Partnerships for Sustainable Development in China: Adaptation of a Global Governance Instrument

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Abstract

Hybrid governance instruments such as public-private partnerships are increasingly applied in so-called emerging countries, in particular Brazil, India and China (the ‘BRICs’). With a more diverse set of influential political actors involved in global governance, the question arises whether existing global governance institutions are effective and legitimate.

This paper focuses on partnerships in China’s sustainable development. China has witnessed rapid economic transition from a plan economy to a market economy. In the course of these developments, China faces increasing ecological stress and social inequity. Reform and intensification of China’s sustainable development governance seems necessary. Are partnerships the road to go? Does China successfully appropriate the partnership model and integrate it into its domestic governance? This paper discusses how Partnerships for Sustainable Development were brokered at the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development, in spite of initial resistance by developing countries; and whether a prevalent partnership model is emerging in China.

Keywords
institutions, governance, partnerships, sustainable development, China, United Nations

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Partnerships for Sustainable Development

Partnerships for sustainable development can refer to a generic and broad category of collaborative institutional arrangements. However, in this article we specifically focus on Partnerships for Sustainable Development (PFSDs), coined at the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (WSSD). These partnerships were defined as “specific commitments by various partners intended to contribute and reinforce the implementation of the outcomes of the intergovernmental negotiations of the WSSD (Programme of Action and Political Declaration) and to help achieve the further implementation of Agenda 21 and the Millennium Development Goals”.\(^2\) PFSDs are registered with the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD).

The political significance of the PFSD process rests on the fact that, for the first time, voluntary, participatory implementation arrangements were presented as an official outcome of an intergovernmental process. In political terms this means partnerships entered the stage as an instrument of international relations, not unlike international treaties and regimes. This event also raised critical voices about the possible substitution of binding intergovernmental agreements by partnerships.\(^3\) Also, the legitimacy and effectiveness of the partnership model have been questioned.\(^4\) These critical comments are supported by the lack of clarity about what partnerships actually constitute. A closer look at the PFSD’s guidelines\(^5\) does not clarify how partnerships

\(^2\) Kara, Jan, and Diane Quarless. ‘Guiding Principles for Partnerships for Sustainable Development (‘type 2 outcomes’) to be Elaborated by Interested Parties in the Context of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)’, paper read at Fourth Summit Preparatory Committee (PREPCOM 4), Bali, Indonesia (27 May–7 June, 2002), pp. 1–2.

