

Policy Brief No. 3: The private sector in international development

Consulting the experts

This policy brief is based on the research project **An unusual suspect: the private sector in knowledge brokering in international development** (the *Unusual Suspects* project) unusualsuspect.org/

One of the key challenges facing the field of international development is knowledge brokering between the domains of practice, policy and research. Knowledge sharing and collaboration across sectors and organisations is argued to be a critical step towards the achievement of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Within this framework of the SDGs, the private sector is receiving increasing attention and is seen as key actor in pursuing sustainable development.

Ample literature is available on knowledge brokering practices as well as on collaborations with the private sector. While knowledge brokering is recognised as one of the potential roles of the private sector, little research has focused on this activity within the field of international development. Only few and tentative findings are available in the literature. The *Unusual Suspects* project has tested these findings by consulting experts in knowledge brokering. While the findings were largely validated, the study also generated new insights with policy implications for more effective private sector involvement for sustainable development.

Testing the literature findings

Against a background of increased recognition of the private sector as important partner in knowledge brokering for development, the *Unusual Suspects* research team aims to contribute to an emerging body of knowledge by consulting experts. Starting point for this endeavour were the findings from a literature review conducted in an earlier stage of the *Unusual Suspects* project.

What the literature says

The literature review revealed a number of interesting findings. First, it draws attention to the great **diversity and complexity of the private sector**. This makes it difficult to characterise the private sector and to develop a blue-print for efficient collaboration. Second, the literature shows that the private sector **invests strategically in channels and experts for knowledge brokering**, rather than engaging in activities in an ad hoc manner. Third, **personal relationships and trust** are identified as important basis for successful knowledge brokering. Finally, the literature points to a number of intrinsic and extrinsic **challenges that constrain private sector knowledge brokering**.

When development colleagues ask “Have you involved the private sector?” the answer should be “Which private sector did you have in mind? And how do you think they will contribute to the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development?”

~ S.Cummings and colleagues, 2019

Knowledge brokering roles of the private sector

While the knowledge brokering role of the private sector in the field of international development has been largely ignored, the dynamics of knowledge brokering processes in other fields and by other actors have been studied extensively. These broader insights were employed to formulate survey questions for knowledge brokering experts.

Six main knowledge brokering roles have been identified, based on a synthesis of five different frameworks by Glegg and Hoens (2016), combined with additional insights by Kiwanuka et al. (Under submission). The key knowledge brokering roles are: **knowledge manager; linking agent; capacity builder; facilitator; evaluator; lobby/advocacy.**

Science for Using Research (SURE)

The [Unusual Suspects](http://unusualsuspect.org/) project is one of the research projects of the [NWO-WOTRO SURE research programme](http://www.nwo-wotro.nl/sure), aiming to strengthen the scientific and evidence base for knowledge brokering activities in research programmes for international development. SURE focuses on knowledge brokering performed by the five Dutch knowledge platforms:

- [Security and the Rule of Law](#)
- [Food and Business Knowledge Platform](#)
- [Water for Development](#)
- [Share-Net International](#)
- [INCLUDE](#)

One of the key aims of the *Unusual Suspects* project is to provide advice for policy makers and research funders on how to develop a policy framework which facilitates knowledge brokering activities with the private sector, tailored to the NWO-WOTRO and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while also relevant to others. Project researchers comprise Barbara Regeer and Sarah Cummings of the Athena Institute, VU University Amsterdam, and Suzanne Kiwanuka of Makerere University, Uganda.

Consulting the experts

Informed by the findings of the literature review, an online questionnaire survey was developed to examine the role of the private sector in knowledge brokering. Some 203 experts completed the survey. Respondents came from all over the world (48% Europe, 14% North America, 13% Africa and 12% Asia) and were working in a great variety of organizational contexts, including the public sector, civil society as well as the private sector (41%). The respondents confirmed to be undertaking the whole range of knowledge brokering activities and largely agreed that the private sector should be involved in this endeavour. That said, some important challenges were found to prevent easy collaboration with the private sector, leading to a number of helpful recommendations for policy.

Time and facilitation (for example during workshops) can enable and strengthen collaboration to generate trust and improve knowledge brokering. A third party, for example a development partner, can initiate opportunities for people to meet and engage.

~ Development consultant from Oceania

Obstacles and needs for better collaboration

Barriers to working with the private sector

When asked to identify the main barriers to collaboration, representatives of the public and private sector pointed to similar obstacles. The five main barriers that were identified were: **conflicting interests, lack of trust, lack of integrity, conflicting priorities and conflicting timelines**. However, there were two differences: public sector actors were most concerned about conflicts of interests, while the private sector was more worried about conflicting timelines. Interestingly, all respondents placed an emphasis on *intrinsic* barriers to working with the private sector, while key catalysts were mostly *extrinsic*. Another obstacle respondents identified was the **risks involved in intersectoral collaboration**.

Catalysts for working with the private sector

Factors that contribute to collaboration and knowledge exchange between the private and public sector in international development are also varied. Respondents placed most emphasis on *extrinsic* catalysts notably: **personal relationships; opportunities to meet; brokerage of contact by third parties; policies and finance to support cooperation**. Additionally, a **recognition of similar interests** was seen as a key *intrinsic* catalyst. The fact that so much emphasis is placed on extrinsic catalysts that contribute to working with the private sector suggests that policymakers can actively facilitate such collaborations.

Key Messages for policy makers

- Experts in knowledge brokering point to various catalysts that promote effective collaboration with the private sector. Policy makers can facilitate such cooperation by creating **funding instruments for cross-sectoral partnerships and physical spaces for the different sectors to meet and exchange knowledge**.
- New approaches should be informed by the **enormous diversity of the private sector** with some private actors better placed to contribute to development than others.
- Thus far, research has focused on successful knowledge brokering with the private sector. This means little is known about collaborations that failed and were undermined by perceived risks. **Investing in research in this area can help anticipate and ameliorate risks** in the future.
- One of the novel findings was that criticism was not only directed to private actors but also to the public sector. **Public sector actors are often ill-prepared to interact constructively and collaborate with the private sector**. More investigation is needed if the potential for collaboration is to be improved.
- Follow news on the role of the private sector in international development on [Capacity4Dev](#)

Sources

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