

# Explaining Variation in the Performance of Energy Partnerships

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## **Abstract:**

Why do some multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development address pressing environmental challenges successfully while others hardly show any results? This article theorizes variation in performance between the most effective and the least effective public-private partnerships in the sustainable energy sector. Two competing hypotheses are discussed. The first hypothesis, rooted in institutionalism, assumes that variation in performance is related to organizational structures and procedures. A higher level of institutionalization and an emphasis on process-oriented decision-making should enhance effectiveness. The competing hypothesis emphasizes the power of actors involved, expecting partnerships that involve key business players and powerful OECD states to perform better than those where powerful actors are absent. The analysis is both quantitative and qualitative, combining a detailed empirical study of a sample of multi-stakeholder partnerships with quantitative research based on a database of more than 320 multi-stakeholder partnerships in sustainability governance. We argue that the level of institutionalization is the most important factor influencing effectiveness, while powerful partners and internal organization can additionally enhance the influence of a partnership under certain conditions.

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## Introduction

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are often regarded as an institutional innovation to solve pressing sustainable development problems. For example, Börzel and Risse (2004) forcefully argue that such partnerships may help to overcome existing regulatory, implementation and participation deficits in global governance. Yet such positive expectations are also contested, and many authors cautioned against an overly optimistic view of multi-stakeholder partnerships in the field of sustainable development.<sup>3</sup> While some see partnerships as an important step in the development of multilateral global governance, others view them rather as a cover-up for interstate power struggles and as an indication of a privatization of international economic relations.<sup>4</sup> At present, more than 350 partnerships are registered with the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. But what does this number represent? Are all partnerships effective, and if not—why? Previous research on the entire population of CSD-registered partnerships indicates that these partnerships vary not only in function, size, goals and organization, but also in performance, with many partnerships being ineffective and, at times, not even traceable in empirical research.<sup>5</sup> The key question is then what explains these differences in performance between the most effective and the least effective partnerships.

This paper scrutinizes this question with regard to a sub-set of partnerships, that is, those focusing on energy. About 15 percent of all CSD-registered partnerships are dedicated to sustainable energy, which is primarily understood as the provision of energy from renewable sources or the popularization of means to economize the use of energy.

This article analyzes the causes of variation in the performance of partnerships measured by their activity and material output, thus inquiring into the potential effectiveness of partnerships. We assume that variation can be explained either by the internal structure of partnerships, especially the decision-making mechanisms, or by

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3. See UN 2005; Martens 2007. Also Streck 2002 suggests the UN agendas are too stagnant to cope with current global problems.

4. See Brühl 2002; Spaeth 2002.

5. See Andonova and Levy 2003; Hale and Mauzerall 2004, Biermann et al. 2007b.

the character of actors involved. Our study mixes qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis, thus attempting to move beyond the “case-study fallacy” that characterizes a large amount of recent research on partnerships. The results of both types of analysis suggest that a high level of institutionalization is needed for a partnership to function, while a specific tri-partite organizational structure and the involvement of powerful actors can additionally improve the effectiveness and scale of an initiative. The research shows, however, that even these modest features are more often than not absent in the universe of CSD-registered multi-stakeholder energy partnerships.

In the following sections we introduce the two competing hypotheses that may explain the variation in performance of partnerships, along with a brief review of the broader academic literature they are derived from. The next section discusses the methodology used in the qualitative and quantitative analysis. We then proceed with the analysis itself: first testing some assumptions derived from the competing hypotheses against statistical data, and second, through an in-depth analysis of selected partnerships. In the concluding section we discuss our core findings and avenues for future research.

## **Research Design**

This section presents the core hypotheses and research methods used in this analysis.

### *Explaining Variation in Partnership Performance: Competing Hypotheses*

Within the burgeoning field of study related to multi-stakeholder partnerships, there are essentially two core hypotheses that are brought forward to explain variation in the performance of such initiatives.

A first hypothesis, derived from International Political Economy and realist theories in International Relations, points to the power of the actors involved as the main explanatory variable. It posits that partnerships which involve powerful business actors and industrialized countries perform best. The reasoning behind this hypothesis is that considerable resources are needed to influence the activities of the energy sector worldwide. On this theoretical basis it can also be hypothesized that the most powerful and influential states will try to dominate specific partnerships, limiting access of other actors. Partnerships can then be expected to appear in areas that are strongly linked to

private business. Hypotheses centering on power can also be linked to neo-Gramscian theory. On this account, we expect powerful “Northern” states and for-profit private actors dominating successful partnerships, thus exercising hegemony under the cover of development aid and environmental initiatives.

A competing hypothesis, derived from institutionalist research traditions, posits that internal structures of partnerships influence their performance: in other words, partnership design matters. Variation in performance would then be related to the legal and institutional design as well as the internal organizational structure of a partnership.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, not the participants but the institutional arrangement in place influence performance. For example, it could be assumed that within an institutionalized and structured context of the partnership, a more process-oriented, deliberative decision-making procedure, in combination with network-style governance, enhances effectiveness.

### *Measuring Effectiveness*

The testing of the relative value of these competing hypotheses requires a concept to measure relative performance of partnerships. Assessing the effectiveness of partnerships is contested because the concept is often under-defined, weakly operationalized and hard to measure.<sup>7</sup> In the area of environmental governance in general, the impact of institutional arrangements on environment quality indicators has to be distinguished against the “background noise” of a large variety of other factors. Young emphasized here the need for large-*n* studies and medium-*n* comparative approaches (e.g. QCA).<sup>8</sup> Yet while the research program on international regimes has made significant progress in its scope, moving from single cases to large-*n* analysis based on a database,<sup>9</sup> the younger literature on transnational policy networks and partnerships is still dominated by small-*n* approaches. Often such studies bring interesting insights; but even though they provide measurements of effectiveness, they

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<sup>6</sup> See Mitchell 1994 and Barrett 1999, Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal 2001 making a similar argument about regimes.

<sup>7</sup> See Bernauer 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Young 2001, 100.

<sup>9</sup> See Breitmeier, Young and Zürn 2006.

often fail to identify reasons for variation in influence.<sup>10</sup> Our work draws heavily on the Global Sustainability Partnerships Database, which was developed precisely as an attempt to overcome these shortcomings and move partnership studies to a new level.<sup>11</sup> For this reason we combine a large-*n* quantitative and medium-*n* comparative qualitative research design.

In the light of the inconclusive debate on the possibilities and ways of measuring effectiveness of international institutions this study concentrates on *output* or the observable effects of a partnership's *activity*. If there is no output, there will be no outcome and no impact.<sup>12</sup> We define output as the operational effects of a partnership's activity—reports, research papers, analyses, draft legislation, disseminated information, conferences held as well as direct coping with problems defined as goals. It is especially important in the case of partnerships for sustainable development, as many of those registered with the CSD actually have visible activity—they stopped functioning, never really started or are for some reason inherently dysfunctional.

