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# Industry and Multisector Alliances to Achieve System-Level Impact

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Over the past three decades, the number of companies that have begun voluntarily reporting on their sustainability activities and performance has grown significantly.[1] And, since 2015, many of the same companies have started to report specifically on their commitments to support

1. KPMG International (2022). KPMG has undertaken a regular survey of corporate sustainability reporting since 1993. The 2022 report covered 5,800 companies from fifty-eight countries, territories, and jurisdictions and reviewed trends in corporate reporting on sustainability performance (since 1993 and 1999), the SDGs (tracked since 2015), and carbon emissions (tracked since 2015) across different industries. As of 2022, 96 percent of the world's largest 250 companies by revenue were reporting publicly on their sustainability-related performance, up from 35 percent in 1999 (p. 13 of the report), with some 74 percent of the largest 250 companies reporting explicitly on their contribution to the SDGs, up from 43 percent in 2017 (p. 57) and 80 percent reporting on carbon targets, up from 67 percent in 2017 (p. 39). The advent of mandatory reporting requirements will continue to enhance the credibility and comparability of such reporting.

As outlined later in this chapter, the World Benchmarking Alliance has developed a method for tracking the SDG-related performance of two thousand influential corporations (the SDG2000) across seven key systems, which also draws on publicly reported corporate data.

the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2015 Paris Agreement.[2] In addition to multinational corporations with global reach and large national companies, more small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) from diverse industries and jurisdictions are starting to support the SDGs.[3] Voluntary actions undertaken by individual firms, while moving toward achievement of the goals, are in aggregate insufficient to achieve the system-level transformations needed for the private sector to be able to support governments in delivering the 2030 Agenda.

While leadership within individual firms and the creation of operational partnerships in firms' own value chains and communities remain fundamental to progress, more ambitious, larger-scale collective action is required. A critical mass of companies working together on a precompetitive basis at the industry level and in large-scale, multisector alliances will be essential to support more inclusive and sustainable development. Such alliances, while complex and challenging to establish and sustain, have an important role to play in helping to overcome some of the systemic obstacles that are impeding the progress of business engagement with the SDGs.

Systemic obstacles to achieving the SDGs and to expanding the contribution of the private sector include a variety of governance gaps, market failures, and trust deficits. These range from the lack of enabling policies, regulations, political will, and industry-wide norms and standards to insufficient resources, innovation, incentives, and market demand from consumers, customers, investors, and other market actors.[4] Lack of public trust in large corporations and governments is another impediment to making progress on the type of deep-seated political, economic, and technological changes and often trade-offs that are needed in many jurisdictions and sectors.[5] A related factor is the absence of effective consultative and governance mechanisms for systemwide coordination on setting common goals and priorities and then holding relevant institutions accountable for their delivery. Few of these system-level challenges can be

2. Ibid.

3. UNDESA (2020).

4. WBCSD (2021).

5. Edelman Trust Institute (2024). The Edelman Trust Barometer is a useful source of trends and insights into public trust of different sectors and institutions. In its twenty-fourth year, the 2024 report surveyed the views of 32,000 respondents from twenty-eight countries, with respondents selected to be "representative of the general population across age, gender, region and ethnicity/nationality (where applicable) within each country" (p. 2).

addressed by any one company acting on its own. In many cases they cannot be addressed even by governments in the absence of broader stakeholder consultation and coordination, often at multiple levels.

Parts II and III of this book provide examples of initiatives by financial actors, policymakers, and regulators aimed at addressing some of these systemic governance, policy, and market obstacles to business engagement in achieving the SDGs. Large-scale business-led alliances among companies and between business, governments, and civil society offer another important set of mechanisms for overcoming these obstacles and scaling up the contribution and impact of business.

This chapter focuses on a subset of precompetitive, industry-led alliances and multisector platforms that are combining a variety of approaches to effect more inclusive and sustainable change in crucial systems such as energy, food, hard-to-abate industries, and finance. Hard-to-abate industries are those that are energy- and capital-intensive and difficult to decarbonize for financial or technological reasons; they are also heavy emitters of greenhouse gases.[6] These alliances aim simultaneously to shape markets, increase the adoption of industry-wide norms and standards, mobilize resources, and advocate for policy reforms at global, value chain, and local levels. The chapter outlines evolving models of large-scale collective action, identifies some of the operational and strategic challenges to implementation, and provides recommendations for the way forward.

## Operational, Project-Level Partnerships to System-Level Collective Action

The formation of sustainability partnerships and the practice of collaboration among business and other sectors are not new. In addition to introducing the term "sustainable development," the seminal report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, published in 1987, explicitly called on governments to increase cooperation with industry, noting that "industry is on the leading edge of the interface between

6. Categorizations of hard-to-abate industries vary, but the list usually includes iron and steel, cement and concrete, aluminum, glass and chemicals, aviation, shipping, heavy trucking, certain food and agricultural commodities, and some land uses. See International Energy Agency (2020).

people and the environment. It is perhaps the main instrument of change that affects the environmental resource bases of development, both positively and negatively. Both industry and government, therefore, stand to benefit from working together more closely."[7]

Almost thirty years later, SDG 17 calls on all actors to "encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships" alongside other joint actions aimed at "strengthen[ing] the means of implementation and revitaliz[ing] the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development."[8]

