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## Ownership dynamics in local multi-stakeholder initiatives

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### ABSTRACT

The nature and dynamics of ownership are often neglected features of multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs). Seventeen cases in four countries illustrate characteristics of narrow government or broad societal ownership and forces for change over time. Refinements to the application of Gaventa's Power Cube are used to analyse such shifts from the perspective of invited and closed spaces for participation. Observations about ways in which stakeholder groups can create a more enabling environment for their collaboration are discussed. Sensitivity to sub-national conditions by weaving endogenous and exogenous forces appears to be crucial if MSIs are to be effective vehicles of choice for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.

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## Introduction

In some two decades, multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) have become key locations for policy decision-making and action on global development issues. A reason is that such transnational bodies often fill a governance vacuum: after all, there is no system of transnational legally enforceable law.<sup>1</sup> While MSIs appear to be better observed and studied when initiated transnationally,<sup>2</sup> collaborative arrangements also operate at national and sub-national levels, for example to set standards and regulate sustainable use of natural resources. Therefore, in this enquiry, locally inspired, (sub)nationally functioning MSIs are the centre of attention. The article addresses a poorly explored issue: What can locally inspired MSIs say in terms of ownership dynamics?

The notion of ownership brings to the fore issues of stakeholder participation through the lenses of institutions, agency and power.<sup>3</sup> For analytic purposes, an MSI distinction can be made between (narrow) government and (broad) societal ownership. The former is a typical understanding of country ownership, relying primarily on official commitment, public resources, political responsibility and authority, where involvement of others is discretionary, according to pre-established rules. Less commonly understood, the latter is characterised by a distribution of commitment and responsibility, the co-allocation of private resources, joint rule-making processes and exercise of power by a range of stakeholders in voluntary

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association for a common purpose. As will be seen, this 'polar' differentiation assists in describing graduations between and understanding of the fluid nature of MSI local ownership seen over time. It also allows for the consideration of MSI legitimacy and governance. Expanding on Gaventa's power cube,<sup>4</sup> a distinction can also be made between government-owned MSIs as 'invited' spaces in distinction to societally owned MSIs as 'claimed/created' spaces for collaboration. Our enquiry involves identifying criteria that can signal the extent to which an MSI 'belongs' to those involved in an operationally meaningful way, in part by observing the context-changing agency exerted by stakeholders to better enable their collective action to be effective.

Data is derived from a four-country comparative study of 17 MSI cases undertaken by an international research team in 2015.<sup>5</sup> We start with a review of recent (summative) studies on MSIs, covering sometimes hundreds of internationally inspired MSIs at multiple scales, in diverse countries, exhibiting varied purposes. From this review a set of MSI effectiveness principles are deduced. An endogenous or locally inspired set of cases applies a generally neglected lens of ownership to better understand MSI processes. Doing so requires interrogation of stakeholders, as well as clarifying why ownership is considered a key principle for development effectiveness. From here, the third section examines research data in terms of ownership qualities and context factors that appear to be common across diverse countries. This material is then applied to what locally inspired MSIs face as agents in better enabling operating environments to support their tasks. The fourth section provides a summary of conclusions.

## Features of multi-stakeholder initiatives

This section reviews discussions on the motivational background for MSIs. It explains typologies used for the studies of cases selected across Costa Rica, Indonesia, Kenya and Kyrgyzstan. The significance of this work is tied to a central premise of achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>6</sup> The envisaged modality involves a nested alignment of international, national and local institutional competences and resources – finance, knowledge, skills, authority and so on – with MSIs explicitly defined in SDG 17:17 as the preferred mechanism for implementing many of the 16 other Goals.<sup>7</sup> This mechanism will, it is argued, overcome the 'silos' experienced when implementing the Rio+20 and Millennium Development Goals, allied to periodic reporting on progress at a High Level Political Forum (HLPF) which will help in gauging commitment while stimulating momentum.<sup>8</sup>

In anticipation of such a central role, a range of MSI-related studies, reports and guides have become available. Some pay attention to a specific MSI outcome area, such as public governance<sup>9</sup> or extractive industries,<sup>10</sup> or cover interventions within a broader domain of change, for example agriculture and management of natural resources.<sup>11</sup> Other overview studies span a wide array of 'partnering' arrangements in terms of their objectives and scales.<sup>12</sup> Some studies identify MSI lessons, seeking out good principles and likely constraints.<sup>13</sup> Within the concept of deliberative democracy, others place emphasis on the legitimacy required for the 'soft law' norm-setting role of MSIs<sup>14</sup> under conditions of (international) governance failure.<sup>15</sup> This literature shows that the territory of MSIs is variously understood and defined, requiring analysts to specify their framework.

Following Stern, Kingston, and Ke, the term 'multi-stakeholder initiative' (MSI) is adopted because the notion of 'partnership' is potentially deceptive in terms of the inherent power

asymmetries involved.<sup>16</sup> After all, a relationship between ‘partners’ would suggest a relationship between equals, which can be an intentionally misleading aspirational labelling if it is structurally improbable.<sup>17</sup> While relational mutuality and power balances are seldom realised in development practice, a heavy reliance on MSIs for delivery of SDG goals makes greater demands on clarity and honesty about what can be realistically anticipated when designing, managing and analysing their actual processes. Such clarity will help focus attention on strategy and mechanisms that can, for example, prepare for anticipated conflicts between stakeholders’ interests, with the Scaling up Nutrition (SUN) Movement offering a practical, pre-emptive model.<sup>18</sup> So even if the term ‘multi-stakeholder partnership’ is also frequently used, such as in the formulation of the SDGs, we would rather avoid it for its obscuring of systemic power differences with, from an MSI governance point of view, a conceptually implausible relational metric.

