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**How to Enhance Multi-level Collaboration and Co-  
Creation to Develop Sustainability via Strategic  
Partnerships with the EU Global Gateway Initiative**

Finland and the University of Vaasa

School of Management  
Master's thesis in Discipline  
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**ABSTRACT:**

The European Union's Global Gateway strategy aims to enhance sustainable development by fostering international partnerships, particularly with the Global South. New complex challenges with climate change require fast and effective moves to answer but also open new business opportunities. An active role is needed to create a new, sustainable future for us all. This thesis investigates how collaboration and co-creation can be leveraged to support sustainability in the context of Finnish universities and operators. The research identifies best practices for effective engagement under the EU Global Gateway framework by exploring the role of co-creation, different forms of strategic partnerships and public-private collaborations, and multi-level governance. The study focuses on Finland's involvement in the Global Gateway initiative, particularly in education and research, and digital and green transitions in the Global South, with a regional emphasis on Africa and Asia. Through a qualitative approach involving a scoping study and interviews with key stakeholders, this research examines the mechanisms for collaboration, challenges in governance, and the opportunities for Finnish institutions, notably the University of Vaasa, to engage in sustainable international partnerships. Findings highlight the importance of early stakeholder engagement, trust-building, transparent dialogue, and strategic alignment to ensure the long-term success of sustainability projects. This thesis contributes to the theoretical understanding of co-creation, multi-stakeholder collaboration, strategic partnerships, and multi-level governance in sustainability efforts, providing valuable insights and managerial implications for academia, policymakers, and private sector actors involved in international development projects.

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**KEYWORDS:** sustainability; co-creation; multi-stakeholder collaboration; multi-level governance; strategic partnership; eu; global gateway; academic engagement

## Contents

1	Introduction	7
2	Background	9
2.1	Motivation of the Study	9
2.2	Background on the Global Gateway Initiative	12
2.3	Research Gap	16
2.4	Research Questions and Objectives	17
2.5	Structure of the Thesis	20
3	Literature Review	21
3.1	Value Co-Creation	21
3.2	Forms of Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations	24
3.2.1	Strategic Partnerships	25
3.2.2	Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration	29
3.2.3	Public-Private Sector Partnerships	30
3.3	Multi-Level Governance	31
3.4	Summary of the Literature Review	35
3.4.1	Framework for future development projects	37
4	Methodology	38
4.1	Data Collection	38
4.1.1	Scoping Study	38
4.1.2	Interviews	41
4.2	Data Analysis	44
5	Findings	51
6	Conclusion, Discussion, and Implications	57
6.1	Implication to Theoretical Aspects of the Field	57
6.2	Implication to Managerial Aspects of the Field	59
6.3	Limitations	61
6.4	Future Research Suggestions	61
7	References	63

Appendices	68
Appendix 1. Scoping Study Summary: Africa/Asia Platform for Sustainability	68
Appendix 2. Interview Questions	74
Appendix 3. Interviewees	76

## Pictures

Picture 1 The Dimensions of Sustainability (Lacoste, 2016).....	10
Picture 2 Finnish Competitive Advantages (Boston Consulting Group, 2023) .....	11
Picture 3 Anticipatory Innovation Governance Model in Finland: Towards a New Way of Governing (OECD, 2022) .....	12
Picture 4 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2021).....	13
Picture 5 EU Global Gateway Initiative .....	14
Picture 6 Building Blocks of Interaction for Co-creation of Value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).....	22
Picture 7 Crafting a Strategic Architecture of Co-creation Platforms (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014) .....	23
Picture 8 Collaborative Value Creation Spectrum (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012) .....	24
Picture 9 Evaluation Criteria (OECD, 2021).....	25
Picture 10 Model of Sustainability Commitment, Collaborative Capabilities and Performance (Luzzini et al., 2015) .....	26
Picture 11 The Collaboration Continuum (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012) .....	28
Picture 12 The Relationship Between the Regulator, Social Capital, and Consumer (Liu et al., 2021) .....	30
Picture 13 Types of Multi-level Governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003, pp. 236).....	33
Picture 14 Theory of Endogenous Change in IOs (Lenz et al., 2023).....	34
Picture 15 Goals and Principles of Finland’s Development Policy.....	40
Picture 16 Global Gateway Finance Institutions.....	41

## Figures

Figure 1 Structure of the Thesis.....	20
Figure 2 Framework for Collaborative Sustainability: Integrating Co-Creation, Partnerships, and Governance .....	37
Figure 3 Challenges Communicated by the Interviewees .....	56
Figure 4 Adapted Framework for Collaborative Sustainability .....	59

## Tables

Table 1 Thematic data analysis from the interviews .....	45
Table 2 Data structure by the Gioia method .....	46
Table 3 Thematic analysis of the data from the interviews.....	48
Table 4 Second-order Themes with quotes from interviews .....	50
Table 5 Aggregate Dimensions.....	52

## Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BAG	Business Advisory Group
BCG	Boston Consulting Group
CE	Circular Economy
CLC	Climate Leadership Coalition
EC	European Commission
EFSD+	European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus
EIB	European Investment Bank
EU	European Union
GG	Global Gateway
GPS	Global Program on Sustainability
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MLG	Multi-level Governance
NDICI-GE	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument– Global Europe
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPO	Non-Profit Organization
OECD	The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPP	Public-Private Sector Collaboration
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TEI	Team Europe Initiative
UN	United Nations
UVA	University of Vaasa

## 1 Introduction

This thesis is part of my master's studies on Strategic Business Development. The research aims to understand collaboration and value co-creation aspects to promote and develop sustainability with the European Union (EU) Global Gateway (GG) in Global South and how the University of Vaasa (UVA) can utilize these methods to reach its goals. With the growing need to address climate change by intermediating new sustainability projects, strategies, and technologies, there is an emerging market within research and partnerships to provide opportunities in the green transition. The Global Gateway initiative is the EU's strategy to address this.

This research's theoretical aspect focuses on co-creation, strategic partnerships, multi-level collaborations, and multi-level governance. These components are crucial in reaching the EU's sustainable development goals and international partnership strategies. As the EU has changed its development policy towards international partnership policy, this aspect aligns with the ESG pillars and the UN's SDG 17 goals. By working together as partners, we can significantly impact towards a better future for Europe and our Globe. Wholesome sustainability is the driving force behind the development of new ways of operating together and collaborating to match these goals better. The EU can show an example of this kind of sustainable partnership globally and answer to the needs of the global environment.

*One plus one is more than two.*

The change towards the Global Gateway strategy requires a "Team Europe" mindset and collaboration to co-create. This building of synergy makes the equation  $1+1>2$  possible. Team Europe Collaboration promotes the EU's chosen strategies for focusing our resources to make a more significant impact. Global Gateway initiative is a high-level strategy that enables change. As the Team Europe mindset rushed forward after the Covid-19 pandemic started in 2020 and the Global Gateway initiative was put into motion in

2021, these working methods are relatively new; it is vital to study how this message has been heard and how the strategies have been implemented in different levels.

