



## SDG 17: It's not about transactional partnerships

By Philippa Smales  
22 May 2017

There has been a lot of discussion recently around Goal 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): the goal of partnerships. In full, the Goal reads 'Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development'. The detail elaborates that successful sustainable development requires partnerships between government, the private sector and civil society.

The problem is that the indicators do not give us any indication of what *kind* of partnership these parties should have. And the problem is compounded by the fact that the first series of indicators are about finance, with an emphasis on the need for financing, investments and private resources. This focus on finance is due to the recognition that, "even if commitments are fully met, ODA will not be enough" ([Ban Ki-moon](#)).

In the light of this emphasis on the need for funding, many are seeing the term 'partnership' to encompass a transactional relationship. However, such a weak understanding of partnership will not get us to the point of achieving the goals.

A transactional relationship is built on a contract, typically a services contract - we provide you money and you deliver. This is not a true partnership. There is no sense of anyone doing anything *together*, there is no coordination or cooperation (both words that frequent the [targets and indicators](#) for Goal 17).

Civil society, and NGOs in particular, are interested in working in partnership with the private sector, but they often end up in a transactional relationship. Justifications for this from NGOs include: they know how to deliver the programs and just need additional

funding; that the private sector see the funding as part of their corporate social responsibility; and that building a partnership is too much work.

As argued in [Working towards Transformational Development and the Sustainable Development Goals](#), those parties within a transactional relationship find themselves “on opposite but mutually beneficial sides of a neutral technical exchange”. The funders are not engaged, and the relationship is unlikely to have an impact on their behaviour or actions. Think of a simple example where an international business gives some of its profits to an NGO addressing women’s economic empowerment, whilst that same business does not consider its own policies and practice in terms of gender equality in its own workforce.

Take this to the macro-scale, and we see developed countries as funders, disengaged from the development process and failing to take responsibility for the Goals domestically.

The Goals themselves are intimately inter-linked and to address them comprehensively, we must focus on partnerships that go beyond transactional relationships. Effective partnerships are founded upon shared vision and goals, as well as shared accountability and risk management.

It will only be with multi-stakeholder partnerships which cut across sectoral and disciplinary boundaries that transformational development to the scale of Agenda 2030 can be achieved.

*Dr Philippa Smales is the Network and Partnerships Manager for the Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network.*

*To learn more about effective development partnerships and to see them in action, join the [RDI Conference 2017](#) ‘Partnerships for Impact on Sustainable Development: collaboration, coordination, solidarity’. Helen Clark, the former Administrator of the UNDP, will deliver the keynote address on Tuesday 13 June at the University of Sydney.*

## **About the author/s**

### **Philippa Smales**

Dr Philippa Smales is the Network and Partnerships Manager for the Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/sdg-17-not-transactional-partnerships-20170522/>

Date downloaded: 4 May 2024



Australian  
National  
University

The Devpolicy Blog is based at the Development Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.