IWRM TOOL - B3.05
Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

Summary

Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs) are collaborative mechanisms that bring together actors from a variety of backgrounds interested to work on a specific challenge or explore an opportunity together. MSPs vary in their degree of institutionalisation, can take various forms, and can operate at different geographic scales – from local to regional, national, and transboundary. This Tool introduces what are MSPs, provides a taxonomy to help understand the different types of MSPs related to water management, lays out key design considerations, discusses some of the key principles on how to set up and maintain successful MSPs, and provides a framework to decide whether an MSP is an appropriate mechanism for your purpose and context.

What are Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships?

Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs) are collaborative mechanisms that bring together different types of stakeholders, i.a., civil society, private sector, governments, international organisations, media, academia, NGOs, and research institutions. MSPs share experience, information, technologies, and other resources towards solving a common challenge or pursuing an opportunity (Tremblay-Lévesque et al., 2022) . MSPs often tackle "wicked problems" that could not be solved by single-agent interventions. Each actor thus contributes to the MSP by bringing in their own set of skills and complementary resources. For instance, an MSP trying to expand irrigation in small farmers communities may benefit from the financial resources that agricultural cooperatives bring, the innovative technology that private sectors have, and the technical knowledge that government extension workers have to offer. A foundational idea to MSPs is that the whole is greater than its part.

The general characteristics of the operation of an MSP include defining a common framework and securing inclusion and meaningful involvement of all stakeholders in the process. The advantage of an MSP as a cooperative workspace lies in the assumption that it increases the efficiency in the solution finding process, and in the implementation of the adopted measures. Stakeholders must be able to influence the process and decisions made, regardless of whether they dispose of large resources or not, and regardless of their belonging to a particular social group. In this regard, an efficient MSP must consider the power relations and hierarchies within the MSP itself (i.e. between partners and other stakeholders) and within any one community and address challenges in terms of gender (Tools B5) or age (and the differences between old/young actors) (Tool C5.01). Facilitators play a vital role in managing MSP processes and ensuring that traditionally marginalised people(s) are meaningfully involved.

An overview and classification of water MSPs

Water resources management is a complex business that involves actors from different sectors working at different levels. The water governance space is therefore filled with all kinds of different MSPs. In fact, the United Nations Partnership Platform lists more than 1700 partnership-based initiatives active in supporting the implementation of SDG 6. To make sense of all those partnerships, Tremblay-Lévesque et al., (Tremblay-Lévesque et al., 2022:16) developed a taxonomy with 6 criteria that can be used to characterise and differentiate between the various water-related MSPs:

Composition

The structure of an MSP is defined by the types of actors and sectors involved, as well as the relationships between them. Some examples include:

- Business—non-governmental organisation (NGO) partnerships: A not-for profit entity enters into a relationship with a business. For example, the International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD] and Mars Incorporated signed a Memorandum of Understanding to improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers, including the issues of water scarcity (Natawidjaja et al., 2015), while GWP-Med and Coca-Cola collaborated on non-conventional water resources (GWP-Med, 2022; Antonakopoulou et al., 2017).

- Public—private partnerships: Private sector participation in delivering public services involving shared risks and responsibilities (e.g. New Cairo Wastewater Treatment Plant; the Manila Water Concession).

- Research and scientific partnerships: Research and development are central to this type of partnership (e.g. International Association of Hydrogeologists; the Lake Chad Basin Research Initiative; International Water Management Institute; Towards Transcultural Transparency research partnership).

- Community-based partnerships: Civil society actors come together to manage a problem, e.g. Associations d'Usagers de l'Eau Agricole (Agricultural Water Users'

Associations) in Morocco; Water Users' Association on old agricultural land and Water Users' Union (WUU) on newly reclaimed land in Egypt (Hassabou and El-gafy, 2007).

- Partnerships between business actors: Initiatives that mobilise diverse business actors and involve stewardship activities (e.g. the CEO Water Mandate).

- Partnerships between State entities: Initiatives that serve as apex coordination platforms (e.g. Tool B3.02) among various governmental entities responsible for various aspects related to water resources management (e.g. Intersectoral Steering Committee of Antigua and Barbuda, Nepalese Water and Energy Commission Secretariat, Kazakh Interagency Council on Water Resources Management).

Initiation

All MSPs need to start somewhere. An MSP may be initiated in several ways:

- Internally initiated: An MSP may be initiated by one of its members. It could start with a few initiators within civil society or NGOs raising awareness about an issue and mobilising a wider stakeholder group (Brouwer et al., 2016). For example, the Alliance for Global Water Adaptation was co-founded by several NGOs in the water sector to work together to find solutions for resilient water resources management.

