

## Commentary

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# Philanthropy, the 2030 Agenda and UN Diplomacy

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**Abstract:** An increasing number of philanthropic organizations (inter alias, POs) are contributing to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs and are involved with the multi-stakeholder process at the UN and other international Organisations. POs' interest in participating in the SDG process has over the years increased due to the multiple crises that the world has to face caused by pandemics, war, food insecurity, poverty, and climate change. The interventions of POs are in general greatly appreciated but also questioned by some Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) who have some reservations about the intentions of POs. Within the family of UN agencies, several International Organizations (IOs) welcome POs and provide mechanisms of engagement (UN, UNDESA, UNDP, WHO). Some POs are taking part in the implementation of the SDGs and the related UN processes and are creating intermediary actors or organizations and platforms for greater scale and impact. Some POs are interested in creating a joint representation at the UN in the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). This new development is the subject matter of this short commentary.

**Keywords:** POs and SDGs; POs and the United Nations HLPF; multi-stakeholder interactions in the UN; PO diplomacy; POs relations with states and non-state actors

## 1 The SDGs at the Cross-road of Multiple Crises

The most recent press release of the United Nations<sup>1</sup> makes a very somber summary of the many crises the world is facing including severe and mutually reinforcing shocks – the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and resulting

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1 <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2023/01/confluence-of-multiple-crises-unleashes-one-of-the-lowest-global-economic-outputs-in-recent-decades-according-to-un-flagship-report/>.

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food and energy crises, surging inflation, debt tightening, as well as the climate emergency and civil unrest and to this needs to be added the war between Israel and Hamas.

The UN Secretary General António Guterres was quoted saying “This is not the time for short-term thinking or knee-jerk fiscal austerity that exacerbates inequality, increases suffering and could put the SDGs farther out of reach. These unprecedented times demand unprecedented action.” He went on to say “This action includes a transformative SDG stimulus package, generated through the collective and concerted efforts of all stakeholders,” he added.

The world is facing very risky situations in the near future. The Press Release of the UN Secretary General António Guterres on DATE closed with a call for urgent action stating:

Strategic public investments in education, health, digital infrastructure, new technologies and climate change mitigation and adaptation can offer large social returns, accelerate productivity growth, and strengthen resilience to economic, social and environmental shocks. Additional SDG financing needs in developing countries vary by source, but are estimated to amount to a few trillion dollars per year. Stronger international commitment is urgently needed to expand access to emergency financial assistance; to restructure and reduce debt burdens across developing countries; and scale up SDG financing.

Innovative financing or resource mobilization and reducing of debt burden to enable SDG implementation in the highly indebted developing countries are key avenues to regain the momentum for the global sustainability agenda and commitment to all with a life of dignity. UN agencies seeking involvement of POs for SDG implementation and for general participation in the UN system.

Implementing the 2030 Agenda through its 17 development goals requires adequate finances, technical knowledge, robust institutional infrastructure and political will to bring this broad and very much needed endeavor to a successful end by the year 2030. A good number of POs can make important contributions to put the SDGs back on track.

To review and discuss ways to strengthen partnerships with philanthropic organizations to accelerate SDG implementation, the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) at the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) together with the United Nations Office for Partnerships (UNOP) organized a special side event in July 2019 during the annual High Level Political Forum (HLPF) held under the auspices of ECOSOC (UN Economic and Social Commission). The two UN agencies prepared and conducted the side event in collaboration with several major PO Organizations namely the SDG Philanthropy Platform, the European Foundation

Center, Synergos<sup>2</sup> and the United Nations Foundation under the auspices of ECOSOC.<sup>3</sup> More of such collaborative activities were planned between the UN Agencies and POs but the onslaught of the COVID-19 Pandemic stopped further collaboration and put continued active engagement into an unknown future.

