

Summary

Overview and main research question

Partnerships have emerged as important instruments in a multifaceted and complex global sustainability governance. At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg more than two hundred partnership initiatives registered as 'Partnership for Sustainable Development', a process which featured as an official outcome of that conference. Commentators are divided over this process. Proponents argue that partnerships effectively address deficits in (state-centered) global sustainability governance, by being solutions-oriented, and by promoting greater inclusiveness of non-state actors. Others have taken a strong stance against partnerships because they ostensibly undermine intergovernmental agreements, challenge public authority, and facilitate the privatization of sustainability governance without the prospect of achieving sustainable development.

The vast majority of empirical research on Partnerships for Sustainable Development however fails to vindicate the role of partnerships in global sustainability governance. Most case studies effectively illustrate the potential and limitations of partnerships, but they also suffer from selection biases. The focus on the most visible partnerships, and the emphasis on the newness (new actors, new approaches, and new coordination mechanisms) they bring into

global governance leads to an exaggerated view that an alternative and better sustainability governance is dawning.

This dissertation fills two gaps in present partnership literature. First, by applying a large-n approach, it vindicates general emergence and effectiveness patterns of Partnerships for Sustainable Development. Second, this dissertation discusses partnerships in specific implementation contexts, rather than discussing them as a feature of multilateral governance. To this end this dissertation focuses on the question:

Why did Partnerships for Sustainable Development emerge in global sustainability governance; how were they adapted to domestic governance contexts; and what has their impact been on global and domestic governance?

The research featured an iterative research approach, combining large-n database analyses with qualitative approaches. Large-n analyses provided with an aggregated view of the Partnerships for Sustainable Development process, while more specific datasets and one specific case were analyzed to examine the adaptation of partnerships to specific implementation contexts.

The second part of this dissertation focuses particularly on the Chinese implementation context for Partnerships for Sustainable Development, adding an important geographic dimension to the inquiry. Therefore, this dissertation also supplements the few dedicated studies on partnerships in China's sustainable development. While most previous studies speculated on the

potential of partnerships in China, the present study goes beyond a discussion of potential and constraints by observing actual adaptation patterns of Partnerships for Sustainable Development.

This dissertation is structured along two successive lines of inquiry; the first is related to partnerships in the context of global governance; the second is related to partnerships in domestic implementation contexts. These lines of inquiry answer three secondary research questions.

- Why did Partnerships for Sustainable Development emerge in global sustainability governance?
- How were partnerships adapted to domestic governance contexts?
- What has been the impact of partnerships on global and domestic sustainability governance?

Key Findings

Emergence

The emergence of partnerships is often explained on institutional grounds although these arguments have rarely been put to the test. A systematic discussion and analysis of different institutionalist theories (Chapter 2) indicates that theoretical assertions are not matched by empirical patterns of emergences in the sample of Partnerships for Sustainable Development. For instance, partnerships do not emerge where functional deficits are greatest, nor do partnerships emerge according to certain organizational models. Rather than reflecting a process of international institutionalization,

the emergence of Partnerships for Sustainable Development seems to be principally informed by political considerations. In order to better understand their political nature, Partnerships for Sustainable Development are studied as a political process (Chapter 3), demonstrating their political ambiguity and their political use. While partnerships were intended to widen participation and ensure support for capacities of developing countries to implement sustainable development, they also opened a space for some countries to avoid new binding agreements. Conflicting suggestions by different delegations as to how partnerships should be institutionalized into the UN system have led to a weak institutional framing. However, the weak institutionalization of Partnerships for Sustainable Development also meant that partnerships were relatively adaptable and unproblematic to diffuse across a great variety of implementation contexts.

The apparent diffusion of Partnerships for Sustainable Development raises the question how their weak institutionalization relates to the emergence of partnerships in domestic implementation contexts. An analysis of the impact of the Partnerships for Sustainability process on the emergence of partnerships in China (Chapter 5) indicates that most partnerships did not build networks within the country. Participation by Chinese actors in Partnerships for Sustainable Development is rather low, and targets and timeframes of partnerships are linked to global and regional priorities rather than national and local ones. The limited direct effects of Partnerships for Sustainable Development on domestic implementation contexts such as China's may cast a critical light on UN sustainable development

processes, however transnational interactions in these processes may change the conditions for partnerships in domestic implementation contexts in indirect ways (see below).

