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How to assess CSO-business partnerships for development

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Key messages

The growing reference to CSO-business partnerships as a 'modality' for development raises the importance of understanding the *processes* underlying these and their policy implications.

Stylised facts suggest 'philanthropic' partnerships are more frequent than 'strategic' partnerships but may be less sustainable; the private sector tends to dominate but partnerships with shared control may yield greater developmental benefits.

This paper presents a case study approach to assess these aspects based on four dimensions: relation to core business; degree of partner engagement; partnership activities; and governance structure.

In particular it proposes combining the above factors with a political economy understanding of interests and external factors to capture the complexity of such approaches in terms of drivers and challenges - this is the basis for future work.

1. Introduction

The recently agreed 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights the need for the development community to act collectively, and commit adequate resources, efforts and nous to tackle substantial and increasingly interrelated challenges: climate change, poverty, gender inequalities, and more.

Acknowledging the complexity of addressing such issues, the development community underlined the need for collaboration between national or subnational governments, private sector actors and civil society actors. As a way to pull together a set of complementary and reinforcing resources, capabilities and knowledge, inclusive multi-stakeholder partnerships will be a key instrument for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda. In this context, partnerships between civil society organisations (CSO) and business are attracting particular attention.

This paper is part of a broader study into the drivers and key constraints to effective strategic CSO-business partnerships for development. Starting from the view that partnerships often prove to be

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challenging to form, initiate and implement, in practice the focus is specifically on the *processes* associated with establishing and operating CSO-business partnerships and the various actors and factors that impinge on this. The aim is not to evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships as such.
The expected findings will serve as a basis for understanding the key roles that donors and other policy-makers could play in order to better support and facilitate strategic CSO-business partnerships. This will then feed the dialogue among donors and other partners in Europe and in Africa.

The main question addressed is as follows: *What are the main partnerships characteristics and institutional factors that drive and constrain the process of establishing and maintaining effective CSO-business partnerships?*

Building on an in-depth literature review on the topic (Byiers et al., 2015), this paper lays out an approach to analyse partnerships in a way that addresses the above question. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the next section briefly summarises the literature about CSO-business partnerships and is followed by an overview of the key gaps found in the literature. This section concludes by introducing the analytical framework that will shape the research. The final section presents the research method chosen to collect and analyse the data.

2. CSO-business partnerships: overview of the literature and analytical framework

2.1. Four dimensions, many classifications: How to unify existing taxonomies

A large body of literature has emerged as a result of the rise in CSO-business partnerships. In order to examine the drivers and constraints in specific business-CSO partnerships, Byiers et al. (2015) identify four key dimensions capturing the characteristics relevant to select and assess CSO-business partnerships:

1. *Relation to core business*: If partnerships involve the core business of the partners;
2. *Degree of partner's engagement*: if partnerships require more or less intense interactions and/or involve exchanges of resources and/or co-creation of new resources;
3. *Partnership's activities*: what activities partnerships involve and their subsequent level of complexity; and
4. *Governance structures*: How responsibility and power are distributed in the partnerships.

Before discussing each dimension in more depth, it is worth noting that they are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary they should be seen as interrelated, thus making some combinations of characteristics more likely to be observed following the type of CSO-business partnership - from strategic to philanthropic.

Dimension 1: Partnerships related to core-business activities

Partnerships can be classified according to whether the associated activities are related or not to partners' core business activities. Philanthropic partnerships are generally not related to core business activities or with the overall strategy of the private partners. On the contrary, strategic partnerships are linked to the regular activities of the private sector partners and fit in their overall strategies.

In the literature, two streams can be distinguished: scholars who think this fundamental difference as a dichotomy (Ashman, 2001), and those who rather see it a continuum (e.g. Galaskiewicz and Sinclair-Colman, 2006; UNGC, 2007; Tennyson et al., 2008). At one extreme, there are philanthropic donations, for example, on the other are collaborations to produce new goods or services targeted towards development. Those thinking in continuum terms point to initiatives such as cause-related marketing initiatives and community development programs. Although in practice philanthropic partnerships seem to be the focus of more partnerships, there is a recent and growing interest in strategic partnerships, explained by its stronger potential to contribute to sustainable development.