- Externally initiated: An external actor (for example, a donor or other facilitating organisation) may initiate a participatory process to form an MSP. In some cases, this process may be driven by financing or programme-specific interests. For example, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) initiated a participatory approach for big water resources projects in the Global South (Asian Development Bank, 2004).

Sector

Depending on the goals they set and how they operate, MSPs may involve different sectors – and stakeholders may not all come from the water sector.

- Intra-sectoral: Players collaborating within a particular subsector of water management, including but not limited to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), irrigation, peace and security, gender, youth, or anti-corruption (e.g. Sanitation and Water for All; Sustainable Sanitation Alliance; WASH Agenda for Change; Global WASH Cluster; Rural Water Supply Network; World Commission on Dams; International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage; Women for Water Partnership; Water Youth Network; Water Integrity Network).

- Intersectoral: Players involved in collaboration that do not belong to the same subsector of water management (e.g. collaboration between 'WASH' and 'irrigation' or 'flood management' and 'hydropower').

- Extra-sectoral: Collaboration between players within the water sector and those outside of it, such as between the 'water' and 'nature conservation' sectors or between the 'water' and 'health care' sectors (e.g. Water and Climate Coalition, The One UN Climate Change Learning Partnership (UN CC: Learn); The Hague Roundtable on Climate & Security; ThinkNature Platform; WASH and neglected tropical disease (NTD) partnerships).

Scope

MSPs may have a different scope of work depending on the nature of their desired interventions. MSP scope can also depend on whether the problem addressed by the MSP is short-term or continuous:

- Project-oriented: When an MSP is convened to deliver a particular project or initiative, such as fixing a specific problem or exploring a given opportunity together (e.g., a consortium of NGOs to bid on a WASH project funded by an international donor). These MSPs generally have a beginning and an end.

- Systemic approach: When MSP actors engage with each other on a continuous basis to solve ongoing problems. GWP, for example, focuses on the way water is managed across sectors and levels to reach an integrated approach to a systemic water problem. These MSPs may not have a particular end point, but rather evolve and become more or less institutionalised over time.

Scale

MSPs intervene and act on water resources management at different scales, including:

- Local: Association of Community Organisations and Providers of Public Water Services and Sanitation in Colombia; Area Water Partnerships in Pakistan

- Sub-national: Ontario Conservation Authorities, North Eastern Regional Institute of Water and Land Management

- National: GWP's Country Water Partnerships; French Water Partnership; German Water Partnership; MSPs in Tanzania; Australian Water Partnership

- Basin: Murray-Darling Basin Authority; Baikal Commission; MSP for the Hindon River Rejuvenation

- Regional: GWP's Regional Water Partnerships; African Ministers' Council on Water; Asia-Pacific Water Forum; South Asia Water Initiative (SAWI)

- Transboundary: Mekong Basin MSP; International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea in the

- International: Global Water Partnership; Cap-Net; World Water Council; International Water Association; International Water Resources Association; Alliance for Water Stewardship; 2030 Water Resources Group

Degree of formality

The way in which MSPs structure their operations varies a great deal. It is helpful to consider whether the level of formality of the MSP you are involved in is suited to the problem you seek to solve. Allowing for a certain degree of generalisation, this can be summarised as follows (Dore, 2007; Warner, 2006):

- Formal: Highly organised, having formal decision-making or formal negotiating mandate (e.g. French Agences de l'Eau [Water Agencies]). This can include a formal membership list and member responsibilities.

- Informal: Consultative/advisory MSP, an unrestricted social group where participants have more space to explore options and propose workable agreements. For example, the Yakunchik MSP in Ayacucho, Peru was developed voluntarily in the context of post-(drought) disaster conflict resolution, not as a formal executive body (Warner and Oré, 2006).
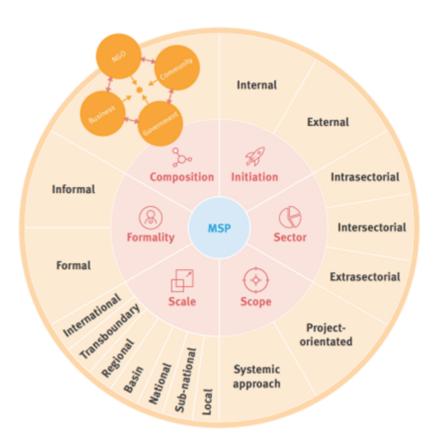

Figure 1. Taxonomy for water MSPs (Source: Tremblay-Lévesque et al., 2022)

Design considerations for setting up MSPs

Setting up an MSP requires design thinking and asking yourself some difficult questions. Below are some key considerations to help you conceptualise and structure your MSP in a way that suits your purpose in the best possible way.

