Chapter 1

Cocreating the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

Abstract

This introductory chapter points to the need for sound and critical reflection on how to mobilize public, private and third sector actors, facilitate collaboration in partnerships and networks, and cocreate SDG solutions that are at once innovative, effective, and democratic. It spells out the aim of the book, which is to show how Goal 17 on partnerships can be used as a lever for securing global transformation toward socioeconomic and environmental sustainability. It explicates the basic argument that cocreation provides a promising strategy for advancing goal attainment by mobilizing competent, engaged, and knowledgeable stakeholders, stimulating innovation and ensuring broad-based support to solutions that make a difference. Finally, it briefly presents the content of the book and explains its intended usage.

Keywords: United Nations; Millennium Development Goals; Sustainable Development Goals; Goal 17; partnerships; networks

How to Work Together to Achieve the SDGs

When in 2015, the United Nations unanimously agreed on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it defined an ambitious global agenda for everyone committed to saving the planet while promoting economic prosperity, human development, and social justice. The task of achieving the 17 interconnected goals for global sustainability is as immense as it is urgent. At times, it may even seem overwhelming and beyond our reach. However, if we all work together, share our resources and ideas, build on our mutual strengths, inspire and encourage each other and build resilience, we have a good chance of succeeding and jointly creating a sustainable future in which humans, communities, and regions can blossom within the limits set by the natural environment.

The idea of bringing government actors, private enterprises, civil society organizations, and local citizens together in trust-based, constructive, and trans-formative collaboration is challenged in many parts of the world. In some countries, public sector organizations are weak and failing while elsewhere they have earned themselves a bad reputation and are looked at with great suspicion by private social and economic actors. There are also countries where well-established bureaucracies and strong autocratic political leaders have little inclination to share power with private actors, local communities, and NGOs. These barriers are regrettable because they prevent the production of public-private synergies and the formation of partnerships that can bring about the transformations that the world desperately needs.

Calling upon all actors to reach out and join forces in the name of global survival, this book aims to make the strongest possible case for the formation of collaborative and synergistic partnerships in all parts of the world. This ambition is nurtured by the many examples of mutual advantage obtained through the gradual development of collaborative relationships and joint solutions. To illustrate, the Food Waste Warrior in Malaysia is established as a social enterprise linked to a central government agency (United Nations SDG Partnership Platform, 2021). It partners with local restaurants, farmers, local government, universities, and NGOs to divert food waste away from landfills and turn it into high-quality fertilizing for biodynamic farms producing healthy foods for local people. Creation of a circular economy for healthy food helps restaurants dispose of their food waste, people to get access to healthy food, local government to develop standards for handling food waste, and the national government to improve public health and restore degraded land and soil. Hence, collaboration turns all participants and the environment into winners.

This example is not unique. All around the world people are heeding the call to act locally to solve problems and challenges with a global reach and significance. Most of them recognize the need for cross-boundary collaboration. Johan in Norway seeks to promote the corporate social responsibility of his firm by inviting other local actors, including the municipal waste department, to collaborate on a new recycling project. Alenka in Slovenia is running a voluntary shelter for homeless people and wants to engage a broad range of public agencies in building new shelters and offering better services to the homeless. Miguel and Maria in Spain are working to create a network of people who are willing to assist the local health authorities during the next pandemic. Eduardo in Brazil is a public forestation planner aiming to mobilize local firms and communities to protect the rain forest and promote sustainable forestry. Carl is chairman of the Seattle Fishermen's Association and works hard to create a local alliance for a sustainable fishery. Sylvain in Benin leads a group of farmers that seeks support from various government programs and international donor organizations in order to spur organic and sustainable farming. Adinda in Indonesia leads a local women's group aiming to reduce child mortality in poor neighborhoods by providing better information and access to public health clinics. Hiroshi and his friends in Japan are university students and have recently formed a green student movement aiming to reduce CO_2 emissions from the

University of Nagoya and the local neighborhood. Amahle in South Africa is a regional environmental officer who works with local communities and some international NGOs and philanthropists to protect the habitat of endangered animals. Vladimir in Russia is organizing shipyard workers across the region in order to secure livable wages and a safer working environment. Mrs. Ann Taylor in Ireland is a local councilor aiming to fight child obesity by fostering collaboration between local schools, supermarkets, fitness clubs and civil society organizations.