While activity alone suffices for some superficial analysis, an in-depth study needs to take into account in how far activity is related to specific functions. Only if a partnership is active in a way necessary to fulfill its function it can be ultimately effective. Within the GSPD, there are twelve types of activity coded for each partnership. These types of generated “effects” are linked to specific functions. In order to be able to (potentially) fulfill a function and thus (potentially) have some effects on a given sector, the activity of a partnership has to be in line with its functions.<sup>13</sup> A partnership is seen as partly fulfilling a function if it has at least one type of visible activity related to it. Working towards fulfilling a function is, however, not equivalent to making concrete progress against targets and reaching the partnership goals initially set out.

Within the context of this research we define the influence of partnerships as the sum of all the effects of partnerships measured by its observable activity.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10.</sup> See Mitchell 1994.

<sup>11</sup> See Biermann et al. 2007b

<sup>12</sup> The concepts of output, outcome and impact were introduced by David Easton in his political systems analysis. We chose, however, to replace the technical term ‘output’ with ‘activity’, although the former is used in the GSPD database.

<sup>13.</sup> Note that ‘function’ is an abstraction of the partnership goals as interpreted by the researcher. The coding of functions for all CSD partnerships was based on information provided to the CSD.

<sup>14.</sup> See Biermann et al. 2007b.

## *Research Methodology and Case Selection*

In testing these two conflicting hypotheses, we employed two methodologies. First, we studied all 46 energy partnerships registered with the CSD by analyzing data contained in the Global Sustainability Partnerships Database. The database is continuously updated and contains information on approximately 340 CSD initiatives. It accounts for a number of possible explanatory factors such as Actors (number, involvement of powerful states etc.), Design (inclusiveness of membership rules, flexibility, governance mechanisms, task division, institutional features etc.), Leadership (type, organizational leadership capacity), and Problem type. We used simple descriptive statistics to show how certain variables and their combinations correlate with the effectiveness (or rather – potential effectiveness measured in terms of observable activity) of energy partnerships. In addition, we conducted qualitative case studies on a sample of 10 partnerships (5 most and 5 least active). In order to structure the qualitative analysis of the selected partnerships, we use eight criteria of categorization, based on the literature on *policy networks*.<sup>15</sup> Categorizing partnerships along these criteria allows us to compare the partnerships in a structured way, while still being sensitive to the qualitative differences between them.

Our logic of proceeding is comparable to that of “nested analysis” proposed by Liebermann.<sup>16</sup> On the background of a large-n statistical study, we chose a sample of cases (divided according to the variation of the dependent variable they represented) and looked at them more closely. The sample selected for qualitative investigation thus covers 20 percent of the whole energy partnerships population. The “top” cluster consists of five partnerships chosen on the basis of two GSPD variables: aggregated activity

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<sup>15.</sup> See Van Varden 1992, Jordan and Schuber 1992, Börzel 1998. The criteria proposed are actors, function, structure, institutionalization, power relations, scope of the arrangement, homogeneity and the issue network vs. umbrella initiative dichotomy.

<sup>16</sup> Liebermann 2005

(output) and an expert survey<sup>17</sup> that ranks partnerships in a number of functional areas, giving a reliable general description of the partnership's potential influence.

The “top” cluster comprises of the Global Gas Flaring Reduction Partnership, Methane to Markets (M2M), Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP), Renewable Policy Network for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (REN21), and the International Solar Energy Society (ISES). Considerable differences between these partnerships are observable. The Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership is by far the largest, with 262 organizational partners involved, while the Global Gas Flaring Reduction Partnership has only 12 partners. Other important differences, allowing for the observance of variation in the explanatory variables are also present and will be discussed below.

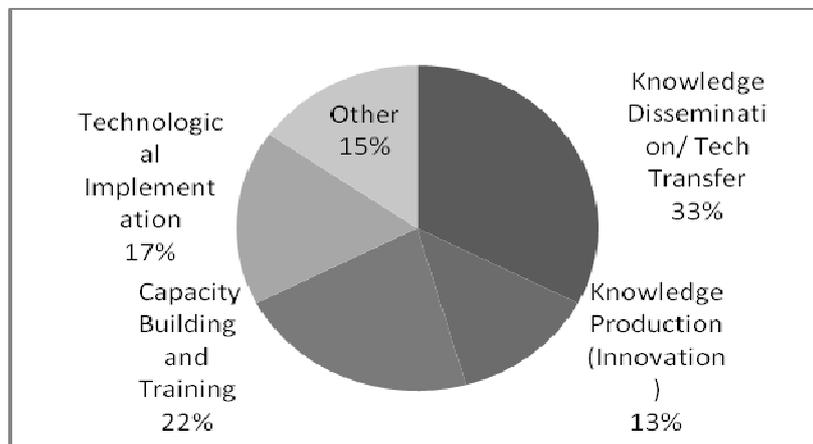
As for the “low activity” partnerships, from the set of energy partnerships not generating traceable output five were actually operational in 2007, that is, were empirically traceable as established and had a specified operational timeframe. It is important to note that 21 of 46 energy partnerships are currently inactive. Five of these were launched but stopped working after an agreed period, but the remaining 16 have either not started yet or were never operational. This problem relates to all CSD partnerships, of which 156 (47 percent) are for one reason or the other inactive. The chosen cluster of “low activity” partnerships thus consists of: African Energy Legacy Projects (AELP), The LPG Challenge, Pacific Islands Energy for Sustainable Development (PIESD), U.S. Clean Energy Initiative (US CEI) and the International Renewable Energy Alliance (REN Alliance). Among these, two were completely unknown for the experts surveyed, while the U.S. Clean Energy Initiative is mentioned quite often—ten times.

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<sup>17</sup> The expert survey was conducted as part of the Works on the GSPD database. It measures the variable of ‘expert mentioning’ – a proxy for partnership’s visibility and acknowledged activeness in the field.

## **Quantitative Analysis of Energy Partnerships**

Energy partnerships within the CSD sample are working towards meeting the goals of sustainable development mainly through knowledge dissemination, technical implementation, building of institutional capacity and innovation. This means that only eight out of 46 partnerships were actually established to create new energy infrastructure on the ground, most of them seem to provide various types of information (fig. 1).



**Figure 1- Main Functions of Energy Partnerships**

Although the provision of information may seem to be a rather “soft” goal, 47 percent of energy partnerships have no traceable signs of activity. Among all the CSD partnerships, 37 percent do not generate output at all, placing energy-related initiatives significantly above average in terms of dysfunctionality. This is an interesting observation if we bear in mind that energy partnerships are a very important set, attracting much political attention. In the remainder of this section, we try to answer why this dysfunctionality occurs, not only through looking at the zero-activity initiatives, but more importantly by showing the common characteristics of most successful initiatives. What is the most important factor affecting variation in visible

activity? Is it the presence of important governmental and business actors, or rather partnership design and internal governance patterns?