The selected multi-actor development initiatives correspond to the following definition of MSIs: (1) bringing about collective action solutions for public benefit, (2) comprised of actors across the public and private sectors (both for-profit and philanthropic), and (3) whose governance and capabilities do not rely on one constituent actor. Research findings presented in this article concentrate on multi-stakeholder arrangements that are ‘inside’ initiatives largely driven by local actors not as a constituent part of global programmes, which does not necessarily preclude them from connecting to overseas development assistance, debates or actors.<sup>19</sup> In our selection process we applied a principle of grounded theory. We did so through a conscious effort to range across many MSI-related variables (geo-historical and political conditioning, intended outcomes, scale, time frames, institutional location, etc.), so not a priori defining which specific stakeholders had to be included. Country selection enabled comparisons between in-country MSIs and one ‘outside-in’ initiative relying on a common international framework and measures, the SUN Movement. When country predispositions towards cross-sector societal collaboration are taken into account, the four can be characterised as reasonably average sites for MSIs to be effective.<sup>20</sup>

### **Stakeholders and MSI typologies**

Multi-stakeholder arrangements must deal with the question: Who exactly are the stakeholders? But also: In what ways and to what degree are they stakeholders? Defining stakeholders is often premised on a wider, or overarching, frame of reference. Here, the conceptual terrain of MSIs can be loosely divided into two referential frameworks: *organisation-centred* or *social-intervention centred*.<sup>21</sup> These can be interpreted from descriptive and normative perspectives,<sup>22</sup> as well as, crudely, reflecting for-profit and non-profit institutional logics. In the case of the former, Freeman’s earlier work<sup>23</sup> saw inter-organisational collaborations in terms of gaining complementary competencies as, for example, in strategic alliances to help manage stakeholder behaviours. In these collaborations, corporate viability remains a principal driver, with stakeholders viewed in terms of what they can contribute to or withhold from this agenda.

The framework of social intervention places emphasis on solving a societal problem at an inter-relational point of reference. Development studies has, by and large, adopted this perspective in order to deal with issues of structural power asymmetry in designing, implementing and evaluating aided projects and programmes.<sup>24</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the framework, evidence and perspective deployed in this article is that of social-intervention

MSIs. By design, it does not look for MSIs dedicated, for example, to standard-setting in value chains, or compensating for democratic failures, but seeks those with a locally inspired rootedness.

For the (comparative) purposes of our multi-country study, stakeholders were placed in seven categories: state, private sector, civil society, (social) media, knowledge and research institutions, international agencies and others. Of note, detailed later, is the importance of actor types and combinations *within* these categories who choose to engage or not in an MSI.

### ***MSIs – principles matter***

If firm categorisation is not on offer, recent research may be able to shed light on what principles makes MSIs what they are – voluntary, multi-actor collaborations – and what they do – design and follow agreed processes to effectively reach a shared purpose. Revisiting the concept of ‘bridging’, Dave Brown<sup>25</sup> reviews experiences of leadership development supported by the Synergos Foundation, which translated into five critical elements for MSIs. First is the importance of local engagement and sensitivity in the provision of external assistance. Second is the development of cross-boundary leadership that builds a credible and strong coalition that connects to the larger context. Third is a way of mutually ‘theorising’ what needs to be done as a collective practice to bring about systemic change, which links to a fourth element of enabling and protecting innovation – new ways of relating and doing things. Fifth is investing in embedding and sustaining institutional change with reconfigured rules and boundaries.

Many MSI studies draw on multi-country data from which principles to guide MSI design and operations can be distilled. Brouwer and Woodhill arrive at seven.<sup>26</sup> Our analysis of this input, combined with reviews of others,<sup>27</sup> suggests that social investment MSIs are more likely to be effective if: (1) the quality of leadership conforms with processes where differences in power are acknowledged and where inclusion and voluntarism of membership are respected; (2) local contexts and actors are recognised as the final arbiters of performance; (3) a common agenda is negotiated and not imposed; (4) mutual trust is gained and maintained; (5) (resource) commitments made are realistic and lived up to; (6) communication is open and fluid; and (7) there is accountable governance with rules of the game that are co-defined and fairly applied (also see Table 1). These guiding principles help indicate why societal change processes require ‘ownership’.

### ***The centrality of local ownership***

Potential success factors reflect the importance of local ownership of an MSI. This is partly a result of the quality of public management in a country, and the way in which bottom-up processes of citizen engagement contribute to strengthening local ownership of change processes within specific contextual features, capacities and local power relationships.<sup>28</sup> This underlines a proposition that MSIs must be tuned to the local setting: acting as change agents requires sensitivity to the operational context differentiated across the various stakeholders and the specific tasks assigned to them. The stakeholder combination co-determines the degree of legitimacy of the initiative in its socio-political setting, particularly to the extent that its purpose is to make good failures or weaknesses in state (regulatory) performance.

**Table 1.** Stakeholder engagement – numbers of types of entities within major categories (per country and per case study).

