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SDGs, Foreign Ministries and the Art of Partnering with the Private Sector

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Abstract

Public-private partnerships that are necessary to reach the targets of the UN's 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pose a test for ministries of foreign affairs. 'Joint responsibility' for public goods runs into practical issues between governments and companies. Government policies supporting the SDGs and sustainability criteria, as well as commercial goals, aim at an enabling multi-actor environment, but they do not prevent friction, lack of mutual understanding and cultural clashes with the private sector. This issue deserves more attention. Apart from a literature review, our research has benefited greatly from oral sources: a multi-stakeholder seminar; online consultation with five selected experts from around the world; as well as written feedback from international organizations and ministries of foreign affairs. Leaving aside risk factors facing companies in this research, we identify three main SDG partnership puzzles for government: contested appreciation of the use of actor resources, especially time, in governance dialogues; transformation of diplomatic practice across the public-private divide; and the point of private-sector organizations combining the seemingly paradoxical roles of lobbying in the interests of realizing business interests and partnering in a process aimed at joint goals. We suggest that diplomatic effectiveness of the SDGs hinges on officials' better understanding of their corporate counterparts, their engagement in the inclusive SDG negotiation process as boundary spanners, and their development of cross-cultural brokering skills.

Policy implications

- Lessons can be learned from early 21st-century public-private partnerships (PPPs), but government actors should be aware that SDG partnerships are different: they are universal in scope; more intrusive in terms of their impact on the diplomatic process; and openly aim at transformations and systemic innovation.
- SDG multi-stakeholder partnerships pose specific challenges for hierarchical work in foreign ministries. They call for a more explicit whole-of-government approach, horizontal knowledge sharing, and greater context awareness of global issues.

MFAs should welcome the SDG process as an opportunity for experimentation with innovation in networked diplomatic practice, based on the principle of trading resources within complex policy networks, which is of much broader relevance for diplomacy today.

- Foreign ministries are advised to keep an eye on the changing environments in which SDGs are being debated: recent transnational trends associated with anti-elitism and protectionism challenge the SDGs, while progressive digitization and the rise of information and communication technologies (ICTs) call for more government dialogue with the technology sector.
- Input from experts and practitioners suggests that the private and public sectors evaluate SDG partnerships differently, creating the risk of a gulf between them when it comes to agreeing on details rather than general policies. Both should aim at improving qualitative partnership-effectiveness indicators.
- Government representatives need to be aware of the double-hatted role of private-sector companies combining their 'public' shareholder role with lobbying interests and practices that run counter to sustainable development principles.

Sustainable Development Goals and multi-stakeholder diplomacy*

The transnational debate on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be described as a process – including associations of it as being something large and even unwieldy, with multiple actors and stakeholders, involving 17 distant goals and 169 challenging targets, and with campaign-style negotiation going hand in hand with multilateral diplomacy in familiar fora. The SDG business is by no means mainstreamed within ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) and there is little that is traditional about the kind of diplomacy needed to grease the wheels of heterogeneous SDG partnerships that are necessary to realize the SDGs. Some twelve years ahead of the UN 2030 Agenda deadline, there are still key issues to be resolved within these emerging partnerships. It is therefore important to understand sticking points in the process geared towards meeting the SDGs. It may, for instance, not have been agreed exactly what SDG ownership means for diverse stakeholders. The UN Agenda 2030 (para 39) mandates all stakeholders to support implementation of the SDGs and targets, bringing together governments, the private sector, and other actors, while mobilizing all available resources.

It may, however, not be clear how responsibility for reaching the SDGs is assumed or distributed in rather diffuse transnational diplomatic arenas, besides that 'each country has primary responsibility for its own economic and social development' (para 41). This debate strides across the public and private sectors, and as such it is defined by players coming from different professional cultures, with contrasting objectives and answerable to their own constituencies. In this dialogue, the meaning of words and phrases matters. Coming from different life-worlds, public and private-sector interlocutors in the SDG debate speak only partially overlapping languages and, without the benefits of simultaneous cultural decoding or translation, uneasy public-private relationships are the rule rather than an exception. This affects one of the key targets of the SDGs, namely enhancement of multi-stakeholder partnerships that 'mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the SDGs in all countries, in particular developing countries' (target 17.16), building on the experience of earlier public-private partnerships (target 17.17). The SDG partnerships need to go beyond what has been accomplished before in PPPs, for example to 'make fundamental changes in the way that our societies produce and consume goods and services' (para 28).

