Multi-stakeholder STI Mechanisms at the UN: Fad or Trap?

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A string of new mechanisms dealing with science, technology and innovation (STI) and the science-policy interface have sprouted at the UN in recent years. Under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) governments established a Technology Mechanism in 2010. The UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) spun off the Intergovernmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services (IPBES) in 2012 (www.ipbes.net). The UN Secretary-General created a Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) in 2013 (http://en.unesco.org/un-sab/content/scientific-advisory-board). Then, in 2015 the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development gave birth to the Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM) (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/TFM).

These mechanisms all share one thing in common: inclusion of stakeholders beyond Member-States and government-endorsed experts.

In contrast to well-established expert bodies like the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) housed at UNCTAD and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the new STI mechanisms have a far less rigid attitude towards informal and non-conventional sources of knowledge and expertise. IPBES principles explicitly value the contribution of indigenous and traditional knowledge systems. The SAB and the TFM have indigenous and civil society expertise in their composition alongside eminent names in the scientific community.

An inclusive approach and the recognition of diverse sources of knowledge is key to ensuring that STI contributes to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The recognition of indigenous knowledge and local innovations are already enshrined in UN treaties and it is only logical that indigenous peoples are represented in mechanisms that provide scientific and technological support to the implementation of multilateral agreements. Civil society representation in STI bodies helps ensure that the views and interests of communities shape the direction of UN priorities and programmes in STI.

The inclusion of rights holders and civil society are hard-fought gains from decades of advocating to participate in decision-making on STI in global development. Since the 1990s, civil society initiatives have proactively set the pace of intergovernmental discourses in governance of new technologies at the UN. On the ground, civil society and social movements have worked with communities in the development, transfer and dissemination of environmentally sound, socially acceptable and inclusive technologies and innovations long before these became fashionable.

The concept of *stakeholders*, however, needs to be challenged. It is based on the flawed premise that business interests have an equal *stake* as the holders of rights such as those held by indigenous peoples and local communities in relation to traditional knowledge systems and biological resources. This justifies that giving a seat to civil society in a multi-stakeholder mechanism entitles business and industry to a seat at the same table. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development sits alongside an indigenous peoples' representative in the 10-Member Group that supports the TFM. The transnational oil company Shell as the representative of business NGOs in the Advisory Board of the Climate Technology Centre and Network (CTCN-AB) of the UNFCCC is entitled to an equal voice with environmental NGOs. Which stakeholders should be represented is controversial. Parties to the UNFCCC agreed to have non-governmental constituencies represented in the CTCN-AB, but only environmental, research and business NGOs – a political compromise that left out the rights holders in climate technologies – women, youth and children, farmers and indigenous peoples.

Danger looms large in using stakeholder inclusion in global STI mechanisms to institutionalize a corporate sector role in the development, transfer and deployment of technologies to achieve the 2030 Agenda with no clear accountability. As civil society representatives lock horns with this sector in STI discourses around the table, UN agencies engage corporate-sector representatives in programme initiatives in between meetings. Members of the CTCN, for instance, tried to push for an engagement policy exclusively for the private sector but was blocked by the Advisory Board that transformed the policy so as to apply to civil society as a whole. While Advisory Board deliberations on the policy were underway, the CTCN went on with corporate-sector engagement funded by a bilateral donor. These non-transparent 'back-room' dealings indicate the creation of a stakeholder hierarchy in decision-making that casts shadows on the sincerity of the goal to "leave no one behind" in STI for the SDGs.

developed countries in the course of the inaugural FfD Forum (New York, April 2016).

Indeed, a bizarre 'Out of UN implementation' narrative characterized the initial phase of the FfD Follow-up process: the UN can propose new initiatives, but their implementation should not necessarily take place within the UN itself. Accordingly, the OECD can advance its 'inclusive framework' with respect to tax cooperation claiming it responds to the UN call for scaling-up action in this field, and the GIF can be operationalized with no accountability with the process that has actually established it.

However, the greatest attack against (still timid) attempts to democratize global economic governance concerns the unproblematized promotion of multi-stakeholder partnerships at all levels. These shift governance mechanisms away from legitimate rights-based and people-centred accountability, by consolidating the primacy of stakeholders against/over rights-holders with no consideration of the profoundly different nature of public and private interests.

Reform of economic, monetary and financial systems to increase their responsiveness and coherence with sustainable development. Another key dimension of MoI concerns the pressing need to reform the economic, monetary and financial systems in order to increase their responsiveness and coherence with sustainable and equitable development. The challenge is greater than simply that of alignment. The reality is that many of the drivers of economic globalization and the marginalization that it generates are deeply rooted in the current monetary and financial systems. Furthermore, these systems have created the impression, and the reality, of a distinct space where state sovereignty – and therefore peoples' sovereignty – does not apply. An example is Argentina's final surrender to the predatory business models of the vulture funds in April 2016, which opened a new cycle of indebtedness (for Argentina) and a new phase of uncertainty on how to handle the next generation of debt crises (for many countries). Once again, attempts to find orderly mechanisms for sovereign debt restructuring processes in the context of the United Nations met the obstinate opposition of developed countries, and with them the legitimate affirmation of the principles for responsible lending and borrowing, which have been subject to lengthy negotiations in the context of the United National Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

Beyond debt, the broader agenda of systemic reforms include the development of regulations to prevent financial crises and to limit their devastating effects, the reform of the monetary system (in terms of capital controls, financial safety nets, Special Drawing Rights, etc.), the governance reform of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and the increased alignment of their activities with development goals, the intractable issue of derivatives and their consequences in terms of commodity price volatility, and the management of climate risk as systemic risk with potentially devastating impact, among others. These issues are only mildly and inadequately addressed by the AAAA. Many of the SDG ambitions will therefore