Country	MSI case	State organ	Civil society	Business	Knowledge and research	Media	International agencies	Other	Total stakeholder
Costa Rica	CR-SUN	4	1	1			1		7
	CR-LGBTI	2	6						8
	CR-IWRM	5	2	5		1			13
	CR-SSHC	3	2		3	1			9
	CR-RLP	1	4	2	1		1		9
Indonesia	In-SUN	3	4	1			3		11
	In-AMAN	2	4						6
	In-KPAN	4	3	1			1		9
	In-SAPA	2	3	1			1		7
Kenya	Ke-SUN	3	1	1			3		8
	Ke-CSORG	1	4				1		6
	Ke-URF	2	5		1		4		12
	Ke-ASDS								
Kyrgyzstan	Ky-SUN	7	2		1	1	2	2	15
	Ky-FA	6	3	1		1	1	1	13
	Ky-PCs	6		1	1		1		9
	Ky-RHF	5	1	1		1	1		9
	TOTAL	56	45	15	7	5	20	3	151
%	37	30	10	5	3	13	2	100%	

Source: Biekart and Fowler, *Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives*. CR = costa rica; SUN = scaling up nutrition; LGBTI = lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersexed. IWRM = water law bill; SSHC = San Jose-San Ramon highway commission; RLP = roads of leadership project; In = Indonesia; AMAN = Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara; KPAN = Komisi Penanggulangan Nasional; SAPA = strategic alliance for poverty alleviation; Ke = Kenya; CSORG = civil society organizations reference group; URF = Usalama reforms forum; ASDS = agricultural sector development support; Ky = Kyrgyzstan; FA = 'foreign agents'; PCs = public councils; RHF = regional humanitarian forum.

These specificities nest within conditions that co-establish an enabling (or disabling) environment, which influences the practice of local ownership. Examples are: the existence of a reliable infrastructure, the adequate functioning and protection of civic space, as well as respect for the rule of law. Such elements affect the strength and hence the effect of stakeholder involvement.

Local ownership is central to the Paris Declaration, which emphasises that development only can be successful and sustainable if a country takes charge of its own development goals and priorities, as well as how these are achieved. A discussion obviously has been whether the government is the primary driver of this process, or whether other stakeholders are equally important: the difference between 'government ownership' and 'societal ownership' referred to earlier. Our research suggests that with so many variables and contexts in play, pluriformity of ownership is likely to be an essential property for MSI effectiveness.

By looking at (sub-)national practices of MSIs, it is possible to get a more nuanced view of the diverse dynamics operating at grounded levels which are often not visible when only focusing on national variables. This triggers the question: What exactly determines a stronger sense of country/societal ownership by MSIs? We suggest this has to do with the way in which exogenous variables are able to reinforce endogenous variables. Other authors<sup>29</sup> have argued that MSIs often are poorly related to the priority needs of Southern countries as they are ad hoc, looking for short-term gains and often too focused on one particular issue. In addition, external and donor-driven agendas often lead to the establishment of parallel

structures that frequently generate fragmentation and superficial consultation, and therefore a weak level of country ownership. If MSIs, on the other hand, manage to do well on the endogenous variables (leadership, vision, management, inter-institutional trust, interlocution, bottom-up organisation and local resourcing) and realise this in a supportive context (good infrastructure and a healthy civic space, as well as complementing other partnerships), the probability of stronger and broader local 'societal' ownership is increased. This analysis of the balance between endogenous and exogenous variables may help us to understand how MSIs manage to create their own conditions for strengthening local ownership.

'What diverse perspectives have in common' is a proposition that has been theorised, advanced and elaborated by Elinor Ostrom. In moving beyond her seminal work on the management of common property resources, her insight and governance argument is that avoiding sub-optimal solutions to address social dilemmas by individual actors – as social intervention MSIs are meant to do – calls for collective action across diverse interests and players:

Social dilemmas thus involve a conflict between individual rationality and optimal outcomes for a group.<sup>30</sup>

Simply put, an individual's predisposition towards self-optimisation needs to be negotiated or 'ruled out' in favour of group optimisation. A principle inherent to MSIs is one of acknowledging inter-dependence by accepting an individually sub-optimal but collectively optimal course of action towards an issue of concern which is sufficiently shared to justify joining in collective agency. While articulated in terms of individuals, it is not unreasonable to assume that this applies as much to organisations.

Agency is exerted or withheld in relation to an imagined future and the risks involved in its attainment conditioned by the 'rules of the game' that institutions embody as a dynamic process. MSIs can thus be understood in relation to the mix of incentives or fears of stakeholders, allied to the power and agendas of those seeking to bring change about and how they choose to do so – that is, the perceived legitimacy of the endeavour. This point brings in discussions on participation, empowerment, inclusion and governance, cornerstones of SDGs. Social intervention MSIs can be viewed through critical theories of participation in relation to changing or consolidating existing societal power relationship.<sup>31</sup> Typically, participation is treated as a spectrum from simple consultation to (shared) decision-making, generally as part of a social transformation strategy.<sup>32</sup> With his power cube, Gaventa applies a tri-dimensional framework involving three levels of scale (sub-national, national and supra-national), three forms of power (visible, hidden and invisible) and three types of spaces for engagement (closed, invited and claimed/created).<sup>33</sup> Thirteen MSIs in this study operate at national and sub-national scales, with four others linked with national secretariats to the international structure of the SUN movement with a secretariat in Geneva.

While analytically more nuanced, the cubic structure can work against appreciating the non-linear ways in which MSI processes unfold.<sup>34</sup> In particular, this may occur if what starts as spaces by invitation of the more powerful – typically a government agency with coercive authority – transform into spaces that are co-created by other stakeholders, suggesting that a broader 'societal' ownership is taking hold. Put another way, a wider legitimacy is being gained through experience of how governance actually works in whose interest, expressed through more directly accountable representation and so on. Conversely, governments can join created spaces and then proceed to take them over by, for example, starting to exclude stakeholders they do not like. MSI governance becomes authoritarian with broad legitimacy called into question. Participation becomes more exclusive and ownership narrowed. These



processes are discussed in the following section, where stakeholder configurations for researched cases are examined.