A relational perspective

This article contributes to the understanding of the SDG debate by focusing on the practical dilemmas of *relations* between the public and private sectors in SDG partnerships. In the context of policymaking, we have a particular interest in making government practices more effective. From this association perspective, our main question is then: what do governments need to consider when developing SDG-related policies? Clearly, the normatively laden term 'partnership' has all too often been adopted without much attention to a shared definition or common criteria underpinning the partnerships. This mirrors earlier findings in conceptual and prescriptive studies about PPPs in the field of development cooperation, which contain lessons that are relevant to the SDG debate (Reich, 2002; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011; Pattberg *et al.*, 2012; Kessler and Slingerland, 2015; Jomo *et al.*, 2016). As confirmed by our literature review, there is plenty of reference to SDG relationship issues in the emerging (policy) literature on SDGs, but little sustained reflection (Pinkse and Kolk, 2012; PwC, 2015; OECD, 2016; Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2016).

International Relations (IR) literature does not come to the rescue, to the extent that it unwittingly contributes to downplaying this issue. Mainstream IR basically shares a substantialist perspective on international politics that is essentially actor-oriented. Paradoxically as it may seem, most IR literature has little affinity with socialization

processes and finds it hard to focus on the relationship as the key unit of analysis. While diplomats perceive their professional ecosystem in terms of relations, the dominant ontological and epistemological perspectives guiding IR scholars push them towards studying everything about actors and other social phenomena rather than starting with the relationships between them (Adler-Nissen, 2015, pp. 284–308). This matters for our discussion of SDGs and public–private collaboration, because practitioners perceive relationship-management issues as one of the first hurdles in the realization of SDGs. The interdisciplinary diplomatic studies literature is more helpful in focusing on the relationship as a moving target, but only to the extent that it addresses diplomacy in post-Westphalian settings, involving multiple actors and, as such, displays ‘neither the hierarchical character of states (...) nor the ephemeral bargaining relationships of markets’ (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery, 2009, p. 560). If anything characterizes the early 21st-century diplomatic process, it is that it is fundamentally networked, even though that apparently makes many diplomats concerned that, being part of a network, they lose their distinctiveness (Slaughter, 2017; LEAD, 2015, p. 13). MFAs and their diplomats therefore need to figure out how to improve their working relationship with multiple stakeholders – particularly those that are further removed from officials’ governmental comfort zone.

The application of concepts and insights from the academic field of public relations to public diplomacy practices can be of assistance in the effort of strengthening SDG partnerships (Fitzpatrick, 2007, 2012). At a more general level, the diplomatic network environment is increasingly about the trading of resources between different actors and stakeholders whose interests are converging in policy networks. Non-governmental actors are viewed less as ‘targets or consumers of government-generated messages but as possible partners and producers of diplomatic outcomes’ (Hocking *et al.*, 2013, p. 73). All of this has consequences at the more practical level of diplomatic skills in an environment in which networking has become the conceptual basis of contemporary diplomacy, and these observations hence apply directly to multi-stakeholder diplomacy in the context of the SDG debate.

Approach and structure

This project added three elements to our literature review, which helped sharpen our focus on issues in government–business relationships, with practitioner experiences as well as expert input from around the world. First, we collected written feedback on research results from experts working at international organizations with relevant know-how and experience in advising national governments: the UN Sustainable Development Goals Fund (SDG-F); and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

(OECD). We also received feedback from multiple departments of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Second, five experts from North and Latin America, Europe and Asia participated in a written online consultation channel. The experts commented on our literature review and parallel findings from the multi-stakeholder seminar. The experts responded to structured interview questions, and engaged in a semi-structured follow-up discussion. As such, this approach takes into account different *cultural* contexts in public-private partnerships – after all an endeavour with universal ambitions – across continents.

