable development, which was the major stumbling block during global negotiations of the Rio+20 outcome document.⁶

This paper lays out a roadmap for how commitments can continue effectively mobilising public, private, and civil stakeholders for sustainable development action and accountability. The goal of the paper is to strengthen the normative standing of multi-stakeholder commitments as an integral element of the global governance architecture for sustainable development. Section II outlines the principles on which commitments, and sustainable development in general, are built. The third section describes three categories of commitment, and the advantages and synergies commitments have in relation to other agreement types. Section IV illustrates the network architecture of global governance that commitments embody, and the necessary coordination and coherence structures for networks. Section V outlines a framework for accountable commitments that draws on principles of mutual responsibility and mutual benefit for commitment-makers and stakeholders. The paper concludes with insights on how to integrate multi-stakeholder commitments into the global governance architecture, notably the new climate agreement and global development goals – both set to culminate on the 70th anniversary of the United Nations in 2015.

II PRINCIPLES OF COMMITMENTS

In many ways, multi-stakeholder commitments embody the core principles of sustainable development. Sustainable development is fundamentally about increasing participation in the shaping and sharing of values in and among networks around the globe. Shared responsibility for effective action on sustainable development problems requires participation and interaction from international to local levels. In this respect, multi-stakeholder commitments are an emergent property of the “new global partnership” called for by the Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda that can transform societies and economies through sustainable development (United Nations, 2013).

Commitments are embedded in principles of mutual benefit and responsibility. By forging participatory partnerships among actors, the mutual benefits are cumulatively greater than the sum of all individual actions. Multi-stakeholder commitments provide a platform to promote global solidarity, and move beyond an aid agenda to foster meaningful collaborations that direct

⁶ *Personal Observation.*

resources to solving enduring sustainable development challenges. In terms of mutual responsibility, commitments are based on reciprocal trust, transparency, and accountability. With the digital and data revolutions, the proliferation of commitments must give rise to a revolution in terms of accountability and transparency to all stakeholders. Together with global agreements, commitments can shift the paradigm of sustainable development to one of enhanced and mutual benefit and responsibility in 21st century globally networked society.

III THREE TYPES OF AGREEMENT

In the sustainable development arena, three overarching forms of agreement are recognised: (1) globally negotiated legally binding agreements; (2) globally negotiated non-legally binding agreements; and (3) non-globally negotiated commitments. The most effective of any of these agreements contain specific, measurable, achievable, resource-based, and time-bound (*SMART*) targets.

3.1 *Globally Negotiated Legally Binding Agreements*

The first agreement type is globally negotiated legally binding agreements that are deliberated by numerous state actors, often through negotiating blocs. Such legally binding agreements are often the singular focus of state and non-state actors in the multilateral processes, as there is often an assumption that legally binding agreements are superior to other types of agreement. However, international legally binding agreements do not automatically translate directly into concrete actions and behaviour changes. Legally binding agreements negotiated by states at the original Rio Earth Summit, on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification, all received an “F” grade from a 2012 article in the journal *Nature* for failing to deliver on their promises of implementation.⁷ The UN itself acknowledges the gaps between the stated aspirational goals of global agreements and their fulfillment in practice, often owing to the lack of specific targets that make it difficult to meaningfully measure progress (see United Nations, 2012b).

The challenges of globally negotiated agreements are magnified by the necessity of finding common ground among 193 sovereign countries. There is an inherent trade-off in globally negotiated settings between the stringency of commitments and participation in the agreement (von Stein, 2008). The consensus-building process for globally negotiated agreements often results in

⁷ <http://www.nature.com/news/earth-summit-rio-report-card-1.10764>

lowest common denominator outcomes, that even if fully implemented would not sufficiently address the magnitude of the challenges at hand. Even though globally negotiated legally binding agreements may be deliberated and ratified in good faith, the implementation of such agreements often falters or slows due to short-term domestic political pressures. With the protracted process of globally negotiated legally binding agreements, any treaty is likely outdated once it is ratified and signed and lacks easy mechanisms for iterative adaptation and improvement.

