

Where now for the Partnership Agenda?

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The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed the way modern society functions and highlighted the responsibility of all societal actors for counteracting its immediate and long term impacts. The pressure is on diverse actors to work together in more targeted, effective and innovative ways: 'Build Back Better' means co-constructing the future. Yet there is very little guidance for the private sector on how to partner well with government and NGO actors who may have a very different modus operandi. The UN Partnership Acceleration 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development launched in 2019 is the most recent initiative which aims to develop a partnership ecosystem capable of supporting the engagement of business as a development actor. This important initiative recognises that partnering requires expertise and a know-how that no actors, companies included, are institutionally predisposed to and that more systematic supportive structures are required. The Agenda provides practical guidance on how to set up and implement partnerships that can be transformative and sustainable. It calls for the development of SDG partnership platforms around the world through which governments and the UN can systematically and effectively work with business and other actors. Local communities are central to the kind of multi-stakeholder action envisaged by partnerships for SDGs. Business contact with communities is most direct and the potential for transformative change is strongest at local level. Yet many blockages exist for constructive relationships which can ultimately undermine the ambition behind the Partnership Acceleration 2030 Agenda. The experience of companies responding to the COVID-19 crisis demonstrates a variety of approaches and practices depending on the type of companies and the local context. Some key insights emerge: where companies have well established links with local communities and other actors, they have been able to mobilise faster and in a more targeted way. This is important for taking forward partnership agendas and suggests that more concrete and

systematic support for companies in building and sustaining constructive relationships with local communities is needed.