UNDP started already in 2016 with a partnership project to deepen collaboration between the United Nations (UN), the philanthropic sector and governments. It first produced a study titled “Converging Interests: Philanthropy-government collaboration to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals” (2016) stating that contributions from philanthropy can accelerate the achievement of the SDGs because the sector has much to contribute in terms of providing funding, technical expertise and innovation but that effective collaboration and engagement from philanthropy requires an enabling environment with incentives for foundations to invest more fully in the SDG framework.<sup>4</sup>

On a more concrete note, UNDP suggested that Philanthropic Organisations should go beyond only financing SDG projects and instead be also involved in the UN SDG process. UNDP offers a roadmap which enables representative of the philanthropic sector to participate along with other stakeholders, in national multi-stakeholder bodies (or “councils”) for SDG implementation the intention being to find ways to integrate POs into the multi-stakeholder SDG process by shifting from single issue solutions to integrated solutions, in order to bring about a systemic change by scaling up at the national and subnational levels.

Taking it a further step, UNDP is now partnering with WINGS, an association of Philanthropic Organisations including Rockefeller Foundation, Evergreens Foundation, Fondation de France, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, Aga Khan Foundation also consulting companies such as Dalberg and government entities like the French Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs and the European Union<sup>5</sup> to help POs entry points for philanthropic contributions to the SDGs.

The cooperation between UNDP and WINGS resulted in the creation of the SDG Philanthropy Platform (SDGPP 2.0) which revitalizes efforts to catalyze and unlock philanthropy’s potential through multi-stakeholder partnerships supporting all forms of philanthropy, social innovations, and financial tools.<sup>6</sup>

Some major foundations have also communicated their commitments to support the SDGs. For instance, the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisers formally launched its

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2 Synergos is a global organization that builds trust and collaboration to solve complex problems. <https://www.synergos.org/>.

3 Philanthropy and the SDGs, Partnerships for Transformation: Philanthropy and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a Special Event at the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) under the auspices of ECOSOC (draft), 24 April 2019.

4 [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/id/HPLF\\_Phylantrophie\\_July.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/id/HPLF_Phylantrophie_July.pdf).

5 <https://wingsweb.org/en/about-board-members>.

6 <https://www.sdgphilanthropy.org/home>.

engagement in the SDG process with their publication “Philanthropy and the SDGs – Getting Started” (2019)<sup>7</sup> and subsequently “Philanthropy and the SDGs: Practical Tools for Alignment” (2022).<sup>8</sup>

One of the multilateral agreements on sustainable development is the Addis Ababa Action Agenda which was concluded in the same year as the 2030 Agenda in 2015. Point 42 of the AAAA agreement directly addresses the POs. It states:

We welcome the rapid growth of philanthropic giving and the significant financial and non-financial contribution philanthropists have made towards achieving our common goals. We recognize philanthropic donors' flexibility and capacity for innovation and taking risks, and their ability to leverage additional funds through multi-stakeholder partnerships. We encourage others to join those who already contribute. We welcome efforts to increase cooperation between philanthropic actors, Governments and other development stakeholders. We call for increased transparency and accountability in philanthropy. We encourage philanthropic donors to give due consideration to local circumstances and align with national policies and priorities. We also encourage philanthropic donors to consider managing their endowments through impact investment, which considers both profit and non-financial impacts in its investment criteria. (AAAA, Clause 42, page 21, *Italic added*)

The advice given to POs in Clause 42 of the AAAA in regard to their participation in the SDGs process is very helpful and explicit. The AAAA agreement is an excellent example of how POs could best coordinate and integrated their much-appreciated investment in the SDGs in different parts of the world.

In view of the bleak picture of the world due to concurrent multiple crises, philanthropic organizations are asked to intensify their participation in the SDGs implementation through strengthening the SDG Ecosystem by the G20 last year<sup>9</sup> Philanthropic Organisations are directly requested to provide support in favor of the poor and debt-ridden developing and least developed countries. It's a crucial moment and a great opportunity for the POs to become more openly a partners in helping the world overcome multiple crises.

## 2 POs Seeking an Advocacy Role in the United Nations and UN Agencies

Philanthropic organizations are playing an increasingly prominent role in supporting the international sustainable development agenda since the founding of UN

<sup>7</sup> <https://cof.org/content/philanthropy-and-sdgs-getting-started>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://cof.org/content/philanthropy-and-sdgs-practical-tools-alignment>.