In sum, the ownership of local social intervention MSIs can be usefully viewed through connected theoretical schemas: legitimacy and governance of collective action, stakeholder inclusion, and power of participation. In doing so, insights from locally inspired and internally constructed MSIs can complement those derived from agency that is internationally prompted and constructed.

### **Multi-stakeholder initiatives: building from within**

The research was aimed, *inter alia*, at understanding how different dimensions of local ownership discussed above play out in practice. We focused on the degree to which an MSI belongs to the society in which it must exert collective agency with effects that sustain outcomes. Country and case study selection for this research was done in a participatory way via an in-country scoping exercise and a joint final identification of MSI cases to be investigated. Four countries were selected with a reasonable degree of openness to an autonomous civil society. Another criterion was a preference for countries with a democratic system facing challenges that could illuminate MSIs as sites of contention. Criteria included MSIs having power dimensions with political edge and multiple sources of financing. With no practical way of determining how many endogenous MSIs were ongoing in each of the countries, grounded design criteria were applied to select and incorporate a wide diversity of examples in purposes, scales, time frames, affected populations and political sensitivity. Attention was paid to MSIs that were driven by internal concerns and dynamics. Categorisation of an MSI's purpose – service provision, standard setting, rule change, socio-political shift – followed Beisheim et al.<sup>35</sup>

The 17 case studies were based on 174 in-depth interviews of directly involved stakeholders and key informants, combined with document review. Research seminars were used to compare results, talk through draft reports and determine where significant differences of methods in practice had been encountered and how they would affect analysis and confidence levels. A feature of ownership is a country or locality tailoring objectives to specific needs, problems and opportunities. The MSI cases studied (see Table 3) were weighted towards reforming institutions and rules, but often accompanied by sub-national delivery of services. Combinations of objectives were more the rule than the exception, making categorisation a very subjective process. For example, for Costa Rica the *Roads to Leadership Project* seeks to empower local communities and entrepreneurs to have greater control over gaining benefits from ecologically protected areas. Kenya and Kyrgyzstan have MSIs dedicated to altering power relations in terms of civil society being better legally protected, and practical citizen oversight of ministries through public councils, respectively. Overall, cases exhibited a context-sensitive mix of social intervention objectives and scales of operation.

### **The structure of national governance**

The agency exerted by MSIs takes place within national structures of political-administrative governance. They partly set the tone for how institutional relations are pre-conditioned and perceived, if not prejudged, in terms of trust. Consequently, a critical issue for the ownership and performance of endogenous MSIs is connecting different locations, layers, scales and classes of state authority in terms, for example, of legitimacy and mandate from below



(devolution) or from above (decentralisation). The national–international interface for externally driven MSIs such as the SUN Movement proved to be the tip of a polycentric iceberg in terms of appreciating the governance framework within which MSIs must operate. Kenya’s new constitution creates and empowers 47 counties that are jostling with the central government for direct access to external resources. Indonesia’s presidential election in 2014 accelerated decentralisation beyond 416 rural district and 98 municipalities to 80,000 villages. Unless an MSI limited itself to trying to collectively renegotiate the rules of the game – such as a Water Law in Costa Rica or proposed amendments to Public Benefit Organisation legislation in Kenya – the design of public administration was a strong determinant of how MSI ownership plays out. Disputes about relative power between the governors and the governed can signal active interest in what an MSI is all about.

### **Stakeholders’ inclusion: relative significance**

Using participatory enquiry, each case study determined the stakeholders involved as well as those that were, from the perspective of the MSI objectives, considered to be ‘missing’. The ‘thinner’ the scope of participation by diverse, relevant stakeholders the weaker ownership is likely to be. To this factor can be added the relative significance for results of those that did actively engage. These two perspectives indicated why ‘unpacking’ stakeholders is necessary.

Table 1 shows the variety in the number of types of ‘entities’ within a stakeholder category that were involved in the 17 cases spread over the four countries (see Table 3).

Entities within the government category can be separate departments and units within ministries, multiple levels of local government, regulatory and parastatal bodies, and parliamentary committees. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) include community-based, faith-based, Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) dedicated to service delivery, advocacy, social movements, etc. The business category ranges across types of industry, (trans)national corporations, lobby associations, and large- and small-scale enterprises. Mass media includes print and broadcast such as local radio, which may be privately or publicly owned. International agencies can be bi- or multi-lateral, lending or grant making. These and other variations mean that consistency of interpretation of types across countries is difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, a comparative analysis was undertaken of the variety of local stakeholders with which an MSI has to deal.<sup>36</sup>

Respondents were asked to rate stakeholders in terms of their relative significance in determining the outcome of an MSI, understood as achieving its intended purpose or objectives. Table 2 shows the distribution of ratings, where 1 = most significant and 4 = least significant.

**Table 2.** Stakeholders’ relative significance.

State organs	Civil society	Businesses	Knowledge/research	Media	International agencies	Other
1 = 16	1 = 5	1 = 3	1 = 0	1 = 1	1 = 7	1 = 0
2 = 0	2 = 8	2 = 2	2 = 2	2 = 1	2 = 4	2 = 0
3 = 1	3 = 1	3 = 4	3 = 2	3 = 0	3 = 1	3 = 2
4 = 0	4 = 1	4 = 1	4 = 0	4 = 1	4 = 1	4 = 1
N = 17	N = 15	N = 10	N = 4	N = 3	N = 13	N = 3

1 = most significant stakeholder; 4 = least significant stakeholder.

Source: Biekart and Fowler, *Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives*.

