

# Assessing impacts of Multi-Stakeholder Partnership (MSP) Support Platforms

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## I. Introduction

Assessing impact is often misunderstood. It is a notorious difficult practice for regular development projects, let alone for Multi-Stakeholder Partnership (MSP) Platforms. A compounding difficulty is that each sector involved in an MSP Platform (government, private sector, civil society, academia) brings their own toolkits, paradigms, and terminology.

Many MSP Platforms struggle to demonstrate impact, as they operate in a context where many other actors and factors are influencing the issue which the Platform aims to address, making attribution not easy. Comparing different MSP Platforms is still in its early days because the shapes and functions of MSP Platforms are very diverse.

Yet, donors, governments, companies and others need to know what return on investment can be expected from their contributions to MSP Platforms. First of all, because they are accountable to their constituencies, but also to be able to lead and steer these MSP Platforms effectively.

This practice note aims to **summarize and reflect on the key issues that need to be addressed when designing impact assessment systems of MSP Platforms**. Since the knowledge on impact and impact assessment of MSP platforms is not yet well developed, insights from three different strands of knowledge are commonly used: first, we know quite a lot about impact and impact assessment<sup>1</sup> in general. This body of knowledge provides us with the tools and methods how to do impact assessments and how to understand impact. Second, we know increasingly more about Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships, about the process of collaboration and the conditions of success. Third, we have some insights from platforms in general, for instance innovation platforms in the agriculture sector (Guijt et al, 2019).

In addition, this practice note is based on an exchange of ideas and experiences by the Community of Practice supported by [Partnerships2030](#). Specifically, insights from a peer-learning workshop on Impacts and Impact Assessment of Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Support Platforms (13-15 November 2019, Costa Rica) organized by Partnerships2030 in collaboration with [ALIARSE](#) were used to inform this note.

In the following we try to come to terms with MSP platforms by distinguishing them from MSPs. Thereafter, we discuss key issues of impact and impact assessment of MSP platforms and suggest an approach for MSP platform impact assessment. The note ends with a reflection on what is needed to make such an impact assessment approach of MSP platforms work.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term impact assessment, instead of "impact measurement" or "impact tracking". Measurement and tracking have a connotation of a yardstick or stopwatch and focus on quantifiable, comparable evidence. In our perspective, impacts are often more complex and less easy to quantify. Therefore, we think that assessment does more justice to the process of weighing the evidence base, including less tangible aspects of how a project/MSP performs. More information can be found here: <https://www.oecd.org/sti/inno/What-is-impact-assessment-OECDImpact.pdf>

## II. Distinguishing MSP platforms from MSPs

A first clarification is how an MSP platform distinguishes itself from an MSP. In a broad sense, MSPs usually have a specific mission, with the potential to demonstrate ultimate impact. MSP Platforms tend to have a less direct relationship to ultimate impact, as they focus more on creating conditions for multiple MSPs to be effective rather than for a single MSP. MSP Platforms support and catalyze collaboration, whereas MSPs deliver collaborative action.

The differences between MSP platforms and MSPs are also discernible in the following definitions:

MSP Platforms	MSP
<p><b>Academic definitions</b>                      “An ongoing mechanism to catalyze collaboration for development, business, non-governmental organizations, donors and other development actors around a particular issue or geography, facilitate innovative collaborative approaches and directly broker and support new partnering action” (Reid et al, 2014)</p>	<p>“A multi-stakeholder partnership is a cooperation arrangement between a variety of actors that jointly engage in a process of dialogue and action to solve a specific problem” (Vermeulen &amp; Woodhill, 2008)</p>
<p><b>GIZ Partnerships2030 definitions</b>                      “Platforms for Multi Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs) support MSPs by providing good practice on relevant issues for cooperation within an MSP, facilitating knowledge exchange and peer learning, and generally supporting MSPs at every stage, from incubating new MSPs to support the impact assessment of existing ones.”</p>	<p>“An MSP is a form of cooperation with the following four characteristics: stakeholders from at least three different sectors (business / civil society / government / academia) work together on equal footing through an organized, and long-term engagement in order to contribute to the common good.”</p>