Many of the consensus-driven UN summits have resulted in broad documents, policies, and goals, and the action plans tend to be "... sprawling documents that offer something for everyone" (Victor, 2006). The responsibilities of states are often vaguely worded in global agreements given the sheer number of negotiating countries, leaving room for interpretation of procedures and actions. Scholars have noted that globally negotiated arenas – such as under Rio+20 and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change – avoid specific and concrete discussion about how to shift to a more sustainable, low carbon world economy, causing global negotiations to "... increasingly become disconnected from real-world policy" (Hodas, 2010; Suding and Lempp, 2007). It is important to recognise that the geographic scale of a threat, such as global climate change, does not determine that the geographic scale of the regime or solution also need be global (Cole, 2011).

3.2 *Globally Negotiated Non-Legally Binding Agreements*

Globally negotiated non-legally binding agreements are a second type of agreement made in the context of nation states. These agreements do not have legally binding obligation, but create institutionalised commitment through more discursive and normative means. There are usually few concrete incentives to improve behaviour or to sanction non-compliance. Because non-binding global agreements can sometimes be a first step towards legally binding global agreements, the two forms of agreement can serve as mutually supporting complements.

Non-legally binding agreements are often employed if states are unsure they have the strategic resources to credibly commit to a legally binding treaty (Betts, 2012). They present a flexible option, and are therefore often negotiated more expeditiously. Stakeholders with differing expectations and relationships informally monitor and encourage compliance with the agreement. In globally networked society, non-legally binding global agreements can be taken up by state, as well as non-state, actors that work to build domestic legal frameworks around them. Agenda 21, the Millennium Declaration, and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation are examples of agreements that pledge signatory states to general courses of conduct.

However, in both legally and non-legally binding globally negotiated agreements there is often slippage, or gaps, between the agreements among nation states and the results that come to bear in reality.

A central problem with state-based approaches is how globally negotiated agreements translate into sub-global actions. Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics winner Elinor Ostrom has written that "... global solutions negotiated at a global level – if not backed up by a variety of efforts at national, regional, and local levels – are not guaranteed to work effectively" (Ostrom, 2010). In the global sustainable development arena, recognition and promotion of sub-global reinforcing efforts are often lacking. The resulting "implementation gap" represents the failure to fulfil stated global agreements, such as the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2012c). The implementation gap also feeds back to the global level, contributing to the lack of ambition in international agreements as there are a paucity of reinforcing actions at other levels. An important lesson from global governance is that employing a single governance unit to solve global collective action problems, simply because of their global impacts, needs to be seriously rethought (Ostrom, 2010).

3.3 *Non-Globally Negotiated Commitments*

The final type of internationally recognised agreement is non-globally negotiated commitments or multi-stakeholder commitments, which include the "voluntary commitments" made under the aegis of Rio+20. Most sustainability problems with global effects are actually the cumulative effect of actions taken by many actors at smaller scales. Traditional collective action theory posits that actors will not voluntarily undertake actions that contribute to sustainable development without externally imposed regulations. Yet self-governance arrangements abound when the provision of a collective good has higher value to the constituents than the costs they are likely to incur providing it (Ostrom, 2010). While commitments do not generally have legally binding force, they do provide individual (and local) as well as collective (and global) benefits and may be highly visible in the eyes of the commitment-makers and their constituencies.

Just as most effective globally negotiated legally binding agreements contain *SMART* targets, so do most non-globally negotiated commitments. Different UN affiliated commitment registries vary somewhat in terms of commitment form, but all require relevance to sustainable development, at least one concrete deliverable, description of the resources devoted, and a clear timeframe for delivery.⁸ By registering with UN affiliated commitment

⁸ Chandavakar, N. *Personal Communication*.

registries, non-globally negotiated commitments are formally linked to the implementation of global goals negotiated at the global level. However, commitments can also be more informally linked but still contribute to implementing global goals. Implementation gaps are still present with non-globally negotiated commitments, but the context of the smaller stakeholder networks in which they are made encourages mutual benefit and responsibility and can allow for enhanced accountability.