Given the international origin of SUN, four cases where government was most significant were to be expected. However, almost all cases had government as most significant, occasionally complemented by others, but as first amongst equals, with civil society a close second. Aid dependency of two of the four countries – with Costa Rica and Indonesia being per-capita exceptions – signalled a significance influence on what are ostensibly country-determined and -driven MSIs. Of course, without data on all MSIs within a country it cannot be precisely determined how big international agencies' role is in co-determining what domestic MSIs arise. The numbers found are more likely to signal a selection bias in the cases – researcher familiarity and networks for access being in play – as well as a binary tendency in social investment MSIs to involve government and civil society, itself often aid financed, with business less inclined to engage unless there is a clear value proposition involved. Businesses' aversion, seen for example in Indonesia, is an understandable reluctance of some to join processes which involve their critics. Examples from the cases illustrate civil society activism against companies producing formula milk promoted by payment to community workers or, in Costa Rica, environmental CSOs challenging the use of water by agri-business. Overall, despite seeking out locally inspired MSIs, the picture is one of predominant government claim-making rather than broad societal ownership.

### **Ownership seen through MSI cases**

A general depiction is one of somewhat thin MSI societal ownership; the MSIs studied tend to be dominated by government and civil society, with international agencies more present than domestic stakeholders. For example, Costa Rica shows significant and logical variation between stakeholders when the issue concerned is economic as opposed to social. The Water Law saw five stakeholders representing different business groups, five parts of government and two NGO platforms, suggesting legitimacy meriting broad-based engagement. Conversely, LGBTI legislation brought six NGOs, and two types of state agency, one department and many conservative political parties. For SUN in Kyrgyzstan, in a fine-grained analysis, respondents identified 13 stakeholders relating to four ministries, seven operational and two policy departments, two parliamentary committees, an inter-ministerial council, local governments, community-based activists, two United Nations (UN) agencies, the technical university and the mass media. The presence of multiple interests suggests inclusive state-based governance arrangements working over the long term.

Within these major categories, cases show instances of active exclusion. Here the distinction made by Gaventa among invited, claimed and closed spaces can be helpful.<sup>37</sup> Some government departments, as well as aid agencies, create obstacles to involvement of others, preferring to negotiate in closed spaces. Civil society organisations can vie for being at the front in representation, pushing others aside or, as in Kenya, keeping international CSOs out of local engagement with government and politics in order not to be seen as the voice of foreign funders. Here, the political legitimacy of endogeneity calls for exclusion of the foreign. The Kenya Public Benefit Organisation's case is also instructive in relation to the involvement of bilateral aid agencies in conditions where geo-political issues are involved. Donors' active public support on the side of CSOs and a move to reduce levels of official aid to the country gave way to their more muted behaviours in the light of the *al Shabab* attack on a Nairobi shopping mall and its implications for Kenya's security role in the Horn of Africa.

Active exclusion of exogenous stakeholders in invited spaces can signal a local assertion of ownership that can be considered positive in terms of perceptions that governance is inviting in practice. In other words, exclusion is not a priori a negative feature of MSI engagement; in this case one can see that invited spaces are redesigned into a 'claimed space'. Many cases signal a similar need to create a pre-engagement process within stakeholder categories where care was needed to ensure that, for example, government did not mediate in ways which ensured participation of only favoured stakeholders, or elites, skewing ownership towards selective exclusion with political/administrative motivations. In Gaventa's terms, in order to prevent exclusion by way of expansion of the closed spaces, invited spaces were used to convert them into more locally owned claimed spaces. Table 3 summarises the ownership dynamics in play for each case, in part driven by somewhat common changes in context.

### ***Discussion: local ownership dynamics***

Not surprisingly, all MSI cases in our study were subject to changes in their operating environments, with differential effects on stakeholders. In turn, this made demands on their ability to respond constructively. Our country comparisons indicated that four types of contextual change appeared to be significant in affecting the strength of stakeholder engagement and hence ownership of the processes involved: (1) how democratic politics disrupts interlocution processes; (2) alterations in governance sites; (3) the effects of institutional mistrust; and (4) shifts in motivations and incentives for collective action.

#### ***(1) The disruptive nature of democracy – coping with discontinuity by design***

A country selection criterion was the presence of a democratic form of political dispensation. The case studies showed that in all settings the nature of political disposition itself changed, impacting on MSI governance to greater or lesser degrees depending on the locus of ownership: governmental or societal. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, ethnic violence in 2010 brought about a new constitutional set-up and radical changes in political life which decentralised the political system, weakened central governance and bolstered nationalist groups, feeding instability in multi-party coalitions. Subsequent elections changed, for example, the Mayor of Osh requiring the renegotiation of a Memorandum of Understanding which was crucial for a societally owned MSI which emerged from ethnic clashes in and around the city. Costa Rica's political system underwent reform which expanded political parties and opened up possibilities for citizens to directly lobby parliament to consider and pass legislation put up by popular demand. Subsequent voting cycles elected regimes with different ideological complexions affecting ongoing MSIs, such as a revision to the Water Law. The potential for societally inspired and owned MSIs increased. Kenya's electoral processes have known widespread violence, leading to indictments at the International Criminal Court as well as creating disruptions to the way public administration is structured nationally and how the civil service operates through who gains senior appointments, which tends to reflect ethnic dimensions in the distribution of political power. This 'changing of the guard' phenomenon is an interpretation of shifts in Kenya's SUN Focal Point which has been downgraded and the lead person responsible replaced, suggesting unstable country-owned governance.

Democratic politics is designed to change regimes and their priorities. A general principle is that incoming regimes will seek to express their identity by 'recalibrating' the policies and practices of their predecessors. What this means in practice is difficult to predict; that it will occur is inevitable. A pre-ability to cope with democratic discontinuity is an MSI pre-requisite.