During the Costa Rica workshop, participants tried to bring more granularity to these two definitions. It was recognized that there is a continuum, with lots of variation in between the two extremes. This led to a classification of three archetypes on a spectrum with the initial working title *The Spectrum of Partnerships and Partnership Support Platforms Self-Assessment tool*<sup>2</sup>:

	← <b>MSP Support Platform</b>	↔ <b>Hybrid Platform</b>	↔ <b>MSP / Collective Impact Partnership</b> →
Vision/mission of each organizational type:	SDG17: To promote and support partnerships that deliver development impact.	A platform itself has specific, overarching mission, facilitates a portfolio of partnerships, each with their own sub-goals, towards the mission.	A partnership has a specific mission (e.g. to increase sustainability in a supply chain), delivered by the partners
Who delivers towards SDGs?	The catalyzed partnerships	Catalysed partnerships plus platform secretariat	The partners (often supported by a backbone organization)
Specificity of ultimate impact	Low relevance	Medium relevance	High relevance
Level of member engagement	Low relevance	Medium relevance	High relevance
Focus on enabling environment	High relevance	Medium/High relevance	Medium relevance

<sup>2</sup> The Spectrum is a work in progress and will be further developed by the MSP Support Platforms Community. More information can be found in the following document: [https://www.partnerschaften2030.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Impact-of-MSP-Support-Plattformen\\_Manuals\\_April20\\_EN.pdf](https://www.partnerschaften2030.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Impact-of-MSP-Support-Plattformen_Manuals_April20_EN.pdf)

Partnership support	High relevance	High/Medium relevance	Low relevance
Directness of final SDG (1-16) impact	Low relevance	Medium relevance	High relevance
Examples	ALIARSE, Partnerships2030, Zambia Business in Development Facility	GrowAfrica, International Land Coalition, The Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH)	Malawi Tea 2020, GAVI – The Vaccine Alliance, Farm to Market Alliance (FtMA)

This practice note focuses on the left and middle archetypes of this spectrum. What these have in common is a focus on supporting other partnerships, and thereby aiming for a more indirect impact compared to conventional projects and MSPs.

### III. Impact and impact assessment of MSP platforms

Developing an impact assessment of MSP platforms requires clarity on the impact assessment **purpose**, the impact **focus**, the **engagement of stakeholders** in the impact assessment, and the **methods** used for impact measurement. Dealing with trade-offs is hereby often a key challenge. In the following, these key issues are laid out more in detail.

#### a. Why assess impact of MSP platforms?

Impact is assessed for different reasons: roughly one can measure for *accountability* (justifying expenses for the funder) and measuring for *learning* (obtaining real-time insight in the MSPs effects towards its goals, in order to steer, adapt and improve), or a combination of these two. In the case of MSP platforms, impact assessment often serves various target groups, such as the platform members, other users, donors, and the platform backbone organization. Therefore, the purpose of impact assessment of MSP platforms is often a combination of accountability, learning, increasing the credibility and legitimacy of platforms, testing underlying assumptions, exploring scaling potential, and understanding how platforms work. Defining a joint purpose of the impact assessment between all key stakeholders of the MSP platform is a precondition for the development of an effective impact assessment system which is supported by the key stakeholders. Decisions about the purpose are often influenced by the capacity, knowledge and skills of the actors to do an impact assessment and finally by the budget available for impact assessment and evaluation.

#### b. What impact of MSP platforms to assess?

Before we delve into methods and good practice for impact assessment of MSPs, we need to unpack the term 'impact'. MSP platforms need to ask the question: what do we aim to change? These changes encompass the positive (and negative), direct and indirect, long-term effects produced by the platform. They differ from the outputs (the products and services which result from the activities of the platform) and the outcomes (the likely or achieved short and medium-term changes).

Impact is often also understood in different ways: some see it as the very targeted and focused change that results from an intervention, like a meteorite hitting the earth leads to an identifiable crater. Others see it as a much more indirect ripple effect after an intervention, in which case there is less direct causality between the action and the result of this action.