Non-globally negotiated commitments represent a normative shift from “reaching agreement” to “implementation.” Globally negotiated settings often produce lowest common denominator agreements, while non-globally negotiated commitments and partnerships bring more ambitious and concrete results-based commitments that would not be achievable in a plenary assembly with 193 sovereign states. Non-globally negotiated commitments bring together coalitions of the willing to take further action than globally negotiated processes allow, and do not suffer from the same blocking power of unwilling partners (Sudding and Lempp, 2007). For example, Rio+20 intergovernmental negotiations were in gridlock over means of implementation, while just outside the doors the full range of stakeholders were committing tangible means of implementation for sustainable development, yet were largely dismissed.

Sustainable development commitments are performance-based and often quite specific in terms of their processes and outcomes. Non-globally negotiated commitments can enhance obligation, precision, and delegation, strengthening the institutionalisation and thus implementation of commitments (Liese and Beisheim, 2011; Sanchez-Cuenca, 1998; Abbott *et al.*, 2000). Greater obligation binds stakeholders to their commitment and compels responsibility through social contracts and license. The higher precision of commitments helps unambiguously define a course of action that translates abstract goals into concrete practices, such as through *SMART* commitments. A greater degree of delegation facilitates assigning the commitment through concrete plans and actions, and embeds mutual responsibility through internal and external monitoring and periodic reporting on commitment progress, as well as mechanisms for both positive and negative incentives for compliance mediated through constituency groups.

Non-globally negotiated commitments can also help “square the circle” between credibility and flexibility. The credibility of such commitments can be quite high as the commitment maker knows it has the strategic resources, or at least the gumption, to back its public commitment. Non-globally negotiated commitments may provide more flexibility than globally negotiated agreements because while actors commit to *SMART* deliverables, the nature of the commitment is often such that more deliberation can occur with its

constituents should the context of the commitment change in light of the rapid and often unexpected changes of the 21st century. They provide greater opportunity for experimentation, choice, and learning – key ingredients for successful governance and institutional frameworks (Ostrom, 2012a).⁹ A certain degree of flexibility also engenders greater and swifter participation (a major obstacle for globally negotiated agreements), as actors are more likely to make a commitment if they know they are not absolutely bound by it as changes occur in a complex world.

Ultimately, non-globally negotiated commitments as well as globally negotiated legally and non-legally binding agreements play a tripartite and complementary role in advancing sustainable development. These three agreement types do not exist in hierarchy, but rather each type is needed to compel action for sustainable development across transnational, national, subnational, and local levels. Global agreements are indeed necessary, but they are not sufficient.

Largely bottom-up structures that aggregate good faith commitments can synergise with largely top-down global agreements by connecting global goals with specific and tangible actions on the ground. Rather than being mutually exclusive, they form a portfolio of mutually reinforcing approaches that can evolve and adapt rapidly as the world inevitably changes. Decades of research have demonstrated that a portfolio of approaches at multiple levels is the best strategy to manage change and risk in a complex and interconnected world.¹⁰ Each commitment and action on its own falls short and some will inevitably fail, but together and synergistically interacting they are resilient over time and geographies.

IV A NEW ARCHITECTURE FOR A NEW WORLD

Each of the three agreement types described above requires architectures for successful implementation. While the architectures for globally negotiated agreements are more developed and well-known, architectures for non-globally negotiated commitments are more nascent. Robust architectures can help orchestrate multi-stakeholder commitments as means of implementation that aggregate to achieve the global goals sought by international agreements.

⁹ http://www.un.org/wcm/webdav/site/climatechange/shared/gsp/docs/GSP1-6_Background%20on%20Sustainable%20Dev.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/green-from-the-grassroots>

4.1 *Mapping the New World*

The model of multi-stakeholder initiatives as an element of the architecture for global sustainable development governance was innovated at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 hosted in Johannesburg, South Africa. The so-called “Type II outcomes” emphasised building social capital with associations of stakeholders that met certain criteria established by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. Type II initiatives were largely oriented around the form of the partnership and procedural relationships among actors.