For all these local endeavors to come to fruition and have a real impact on one or more SDGs, these local changemakers will have to make a series of important decisions about how to define the problem they are addressing, whom to involve in creative problem-solving, how to spur collaboration and collective action, and how to measure progress toward goal attainment. They may discuss their plans and strategies with friends, colleagues, and allies and distribute important responsibilities for joint efforts to other actors. They may also draw on valuable experience from other similar initiatives in the own region or country, or perhaps from abroad. Still, initiating and driving local processes of collaborative governance, which aim to engage a plethora of public, private, and third sector actors in the creation of solutions that have public value and are valued by the public, is a daunting task that calls for critical reflection on the part of local changemakers. Many things can go wrong when it comes to collaborative governance due to either bad or ill-informed decisions or unacknowledged conditions for action. Thus, since failure is often unaffordable in the face of urgent problems, we need to reduce the risk of failure by carefully thinking through the different steps in the collaborative process in order to secure desirable outcomes.

In order to stimulate and facilitate sound and critical reflection on how to mobilize relevant and affected actors in a joint effort to reach one or more SDGs, this book brings together state-of-the-art research and practical learning from local cases from around the world. It provides a systematic guide enabling local changemakers – whether public or private – to make well-informed and context-sensitive decisions about how they can engage local actors in joint efforts to cocreate public solutions to pressing problems. Spurring reflection on how to mobilize local actors, facilitate collaboration, and produce public solutions that are at once innovative, effective, and democratic is a key condition for accelerating the endeavor to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

The Aim of the Book

This book aims to support and inspire the reflections of public employees, private firms, NGOs, donor organizations, philanthropists, project managers, local citizens, and other relevant changemakers who aspire to cocreate solutions to the pressing problems and challenges that confront our social and natural environment. It addresses a broad set of issues that are relevant to public and private actors seeking to sponsor activities, convene partners, facilitate collaboration,

catalyze disruptive change, and have a collective impact on the future. It combines research-based reflections on the tasks that local sponsors, conveners, facilitators, and catalysts must perform in order to spur the cocreation of local solutions to global problems with empirical examples from different parts of the world that demonstrate how these tasks can best be accomplished in practice under varying conditions.

The book is neither a practical manual prescribing action, nor a scholarly review of the literature on cocreation in the field of sustainable development. Rather, it provides a reservoir of practical and scientific knowledge and advice that active and responsible changemakers around the globe can interrogate, learn from, and purposefully adapt in order to accomplish their mission of making things better and saving the world through collaborative endeavors aiming to produce innovative public value outcomes. It is our hope that people will dive into this pool of knowledge, critically compare the points and arguments with their own experience and situation, and pragmatically adapt and deploy new insights to spur collaborative action and achieve results.

Most books focusing on the SDGs recognize the need for cross-boundary collaboration. Nevertheless, the burgeoning SDG literature tends to focus either on how to achieve a particular goal or how a particular institution or actor can contribute to realizing one or more SDGs. Hence, many books take a sector-specific approach to advancing the SDGs, and provide in-depth studies of the problems and available solutions within a particular area such as forestry, climate, health, education, poverty or justice. Another line of inquiry looks at how actors at multiple levels can contribute toward the SDGs. Some books look at the strategies and efforts of the UN system, the international donor community and global society, while other books look at the actual and potential contribution of financial institutions, private firms and industries, state institutions such as courts, police and regulatory agencies, local government and vulnerable social groups such as children, women, smallholder farmers, migrants and those living in extreme poverty. This book takes a different approach by focusing on how all these different actors can be brought together in fruitful collaboration to achieve any of the interconnected SDGs. Hence, by focusing on partnerships as a lever of change, the book has relevance for all actors, whether public or private, local or global, or sector-specific or cross-sectoral. Moreover, while many SDG books are focusing on the Global South, this book has a global relevance as it is written for all those people around the globe who aspire to use multiactor collaboration as a tool for producing innovative solutions that can help to make the world a better place.

The Argument in a Nutshell

The UN's SDGs not only set an agenda for global problem-solving, but also provide an important recommendation for how public actors can produce solutions and make a real impact in and through the mobilization of societal actors.