### *The Impact of Important Actors on Partnership Activity*

According to the “powerful actors” hypothesis, effectiveness of partnerships is related to the power and resources of important partners, who have an interest in the initiative’s activities. This should mean that influential partnerships (those showing high activity) are led by powerful states or business actors, and also that ineffective initiatives should have many small developing states or NGOs as partners. Our data shows that states are indeed reluctant to give away control over energy initiatives to private actors—two thirds (30) of partnerships in this sector are led by states (16), intergovernmental organizations (8) or UN-system organizations (6). But the fact of having a public actor as main partner does not necessarily improve their effectiveness, as the activity/no-activity ratio remains the same for these thirty publicly-led initiatives as for the whole energy sample (47 percent). Just under two thirds of all CSD partnerships are public-led, and 44 percent of these have no signs of activity, therefore energy partnerships do not stand out from the average. Only 16 energy partnerships are led by private entities, in four cases business (among them the LPG Challenge Partnership) and in two NGOs. Only one (World Nuclear University) of these six are active. This suggests that there is very little correlation between the type of lead actor in a partnership and its effectiveness measured in the most basic terms of activity.

Only 7 out of 16 state-led initiatives have signs of activity, suggesting that states (no matter if they are powerful or not) are even less effective leaders than IOs. However, if we only look at the partnerships with a high OECD state participation (over 4 OECD states as partners) we receive a set of seven partnerships, six of which have visible activity, and with three out of five “high-activity” cluster partnerships among them (M2M, REEEP and REN21). Additionally narrowed down to those state-led partnerships that also have at least one EU member as partner, we receive a fully operational and active sample. Only 15 of the total 330 CSD partnerships meet the same criteria, and all show activity. This finding is very interesting and seems to be consistent with the “powerful actor” hypothesis. The role of EU states, different in terms of political culture, can be crucial in this matter. If we include partnerships with high OECD representation, but no EU state, the very narrow sample is quite ineffective.

This can be read as an argument supporting a hypothesis that decision-making culture that matters, and that is linked to the specific deliberative decision-making style represented by the continental EU states then these should be present in these effective partnerships.

So far only the initiatives led by either states or businesses were analyzed. But a combination of powerful state and business partners is also very common. As the example of the largest energy partnership, and one of the largest CSD registered partnerships—REEEP—it is precisely the combination of both which can lead to high influence. 72 percent of the energy partnerships that have both OECD states and private for-profit actors as partners are visibly active (among them four out of five partnerships forming the “high activity” cluster). It does not matter if the OECD states are also from the EU. This correlation is even stronger for the overall CSD population, where over 80 percent of partnerships with both OECD states and businesses show signs of activity (82 percent if the OECD state is actually leading the partnership).

This does not prove that the involvement of powerful actors explains high performance, since the data indicates merely a positive correlation but not necessarily a causal relation. To nuance the answer a bit, let us just mention that if additionally the partnerships’ internal structure is taken into account—by filtering out only the initiatives with network-type steering (non-hierarchical) we find that 91 percent of partnerships meeting all these criteria are active. OECD and business involvement plus network-type steering—is perhaps a formula for success, but not an explanation. Again, the conclusion can be that on the basis of a statistical study it is not possible to explain the difference in influence, although the correlation observed is quite strong. However, the suggested “formula” mixes variables from two realms—the one external to the partnership itself, comprising of actors, and the internal structure.

### *Number of Actors—Cause or Consequence of High Effectiveness?*

Following the path of the “actor power” hypothesis, one could suggest that larger partnerships are “more powerful” and should thus perform better. The energy partnerships with visible activity are highly diversified. Their size, measured by number of partners, varies from 2 to over 250 (REEEP), giving an average of 46 partners. This makes them much bigger initiatives than the group of partnerships with no activity, which have on average less than ten partners. The average number of partners in CSD

partnerships is 17.2, suggesting that active energy partnerships are more effective because they are larger (the average number of partners in all active partnerships is 29). It is also likely that they are larger because they attract more partners, and they attract more partners because they have visible activity. Then again, they gain new partners who bring in new resources and in turn enhance activity even further. The primary reason for activity is not the number of partners, as every partnership at some point had to start with only a handful of stakeholders. Effective energy partnerships simply gather more partners (which can be interpreted as getting more attention) than ineffective partnerships on average, supporting the claim that sustainable energy is now the place to be. Only an analysis of concrete cases in time, showing the growth of specific partnerships, could help in directing the causal arrow one way or the other. That sort of analysis is of course beyond the scope of *large-n* methods alone.

### *Linking Internal Structure to Activity*

The character of internal structure can explain partnership performance both at the most superficial and at deeper levels. The most evident finding is that energy 79 percent of partnerships that are operational (have updated the CSD database since 2005), and have their own functioning websites have visible activities. Another seemingly banal, but as we shall see immensely important factor is staff. Partnerships institutionalized in the form of an actual organization, having its own dedicated staff, are visibly active. This is not surprising; it only means that people getting paid to work for a given initiative are doing their job. What is much more interesting is that having staff is not a basic characteristic of CSD-registered initiatives. Only 10 out of 46 energy partnerships have staff. In the CSD population the ratio is 30 percent—still very small.

A similar observation can be made for another factor typical for organizations – corporate identity, usually associated on the very minimal level with having a “brand” name, a logotype and concentrating efforts under corporate “colors.” Only 11 energy initiatives have a corporate identity thus defined, and ten of them are also active.

If sustainability partnerships are to become the institutional answer to the global problems of our times and an effective challenger to “classic” international organizations should they not reach at least a minimal level of institutionalization? If two thirds of initiatives registered with the CSD do not even have people working in their name on a daily basis, how can they be expected to make an impact?

Institutional variables can have a much stronger influence on the dependent variable; but again, to show that a much more in-depth approach is needed. On the basis of statistics alone no conclusive explanation of partnership performance can be made. Neither the “actor power” hypothesis nor its “decision-making style” competitor can be refuted or sustained. The former seems to have more support in the data, but it is rather showing a path to follow than explaining a mechanism. The hypothesis linking performance with internal structure and decision-making style could not be properly “tested” using the GSPD, as the data set does not contain the necessary variables. Apart from the positive correlation of OECD and business partners and activity-generating capacities, the main finding of this large-*n* analysis remains on a rather critical level.

One of the most important discoveries is that more than half of sustainability partnerships do not have traceable activity, that nongovernmental organizations do not seem to have any impact on partnerships’ effectiveness and that the level of institutionalization and organization of CSD initiatives is low. This is why most efforts in the following sections are channeled to explaining the success of certain rare cases, rather than explaining dysfunctionality. In the remainder of this paper we will not only take into account the fact of having or not having staff, but also the actual decision-making scheme, steering mechanism and structure.