Over this period, likely thousands of individual companies have established or participated in a wide variety of sustainability partnerships. Large companies in particular can point to their engagement in multiple different partnerships, often with diverse partners, goals, and timelines, in numerous different locations and with different levels of activity. These partnerships range from global alliances to supply chain coalitions to local community groups and may combine both philanthropic and core business resources and motivations. Likewise, the number of industry-level collaborative efforts to support sustainable development at scale is growing. It is fair to assume, for example, that most of the 25,000+ firms that are members of the United Nations Global Compact are participating in partnerships to support the SDGs.[9] To cite just one instance, the SME Climate Hub, which is itself supported by a coalition of business groups and financial institutions, is partnering with some eight thousand SMEs to enable climate action by small businesses.[10]

Despite the numerous individual examples and case studies and the substantial anecdotal evidence on corporate-led partnerships for sustainable development, it is difficult to track or evaluate their number, scope, or impact. There is no commonly agreed-on way to categorize the different types of sustainability partnerships that involve business, nor is there any reliable and comprehensive database. This lacuna makes it impossible to assess the total numbers of such partnerships, let alone evaluate their

7. United Nations (1987).

8. UNDESA (n.d.). For additional historical background on frameworks for UN, government, and business partnerships for sustainable development, see United Nations (2015).

9. For the list of participants in the United Nations Global Compact, see the website at https://unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/participants.

10. For information on participants in the SME Climate Hub, see the web page "Our SMEs" at https://smeclimatehub.org/our-smes/.

effectiveness, whether on an individual company or partnership basis, comparatively, collectively, or cumulatively. Yet there is little doubt that partnerships have a role to play as catalysts of change for sustainable development, and there is value to better understanding their different models, challenges, and relative effectiveness.

### *Categorizing Business Partnerships and System-Level Collective Action*

As part of an effort to characterize different forms of business sustainability partnerships, work that was supported by the Business and Sustainable Development Commission, I previously identified five levels of collaboration that large companies were engaging in with the aim of scaling up their impact in managing sustainability risks and opportunities.[11] These were:

- *Cooperation with business partners along specific value chains.* Partnerships of this kind are often one-on-one partnerships with the limited goal of addressing an operational or strategic challenge within a specific value chain.
- *Project-level financing and implementation partnerships.* Such partnerships usually entail one or a few companies partnering with one or a few governments, financial institutions, research organizations, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to share risks, costs, or resources in developing new technologies, products, services, or delivery models with explicit sustainability goals, or to increase philanthropic support and donations for humanitarian goals.
- *Industry-level, precompetitive business alliances.* These alliances typically involve a group of companies working together within or across an industry to drive sectorwide change.
- *Multistakeholder institutions, platforms, or networks among groups of companies, governments, or civil society organizations (CSOs).* These large-scale alliances are aimed at overcoming governance gaps and market failures to achieve widespread change.
- *Coordination between different levels or types of partnership.* These efforts aim to align or proactively coordinate the actions of separate partnerships with the goal of achieving a multiplier effect to support systemic change at scale.[12]

11. Nelson (2017). See also Grayson and Nelson (2013) and Nelson (2013).
12. Nelson (2017).

This chapter focuses on the last three of these partnership approaches, in which businesses interact with other businesses and stakeholders or with broader networks. While many thousands of smaller partnerships at the operational, individual supply chain, community, and project levels can cumulatively contribute to sustainable development outcomes, it is these large-scale alliances that are most likely to drive system-level transformation, the challenges of establishing and sustaining them notwithstanding.

Others have sought to categorize large-scale, transformative partnerships according to the ambitions of the alliances in question. The World Resources Institute, for example, has divided transformative partnerships into two broad categories. Those in the first category, described as *enabling partnerships*, aim "to shift policies and practices to move actors more quickly to a sustainable development pathway. To do so, they may form roundtables or voluntary commitments to set sustainability standards; they may focus on sharing knowledge or advice; or they may look to create market conditions such that commercial investments are feasible in the future."[13] Those in the second category, described as *market-driven partnerships*, "use the power of market signals and forces to drive sustainable change by launching a commercially viable product or service."[14]

In a similar vein, Lambin and coauthors from Stanford University have identified what they describe as three "upscaling pathways" whereby coalitions of public, private, and civil society actors align their motivations to drive sustainability transition at scale.[15] These pathways can be summarized as follows:

- *Market power pathway:* This pathway entails leveraging a dominant private actor's market power or that of a small group of dominant private actors that are willing to work with civil society and government actors to drive change along their supply chains.
- *Public policy integration pathway:* In this pathway, CSOs or progressive actors from the private sector design and pilot voluntary sustainability initiatives, after which government adopts elements of successful initiatives into legal mandates, thereby making these initiatives applicable to all actors in a jurisdiction and considerably bolstering their integration.

13. Li, Gray, and Dennis (2020).
14. Ibid.; United Nations Global Compact and Accenture Strategy (2018).
15. Lambin et al. (2020).