There is a mixed record of success from Type II partnerships. A total of 348 partnerships were registered with the United Nations both during and after the conference, yet a review by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs revealed that only 198 were active as of Rio+20.¹¹ The remainder had either completed their deliverables or were disbanded. Perhaps the most important lesson learned from the Type II partnerships is that accountability matters and must be structurally embedded from the beginning into multi-stakeholder arrangements.¹²

In contrast to partnerships, the commitments registered at Rio+20 emphasised the *outcomes* of associations. Commitments usually involve an association or partnership (often with non-state actors, unlike Type II partnerships), but shift the emphasis from building social capital to actual implementation. Accountability is embedded in the Rio+20 commitments by requiring commitment-makers to periodically and publically report on progress made toward commitment deliverables. It also strengthened through external appraisals such as those conducted by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and by third party independent review of commitment progress such as reported by the Natural Resources Defense Council (United Nations, 2013; Stakeholder Forum and Natural Resources Defense Council, 2013). Both reviews recognise the significant progress on implementing select cornerstone commitments, but emphasise the need for structures that promote further action and accountability.

In her final speech as US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton called for a “new architecture for a new world” to address climate change and other pressing global challenges.¹³ She called for a world that is “more Frank Gehry than formal Greek”.¹⁴ The metaphor of the “old world” is the handful of big

¹¹ Chandavakar, N. *Personal Communication*.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/02/01/hillary-s-farewell-speech-read-the-transcript.html>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The network map highlights the centrality of some nodes compared to others. For example, the Clean Development Mechanism (red) occupies a central node in Figure 1. Scholars have argued that centrality is of great importance in networked systems because it holds a greater degree of influence over the network, even with entities that are not directly connected (Slaughter, 2012). Network centrality allows an organisation to assemble greater knowledge through enhanced cross-fertilisation of information. Additionally, centrality signifies some measure of prestige. Transnational institutions in the climate change network use limited organisational structure and engage in information sharing, capacity building, goal setting, and direct action on issues (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2012). The network map emphasises the growing interrelation among actors and the transition from pillars or ‘islands of governance’ to networks or ‘archipelagos of governance’ (Abbott, 2012).

4.2 *The New Architecture of Action Networks*

The Rio+20 commitment model represents a more participatory approach to global governance than past proceedings. The final paragraph (283) of the globally negotiated outcome document recognises the registry of commitments from Rio+20, and invited the Secretary-General to compile the commitments in an internet-based registry and facilitate access to other registries that have compiled commitments.¹⁶ Paragraph 283 also stated that the registry should be “periodically updated” in order to make information about the commitments fully transparent and accessible to the public.¹⁷ This mandate was realised with the release of the UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform (SDKP) website in late 2012.¹⁸

The Rio+20 commitments are somewhat loosely organised into archipelagos or networks of governance. The UN now recognises numerous commitment platforms or “action networks”: action-oriented communities where stakeholders collaborate, share information and resources, and foster accountability for sustainable development initiatives. Action networks are meant to “... catalyse and drive action and commitments from stakeholders and their networks to implement concrete policies, plans, programs, and projects in support of the objectives of the network”.¹⁹ Building strong commitments can be more effectively undertaken in small- to medium-scale governance units, such as action networks, that are linked together through information networks and monitoring at all levels (Ostrom, 2012a).

¹⁶ http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/66/288&Lang=E

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>

¹⁹ <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1069>

In addition to the registry on the Rio+20 Conference website, there are nine UN affiliated action networks to advance sustainable development on specific thematic areas or sectoral topics. These include: Small Island Developing States; Green Economy Policies; Sustainable Transport; Sustainable Cities; Sustainable Energy for All; the UN Global Compact; the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative; and the Every Woman Every Child Initiative. A breakdown of how many of the 1,382 total commitments were registered through each action network is provided in Figure 2. Some 200 commitments were individually registered though the Rio+20 Conference website and are, therefore, not associated with a specific action network, representing a somewhat different challenge for monitoring and encouraging the commitments. There are also many commitments that serve to advance global goals, and yet are not formally recorded by the UN.