Dimension 2: Degree of partner's engagement

The degree of engagement is characterised by three main aspects: (i) the frequency of interactions, (ii) the intensity of interactions, and (iii) the type of resources shared. In that regard, strategic partnerships require a different degree of partner engagement than philanthropic partnerships.

In strategic partnerships, partners usually aim at co-creating value by, for example introducing new products or services that require combined collaborative inputs and efforts to achieve success. This in turn requires more frequent and more intense interactions between the partners, as they tend to collaborate on complex projects, which often have a longer time horizon. Strategic partnerships also involve more resources in terms of quantity and quality – not only partners share financial resources, but they more importantly exchange knowledge, expertise and competencies.

A high degree of engagement also implies more challenges: strategic partnerships are more complex relationships where partners need to (i) find common areas of interest and (ii) overcome cultural, organisational and communicational barriers which can affect the formation, initiation and implementation of partnerships. Combining and transferring knowledge requires frequent and intense interaction, in order to build trust and finding areas of overlapping expertise that can be a common ground for knowledge and skill transfer.

On the other hand, philanthropic partnerships mainly involve donations meaning that the relationship between partners is arm's length, involving a lower degree of engagement. Partners are therefore less obliged to interact frequently or intensely, and their contribution within the partnership is often limited to financial resources (e.g. donations), which require virtually no interaction between the parties.

Dimension 3: Partnership's activities

In the literature, CSO-business partnerships are also classified according to the nature of the activities performed within the partnership, the third dimension of CSO-business partnerships.

As seen in the literature review (Byiers et al., 2015), activities implemented in philanthropic partnerships are by definition not related to a firm's core business activities, and can be characterised by their simplicity. Such activities comprehend e.g. advocacy, donations-sponsorships, marketing activities/campaigns, employee fundraising, or product licensing. The nature of the activity has important implications for the partnership process, independent of whether or not it relates to core business, and of the level of partner engagement.

Strategic partnerships, directly related with firms' core business activities, have to do with their regular operations. Consequently, they involve a set of more complex activities related to marketing, production, or new business development, which are characterised by the concept of value co-creation. This highlights the need for such partnerships to have competent and resourceful members, so as to perform well in such activities.

Table 1 below summarises the key references and their focus in terms of the categories of CSO-business partnerships, according to the three dimensions discussed above.

Table 1. Philanthropic versus strategic partnerships in the literature

Dimension	Author(s)	Philanthropic	Strategic
Partnerships related to core-business activities	Ashman (2001)	Philanthropic	Strategic
	Galaskiewicz and Sinclair-Colman (2006)	Philanthropic, strategic, commercial	
	Tennyson et al. (2008)	Philanthropy, social investments	New commercial initiatives, core business

Degree of partners' engagement	Austin (2000)	Philanthropic, transactional	Integrative
	Rondinelli and London (2003)	Arm's length	Interactive, formal management partnerships
	Bitzer et al. (2009)		Broker networks, strategic alliances, collaborative partnerships
	Googins and Rochlin (2000)	Reciprocal exchange, developmental value creation	Symbiotic value creation
	Darko (2014)	Awareness raising	Information sharing, resource contribution, resource pooling
Partnerships' activities	Tennyson et al. (2008)	advocacy, sponsorship, marketing	capacity building, brokering, business
	Dahan et al. (2010)		market research, product R&D, procurement, distribution, marketing, new business development

Source: Byiers et al. (2015)

Dimension 4: Governance structures

The fourth dimension discussed in the literature concerns the governance structures that shape or regulate CSO-business partnerships. Focusing on the partnerships process, governance structures define how the partnerships is set and managed (e.g. how partners select each other; how roles and responsibilities are divided); and (ii) reflect the way power is distributed within the partnership. They have consequently important implications for the internal functioning of the partnership, its decision-making processes and its outcome (developmental impact).

It is worth noting that governance structures are not necessarily related to the partnership's type – whether partnerships are philanthropic or strategic, even if this may have an impact on how governance structures are formed. Having said that, and as highlighted by the Danish Red Cross study (2015), some characteristics of partnership's governance such as managerial complexity/involvement can be linked to its type.

Table 2 complements Table 1 by illustrating the interrelation between the four dimensions and the partnership's type when put in practice. To do that, dimensions are divided into their main characteristics (exception being the governance which characteristics are not always linked to the partnership types), which in turn are assessed according to the type of partnerships.