<sup>9</sup> Source: [https://www.g20-insights.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/TF9\\_Intensifying-philanthropic-participation-in-SDGs-through-strengthening-the-ecosystem.pdf](https://www.g20-insights.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/TF9_Intensifying-philanthropic-participation-in-SDGs-through-strengthening-the-ecosystem.pdf).

Foundation in 1998.<sup>10</sup> Many POs are early embracers who have started aligning their planning and grant strategies to the SDGs. According to the Foundation Center, the total foundation SDG Funding worldwide in 2016 has reached over USD \$112 billion.<sup>11</sup>

von Schnurbein (2020) also points out that before the 2030 Agenda started in 2015, a total of 6203 partnerships were registered on the UN Partnership Platform and from 2015 to 2018, a total of 7924 partnerships were registered showing an encouraging increase of partnership aligned with the targets of SDG 17. POs could for instance contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in many ways.<sup>12</sup> As advocates, they could support awareness raising through the integration of SDGs into their programming efforts and through thought leadership of collective platforms; as impact drivers, they can catalyze change and generate impact through big bets, collective action, cross-SDG partnerships; and as innovators, they exhibit a great willingness to test new ideas, adopt innovative approaches, forge new coalitions<sup>13,14</sup> and help de-risk investments.

There is a significant potential to further scale up philanthropic engagement in SDG implementation once proven efficient and effective. Involvement of POs in SDG implementation would be very timely and beneficial, especially for indebted developing countries. POs with expertise in the financial sector could help highly indebted DCs and LDCs find solutions for financing their need for sustainable development. As pointed out by the OECD (2023), the current state of indebtedness of DCs and LDCs requires collective, cohesive effort by all actors along the sustainable investment chain. POs could play a very helpful role not only as providers of financial resources but also as financial advisers creating integrated policies and tools that could shift financial funds to where needs are greatest.

But given the complex nature of the 17 SDGs, POs need to develop knowledge and skills that address the systemic nature of UN-led interventions. This is very different from organizing a punctual, vertical project as is still most of the time the case with today's POs whose approach is often very private (Nam et al. 2013) and single case-oriented (Tudor et al. 2024, p. 190), PO driven and characterized by private and confidential forms of interactions. Particular attention needs to be given to the acquisition of diplomatic skills to be effective in an operating environment with uncertain initial conditions where multiple forces (external and internal) often vie

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**10** Source: <https://unfoundation.org/who-we-are/our-mission/>.

**11** Source: <http://sdgfinders.org/sdgs/>.

**12** Acknowledged by Member States in paragraphs 41 and 45 of the 2030 Agenda, as well as paragraph 42 of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda.

**13** Source: <https://oecd-development-matters.org/2016/11/02/the-three-circles-of-philanthropy-taking-a-tiered-approach-to-achieving-the-sdgs>.

**14** Source: [https://www.oecd.org/site/netfwd/Philanthropy\\_Letter\\_winter2017.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/site/netfwd/Philanthropy_Letter_winter2017.pdf).

for influence in a porous decision-making process. Leadership in this context is not hierarchical but rather dynamic and evolving.

The following challenges of participating in SDG implementation in a multi-stakeholder and multi-party context of the UN system need to be taken into account by POs before they venture into SDG implementation and related partnership activities.

## **2.1 Capacity Building by POs for SDG Implementation: Need to Build Alliances with Other POs, NGOs, and CSOs Not Only with Governments and Private Sector Companies**

The 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs was a very ambitious and inclusive undertaking. The negotiation process from 2013 to 2015 involved the member governments and non-state actors such as enterprises and civil society actors from all parts of the world who engaged in parallel negotiations within the Open Working Group (OWG) process (Saner-Yiu and Saner 2014).