## **A Qualitative Assessment of Energy Partnerships**

While quantitative data can be used for an overview of the CSD partnerships operating in the energy sector, and can show general tendencies, there is a need to look into the actual structures of partnerships in order to explain variation in their performance. For the comparative analysis of the ten partnerships forming two clusters—“high activity” and “low activity” groups were described using nine criteria discussed in the methodological section. The two clusters are first briefly compared to show why the five dysfunctional partnerships cannot be expected to be as successful as the five “champions”. We subsequently discuss three problems with partnerships in general, well illustrated by the “low activity” cluster. We conclude with an explanation for variation in partnership’s problem-solving capacity.

### *Explaining failure—why some partnerships cannot be effective*

Five partnerships forming the “low activity” cluster are ineffective because they lack problem-solving capacity. Even if the activity-coding is slightly biased in favor of larger partnerships that are able to invest substantial resources into their public relations and communications programs, it can be stated that from an “objective” point of view, these initiatives are formally active, but are doing almost nothing to fulfill their goals. It is much easier to explain their failure than to account for their counterparts’ success.

Firstly, the level of *institutionalization* of our “low activity” sample is on average very low. For example, the *African Energy Legacy Projects* is a joint venture of energy producers rather than an international organization (SADC 2009; SAPP 2009). The “initiative” is lead by the South African ESKOM, but even the single company’s employee directed to represent the AELP is unreachable, or does not work for ESKOM anymore (CSD 2009). The *LPG Challenge* resembled a UNDP project rather than an actual formalized partnership. Its vagueness is evident by the fact that the initiative has two different names (also LP Gas Rural Energy Challenge) under which it can be traced, diminishing its corporate identity. The *Pacific Islands Energy for Sustainable Development* (PIESD) is a programme, undertaken to implement a policy document, realized by SOPAC—Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission. The SOPAC (2009) website does not list PIESD at all. Additionally, the “partnership” has recently been subsumed under the larger REEEP. The first major problem of ineffective partnerships is then the lack of institutionalization in form of an independent entity. This results in the unclear structure of most such partnerships. This does not mean that they are grass-root arrangements. Usually they are just proposed initiatives, which have never been fully made operational. Most of them are inactive, but those that claim to be, are also doing very little, perhaps because there is no one to work in the name of a given partnership. Neither the actors’ power nor the style of decision-making can have any impact in that case. But OECD and business involvement can make a difference, by introducing good practices to the workings of such partnerships (e.g. the PIESD newsletter issued after the signing of a memorandum of understanding with REEEP [PIESD 2007]). Minimal institutionalization, self-reports, website—all these could be achieved with small cost and effort. Once a formal structure is established and a partnership becomes fully operational, the style of decision-making can also play a role. In that sense, institutionalization is the absolutely basic factor leading to partnership’s effectiveness. All “high activity” partnerships are highly institutionalized, usually in a

typical form of international organizations with steering committees and secretariats (cf. Szulecki 2009).

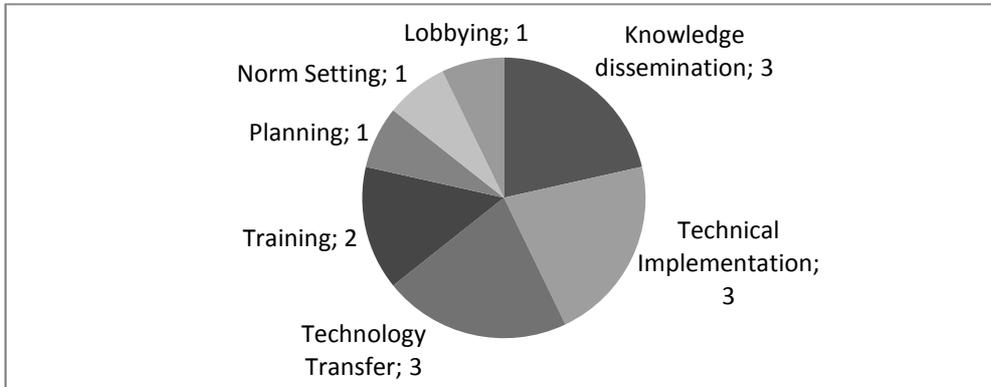
Secondly, ineffective partnerships can be *purposefully not institutionalized*, as they often play a role of *brands* rather than actual organizations. The two remaining partnerships from the “low activity” cluster—U.S. Clean Energy Initiative and the REN Alliance—are examples of such “brands” or “labels”. Their role is to be an umbrella for other existing partnerships, organizations and programs, but they themselves have neither staff nor actual resources to perform any functions. The US CEI (2009) is only a name given to a wide range of American-led programme and organizations. Although it brings together very powerful actors (US Department of State, EPA, USAID, WHO, UNDESA, the World Bank, UNDP), it has little actual action capacities. But knowing that it is only a “brand” sticker for numerous other initiatives can explain the very high expert “mentioning” score of US CEI. The REN Alliance is a coalition of four actual RE organizations (REN Alliance 2009).<sup>18</sup> They are all active and visible in the energy sector, some for more than half a century (ISES), but the advocacy projects bearing the REN Alliance brand are performed by individual member organizations. It is the only “low activity” partnership with a website and a logotype. Nevertheless, it has no visible activity of its own (GSPD 2008). The question is then why such initiatives are established in the first place? Why create a partnership which is meant to do nothing concrete and has no chance of success? To answer these questions, we must first problematize the concept of “success”. As Beisheim and Dingwerth<sup>19</sup> point out, we first need to ask: *success for whom?* Success from the perspective of founders or members at large is not necessary the same as “objective” success from the perspective of the entire society or the environment. And so, what may seem as unacceptable waste of resources and attention—multiplying the number of dysfunctional sustainability initiatives—can well be explained by publicity and “synergy” profits for the partners. It is definitely better to have a broad portfolio of partnerships in various sectors than have none or just a few, even if they are active. This explains, to some extent, the alarming ratio of inactive and ineffective partnerships in the CSD register.

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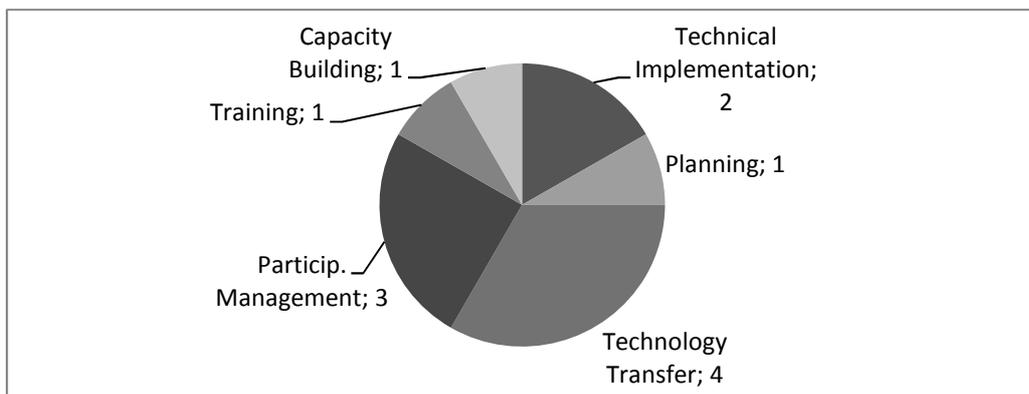
<sup>18.</sup> The International Geothermal Association (IGA), the International Hydropower Association (IHA), the *International Solar Energy Society* (ISES) and the World Wind Energy Association (WWEA).