Table 2 - Overview of the four partnership dimensions

Dimensions	Characteristics	Type of partnerships: Philanthropic		Strategic
Core Business	Degree of “centrality”	Peripheral	→	Core
	Strategic value	Modest	→	Significant
	Time perspective	Short term	→	Medium/Long term
Degree of Engagement	Frequency of interaction	Low	→	High
	Intensity of interaction	Low	→	High
	Type of primary resources involved	Financial	→	Knowledge and competences
	Flow of resources	One-way	→	Co-value creation / Shared value
Nature of activities	Activities’ complexity	Simple	→	Complex
	Scope of activities	Narrow	→	Broad
Governance	Managerial involvement	Department	→	Executive
	Managerial complexity	Simple	→	Complex

Adapted from Danish Red Cross, (2015, p.14)

2.2. Stylised facts about CSO-business partnerships

The review of CSO-business partnerships’ case studies provides the following set of four stylised facts.

Philanthropic partnerships seem to be more frequent than strategic partnerships...

In the survey of Dutch NGOs by Elbers (2004), philanthropic partnerships are found to be more common than strategic partnerships. Anecdotally, this still seems to be the case today.

As discussed above, philanthropic partnerships generally require lower levels of partner engagement, thus needing less resources to function and maintain than strategic partnerships. This argument gains further relevance in these times of resource scarcity, and is reflected in the State of Partnership Report, where most of the NGOs surveyed declared that their partnerships were “limited to a financial relationship” (Partnership Resource Center, 2011, p. 25). This short-term focus mirrors the potential added-value of strategic partnerships: intense interactions means more (both in quantity and types) resources exchanged, and increased spillovers effects.

However, strategic partnerships come at a high cost in terms of time and efforts. To implement an integrative partnership requires creation of a ‘partnership space’ or a space of ‘cultural compatibility’, i.e. an area of overlap of interests and cultures. This takes a lengthy process of trust building to mitigate the differences in terms of interests, missions and governance structures between the partners (Rondinelli and London, 2003). Trust is key to maximise synergies and build the success of the venture.

Besides trust, building a partnering space depends on the ‘organisational fit’ between the partners, or the “internal match or the compatibility between organisations” as phrased by Van Tulder and Pfisterer (2013: 2). Jamali and Keshishian (2008) define ‘compatibility’ as the “complementary strengths and weaknesses and commitment as reflected in the formalised commitment of necessary time, energy and resources” (p. 280). This match happens when partner interests are aligned, and their role considered appropriate in the context of the partnership. Although ambiguity about the motivations for working together and the processes for collective decision-making are common (Rein and Stott, 2009), ensuring an organisational fit between partners is a way to mitigate and/or avoid misunderstandings, misallocation of costs and benefits, mismatches of power, mismatched partners, misfortunes of time, and mistrust (Berger et al., 2004).

While the literature seems to suggest that philanthropic partnerships are more frequent than strategic partnerships, it would be interesting to test the veracity of the arguments advanced in the literature *justifying the reasons why firms and CSO engage in philanthropic partnerships; and to what extent strategic partnerships can be better incentivised so as to be considered as attractive as philanthropic partnerships.*

...but strategic partnerships potentially bring more member benefits

Besides engendering stronger knowledge and spillovers effects, on paper the potential to align and achieve social and commercial objectives appears higher through strategic partnerships. These are considered more likely to be financially sustainable and more stable than philanthropic partnerships (Luzzi, 2012) that rely on continuous willing funders.

Yet, empirical evidence proving that strategic partnerships developmental impacts are higher than philanthropic partnerships is lacking, in part due to the focus of case studies on one or the other type of partnership. An analysis of ten CSO-business partnerships in India, Brazil, and South Africa, concludes that strategic partnerships “were no more productive than resource-based partnerships and sometimes were less so. The development impacts are not insignificant, but neither are they highly impressive in comparison to other kinds of collaborative strategies or the aspirations of many development CSOs for ending poverty and social injustice” (Ashman, 2001, p. 1110). Much depends on the ability to measure impact, a common problem for public or partnership development projects alike, and the ability to find a counterfactual - the ‘compared to what’ issue.

Although it seems reasonable to assume that strategic partnerships benefit more for partners and engender more developmental impacts than philanthropic partnerships, further empirical research is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

In CSO-business partnerships, the private sector tends to dominate...

