Building Strong Partnership for SDGs: Analyzing Participation of Nigerian Stakeholders

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1. Introduction

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for sustainable development constitutes the blueprint for peace, prosperity, and a healthy planet, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide the necessary guidance in terms of targets and indicators. SDG 17 emphasizes the critical importance of partnerships for sustainable development, based on the assumption that partnerships will mobilize a wide range of stakeholders in the sharing of knowledge, expertise, technology, and resources towards achieving the global agenda. Multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs), since their emergence in the sphere of global public policy making, influence sustainability governance towards achieving sustainable development. In over two decades, partnerships have emerged not just as actors in sustainability governance but agents with the "ability to prescribe and obtain the consent of the governed" (Biermann et al. 2009). The concept of MSPs is often advocated as one of the most participatory and effective mechanisms available to enhance sustainability governance (Pattberg and Widerberg 2016; Pattberg et al. 2019). However, empirical studies have shown that partnership arrangements are often unable to deliver on their goals (Beirmann et al. 2012) and are challenged by lack of participation and inclusiveness, possibly resulting in unbalanced representation, in particular in the Global South. The region of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is no exception. Limited inclusiveness often results in incoherence in agenda-setting, contested decision-making processes, and suboptimal (and sometimes no) outcomes of partnership initiatives (Compagnon 2012; Gereke and Bruhl 2019; Read et al. 2019). Yet, transitioning to strong partnerships for achieving the SDG 17 requires increased participation and inclusiveness that enhances the role and influence of partnerships towards achieving the SDGs. Participation and inclusive criteria in the design and governance of partnerships guarantee that local context and specific sustainability priorities are taken into account. In addition, participation and inclusiveness increase legitimacy, optimism for effective outcome and confidence of achieving domestic resource mobilization required for the localization of the implementation of the global

agenda. Consequently, research needs to urgently explore how multi-stakeholder partnerships can achieve increased participation and inclusiveness by mobilizing underrepresented stakeholders. Against this background, this chapter analyzes inclusiveness and representation related to stakeholders from the SSA region. Using Nigeria as a case study, we explore participation of Nigerian stakeholders in multi-stakeholder partnerships, focusing on perceived obstacles to participation and inclusiveness.

Over 150 stakeholders comprising nation-states, subnational actors, non-governmental organizations (NGO), businesses, and academics participate in the 134 multi-stakeholder partnerships registered, as of 15 December 2019, on the Partnerships for SDGs online platform, self-reporting implementation in Nigeria.[1]

In analyzing the participation and inclusiveness of MSPs in Nigeria, we formulated three key questions: Is the participation of stakeholders in partnerships spread or skewed? Is stakeholders' participation in partnerships participatory and inclusive? And finally, is the participation of local/regional stakeholders adding value to the agenda-setting and decision-making process?

The chapter is organized as follows: first, we will review the Partnerships for SDGs online platform, focusing on MSPs implemented in Nigeria. Second, using survey data on SSA partnerships, we analyze the perceived factors hindering participation in MSPs. Finally, the chapter discusses the impacts of limited participation on partnerships in relation to agenda-setting, decision-making processes, and outcomes. Understanding Nigerian stakeholder participation in multi-stakeholder partnerships will offer an opportunity for the reflection required for building strong and effective partnerships for the SDGs.

2. The Concepts of Participation and Inclusiveness

The United Nations, in adopting the SDGs in 2015, stressed that its successful achievement is dependent on adoption of an inclusive and participatory approach in implementation. Inclusiveness and participation are regarded as key features of pluralism. Participatory and inclusive structures tend to facilitate decision making, implementation, and acceptance as well as ensuring transparency and accountability (Glass and Newig 2019). These concepts are viewed as core criteria towards establishing the legitimacy of decision-making processes that have collective impact. Inclusiveness and participation are viewed from two

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[1] See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships (accessed on 29 July 2020).

