BACKGROUND NOTE

Monitoring commitments of non-state actors

The multiplication of commitments by non-state actors—private sector, local and regional authorities, NGOs—to support the implementation of sustainable development is both promising and problematic. The most long-standing experiments (Rio+10 partnerships for sustainable development) and the most recent (Lima-Paris Action Agenda) have so far demonstrated limited effectiveness and the need to increase accountability associated with these voluntary commitments. In this context, this session will seek to identify the types of governance that would simultaneously stimulate experimentation and innovation and facilitate the implementation of commitments made, while guaranteeing that their implementation is not detrimental to the most vulnerable stakeholders or to marginalised environmental issues (biodiversity, for example).

1. CONTEXT

The implementation of international agreements on sustainable development has long been considered to be the sole responsibility of states. By transposing these agreements into law, regulations and different incentives, states are in fact obliged to redirect the practices and behaviours of non-state actors—citizens, companies, regional authorities—towards greater sustainability.

However, these non-state actors are not just the passive targets of state action. They also have a history of involvement in the implementation of sustainable development. The last 15 years have thus been marked by the multiplication of voluntary commitments, often made within the framework of multi-stakeholder platforms. These were created to stimulate the involvement of all stakeholders in a given sector with a view to specifically implementing the goals associated with international agreements. The large-scale launch of platforms of this type dates back to the Rio+10 Summit, with the Johannesburg partnerships for sustainable development, known as "Type II partnerships" (2002). These were followed by the Rio+20 (2012) voluntary commitments then, more recently (2015), by the Lima-Paris Action Agenda for the implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate change. This agenda includes more than 350 initiatives in 10 fields, totalling the commitments of more than 5,000 stakeholders of all types (companies, local authorities, investors, and civil society organisations). Platforms of this type have been set up in almost all sectors of sustainable development and are considered as essential tools for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition to the changes that would be generated by the specific implementation of the commitments made within them, these platforms have many benefits: flexibility, reactivity, the capacity to facilitate exchanges between stakeholders and to foster experimentation and innovation, etc. (Chan *et al.*, 2015). More generally, they should help to close the implementation gap for international agreements and, as such, are presented as a response to the limitations of multilateralism.

2. ISSUES/SOLUTIONS

There are at least three factors that make the monitoring of these platforms and the commitments made within them a key challenge for the coming decade.

The first concerns current *expectations* of these platforms, which have grown substantially over the last few months. The scale of the commitments made within the LPAA framework, whether by regional elected representatives (see for example the Compact of Mayors) or by private companies (see for example the commitment to remove commodity-driven deforestation from supply chains), has significantly contributed to the credibility of the intergovernmental agreement obtained in Paris during COP21. The monitoring of these commitments appears essential from this perspective. It will ensure they do not become a dead letter and that they continue to act as a stimulus for states, thereby contributing to a broader movement of inevitable transition towards greater sustainability.

The second factor refers to the difficulties encountered by the first voluntary partnerships in keeping their promises. An evaluation of the partnerships for sustainable development launched in Johannesburg in 2002 conducted 10 years after their launch shows that they have produced very little in the way of specific action. Given that insufficient resources were allocated to monitoring the implementation of commitments, it has been impossible to hold stakeholders accountable

for their promises and to redress the balance over time, which has reduced the *effectiveness* of these partnerships.

The third and final factor relates to issues of *accountability* and *legitimacy* of commitments and of the platforms in which they are made. In the field of food security, for example, civil society organisations have been critical of certain initiatives that they believe not only fail to produce substantial changes, but also have potential negative effects on the most vulnerable populations (land grabbing, unfavourable supply contracts, etc.). Underlying these issues is the difficulty civil society organisations may encounter in participating and making themselves heard within bodies that are mainly comprised of the most resource-rich stakeholders (see in particular Bäckstrand, 2006; Biermann *et al.*, 2012).

Numerous challenges are therefore associated with monitoring multi-stakeholder platforms, including:
– stimulating the *voluntary* commitment of all types of stakeholders—civil society, local authorities, private sector—in order to foster experience sharing, innovation and cooperation;
– ensuring commitments made by stakeholders are actually implemented, in order to effectively foster experimentation and the leverage effect for the sustainable development represented by these commitments;
– but also ensuring that what is implemented under these commitments has no negative effects on other issues or stakeholders (especially in terms of human or environmental rights/sustainability and for the most vulnerable stakeholders).

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE SESSION/QUESTIONS

In this context, this session will examine the nature of the accountability frameworks that must be applied to the platforms regulating the voluntary commitments of non-state actors. More specifically, approaching the concept of accountability from a political and relational viewpoint, the aim is to determine:
– the governance rules to apply to these platforms in order to ensure commitments made are evaluated *ex ante* according to a minimum grid of criteria based on rights;
– which stakeholders are best placed to ensure monitoring of commitments and which resources do they require in order to hold the stakeholders who commit accountable for these commitments in a context in which everything is said to be "voluntary"? Recent experience shows that NGOs and CSOs cannot play this role alone, in particular because they are often in a position of considerable asymmetry of power in relation to the other participants in these initiatives;
– which monitoring mechanisms need to be implemented for this.

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