Structure or process

You can for example think of your MSP as a structure, i.e. as an entity or construct with different attributes in terms of actor-constellation, types of goals, and different geographical, disciplinary, and sectoral and thematic foci. Or, you can think of your MSP as an ongoing process of partnering. In this view, partnership can be understood as a form of collaborative governance which may enhance democracy by providing the possibility to influence political decision–making to organisations, citizens, and different administrative levels (Stott, 2023). When thinking about your MSP as a structure, you might want to think about who the best partners would be and how to make the best institutional design. When thinking about it as a process, you might pay more attention to the human resources and time needed to make the MSP successful.

Instrumental or intrinsic value

Another way to think about your MSP is in terms of instrumental and intrinsic value; is the partnership a means to an end or and end in itself? Stott and Murphy (Stott and Murphy, 2020) describe instrumental partnerships as relationships between organisations where partners seek common ground, with horizontal decision-making arrangements, as transitional in nature, and with an emphasis on impact and results. In contrast, intrinsic value partnerships are characterised by being consituted as relationships between people who are able to live with disagreement, where power is constantly renegotiated in decision-making processes, as ongoing rather than transitional, and with an emphasis on processes that facilitate achievements of impact and results. MSPs are often thought of as instrumental, but paying attention to the intrinsic value of partnering might help you appreciate the learning that comes out of conflicts and the value of people simply coming together and trying to understand the other side.

Traditional or transformative

Finally, the partnership can be set up or viewed on a spectrum ranging from leverage/exchange partnerships on the one end and transformative partnerships on the other (Stibbe and Prescott, 2020). The leverage/exchange partnership is characterised by one partner donating to another, or partners exchanging resources. In between the two 'extremes' is the partnership for better traditional development, which is a partnership delivering more than the sum of its parts by combining the partners' complimentary or similar resources in new ways to create greater impact, efficiency, innovation, or scale. The transformative partnership delivers change on a system level (Stibbe and Prescott, 2020; Stott, 2023). These partnerships aim to tackle underlying causes of unsustainability and create a lasting, sustainable situation. This is done by appreciating the interconnectedness and complexity of our world and bringing together essential complementary resources that can provide the shift needed to deliver systems transformation. Importantly, systems

transformation cannot be achieved by any one actor working alone.

Guidelines for building successful MSPs

Partnerships create different value that can help us transform systems towards a more sustainable future. One way to evaluate the success of water MSPs could be to look at the relational and technical qualities it produces (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007). Based on that understanding, the first aspect of a successful MSP questions whether it leads to enhancing the way people work together, including their ability to resolve conflicts and build trust. An MSP could be deemed as successful, for instance, if it leads to developing a shared common understanding and vision for the management of a river basin, especially if this watershed was previously marked by high competition and conflicts. The "technical qualities" dimension refers to the extent to which the MSP can improve the sustainability of the socio-ecological system. This can include whether an MSP can lead to reducing water abstraction rates below the level of natural replenishment or whether it prevents or limits pollutions and spills into water bodies. Taking a more adaptive stance on sustainability, one could argue that successful MSPs are those that allow governance regimes to become more resilient to water related risks (Fjäder, 2021).

This discussion on what is a successful MSPs, has been paralleled by an equally important debate on what are the ingredients to make these platforms more effective (e.g. Brouwer and Woodhill, 2016; Gray and Jill, 2018). For instance, Stibbe and Prescott (Stibbe and Prescott, 2020) suggests 4 building blocks of effective partnerships: (1) the fundamentals: partnerships must be able to create significant value, and the 'right' partners at the table must be included to be successful, (2) partnership relationship: the complex, multi-faceted dynamic relationship among partners must be kept strong, (3) structure and set-up: the partnership's structure should be fit-for-purpose, and (4) the partnership should be well managed, and requires the application of leadership at multiple levels.

With respect to MSPs for sustainable land and water resources management, Tremblay-Lévesque et al., (Tremblay-Lévesque et al., 2022) suggest 6 ingredients:

- **Ingredient 1** – Context analysis: How to assess water challenges through the lens of MSPs and how MSPs can be analysed and established in a practical manner.

- **Ingredient 2** – Setting an agenda for change: How to prepare for making change through collective action, from a conceptual level down to hands-on project development.

- **Ingredient 3** – Knowledge management: How knowledge can be shared and leveraged between multiple organisations within and outside a water MSP.

- **Ingredient 4** – Resource mobilisation: What are the key partnership-based financing mechanisms and how to resource MSPs in the water sector?

- **Ingredient 5** – Effective communication: How to foster effective communications within MSPs and how to successfully engage external audiences.