For MSP Platforms, which aim to tackle complex SDG-related problems in a rather indirect manner, impact is less likely to be like a meteorite hitting the earth. Impacts are more on system level, making attribution problematic. System change involves *shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place* – instead of attacking the problem with a single solution. MSP Partnership support platforms might develop SDG-related impact indirectly through the MSPs they support. And here again, many factors may influence the effectiveness and impact of MSPs that are beyond the influence sphere of the platform.

Platforms may focus primary on their performance (its form and functionality). The activities of MSP platforms can have however impact at various levels. Partnership support platforms and hybrid platforms, for instance, may have long-term effects on the member organizations and MSPs that result from their engagement in and or use of the platform. Impact or changes within the platform that result from interactions and activities between members might be another level where impact is directly generated. A third level may be the impact of changes in the individuals that result from their engagement in the platform. It can be valuable for platforms to look broader than their performance when they want to understand their impacts.

**c. *Who assesses the impact of MSP platforms?***

The multiple purposes of platform impact assessment usually ask for a sequenced combination of external expert assessment and platform self-assessment. Like other forms that are based on multi-stakeholder engagement, there is a call for participative assessment methods of MSP platforms. However, who is involved in the assessment depends on various factors, amongst others: the primary purpose of the assessment; the capacity, knowledge and skills to do an impact assessment; the availability of supportive tools; the role of the backbone organization; the participation and engagement of members and stakeholders and the available budget. MSP platform impact assessment systems should build in realistic and suitable stakeholder engagement processes that ensure continuous dialogue and foresight. This helps platforms to ensure that stakeholders are kept engaged in the impact assessment process and feel co-ownership about the process and the outcome.

**d. *How to assess the impact of MSP platforms?***

The professional field of impact assessment falls into roughly two camps: the naturalists and complexity/system thinkers. Naturalists state that metrics are required to be able to say anything sensible about changes or impacts. Complexity/system thinkers are less concerned about tracking metrics but propose using adaptive approaches to make sense of what is happening and develop and adapt impact pathways accordingly.

We suggest that for MSP platforms, complexity sensitive approaches that focus on contributions to systemic change are most appropriate (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). Yet, methods to use these are less common and require more tailoring than a clear set of metrics. Metrics are also important, but mainly for tracking activities, outputs and outcomes. The mistake often made by MSP platforms is that they formulate ultimate ambitions on an abstract, systemic level, yet their M&E and impact assessment frameworks are geared towards measurable activities and outputs only. Assessments are often designed to provide timely information rather than do rigorous assessments due to budget restrictions, priorities, timeframes and the dynamic nature of MSP platforms. Data and information on activities and outputs are valid for steering the platform and – if done in a systematic manner – may help to track changes over a longer period. Such data are however less suitable to deliver meaningful information on the actual achieved system change.

So, should MSP platforms choose for the naturalist approach or the complexity/systems approach? That is the wrong question. A combination of a solid theory of change (ToC), continuous stakeholder engagement, the right metrics, and mechanisms for sense-making can lead to a plausible contribution story about impact of an MSP platform (see figure 1). In order to achieve a solid yet suitable impact measurement of MSP platforms, a mix of data is required. Quantitative data is necessary for metrics and to identify emerging trends, whereas qualitative data is required for developing the narrative that explains these trends.