Figure 2: *Breakdown of the Origin of Commitments at Rio+20*²⁰

<i>United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20)</i>	
Voluntary commitments individually registered	200
Sustainable Energy for All	120
UN Global Compact	125
Higher Education Sustainability Initiative	272
Green Economy Policies and Practices	302
Sustainable Transport Action Network	21
<i>World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSDD)</i>	
Partnerships for Sustainable Development	198
<i>Other Initiatives</i>	
Every Woman Every Child	144
<i>Total</i>	1,382

4.3 *Networked Governance for Sustainable Development*

Action networks are somewhat decentralised governance arrangements that steer networked organisations towards broader goals (Backstrand, 2006;

²⁰ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Special Edition of the *Sustainable Development in Action Newsletter*, July 2013.

Andonova, *et al.*, 2009). Like other networked governance arrangements, organisations hold independent authority and decision-making power. Network governance is also known as polycentric governance, and exists when “... multiple public and private organisations at multiple scales jointly affect collective benefits and costs” (Ostrom, 2012a). The commitments in the action network are not owned by anybody. Yet the grouping of commitments under action networks also creates many interdependencies. The diversity of organisations nested in action networks allows them to be more dynamic and adaptable than other institutional arrangements with more formal and hierarchical structures.

The benefits of being part of an action network accrue to the “club” nature of these structures. Clubs are groups of actors that are united by a common commitment to produce benefits beyond what regulations require. Association with action networks is based on certain requirements and extends the excludable and non-rivalrous benefits that are associated with the network’s image and standing. One example of a commitment club is the Consumer Goods Forum and USAID partnership to achieve zero net deforestation in corporate supply chains by 2020. This initiative brought together a coalition of willing actors to adopt more rigorous standards and procedures than regulations dictate for long-term mutual benefit, with success hinging on the compliance of members with the rules to which they have committed.

One of the advantages of action networks is that the barriers to entry are very low. However, low barriers to entry can also make the network more susceptible to diluted prestige through loss of rigour and credibility. Nevertheless, the first step in many successful voluntary programmes is ensuring that wide arrays of actors are part of the club. Low barriers also engage small- to medium-scale organisations that are linked together through diverse information and networks. Action networks must strike a balance between stringency of membership and participation to be both credible and flexible (Prakash and Potoski, 2006). As the network increases membership, compliance monitoring and standards can be ratcheted up to increase legitimacy and effectiveness.²¹

One example of ratcheting up from voluntary participation to more monitored coordination can be found in the Bologna Process to create a standardised degree system for European universities (Ravinet, 2008). The initial proposal was advanced by Western European ministers, but voluntarily signed onto by the other European countries. Even though the commitments were voluntary, the collective obligations were increased over time and members found them legitimate because they meshed with prevailing global

²¹ Cashore, B. *Personal Communication*.

norms. They were also justified in that countries used the collective process to implement national level reforms that were in their self-interest. Over time, the system evolved from one of voluntary cooperation to monitored coordination and implementation where countries felt obligated by their initially voluntary commitment. As long as nations felt they benefitted from the process, their sense of obligation and ownership grew with the cooperation-based approach. While the Bologna Process only involved state actors, lessons can be inferred for networks of state and non-state actors.

Commitments within action network architectures promote positive organisational behaviour. Actors linked through the network enhance their ability to influence and learn from one another. Members do not want the standing of the network to be degraded and, therefore, may monitor and encourage accountability from other actors and thus increase the likelihood of the commitment deliverables being fulfilled. The non-hierarchical structure allows members to tap into the network's resources through government, private sector, media, and civil society organisations. Access to additional resources and information enhances the credibility and likelihood of meeting a commitment.