Adaptation

The diffusion of Partnerships for Sustainable Development is not only a multilateral political process. Rather, the diffusion of partnerships into domestic governance depends on international and transnational channels of transmission; domestic structures; and the flexibility of (individual) partnerships. In fact, the weak institutionalization of partnerships in global sustainability governance makes the question how partnerships adapt to specific implementation contexts more salient. In spite of considerable legal, institutional and cultural constraints, a prevalent model of partnership has developed in China's implementation context (Chapter 6). Most partnerships in China feature many foreign actors, few domestic NGOs, foreign based administration, and foci on sustainability issues on a global or regional scale. This prevalent model could be regarded as a relatively successful adaptation of the partnership instrument because partnerships in China produce more relevant outputs than the global average. On the other hand, the prevalent model of partnership also indicates that most partnerships are not embedded in China's sustainability governance – they are partnerships in China rather than Chinese partnerships. By contrasting the Chinese and Indian political and institutional environments (Chapter 7), implementation contexts are furthermore highlighted as key explanatory factors in the adaptation of

partnerships. Differences in the sets indicate disparate relations between partnerships and governments. While in India partnerships are sometimes antagonistic vis-à-vis government, a larger number of partnerships in China are designed to support government functions. Finally, adaptation at the micro-level is investigated in a case study on the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) (Chapter 8), a global biodiversity conservation program and one of the very few that promote the development of local partnerships in China. It demonstrates that the CEPF significantly adapted its approach in China in terms of organization, strategies and operations. Some of these adaptations contradict CEPF's global approach (see below).

Impacts: global sustainability governance

In terms of impacts of Partnerships for Sustainable Development, this thesis focuses on answering three questions: whether partnerships lead to a more effective global sustainability governance; whether partnerships extend global modes of governance; and, how global transnational engagement affects transnational engagement domestically.

The idea that partnerships make global sustainability governance more effective has gained considerable traction within the UN system, but also among governance scholars. To substantiate these effectiveness claims, this thesis presents a study into the overall effects of Partnerships for Sustainable Development (Chapter 4), in particular in terms of norm development, norm implementation and norm inclusiveness. Analyses using the GSPD indicate that Partnerships for Sustainable Development, while rhetorically linked

to norm setting, implementation and participation, in practice do not live up to promises of effectiveness.

Impacts: extending global governance

Critics of neoliberal globalization argue that partnerships are instrumental in the extension of neoliberal governance into developing countries. This dissertation presents an analysis of adaptation patterns within a partnership to determine whether and to which extent these reflected features of international institutionalism and neoliberal governance (Chapter 8). The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund is one of the few partnerships that explicitly aim to reconfigure governance in China. As a funding mechanism, the CEPF seems to conform to the notion of a neoliberal partnership as it allows international funds to circumvent national treasuries. Furthermore, CEPF's governance approach emphasizes biogeographic areas, and downplays the political geography of state-centered governance approaches. In China, the CEPF navigated between two somewhat contradictory partnership approaches: one which excludes the state and employs a narrow definition of civil society, and another which intensively collaborates with the state and employs an expanded definition of civil society. The analysis of CEPF's operations in China demonstrates that the impact on governance is an amalgam of influences from global and domestic governance, whereby the latter influence seems to be more important.

Impacts: Transnational linkages

This thesis investigates the impact of global transnational engagement on governance and transnational engagement domestically (Chapter 5 and Chapter 8). Partnerships are commended for facilitating the inclusion of a greater number of political actors, in particular transnational actors. The case of the CEPF in China however demonstrates that different types of transnational actors are unevenly empowered. International NGOs and research organizations were assigned coordinating responsibilities and received most investments. In spite of CEPF's explicit aims to alleviate poverty and to develop local civil society capacity, local people and NGOs did not benefit to the same extent. Rather, some patterns of exclusion (e.g. local people and local civil society) persist in CEPF's governance network. These findings corroborate the conclusions of previous studies in other subject areas (e.g. women's rights) that transnational engagement in global politics does not necessarily impact positively on domestic transnational engagement. Transnational engagement in global politics can even lead to a relative relegation of already marginalized groups.

The study of UN summits and transnational interactions (Chapter 5) indicates that the Partnerships for Sustainable Development process did not lead to the emergence of Chinese sustainability partnerships. However, transnational interactions have an impact on the relation between international and Chinese NGOs, which is increasingly becoming interdependent. Moreover, following the examples of business engagement at UN summits, Chinese NGOs and business

have recently started to collaborate in joint initiatives. The findings suggest that, while the Partnerships for Sustainable Development process does not directly impact on the emergence of partnerships in China, indirect impacts of UN summitry on relations between domestic NGOs, business and government help to bring about better circumstances for partnerships in China.

Suggested research

This research conveys the overall idea that an understanding of partnerships in global governance is incomplete without a careful reckoning of their adaptation to specific implementation contexts. The current dissertation helps to lay a groundwork for research on the effects and the outcomes of global sustainability partnerships in specific implementation contexts. Research should be extended across thematic policy areas and governance contexts.