Designing governance structures to govern the distribution of decision-making power is “a hugely important challenge in partnering” (Tennyson et al., 2008, p. 18) and can impact on the effectiveness of CSO-business partnerships. By governance structures, we mean the legal structures and rules set out regarding the way the partnerships is organised and run, and how decisions are made.

A ‘balanced’ governance structure would help ensure, for example, that consumer’s rights are guarded in the case of marketing-related partnerships, or the fair and appropriate inclusion of smallholder producers from developing countries in production-oriented partnerships. In both cases, governance structures can help maximise the developmental impact of the partnerships.

However, as evidenced by the interviews of firms and government representatives conducted by Kolk et al. (2008), “the government should accept that corporate interests will always be leading in a [CSO-business] partnership” (ibid., p. 268). Private sector partners tend to dominate partnerships (Ashman, 2001) for two main reasons: on the one hand businesses are often those bringing financial resources into the partnerships; and on the other hand their bargaining power is generally greater - large MNCs are able to exert pressure on smaller partners in developing countries.

In contrast, governance structures may engender power imbalances in favour of a particular partner who can dominate decision-making processes. Although in the short-term such government structures might benefit to the private sector, they may also undermine the overall sustainability of the project causing a lose-lose situation (Ashman, 2001).

So more research is needed to uncover the dynamics and impacts of governance structures on CSO-business partnerships. Besides, unbalanced governance structures are a potential area where international donors could intervene and help partners to re-balance the governance structure of CSO-business partnerships.

...however, partnerships with shared control yield greater developmental benefits.

As evoked above, governance structures and particularly shared control of the partnership can greatly contribute to partnership’s effectiveness, both in terms of sustainability and developmental impacts.

The literature identifies the following elements that contribute to more balanced governance structures within partnership:

- Shared control is more likely to happen in partnerships based on a high degree of institutionalisation/formalisation. Formal agreements including the role and responsibilities of partnerships' members provide greater transparency, and limit the extent to which actors can leverage their resources to increase influence over the partnership (Ashman, 2001; Beisheim and Liese 2011). By ensuring that communications, decision making processes, and evaluations are open and transparent, weaker members are able to participate according to what has been agreed.
- A critical factor associated with (un)balanced governance structures is the perception of partnership's actors on resources - where financial resources are considered the most valuable. Awareness about the non-financial contribution of civil society partners, the existence of complementarities and synergies, and the opportunities for joint learning may equally need explicitly acknowledged and promoted. This would in turn increase the chances of balancing the partnerships' governance structures, and achieving the objectives of the partnership (Ashman, 2001).

Governance structures, which (i) define how the partnerships is set and managed (e.g. partners' motivations; how roles and responsibilities are divided); and (ii) reflect the way capacity and influence are distributed within the partnership, are to date a "terra incognita".

More research is therefore needed, and better links between governance and partnerships' effectiveness and developmental impacts should be established. Uncovering governance mechanisms will therefore be key to highlight effectiveness factors/criteria of partnerships.

2.3. The importance of the context

Beyond the four partnership dimensions described above, the way a partnership functions and its impact will fundamentally depend on the underlying context into which a partnership attempts to grow. This underlines the importance of taking account of the structural and institutional context in which CSO-business partnership takes place, with different interests and incentives around the project having a potentially strong influence on project success. From a CSO-business partnership perspective, learning and building on "local institutional and governance structures" (Pattberg and Widerberg, 2014) therefore seems to be crucial when delivering common goods.

Further, the relations between the institutional context and the CSO-business partnership functions in a two-ways direction. If the institutional context affects the partnership and its outcomes, the CSO-business partnership can also influence institutions, the most obvious example being when partnerships set up new industrial standards.

Yet this relationship is clearly missing from the current literature, where limited research has taken into account the institutional and political context in their analysis. In order to link practice to policy, and to provide sets of concrete recommendations to build effective CSO-business partnership, including the institutional context should be seen as prerequisite.