dimensions. While inclusiveness connotes involvement in a process, participation is understood as the ability of the participants to make inputs to policies (Quick and Feldman 2011). Inclusiveness and participation, therefore, are tools directed at mobilizing affected stakeholders to be represented in the decision-making process (Backstrand et al. 2012). By this means, accelerating a bottom-up governance approach in the implementation of the SDGs is also stressed in the SDGs declaration. Bottom-up governance approaches, characterized by inclusion and participation of stakeholders, are only effective when they are accepted by all stakeholders with measurable representation in decision-making (Kelly et al. 2016). However, while inclusiveness and participation tend to increase the legitimacy of a decision-making process, the effects of inclusiveness and participation criteria on effectiveness vary (Kalfagianni and Pattberg 2013). This is as a result of several factors, including: types of stakeholders participating, pattern of participation, and under or over representation of stakeholders in the decision-making process (Malex et al. 2019; Backstrand et al. 2012). Therefore, satisfying these criteria requires determination of several factors, including type of stakeholders and level of participation that would add value with positive effect on agenda-setting and outcome (Schmalzbauer and Visbeck 2016). However, despite the UN declaration on the implementation of SDGs through multi-stakeholder partnerships via an inclusive and participatory approach, the SSA region is underrepresented in partnerships (Backstrand et al. 2012). Therefore, our study on partnership, focusing on the SSA, will analyze issues of limited participation and inclusiveness; we will also suggest paths towards increased participation of the region in partnerships, thereby accelerating the achievement of SDG 17.

3. Multi-Stakeholder Partnership: Definitions and Meaning

The concept of partnership denotes interactions of both state and non-state actors that is voluntary and collaborative, as well as sharing risks, resources, and responsibility (Pattberg and Widerberg 2016). The social science literature describes public–private partnership or multi-stakeholder partnership as a platform for the interaction of the public and private sphere to provide collective public goods and services (Schaferhoff et al. 2009). Specifically, it is understood as an opportunity for non-state and state actors, including businesses, NGOs, academics as well as subnational actors such as municipalities, cities, and regions to contribute towards achieving global sustainable development goals (Pattberg and Stripple 2008). Through the provision of voluntary commitments alongside the state, partnerships have been identified as a significant part of the global sustainability governance architecture,

particularly in the implementation of the SDGs. Regarding definition, there is no universally accepted definition of multi-stakeholder partnership. However, available definitions of partnership have centered on criteria related to actors, functionality, institutionalization, transnationalism, voluntariness, shared risks and responsibilities, goals, collective goods, governance, among others (Pattberg and Widerberg 2016). Partnerships for sustainable development provide governance functions—producing and/or distributing collective goods and services. Therefore, the concept is described as an institutionalized collaboration between the private and public actors aimed at providing collective goods (Schaferhoff et al. 2009).

4. Methods and Material

4.1. Methods

For this study, we analyzed data from the Partnerships for SDGs online platform and conducted a survey of stakeholders participating in partnerships in Nigeria.

First, we started with the overall universe of cases, the more than 5000 partnerships registered on the Partnerships for SDGs online platform (as of 2020), and subsequently, filtered for partnerships indicating activities in Nigeria, which resulted in a total of 134 cases. We, then, categorized the MSPs into having either a primary global or national focus. We relied on the scope of membership and geographic implementation as criteria for the categorization. For example, a partnership with transnational membership and implementation is categorized as globally focused, while a partnership with national membership and implementation scope is categorized as nationally focused. We consequently identified more than 150 unique stakeholders, including NGOs, academics, federal agencies, subnational agencies, and business actors.

Second, the data for analysis of the perceived constraints are sourced from a broader international survey on MSPs, with a special focus on the SSA region, aimed at identifying the regional actors participating in MSPs, their level of participation, their motives, and potential impacts. The survey was based on the SurveyMonkey online survey tool and analyzed 36 Nigeria respondents' responses. While 120 Nigerian stakeholders identified from the online platform participated in the broader survey, 36 (response rate 30%) reacted to the survey question on perceived obstacles to participation in partnership for the SDGs. Categories of stakeholders that responded to the survey are members of the Non-governmental Organization (NGO), Business, Business Association, Academic (Research institutes), and National government agencies. The core criterion to participate in the survey was that respondents were geographically located in SSA. Among other things,

the survey asked respondents to rank on a scale from 1 to 4 (1—Most Hindering Factor; 2—More Hindering Factor; 3—Hindering Factor; 4—Less Hindering Factor) what they perceived as hindering factors that constrain stakeholder participation in partnerships.

Using the Partnerships for SDGs online platform has its limitations, as the number of partnerships on the platform changes on daily basis. Therefore, the study relied on data available on the online platform as of 15 December 2019. In addition, the platform does not verify the authenticity of the multi-stakeholder arrangement registered on the platform. However, the platform has become a starting point for measuring stakeholder participation in the implementation of the SDGs.