**Table 3.** Case studies and their ownership dynamics.

Country	Case	Brief description/goals	Ownership dynamics	Performance*
Costa Rica	MSC–SUN	To contribute to the reestablishment of the already-existing ‘umbrella instance’ of political dialogue in the nutrition policy sector	GOV-owned, consistently	LOW
	MSD–LGBTI	MSI directed at policy reform to afford equal access to medical services and health insurance for LGBTI	GOV > SOC owned, but stagnating	LOW
Indonesia	MSD–ANDA	A participatory citizen-inspired process for new legislation on the country’s water resources	SOC–GOV ownership moving to GOV-owned	LOW
	MSC–SSHCH	Citizen action to alter the country’s approach to investment in public infrastructure, starting with the San José highway	GOV–SOC ownership	HIGH
	MSC–RLP	Business-led collaboration with public institutions and local organisations to develop eco-tourism in Osa peninsula	SOC owned, with large private sector role	HIGH
	MSC–SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition – international Initiative commencing 2011 to reduce proportion of stunted and wasted children	GOV-owned; decentralisation obstructs	LOW
Kenya	MSD–AMAN	Alliance for legislation to protect rights of indigenous people	SOC-owned dynamic	MEDIUM
	MSC–KPAN	Re-launch of the national AIDS Commission	SOC-owned, local level more GOV owned	LOW
	MSC–SAPA	CSO-led coalition for poverty alleviation	Weakly GOV owned, also due to decentralisation	HIGH
	MSC–SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition – international initiative commencing 2012	SOC owned, consistently GOV owned	LOW
	MSD–CSO reference group	CSO-led coalition to prevent new amendments to the Public Benefit Organisations Act that will restrict civic space	SOC owned	LOW
Kyrgyzstan	MSD – URF	CSO-led dialogue to reform Kenya’s policing and the security sector	SOC owned, blended	HIGH
	MSC–ASDS	Multi-actor collaboration to commercialise agriculture through value chains in each of the 47 counties	SOC owned, blended	LOW
	MSC–SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition – international initiative commencing 2011	GOV owned	MEDIUM
	MSD–foreign agents MSC–public councils	Initiative to counter the re-introduction of a bill labelling some CSOs as ‘foreign agents’ MSI to monitor, set standards, open up information, improve accountability and annually assess the performance of ministries	GOV owned, with no SOC SOC owned	LOW LOW
	MSC–RHF	From a post-ethnic violence humanitarian MSC to a social development MSD in the city of Osh	SOC owned	HIGH

Note on performance: \*Stakeholder assessment of progress against MSI objectives.

Source: Biekart and Fowler, *Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives*. SUN = scaling up nutrition; LGBTI = lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersexed. IWRM = water law bill; SSHCH = San Jose-San Ramon highway commission; RLP = roads of leadership project; AMAN = Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara; KPAN = Komisi Penanggulangan Nasional; SAPA = strategic alliance for poverty alleviation; URF = Usalama reforms forum; ASDS = agricultural sector development support; RHF = regional humanitarian forum; MSD = multi-stakeholder dialogue; MSC = multi-stakeholder collaboration; GOV = government; SOC = society.

### **(2) Pluralisation of governance – institutional location(s) matter**

Associated with the disruptive nature of democratic politics described above were shifts and expansions in the places from which authority was exercised, thereby increasing interfaces where the population can exert voice, occasionally with ‘teeth’ which was more prevalent at the local level. A picture in three of the four countries – Costa Rica being the exception – were constitutional reforms that decentralised authority to lower level jurisdictions. As alluded to previously, this did not necessarily translate into greater administrative or local political openness to public input or oversight. But where it did, local sensitivities could gain administrative traction, for example in indigenous control over natural resources. The Indonesia cases provided evidence that decentralisation has increased the complications of implementing MSIs through local authorities that, despite enjoinders from the central government, can pursue their own priorities in response to local sensibilities. The general point is that the institutional configuration and distribution of power is a key to societal ownership and how MSI governance is constructed.

### **(3) The issue of (mis)trust and the value of conflict**

Country predispositions towards multi-institutional collaboration referred to previously included importance of trust in establishing effective processes for collective action. Lack of trust between types of stakeholders, as well as within them, features in a number of cases as an ineffectiveness factor. Kenya is plagued by antipathy between the current Kenyatta regime and civil society organisations dedicated to issues of human rights and advocacy more generally. Though less pointed, the establishment of MSIs in counties to bring about economic improvement in value chains is hindered by the mistrust of the business community in the integrity and intentions of the political and administrative leadership. Of all countries in the study, Kenya scored worst in perceptions of corruption as well as an enabling environment for civic life and public engagement. Costa Rica scored best of all four in both regards and also provided MSI cases hosted by the private sector in collaboration with multiple levels of local civil society. By any measure, trust in the word and deed of other stakeholders – which does not mean their likability or having a shared view of the world – is vital, as is the generative value of disagreement when properly managed.<sup>38</sup>

### **(4) Motivation and ‘missingness’**

A stakeholder identification exercise was part of each case study. It included considerations of which stakeholder group that would be likely to have an interest in the agenda and objectives of an MSI was not at the table. In some cases, stakeholders’ concerns about possible co-optation made it a better strategy to observe and play a critical watchdog role of MSIs as they unfolded.