3. Analysing CSO-business partnerships

3.1. Analytical framework

As previously mentioned, this paper aims to summarise the key aspects regarding effective CSO-business partnership processes in order to address the following gaps found in the literature:

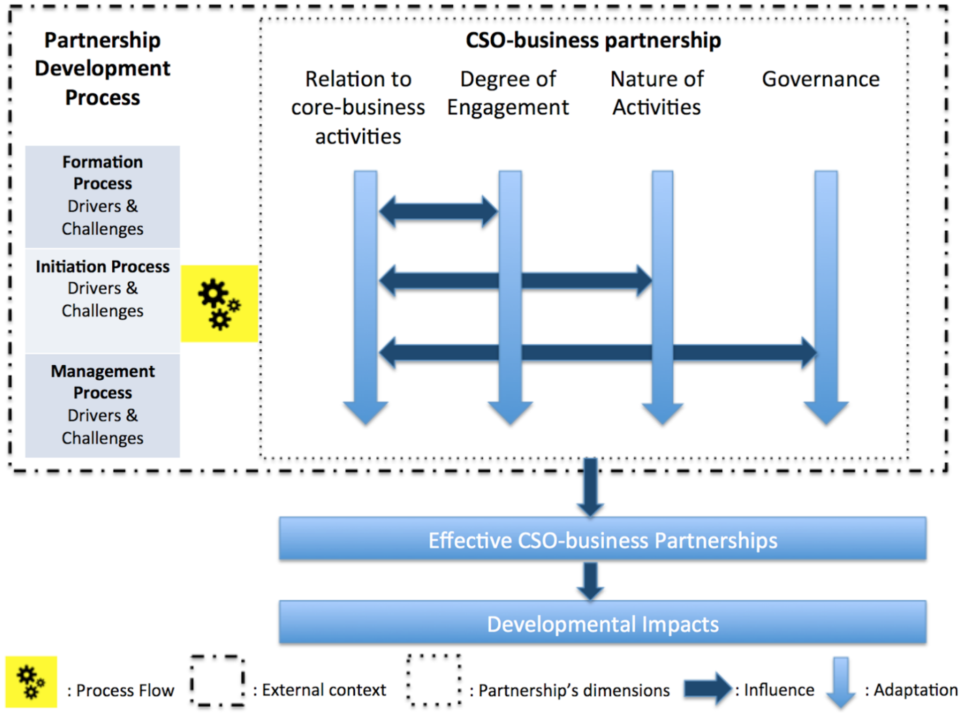
1. Partnership formation, initiation and management processes have not been sufficiently addressed in the literature,
2. Governance structures including partnership power balance has largely been overlooked in the context of CSO-business partnerships; and

3. The reciprocal influence between the broader institutional context and the partnerships has rarely been taken into account in CSO-business partnership's analysis.

A comprehensive analysis, linking these different aspects will help uncovering some of the mechanisms affecting the effectiveness of CSO-business partnerships.

Building on the above discussion, we propose the following analytical framework to study partnership characteristics relating to the four dimensions of core business, degree of engagement, nature of activities, and governance that emerge as important are in the process of establishing and maintaining effective partnership; and how the origins and external context impact CSO-business partnerships and ultimately their effectiveness.

Figure 1 - An analytical framework for CSO-business partnerships



Source: Authors' own compilation

This analytical framework is based on the following reasoning: CSO-business partnerships are formed, initiated and managed based on the interests and objectives of the individual partners around an identified need. These in turn define the relation of the partnership with the partner's' core business activities and the subsequent interaction between partners: the more their interest and objectives are integrated within the partnership, and the more strategic the partnership becomes. The three other dimensions characterising partnerships, i.e. the degree of engagement, the type of activities involved within the partnership, and the governance structure adapt accordingly, affecting the effectiveness of the partnership.

CSO-business partnerships are embedded in an external context, which offers a set of opportunities and constraints. Taking these into account allows for a better understanding of (i) their impact on partnership's origins or *raison d'être;* and (ii) how partnerships are then able to then adjust to the changing context and exploit opportunities and mitigate challenges. Their capacity to adapt also contributes to the overall effectiveness of the partnership.

The assumption underlying the analytical framework presented in Figure 1 is that by studying the partnership development process, and linking it with the evolving dimensions of CSO-business partnerships, we will be able to reveal some of the key aspects that contribute to its effectiveness. Particular attention will be paid to governance structures and aspects such as decision-making process, and partnership structure.

Qualitative approach

In order to tackle the complexities inherent in the above discussion, analysis necessarily becomes more qualitative in nature. When addressing CSO-business partnerships processes, there is an increasing demand for qualitative approaches that facilitate the research process of exploring and discovering new aspects of the field (Gartner & Birley, 2002).