4.2. Partnerships for SDGs Online Platform

The Partnerships for SDGs online platform was created to register voluntary commitments and MSPs in support of implementing the SDGs. The Partnerships for SDGs online platform is a UN global registry of voluntary commitments and multi-stakeholder partnerships, managed by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DSDG/DESA). The platform is also expected to facilitate knowledge and expertise sharing among stakeholders and partnerships. Actors interested in registering partnerships or voluntary commitments are expected to satisfy the SMART criteria. The SMART criteria require that the registered initiative should be specific, measurable, achievable, resource-based, and time-bound. Aligning the MSP initiatives registered on the platform to the SMART criteria requires that initiatives are directed at contributing to achieving goals and targets with measurable indicators. It also requires that registered initiatives are achievable with attainable goals, secured resources, and time-specific deliverables. Generally, the platform has emerged as one of the key tools in monitoring and tracking SDG 17 implementation. The Partnerships for SDGs online platform visualizes an improved number of partnerships commitments linked to achieving the global goals, particularly in the SSA region.

Globally, over 5000 partnership commitments are registered on the platform as of 15 December 2019, focused on achieving one or several goals of the SDGs. Out of this, 171 indicated implemented activities in Kenya, 127 indicated implementing in South Africa, and 134 indicated implemention in Nigeria. This is an increase of 11 partnerships registered on the online platform (approx. 9% increase in number of partnership commitments) from 123 in May 2018, self-reporting implementation in Nigeria. Figure 1 above shows the distribution of MSPs that self-reported implementation in sub-Saharan African countries. Nigeria is strategic in the

achievement of the SDG in the sub-Saharan African region. With its current growth rate and sustainable development challenges, implementation of Agenda 2030 in Nigeria will have effects on the SSA region as a whole, hence, the selection of Nigeria as a case study for this study.
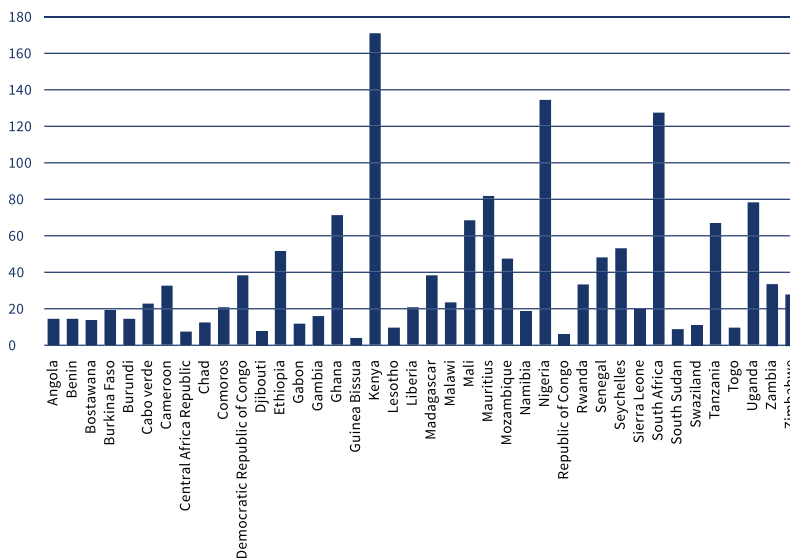

Figure 1. Multi-Stakeholders Partnerships Implementation by SSA Countries. Data sourced from Partnerships for SDGs online platform (https://sustainabledevelopment. un.org/partnerships).

As presented in Figure 2, the 134 partnerships implemented in Nigeria comprised of initiatives linked to one or more of the SDGs. SDG 5 (39) has the highest number of multi-stakeholder partnerships, followed by SDG 4 (33), SSDG 3 (32), and SDG 1 (31). SDG 17, which is on strengthening partnerships for the implementation of the global agenda, has 31 partnership commitments. SDG 10 (8) has attracted the lowest number of partnerships. In short, partnerships may favor implementation of one goal over others. For instance, more partnerships are focused on addressing SDG 5 (achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls) than partnerships linking their actions to addressing SDG 10 (reduce inequality within and among countries). While Nigeria continues to highlight the importance of implementing innovative initiatives in its energy sector and solving cross cutting environmental, social, and economic issues, only 16 partnerships currently indicate that their actions

are focused on SDG 7 (ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all).