In fact, Goal 17 points to the central importance of partnerships, networks, and multistakeholder collaboration for bringing together a broad range of public, private, and civil society actors in realizing the first 16 goals. This strategy is spot on in a world where knowledge, resources, and governance capacities are widely distributed across an array of government agencies, private enterprises, civil society organizations, political activists, local communities, national development agencies, and international NGOs. Since it is unlikely that one single actor possesses all the resources and ideas needed to make things happen and fulfill one or more SDGs, it makes good sense to rely on the collaborative advantage of a broad range of public and private actors who will often be able to do things together that none of them are capable of doing on their own (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). To illustrate, the devastating Corona pandemic has clearly demonstrated that governments and public health systems from Timbuktu to Tokyo and New York cannot fight this lethal virus alone, but need to mobilize citizens, volunteers, civil society organization, private companies, international aid organizations, etc. to help those who are infected and to eventually control the outbreak.

So, in a nutshell, our argument is that Goal 17 on partnership is a lever of change since – in our interpretation – it insists that public, private, and third-sector actors around the world should not seek to go into it alone, but instead strive to bring together a broad range of actors in cross-boundary collaboration through networks and partnerships that provide arenas for creative, legitimate, and effective problem-solving. Governance based on collaborative interaction in networks and partnerships enables local actors to benefit from collective wisdom and swarm intelligence. We are often wiser, more resourceful, and more courageous when we are doing things together rather than relying on our own limited cognitive and organizational capacity.

This book offers a particular reading of Goal 17. Hence, we want to push the recommendation of cross-boundary collaboration a little further by arguing that collaborative governance aiming to involve public, private, and third sector actors in creative problem-solving paves the way for involving an even broader set of actors in cocreation of innovative public value outcomes. Hence, our bold claim is that the advancement of cocreation as a collaborative problem-solving strategy can breathe new life into the global efforts to achieve the SDGs. The interim reports on the SDGs submitted by all UN membership countries in 2019 suggest that the glass is half empty rather than half full. Presently, we are halfway through the process of implementing Agenda 2030, but there is a long way to go before fully achieving the SDGs. This Agenda is not only tremendously ambitious, but it has been interrupted by the necessary efforts to fight the Corona pandemic. Cocreation provides a promising strategy for getting back on track and advancing goal attainment by mobilizing competent, engaged, and knowledgeable stakeholders, stimulating innovation and ensuring broad-based support for solutions that make a difference.

Overall Content of the Book

The first two chapters of the book carefully explains the basic argument we want to advance. Hence, *chapter 2* briefly explains the emergence and content of the SDGs and proceeds to discuss the significance of local action for achieving them, and *chapter 3* explains why collaborative governance in general and cocreation in particular provides an attractive and promising strategy for local actors aiming to fulfill one or more SDGs. Together, these opening chapters prescribe a simple cure for the dire problems and immense challenges that our social and natural environment faces: build platforms and arenas that attract and involve relevant and affected actors in collaborative processes that spur creative problem-solving, build common ownership over new and bold solutions, and facilitate monitoring and continuous improvement of results.

To support the critical reflection of local actors aiming to pursue one or more SDGs through local collaboration in networks and partnership, the next 10 chapters identify and discuss the key aspects of the process of local cocreation of global SDGs:

Chapter 4 reflects on the translation of global SDGs to local contexts that differ in terms of the urgency of the problems and challenges at hand and the political and socioeconomic conditions for solving them. If local actors fail to recognize the relevance of one or more SDGs, the formation of network and partnerships is impossible. Hence, translation work that aims to connect global goals with local problems is highly important. Cocreation offers a strategy for the 'localization' of the Global SDGs.

Chapter 5 explores how government actors, international organizations, and other relevant sponsors can support the formation of platforms and arenas for coccreation of local SDG solutions. Platforms are relatively permanent meeting places that attract relevant and affected actors and facilitate the formation of collaborative arenas in which cocreation can emerge and flourish. Platforms and arenas are institutional designs that help scaffold processes of multiactor collaboration and cocreation of public value outcomes.

Chapter 6 raises the pertinent question about how to convene local actors and motivate them to participate in cocreation of new solutions to old or emerging problems. It also considers the equally important questions of how to empower them so that they can participate competently and effectively in the collaborative endeavor to achieve one or more SDGs, and how to build a sufficient level of trust between the actors in order to facilitate the exchange and pooling of knowledge, ideas, and resources.

