This thesis is about the introduction of sustainability partnerships into global environmental governance. Following the endorsement by the UN in 2002 as a legitimate governance mechanism, transnational partnerships have become mainstream, and hundreds of partnerships have been initiated. Examples of public-private cooperation are fast expanding to every issue on the environmental agenda. While this means that partnerships are successful in a mimetic sense, this thesis reconsiders their desirability as a way of governing human interactions with the ecosystems of the planet.

The positive assumptions about transnational partnerships as a governance mechanism appeared at the institutions and platforms of the United Nations, where their development took place since the end of the Cold War. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg in 2002, sustainability partnerships were formally endorsed and became a transnational regime under the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). This took place at a time global regulatory arrangements were losing their popularity, and environmental issues had lost their priority as immediate (i.e. less politicised) areas for collaboration between otherwise antagonistic political systems.

Accordingly the thesis begins with an explicit focus on the origins of partnerships and the emergence of the partnerships regime. This process coincides with (1) the increasing involvement of non-state actors in decision-making, particularly that of the private sector (2) a deepening of the implementation deficit in global environmental governance, wherein international agreements are insufficiently implemented, resulting in regime and governance failures. With their flexible organisation model based on mutually beneficial relationships for the actors, partnerships were expected to address this deficit. Naturally, policy implementation is accompanied by discursive influences, both in terms of participatory effects within and outside of the UN, and in terms of changes in global governance.
Among CSD partnerships, many contradictory aims can be identified. They normalise and legitimise certain meanings (over others), thereby contributing to the transformation of global environmental governance. As such, partnerships reflect important shifts in global environmental governance, and different narrations about partnerships surface to reveal the theoretical and fantasmatic filters that mutually constitute them.

In this sense, proliferation of sustainability partnerships manifests an intersection of after nature and the end of history, as stated in the title of this thesis. These phrases indicate that partnerships were introduced and formed in a period that is at once characterised by increasing difficulties in understanding and representing nature at the transnational level, while at the same time reflecting the well-known narrative about liberal democracy as the victorious ideology since the end of the Cold War.

**Approach**

It is critical for this study that partnerships operate differently at different levels of governance. While in local and regional governance they operate in the shadow of hierarchy, they constitute a regime at the transnational level where there is no legal authority that can be petitioned in case of undesired consequences or policy failure. Hence the positive assumptions underlying sustainability partnerships that were decisive for their formation resulted first in their operationalization at global and transnational environmental governance (as principle implementation mechanisms for sustainable development policies, particularly that of the Millennium Development Goals, MDGs). Then, their actualisation process revealed that they were equipped with little decision-making power.

The success or failure of partnerships as a form of governance is not determined by outcomes or problem-solving capabilities: Success of this kind is unable to differentiate between institutionalisation towards better or worse governance. What is a desirable institutionalisation process? How would it be possible to reconsider the existing options against the background of other options that were once (and maybe are still) available?

Importantly, the introduction and formation of a partnership regime was not without contestation. Various groups within the UN system disputed
and resisted it and their contestations are important sources of information for a political scientific inquiry into the partnerships regime. They reveal the changes in the power distribution by this shift in governance and indicate conflicts that underlie current political tensions. Some of the issues regarding new governance mechanisms have been resolved; others have sedimented into the logics of these new practices called partnerships. Understanding these conflicts could reveal the structural limitations of such institutions or solve some of the underlying problems.

Accordingly the thesis explicitly focuses on the origins of partnerships and the emergence of the partnerships regime by prioritizing their discursive power. The issue areas in which partnerships are formed, the parties involved, how they operate etc. define their own success and failure; in short their life-story can provide us with the details of this power.

The changes and dynamics captured in these issue areas, in turn, are reflections of the shifts in discourses of governance. This translates into a method that can be distinguished from more traditional lines of research by its continuity in the explanatory process. It considers social inquiry as a circle between evidence, interpretation, theorising, reflection, and re-appropriation of all these in the light of ontological presuppositions. Thus, the dissertation is structured by the following propositions:

- partnerships can be used as analytical mirrors that reflect certain transformations in the discourses of global governance,

- through a study of discourses that mediate our understanding of partnerships, these different symbolic orders can be linked for a fuller analysis and understanding of partnerships themselves.

In this respect the inquiry is also an attempt to understand the role and capabilities of social science differently; it is necessary to ask what kind of transformations the replication of this form of governance foreshadows. To that end, questions such as ‘how, or what kind of partnerships succeed in solving environmental problems?’ and ‘how can we make them more effective governance mechanisms?’ should not precede others such as,

- How and why did partnerships become the designated governance mechanisms to solve environmental problems?
- How and why did this process prescribe the resulting manifestations of partnerships as opposed to others?