However, a visualization of the number of multi-stakeholder partnerships on the platform tends to suggest increased optimism and hope of accelerating the implementation of the global sustainability agenda (Chan et al. 2019). Observing all shades of partnership arrangements on the platform suggests the involvement of all stakeholders, thereby increasing the optimism of bridging implementation gaps and addressing democratic deficits in sustainability governance process, particularly satisfying the criteria of representative, participatory, and inclusiveness norms (Pattberg and Widerberg 2016). Yet, are the arrangements focusing on Nigeria inclusive and participatory?
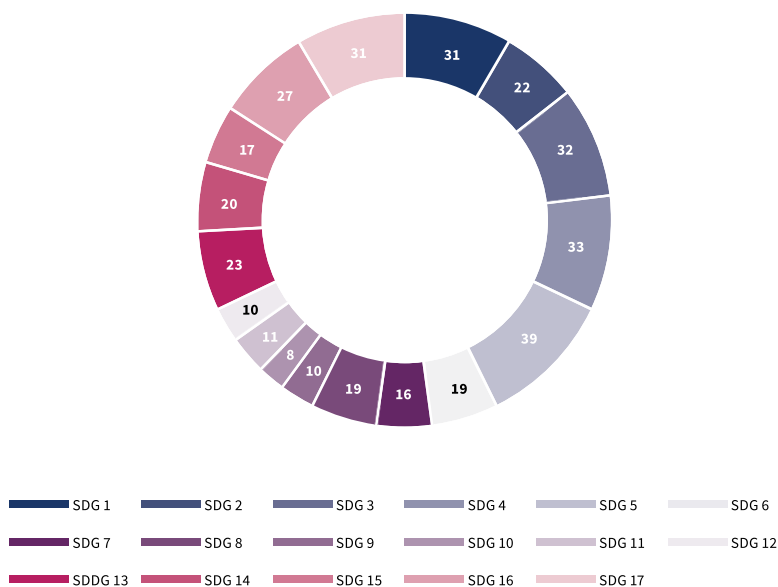

Figure 2. MSP Initiatives by SDGs (Partnerships for SDGs online Platform—data sourced from https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships).

4.3. Case Study Context—Nigeria

Nigeria is situated in Western Africa and is the largest economy in the SSA region, with an estimated GDP of 376.284 billion US Dollars. The country is the largest producer of crude oil in Africa and the sixth largest producer in the world, making it a key member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Nigeria has an estimated population of about 200 million with a projection that the

population will practically double in 2050 to about 411 million. With this projected population, Nigeria would be the third most populous country in 2050, behind India and China. Regarding political structure, Nigeria is divided into 37 subnational entities (states) and 774 local governments. Despite its position in the region, Nigeria is confronted with several sustainable development challenges. For example, Nigeria is confronted with sustainable development issues such as high poverty rate, high youth unemployment, irregular migration, low access to electricity (with only 54.4% of population having access nationally and only 1 in 4 persons connected to the grid in the rural areas), and environmental degradation arising from exploitation of fossil fuel (OSSAP-SDGs 2017; SEforALL n.d.; The World Bank n.d.). Nigeria's environmental sustainability challenges are diverse and varied, ranging from intense flooding as a result of a rise in sea level in Lagos and other cities in the southern and north central regions; desertification rampaging the northern part of the country; the shrinking of Lake Chad in the northeast region of the country. These challenges are causing human insecurity in the form of loss of livelihood, dwindling agricultural production, and in some instances, dangerous tensions and armed conflicts arising from climate change-induced migration. Like other sub-Saharan African countries, Nigeria suffers from resource constraints, weak institutional capacities, infrastructural deficits, and is fraught with a fragile socio-political environment that is hindering efforts towards tackling these problems. Nigeria, like other countries in the SSA, is active in the implementation of the SDGs and incorporated them into its national policies and strategies. For example, Nigeria has, since the inception of the SDG, embarked on policy reforms aimed at harmonization and integration of SDGs into its development plan at the national level. Nigeria presented its national voluntary review (NVR) in 2017 and 2020, detailing SDG implementation progress; Nigeria has also developed a homegrown analytical framework, Integrated Sustainable Development Goals (iSDG), for assessing policymaking impact on the SDGs. In recognition of the importance of partnership in the implementation of the SDGs and to accelerate achieving SDG 17, Nigeria's National Strategy provides an institutional framework for engaging stakeholders, through Private Sector Group on SDGs, Development Partners on SDGs, and Civil Society Advisory Group on SDGs (OSSAP-SDGs 2017).