- **Ingredient 6** – Conflict management: How to negotiate and manage conflicts and how to address common tensions that water MSPs face both internally and externally.

Other principles and ingredients that can be found in the literature about setting up and maintaining an effective MSP include:
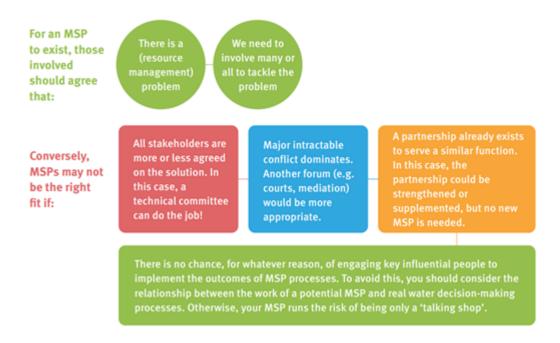
- **Embrace systemic change:** going through steps like a context analysis to assess the complexity of a situation and the use of methodologies like soft system methodology which focuses on inter-relationships, perspectives, and boundaries (Stibbe and Prescott, 2020).

- **Create a multi-layered platform:** to address the complexity of working with cross-sectoral and cross-level actors so as to facilitate the collaboration (Swallow et al., 2006, Pattberg and Widerberg, 2016)

- **Work with country and local priorities:** this will strengthen the capacity and encourage the delivering of finance and other means of support (Tool D2.01).

- **Work with power:** analysing the power and how it's exercised (by domination or control, individually, collectively with the ability to act together) makes for one possible to influence the power structures, influence powerful stakeholders, empowerment ("power to empower others") of individuals or collective group(s) being valued within an MSP (Cunningham et al., 2019). For a framework on how to manage power imbalances within MSPs see Stibbe and Prescott (Stibbe and Prescott, 2020).

- **Deal with conflict:** whether it is constitutive to the MSP or emerges in it, it's essential to address it in a constructive approach (through an interest-based negotiation) so the actors can continue to work together (Brouwer et al., 2019). See also Tool C6.03 and Tool C6.01.

- **Communicate effectively:** directly linked to the previous principle, involves a non-violent communication between the stakeholders and an active listening from them, important to acknowledge the cultural differences, which could lead to quid pro quo or tensions (Calabrese, 2008).

- **Promote collaborative leadership:** relies to the challenge within an MSP to share the leadership responsibilities which concern the fact to bring together, support, inform, etc. (Brouwer et al., 2019).

- **Foster participatory learning:** determinant since the actors have the opportunity

to learn from each other and reflect on the process and the ways they have collaborate so the whole process can be improved in the future (Brouwer et al., 2019).

- **Institutional design:** According to Beisheim and Liese (Beisheim and Liese, 2014), the effectiveness of partnerships is determined by the degree of institutionalization in PPPs. The degree of institutionalization is operationalized as; (i) the degree to which rules are binding for partnership members (ii) the degree of delegation to an external monitoring agency; (iii) the degree of clarity and unambiguousness of goals and rules.

To partner or not to partner?

Before you decide whether or not to engage in an MSP, consider if this is the right solution for you and your organisation. As emphasized by Stibbe and Prescott (Stibbe and Prescott, 2020), MSPs are an important commitment that should not be entered into lightly. It is A commitment that requires A lot of time and resources from all parties involved. Furthermore, partnership formation may be unnecessary if the challenge can be resolved by for example purchasing a product or a service (Stott, 2023). To make the go/no-go decision and assess the implications, values, and risks of partnering, you can use the "internal prospective partnership assessment" offered in The SDG Partnership Guidebook (Stibbe and Prescott, 2020). Alternatively, a few basic questions can allow you to assess whether an MSP is really fit for what you are aiming to do (Figure 2).

For an MSP to exist, those involved should agree that:

- There is a (resource management) problem
- We need to involve many or all to tackle the problem

Conversely, MSPs may not be the right fit if:

- All stakeholders are more or less agreed on the solution. In this case, a technical committee can do the job!
- Major intractable conflict dominates. Another forum (e.g. courts, mediation) would be more appropriate.
- A partnership already exists to serve a similar function. In this case, the partnership could be strengthened or supplemented, but no new MSP is needed.

There is no chance, for whatever reason, of engaging key influential people to implement the outcomes of MSP processes. To avoid this, you should consider the relationship between the work of a potential MSP and real water decision-making processes. Otherwise, your MSP runs the risk of being only a 'talking shop'.

Figure 2. Questions to determine if an MSP appropriate (Source: Tremblay-Lévesque et al., 2022).

Thematic Tagging

Gender , Youth

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