Third, in line with our objective of undertaking applied research, throughout our research we sought feedback on conceived policy recommendations from various practitioners. We held a multi-stakeholder seminar, which was steered by questions emerging from our review as well as the online consultation channel. We tested our findings and recommendations in a multi-stakeholder seminar in The Hague, the Netherlands, where we focused on practical input on three aspects: 1) private-sector perspectives on effective public-private partnerships; 2) government capacity and private-sector needs; and 3) opportunities and risks in the light of SDG partnerships.

Inevitably, there are many pertinent questions that fall outside the scope of this article. What we first need to emphasize is that we will not discuss the private-sector perspective on SDGs. Private-sector actors do, of course, have their own concerns about SDG partnerships. We realize that companies are acutely aware of commercial and non-commercial risk factors when contemplating partnerships with the private sector. This deserves attention in future research and would require another kind of project design. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that much greater effort is required to empathize with and understand business interests and goals in the SDG debate. What our project does confirm is that it is difficult for researchers to engage business representatives in *discussions*, which, we surmise, may have coloured academic work in general on SDGs. Also outside the scope of this project are effectiveness and accountability concerns, which loom large in discussions about the SDGs, and they attract the attention of academics and consultants (Bäckstrand, 2006b; Held, 2004, pp. 364–391; SDG Fund, 2015; Hoxtell, 2016). Nor do we enter the debate on particular sectors in the global economy. Finally, we leave it to others to focus on the important question of how the SDG debate could be enriched by comparing the practices of the Rest with those of the dominant West. Here we see particular merit in zooming in on the experiences in OECD economies that are characterized by closer relations between government and the public sector, such as Japan and South Korea.

Our argument is structured in four parts. The next section will briefly introduce the rise of partnerships as well as some of the conventional wisdom regarding collaborative diplomacy in the context of the UN 2030 Agenda. The following part will discuss the uniqueness of the long-term partnerships – that is, as a necessary condition for meeting the agreed SDG goals and targets. The penultimate section will focus on challenges for government actors compared with the partnerships *before* the 2030 Agenda, followed by a brief conclusion.

The rise of (SDG) partnerships

Focusing on public-private *relations* in SDG policy processes is in the direct interests of improving global policies. Government officials are advised not to see SDG-oriented collaboration with the private sector as exceptional, but to welcome it as diplomatic innovation that is in sync with broader patterns of change in diplomacy. Since the 2002 Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development, the private sector has become much more visible in PPPs, and it has acquired greater legitimacy as a co-creator in other participatory policy arrangements (Bäckstrand, 2006a). Many governments and international organizations have become vocal advocates of PPPs, especially in the fields of international cooperation and development, while others have at least paid lip-service to the importance of their rise (Kessler and Slingerland, 2015; Glasbergen, Biermann, and Mol, 2007). At the beginning of this century, the one hundred largest firms in the world were on average involved in about 18 cross-sector partnerships with 'non-market' actors (Partnerships Resource Centre, 2010). A lot has happened since, but PPP output legitimacy is also contested among practitioners, as their effectiveness is often disputed. The PPPs often have an imbalance between governance (too much) and action (too little), as New York-based think tanker David Steven argued persuasively in our online consultation). Nevertheless, there is widespread belief that sustainability requires private-sector leaders assuming responsibility alongside government and civil society (Sachs, 2012, pp. 2206–2211). As van Tulder *et al.* put it: 'the question facing many actors in society has shifted from one of *whether* partnerships with actors from other sectors of society are relevant, to one of *how* they should be formed, organized, governed, intensified, and/or extended' (van Tulder *et al.*, 2016). This article's interest in this discussion lies in successful government adaptation to this new reality.

In the Western world, various countries have pioneered different approaches towards PPPs, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with its Global Development Alliances and Germany with its *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*. Above the level of states, the OECD has become an institutional frontrunner in supporting these and other efforts with evidence-based advice. There

appears to be consensus about the role of national governments in PPPs in general, and these practices have been carried over into the debate about SDGs. Above all, government policy needs to provide an enabling environment that supports *both* the private sector and SDGs. In other words, SDG policies have the best chance of becoming successful if they are based on the principle that sustainability criteria are tied to commercial viability.

The Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) and Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Netherlands MFA singled out four key roles for government in relation to the private sector: that of legislator; grant provider; partner; and market manager (Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2016; IOB, 2013). In this perspective, government policy for the SDGs is, broadly speaking, to ensure an environment that contributes to employment, livelihoods, and wellbeing, while ensuring sustainable practices with regard to people, planet, and prosperity. Yet consultations have shown that the private sector seeks more clarity from government on what all of this means in practice, and it calls for a regulatory and legal roadmap for SDG implementation. For government, collaborative diplomacy on SDGs means that the 'enabling' and 'regulating' roles of the national administration need to be balanced, and it implies a noteworthy stepping up of the more familiar game of policy coordination within the public sector.

Recent experience with global commons' initiatives does provide some guidance. SDG 13 on the climate action debate can be viewed as a pilot for the wider SDG experience, with by no means all of the answers but some key lessons for government. A review of global partnerships by the Center on International Cooperation at New York University identified three areas of best practice for partnerships: a clear theory of change; focus on countries where results can be delivered; and a results chain ranging from global cooperation to results at local level (Steven and Kazambushi, 2016, pp. 40–42). SDG 13 is often seen as a policy area that demonstrates the feasibility of working partnerships with multiple stakeholders and with concrete results in terms of their engagement in shaping policy. Campaign-style diplomacy has gone global with initiatives such as the Road Map for Global Climate Action (2015), the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action (2016), and the High Level Climate Champions (2016). These initiatives aim to catalyse climate action by stimulating partners from all countries and sectors. Below the state level, an interesting development in the climate case is that institutional arrangements with the participation of stakeholders from different segments of society have played a key role in the adoption of regional and local climate policies (Barbi and Da Costa Ferreira, 2017).

Features and fears

SDG partnerships are a development in international policy with unique features. The experiences of partnerships add to existing knowledge on effective cooperation in other multi-stakeholder contexts. There are, however, not yet any specific indicators for measuring the effectiveness of SDG PPPs, and a somewhat cynical take on current reality is that PPP effectiveness is measured by the 'amount of US dollars committed'.ⁱ The truth is that it is too early for a mechanism that tracks progress of the implementation of partnerships, including their successes and failures, to be in place. Research about the outcomes of partnerships is still very limited and impact studies are 'mainly grounded on evidence employing (...) "best practice" reasoning' (Bäckstrand, 2006b, pp. 290–306). Consequently, one should critically assess whether individual SDG partnerships are fit for purpose. This section points to three distinct features of the partnerships, and the need to balance understanding and critique of the corporate sector.

First, one should bear in mind that the SDGs ask for *universal* solutions instead of a more straightforward North–South transfer of aid and technology, as was the practice during the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As a result, the SDG Agenda applies worldwide and requires international cooperation and joint responsibility (UN SDG-F, 2016). Universality is defined as 'the need for all countries to internalize their interdependencies in their actions, to consider how domestic actions impact other countries and the global commons, and also to take account of new actors (i.e. global corporates) who may constrain as well as shape national policies' (O'Connor *et al.*, 2016). Two conspicuous and practical differences with earlier UN agendas and partnerships are that the goals cannot be reached without domestic action and policy in affluent countries, and that the private sector is expected to do more than 'pay up' or transfer technology.

Second, the ambition level of the SDGs and targets for 2030 is so high that even in a highly developed country such as Sweden, over 75 per cent of the 'non-development cooperation' targets require at least some work (Weitz *et al.*, 2015). This includes as much as five of the six targets under the goal 'gender equality' (Weitz *et al.*, 2015, p. 7). The SDGs are in no way a marginal modification of current practice and clearly some of them cannot be realized without important changes. For example, policies to reduce impacts that would help reach sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12) are notably absent in many Western countries, while 'fundamental changes in the way that our societies produce and consume goods and services' is needed, according to the UN Agenda 2030 (para 28). Therefore, in some way the SDGs ask for real *transformative*