<sup>19.</sup> Beisheim and Dingwerth 2008, 6.

Thirdly, “low” and “high activity” partnerships vary significantly in terms of the functions they are meant to perform (As coded in the GSPD. See: figures 2 and 3).



**Figure 2—“High activity” Cluster Functions**



**Figure 3—“Low Activity” Cluster Functions**

The most visible difference is the emphasis on participatory management, technology transfer and technical implementation among the “low activity” partnerships, in contrast with knowledge dissemination as one of the key functions for “high activity” ones. Insofar as the “laggards” do not have any visible sins of activity at all it is not possible to see any function-activity fit. What needs to be noted, however, is that participatory management and technical implementations are difficult to achieve, and none of the “high activity” cluster initiatives manages to have any influence in this area either. In other words, the third reason explaining ineffective partnerships’ failure is the choice of functions and goals that are very difficult to reach. This is not wrong in itself, but may account for the weaker performance. As figure 1 shows, energy partnerships rarely take up the more difficult functions. Do “high activity” partnerships

perform that well, in contrast to the “laggards”? The function-activity fit analysis shows a more complex relationship.

*Making Noise and Making a Difference: An Analysis of Function-Activity Fit*

Activity, or output, is not equivalent to problem-solving capacity and ultimately effectiveness. It is rather an indicator for potential influence and success. In order to be considered successful in terms of making progress against certain predefined targets, a partnership is expected to be active in ways fulfilling its functions. Having many types of activity does not necessarily have to directly help in reaching goals, it does, however, add to publicity. On the other hand, less types of activity concentrated only on function fulfillment can be seen as an indicator for potential effectiveness. Activity-generating partnerships vary significantly with regard to their function-activity fit. Some initiatives have activities, but related to the “wrong” function (that is, not the one initially declared for the partnership to perform), while others only produce few types of activity, but focused precisely on the actual function to be fulfilled.

<b>P-ship</b>	<b>Function I and related Activities</b>	<b>Function II and related Activities</b>	<b>Function III and related Activities</b>	<b>Excess Activities (fraction of total)</b>
GGFRP	<b>Knowledge Dissemination 3/4</b> Training, Workshop, Conference participation	Technical Implementation 0/1 -	<b>Technology Transfer 2/4</b> Training, Workshop	Research, Standards, Policy, Self-Reports <b>(4/7)</b>
M2M	<b>Planning 3/4</b> Policy, Workshop, Conference participation	<b>Technology Transfer 2/4</b> Workshop, Infrastructure and Technology transfer	<b>Training 1/2</b> Workshop	Advocacy, Self-Reports, Database, New Institutions <b>(4/8)</b>
REEEP	<b>Knowledge Dissemination 3/4</b> Database, Workshop, Conference participation	Technical Implementation 0 /1	<b>Norm Setting 1/1</b> Standards	Advocacy, Self-Reports, New Institutions <b>(3/7)</b>
REN 21	<b>Lobbying 2/2</b> Policy, Conference Partici-	<b>Knowledge Dissemination 2/4</b> Workshop, Conference Par-	-	Research, Advocacy, New Institutions <b>(3/6)</b>

	Function	Activity	Function-Activity Fit	Excess Activities
ISES	<b>Training 2/2</b> Workshop, Training	<b>Technology Transfer 2/4</b> Training, Workshop	Technical Implementation 0/1	Research, Advocacy, Policy, Conference participation <b>(4/6)</b>

**Table 1—"High Activity" Partnerships" Function-Activity Fit and Excess Activities<sup>20</sup>**

The Mediterranean Renewable Energy Program (MEDREP) has only three types of activity, yet they act towards the fulfillment of two out of three of its functions. An even better example is the “Energy for Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Development” initiative, which has only one type of activity, but it is also (ideally) helping it in reaching its goals in two out of three areas. The “high activity” cluster contains only two partnerships fulfilling all of its functions—M2M and REN21.<sup>21</sup> However, the remaining three “champions” are performing relatively well and act towards two out of three functions (table 1). The degree to which a function is fulfilled is impossible to measure, but this analysis is based on the hypothesis that potential influence is a good and viable indicator of performance.

And yet it is important to note is that types of activity are very diversified in the efforts and resources needed to generate them. Conference participation or even workshop organization are hardly related to infrastructure construction. Three partnerships in the “high activity” cluster have Technical Implementation as their function, but none of them has matching visible activity. AELP, one of the “laggards”, was established to fulfill this function alone—and so far it fails. Should AELP finally complete the

<sup>20</sup>. The table presents the activities of given partnerships (in the GSPD) categorized according to the three functions coded for each partnership in the Database. The fourth column lists activities-output not related to any of the three functions. For each function, the activities of a partnership are shown as a fraction of all the types of activities that are aimed at fulfilling this function. The activity types not related to function fulfillment are shown as a fraction of the total activity types of a given partnership—thus showing what part of its activity is not related to the actual goal fulfillment.

<sup>21</sup> In the total whole sample of energy partnerships there are six other initiatives that also manage to concentrate their efforts in activities that should eventually result in the fulfillment of their envisaged functions. These are: Asia CDM Capacity Building Initiative, CLASP, GNESD, PEPS: Promoting an Energy-efficient Public Sector, RERE, and The Electricity Governance Initiative.

construction of at least one transmission line improving the Pan-African electric grid, it would reach a very important and measurable goal—perhaps its actual impact would be much more important than that of the whole “high activity” cluster combined. But the functions chosen by the energetic “top 5” are usually much more modest. Three of them aim at knowledge dissemination, three at technology transfer, two at training and the remaining functions are planning, lobbying and norm setting. All of these functions relate to information and “know-how” dissemination.

Another relevant observation is the amount of excess output generated as a result of activities not related to initially declared functions. If we exclude the possibility that this “bonus” activity is a result of theoretical and methodological shortcomings (the explained subjectivity of function-activity fit analysis, meaning that the so called “excess activity” could in fact be perceived by the partnership itself as fulfilling its core functions), the remaining conclusion is that active partnerships are putting effort and resources into irrelevant activities. Irrelevant again from the perspective of the general public, in the sense that the partnership is not working towards goals and impact but rather working just for the sake of it. For all five “high activity” partnerships, at least half of the performed activities cannot be meaningfully related to its functions. If we assume that such mode of operation is using many resources, which could have been channeled towards progress against important targets, it turns out that even the most effective energy partnerships are quite inefficient.