As the questions in Collaborative Sustainability are massive, this research focused on Finland's part in the EU and our role in the Global Gateway initiative. The EU's international partnership strategies include five key areas of partnership: Education and Research, Transport, Climate and Energy, Digital, and Health. Finland focuses on education and research, digital, and climate and energy. After studying the Finnish involvement and discussing with experts, the two chosen cases for this research are Education and Research and Digital and Green transition. The scope of this research focuses on where the Finnish operators are involved and how and if there would be something worth expanding in Finland. However, this study also wanted to view the academic opportunities, such as how academia, such as the University of Vaasa, can be involved. This was done by "following the money" by studying the funding methods and how the investments are directed by compounding a scoping study of global development programs such as the Global Gateway. As for the vast diversity in areas, projects, and strategies, this research focuses on Africa and Asia in the Global South. Africa presents the traditional actor in the Finnish and European development projects, and Asia presents the new and ever-growing environment with international partnerships. These areas are also aligned with the Finnish partnership and development strategies.

## **2 Background**

This chapter presents the motivation and background that sets the tone and aspect for the study. It explains the green transition and growth as a motivator, focusing on the Finnish aspect and diving into the university and research world. It goes through the path toward the need for a scoping study regarding the EU Global Gateway and the flagship projects. The research gap is formed from this, and critical research questions and objectives are modified. The chapter will end by explaining the structure of this thesis.

### **2.1 Motivation of the Study**

The University of Vaasa's exploration of sustainability platforms for various projects, tools, and funding mechanisms motivated the study. This was achieved by conducting a scoping study to examine this aspect and then diving deeper into the possibilities of collaboration and co-creation for the university. At the start of this thesis project, UVA's cooperation with the Global South focused on Asia and attracting new students to join. As Finland is a small country with limited university resources, we focused on utilizing the EU to collaborate with Africa and Asia through the Global Gateway program and aligned programs. During the scoping study, the government of Finland changed in 2023, and due to budget cuts, funding for the projects in Finland was cut out of the budget, creating a new aspect of the thesis for future reference.

In this ever-changing world with complex global challenges regarding sustainability, there is a growing need to integrate sustainability in every aspect of academia, business, and politics. In the upcoming years, climate change will exhilarate the transformation towards green transition and open new opportunities. Still, it will also force society to jump to the unknown. This, however, cannot be done alone but will need collaboration, and due to the fast change, uncertainty, and complex systems and problems, we need it to be successful and effective (OECD, 2022). This highlights the importance of success in collaboration and sustainability in international development projects and identifying future opportunities to address the challenges. The term “sustainability” can be defined

by the UN's 1987 Brundtland report, which states that it is "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their needs." Multiple points of view can be considered when discussing sustainability, but the triple bottom line explains the three main dimensions of sustainability: environmental, economic, and social (Lacoste, 2016). All aspects hold different viewpoints, and it can be argued that they depend on each other. Closs et al. (2011) state that social issues can be articulated better for future research on management by dividing them into education and ethics. Lacoste (2016) modified their figure with a process aspect. (Closs et al., 2011; Kaur et al., 2019; Lacoste, 2016; OECD, 2022)



**Picture 1 The Dimensions of Sustainability (Lacoste, 2016)**

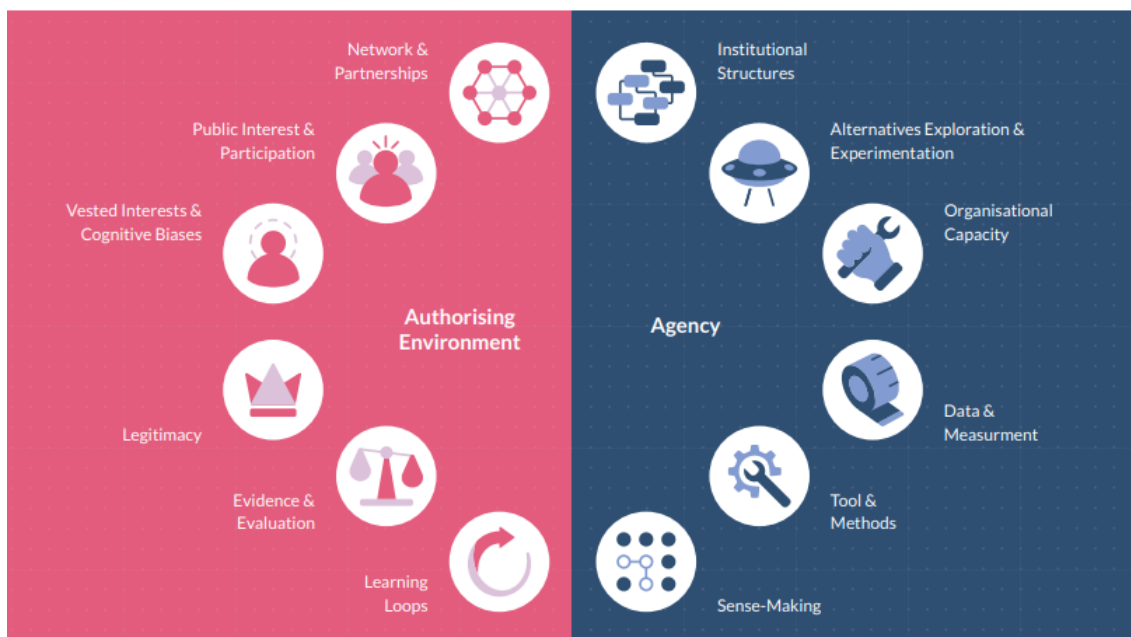
One accelerating factor is population growth. The increasing part of the world population rises to level 2 (Gapminder, n.d.), leading to a more urbanized global population. This urbanization is impacting cities, leading to increased energy consumption, higher levels of pollution and more waste production (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005). The local authorities have a vital role in developing the cities and regions towards more sustainable future. However, the rest of the world cannot stand still after years of expediting climate change, as the change affects all of us. We need new options and collaborations to succeed in these leaps towards a more sustainable world.

Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and Climate Leadership Coalition (CLC) published a report on the Green Transitions opportunities to Finland, “Finland’s Moonshots for Green Growth,” in 2023. The report introduced the opportunity for the green transition via Finland’s competitive advantages (Picture 2) and growth possibilities, concluding that the green transition is an opportunity for growth that Finland cannot miss. Aligning Finnish strengths, export action sectors, and know-how, the Green Transition can secure the Finnish welfare state and reach the ambitious climate objectives, but also act as a meaningful player globally in this transition.