- *Government-led pathway:* Here, governments lead transformations, but government actions are reinforced by private action as a result of willing and capable policymakers coordinating effectively with civil society and private actors.[16]

### *The Role of Systems Leadership by Individuals and Institutions*

The models of large-scale collective action and coordination outlined in the previous section involve business actors, both individuals and institutions, engaging to varying degrees with each other and with governments, financial institutions, and CSOs in a particular system or ecosystem. Engagements may be within or across industry sectors or development sectors or may occur among a complex set of value chains. Engagements may occur simultaneously in place-based national, subnational, and city- and community-level systems. Such interactions and systems are rarely static. Effective engagement is usually a dynamic and adaptive process. It involves collective efforts to identify and cultivate a shared vision for change, map and mobilize relevant stakeholders, and understand systemic obstacles to achieving change and specific pathways for addressing these obstacles, and then aligning interests, incentives, and accountability mechanisms in a manner that doesn't stifle widespread innovation and action by individual actors.[17]

The obstacles to engagement and change are often similar, regardless of the system, sector, or jurisdiction in question. A two-year consultative process led by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development to survey the views of corporate leaders, policymakers, and sustainability experts identified five broad types of constraints to achieving greater scale and systemic impact:[18]

- policy and regulatory gaps,
- differences in norms and values,
- lack of sufficient or accurate data and information flows,
- inadequate or misallocated capital and financial flows, and
- lack of incentives to support technology development and implementation.

16. Ibid. The titles of the pathways are as in the original report; the descriptions are paraphrased.

17. Nelson and Jenkins (2016).

18. WBCSD (2021).

The same obstacles to systemic change have been identified by other studies and through practitioner experience. Drawing on the extensive literature examining systems change and systems thinking, Kania, Kramer, and Senge have described six interdependent conditions of systems change, namely, policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models.[19] They comment that these "six interdependent conditions typically play significant roles in holding a social or environmental problem in place. . . . The interaction can be mutually reinforcing or it can be counteracting."[20] The conditions can also be affected by biases in the underlying models, such as race and gender biases, which means changemakers must be acutely attuned to the sorts of power dynamics that turn relationships in one direction or another.[21]

In short, system-level collective action aimed at accelerating and scaling up the transition to sustainable development requires participants to address more than one of these obstacles or conditions simultaneously. Participants, whether business leaders or other actors, need to understand the feedback loops between them and the related trade-offs, synergies, and cobenefits. They also need to understand the key stakeholder groups with the ability to influence the agenda, whether in a supportive or in an obstructive manner, and the roles of power dynamics, values, incentives, and vested interests.

None of this is easy, and new leadership skills and capabilities will be needed by both individuals and institutions. The type of linear, command-and-control leadership that has often characterized public and private sector leadership in the past is no longer fit for purpose. Effective collective action calls for what has been referred to as systems leadership on the part of participating individuals and institutions.[22]

## Prioritizing Collective Action for Key Systems, Sectors, and Actors

A key question that needs to be addressed is, what are the systems and pathways that are most important strategically for achieving the SDGs? Relatedly, who or what are the key industry sectors and companies that have the

19. Kania, Kramer, and Senge (2018).
20. Ibid
21. Ibid
22. In addition to Kania, Kramer and Senge (2018) and Nelson and Jenkins (2016), see also Dreier, Nabarro, and Nelson (2019).

greatest potential to drive change in these systems, alongside other institutional actors, such as governments (at different levels) and CSOs?

*An Emerging Focus on Key Systems and Transformation Pathways*

In the introduction to a special feature on sustainability transitions in consumption-production systems published in 2023 by the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the organizers note the following: "The ultimate stage on which the pursuit of sustainability is played out is now generally understood to be that of the globally intertwined, coevolving and extraordinarily complex nature-society system. On that stage, people seek to meet their needs for food, shelter, energy, health, etc. by tapping the earth's resources and human ingenuity in ways mediated by markets and other institutions, politics, and power."[23] The special feature focuses on innovations and developments in three production-consumption systems—electricity, mobility, and food—and on emerging cross-cutting themes, including interactions between different production-consumption systems.[24]

In 2021 the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) "embarked on a new strategy to develop and apply systems science to support transformations to sustainability."[25] Built on nearly half a century's worth of scientific research, the 2021–2030 strategy focuses on three core systems or domains, which the IIASA recognizes are often incompatible—production and consumption, biodiversity and ecosystem services, and equitable and resilient societies—as well as on four key drivers of sustainable development, namely, governance and institutions, technology and innovation, economy and society, and population and behavior.[26]

The emerging focus on systems approaches to support sustainable development is not the domain solely of the scientific and academic community. Several business-led or business accountability organizations are realigning their programs to focus on key systems or pathways as the most effective way to engage business in accelerating and scaling up the transition to sustainable development.

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), for example, has identified nine transformation pathways that its members

23. Geels, Kern, and Clark (2023).
24. Ibid.
25. IIASA (2020b).
26. IIASA (2020a).

consider to be "at the heart of what is needed to realize a world in which 9+ billion people live well, within planetary boundaries," and where business plays a central role in either supporting or undermining systemic change.[27] These pathways are energy; transportation and mobility; living spaces; products and materials; financial products and services; connectivity; health and well-being; water and sanitation; and food.[28] As the WBCSD recognizes, "While business can take a leading role, it must work on and design systems transformations, together with scientists, policy makers, financiers and investors, innovators and consumers. Only collaboration at unprecedented levels will create the impact and speed needed."[29] This points to the need for more ambitious models of collective action and alliances.