Credible commitments and action networks engender stakeholder goodwill and enable partnerships and resource sharing that would not have been possible otherwise (Prakash and Potoski, 2007). Trust is of central importance in action networks, especially when participants are not able to engage in face-to-face interactions regularly. Structures that enhance trust and reciprocity among actors can encourage short-term costs to be undertaken for longer-term gain because actors believe most others are complying with the rules and they want to maintain a reputation for being trustworthy (Ostrom, 2010). Studies have shown that even without externally imposed rules, short-term actions that provide long-term benefits and risk reduction will be taken if they are carried out in an arena of trust and reciprocity (Ostrom, 2010).

Action networks can overcome some of the challenges in sluggish globally negotiated agreements where a convoy is only as fast as the slowest ship. By designing architectures that make it in the self-interest of organisations to share knowledge, resources, risks, reputations, and best practices, commitments within action networks can forge innovative synergies that become a source of collaborative advantage for participants. When sustainable development cooperation becomes both individually and collectively optimal for actors, it can help transcend the consensus requirements that stall many globally negotiated agreements.

4.4 *Orchestration of Action Networks*

Action networks often register individual commitments along thematic areas. However, they also have an orchestration role to encourage stake-

holders to make commitments and partnerships that provide information and resource support in order to advance broader societal governance goals (Abbott *et al.*, 2012). Orchestration stands in sharp contrast to hierarchical approaches as it acts indirectly through intermediaries and it exerts soft instrument control over those intermediaries. Orchestration serves to bring state and non-state actors together and highlights their symbiotic role in global governance. The glue that holds orchestration together are the common interests created by globalisation, and the need for diverse actors to cooperate in order to manage change in an uncertain and complex world (Abbott *et al.*, 2012).

The Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) is a hugely successful example of an action network architecture that orchestrates a commitment making and nurturing model. Commitments to the Initiative are organic, but its architecture seeks to increase the level of prescription and guidance, orchestrating commitments towards alignment with strategic global goals, as prudent. This also helps enhance centrality within the network. Often times, commitment-makers working on thematic sustainable development projects are not even aware of other actors working in the same region or even the same locality. Network centrality, or influence in a network without necessarily having a direct relationship, and up-to-date online registries can facilitate finding partners and increase the efficacy of commitment resources, especially in the developing world (Slaughter, 2012).

The UN Global Compact came to the realisation that there were far too many disparate initiatives in their action network related to water that were not aware of each other's work. They orchestrated an online map-based platform, called Water Action Hub, that "... assists stakeholders in efficiently identifying potential collaborators and engage[s] them in water related collective-action to improve water management in regions of critical strategic interest".²² The stakeholder-updated map allows organisations that are interested in water deliverables to synergise efforts to produce even greater impact. Such architectures serve to match the supply of commitments to their demand, helping all regions achieve progress across dimensions of sustainable development.

Another orchestration of action networks for development cooperation is UN South-South Global Assets and Technology Exchange (GATE).²³ The online platform orchestrates small and medium enterprises and entrepreneurs in the global south with a global network of investors and capital. The website features an exchange board where assets and technology can be featured and exchanged by interested parties. Such a transparent sustainable

²² <http://wateractionhub.org/>

²³ <http://www.ss-gate.org/>

development exchange platform provides tangible benefits to stakeholders in the global south and contributes to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and other global goals.

V ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH ACTION NETWORKS

There were a significant breadth and depth of commitments made at Rio+20, but the real test will be to continue to monitor their implementation and ensure accountability. Accountability of commitments is an integral part of ensuring long-term value to all stakeholders. The Secretary-General has made this point abundantly clear, stating "... the world is watching and will hold us all accountable to the commitments made in Rio".²⁴

5.1 *Mutual Accountability and Mutual Benefits*

Commitments in action networks rely on monitoring and reporting to ensure durable cooperation (Ostrom, 1990). Monitoring is one of, if not *the* most crucial characteristic in well-managed institutional arrangements (Ostrom, 2012b). Commitments registered within action networks must publically report on progress toward deliverables on a periodic basis, but there is no strong external accountability framework to verify action and extend rewards and sanctions as necessary. If periodic reporting is lacking on a commitment, action networks may wish to employ some form of graduated sanctions including dismissal from the registry and the concomitant resources and reputational benefits it provides. There are incentives for the network to assist in monitoring as removing free-riders enhances the reputation and mutual benefits of the network.