**Picture 2 Finnish Competitive Advantages (Boston Consulting Group, 2023)**

The Global Gateway initiative presents many opportunities for UVA, other universities, and Finland to engage in international collaboration, enhance research capabilities, and contribute to sustainable development. For universities, such can be joint research projects, access to funding and grants, and exchange programs. The role of Finland will similarly benefit from these opportunities and possibilities and can help to seize the growth opportunities with its competitive advantages as part of the EU.



**Picture 3 Anticipatory Innovation Governance Model in Finland: Towards a New Way of Governing (OECD, 2022)**

The OECD pictured the Anticipatory Innovation Governance Model in Finland (picture 3), which shows vital aspects of developing innovative approaches to challenges and new agile methods to address them. The model includes similar elements to the theory in hand to international partnerships, collaboration, and multilevel governance. From measurable data, tools, evaluation, and learning loops to more subjective aspects such as vested and public interests and legitimacy and networks' role in governance, this model shows the complexity of the challenge.

## 2.2 Background on the Global Gateway Initiative

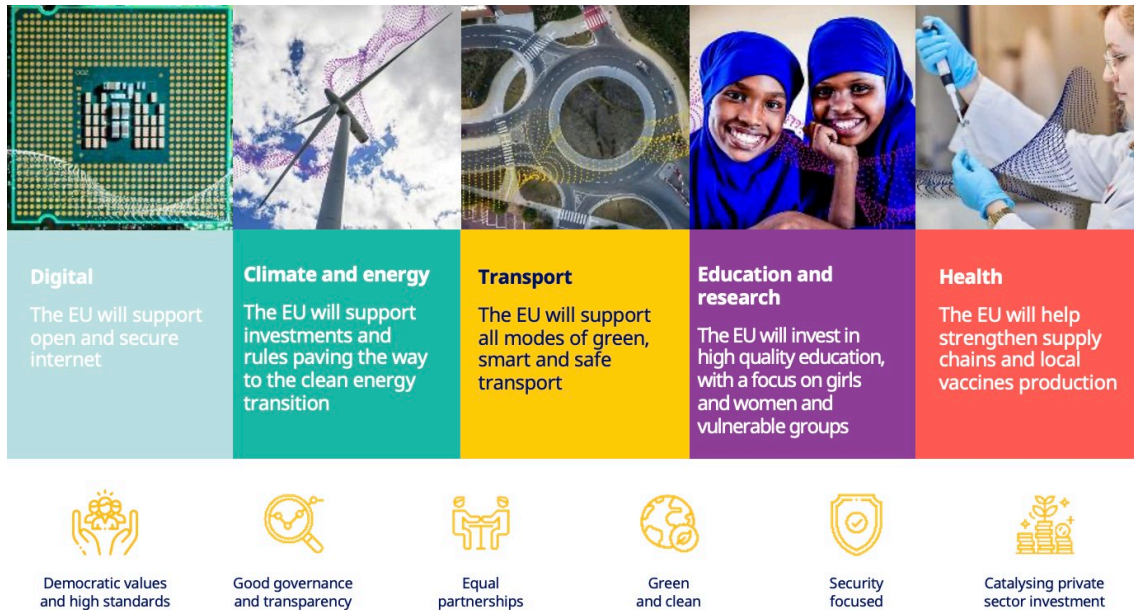
The European Commission's (EC) International Partnerships mission is "to contribute to sustainable development, to eradicate poverty, and to promote peace and the protection of human rights through international partnerships that uphold and promote European values and interests" (European Commission, n.d.-b). In 2021, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the EC launched the Global Gateway as a significant infrastructure development strategy globally in the evermore competitive world. The Global Gateway is aligned

with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG, picture 4). It aims to support the partner countries in reaching the green and digital transition needed by mobilizing €300 billions of investments to these projects during 2021-2027 (European Commission, n.d.-a).



**Picture 4 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2021)**

Global Gateway operates worldwide, adapting to the changing needs and interests in global environments regionally. Development projects focus on physical infrastructure, promoting sustainable transition and economic growth. GG also helps govern the project environment to reach efficient and effective results by offering enabling conditions and attractive investments. In addition to physical infrastructure development, GG also taps into the response to health threats, digital transformation, and the need for a “new scientific and production revolution needed to combat the climate change” (European Commission, 2021). Picture 5 shows the GG initiative’s focus and drivers.



**Picture 5 EU Global Gateway Initiative**

Promoting sustainable development includes environmental protection and social inclusiveness, and the GG initiative acts as a strong and loud advocate to support these developments in parallel. To reach its goals, GG facilitates knowledge sharing between partners and stakeholders to create a network to share these best practices, research findings, and technological innovations, and the first Global Gateway Forum was held in October 2023 to do just that. This kind of activity also fosters partnerships between different areas of operation and is a concrete example of multilevel collaboration. To support these initiatives, GG also assists governments and local authorities in formulating and implementing these policies that promote sustainability, support the wanted transformation, and empower communities with these decision-making processes. (European Commission, 2021)

Implementation strategies include **collaborative projects** including governments, businesses, international organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and communities; providing training and resources for **capacity building**; fostering **innovation and research** initiatives in sustainable practices and technologies; providing robust systems for **monitoring and evaluating** the impact; and mobilizing **funding and investment**

from various factors such as banks, donors and private investors to support sustainability projects. These strategies need understanding value co-creation, strategic partnerships, multistakeholder and public-private sector collaboration, and multilevel governance (MLG). (European Commission, 2021)

### *EU-Africa*

The EU-Africa initiative encompasses a €150 billion investment by the European Union to support the Global Gateway's sustainable objectives by 2030. This collaboration emphasizes sustainable energy, aiming to augment renewable energy generation, including producing clean hydrogen with a capacity of 300 GW. The biodiversity goals include enhancing the livelihoods of 65 million people by stabilizing 3 million square kilometers of land and ensuring water security. This initiative also addresses agri-food systems to accelerate sustainable transformations in the food supply chain, agriculture, fisheries, and food development. It aims to improve the capacity for climate change adaptation and significantly reduce disaster risks by enhancing climate resilience and governance preparedness.

Digital transition projects are integral to this initiative, encompassing submarine and terrestrial fiber-optic cables, cloud and data infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks designed to ensure safe, secure, and reliable universal network access. The initiative also seeks to stimulate sustainable growth and decent job creation through investments in multi-country transport infrastructure and inclusive economies. It supports businesses, especially women entrepreneurs and early-stage companies, through education, training, and youth mobility programs. Additionally, it promotes the transition towards sustainable global value chains in sustainable mineral raw materials.

Furthermore, the initiative prioritizes investments in science, technology, and innovation, focusing on leveraging EU space programs and strengthening health and pharmaceutical systems. This includes enhancing manufacturing capabilities and access to vaccines, medicines, and health technologies. (European Commission, n.d.-a, 2021)

*EU and ASEAN*

The Global Gateway initiative aims to establish smart, clean, and secure links between the EU and ASEAN, with green transition and sustainable connectivity as top priorities. The EU has committed €10 billion in investments from its budget until 2027 to support these goals. Collaborative efforts are directed towards environmental protection and climate change mitigation, sustainable connectivity and digitalization, economic integration and sustainable investments, health and education, and emergency response and preparedness.