- Do partnerships normalise or legitimise certain rationales, symbolic orders, modes of organisation, sectors, economic and political regimes, actor constellations over others?

- Which discourses mediate our understanding of partnerships? To what extent have they been influential in their institutionalisation? Are there any conflicts between them? If so, is it possible to reveal some of the paradoxes that sedimented into the logics of the partnerships regime through a historical study of these discourses?

- Inversely, what kind of shifts do partnerships reflect about the changes taking place in
  – global politics and ideologies?
  – environmental governance?
  – democracy?

- In what ways are these shifts sufficiently important to transform the existing practices, power structures, and orders of meaning in international relations and/or global governance?

Outline

The thesis identifies different processes of institutionalisation within the partnership regime, particularly in terms of how partnerships enact certain discourses (of economy, democracy and environment) rather than others. From this point of view, it becomes possible to distinguish the kind of institutionalisation to address social and environmental concerns, beyond a critique of partnerships.

The text is organized into two parts: The first part (Chapters 1-4) begins with an introductory chapter and continues with two chapters on methodological and theoretical reflections that have guided the research, particularly on the various concepts, tools and assumptions. Initially its aim is to scrutinise theoretically how such conflicting discourses can
merge into a structure and what kind of a framework is necessary to study unintended consequences of the policy discourse. Discourse theory and eco-criticism are particularly powerful methods in relation to the subject in question. The last chapter of part one is also the first empirical chapter, based on the data gathered for the Global Sustainability Partnerships Database (GSPD), developed for the PARTNERS project, at the Institute for Environmental Studies, VU University Amsterdam. This chapter introduces the different narrations regarding the emergence of partnerships; and how these stories influenced the resulting partnerships regime.

The second part comprises the analysis of mediating discourses, and the conclusions. Chapters 5-7 consists of the three discourses analysed: privatisation of governance, sustainable development, and democratic participation. These chapters focus on the historical development of each of these discourses, shedding light on present narrations of partnerships. It also serves to reveal how ‘myths’ have become discourses through which governance is practiced, how these mediating discourses implicated the formation and actualisation of partnerships and the characteristics of the partnerships regime. Without studying these discourses, the following conclusions would have remained –at best- abrupt observations. Hence, Part II begins with an analysis of private governance institutions, focusing on the shifts in international relations towards increasingly market-based, voluntary, non-governmental solutions to environmental problems. Next, the shifts in the environment/development debates as are studied historically. Tracing the development of the sustainable development discourse in the UN context reveals how global environmental and developmental issues are co-constituted and enacted by partnerships. Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on the shifts in the perceptions of participation and democracy.

The conclusions begin with empirical, theoretical and methodological observations resulting from this study. However, it also aims to take another step in respect of partnerships as a promise to address the dilemmas between the political centre and the political left and between the logics of cooperation and competition among public and private sectors. The implication of this observation at the global and transnational levels of governance is the promise of democracy and inclusion. The thesis con-
cludes with reflections pertaining to the potential of partnerships as an end to antagonisms in global environmental governance.

**Main Conclusions**

Dynamics of international organisations are fundamentally different in the first two stages of its existence. During *discourse institutionalisation* the discourse sediments into an institution through repetitive social practices it implied. When there are negotiations involved, institutions often contain sediments of a number of competing discourses; and these pieces, or sediments, solidify into the logics of the institution. The success of such an organisation depends on the extent to which a consistent discourse can be brought out of this assortment of demands, in a short time.

In case of partnerships, this has not been the case: the potential of the CSD partnerships diminished as the momentum was lost in the few months after the WSSD. While a limited number of individual partnerships have considerable influence, the WSSD resulted in a weak partnerships regime. So far it has not only failed to address governance deficits, but it is also extremely unlikely to accomplish the MDGs. This is the second stage in and institution’s life, wherein a consistent practice might emerge from this mosaic-like structure. If it does, these practices become increasingly commonplace, and start forming standards, rules, excellence criteria etc. to consolidate the social practice. Simultaneously, the institution can operate so as to exclude other ways of producing the same results, e.g. by assuming complete authority over an issue, producing licensing procedures, insisting that its service/product is actually needed, or by discrediting communities that resist its rationale. From an ‘Illichist’ point of view, partnerships are manipulative institutions: They create radical monopolies, false public utilities and new ‘needs’ while being socially addictive (i.e. they prescribe increased doses of their products of services when smaller quantities have not yielded the desired results).

**Private governance**

Addressing governance deficits through private governance mechanisms presumes that global financial markets *can* correct state failures. Sustainability partnerships are mechanisms to implement what states
failed to implement, (self-)regulate where states fail to regulate. Furthermore, they keep legislations on social/environmental issues analogous to those of financial governance, operating within the same frames of reference. Yet, legality does not assume legitimacy: While partnerships are not disputed in terms of being legal entities, their legitimacy is challenged by various parties. Their output legitimacy is questioned as the results of their activities are limited in terms of developmental and environmental achievements. Their input legitimacy is questioned in terms of their accountability and inclusiveness.