This last point of critique should not divert our attention away from the fact that more than 50 percent of all CSD partnerships are showing hardly any activity related to achieving their sustainability targets. Among them, the “high activity” cluster partnerships are real “champions”, and in the remainder of this chapter we consider different explanations for their relatively good performance.

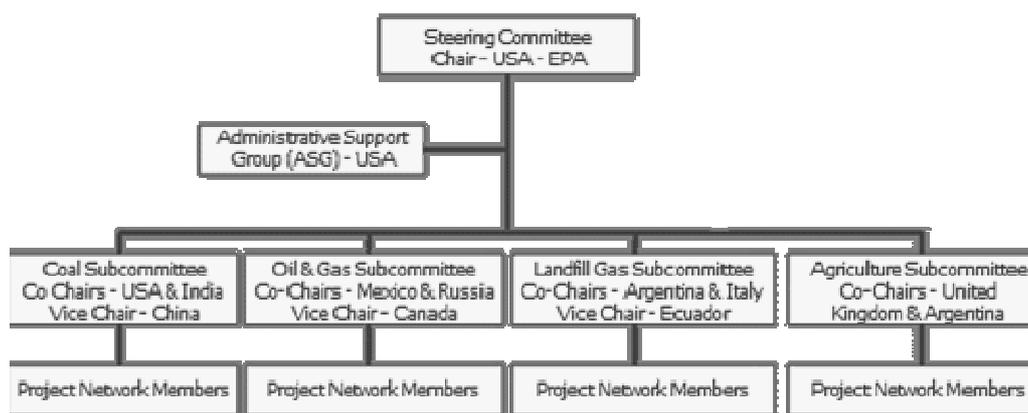
### *Structure Matters: Explaining Problem-solving Capacity through Internal Organization*

An inductive study of the five most effective energy partnerships shows that they have common features at the level of internal organization, which can be seen as increasing performance. While the very low level of institutionalization among the “low activity” partnerships is the key reason for their dysfunctionality, the energy sector “champions” are highly institutionalized and have robust organizational structures (cf. Pattberg et al.

2008). This helps them work towards the achievement of their goals, despite the fact that all these initiatives are very diversified (with the exception of the GGFR).

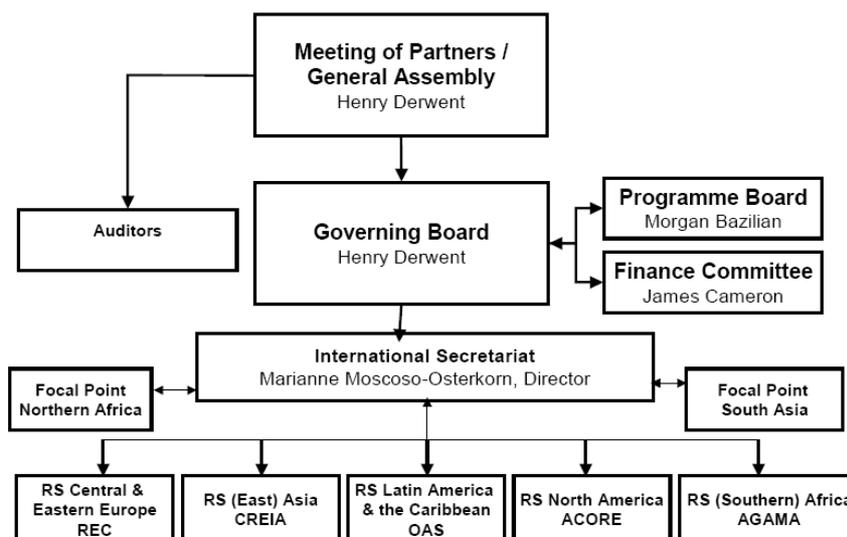
There are two important structural features in “high activity” partnerships that play a role in increasing problem-solving capacity. The first is the management structure, resembling international organizations, in which three elements are present: a general assembly representing all the partners/members, a smaller executive board performing regular activities, and an administrative as well as representative secretariat which keeps the organization running. The second feature is the presence of sub-bodies organized either along specific issue areas or geographic location, allowing for the constant reception of important signals from the organization’s environment.

All of the “high activity” partnerships show elements of the structure mentioned above. Methane to Markets (fig. 4) has a permanent Steering Committee, which comprises of maximum two delegates from each of the partner-states (M2M 2009).



**Figure 4—M2M organizational structure (source: [www.methanetomarktes.org](http://www.methanetomarktes.org))**

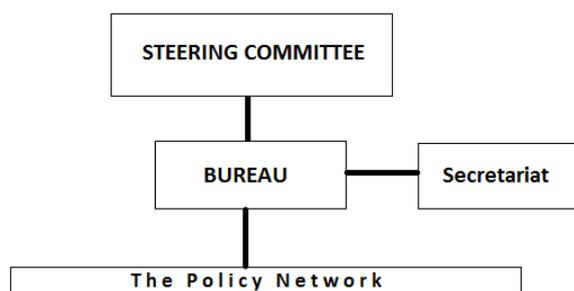
The Steering Committee meets regularly, but the day-to-day administrative activities are taken care of by the Administrative Support Group (ASG), the partnership’s effective secretariat. Sub-committees act both as lower level executive, and focused governance organs. In the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (fig. 5) the division between the permanent executive body and the general assembly is much clearer (Szulecki 2009). The Head of the Governing Board (executive) is also the chair of the annual Meeting of Partners.



**Figure 5—REEEP organizational structure**  
(source: REEEP 2009)

The organizational backbone of the partnership is the International Secretariat, employing 8-10 permanent staff members. It not only deals with the administrative and coordination issues, but also engages in lobbying activities and public relations (Moscoso-Osterkorn 2005). The Programme Board and Finance Committee are elements of a complex yet transparent decision-making structure, which also involves Regional Secretariats (with permanent REEEP staff) and Focal Points.