The partnership is grounded in a shared belief in an open and inclusive rules-based multilateral order. It is committed to regional integration and strives to promote peace, stability, and prosperity. Joint efforts focus on enhancing security, strengthening resilience, achieving sustainable development, improving connectivity, and fostering sustainable economic growth.

Economically, the European Union was the second-largest foreign direct investment stockholder and the third-largest trading partner in ASEAN as of 2021. In terms of security, the cooperation includes counterterrorism, cyber, and maritime security.

The collaboration emphasizes green and inclusive sustainable development, decent work, sustainable connectivity, EU-ASEAN policy dialogue, good governance, human rights, security, and resilience. (European Commission, n.d.-a)

### **2.3 Research Gap**

The thesis aims to understand and find ways to participate actively in global change and growth by studying how to build successful and effective collaboration in this complex environment. The research gap is how a small university, such as the University of Vaasa, can build successful and effective sustainability partnerships by acting as an active

member in the EU's Global Gateway initiative. The research focuses on African and Asian cooperation due to the vast market and the strategic focuses of Finland and UVA. How does being part of a more extensive EU network encourage the University's goals? When discussing EU collaboration, the theory of Multilevel Governance steps in, and how that aspect affects the nature of the partnership.

The qualitative research will compare different funding and flagship projects and their elements in collaboration and partnerships, and the projects will act as a base for future studies. Due to projects and partnerships under GG being in the early days, no similar studies have been found in this research field. The field of project finance could act as one concrete aspect of understanding and studying this outlook, and it would help the University apply and focus research on these.

This research could provide interesting input into future studies and opportunities regarding the current and future role of public-private sector collaboration and strategic partnerships in promoting the SDGs. Finance is a significant aspect of development projects; collecting an understanding of investor and funding opportunities, especially from the EU and private companies' collaboration, requires collaboration and transparent and timely dialogue to catch the opportunities. Collaboration can facilitate large-scale sustainability projects that require sustainable synergy, ensure long-term resilience and sustainability of investments, and promote circularity (European Commission, 2016, 2017). We can see the green transition and circular economy (CE) providing opportunities that might not yet be well adapted to innovative and green public procurement protocol, but that would truly benefit society and the economy (Alhola et al., 2019). This research examines how co-creation, collaboration, and partnerships can address these aspects.

## **2.4 Research Questions and Objectives**

This study aims to tap into this research opportunity by answering the following questions:

*How can multilevel collaboration and co-creation in multi-stakeholder collaboration in sustainability be promoted in the EU Global Gateway with the Global South?*

*How to create an environment for multilevel collaboration to develop sustainability?*

*What kind of partnerships are most influential for universities like UVA?*

*How does multilevel governance affect the collaboration with the EU GG to promote SDGs?*

*For effective, prosperous, and sustainable collaboration, what is needed?*

Sub-questions are derived from the research questions to provide further guidance for the study. Sub-questions are:

*What key factors contribute to successful co-creation between European and African stakeholders in sustainable development projects?*

*How can co-creation practices enhance stakeholder engagement in the Global Gateway projects?*

*How can the University of Vaasa effectively and successfully collaborate with institutions in Europe, Africa, and Asia to drive innovation and capacity building under Global Gateway?*

*How can collaboration foster innovation and sustainable solutions within the Global Gateway EU-Africa initiative?*

*What are the primary challenges and barriers to success in collaboration between European, African, and Asian partners, and how can they be addressed?*

*What best practices can be identified, and how can they be replicated and scaled?*

*Are there characteristic differences between the EU Global Gateway projects and African and Asian collaborations that should be considered?*

*How can the effectiveness of co-creation and multilevel governance approaches be measured in the context of sustainability in Global Gateway EU-Africa initiatives?*

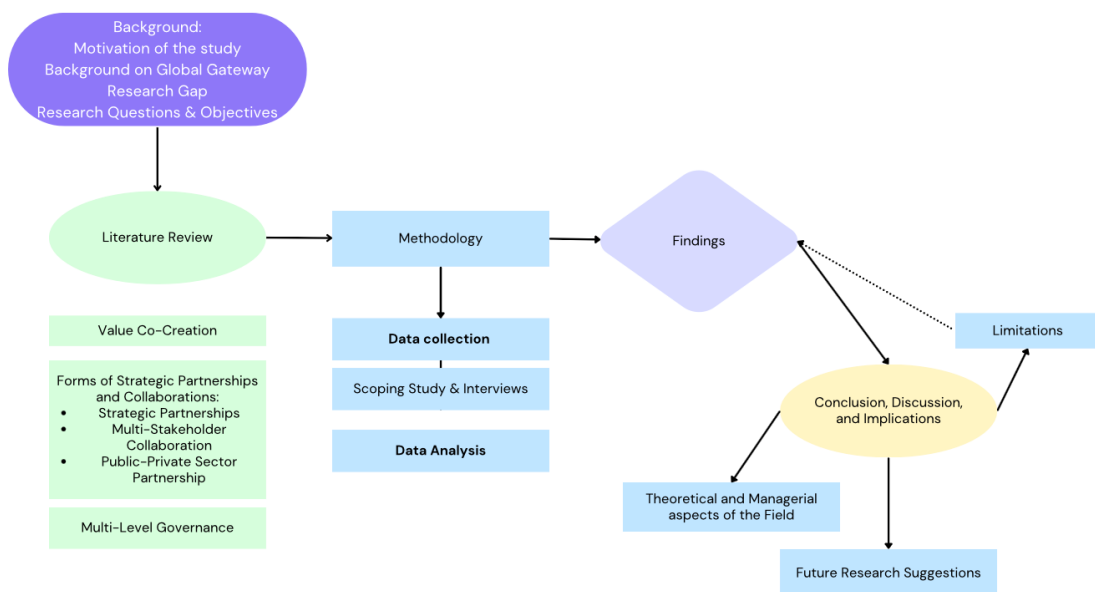
*What mechanisms can be established to ensure policy coherence and effective coordination across different levels of governance in the Global Gateway projects?*

This thesis dives into theoretical frameworks of co-creation, multilevel governance, and sustainability to address these research questions. The sustainability aspect will follow through the theory, addressing how the integration of environmental, social, and economic dimensions meets the needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations, 2021). Co-creation focuses on collaborative processes that include stakeholders in the value-creation process. Multilevel governance explores how different levels of government interact in co-creation, responsibilities, and decision-making processes.

The expected contribution of this thesis is to identify the best practices and highlight the successful methods and factors in collaboration building and co-creation within the Global Gateway EU-Africa and EU and ASEAN. Besides the research questions, this thesis will provide specific information for Vaasa University concerning questions such as where UVA and Finland should operate and how.