change and *systemic innovation* that will affect government regulations and private-sector supply chains. Innovation in the sense of the SDGs needs to be 'both technical and institutional, and even conceptual or theoretical', according to Chun Zhang of the Shanghai Institutes of International Studies (SIIS) in our online consultation. Some of these transformations, such as the energy transition, have clear winners and losers in the private- (and public-) sector spheres and in this way, according to the Brazilian expert Fabiana Barbi, the political nature of partnerships becomes evident (online consultation). Moreover, the interlinkages between separate SDGs mean that action on one could have a (negative) effect on other goals. For example, action on SDG 7 (energy security) will nevertheless require a shift away from fossil fuels in order to meet SDG 13 (climate action). This is a difference with the MDGs, which have been criticized for treating symptoms of underdevelopment rather than 'addressing complex social systems', and for aiming at quick impact (Nelson, 2007, p. 2047).

Third, the SDG partnerships deal with *public goods* and multiple (private) stakeholders. This is not completely new, as the protection of the global commons and the role of the United Nations was addressed earlier (Kaul *et al.*, 1999). The difference, however, is that the SDG agenda makes this a joint responsibility of public and private stakeholders. The 'public' role of the private sector is already recognized in concepts such as Shared Value (Porter and Kramer, 2011), Corporate Social Responsibility, and Responsible Business Conduct (OECD, 2016), as well as in narratives emphasizing the international agency of companies, such as Business Diplomacy (McEwan *et al.*, 2017; Riordan, 2014; Kesteley *et al.*, 2014). Companies have the potential to bring a variety of resources and strengths to sustainable development, while becoming active participants in multi-stakeholder diplomacy. Multinational corporations (MNCs) can on the one hand be seen as 'the main driver of economic growth, an innovator of new technologies' (UNDP, 2012) with 'massive capacity to reach large-scale solutions' (Bradford, 2015), and their business models have a distinct impact on global value chains (Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2016, p. 24). Sustainability then becomes an integral part of the commercial strategies of, for example, Unilever, Philips, DSM, IKEA, SABMiller (AB InBev), AIG, Siemens AG, BBVA and H&M, and these companies have a long-term strategy in which natural and human capital have distinct value. Companies can contribute with investment, innovation and market knowledge. These are all necessary for transformative action, according to David Messner of the German Development Institute (online consultation). On the other hand, in the interests of these aims and strategies, they have an obvious – although often not openly stated – interest in developing an improved capability for stakeholder and network diplomacy.

A more critical perspective on the role of the private sector in delivering public goods has been offered by scholars, especially in the domain of development cooperation, when they detected a private-sector-led development model. Leaving implementation too much to the private sector could in this line of thinking, for example, lead to imposing business values as non-negotiable – for example, the right to make a profit, and right to own and exploit land resources. Others have pointed to the fact that SDGs may simply not be in the commercial interest, or that many large companies are in fact double-hatted: they are also acting as ‘lobbyists for policies antagonistic to sustainable development’ (Sachs, 2012, p. 2211). Some quotations from large companies make clear that businesses may have a different understanding of public goods, as in a former Nestlé CEO’s statement that ‘declaring water a human right is extreme’.ⁱⁱ To alleviate the risks of private-sector involvement in delivering public goods, some consulted experts therefore propose strong state intervention, whereas others place the emphasis on the potential of commercialization as a central condition for the private sector to become involved in SDG partnerships (Umbach, Zhang, Steven, Barbi, Messner, online consultation). As in a proper socialization process characteristic of modern diplomacy, the two sides need to meet in the middle. Muraskin’s 2002 observation could be applied to today’s SDGs:

if the public sector has to reach out to industry and try to see the world through its eyes, industry needs to meet it half way as well. It must modify its market orientation enough to admit that it produces a public good as well as a profitable item. (Muraskin, 2002, p. 158).