5. Results

5.1. Analysis of Stakeholder Participation in Partnerships

5.1.1. Stakeholder Participation: Spread or Skewed?

In total, 134 out of over 5000 partnerships and commitments registered on the Partnerships for SDGs platform self-reported that they are implementing (some of) their activities in Nigeria. The activities differ in terms of their composition of actors, focus of initiative, and geographical scope of implementation. While some of the partnerships are global in character (i.e., transnational membership and implementation scope), others are national in character with national membership and scope of implementation. As presented in Figure 3, 45% of the MSPs that self-report implementing (some of) their activities in Nigeria are nationally focused, while 55% are globally focused. A simple view of the different multi-stakeholder partnerships registered on the platform, without any systematic scrutiny, suggests improved participation and inclusiveness of stakeholders. Against this background, it may be concluded that we are witnessing, in fact, a bottom-up governance approach, as envisioned in SDG 17. However, our critical analysis of the data suggests that membership of most of the multi-stakeholder partnerships on the platform does not represent a spread in participation but that membership remains skewed. First, in terms of spread, analysis of the data shows that the membership of global focused partnerships is dominated by stakeholders from the Global North. Second, the nationally focused partnerships are dominated by non-government organization with limited membership of stakeholders at the subnational and local level. In addition, the nationally focused partnerships have no clearly defined governance structure, required for coordination and policy influencing. Generally, our review of the membership of partnerships implemented in Nigeria indicates unbalance. Yet, proponents of multi-stakeholder partnerships in policy making have often pointed at the number of partnerships on the platform as an indication of inclusion and participation. However, numbers alone do not translate into an inclusive and participatory partnership, thereby posing fundamental governance risk to policy makers. For example, skewed participation, rather than strengthening the capacity of participating stakeholders, may distort equitable distribution of development and, thereby, strengthen business interests using the partnership platform (Mert and Chan 2012).
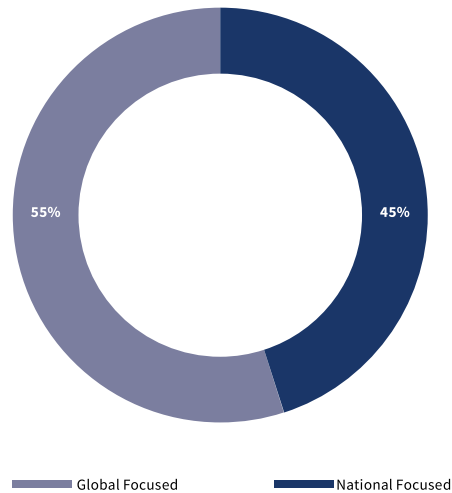
Figure 3. Implementation scope of MSPs in Nigeria (Partnerships for SDGs online Platform—Data sourced from https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships).

5.1.2. Participation and Inclusivity

Visualizing stakeholder participation shows diverse participation of stakeholders ranging from state actors to non-state actors, including NGOs, businesses, business associations, academics, and community development associations. More than 150 stakeholders participate in 134 partnerships registered on the platform and indicate implementation in Nigeria. While NGOs and the federal government (through their agencies) dominate membership and leadership of (nationally focused) partnerships, local government and community level-based actors are, by and large, absent. All in all, NGOs, nation-state actors, and business are the dominant participants (88%) in partnerships. In addition, a review of membership of partnerships shows that globally focused partnerships are dominated by national actors. Another finding is that participation of subnational actors and academics is limited, and that local governments are absent from partnerships. Figure 4 below illustrates the distribution of stakeholders' participation, showing that 43% are NGOs and 26% are business stakeholders, while 19% are nation-state agencies. The partnerships that the subnational actors participate in are usually project-specific, designed, and coordinated by international organizations such as UNDP, UNICEF, World Bank, etc. This trend does not support the bottom-up sustainability governance approach as envisaged in the implementation of the SDGs, which stresses participation and inclusiveness, in the implementation of global Agenda 2030, thereby posing major