This research is threefold: it begins with a scoping study on current platforms in the EU with Africa and Asia, continues with value co-creation and different strategic partnerships and collaborations with the multilevel governance aspect, and ends with assessing these to find operative strategic partnerships that the Finnish university environment could potentially utilize to receive synergies in sustainability projects.

## 2.5 Structure of the Thesis



**Figure 1 Structure of the Thesis**

Here, you can see the flow chart on the thesis structure (Figure 1). After the groundwork of this study's motivation, the background on the Global Gateway, and what this research answers, the research moves forward to the theory. The literature review includes theories from Value Co-Creation to Forms of Strategic partnerships and collaborations to Multi-level Governance. The methodology consists of data collection of a scoping study and interviews to fit the chosen cases and the data analysis. The findings present the data and conclusion, discussion, & implication section combine the managerial and theoretical implications, the study's limitations, and suggestions for future research that act as the discussion in academia.

### 3 Literature Review

This chapter provides a theoretical framework for this thesis. The core theory for this study includes value co-creation, forms of strategic partnerships and collaborations, and multi-level governance. After this literature review, the theoretical framework for the thesis will be drafted. The theoretical framework section upholds the context of sustainable development throughout the chapter.

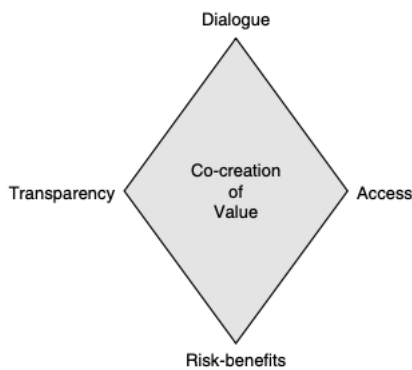
*“Being responsible also does not mean doing it all ourselves. Responsibility is a form of sharing, a way of recognizing that we’re all in this together. ‘Sole responsibility is an oxymoron.’”(Visser, 2011, p. 5)*

#### 3.1 Value Co-Creation

The concept of co-creation by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) means creating value for the company and the customer by having joint problem-solving and continuous dialogue. Lacoste (2016) explains co-creation as co-creating value with and for them. In value co-creation, dialogue is essential as it allows building value via conversation or network (Lacoste, 2016). The reason behind co-creation is usually strategic rather than change in the operating environment, even when the change in the society or the ecosystem might be behind the decision (Arnold, 2017). The sustainability challenges and societal changes need to be framed to start the process of co-creation (Mauser et al., 2013). A sustainable co-creation process often emphasizes servitization where products and services are united (Lacoste, 2016) but also software and, therefore, digital servitization that has a vital role in the green transition towards the sustainable development goals (Kohtamäki et al., 2019).

Literature in co-creation primarily focuses on transdisciplinarity in research, which concludes non-academic actors in the research process. This is especially important to sustainability co-creation as the goal is to find opportunities to tackle societal problems and reach global social goals such as the UN’s SDG. (Mauser et al., 2013; United Nations, 2021)

There are different blocks regarding the interaction, but without dialogue, other aspects of the value creation will not effectively happen (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Picture 6 shows the building blocks of interaction. These four aspects are required throughout the collaboration when discussing value co-creation in sustainability. When the co-creation is with different types of organizations or countries, transparency, and access might be difficult to manage without a transparent platform. Risk and benefits are strongly linked to SDG goals and, therefore, right at the core of Global Gateway. Lacoste (2016) argued that the role of sustainability has not been studied in the value co-creation network.



**Picture 6 Building Blocks of Interaction for Co-creation of Value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004)**

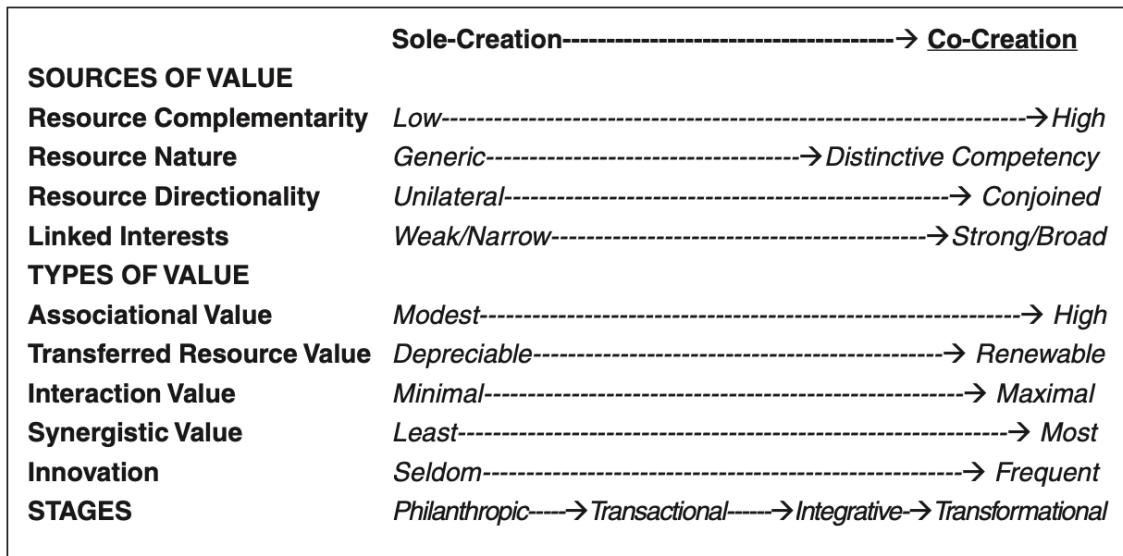
For the co-creative environment to occur, leaders must prioritize stakeholder experience in engaging to support co-creation so that individuals within the ecosystem can develop the co-creation effectively at the organization of co-creation (Arnold, 2017; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014). Ramaswamy & Ozcan (2014) picture this process in their chart of Crafting a Strategic Architecture of a Co-creation Platform (Picture 7). The chart acknowledges a broad sector of stakeholders as individuals, including customers, employees, suppliers, financiers, partners, citizens, and others. This human experience in the value creation requires open social resources and strong management to achieve effective co-creation within the engagement platforms. Management methods to implement co-creation in

the organizational processes are different co-creation tools, clear motive and purpose, and interactive processes for the co-creation platform. For sustainability management, co-creation interaction and integration levels can be numerically managed, as well as sustainability significance and specificity (Arnold, 2017). The network resource aspect (picture 7) includes the private, public, and social sectors. Arnold (2017) concluded that for sustainable co-creation to bloom, the companies' engagement in the joint programs with governmental and non-governmental organizations should be broadened. This aspect can hold in the role of science in the value creation and co-creation. More over co-production of knowledge in sustainability can provide much-needed effectiveness to sustainability (Mauser et al., 2013).