The final agreement signed in 2015 consists of 17 goals, 169 targets and 248 indicators.<sup>15</sup> To monitor the progress, the SDG community of actors agreed to meet every year till 2030 for countries to share with the other countries and constituencies how far they have been able to implement the SDGs in their country and to hear from them their experiences in overcoming some of the barriers and challenges. Comparable meetings about the SDGs are held at regional level first, then they culminate in the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) which is held every July in New York.

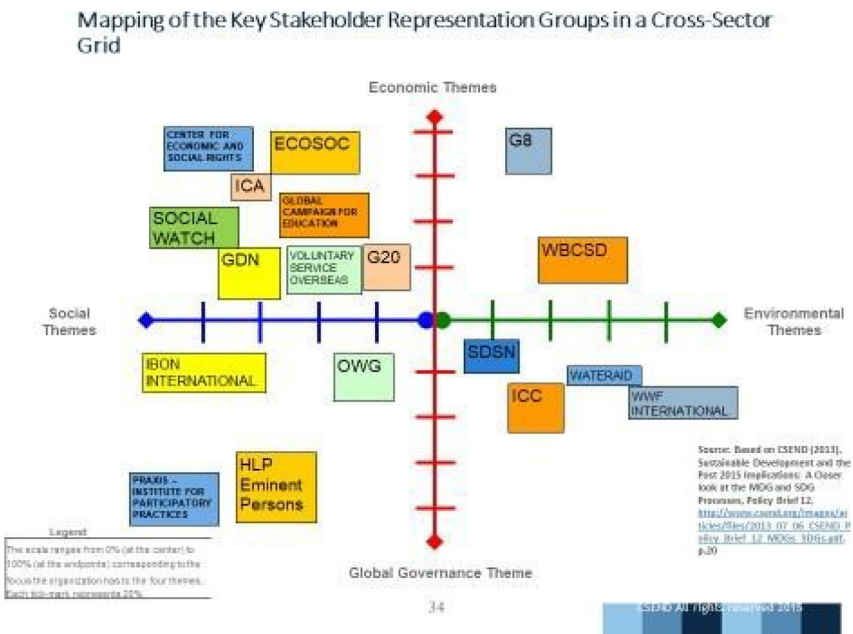
The HLPF adopts inter-governmentally negotiated political declarations and meets every four years at the level of heads of State and Government under the auspices of the General Assembly and every year under the auspices of ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council) with a 3-day ministerial segment. During the HLPF meeting, the ECOSOC accredited NGOs are inside the room participating with their own statements and engaging in consultations with government representatives and other accredited NGOs.

Alliance building is part of influencing in the UN context and is based on convergence of interests and availability of adequate sources of power (reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, expert, and resources) and the ability to find common ground and solutions through constructive negotiations of multi-party kind.

The negotiations between state and non-state actors are complex, challenging and very important for the future orientation of the SDGs. Figure 1 gives an overview of the key thematic proprieties that were negotiated amongst state and non-state actors. The context of the 2030 Agenda, as conceptualized by the authors, consisted of Economic, Social, Environmental and Governance themes.

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<sup>15</sup> Source: <https://hlpf.un.org/objectives>.



**Figure 1:** Mapping of the negotiation positions of key non-state actors or alliances leading to the 2015 declaration (Source: Saner and Yiu 2015).

Some of the key actors are depicted and placed in the four quadrants according to their main concerns and negotiation positions which influenced the outcome of the 2030 Agenda. Two of the prominent actors of the 2030 Agenda are well known representatives of the private sector and of civil society namely the World business Centre for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) based in Geneva and IBON based in Manila, Philippines.

WBCSD was incorporated as a not-for-profit foundation in 1971 and is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. WBCSD supports sustainable development. It has over 200 international companies as members.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, IBON International is a service institution which represents civil society organizations from all parts of the world. It is linked to the IBON Foundation based in the Philippines.<sup>17</sup> Other well-known organizations depicted on figure are environmental or social NGOs (WWF, Social Watch) and others represent business e.g. the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC).

<sup>16</sup> Source: <https://www.weforum.org/organizations/world-business-council-for-sustainable-development-wbcd>.