governance risk to the multi-stakeholder partnership arrangements, particularly in the design of its initiatives. First, the trend makes it difficult to and complicated in reflecting local priorities into its implementation and decision-making process. Second, the NGOs participating in most of the nationally focused partnerships often are constrained by lack of structure, resources, and capacity, thereby posing an accountability risk. In addition, the lack of participation and inclusiveness, for instance, may further exacerbate uneven global distribution of knowledge, which equips stakeholders for quality participation (van der Molen 2018).
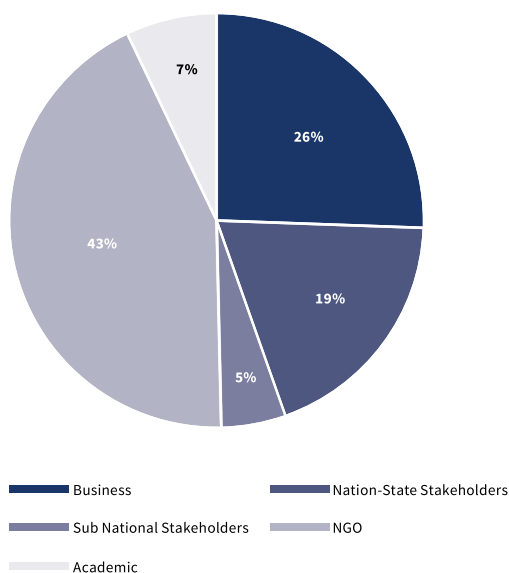

Figure 4. Category of Stakeholders Participating in MSPs (Partnerships for SDGs online Platform—Data sourced from https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships).

5.1.3. Quality Participation: Value Added or Rhetoric?

SDG 17 emphasizes that inclusive and participatory stakeholder participation through partnerships will add value to the implementation process of global goals. It is assumed that such a scenario will stimulate the bottom-up governance approach, thereby increasing ownership and acceptance criteria. However, contrary to this view, in sub-Saharan Africa, participation in and membership of partnerships have little or no impact on the partnership performance and outcome (Szulecki et al. 2012; Compagnon 2012; Mawejje 2019). In recognition of this deficit, it is argued that state actor involvement and leadership of multi-stakeholder partnerships may

lead to improved performance and outcome, particularly with their democratic legitimacy and bureaucratic structure. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, there is no empirical outcome to support this assumption, as state-dominated partnerships are constrained by several factors, including limited resources and expertise as well as weak institutions that impede accountability and transparency. Second, visualization of the Partnerships for SDGs platform shows that even the nationally focused partnerships, dominated by nation-state actors, may not be creating any (valuable) outcome. For example, a cursory view of the reporting dashboard of the platform shows that there are few reports from national focused MSPs that indicate activities and results. In addition, following initiative registration on the platform, there is little guarantee that the initiatives have the resources required for implementation. This often raises questions about the partnerships and voluntary commitment approach in Nigeria, particularly with the argument that the approach in the Global South may not deliver on the optimism due to several factors, including the inadequacy of capacity, resource, and institutional accountability criteria (Okereke et al. 2018).

5.1.4. Perceived Obstacles: Why Is Participation Limited?

Achieving Goal 17 requires an inclusive and participatory approach towards implementation of the SDGs. The value of participation is not only measured in quantitative terms regarding the number of stakeholders participating in partnerships, but also as the value of such participation. Against this background, this study identified and ranked stakeholder perceptions on what they consider obstacles constraining participation in MSPs. The responses identified four key factors: resources, capacity, knowledge, and governance structure of partnerships. As depicted in Figure 5, the respondents ranked resources as the biggest obstacle, followed by capacity, knowledge, and governance structure of partnerships. It is not surprising that resources are the most frequently perceived obstacle, particularly as it determines, among others, the cost for effective stakeholder inclusion in the participation process (Aggraeni et al. 2019). Capacity and knowledge gaps are perceived as other key obstacles that constrain the effective participation of stakeholders from the Global South (Szulecki et al. 2012). In an attempt to bridge this gap, over 80% of the partnerships visualized on the UN platform commit to capacity and knowledge-based initiatives. Governance structure of partnerships, including, for example, functioning secretariat, is identified as one of the key ingredients in achieving effective design and impact making partnerships. However,

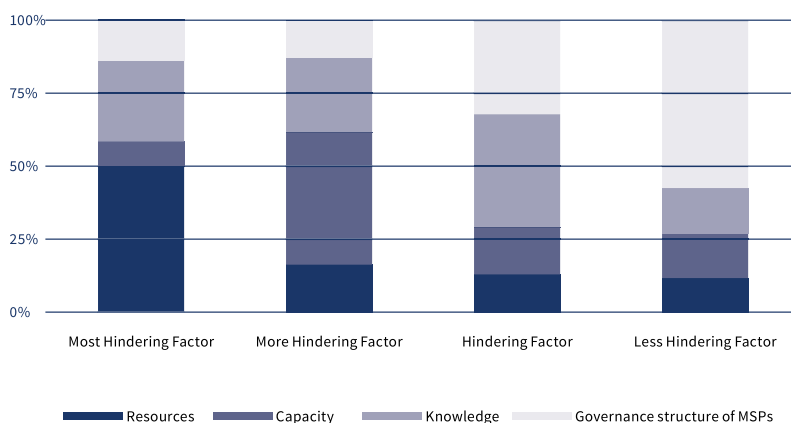the respondents in this study perceived governance structure of partnerships as a less constraining factor.