A systems approach has also been adopted by the World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA). Initiated in 2018 as a multistakeholder alliance, the WBA set out to benchmark the impact of major corporations on each of the 17 SDGs.[30] Following several years of consultation, the alliance shifted its focus from the 17 SDGs to seven systems transformations, stating, "The 2030 Agenda requires that we challenge our current thinking and no longer act in silos. We have learned over the course of global stakeholder consultations involving more than 10,000 people that we cannot assess progress issue by issue, SDG by SDG, given that all areas are interrelated."[31] Although not identical to the transformation pathways identified through the WBCSD's global consultative process, there is substantial overlap in the seven systems transformations that have been identified by the WBA, namely, social, decarbonization and energy, food and agriculture, nature and biodiversity, digital, urban, and financial.[32]

These examples reflect a growing body of both academic research and practitioner action and coalition building focused on identifying key stakeholders, drivers, and obstacles—research and experience that will be essential for determining progress in complex and often context-specific, but clearly defined systems.

27. WBCSD (2021). The author served on the External Review Committee for this report.
28. Ibid., 8.
29. WBCSD (2024.)
30. WBA (n.d.a).
31. WBA (2019).
32. WBA (n.d.b).

### *Identifying and Mobilizing Key Industry Sectors, Value Chains, and Companies*

It follows from the evolving focus on key systems and transformation pathways that certain industry sectors, value chains, and companies within these sectors will have a particularly important role to play in moving society toward more sustainable models of economic growth and development.

Although not a perfect match, there are obvious industry sectors that align directly with such systems as energy, food and agriculture, transportation and mobility, the urban and built environment, products and materials, financial products and services, digital and connectivity platforms, and health. Within these sectors, it is also possible to identify specific value chains and companies that have a high or disproportionate impact—for better or worse—on the achievement of key SDGs.

The WBA has developed the concept of "keystone companies." The alliance proposes that "the largest companies in a given industry can operate similarly to keystone species in ecological communities. That means that they can have a disproportionate effect on the structure and the system in which they operate."[33] This observation aligns with the "market power" upscaling pathway identified by Lambin and coauthors and discussed earlier in the chapter, which relies on leveraging the market power of a dominant private actor or of a small group of dominant private actors that are willing to work with civil society and government actors to drive change along their supply chains and arguably in the system more broadly.[34]

The WBA has identified, and continues to refresh on an annual basis, what it calls the SDG2000, a list of the two thousand companies "with the greatest potential to transform systems and influence outcomes on the SDGs."[35] Five principles for selection are used, reflecting a company's dominant position in global production revenues or volumes within a particular sector, its control of production and/or service provision, its ability to connect systems through its network of subsidiaries and supply chains, its influence on global governance processes and institutions, and its global footprint, particularly in developing countries.[36]

33. WBA (2021).
34. Lambin et al. (2020).
35. WBA (2021), 18.
36. Ibid.

The WBA has used this approach to develop a set of benchmarks to compare the sustainability performance and accountability of influential companies in the seven systems transformations that it has identified. For the decarbonization and energy system, for example, it is developing comparative benchmarks on performance and accountability for major companies in oil and gas, electric utilities, automotives, transport, buildings, heavy industries, and food and agriculture.[37]

The concept if not the terminology of "keystone companies" is being used by other sustainability-oriented corporate benchmarking and accountability initiatives. These initiatives are usually structured as multistakeholder nonprofit organizations, independent of the companies they assess and benchmark, that aim to research, influence, and incentivize the most influential companies in the most important sectors and systems.

Examples include the Access to Medicines Foundation, which benchmarks the most impactful value chains and companies in the health sector with the goal of driving both competition and stakeholder pressure for improving access to and affordability of essential medicines, vaccines, and health diagnostics services.[38] The Access to Nutrition Initiative takes a similar approach of researching, benchmarking, identifying lessons and good practices, and engaging stakeholders such as investors and policymakers to influence key companies in the food and beverage sector to improve access to more nutritious and affordable foods.[39] In their inaugural Corporate Climate Stocktake in 2023, the We Mean Business Coalition and its partners focused on "keystone companies" and sectors by assessing "300 of the world's largest emitters" and providing "a data-based analysis of eight key transition sectors: power, road transport, concrete and cement, steel, shipping, agriculture, aviation, and hydrogen."[40]

These multistakeholder coalitions are mostly examples of nonprofit platforms aimed at influencing and driving corporate behavior from the outside rather than being led and driven by keystone companies themselves. Yet the model of the most influential companies in the most important sectors taking the lead themselves on a voluntary basis is one with encouraging examples and untapped potential. Today, most industry

37. Urlings et al. (2023).

38. See the home page of the Access to Medicines Foundation at https://accesstomedicinefoundation.org/.

39. See the Access to Nutrition Initiative's mission statement at https://accesstonutrition.org/mission-vision-values/.

40. We Mean Business Coalition (2023).

sectors can point to examples of a core group of influential companies and business leaders jointly establishing precompetitive coalitions that aim to proactively and collectively address systemic obstacles to sustainable development on an industry-wide basis.

Examples of industry-led, market power–driven coalitions that aim to support more inclusive and sustainable development include the Responsible Business Alliance, which describes itself as "the world's largest industry coalition dedicated to responsible business conduct in global supply chains" and, together with its Responsible Minerals, Labor and Factory Initiatives, has "more than 500 members with combined annual revenues of greater than $7.7 trillion, directly employing over 21.5 million people, with products manufactured in more than 120 countries."[41] Other examples include CEO-led initiatives such as the Consumer Goods Forum, the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM), the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, the ICTI Ethical Toy Program, the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA), the Fashion Pact, and a variety of commodity- or value chain–specific alliances, to name a few.[42] The approach and efficacy of each coalition vary, so it is important to consider the determining factors for success.