A distinction has been made between two frameworks for MSIs: *organisation centred* and *social intervention centred*. Each approach reflects different logics as drivers for MSI involvement. It turns out that many MSIs offer no clear value proposition for business, a point confirmed by others.<sup>39</sup> HIV/AIDS and nutrition in Indonesia had sufficient commercial significance for engagement by pharmaceutical, mining (to protect their employees) and food nutrient companies. An incentive for business engagement can be a realisation that changes sought by MSIs are having a positive effect in terms of legitimacy of stakeholder process while having negative effects on commercial interests, stimulating involvement. Notable is that business engagement with an MSI embodying social development as an objective does

not seem to offer adequate reputational gain to join in. This behaviour might be allied to the relative lack of media engagement with MSIs or public communication strategies deployed by them. Reasons for this are far from clear. It is apparent that those who promote and design MSIs need to factor in ways of connecting or blending the logics that define value for for-profit, non-profit and public institutions. Without this design criterion, MSIs are likely to remain binary rather than tri-party affairs, potentially simplifying governance while narrowing the ownership base.

### ***The task of agency: stakeholders re-make the context***

The truism that ‘context matters’ calls for a fine-grained understanding of MSIs. Recent approaches to political economy analysis are one way of doing so,<sup>40</sup> but can be usefully complemented by closer attention to that of corporate governance to gain a view of what MSI incentives business is sensitive to.<sup>41</sup> Teasing out what the specificities of ‘context’ means for MSIs can be a valuable addition to their design. But this additional information will be of marginal values if stakeholders cannot or will not become more adaptable and responsive – a critical competency for MSI effectiveness. Put another way, stakeholders are not just in a context: *they themselves must make the context they are in*. Based on the cases, Table 4 illustrates what this means if different types of stakeholders act against disabling conditions.

Building from within is a perspective that takes the principles of societal ownership with inclusive governance as important factors in gaining effectiveness of development efforts. MSIs are a way in which societal ownership can be more widely spread beyond government to other institutions so that, *ceteris paribus*, change is more likely to endure as a ‘new normal’. Overall findings highlight factors which co-determine the effectiveness of MSIs that are driven from within, which endogenous MSIs are unlikely to avoid. Three are described below, starting with the ability of stakeholders to adjust to the shifting, layered landscapes in which they operate – a complex issue of coping with and responding to (dis)enabling environments. Detailed analysis of the factors respondents cited as ways to improve the MSIs with which they are involved provides a fairly comprehensive picture of what different types of stakeholders need in terms of an enabling environment and responses when this is not in place or moves away from what is required.

The cases in our research show consistency with the propositions associated with society as a complex adaptive system calling for continual and timely iteration of actions towards objectives.<sup>42</sup> If the metaphor for development projects is one of navigating complexity, the need is compounded when MSIs are in play.<sup>43</sup> Governments lean towards uniformity in perspective as a default position. Typically, wide-ranging comparisons are relied on to distil ‘consistencies’ in lessons learned, translated into ‘standardised templates’ while, at best, suggesting local adjustments that do not challenge the model as such. The 17 cases in four country settings offer little evidence to suggest that this is a feasible way of thinking about increasing the probability of societal ownership-driven MSI effectiveness. This does not mean that templates are not valuable ways of sharing experience, but courage is needed to make MSIs bespoke. MSIs are best viewed as learning processes, not as bounded organisations.

**Table 4.** Stakeholders' context enabling dynamics.

Stakeholders	Desired enabling conditions	Disenabling conditions
State organs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regime legitimacy with public trust</li> <li>• Policy continuity</li> <li>• Political power distributions that require the executive to respect and negotiate with other institutions</li> <li>• 'Flexible' decentralisation which devolves ownership as well as responsibility, allied to adequate oversight for coherence and accountability</li> <li>• Individuals/champions dedicated to making the MSI work for all</li> <li>• Adequate autonomy from political parties with an organic base to mobilise/bring issues onto the public agenda</li> <li>• History of successful pro-social collective action</li> <li>• Relative stability of a respected leadership</li> <li>• Recognised competence</li> <li>• Seeing a value proposition in the socio-politics as well as the economics of MSIs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over-centralisation which counters local MSI formation</li> <li>• Inadequate resources to deliver on commitments</li> <li>• Incoherence/conflict of laws and regulations between national and local levels</li> <li>• Rotation of public servants</li> <li>• Institutional egos that feed non-collaboration at multiple levels of administration</li> <li>• Excessive dependency on personal relations holding stakeholders together</li> <li>• Fragmentations working against coherent positions on issues of common concern</li> <li>• Inadequate local resources/competences with external dependencies</li> <li>• Using MSIs as opportunistic engagements without real commitment</li> </ul>
Civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social commitment as a corporate-wide strategy with performance metrics the public appreciate</li> <li>• Transparency in the application of knowledge-power</li> <li>• Making MSI accountability a public benefit</li> <li>• Practical application of Paris and Busan principles, particularly those advancing government and wider social ownership</li> <li>• Adjusting to changes introduced by elected regimes</li> <li>• Taking a long view</li> <li>• The general public is actively engaged in domestic affairs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deploying informal channels of influence on MSI processes</li> <li>• Preference to deal directly with government or civil society but not both at the same time</li> <li>• (Biased) information retention for institutional gain</li> <li>• Protecting particular stakeholder behaviours from public scrutiny</li> <li>• Shifts in policy, lack of consistency/staying power</li> <li>• Inability/unwillingness to collaborate and align behind government policies</li> <li>• Rotation of staff</li> </ul>
Business		
Knowledge/research Media International agencies		
Other		

Source: Biekart and Fowler, *Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives*; MSI = multi-stakeholder initiative.



## Conclusions

This paper explored an important but relatively neglected dimension of MSIs, that of societal (local) ownership. Doing so from a majority of endogenous empirical cases points to indicators of what societal ownership means in terms of factors to be taken into account in MSI design, consistent with voluntary civic engagement (such as institutional location, trust, leadership and dealing with complicated issues of management). Also essential is the sensitivity and agility to cope with democratic disruptions, as well as stakeholders' competencies, commitment and energies required to alter the context to what is required for effectiveness. It has to be recognised that civic agency is a *sine qua non* for societal ownership of the SDGs.