**Picture 7 Crafting a Strategic Architecture of Co-creation Platforms (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014)**

Building connectivity is, therefore, needed to achieve effective co-creation. In this increasingly globalized world, connectivity is essential to reaching targets. Co-creation and connectivity foster collaboration, inclusivity, and ownership amongst different actors, which not only makes the process effective but also equitable and resilient in this ever-changing world.



**Picture 8 Collaborative Value Creation Spectrum (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012)**

Creating value is the central justification of partnerships (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). Therefore, knowledge of the value creation and co-creation is required to understand the processes of partnerships and collaborations. The collaborative value creation spectrum (CVC), in picture 8, shows the difference between value co-creation and sole creation, as of working alone. Sources of value such as resource complementarity, nature and directionality, and linked interests define well the basic needs to transfer towards co-creation (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). When moving toward collaboration and partnerships, it is necessary to understand the aimed value to fully understand what kind of collaboration is possible to target and not to live in a false view and expect different results.

### **3.2 Forms of Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations**

This section gathers suitable theories regarding different forms of strategic partnerships and collaborations. These forms of collaboration are within the scope of this thesis and have their specific definitions, which the chapter presents. The forms that this thesis presents are Strategic partnerships, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and public-private sector collaboration. Collaboration can have touchpoints with all these forms.

*“In context of business, collaboration helps to gain access to knowledge resources and collective wisdom of two or more Organizations. This further helps gaining sustainable growth along with widening the operational horizons of business” (Kaur et al., 2019, p. 45)*

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) has defined its evaluation criteria for successful collaboration (picture 9): sustainability, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, coherence, and relevance (OECD, 2021). These evaluation criteria can be utilized when discussing the success of these partnership and collaboration forms.

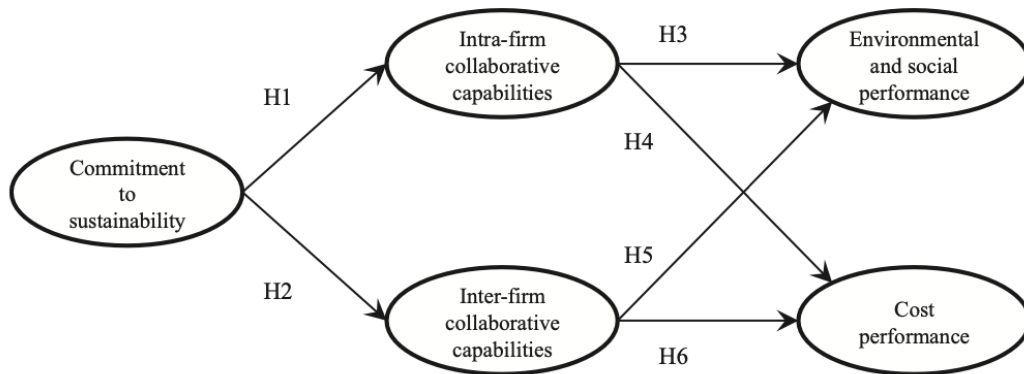


**Picture 9 Evaluation Criteria (OECD, 2021)**

### 3.2.1 Strategic Partnerships

Interorganizational collaboration means collaboration between two or more organizations, such as businesses, NGOs, governments, or any organization (Demirbag et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2019). Strategic partnerships take collaboration one step further by building a shared long-term strategy between the organizations, allowing them to gain

value for both individual firms (Kaur et al., 2019). They can be public-private partnerships (PPP), corporate-NGO partnerships, industry collaborations, or academic and research institution collaborations. Such collaborations can harness capabilities and tacit knowledge that might be hard to access, but they also make it more accessible to reach growth within new areas or to tackle new complex and global challenges through social innovations (Demirbag et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2019). Strategic partnerships' main idea is to "strategically leverage the core competencies of both partners to address market failure or social opportunity and thus engender social innovation" (Ber & Branzei, 2010, p. 141). On top of this, partnerships can reduce costs by information sharing regarding search, relationship management, and negotiation while becoming more sustainable (Jraisat et al., 2022a; Luzzini et al., 2015). Other partnership activities include sharing research and development platforms and growth pathways in innovation and R&D (Demirbag et al., 2021). Picture 10 demonstrates the collaborative capabilities role performance in cost reduction and environmental and social (Luzzini et al., 2015). Luzzini (2015) also argues that collaboration makes improving cost and sustainable performance possible and does not see them as trade-offs.



**Picture 10 Model of Sustainability Commitment, Collaborative Capabilities and Performance (Luzzini et al., 2015)**

The strategic partnership leverages trust, openness, dialogue, and shared risks and rewards to achieve high engagement in collaboration (Ber & Branzei, 2010; Jraisat et al., 2022). Studies have highlighted the importance of the role of emotions, engagement,

hot cognitions, social connections, feedback loops, information flow, amplifying actions, and social learning in partnerships (Ber & Branzei, 2010; Fiol et al., 2009; Jraisat et al., 2022a). Also, studies identified three different interaction levels: cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. Collaboration is the most intense interaction level, including joint strategic and functional planning and problem-solving throughout the value chain (Jraisat et al., 2022a).

According to Austin and Seitanidi (2012), collaborative value creation has four partnership stages: philanthropic, transactional, integrative, and transformational (picture 11). Philanthropic is the partnership with the lowest engagement, such as sponsorship with minimum joint activities (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). Commonly, partnerships fit the “transactional” stage, where there is a transparent transaction of resources, and both parties benefit from the partnership. Still, Austin and Seitanidi (2012) argued that the long-term positive development for societal welfare is uncertain. The integrative collaboration includes deeper synchronizing of strategies and better information flow to create better and more meaningful societal changes (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Ber & Branzei, 2010). The most intense partnership type is transformational, where the collaboration truly transforms and innovates new and better options through the partnership. Here, society takes an active role in the transformation (Ber & Branzei, 2010), and the aim of the collaboration “is to create disruptive social innovations” to benefit “society at large” (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012, p. 743). The Collaboration Continuum (CC) represents well the different aspects of the relationships to be studied in the partnership.