<sup>17</sup> Source: <https://iboninternational.org/>.

Some of the non-state actor organizations that participated in the 2030 Agenda negotiations were foundations or philanthropic organizations. The participation of these non-state actors was punctual and specific during the two-year negotiations process depending on a POs interest.

A different situation is the structural and permanent representation of non-state actors.<sup>18</sup> They are called Major Group (MG) or Stake Holder Group (SG). The nine MGs are the Women, Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples, Non-Governmental Organizations, Local Authorities, Workers and Trade Unions, Business and Industry, Scientific and Technological Community, Farmers.

The twelve Stakeholder Groups are Persons with Disabilities, Volunteers, Education and Academia, Group on Ageing, Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism, Financing for Development, Sendai Group, Together 2030, LGBTI, Africa Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism, ECE Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism, and Communities discriminated on Work and Descent.

These MG and SG groups have official status and are self-organized for instance with a secretariat and three co-chairs or some other agreed structural representation. The MGs and SGs meet normally once a month, have two coordinators and build alliance within their community but are also active outside the HLPF context.

POs can engage with any one of them externally but within the UN and HLPF, organizations need to have ECOSOC accreditation to access contacts and participate in discussions.

### 3 POs Becoming Structurally Involved in the UN – Some Hurdles and Resistance

The T20-G20 published a brief in 2022 titled “Intensifying collaboration between Philanthropic Organization and the SDGs through strengthening the Global Cooperation of SDG Financing”.<sup>19</sup> The Brief suggests that an effective regulatory environment should be created involving relevant stakeholders and enabling philanthropic capital to have long-term strategic investment towards SDGs achievement.

As mentioned above, there have been renewed attempts by UNDP to bring POs closer in touch with the UN and the UN-Agencies. Collaboration between the UN and its Agencies with POs is already possible on a punctual basis, e.g. in regard to specific time limited projects.

<sup>18</sup> <https://hlpf.un.org/home>.

<sup>19</sup> Source: [https://www.global-solutions-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TF9\\_Intensifying-philanthropic-participation-in-SDGs-through-strengthening-the-ecosystem.pdf](https://www.global-solutions-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TF9_Intensifying-philanthropic-participation-in-SDGs-through-strengthening-the-ecosystem.pdf).



Should POs want to become a more permanent member of the HLPF process, another option could be that a new Stakeholder Group would be created which would give POs an official statue and recognition similar to the already existing Major Groups and Stakeholder Groups. To create a new Stakeholder Group, POs interested in an institutional role would have to consult the rules which provide the basis for such an application drafted at the end of 2019 by the HLPF Coordinators titled “MGoS HLPF COORDINATION MECHANISM” (MGoS HLPF COORDINATION MECHANISM 2019) and approved by consensus on 18th December 2020. An application for a new SG can last a whole year. The other MGs and SGs provide their comments and the two coordinators verify whether the new SG has the necessary organizational and institutional capability. In general, a new SG is presided by a representative of the new PO entity with supported by two other PO entities.

The challenge will be to create a broad coalition of POs who are eager to become part of the HLPF. Out of the larger coalition, a consortium of POs could be formed which could serve as an Executive Committee of the coalition and subsequently three POs could be selected to form the team which would represent the PO voice at the HLPF. Three PO organizations should be sufficient and the group would have to write a concept paper, nominate a chair team and select one of the three to be the designated head of the new SG.

There are however a couple of issues that need to be addressed and solutions found for the following queries:

1. What kind of POs should form the core membership of a future HLPF Stakeholder Group “Philanthropy”?
2. Which PO orientation should dominate? POs active in humanitarian aid; SDG advise, academic abilities, social policy (poverty reduction, gender etc.) and if providing policy advice, what kind of advice would be welcomed and what kind of practice in the field would be expected to qualify as member of such a new SG-Philanthropy + SDGs?
3. What selection criteria should be applied in regard to participation in the new Stakeholder Group POs?
  - (a) In case an applicant POs is affiliated with a religious movement, does it have a clear mission statement which confirms that its mission and operational objectives are not in contradiction with basic human rights (both UN HR conventions) and respect of the UN rules and charters of operations?
  - (b) In case the applicant PO is funded by a government, does it fall into the category of a “GONGO” (Government-organized non-governmental organization), if so, how does the applicant PO prove its autonomy from government domination?
  - (c) The consortium would also be advised to clarify whether POs accused of Philanthro-capitalism would be welcomed as members of the new SG or

rejected and on what grounds (Brin 2014). Example of such an exclusion should be POs who are linked to the tobacco industry.