Chapter 7 considers how to define problems, stimulate mutual learning, and catalyze innovation in ways that spur the development of new and bold solutions that carry the promise of effectively solving the problem(s) at hand while enjoying widespread support. Innovation is important to break deadlocks and solve complex problems that cannot be solved by retreating to standard solutions.

Chapter 8 looks at joint efforts to build and test prototypes of the most promising solutions in order to prompt fast learning about what works in practice. Prototyping is a crucial strategy for detecting and correcting problematic issues at an early stage where the costs of failure are still relatively minor. Iterative cycles of testing and revising prototypes enhances the chance of goal attainment.

Chapter 9 discusses how local actors may find ways of funding and financing the design and realization of cocreated solutions that facilitate cost and risk sharing. Despite the manifold resource contributions of the actors participating in cocreation, financial resources are needed both in the initiation and design phases and in the implementation and evaluations phases. The chapter looks at how these resources are provided, for example, by means of blended financing.

Chapter 10 looks at how cocreated solutions are implemented through collaborative adaptation that involves downstream actors such as users, households, neighborhoods, and local businesses in adjusting the form and content of new solutions to new developments and the actual conditions on the ground. Collaborative adaptation helps to ensure the robustness of the new solutions.

Chapter 11 reconsiders how local cocreation projects can be jointly evaluated in ways that respect their emerging character and spur experiential learning. The traditional evaluation tools needs to be supplemented by new forms of developmental evaluation that aim to support continuous improvement and innovation of cocreated solutions by asking a series of critical evaluative questions.

Chapter 12 confronts the challenge of holding projects based on cocreation to account for their results and impact and promotes the idea of social accountability that allows external actors to critically scrutinize the outputs and outcomes of cocreation based on publicly available accounts provided by local projects.

Chapter 13 reflects on the nature and character of cocreation and the different national and local conditions for promoting cocreation of SDG solutions and based on these reflections it calls for the development of new forms of leadership and management that can support and enhance collaborative processes of creative problem-solving and drive them to successful conclusion.

The book concludes with a critical discussion of some big global challenges and possible ways forward. *Chapter 14* revisits the economic discussion of the need to incorporate the natural limits to growth in economic growth theory, the need to secure political stability in times of rapid societal change triggered by the transition to sustainable living, and the democratic challenge of how to accommodate the pressure for enhancing empowered participatory governance while respecting the political authority of political leaders and the institutions of government.

How to Use This Book

This book is dedicated to all those people who want to act locally to reach global goals and use collaboration in partnerships and networks as a governance tool.

Policy entrepreneurs, social innovators, and professional changemakers around the world may read the book on their own initiative in search of inspiration and advice about how the difficulties, barriers, and dilemmas emerging in local processes of cocreation can be tackled. As mentioned above, the main part of the book provides a systematic analysis of the different steps in and aspects of local cocreation processes in relation to which it identifies core dynamics, problems, and solutions. This format permits readers to compare their own experiences, problems, and aspirations with the scientific and empirical insights from existing research, and in so doing, to get new ideas about how to spur cocreation of public value outcomes.

Public and private organizations may also use the book as a part of voluntary or mandatory training programs that aim to empower local actors and give them a head start when it comes to spurring local cocreation of SDG solutions. To this end, the book combines theory-based explanations of the basic arguments about how to enhance goal attainment through cocreation and empirical insights into local experiences and best practices with inventories of practical tools and recommendations that support local action.

The book is published in Golden Open Access so that people all over the world can download it freely and gain access to new knowledge about how to use multiactor collaboration as a lever of change. This free and open access supports our ambition to use our scientific and practical knowledge acquired through decades of engaged scholarship to make a real impact.

Our hope is that the ideas, arguments, and advice put forth in this book will help to accelerate the formation of local platforms and arenas for collaborative innovation that can help us to reach the highly ambitious SDGs by 2030. We are not so naïve that we believe that our scholarly input alone will change the world, but we are convinced that local changemakers – whether public or private – who sample useful scientific and practical knowledge, compare it to their own experiences, and critically reflect on its usage can spearhead the change we need to secure political, social, economic, and environmental sustainability.