	<b>Stage I</b>	<b>Stage II</b>	<b>Stage III</b>	<b>Stage IV</b>
<b>NATURE OF RELATIONSHIP</b>	<i>Philanthropic &gt; Transactional &gt; Integrative &gt; Transformational</i>			
• <b>Level of Engagement</b>	<i>Low ← ----- → High</i>			
• <b>Importance to Mission</b>	<i>Peripheral ← ----- → Central</i>			
• <b>Magnitude of Resources</b>	<i>Small ← ----- → Big</i>			
• <b>Type of resources</b>	<i>Money ← ----- → Core Competencies</i>			
• <b>Scope of Activities</b>	<i>Narrow ← ----- → Broad</i>			
• <b>Interaction Level</b>	<i>Infrequent ← ----- → Intensive</i>			
• <b>Trust</b>	<i>Modest ← ----- → Deep</i>			
• <b>Internal change</b>	<i>Minimal ← ----- → Great</i>			
• <b>Managerial Complexity</b>	<i>Simple ← ----- → Complex</i>			
• <b>Strategic Value</b>	<i>Minor ← ----- → Major</i>			
• <b>Co-creation of value</b>	<i>Sole ----- → Conjoined</i>			
• <b>Synergistic value</b>	<i>Occasional ← ----- → Predominant</i>			
• <b>Innovation</b>	<i>Seldom ← ----- → Frequent</i>			
• <b>External system change</b>	<i>Rare ← ----- → Common</i>			

**Picture 11 The Collaboration Continuum (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012)**

In this fast-changing world, shifting the strategic focus from inside the firm to collaborators can help organizations stay competitive (Kaur et al., 2019; Porter & Millar, 1985). Social innovations aim to serve society by finding more efficient, effective, and sustainable solutions to utilize social value creation to reach the SDGs (Ber & Branzei, 2010; Kaur et al., 2019; United Nations, 2021). Cross-sector partnerships in social innovation can be seen as more resourceful and resilient than organizations addressing social challenges alone (Ber & Branzei, 2010).

Le Ber (2010, p. 144) identifies that many strategic partnerships fail due to “mises—misunderstandings, misallocations of costs and benefits, mismatches of power, mismatched partners, misfortunes of time and mistrust.” Different types of organizations, e.g., NGOs, governments, and corporations, are open to tension and conflict because of differences in the organization's base of being (for-profit vs. nonprofit). Information delay and lack of comprehensive analysis also can cause trouble in strategic partnerships (Kaur et al., 2019). Coevolution, adaptability, and flexibility are needed for the partnership to avoid these “mis-es”. (Ber & Branzei, 2010)

### 3.2.2 Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

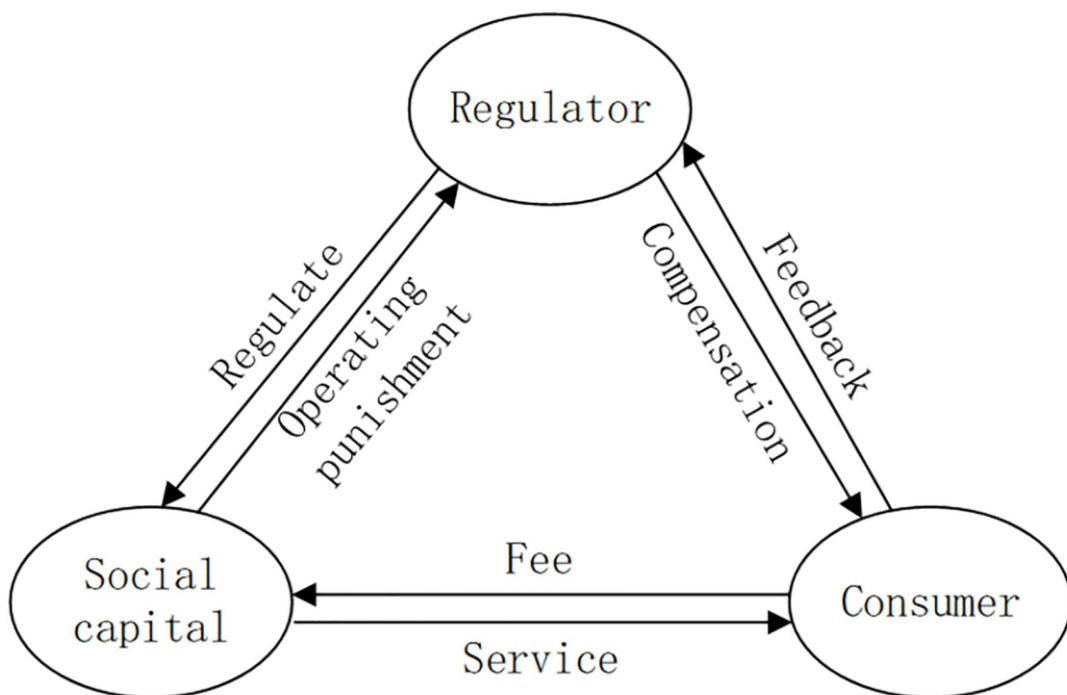
In sustainability, multi-stakeholder partnerships are collaborations where stakeholders from different sectors of society join forces to tackle sustainability issues by creating synergies. Ayala-Orozco et al. (2018) define multi-stakeholder collaborations (MSC) as an “interactive process in which actors with diverse points of view work together, implementing collective action, and sharing risks, resources, and responsibilities.” Collaboration success criteria can sometimes be intangible, but they can also be measurable.

Sustainable Development Goal 17 is to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. This explains how important it is for multi-stakeholder partnerships to aim for sustainability. Sustainability needs the sharing of knowledge, expertise, capabilities, and technological and financial resources globally. The OECD supports multilevel governance via collaboration across various levels of government to effectively spread and share information, funding, capacity, and accountability by leveraging trust among stakeholders (Jeffery & Peterson, 2020). (United Nations, 2021)

Because of the complexity of the structure, coordination of the MSCs needs clear guidelines. At the university level, much of the collaboration is MSC, and Mauser et al. (Mauser et al., 2013) suggested that higher education transforms into an education-innovation system to reach modern problem-solving and stay on top of the changing environment. This kind of university field coordination includes the government and the industry as stakeholders throughout the process at all levels (Mauser et al., 2013). Knowledge creation in MSC needs to be organized and coordinated and, according to Jantsch (1972), in four levels: empirical, pragmatic, normative, and purposive (Jantsch, 1972). This aspect is also valid regarding sustainability, as the common purpose, the so-called greater good, is the one driving the change in this kind of MSC.

### 3.2.3 Public-Private Sector Partnerships

According to the World Bank (2024), Public-Private sector partnerships (PPPs) are “a mechanism for the government to procure and implement public infrastructure and/or services using the resources and expertise of the private sector.” PPPs are primarily used when governments lack specific know-how and efficiency to foster new solutions, gather finance, and spread risks of a development project. Governments hold the regulative role of ensuring that public funds are appropriately used and that society receives the needed services. Private sector company provides the service and receive fees and revenue from providing such service (Liu et al., 2021). Picture 12 shows the relationship between the regulator (government/social organization), Social capital (private company), and consumer (society), as Liu et al. (2021) demonstrate.



