

That's all very well but...

Friends of the Earth's Guide to Partnerships

The issue of partnerships is one of the most controversial at the WSSD. What does Friends of the Earth think? In short, the right kind of partnerships should be the icing on the cake. The problem is, there is no cake at the moment.

Where can I find the proposed partnerships?

www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/sustainable_dev/partnership_initiatives.html

Business promoted partnerships at: www.basd-action.net/initiatives/index.php

What are partnerships?

“Non-negotiated partnerships and initiatives to implement Agenda 21... will not be negotiated by all present [at the WSSD – i.e. governments]. Rather, they need only be agreed by those directly involved, who will commit themselves to taking the partnerships forward and making them a success.” UN.

What is the problem with partnerships?

- The US and other governments are using partnerships to distract from their opposition to binding multilateral agreements such as the Climate Change and Biodiversity Conventions agreed at Rio. Even business lobbyists agree the WSSD's partnership mania should not inhibit a robust political agreement. Robust legally binding measures are, in the end, essential if sustainable development issues are to be dealt with effectively.
- Partnerships put multinationals at the heart of sustainable development, without ensuring they are fully accountable for their actions. The failure to secure corporate accountability has given unaccountable corporations carte blanche to prevent progress on sustainable development since Rio.
- Partnerships happen anyway and do not need a major multilateral political Summit to deliver them.
- Partnerships, by their nature are piecemeal, limited in scope, scale and time and cannot – even for their enthusiasts – be seen as sufficient to deliver sustainability.
- Partnerships are voluntary. This is meaningful for the voluntary sector. But voluntarism in the private sector has meant a failure to deliver sustainability as UNEP has stated, since Rio a few corporations have embraced sustainable development, but for ‘the majority’ it has been ‘business as usual’ – demonstrating the failure of business voluntarism.

- Case by case individual partnerships are, of course, not necessarily all bad. This makes it an even greater concern that they carry such weight within the WSSD, because even the partners themselves are aware of their limitations. Also partnerships do not necessarily have to involve the private sector.
- The US has stated it wishes to see partnerships take over from traditional Overseas Development Aid – many see this as the privatization of aid.
- Partnerships are an excellent way for corporations to greenwash their image. Constructive activity on selected environmental and humanitarian initiatives allows a company to deflect attention away from its real social and environmental practices – in particular other things it might be doing which are more controversial.

Examples of partnerships that illustrate these concerns

Malaria Prevention Partnerships; A Strategic Health Management Approach

Exxon Mobil has implemented a program in over 30 African countries to prevent and combat malaria within its workforce. The company is focusing on new drug discovery and new drug development.

Comment: Of course, it is important to combat malaria, a major tropical killer. However, Exxon has been a major force in preventing the US from signing up to the Kyoto climate protocol. Millions of people will die from floods and other extreme weather events if climate change isn't stopped. Africa is particularly vulnerable.

Comparative Matrix of Forest Certification Schemes

The Confederation of European Paper Industries aims to promote sustainable forest management by establishing an internationally recognized benchmark against which the results of various forest management certification initiatives can be compared.

Comment: The mainstream forest industry has never accepted the FSC scheme (itself a credible best-of-sector initiative) as appropriate because it is too stringent. Recently it has created similarly named greenwash initiatives (such as the “PEFC”) and created matrices to compare ‘different standards’ in order to claim equivalence to and thereby undermine the FSC. This appears to be an attempt to further greenwash this idea by giving it UN credibility.

Responsible Care in the Chemical Industry

Operating in 46 countries and led by the International Council of Chemical Associations (ICCA) Responsible Care in the Chemical Industry strives to improve the chemical industry’s health, safety and environmental performance.

Comment: Launched in 1989 this initiative still only has half of Europe’s chemical companies signed up. Performance is slowly improving (probably due to regulatory pressure), but the industry remains a major polluter and has failed to carry out even basic safety assessments on 86% of the chemicals it manufactures in the greatest quantities. In the UK, for example, the industry releases thousands of tones of cancer-causing chemicals into the air every year. Most of its factories are located in some of the UK’s poorest neighborhoods.

Indonesia & Micro-credit Program with Local Communities

TotalFinaElf-Indonesia is working with the Indonesian government, local communities and NGOs to improve the level of education, health, social services and income-generating activities in the Mahakam Delta.

Comment: TotalFinaElf's commitment to local communities is rather more controversial in Burma where its much-criticized activities help to keep in power the Burmese Military government. Even the US and UK governments have called for their companies to pull out (albeit ineffectually).

CropLife Partnership

A partnership for promoting appropriate technology to agricultural professionals.

Comment: CropLife International is a Brussels-based global plant science federation led by GM companies such as Bayer CropScience, Monsanto and Syngenta. CropLife has presented itself as a promoter of something called "Green Biotechnology" referring to biotech projects that Monsanto, USAID and others are currently conducting in Kenya on GM sweet potato, and in South Africa on GM cotton. It disguises its promotion of GM by talking instead about promoting "appropriate technology" to agricultural professionals in developing countries who are "best positioned to help farmers access the information and knowledge they need to reap the benefits of knowledge-intensive, sustainable management practices...".

Engaging the Advertising Industry to Help Communicate Sustainability Around the World

The goals of this project are to use the skills and reach of the international marketing and communications industry to develop a global campaign promoting sustainable development to audiences around the world.

Comment: The marketing industry has done more than anyone else to drive consumerism in the Global North. The consequence is the exploitation of resources in the developing World to feed the profit making of marketers.

Global Mining Initiative

Nine leading mining companies participated in this initiative to identify the mining industry's role in sustainable development.

Comment: The initiative has already reported. While it is a useful basis of knowledge, many have seen it as a mechanism for delaying tough action to ensure this much-criticized industry is made subject to proper legal accountability.

Mediterranean Oil Industry Group

This initiative aims to improve oil spill preparedness and response around the Mediterranean Sea, and build the capacity of local governments and local institutions to oversee these activities.

Comment: In practice this initiative is a way of preventing phasing out of oil, prosecution of polluting companies and international regulation of shipping. In the mean time, the new Baku-Ceyhan pipeline will lead to greater amounts of oil being moved through the Mediterranean.

Alternative Fuel Initiative

Fiat, the Italian Ministry for the Environment, and Unione Petrolifera unite to promote low-emission methane-powered vehicles and reduce air pollution in Italy's cities.

Comment: There are already lots of methane powered vehicles in Italy. Methane engines do cut emissions but only marginally. Italy, instead, should concentrate on hybrid engines and the development of renewably powered battery or fuel cell vehicles.

Forest Partnership for Action

The UK government is proposing a broad-based partnership tackling illegally sourced timber imports, procurement and UK woodland restoration.

Comment: The UK's partnership is a good example of a constructive initiative that contains many useful elements, but distracts from the failure of governments as a whole to effectively tackle the destruction and degradation of the World's forests. Rio failed to agree a legally binding agreement on forest conservation and sustainable use and so in the last decade approximately 10% of the world's forests have been destroyed.

Specific comments on the partnership:

- Timber Procurement: The UK Government has so far failed to implement its 1999 commitment to only procure legal and sustainable timber. The partnership does not have a strong enough target (FOE has proposed this commitment is fully implemented by 2007 and should apply to the whole public sector).
- The Partnership aims to raise the amount of UK commercial woodland certified to FSC standards from 40% to 60% and timber products from 60% to 80% by 2007. Given good progress already, FOE has proposed a 100% target.
- Illegal Logging: FOE has supported the idea of an EU communication and legal instrument on illegal logging, but this should not delay action to make it illegal in the UK to import illegally sourced timber.

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