Figure 5. Perceived Obstacles to participation in MSPs (SSA in Partnerships for SDGs Survey, 2019).

6. Discussion

The concept of multi-stakeholder partnerships is a result of a shift in global public policy and recognition that the SDGs objectives are best achieved by the design of a multi-stakeholder approach that integrates non-state actors in the policymaking and implementation process (Marx 2019). The SDGs implementation is anchored on the agenda that tends to advance the interest of the most underrepresented in the society through a multi-stakeholder approach that increases inclusiveness and participation in governance arrangement and process. However, empirical studies have highlighted the limitation of partnerships' performances, particularly in delivering their commitments. Some studies argue that these limitations vary in type of partnerships, citing empirical evidence that state-led and dominated partnerships are more likely to perform at suboptimal levels (Shin et al. 2017). In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, studies show that suboptimal performance is not restricted to only state-led partnerships but almost all partnerships, as they have limited or no output and outcomes (Compagnon 2012). For example, a recent study of global partnership, EITI, suggested that membership of the sub-Saharan African states has little or no impact in achieving the network's key commitments (Mawejje 2019). Limitations of partnership performances can be traced to the question of participation and inclusiveness due to several factors, including skewed participation, limited stakeholder participation, and lack of quality participation.

First, in quantitative terms, partnership arrangements, often are not inclusive and participatory enough, lacking the capability to galvanize the underrepresented into partnership participation with consequences on agenda-setting and decision-making processes. Both globally and nationally focused partnership arrangements have limited participation of subnational and local level-based stakeholders. Yet, there is optimism that subnational and local level-based stakeholders are key platforms towards achieving a bottom-up governance approach in the implementation of the SDGs, particularly in achieving localization of SDG implementation. For instance, the subnational and local level-based stakeholders play a key role in enabling collaborating arrangement and linkage platforms that facilitate plan for the achievement of the global sustainability agenda (Jorgensen et al. 2015; Hsu et al. 2019). Both levels of governance are also considered as places where interventions and policies for sustainability governance are experimented and developed into scalable actions (Van der Heijden 2019; Koehler et al. 2018). Setting an agenda for partnership initiatives, relying on local actions, will offer an opportunity for a bottom-up governance approach, reflecting local priorities, and demonstrating inclusiveness and participation. Furthermore, the participation of relevant stakeholders does not only engender inclusiveness but encourages diverse opinions and inputs in the agenda-setting and decision-making process, thereby enriching and adding value to the process. Yet, it is observed that the partnership agenda is often in conflict with local priorities and needs, with different actors pursuing different agendas from different perspectives (Gereke and Bruhl 2019). Generally, the study strengthens the argument that stakeholders of the country, like other stakeholders of the Global South, are less represented in partnerships, thereby reinforcing the critical questions of legitimacy, accountability, and transparency of the decision-making process (Pattberg and Enechi 2009). However, the discussions about the limitations in inclusiveness and participation should not be restricted to the numerical balancing of stakeholder participation (Chan et al. 2019). The discussion must be also extended to building and strengthening of platforms for knowledge exchange, capacity building, and identification of scalable actions at the local level as well increased discussing strategies for the realization of local resource mobilization indicators of the SDG 17.

Second, the limited inclusiveness and participation that characterize multi-stakeholder partnerships often render its decision-making processes contestable (Chan et al. 2019). This, again, brings to the fore questions regarding the legitimacy, accountability, and transparency of the partnership decision-making process (Pattberg and Enechi 2009). For instance, there are concerns that limited inclusiveness and participation of actors may encourage the hijack of the decision-making process