## Emerging Practice and Insights from System-Level Alliances

Whether large-scale alliances are business-led and consist only of companies working collectively on a precompetitive basis or are structured as multisector or multistakeholder entities and networks characterized by business leader engagement alongside policymakers and civil society leaders, they share similar approaches to accelerating and amplifying change toward sustainable development. Key shared activities of such coalitions include the following:

- *Setting industry standards, goals, and commitments:* This type of activity may include establishing industry-wide norms and standards that all members either must adhere to or demonstrate

41. See the Responsible Business Alliance web page "About the RBA" at https://www.responsiblebusiness.org/about/rba/.

42. The author has served as an adviser to or has served on boards related to some of these industry alliances, including ICMM, EITI, and the ICTI Ethical Toy Program.

they are on a pathway to meeting; "setting ambitious shared goals or roadmaps for achieving specific social or environmental objectives (or the SDGs more broadly)"[43]; establishing a common mechanism for companies to report and benchmark their performance against these standards, goals, and roadmaps; and sharing lessons and good practices within the industry.

- *Accelerating or scaling up innovation and market development:* Activities in this category could include supporting precompetitive R&D consortia for essential technologies, products, or services that have the potential to meet social and environmental needs and creating or strengthening markets or value chains for essential technologies, products, or services. Companies can compete once the markets are created or strengthened, but often benefit from working together at the outset to make markets and market-based solutions commercially viable.
- *Undertaking joint policy advocacy and government engagement:* Activities of this kind undertaken jointly seek to influence the broader enabling environment for sustainable business.[44]

Increasingly, as outlined earlier in the chapter, the most effective coalitions aim to simultaneously address some combination of the above goals, recognizing that a holistic approach is needed to tackle root cause obstacles and drive system-level change and is preferable to working on individual obstacles on their own in isolation from each other. But approaches addressing multiple goals simultaneously are not easy to craft, and take sustained time and effort to implement and sustain. In a study of more than fifty corporate-led sustainability alliances, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) found that "approximately 30% were able to address root causes to deliver at-scale social and environmental benefits. The remaining 70% were either focused on mitigating negative societal and environmental impacts without addressing root causes or targeting root causes but not yet able to scale their initiatives. And of those alliances that have a real impact, half are more than 15 years old—demonstrating that it takes time for an alliance to become a truly effective vehicle for collective action."[45]

43. Samans and Nelson (2022).

44. These goals draw on previous work by the author, including Samans and Nelson (2022) and Nelson (2010, 2013, 2017).

45. Young, Beck, and von Szczepanski (2022).

Despite the challenges of establishing and sustaining large-scale collective action and alliances, there is untapped potential for these alliances to be mobilized in supporting sustainable development. Two broad types of collective-action alliance with strong potential are those focused on driving sectorwide transformation within key industry sectors or production-consumption systems such as energy, food, mobility, or the built environment and those focused on driving place-based systems change at national, subnational, or city (or smaller) levels. Each type is discussed next.

### *Alliances to Drive Sectorwide Transformation*

Precompetitive, industry-led or sector-specific alliances that seek to integrate setting standards, goals, and commitments, accelerating or scaling innovation and market development, and engaging with governments on policy issues warrant increased attention and support. The BCG analysis found that the vast majority of the industry sector coalitions BCG surveyed, 82 percent, were focused on enabling sustainable operations through setting industry standards. Fewer than 50 percent were primarily concerned with shaping the context for sustainability by influencing regulations and shaping customer preferences, and fewer than 15 percent sought to drive innovation through spurring joint R&D and catalyzing funding for innovation.[46] There is thus room for further progress, especially with respect to driving innovation, attracting private sector funding, and creating markets to meet the SDGs.

Two recently established alliances that aim to achieve sectorwide transformation through multifocus pathways are the First Movers Coalition and the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero, both of which were created as large-scale, public-private collective action platforms as part of the process leading to the COP26 climate conference in Glasgow in 2021. While both are relatively new and face operational and strategic challenges, they offer interesting models to observe, learn from, and potentially emulate and adapt going forward.

**FIRST MOVERS COALITION (FMC).** The FMC was created as a joint effort by the U.S. government, under the auspices of the special presidential envoy for climate, and the World Economic Forum. Its participants have the

46. Ibid., 4.

shared objective of scaling up technological innovation and decarbonization in the following hard-to-abate industry sectors: aviation, shipping, trucking, aluminum, cement and concrete, steel, and carbon dioxide removal. As outlined by the Forum, "One of the challenges in decarbonizing these sectors is that around 50% of the reductions needed to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 need to come from technologies not yet commercially available at scale. . . . FMC is designed to build early demand for decarbonized solutions through purchasing commitments made by members, to help accelerate the adoption of breakthrough near-zero emissions technologies and reach commercial scale by 2030."[47]

Three years after its establishment, the FMC has more than ninety members from top global corporations that have made purchasing commitments. Those commitments are sending a demand signal for near-zero emission products and services amounting to some $16 billion in aggregate demand by 2030 and an estimated 31 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in annual removals.[48] At the same time, in addition to companies making purchase commitments, the Forum has recognized the importance of undertaking parallel efforts to mobilize concessional capital, blended public-private finance, and derisking mechanisms to unlock commercial private capital for further expanding these markets. It has also developed a government engagement strategy to advocate for supportive policies, incentives, standards, and mandates.