Challenges for national governments

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the partnerships, the argument often advanced is that with multiple stakeholders’ involvement in the SDGs, the distribution of responsibility is becoming more ‘democratically legitimate’ (Bäckstrand, 2006b, p. 158). As a result of the all-encompassing nature of the whole process, it may be much harder, however, to assign responsibility to *certain actors* (Engebretsen *et al.*, 2017). The nature of multi-stakeholder networks is, after all, that they are diffuse, and that power and control are dispersed unevenly throughout the network (Keohane and Nye, 2003; PwC, 2015). Recent analyses of public–private partnerships in infrastructure development in Canada already point to this difficulty and conclude that the partnership method actually has been ‘largely incongruent with increased accountability, while failing to drive technological innovation or limit cost escalations during the planning process’ (Siemiatycki, 2006). Businesses and citizens apparently find that national governments hold the prime responsibility for achieving the SDGs, and it is thus to the role of government that we now return.

Government activism is no less than a condition of success for SDGs; and without governments, one can safely postulate, the private sector would make a much smaller contribution to the SDGs (PwC, 2015).ⁱⁱⁱ One complication for corporate input in the SDG debate is that there is no 'clear entry point' for the corporate sector in the UN system, with the exception of voluntary initiatives such as the UN Global Compact (SDG-Fund, 2015, p. 27). Nor is it clear to what extent more formal corporate participation would encounter civil-society opposition. One line of critique, after all, is that private-sector involvement is likely to privilege powerful (Western) actors and consolidate capitalist power structures (Paterson, 2001).

SDG partnerships stand or fall with converging interests, which are a prerequisite of objective-driven relationships between government and business. Our field research indicates that there are at least four main hurdles of which governments need to be aware. First, in the process of forging SDGs, it is clear from our practitioners' input that time is a much scarcer resource for business than for government, which results in a different intuitive appreciation of what is 'too much governance'. Time-consuming consultation processes may be seen by corporations as evidence of little action, which strengthens the case for a light touch when it comes to SDG governance structures in which business actors are taking part.

Second, it is pertinent for national diplomats to realize that the more democratic 'interface cultures' of SDG networks are very different from hierarchical environments that are historically more familiar to them. Public-private networks are environments with *sui generis* rules of engagement in which traditional diplomatic norms are not being accepted at face value. Government is not perceived as the self-evident centre of such networks, and diplomats lose their distinctiveness in an environment where knowledge and capacity for action, rather than actor provenance, count.

Third, as far as the SDGs are about long-term aims and objectives, it is important for government officials to understand the business perspective on strategic action. Big companies like scenario planning, but they are also lobby organizations with business models geared towards profit-making, and their long-term sustainability aims are therefore not supposed to stand in the way of short-term commercial objectives. The widening Volkswagen emissions scandal in 2016–2017 illustrates that the competing demands of the long term and the short term can apply a great deal of pressure on the highest levels of management. As a previous case study on a public-private partnership for peace and justice in the Netherlands revealed, it is of utmost necessity to have a

shared purpose, aim and narratives among stakeholder groups from the start of the partnership (De Beer and Van Buitenen, 2016). Governments need to be clear on the purpose of the partnership, as was a clear recommendation from our project's roundtable meeting (18 May 2017 in The Hague). The SDG public-private partnerships should 'avoid the risk to create lowest common denominator dynamics (Messner, online consultation).

Fourth, as already mentioned above, it is crucial for governments to understand that corporate engagement with the SDGs will only become 'for real' when their key components can be commercialized (Zhang, online consultation). Fundamental corporate concerns with the potential for commercialization are likely to move to the centre of debates once partnership talks move to the detailed stage. As one would expect, in countries with a close structural nexus between government and business, whether an authoritarian state like China or democratic powers such as Japan and South Korea, this operational principle is more readily accepted.

On a more practical level, it became clear in our collective multi-stakeholder discussion that the issue of diplomatic skills' needs is begging for attention. As diplomats operate on the cusp of the international and national spheres, they are dealing with business actors both abroad and at home. Skills that are needed in the context of SDG debates and that need to be developed in a whole-of-government setting are: dialogic competences; network learning and knowledge sharing; dealing with the kinds of uncertainties that are inherent in the SDG debate; and awareness of the context of global issues that have contrasting economic, ecologic, and social dimensions. The paradox for national governments in SDG networks with diverse stakeholders is that they may have to operate under the constraints identified above, but that they do have the asset of their convening power when inviting companies to the table. Simultaneously, from a broader perspective, it is of course the inability of the collective of states to shape international governance structures that has persuaded governments to involve other public as well as private actors in global governance. Still, at a more practical level, collaboration with the business sector is generally experienced as taxing. Returning to the SDGs, governments can harness special strengths: as policy machineries, their public relations capacity to promote SDG goals is aimed at much broader constituencies than those of companies; and as boundary spanners, they are better placed to shape a cohesive approach that will help to unite all stakeholders.