by powerful actors and influence decisions that serve narrow interests, thereby distorting development distribution and increasing inequalities (Okereke 2018; Pattberg et al. 2019; Pattberg 2010). The perception of the effective decision-making process of multi-stakeholder partnerships arrangement is strengthened when it is particularly characterized by diversity and inclusiveness with a measurable representation of the underrepresented (Kelly et al. 2016). The participation of Nigeria-based NGOs in multi-stakeholder partnerships, in quantitative terms, raises the optimism of ameliorating the participatory limitation and ensuring effective representation in the decision-making process. Particularly, as NGOs are described as playing the key role of contributing technical capacity support to decentralized and participatory governance as well providing a grassroots linkage and platform, where the marginalized and excluded promote their interest and nurture innovation (Cook et al. 2017; Banks et al. 2015). This assumed role of the NGOs ideally ensures the emergence of a bottom-up governance approach in the decision-making process. However, NGOs in the Global South are significantly constrained by several variables, including lack of resources, knowledge, and capacity to participate in decision making and deliver on their functions without seeking 'external' assistance. Additionally, in sub-Saharan Africa, poor networking and cooperation among NGOs constrain their ability to influence the decision-making process (Ariti et al. 2018). Gaps in the societal awareness and knowledge of sustainable development issues fuel perceptions that also limit space for participation and inclusiveness. For example, the skewed participation and limited inclusiveness in the decision-making process often strengthen the perception among NGOs based in Nigeria that partnership is a Global North affair (Bansard et al. 2016). Bridging the societal awareness and knowledge gap will empower stakeholders and enhance quality participation in partnerships.

Third, achieving improved outcomes is one of the major challenges confronting partnership arrangements, and is more obvious in sub-Saharan Africa (Compagnon 2012; Beisheim et al. 2014). This phenomenon is, again, traced to several structural features, including lack of capacity and resources of stakeholders in the region to effectively participate. In addition, the global partnerships with the capacity and resources often overlook the locale-specific contextual priorities and needs in its agenda-setting process, especially in engaging diverse stakeholders at the local level and utilizing local-level knowledge in the design of partnerships (Schmalzbauer and Visbeck 2016). Therefore, achieving improved outcomes requires the creation of an inclusive and participatory space. The burden should not only be on the stakeholders of the region to voluntarily participate in partnerships but also the responsibility of the global focused partnerships to put in place some critical

strategies aimed at galvanizing broad stakeholder participation. First, what is needed is a deliberate strategy that creates a linkage platform for collaboration aimed at exchanging knowledge and sharing experiences between nationally and globally focused partnerships. A collaborative arrangement that enables representative, participatory, and inclusive interactions would lead to improved outcomes, accountability, and increased transparency. Second, there is a need for globally focused partnerships to engage in a bottom-up approach in the design of its programs through the identification of scalable actions at the local level. While this may fit into the argument for a meta-governance structure of partnerships (Pattberg and Widerberg 2016), it also helps in enabling an inclusive and participatory bottom-up governance approach envisaged in SDG 17.

7. Conclusions

Achieving SDG 17 is a challenging task, particularly as the successful implementation of this goal transforms the implementation of the entire SDGs. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are at the center of SDG implementation, and it is assumed that this approach will address the inclusiveness and participation deficit in global sustainability governance, thereby achieving the 'no one is left behind' principle of the SDG declaration. However, participation deficits in multi-stakeholder partnerships persist, particularly in the Global South and the SSA region. Unbalanced partnerships are less likely to create lasting impact towards achieving the SDGs and confronting sustainable development challenges in the SSA region. With the SSA region underrepresented in MSPs, in particular, in partnership agenda-setting and decision-making processes, SDG implementation is at risk. Therefore, achieving the implementation of SDG 17 requires deliberate policy strategies that strengthen partnerships; mobilize stakeholders at different scales to participate in partnerships; create and enhance linkages, and capacity building platforms. Furthermore, in recognition of the important role of the subnational and local level in sustainability governance and their gross limited participation in partnerships, there should be a deliberate policy strategy targeted at mobilizing and enabling stakeholders at these levels to participate. This approach would lead to increased inclusiveness and participation as well as to a more bottom-up implementation approach. These strategies for enabling inclusive and participatory partnerships are not exhaustive but are intended to prompt further research on the subject of partnerships for SDGs implementation and sub-Saharan Africa, especially with the limited scholarly research focusing on sustainability governance and the SSA region (Gerlak et al. 2020). Consequently, further research should focus on

scrutinizing the complexity of unbalanced actor participation, the type of stakeholder participating, understanding local context and priorities that enable participation as well the role of the subnational and local level; what are the motivations for participation; what platform is suitable for galvanizing and mobilizing participation and how to increase participation and inclusiveness towards the realization of SDG 17.

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