In short, the FMC is taking a holistic and multidimensional approach to overcome both governance gaps and market failures. It aims to enable its corporate members to "become part of a wide ecosystem of partners advancing the supply, financing, and deployment of innovative emerging climate technologies via bankable projects and offtake agreements, supported by access to financing solutions, development of critical infrastructure and government support."[49]

Building on the early lessons of the industry-focused FMC, in December 2023 at COP28 the Forum launched a First Movers Coalition for Food, supported by the government of the UAE and an initial twenty companies.[50] The First Movers Coalition is expected to take a similar

47. WEF (2024b).
48. Ibid. See also WEF (2024a).
49. WEF (2024a, 2024b).
50. WEF (2023).

approach with companies and other actors in the value chains of the commodities beef cattle, dairy, rice, row crops, soy, and palm oil, which are estimated to account for up to 70 percent of the global agrifood systems' greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, in addition to having a major impact on freshwater use, nature, human rights, and livelihoods.[51] At its launch, the partners set a shared goal of creating "a combined procurement commitment with an estimated value of $10–$20 billion by 2030."[52]

**GLASGOW FINANCIAL ALLIANCE FOR NET ZERO (GFANZ).** GFANZ is another system-level collective action platform with the goal of "coordinat[ing] efforts across all sectors of the financial system to accelerate the transition to a net-zero global economy."[53] Established in April 2021 by UN Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance Mark Carney and the COP26 presidency, in partnership with the UNFCCC Race to Zero campaign, GFANZ is today the world's largest coalition of financial institutions publicly committed to support this transition. As of mid-2024, it was composed of more than 700 financial institutions in more than fifty countries and eight sector-specific alliances bringing together asset owners, asset managers, banks, financial service providers, investment consultants, venture capital firms, and export credit agencies.[54]

Like similar system-level coalitions, GFANZ has a multilevel and multidimensional approach to influencing company performance and sector transformation. From the outset, it has aimed to expand the number of financial institutions that have made public, measurable commitments to help fund the energy transition through their own operations. At the same time, it is coordinating these institutions to collectively address sectorwide challenges associated with the net zero transition. In addition to supporting participating companies and sector initiatives to develop credible net zero pathways and action plans, the alliance is engaged in joint efforts to mobilize climate finance for emerging markets and developing countries and to develop credible voluntary carbon markets. It also aims to influence governments on defined public policy reforms, working at the level of global governance as well as through national and regional chapters.

51. Ibid.
52. Ibid. See also WEF (2024c).
53. See the GFANZ web page "About Us" at https://www.gfanzero.com/about/.
54. Ibid.

GFANZ's efforts have not been without challenges or critics from both ends of the political spectrum. The more common criticisms are that the targets set for member financial institutions are either too ambitious or not ambitious enough and that the methods being used to track progress are either too demanding or too opaque and easy to manipulate.[55] Politics weighs in as well: participating financial institutions may face threats of litigation because they continue to fund fossil fuel expansion while the very same institutions risk being sued in certain U.S. states and jurisdictions for publicly committing to meet ambitious climate targets in the first place. Merely participating in the collaborative format may draw threats of antitrust action. These factors have influenced the withdrawal of major insurance companies from the Net-Zero Insurance Alliance and increased the pressure on other financial institutions to withdraw.

The range of challenges and the types of criticisms that GFANZ faces illustrate the enormous complexity of trying to undertake collective action to advance systems change and the multiple layers and interdependencies of economic, political, cultural, methodological, and technical factors that need to be understood and navigated. While not a reason to retreat from collective action—indeed, collective action is one of the most important approaches available for driving and sustaining sectorwide transformation—it is important to be realistic about the time and effort needed to achieve this transformation.

Alliances focused on supporting sustainable development in essential systems and sectors offer one high-potential avenue for change. Another pathway to broaden and amplify business engagement in sustainable development goes through place-based alliances, which may be aligned with one or more essential sectors but organize around a specific jurisdiction or spatial area as the core structure.

### *Alliances to Drive Place-Based Transformation*

Place-based transformation can happen at any jurisdictional or spatial level, from the local community level to towns and cities, subnational regions, industrial clusters, corridors, landscapes, and states up to the federal level within countries. They can also occur across national borders on a regional level. There is an opportunity to convene key stakeholders and

55. Pellegrino (2023); see also Reclaim Finance (n.d.).

decision-makers, including businesses, at any one of these levels for the purpose of agreeing on a shared vision and the goals, pathways, and resources needed to influence progress on one or more of the SDGs or in the complex production-consumption systems outlined earlier in the chapter.

Engaging the private sector more strategically in well-structured and ideally multiyear country-level platforms and city-level coalitions offers two interesting pathways for accelerating and scaling up place-based solutions to sustainable development.

**COUNTRY-LEVEL PLATFORMS**. Country-level platforms bring together key groups of stakeholders, including decision-makers and funding entities, in government, business, civil society, and sometimes the donor community around a shared national or subnational agenda, which may be issue- or sector-specific or focused on supporting a broader sustainable development agenda.