Partnerships as representative of private governance institutions operate in a legal vacuum, and a process that can be described as a limitation of legal liabilities, or ‘delegalisation.’ While international negotiations of new treaties have failed since 2002, new governance mechanisms are increasingly characterised by voluntary and unbinding sets of rules outside of legal system.

- The end result is a shift from public law to private governance and private institutions, wherein the core problem is a diminishing role for the public, democratically controlled law.

- Voluntary, unmonitored arrangements make failures difficult to detect and in cases of failure responsibility is so diffused that no party can be held accountable.

- Narratives of globalisation and markets consolidate homogenisation in financial governance across the world, which began with the invention of partnerships as an ownership model with limited liability. Although state actors have arguably lost power relative to global capital markets, the international state system copes with the market order by inventing new governance mechanisms that are in line with the dominant narratives of globalisation. Partnerships are one example of these new forms of legality.

- The continued fragmentation and deregulation of social/environmental governance allows for state actors to maintain some degree of control over their economies. On the other hand, as market
failures are no longer corrected by the states and are often regarded as inevitable results of globalisation, they are narrated as state failures. In this process, social influence of the corporation is consolidated as it becomes both a legitimate stakeholder in global politics and the medium between hypermobile capital and the public sphere.

All together these processes can be called the privatisation of global governance, wherein corporate actors are increasingly included in the political decision-making –either by state actors willingly relinquishing some of their functions, or by unwillingly being abided by private authority- and in which regulatory approaches based on state-coercion are replaced by market-based and voluntary mechanisms.

**Sustainable Development**

Social and environmental issues have exclusively been represented by the sustainable development discourse within the UN, since 1987. Sustainable development has become the structuring variant of developmental discourses particularly following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Discursively, the concept brought together the conflicting needs for economic growth and ecological conservation, thereby suggesting a harmonious resolution to the dislocation generated by various environmental problems resulting from economic development.

- The signifier sustainable development has become overloaded with various meanings, and ended up dissolving its precise significance. Yet, it has successfully co-opted most eco-political movements, and marginalised the rest. In the long run, most environmental discourses previously articulating more radical viewpoints conformed to this new understanding. Professional environmental NGOs, consumer campaigns, and liberal environmental values have become the norm. At the end of this process, the ecological was no longer a negation of the capitalist logic; environmental values were being redefined by developmentalism.

- Managerial approaches to environment standardised and objectified issues that are of political nature and relocated them into the sphere of the social. Thus, emerging discourses such as voluntarism, expertise,
and win-win situations negated the political nature of environmental issues.

- At the international level, environmental conservation has become a part of official development aid, which has been instrumental in establishing the hegemony of industrialism, modernisation and development. Through ODA, environmental principles defined strictly within the confines of these hegemonic discourses were introduced to the recipient societies. It is critical to assess the extent to which these projects, funds, institutions, technologies and values can be refused or transformed by the recipient community, when designing and assessing development aid.

Participatory Democracy

The Rio Summit opened the space for the participation and inclusion of previously unrepresented groups in governance platforms. The civil society was invited to join certain UN platforms, such as the CSD, in the form of major groups. When the radical potential of civil action was transformed in this fashion, the numerous, plural and diverse demands articulated in 1992 were unified under the ambiguous end goal of sustainable development. This greatly limited the major groups in participating, contesting and exerting power.

- The categorisation of civil society into major groups coincides with the conception of partnerships in the UN texts, wherein they are associated with the participation of social groups, democratisation, and inclusiveness. But their actual institutionalisation and endorsement in 2002 rendered partnerships as institutions of the status quo, replicating earlier social exclusions. At the Johannesburg Summit, partnerships were redefined as implementation mechanisms aimed to mobilise major groups towards sustainable development in a cooperative fashion. The power of partnerships as a means to intensify participation was restricted to implementation once they were institutionalised. This is why partnerships are regarded by most environmental NGOs and many major group representatives as co-option mechanisms.
Responses to this counter-productivity are manifest in the demands for alternative rules for global governance, as well as the reluctance and even refusal of certain social groups in joining partnerships. For the most part, the frustration of major groups parallels the experiences of various local groups and social movements that attempted to have a say on global governance.

Participation in (or through) partnership projects is further complicated in the context of development. The developmentalist ideology succeeded in internalising and depoliticising the demands for a more democratic and participatory global governance, so long as these demands could be articulated with the hegemonic developmentalist project. It has become an integral part of the developmentalism, without being able to remedy the democratic deficit in the most significant platforms global governance.