The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs has a three pillar model of accountability for commitments.²⁵ The first pillar is commitments are *SMART* when registered, which facilitates follow-up. The second pillar is accountable commitment makers, inviting them to self-report progress in real time through the SDKP which will contribute to an annual review published by the UN Secretariat each July. To avoid creating reporting fatigue, action networks can report on progress based on their individual reporting mechanisms and informal stakeholder dialogues. The third pillar is transparency and stakeholder participation, allowing all stakeholders to play a crucial monitoring role and hold commitment makers accountable to follow through. This pillar includes third party independent reviews of commit-

²⁴ https://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/search_full.asp?statID=1588

²⁵ Chandavakar, N. *Personal Communication*.

ments, such as by the Natural Resources Defense Council “Cloud of Commitments” initiative and reporting. External verification or “ground truthing” can focus more heavily on lagging deliverables than either self-reporting or the neutral UN Secretariat, and thus enhances the credibility of commitments and their action networks.

Such accountability platforms reduce the information asymmetries that often belie shirking of responsibilities and have hampered past approaches to global sustainable development partnerships (Biermann *et al.*, 2012). Independent review platforms provide a low-cost means for external stakeholders to assess an organisation’s internal programmes and activities, and to differentiate between organisations that are faithful to their commitment and those that are unfaithful, extending rewards and sanctions as necessary. Perhaps most importantly, mutual monitoring by actors and their constituents can build trust and iteratively adapt institutional rules (Ostrom, 2012b).

Active participation of constituents in the management and monitoring of sustainable development efforts is critical (Grafton, 2000). A wide range of actors is needed to develop solutions within a network architecture for implementation and accountability (Biermann *et al.*, 2012). Critically, this multi-level engagement and deliberation can help establish learning networks that work in the interest of institutions to meet their commitments and lead to the creation of adaptive governance within commitment architectures (Kanie *et al.*, 2012). Information and communication technologies grounded in the data revolution can be very effective for engaging geographically diverse constituents around commonly held values, shared ideas, and institutional membership.

Commitment-makers will not be accountable unless they also receive shared benefits in return for being part of the club. An effective accountability framework has social or financial sanctions (sticks), but perhaps more importantly provides structural incentives and benefits for actions that are beyond business as usual (carrots). One of the key ingredients of success in the CGI commitment model is how it emphasises benefits over punishments in terms of fostering accountability. CGI highlights the carrots for commitment-makers, touting public relations benefits through association with President Clinton and the CGI brand, as well as the media. Carrots also include additional resources and learning networks provided by CGI and other commitment-makers. Additionally, the multiple venues for face-to-face interaction and relationship forging among actors operating in the action network serve as one of the best mechanisms for accountability. This also creates space for commitment-makers to share not just successes, but failures and mid-course corrections that were made along the way.

The Every Woman Every Child movement spearhead by the Secretary-General is one of the most successful action networks with robust accountability structures. The network has advisors that look at all commitments holistically and send regular questionnaires to partners to solicit more information in order to spotlight progress or assist with mid-course corrections. The annual questionnaire self-reporting helps sustain momentum from leaders of commitment-making organisations. The action network also has an independent expert group that produces reports on the implementation of commitments, including progress towards globally negotiated goals such as the Millennium Development Goals.²⁶

5.2 *Accountable Commitments in Global Governance*

An additional benefit for commitment-makers is the ability to influence and advance global processes at the UN and elsewhere. Commitments such as those from Rio+20 are associated with the UN and can leverage its brand, goals, and values and translate them into a shared story that can reach out and engage many people beyond simply the action networks. Partnerships that work with a range of actors around shared goals and values have been endorsed at every single major UN conference starting with the Millennium Declaration in 2000.