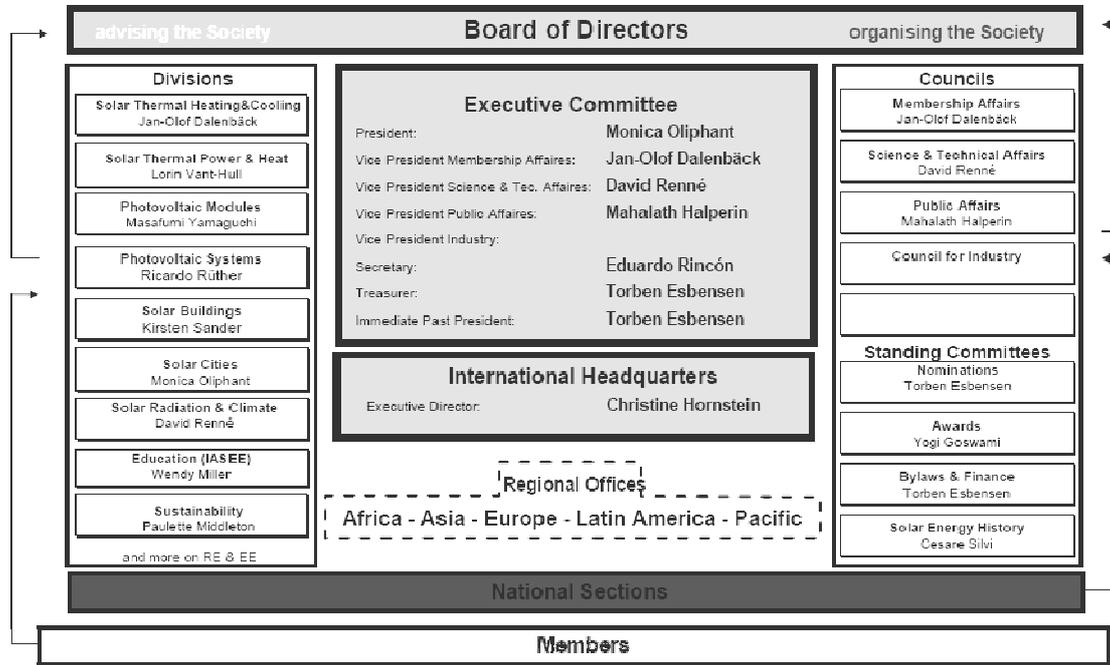
This core structure is also visible in the Renewable Energy Policy Network for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (fig. 6). The Steering Committee in this case is the larger assembly, while the day-to-day executive is the elected standing Bureau (REN21 2009).



**Figure 6—REN 21 organizational structure**

Again, the administrative and representative functions are performed by the permanent Secretariat, which is (as in the case of REEEP) the main carrier of the partnership's corporate identity. Being an actual international non-governmental organization (with

a 54-year track record), the International Solar Energy Society has the most complex structure of the “high activity” initiatives. It is, however, possible to distinguish the same core organs as in the three already discussed initiatives (fig.7).



**Figure 7—ISES organizational structure (source: ISES 2009)**

In the ISES, the Board of Directors acts as a steering committee, with the Executive Committee as the permanent executive body. The International Headquarters in Freiburg is only a different name for a typical secretariat. Additional bodies such as the Divisions, Councils and Standing Committees diversify the executive, while Regional Offices and National Sections act as local secretariats and focal points for the organization. Only the last “high activity” partnership does not have the tri-partite core developed in full. The Global Gas Flaring Reduction partnership is coordinated by a temporary secretariat at the World Bank, and a Steering Committee was only planned to be established (GGFR 2009).

All this supports our argument that such tri-partite structures enhance the potential effectiveness of a partnership. The secretariat is a nodal point, which in a way “is” the organization; that is where the staff dedicated to its day-to-day activity is employed. This implies two things. The secretariat is the carrier of the partnership’s organizational identity, and therefore is crucial for its success.

The other key point in partnership organizational structure is the steering committee/board. If we look at the names of people sitting in the various steering committees and executive boards, we can notice that among the energy partnerships some names appear quite often.<sup>22</sup> Although board members come and go, the fact that certain names appear more than once suggests that these executive bodies are the focal points for expertise. While secretariats guarantee visibility, operational disposition and “brand” continuity (they are also the driving force of the organization, like any bureaucracy), executive boards are necessary for important decisions leading to goal attainment, partnership’s growth and donor credibility. In other words, partnerships that do not adopt this basic tri-partite structure in some form are far less likely to succeed in their long-term efforts.

The second decisive feature of successful partnerships is the presence of executive and administrative sub-organs. M2M has a set of four sectoral subcommittees, representing the methane producing industries, while REEEP has eight Regional Secretariats (and corresponding regional steering committees) and two regional focal points. Both these (seemingly different) sets of organs play a very similar role. M2M draws its relative success from the close link with industry in specific issue areas, while REEEP, as emphasized by one of its senior staff member, aims at a regional and local focus:

“In the past a lot of these regional consultations were really one-sided. [...] Being bottom-up and driven by your partners in the regions has a significant advantage in terms of ownership by those countries.”<sup>23</sup>

The ISES is situated in-between these two approaches, combining a regionally and nationally focused approach with the issue-oriented perspective. It can be argued that such lower-level orientation plays an important role in enhancing a partnership’s influence. This does not have to be reflected in the activity, but rather in the actual function fulfillment.

An important observation that can be made at this point is that the basic tri-partite structure and the ideal-typical responsiveness to lower level needs is not an

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<sup>22</sup>. The most striking example is Griffin Thompson from the US State Department, who sits in the Steering Committee of REN 21, the Governing Board of REEEP and another successful CSD partnership—the Global Village Energy Partnership. Piotr Tulej from the European Commission also shares REN21 and REEEP duties.

<sup>23</sup>. Interview with senior REEEP executive, 02.04.2008, Vienna.

“institutional innovation”. A member assembly, an executive board, and a secretariat are very typical features of “traditional” international organizations. If multi-stakeholder partnerships are just smaller and less important IOs, then what is their added value? We shall come back to this question in the conclusion.

### *Powerful Actors and Privatized Environmental Governance*

The Global Gas Flaring Reduction partnership stands out from the rest, as its organizational structure is rooted in a different “tradition”. The initiative resembles an IO *project* much more than a self-standing international or non-governmental organization. It is, in fact, a program of the World Bank, headed by a Program Manager. At first glance, the partnership is almost a twin of the LPG Challenge—also an IO project, but hosted by the UNDP. Both are also rather narrow-in-scope sectoral initiatives. Such degree of similarity allows for a fruitful comparison. While the structure of LPG Challenge was unclear and there seems to be no person responsible for the partnership’s activities (or lack thereof), the GGFR has a permanent staff of ten (all World Bank employees), which is a very decent number compared with the CSD partnership universe. A Steering Committee is to be established, until that time the World Bank takes care of the day-to-day administrative activities. While the lack of institutionalization, staff, and resources can be an explanatory variable, it also needs explanation. The LPG Challenge is a development-oriented program under the UN. While energy is its main theme because it deals with liquid petroleum gas (LPG), its goals are in fact related to the improvement of living standards, health, and poverty alleviation (CSD 2009). The GGFR unites a number of very influential and powerful partners, and its activities can have important environmental impact precisely because it is related to one of the most important industrial globally—the oil industry. The comparison between these two initiatives supports the “powerful actor” hypothesis about partnership effectiveness. With private partners like British Petroleum, ExxonMobil, TotalFinaElf, Statoil, Shell Petroleum, Norsk Hydro and Chevron Texaco, governments of the US, Norway, UK, OPEC as well as other oil exporters, and the administrative support of the World Bank, the GGFR seems to be destined for success. And yet its performance raises many questions. Despite the potential resources available, it failed to fulfill the most difficult function—technical implementation. More

than a half of its activity is not related to its functions. The GGFR seems to be a perfect example of the privatization of global environmental governance.<sup>24</sup> In the lack of existing international regulation of gas flaring, private actors and interested governments (Norwegian government, which is the main owner of the semi-private oil industry companies Statoil and Norsk Hydro stands somewhere between public and private stakeholders in this case) decided on voluntary regulation for themselves. This can be interpreted either as a positive action and “greening” of the oil industry, or as “green window dressing”, which hides cartel-like practices. In either case, the role of powerful public and private actors is considerable, while the impact of internal organization is hard to evaluate.

