

"Public-Private Partnerships: what does it mean for the UN?"

Report on a United Nations University Midday Forum (30 June 2010)

By Lorenzo Congiu

On the 30th of June 2010, at 13:30 pm New York Time, the United Nations University organized the UNU Midday Forum on public-private partnerships. The main speaker at the forum was the director of the UN office for Partnerships, Amir A. Dossal. The moderator of the forum was Jean-Marc Coicaud, director of the UN University Office in New York. The aim of this forum was to discuss what role "innovative partnerships" can play in achieving the UN's agenda. As companies have moved to new, more active, approaches in corporate philanthropy, new forms of cooperation have been developed. These forms of cooperation are supposed to lead to "innovative solutions", which are seen as essential and mutually-beneficial for achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals.

Mr. Dossal provided first a brief history of the creation of the UN Office for Partnerships. The UN Office for Partnerships provides advice on effective partnership strategies, and on the applicable UN rules and regulations. It also advises how the partners can remain within the existing legal framework. Mr. Dossal compared the UN Office for Partnerships with a marriage broker. The main aim of this UN office is to bring different partners together, like a "partnership broker". However, like the marriage broker is not always present at the wedding, the 'partnership broker' is not present at the implementation stage of the established partnerships.

Mr. Dossal acknowledges that the UN itself started relatively early with establishing partnerships with other parties. The partnership with the *Rotary International* is an example of this. As the UN became increasingly involved in collaborations, it became clear that change cannot be achieved in silos, and that better results are achieved

through working together. Nonetheless, "it is hard to change a super tanker (i.e. UN) and its habits". Nevertheless, partnerships are considered as "problem solvers" and the number of partnerships has grown exponentially in the last years.

But what constitutes a partnership? Dossal defines partnerships as follows: "Partnerships are really about relationships; not about a contractual agreement. It is about sharing values, looking at each others' competences and complementing each others' leadership issues." Fortunately, actors outside of the UN system – such as entrepreneurs - have expressed their willingness to help and have a stake in solving the issues the world is faced with today. Hence, the UN can play an important role as an agent that brings together those that are willing to invest in the poor. The UN can further help them to set up



Mr. Dossal.
Photo source: un.org

"What we do is, we build new partnerships, we catalyze them, we do not implement anything. Our office is really kind of partnership broker."

Amir Dossal,
Director UN OfP

collaborative projects. In turn, these projects function as a publicity tool for the UN. Joint projects create more understanding for values and norms of UN organizations. It is not only the UN that gains from these partnerships, companies increasingly realize that development projects can support their triple bottom-lines.

The importance of social entrepreneurs

Social entrepreneurs are a real inspiration for the UN Office for Partnerships. Social entrepreneurs aim to develop sustainable (business) models for problem-solving and poverty reduction. In particular cross-sector partnership can function as such sustainable models. Cross-sector partnerships create the opportunity for partners from different societal spheres to achieve goals that were unimaginable or unachievable without the partnership. For example, in public-private partnerships market parties usually contribute large amounts of different resources and the state can provide the enforcement of regulations in order to make sure the market party does not exploit customers and receives a return on investment. Cross-sector partnerships allow for innovative solutions that would have otherwise been hard to find. Partnerships show that through sharing of each others stories and competences one can learn and improve operations. For example, a North-South partnership between NGOs can provide a transfer of technology or resources. However, it is still important to look beyond the mere transfer of technology or goods. “What, for example, happens after you have delivered the medicines to the poor?” It is relevant that the partnership does not stop at the outcome and outputs, but aims to achieve its ultimate objective.

UN Office for Partnerships and Global Compact are complementary

In the remaining discussion of the UNU forum, the audience asked questions mainly addressing specific issues. Firstly, on the relationship between the UN Office for Partnerships and the Global Compact, Mr. Dossal understands that both organizations are complementary. The Global Compact is aimed at stimulating companies to improve their corporate behavior. Often, these companies come to the UN Office for Partnerships to ask for practical advice on how partnerships can support their endeavors. Some persons commented that this practice could conflict with “the UN’s role of regulating and blaming the bad

behaviors of the corporate world”. Mr. Dossal advocates that engagement with the corporate world is the only way to facilitate change and to (slightly) improve firm’s behaviors. Furthermore, he acknowledges that the UN is not capable of enforcing particular operating principles on companies. As final remark he said that this holds also true for the position of the UN vis-à-vis states.

Best Practice sharing is unstructured

The second question focused on best practice sharing between UN offices. Mr. Dossal responded that information is been shared by different UN offices, however, in a relatively unstructured way. Mr. Dossal further remarks that sharing of information is often limited to organizations in the same silo and thinks that information sharing outside of the silo would be more beneficial.

Challenging Issues remain

The remaining questions mainly focused on specific issues such as, the aging population, youth engagement, and lack of transparency (especially in projects in challenging environments). Mr. Dossal started with acknowledging the fact that the engagement of aging population could be essential; nonetheless he mentions that NGOs that address these issues do not put in enough effort to promote the awareness of this problem. He argued that NGOs, such as AARP, could do more to become part of the solution instead of being only the voice of the problem. To continue with the topic of youth engagement in UN projects, Dossal thinks that the UN focuses on them especially. Nonetheless, it is important that the projects create jobs and keep the youth active, because the increasing youth unemployment can be a threat for development and world security. In addition, Mr. Dossal admits that transparency issues (e.g. corruption) are a real challenge. Transparency issues will not be solved in one day, but he expects improvement in the coming years.

Partnering particularly important for Africa

The topic of partnerships was again addressed by focusing on the importance of partnerships in Africa. Mr. Dossal admits that this is an important issue. He thinks that an increase of partnerships in African countries is necessary, because it is a continent with a lot of potential (empowerment of the poor) and opportunities (e.g. mineral resources). Therefore, he also asks companies to invest and operate in Africa. In that way, companies provide employment and long term involvement with the continent. In order to make this endeavor effective, the UN Office for Partnerships can help share visions on how to invest in Africa, and how to create a market. Mr. Dossal stresses that it is also about a change in behavior and of merely seeing the poor as a market. Empowerment of the poor can be

achieved through the provision of micro credits. That way the start-up of small enterprises is stimulated. These market initiatives can be initiated in a broad context, compared with traditional community support, which is more locally focused.

Youthful organization

At the end, Mr. Dossal specifically addresses the youthful nature of his office, which, in his eyes, is also reflected in the number of interns working at the UN Office for Partnerships. He thinks that this is important because “they are the future, those that can share the UN message”. He closes the UNU forum by highlighting that the work of the UN Office for Partnerships cannot be seen as a normal job but as an art, as it requires creativity: “Scientific art to build relationships”.

- Link to video of this UN Midday Forum: <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/7993564>
- The *Partnerships Resource Centre* has a research project on the partnership portfolio of International Organizations like the UN: www.erim.nl/partnerships