Context matters, and the technological and political parameters of the SDG debate are changing. Since the acceptance of UN Resolution A/RES/70/1,^{iv} attention has grown for the potential of new technologies to help achieve SDG goals in fields as diverse as

healthcare, education and climate change (The Earth Institute, 2016). These discussions are paralleled by the advance of national and multilateral policies on digitalization for development. They raise the bar for foreign ministries, in that they require regular dialogue between the technology sector and foreign ministries that are coming to terms with the impact of the digital age on diplomacy. In terms of outreach, digitalization has the potential to involve more citizens and interest groups and stimulate 'global real time civil society interactions' (Gaby Umbach, online consultation).

Finally, government efforts aimed at realizing the SDGs are not taking place in a political void. Some criticism levelled against the SDGs is that the whole enterprise is essentially carried forward by 'believers'. National politicians may not see the promotion of SDGs at home as electorally risk free, as political opponents may reject this as an elitist agenda. Prioritizing SDGs in public diplomacy policies has also become more complicated in a polarized political environment. In the present 'post-fact' epoch, elite opinion and scientific expertise cannot be assumed to stand above politics, as illustrated by the transnational controversy about fake news. Especially in the United States, but also in Europe, there is evidence that 'facts' are becoming 'relativized', and professional authority challenged, by a new style of political rhetoric. In some quarters, the very idea of SDGs is itself under challenge, which is an international political trend that diplomats cannot ignore.

Conclusions

We have argued that focusing on the *relationship* between government and business – with their disparate professional cultures – deserves more attention in the interests of realizing SDGs and the global policy agenda in general. Socialization between the two sectors as a condition of policy effectiveness appears to be more important than is generally realized. The governance of SDGs will continue to be a state-led process, while the UN 'acknowledges' the role of the private sector in implementation.^v Governmental capacity to remain successful in evolving public policy networks, however, does require empathy and a deep understanding of the identity, concerns, norms, and habits of the corporate sector. This matters a great deal: individual companies would, after all, make a much smaller contribution to the SDGs if the process was not mediated by governments. Less effective governance would make SDG goals and targets increasingly unrealistic. As a result, the task of working with the private sector needs to be mainstreamed within MFAs. It must be addressed on multiple levels, from practitioners gaining a good conceptual grasp of understanding of their own profession, to improving skills and the tools needed in mixed-actor environments with an inevitable degree of dissonance in behavioural standards. Ultimately, in terms of government practice, the SDG process

gives more of a chance of getting modern diplomatic work processes right. The whole experience can, in fact, be seen as a timely trial for governments on the threshold of a world in which the corporate sector may enjoy greater agency. Each generation of diplomats meets its own set of specific challenges. Maximizing diplomats' relations with the corporate sector should rank high on the list of requirements for diplomatic effectiveness.

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ⁱ In the 'Final List of Proposed SDG Indicators', one could find the following indicators on multi-stakeholder partnerships: 17.16.1: 'Number of countries reporting progress in multi-stakeholder development effectiveness monitoring frameworks that support the achievement of the sustainable development goals'; and 17.17.1: 'Amount of United States dollars committed to public-private and civil society partnerships'. Available online from: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/11803Official-List-of-Proposed-SDG-Indicators.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ See online at <http://www.nestle.com/ask-nestle/human-rights/answers/nestle-chairman-peter-brabeck-letmathe-believes-water-is-a-human-right> for the response by Nestlé.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to a PwC survey, businesses and citizens alike believe that governments have the prime responsibility for achieving the SDGs (49% of business responders and 44% of citizens ranked government as first); see PwC (2015).

^{iv} UN General Assembly, 'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', UN Resolution A/RES/70/1, adopted on 25 September 2015, available online from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.

^v See the text of the UN 2030 Agenda, para 41, available online from: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.