## **Conclusion: Power or Structure?**

From the findings presented so far we conclude that the involvement of powerful actors is necessary but not sufficient for an initiative’s success. As the quantitative analysis has shown, the presence of industrialized countries, along with that of private for-profit partners, is quite strongly correlated with activity. The more in-depth analysis suggests that the influential partnerships link many powerful states and businesses. By contrast, most of the “low activity” cluster initiatives include weaker and poorer African countries (AELP, LPG Challenge) or Small Island Developing States. However, a more detailed analysis suggests that powerful actors are not enough. First of all, if a partnership serves as a “brand” rather than an actual organization, it will not be effective in the “objective” sense, even if it has far reaching support from the United States (as the US Clean Energy Initiative) or from influential and established international organizations (e.g. REN Alliance). In such cases, the powerful partners can influence a partnership’s “visibility” and reputation (i.e. US CEI), but real effectiveness is not really the direct goal of these initiatives.

Another point emerging from the qualitative analysis is that the level of institutionalization and the internal organizational structure of an initiative matter. Effective partnerships have to be institutionalized into real organizations. If they are, they become operational and can work towards achieving the envisaged goals. Depending on the scale of these goals, the activities of a partnership may require more

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<sup>24</sup>. Brühl 2002; Falkner 2003.

or less resources. If the aim of a partnership is knowledge dissemination, training or advocacy, the resources needed are quite limited. The non-governmental ISES is able to function effectively for over five decades without being “taken over” by business actors or powerful states. The same can be said of REN21, which is meant to be a lobbying advocacy network. The more strategically important the issue area (e.g. oil, energy security), the higher the chances that powerful state actors will get involved. The example of the GGFR partnership shows that petroleum-related issues feature prominently on the agenda, attracting powerful actors to “voluntary” private regulation. The case of REEEP suggests that while wealthy and powerful donors are important for the scale of an initiative, it may actually be the bottom-up (be it regional or issue-oriented) approach that relates to the influence a partnership can have and the impact it potentially could make.

The decision-making styles and the governance culture might also play a role, but only in the context of a functional partnership. If a partnership is operational and well institutionalized in the form of an organization with functional forums of decision-making, then (and only then) can the factor of deliberation make a difference.

The main conclusion of this study is that a partnership, in order to be effective, needs to be institutionalized, preferably in the form of an organization with a regularly meeting executive board that should include the representatives of major stakeholders, and a permanent administrative secretariat, dedicated to the goal and mission of the initiative. Powerful actors’ involvement can help by bringing in necessary resources, and is crucial in the case of large-scale partnerships established to perform difficult and costly activities.

Apart from that, however, there are numerous critical observations that need to be summed up. The statement that a partnership should be institutionalized to be functional may seem trivial, but in the context of over 300 CSD partnerships—clearly is not. The findings of this study directly challenge claims that partnerships are a positive institutional innovation established to reach the goals of sustainable development. While their broad and general goals are widely accepted, it seems that many partnerships do not deliver concrete steps towards achieving international commitments and remain mostly at the level of political rhetoric.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Biermann et al. 2007a.

Firstly, the minority of partnerships that is operational and has visible signs of activity takes some organizational form. The examples of relatively effective partnerships that were investigated in this paper show that that form in fact differs very little from the standard structure of international organizations. Partnerships can only be seen as institutional innovations because they often take the form of private-public governance schemes. But the example of ISES suggests that as far as non-governmental organizations and epistemic communities are concerned, the “private” sector was already included in such initiatives for some time. Only direct involvement of business actors seems to be new, but then—the question is if this form of “innovation” is in all cases necessarily positive. The case of privatized environmental regulation, exemplified by the GGFR partnership, comes to mind.

On the other hand an argument in support of the claim that partnerships are a change for the better in global governance is that their permanent secretariats—the administrative bureaucratic cores—are usually quite efficient. They employ few staff-members who are meticulously monitored by the donors. This helps to save financial resources for other activities than just running the organization. This is an often-mentioned weakness of traditional IOs, most notably the UN itself. In this sense, the closer cooperation with business actors and the diffusion of modern corporate management patterns is indeed a positive innovation.

Within the CSD community, where numerous actors are involved in similar activities, we can observe the problem of “turf wars”. It is quite clear that numerous partnerships with a larger scope are doubling their functions and efforts to some extent. The British and Norwegian led REEEP, Italian MEDREP, German REN21, French ADEME, and American GVEP—all partnerships in the general area of “renewable energy”, are a good example. Sometimes this leads to cooperation, on other occasions potential areas of intervention are demarcated along the lines of older “aid regimes” often of colonial origin. But resources can also be wasted this way, and this is a conclusion supporting the establishment of an overarching regulatory body in the sustainable development and environmental governance sector.<sup>26</sup>

And another point that logically follows the last one is that there are simply too many partnerships. Not only are they doubling their functions, but also most of them only

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<sup>26</sup>. Biermann 2000.

pretend to be there. If inactive partnerships were erased from the CSD database by the UN DESA staff, the population would most likely be halved. But the political myth of multi-stakeholder partnerships is still kept afloat. Partnerships that do not operate or never operated at all are kept in the register and can even become partners of other partnerships (as happened with the PIESD and REEEP). This critique may seem unfair for those partnerships that are doing their best to fulfill their goals. But even in their case, the promise of global governance through multi-stakeholder partnerships seems to be false. Their scope is simply too small, and the dependence on donor attitudes and interests—too binding.

Finally, a question concerning our concepts. Why should we use the term partnership at all? Is it not a signifier without a designate? The CSD initiatives are very diversified, some are programs of larger organizations (LPG Challenge), some high-hoped ephemeral declarations (AELP), other are only labels, brands or “stickers” designed to mark the actions of some other entities (REN Alliance). The remaining minority are more or less complex international (usually non-governmental) organizations. But is there sense in using the vague concept of a “partnership”, which can effectively be substituted for other ones? And more importantly: why should we use a term with such positive connotations to describe the institutional symptom of global governance’s greatest problems? In the last case, the question is probably the answer.

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