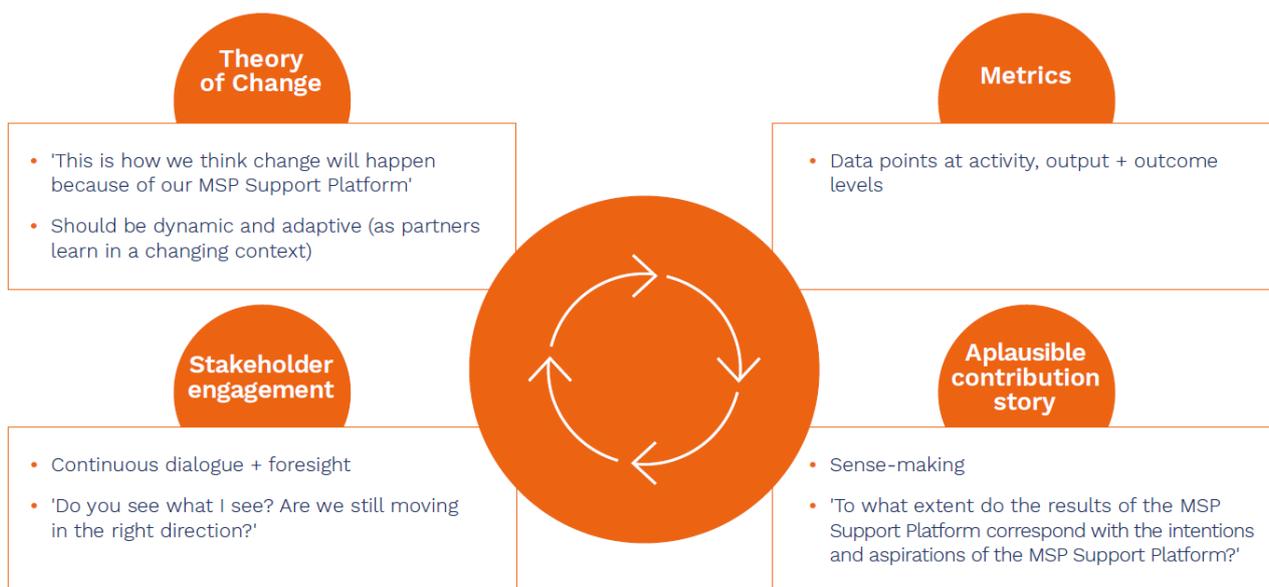


Figure 1: Suggested building blocks for MSP platform impact assessment

#### IV. What is needed for (improving) impact assessment of MSP platforms?

MSP platforms require support, capacity and knowledge to apply the suggested building blocks of combining a solid ToC, continuous stakeholder engagement, the right metrics, and a plausible contribution story. In the following we reflect on four lessons learned/ways forward.

First, **MSP platforms do require information and tools** which are accessible, understandable and applicable. There is an evident tension of on the one hand, a call for specific methodologies to measure impact related to specific platforms. On the other hand, there is a call for standardization and recognized frameworks for platforms that can be applied. The tension requires that platforms get support for developing platform M&E frameworks by experts. This need is evident in terms of methods (e.g. ToC development and setting up participative evaluations). However, the context and experience of the MSP platform and its key stakeholders are key for making sense of the results of the assessment.

Second, impact assessment can be included in the M&E system, but platforms may not have the (financial) support to do impact investments. Internally, there needs to be a common understanding and support by all key stakeholders involved in the platform that **impact assessment is an important element of the platform that requires a budget**. Externally, collaborations between knowledge institutes, donor organizations, governments, companies and NGOs are required to join resources for realizing impact assessment of MSP platforms.

Third, **capacity is required for combining metrics and sensemaking methods**. Platforms can only understand their impact when they are able to capture and make sense of the "interaction impact" that is created by the MSP approach they are pursuing. Tools and trainings on impact assessment could be developed that involve the connections between the impact of the platform and its partnerships. Collaborative approaches such as jointly developing a theory of change may develop the capacity to better navigate and understand the assumptions that underly the platform impact focus. This would help platform partners to develop evidence of the impact narrative of their MSP platform.

Fourth, **evidence on how and why platforms work and generate impact requires collaborations** between knowledge institutes/experts and platforms. Such collaborations (maybe in the form of action research) are required for creating and sharing knowledge on impact assessment of MSP platforms. Building evidence on the impact of MSP platforms requires that insights on studies are shared externally. Not only best practices but also learning from failures is necessary. Even though platforms are highly diverse, comparing and contrasting findings

with other platforms is required for thickening the impact evidence. Synthesis of experiences of impact assessment processes and methods may also help to increase learning about which methods work best for platform impact assessment.

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