- (d) If linked to political parties such as is the case of the many German Foundations, how to guarantee the autonomy of such POs and prevent such POs from being extensions of political pressures?
  - (e) It will also be important to avoid inclusion of POs in the new SG who have a dual purpose that is they support social and environmental causes but use their benevolent activities as a form of SDG washing or worse as an opportunity for marketing of products of the POs commercial mother company.
  - (f) From a basic management and organizational point of view, it would be also necessary to show evidence that the selected PO members of such a new PO-SG member can show evidence of accountability and regular practice of monitoring and evaluation of its activities.<sup>20</sup>
4. In view of the inherent competitiveness of POs, it would be useful if the future PO Stakeholder Group would agree on a rotation of the three co-chair POs to give POs from different countries and continents the possibility to participate for a limited amount of time, e.g. three years.

In light of the tensions between supporters and opponents of Philanthropic Organizations in general and in particular in regard to the mixed attitudes of some CSOs regarding POs becoming members of the United Nations HLPE, it would be useful for the PO community as well as for the CSO community at large to draft a code of conduct for POs who want to become member of a future SG-PO at the HLPE. It is through direct exchanges that CSOs and POs can more likely discover that they can have more convergence than assumed divergence as suggested by von Schnurbein (2023).

For instance, one could imagine a hybrid code of conduct including the main guidance drafted by Sprecher et al. (2021) available in “Swiss Foundation Code: The Principles and Recommendations for the Establishment and Management of Grant-making Foundations” and the partnership principles elaborated by Oxfam in 2012 based on its long-term development, humanitarian response and disaster prevention and campaigns and advocacy.

## 4 Conclusions

A growing number of P.O.s expressed interest in contributing to the SDGs and the international and multi-stakeholder efforts to find solutions to the multiple crisis and

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<sup>20</sup> Past research on POs ability and practice of M+E show a great variety of practice see: <https://www.csend.org/images/articles/files/20130623-Health%20M%20E%20Report%20v9%20FINAL.pdf>.

long-term issues pertaining to sustainability such as pandemics, war, food insecurity, poverty and climate change and a general sense of insecurity.

The United Nations and its Agencies have decision making processes best characterized as multi-lateral, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder and hence are multi-actor by the virtue of their role and mandate. Rules of UN negotiations and decision making are very different compared to decision making processes of traditional POs who tend to engage more vertically and are more used to autonomous driven decision-making.

POs interested in being part of the UN SDG process should be able to understand and be equipped with capacities that allow them to effectively participate in the horizontal and multi-level nature of UN processes and in addition master the use of diplomatic competencies such as alliance building, framing of issues, policy negotiations, agenda and standard setting and apply multi-party negotiations skills.

POs are increasingly taking part in the implementation of the SDGs at the United Nations and can become much needed intermediary actors who can facilitate multi-stakeholder solutions and provide platforms for greater scale and impact. SDG implementation requires financing and knowledge how to structure infrastructure development in developing countries through PPP and general social development competencies as suggested by von Abendroth (2024).

Future research and capacity building are required to support POs who want to venture into the complex environment of international relations and diplomacy. They need to acquire respective skills and knowledge and possibly rethink their business model and operational modalities.

POs keen on joining the international community to contribute to the implementation of the SDGs are advised to visit the sources given in this article and to subsequently assess their strengths and weakness in regard to Advocacy, Diplomacy and Capacity Building in the domain of the SDGs in Developing and Least Developed countries and the United Nations.

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