The 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement both call for state-led processes to establish national action plans and review progress. As part of the 2030 Agenda, UN member states are encouraged to conduct voluntary national reviews (VNRs), described as "regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven."[56] The Paris Agreement similarly requires governments to establish "climate action plans to cut emissions and adapt to climate impacts"[57] and to update these plans every five years in the form of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).[58] As of late 2024, the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development reported that 406 VNRs had been presented, with many countries having presented multiple reviews.[59] Meanwhile, the UN's 2023 NDC Synthesis Report indicates that 168 NDCs had so far been published, representing 195 parties to the Paris Agreement.[60]

The process of developing and implementing a national sustainable development strategy or climate action plan, including the development of

56. Voluntary national reviews are described in United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development [2024a].

57. See the 2022 one-page summary on Goal 13 at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/goal-13/.

58. See the United Nations Climate Action web page, "All About the NDCs," at https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/all-about-ndcs.

59. United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development [2024a].

60. United Nations Climate Action (2023).

VNRs and NDCs, offers a convening mechanism for governments to engage with national companies of all sizes and sectors alongside other nonstate actors. There is currently no comprehensive review available of the different types of convening mechanisms and no analysis of the nature, scope, or scale of business sector engagement in the countries where such mechanisms exist. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when private sector engagement does happen, it tends to be in the form of one-off or irregular consultations rather than more structured strategic and multiyear advisory councils, national pacts, or resource mobilization platforms.

Evolving models exist that are worth reviewing in more detail to assess their effectiveness and applicability to other countries. One example is Sustainable Iceland, a cooperation platform established by the Iceland prime minister's office in December 2022.[61] Supported by a Sustainability Council, chaired by the prime minister, and consisting of "other ministers in the government, and representatives from the business sector, trade unions, local authorities, the Icelandic parliament, civil society and NGOs," the platform's tasks include formulating the country's sustainable development strategy, identifying goals and indicators, and engaging in consultation and coordination, among other activities.[62]

Kenya's SDG Partnership Platform offers another country-level example. Established with support from the UN in 2017, this country-level alliance "convenes and connects leadership from Government, development partners, private sector, philanthropy, civil society, and academia to create 'SDG Accelerator Windows;' to catalyze SDG partnerships, financing and innovations in alignment with Government development priorities."[63] The private sector is officially represented by the Kenya Private Sector Alliance and a core group of leading Kenyan and multinational companies. Participants jointly prioritize initiatives within the government's Big Four Agenda, which is focused on manufacturing, food and nutrition security, universal health, and affordable housing.[64]

In some countries, national business associations have taken a systematic and multiyear approach to mobilizing their members to support the SDGs

61. See the Government of Iceland's web page "Sustainable Iceland" at https://www.government.is/topics/sustainable-iceland/.

62. Ibid.

63. SDG Partnership Platform (2023).

64. Republic of Kenya State Department for Planning (2022).

and to engage strategically with their government. One example is Japan's Keidanren, with its membership comprised of more than 1,500 representative companies, 106 nationwide industrial associations, and the regional economic organizations for all 47 prefectures. In 2015, Keidanren created its Society 5.0 for the SDGs platform, which offers a useful model for business engagement on the SDGs at a country level.[65] Chile's ACCIÓN Empresas is another example; it has worked with other Chilean business groups and the government to produce the first national Voluntary Business Report for Sustainable Development as part of the country's VNR.[66]

More analysis is needed of the different models of country-level platforms that aim to drive sustainable development at a national level or in specific sectors within a country. Whether these platforms are led by government and structured to systematically include business or are led by business associations and focused on influencing or supporting government priorities, they have the potential to broaden and amplify impact, but their effectiveness and the challenges they face need to be better understood. Research by Engberg and Linn points to some of the factors that enable country platforms to be effective in pursuing a scaling agenda for achieving the SDGs, ranging from whether they have a longer-term vision of outcome goals to their scope, organizational structures, resourcing mechanisms, and governance models.[67]

**CITY-LEVEL COALITIONS**. The subnational alliance is another place-based format that offers significant potential for mobilizing companies and business associations to work with municipal or state governments and other stakeholders in expanding joint efforts on sustainable development.

Since the Local Agenda 21 model was implemented after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, city-level coalitions have continued to evolve as effective multistakeholder platforms for working toward systemic change. Coalitions such as the Resilient Cities Network, the C40 Cities consortium, and the long-standing ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability network all offer interesting models for mobilizing public and private resources around a shared agenda for sustainable development.

65. See the home page of Keidanren SDGs at https://en.keidanrensdgs.com/homeen. See also Inoue (2019).

66. WBCSD (2023). See also Gobierno de Chile (2023).

67. Engberg and Linn (2023). See also the Global Community of Practice on Scaling Development Outcomes website at https://scalingcommunityofpractice.com/.

Within municipalities, industrial clusters or business parks where companies from different industries and value chains are colocated offer another convening mechanism to facilitate implementation of sustainability initiatives such as circular economy models, carbon capture and storage hubs, and shared training and workforce development programs. As the World Economic Forum notes, these clusters "provide opportunities for scale, sharing of risk and resources, and aggregation and optimization of demand," yet "often, industrial clusters' impact is limited due to the lack of cooperation and common vision from co-located companies and governments."[68] They can also be an effective platform for engaging and building the sustainability capacity and impact of SMEs.

In recent years, a growing number of cities have started to produce voluntary local reviews.[69] Like the national reviews, these local reviews show that the private sector is not always engaged in a structured or strategic manner. More analysis of business engagement models at the city level or in voluntary industrial clusters and business parks could help identify good practices and opportunities for replication.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

As the examples in this chapter illustrate, large-scale business-led or multistakeholder alliances have untapped potential to drive system-level sustainability transitions. Building and sustaining these alliances is a complex and challenging process. Success is far from assured as they face both operational and strategic challenges.