Our enquiry started by asking what MSIs tell us about civic engagement that satisfies the principle of societal ownership rather than government ownership, and whether there are dynamics of moving from one to the other. A range of locally, as well as globally, initiated MSI cases were reviewed, involving four country contexts.

A first conclusion is to avoid searching for a specific and ideal MSI template, for example for each SDG or target. Instead there is a need to look for the appropriate balance of endogenous and exogenous variables which will define the strength of ownership where it matters – in the polity and its institutions. Each national and sub-national context will differ and therefore this balance is different everywhere.

A second conclusion is that the success of an MSI respecting the Paris principle of societal ownership is based on its capacity to involve and manage stakeholder behaviour towards themselves. After all, this capacity is likely to create a favourable context, giving agency to what otherwise has been seen as rather disempowered and ad hoc partnerships, unable to contribute to meaningful systemic change.

A third conclusion, and probably one of the most challenging, is that government ownership is less likely to arrive at successful outcomes unless there is a move towards more inclusive and broader societal ownership with its implications for how MSIs are governed. It is essential to work with the primacy of sub-national determinants of ownership that are essentially political rather than technical in nature. The case studies show that stakeholders on the ground calibrate the costs and benefits of collaboration from so many vantage points that top-down aggregated imperatives are simply too coarse to be relied on as a foundation for ownership-based agency. Multi-stakeholder dynamics require unpacking by looking at the primary incentives for collaboration and assessing how internal stakeholder balance eventually determines positive achievement over time. There is a need for future studies that particularly zoom in on how we can establish more precise criteria for assessing the successes of societally owned MSI processes, as these will be essential to determine the success of the SDGs a decade from now.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on Contributors

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**Alan Fowler's** more than 40-year career spans both practical and academic involvement with civil society, civic agency, non-governmental development organisations, foundations and African philanthropy. He is co-founder of the International NGO Training and Research centre (INTRAC), with voluntary service as an elected member of the governing bodies of the International Society for Third Sector Research and Civicus the Global Alliance for Citizen Participation. Resident in South Africa, current academic appointments are as honorary professor of African philanthropy at the Wits Business School and emeritus professor of the International Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University. Recent publications focus on the role of interlocutors in multi-stakeholder processes allied to the evolution of polycentric governance.

## Notes

1. Ruggie, "Theory and Practice of Learning Networks"; and Rasche, "Global Policies and Local Practice."
2. Pattberg and Widerberg, *Transnational Multi-stakeholder Partnerships*.
3. Fowler and Biekart, "Relocating Civil Society"; and Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change."
4. Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change."
5. Biekart and Fowler, *Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives*.
6. United Nations, *Transforming Our World*.
7. Dodds, *Multi-stakeholder Partnerships*; and Hazelwood, *Global Multi-stakeholder Partnerships*.
8. Risse, "Implementing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs."
9. Brockmyer and Fox, *Assessing the Evidence*.
10. Rich and Moberg, *Making Collective Governance Work*.
11. Brouwer and Woodhill, *The MSP Guide*.
12. OECD, *Development Cooperation Report 2015*; and Stern, Kingston and Ke, *More than the Sum of its Parts*.
13. World Bank, *Increasing the Effectiveness of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives*; and Beisheim and Simon, "Multi-stakeholder Partnerships."
14. Abbott and Snidal, "Hard and Soft Law in International Governance"; and Mena and Palazzo, "Input and Output Legitimacy of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives."
15. Glasbergen and Schouten, "Transforming Capacities of Global Sustainability Standards."
16. Stern, Kingston, and Ke, *More than the Sum of its Parts*, 3.
17. Moncrieffe and Eyben, *The Power of Labelling*; and Fowler, "Introduction Beyond Partnership."
18. GSO, *Engaging the SUN Movement*.
19. Beisheim and Simon, "Multi-stakeholder Partnerships."
20. Biekart and Fowler, *Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives*.
21. Mitroff, *Stakeholders of the Organisational Mind*.
22. Freeman, "Response: Divergent Stakeholder Theory."
23. Freeman, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*.
24. Menocal, *Getting Real about Politics*.

25. Brown, "Bridge Building for Social Transformation."
26. Brouwer and Woodhill, *The MSP Guide*, 44–121.
27. Fowler and Biekart, "Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives for Sustainable Development Goals."
28. Beisheim and Simon, "Multi-stakeholder Partnerships," 6.
29. Bester, "Scoping Study on Monitoring"; and Beisheim and Simon, "Multi-stakeholder Partnerships."
30. Ostrom, "The Complexity of Collective Action Theory," 3–5.
31. White, "Depoliticising Development: The Uses and Abuses of Participation"; Blackburn and Holland, *Who Changes? Institutionalising Participation in Development*; and Molenaers and Renard, "The Trouble with Participation."
32. Hickey and Mohan, "Relocating Participation within a Radical Politics of Development."
33. Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change."
34. Pantazidou, *What Next for Power Analysis?* 24.
35. Beisheim et al., "Transnational Partnerships: Conditions for Successful Service."
36. Biekart and Fowler, *Comparative Studies of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives*.
37. Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change."
38. PONDY, "Reflections on Organizational Conflict"; Fowler and Biekart, "Navigating Polycentric Governance."
39. Pattberg and Widerberg, *Transnational Multi-stakeholder Partnerships*.
40. DLP, *The Political Economy of Development in Africa*.
41. O'Sullivan, "The Political Economy of Comparative Corporate Governance."
42. Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*.
43. Burns and Worsley, *Navigating Complexity in International Development*.

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