A second argument for adopting a qualitative research method is the desire to explain the reality of CSO-business partnerships and analyse them as being part of, rather than isolated from, their environment (Lowder, 2009). To do so requires a deep understanding and analysis of their experiences, which can be obtained by a qualitative research method, allowing gathering rich and in- depth data, and capturing meanings and codes that would not appear by using quantitative researches.

A case study approach allows an exploratory investigation, providing opportunities to separate a complex set of factors and relationships, though in one or a very limited number of occasions (Easton, 2010).

3.2. A political economy approach to partnerships

The analysis of case-studies can be structured around a combination of five political economy lenses, as described by Byiers, Vanheukelom and Kingombe (2015), and the four dimensions discussed above. This leads us to propose six areas for analysis, linking underlying issues of structural factors, institutional incentives and actors interests with the partnership dimensions discussed above. Underlying each is a discussion of partner and other actor interests and incentives, such as beneficiaries and competing firms or organisations.

Table 3: Six Areas for Analysis

Areas	What	Details
Project origins	History of the partnership	Initiator and main initial motivations, objectives etc. of the partnership
External factors	Effect on partnership of factors external to the partnership	The way that location, market dynamics, outside actors, institutions and authorities affect the partnership design and process
Type of partnerships	Whether a philanthropic or strategic partnership	Balance of development/commercial goals, alignment with core business, CSR etc.
Activities	Nature of partnership activities	Advocacy, sponsoring, training, designing, buying, marketing etc.; together or apart; cooperation required or just desirable.
Degree of partner engagement	Frequency, type of interactions; resources brought	Arm's length or strategic joint decision-making and implementation; levels and types of resources brought by partners; power balance within the partnership.
Governance structures	Mechanisms to define and shape roles and responsibilities	Formal MoUs, contracts etc. on roles, objectives and governance of partnerships; and informal practices.

While these different areas are not mutually exclusive, semi-structured interviews along these lines are intended to provide both a useful structure for discussion and analysis, but also for systematising information relating to the partnerships under analysis in order to draw lessons for policy-makers.

Clearly such an approach can be applied to a range of different types of partnerships across sectors. This includes economic sectors, but also social or other sectors where CSO-business partnerships can play a role. This approach allows comparisons of strategic CSO-business partnerships within and between sectors, and can help uncover further insights about (i) how partnership characteristics affect the establishment and management of effective CSO-business partnerships in different sectors, and (ii) the role of donors in fostering and facilitating effective CSO-business partnerships.

Studying different sectors allows exploration of whether CSO-business partnerships can equally well exist in different sectors. This can also help understanding the interrelated macro/meso drivers and challenges explaining why CSO-business partnerships do (not) engage with different sectors.

Finally, selecting partnerships that combine a range of stages of development would seem advisable in order to gather insightful information. Members with experience have generally accumulated more knowledge, capabilities and lessons learnt than their novice counterparts, while partnerships in progress can also reveal important insights. Furthermore strategic CSO-business partnerships are long-term based, and demands time to get started and work.

4. Conclusions

Strategic partnerships are increasingly attracting attention as they bring innovative and sometimes impactful solutions to economic social or political issues. This will increasingly be so, with the adoption of the recent Sustainable Development Goals, to be met by 2030.

That being said, while varying widely, partnerships are very complex and demanding to initiate and manage. These characteristics often pose challenges to partnerships to reach their objectives and developmental impacts, and to policy-makers wishing to promote and support them. More insights on the process underlying partnerships and in-depth analysis about the drivers and challenges of such partnerships, and about the process driving them should help addressing this. Ultimately, the aim is to highlight key aspects to take into account for partnerships to be effective.

As this paper summarises, four key dimensions emerge from the literature as being key to understanding CSO-business partnerships. These are:
- the nature of the partnership with regards to business strategy;
- the degree of partner engagement;
- the activities of the partnership and
- the governance structures.

The governance structures have received least attention. Further, the role of the institutional context on partnerships is rarely studied, although it has been observed that CSO-business partnerships tend to be rare in context marked by low governance, such as least developed countries - especially in cases of fragile or conflict affected states.

By connecting the above dimensions with a broad political economy framework, this paper sets out an approach to analysing partnerships that is hoped to go beyond discussions of success or failure to understanding the interests, incentives and underlying factors that ultimately define the likely success of the development community in moving from rhetoric to practice.

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