

Conclusion: More Than One Step Beyond – What Next?

To develop MSPs further as a tool for sustainable development, two main steps need to be taken.

First there is a need for common learning on MSPs. Despite a great number of processes which have been carried out over the last few years and those which are ongoing at the moment, it is remarkable that there is little communication between them. One reason appears to be that people are typically working within specific sectors, such as environment, poverty, gender equity, and so on. Concentrating on their respective goals, they have built networks within their sectors but rarely across the sectors and issues. Also, many people are focusing their work on a particular level (international, regional, national, local) and there is a chronic problem of missing links between those levels, which again leads to limited networks.

As our work has shown, what is potentially emerging is a large amount of expertise and experience which seems at the moment to be rather scattered and unconnected. People carrying that expertise, however, form a rich and resourceful 'community of practice'. This knowledge management term describes a group of people who do similar work but do not necessarily work in the same organizations or sectors. They share many interests and concerns, and find solutions to similar problems in very different environments. It seems that as regards MSPs, there is a community of practice, or even a movement, 'out there' which needs to connect much more and begin to define itself.

As we move ahead in developing MSPs, it will be important to enable this community to come together, to share their experiences and create opportunities to learn from each other. MSP practitioners would benefit from 'learning exercises', drawing out the common

factors of success and failure, the results of which could be made available for people who are designing new or adapted multi-stakeholder processes.

Developing the network would also help to promote the MSP ideas more powerfully. It would also be an important basis for developing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for MSPs. In order to establish the effectiveness of MSPs and their components, it will be necessary to develop shared sets of indicators and standardized tools for evaluation to determine their impact in 'real life' terms. The question of measuring the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms in sustainable development has not been addressed sufficiently, and again, work that has been done needs to be shared much more widely to avoid duplication and the reinvention of wheels. This will be an important component of further learning on MSPs; it will help to develop the concept and to promote those features and components which have indeed proved to work.

It would be very useful to set up a unit or mechanism for information exchange and overall coordination or advice on matters of multi-stakeholder participation and collaboration, which would provide a stakeholder hub for learning, networking, indicators' development and promotion. This should be set up as a multi-stakeholder effort.

What we say here about MSPs and learning concerns the need to do this correctly and thoroughly, otherwise there is a danger that MSPs will turn out to be just another fashionable buzz-word and activity, which will soon fade to make way for the next one. We need to be careful not to waste such an important concept.

Experimenting with a common framework such as the one we propose here will help to promote MSPs. We will find out more about what they can deliver and how best we use their potential - as independent processes as well as ones designed around official decision-making.

Second, for MSPs to contribute their potential more effectively, governments and intergovernmental institutions will need to develop more consistent policies as regards stakeholder participation. At the moment, different bodies are experimenting with different structures and mechanisms. And it is indeed difficult for stakeholders to understand what is expected of them, what they are being invited to do and how reliable that role will be. In addition, governments should involve stakeholders more effectively, for example by challenging them to discuss the implementation of policies and decisions in multi-stakeholder settings. This would alert stakeholders to their responsibilities, generate their commitment and forge partnerships, thus helping to make things happen.

The UN has a key role to play in developing appropriate mechanisms and making suggestions to its members. Agreeing advanced

mechanisms of transparent, equitable and legitimate stakeholder participation will ultimately strengthen (inter)governmental institutions, in terms of democratic governance as well as of adequately addressing global challenges. Reinicke et al (2000) have suggested a clearing house that would act as an information hub. One could imagine a unit within the UN Secretary-General's office, governed 50-50 by the UN and stakeholders, with staff being seconded from the UN and various stakeholder groups. It could produce material for member states, laying out the various options and experiences as well as suggestions on how to move forward.

The increase of corporate power and the rise of influential NGO movements presents a great challenge for democratic systems. By addressing the challenge proactively rather than reacting to pressures from powerful stakeholders or engaging in various, rather unconnected individual initiatives, governments and intergovernmental bodies will also avoid their own disempowerment. Multi-stakeholder processes offer a tool by which governments and intergovernmental institutions can channel their relationships with stakeholders.

MSPs are being created not only because we need to develop new tools beyond 'business as usual, government as usual and protest as usual' (Hohnen, 2001). They are emerging because the solutions are often as complex as the problems, and all stakeholders have ideas about possible solutions and need to be part of them. The challenge is to provide them with the fora to bring their wisdom to the table effectively and equitably.