Commitments and action networks will play a central role in the preparatory and implementation process of the post-2015 development agenda and future sustainable development goals. Multi-stakeholder commitments are a critical means of implementation for meeting global goals, and respond to the clarion call of the High-Level Panel to forge a “new global partnership” that generates a sense of ownership from all stakeholders for the goals (United Nations Publications, 2013). The work of the SDKP and action networks also furthers the Panel’s recommendations for platforms to improve the accountability and transparency of all commitments.

The Rio+20 outcome document created a new high-level political forum on sustainable development at the UN. The purpose of the forum is to follow up on the implementation of sustainable development and to provide a dynamic platform for regular dialogue, transparency and coordination of sustainable development activities (United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, 2012). Action networks, with the support of the high-level political forum, can play an orchestration role to catalyse, enrol, and support state and perhaps even non-state actors to make credible sustainable development commitments and ensure they are followed through in an accountable manner.

²⁶ Edjang, S. *Personal Communication*.

The next global climate agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is expected in 2015. Parties are seeking a universal agreement with legal force, yet many participants in the negotiations recognise the need for a framework that incorporates both legally binding and non-globally negotiated commitments (Yale Study Group, 2013). Effective commitments will require a framework for monitoring, reporting, and verification, enhanced publicity, and resources for developing countries that make and deliver pledges.

The Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in 2014 will seek multi-stakeholder partnerships and commitments for sustainable development as a parallel and complementary process to the negotiated outcome document. The focus will be on ensuring accountable commitments that do not leave behind implementation gaps. Leaders of SIDS have made commitments a priority, calling for “... strengthening of collaborative partnerships between SIDS and the international community.”²⁷ Such an agenda redefines development cooperation, moving beyond a hierarchical aid agenda and toward a network of stakeholders with shared benefit and responsibility in terms of successes and failures. The full potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships and commitments must be brought to bear in all of these processes in order to significantly bridge the sustainable development implementation gap.

VI CONCLUSION

Many observers declared Rio+20 a failure due to its less than ambitious globally negotiated outcome document. Yet the true success of any endeavour should be judged by its originally stated goal: to renew the political will for sustainable development and address implementation gaps. While the globally negotiated political will may have been tepid, the will of all stakeholders was nothing but renewed through new and strengthened commitments to sustainable development. The legacy of the “future we want” will rest heavily on the aggregate quality and the quantity of non-globally negotiated commitments to achieve specific, measurable changes in behaviour and policies that close the sustainable development implementation gap.

Multi-stakeholder commitments, supported by orchestration architectures such as action networks and registries, are an emerging form of global governance that can help address implementation gaps in multilateral state-led agreements and bring together actors from government, the private sector,

²⁷ <http://sids2014.org/index.php?menu=1507>

and civil society together to address collective problems. Commitments represent neither hierarchy nor anarchy, but a facilitative model of networked global governance for the 21st century. Sustainable development functions are performed by networks of independent and interdependent actors that mobilise resources for individual institutional benefit, as well as broader societal value.

The inherent complexity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness of sustainability challenges necessitates resilience. Diverse problems of sustainable development also require diverse institutions in order to create the necessary resilience. The most resilient institutional arrangements for embracing complexity and uncertainty, rather than ignoring them, are optimised networks. Networks facilitate rapid information sharing and sufficient organisational redundancies so that if one segment of the network fails, it does not bring the rest of it down as well. Networked global governance serves to increase institutional and social learning, trust, accountability, and ultimately implementation of sustainable development outcomes at multiple scales. Multi-stakeholder commitments are not a panacea, but can complement current and forthcoming globally negotiated agreements, such as the new climate agreement and sustainable development goals. However, even in the absence of globally negotiated agreements, commitments architectures can stimulate the practical yet transformative changes we need to truly realise sustainable development.

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