Operationally, large-scale alliances have high transaction costs and require a substantial commitment of resources by participating companies and other partners, both financial and in the time and skills commitment of key decision-makers. Even when major commitments of time, talent, and funds are made at the outset, it can be difficult to sustain this level of commitment over the years to decades needed to drive systems transformation. Changes in leadership in a company, government entity, financial institution, or foundation often result in the prioritizing of new projects rather than a recommitment to the alliances championed by a predecessor.

68. WEF (2024d).
69. UN-Habitat (2024).

Strategically, precompetitive industry alliances may face antitrust litigation. This has been a particular challenge in recent years for corporate-led climate and ESG coalitions, especially in the United States. As Gasparini and coauthors comment, "Alliances and their members must always remember that no matter how good their intentions are, certain actions can expose them to antitrust enforcement threats or sanctions. Although rules vary by jurisdiction and are constantly changing, politicians opposed to decarbonization can allege antitrust behavior or violations of fiduciary duty, and their allies can engineer outright boycotts."[70]

Measuring and attributing impact is also difficult in complex, large-scale, multidimensional and multistakeholder alliances. Difficult, but not impossible. In their edited volume, *Partnerships for Sustainability in Contemporary Global Governance*, Andonova, Faul, and Piselli propose a theoretical framework that "specifies distinct pathways to partnership effectiveness. These include (i) the attainment of a partnership's self-declared goals; (ii) the creation of value for partners; (iii) productive collaboration inside a partnership; (iv) the impacts of a partnership on affected populations; (v) its influence on collaboration and institutions outside a partnership."[71]

Despite the challenges of building and sustaining business-led or multistakeholder alliances, these alliances offer a valuable and to date inadequately deployed mechanism for increasing impact and driving systemic change in sustainable development. This type of framework warrants further analysis, experimentation, and engagement on the part of business leaders and policymakers. In this regard, the following three recommendations are worth considering in developing a post-2030 agenda.

### *Take a Systems Approach Focused on Key Sectors and Corporations*

A post-2030 global policy goal framework could take more of a systems approach to identifying the sectors, pathways, and actors, including corporate actors, that will be most influential in scaling up solutions to sustainable development.

As outlined in this chapter, complex production-consumption systems are at the core of meeting many essential human needs. This includes expanding access to affordable, adequate, and safe food, energy, health

70. Gasparini et al. (2024).
71. Andonova, Faul, and Piselli (2022).

care, housing, mobility, financial services, and digital connectivity—as well as being central to job creation and improving livelihoods. The same systems, however, are also the largest sources of GHG emissions, water use, and impacts on nature. In many cases they are the causes of human rights abuses, unsafe and insecure working conditions, and inequality.

For better or worse, private sector actors play an essential role in most of these systems, and business leaders in most industry sectors increasingly recognize the need to participate in efforts to make these systems more inclusive and sustainable. Large-scale collective actions and alliances offer important mechanisms for doing so.

As outlined earlier in the chapter, a relatively small number of corporations—two thousand or so—have a disproportionate influence in supporting or undermining sustainable development. They should be a core focus for engagement by policymakers and civil society actors in the future, in terms of establishing and spreading norms and standards, mobilizing resources to support increased investment and innovation, and improving corporate accountability. At the same time, it will be important not to ignore the contribution of millions of smaller enterprises and not to miss opportunities to enhance their engagement.

### *Focus on National or Subnational, Place-Based Coalitions to Engage Business in Sustainable Development Strategies*

National and subnational governments could be more systematic in engaging business associations, sector-based trade and industry groups, SMEs, and corporate sustainability or responsibility coalitions to jointly define priorities and pathways for delivering on the SDGs and climate commitments.

The creation of multiyear sustainability advisory councils, national pacts, or resource mobilization platforms that explicitly include private sector leaders on a sustained basis could facilitate the implementation of norms and standards, establish mutually agreed-on goals and commitments, identify different sources and types of funding, and clarify relative roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities.

Nationwide sectoral alliances, city-level coalitions, and industrial clusters offer high potential for testing and supporting the broad application of innovative technologies, products, services, business models, and financing mechanisms; for influencing policy reforms; and for creating market demand to support sustainable development.

### *Mandate Industry- and Corporate-Level Reporting and Accountability Mechanisms*

Increased corporate accountability and transparency are essential to assessing impact, understanding risks, and building trust between companies and other stakeholders.

The evolution of mandatory—and double materiality—sustainability reporting requirements for individual companies has high potential to propel more responsible business practices and greater corporate impact for sustainable development. At the same time, there is the potential to explore collective reporting and accountability mechanisms through national business associations or sector-based trade and industry groups. Governments could encourage or require such business organizations to provide an annual or biennial report on the contribution their members are making collectively to supporting priority sustainability goals. Such a process not only could serve to enhance stakeholder understanding of the role that key industries or groups of companies are playing in supporting or undermining sustainable development, it could also provide a mechanism for shared learning, competitive benchmarking, and greater collaboration.

In summary, precompetitive collective action by companies in key systems, sectors, and jurisdictions, as well as multisector or multistakeholder alliances, offers tremendous potential for increasing the scale and impact of the business contribution to sustainable development. Such actions and alliances warrant greater analysis, attention, and investment on the part of leaders in both the public and the private sector.

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