**Picture 12 The Relationship Between the Regulator, Social Capital, and Consumer (Liu et al., 2021)**

Developing countries are great examples of PPPs that can create great societal benefits as these countries need many social infrastructure projects but have limited finance for quick development. Such development projects can be hospitals, schools, infrastructure

for energy, transportation or housing. To be able to minimize the carbon footprint, this kind of massive development needs cannot be made as a quick fix, but we need green, sustainable methods to fulfill the needs of these projects. PPPs can attract companies (social capital in picture 12) to invest in these projects and promote sustainable development (Liu et al., 2021). PPPs allow the capabilities to be shared as the project's skills and resources are joint. Still, they also share the risks and responsibilities, lowering the risk of failure or financial losses. This requires the contract to state clearly how operations are allocated. To receive successful results, PPPs require effective governance, monitoring mechanisms, clear objectives, and risk allocation (Liu et al., 2021; World Bank Group, 2022).

Capabilities private sector companies hold that can be shared in partnerships can be divided into four types of resources according to Austin and Seitanidi (2012) and Jraisat (2022): Financial, including profit and income; intangible, as of knowledge and reputation; organizational, as structure and culture; and physical as equipment and machinery. However, companies might lack the reputation and legitimacy to provide such services solely or fulfill the development project. This is why it is mandatory to find the right partner that fits the need to create synergy benefits for both. (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Jraisat et al., 2022a; Liu et al., 2021; Selsky & Parker, 2005)

Selsky and Parker (2005) argue that cross-sector partnerships “emerge at the intersection of business and nonprofit sectors, government and business sectors, government and business sector, and their conjoint intersection” (Selsky & Parker, 2005). This kind of collaboration usually builds a complex global partnership and network structure. For that to work, effective governance and information flow is required.

### **3.3 Multi-Level Governance**

Multi-level governance (MLG) is a critical theory for European Union cooperation and policies, especially regarding sustainability. MLG is a theoretical framework that represents continuous cooperation and interaction within multiple levels of government,

including public and private sector actors (Börzel, 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Trein et al., 2019). The interactions have vertical and horizontal dimensions: vertical meaning between different levels of government, from local to supranational, and horizontal meaning between actors at the same level (Marks, 1993). The base of MLG theory was formed by studying EU structural policy in the early 1990s when the current institute of EU was merging (Jeffery & Peterson, 2020). However, it has developed into a modern form of governance and a theoretical framework that can be used globally when studying and tackling global political challenges.

MLG includes non-governmental stakeholders as active members of the collective decision-making policy alongside sub-national authorities (Jeffery & Peterson, 2020). Governance does not include only government and its authorities, but how they “coordinate their actions in multilevel formal and informal networks” (Börzel, 2020, p.780). The informal norms can support, substitute for, or replace formal organizations. The framework helps to analyze the institution’s settings in such collaboration. (Börzel, 2020)

The benefit of MLG is its scale flexibility that can be adapted to diverse contexts and policies and allows true inclusion with a wide range of stakeholders and actors (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Efficiency gains with this scale flexibility and expanding policy portfolio help when global collaboration becomes more complex, such as the EU (Lenz et al., 2023). However, MLG has challenges as it functions in complex environments, collecting multiple actors. Therefore, the weakness of the framework lies in the cost of coordination and monitoring accountability (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may answer the challenges MLG faces with monitoring as they can provide local knowledge and publicly monitor the accountability of the member states (Jraisat et al., 2022b; Lenz et al., 2023). The rising of nationalism has challenged MLG, as nationalists hinder international organization development and promote more of the isolative decision-making processes (Lenz et al., 2023).

Type I	Type II
<i>General-purpose jurisdictions</i>	<i>Task-specific jurisdictions</i>
<i>Nonintersecting memberships</i>	<i>Intersecting memberships</i>
<i>Jurisdictions at a limited number of levels</i>	<i>No limit to the number of jurisdictional levels</i>
<i>Systemwide architecture</i>	<i>Flexible design</i>

**Picture 13 Types of Multi-level Governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003, pp. 236)**

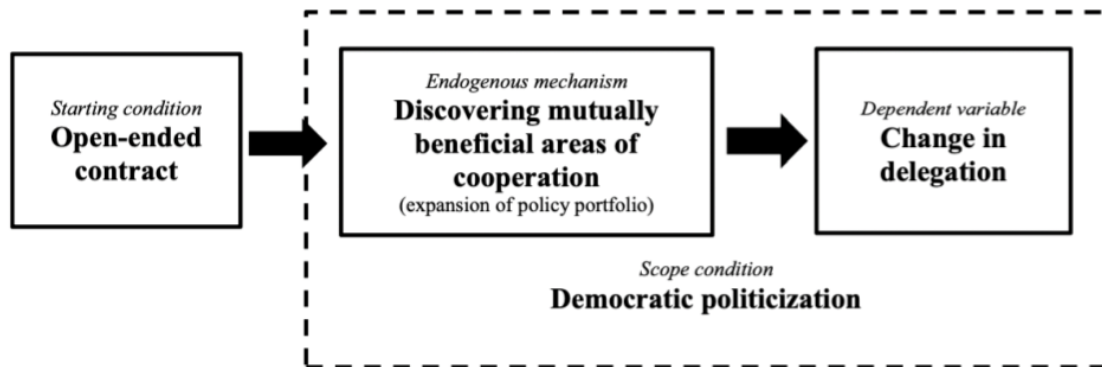
Hooghe and Marks (2003) identify 2 MLG types pictured in picture 13. Jeffery (2020) argues that Type I draws inspiration from federalism and limits the autonomy of different actors by bundling coordination and competencies to operate with general-purpose jurisdictions. For example, this type of MLG can be seen in the US, where the institutions are more hierarchical and stable (Jeffery & Peterson, 2020). Börzel (2020) argues that type I operates more regionally than globally because of the tension between community and scale. Opposite to that, type II presents how multi-level governance is orchestrated in the EU, where governance is “flexible rather than durable” (Hooghe & Marks, 2003, p. 237), therefore operating well in task-specific jurisdictions (Jeffery & Peterson, 2020). This type can operate without a similarly strong sense of community when utilizing strong networks cooperating with non-state actors such as businesses (Börzel, 2020).

*“No other international or regional organization empowers independent bodies to take autonomous decisions more than the EU does, the European Commission, the European Court of Justice, and the European Central Bank being the most prominent examples of supranational authority” (Börzel, 2020)*

In the EU, governance can be seen as more inclusive than hierarchical (Jeffery & Peterson, 2020), allowing MLG to spread beyond Europe (Börzel, 2020). The application of MLG to European Integration and the EU has been studied using three theories: neo-functionalism, intergovernmental, and post-functionalism (Hooghe & Marks, 2019).

Modern governance cannot work if power acts as a zero-sum game where “if one gains power, another loses it,” appears (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Jeffery & Peterson, 2020). This is especially critical in MLG’s environmental policy. Environmental governance requires cooperation across all levels, from local to international, to be truly impactful, as nature does not know borders (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005). Here, MLGs' input in the negotiation and knowledge sharing is crucial. MLGs Environmental policy can contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity conservation, sustainable urban development, waste management, and circular economy.

Lenz (2023) argues that open-ended contracts allow and enable institutional evolution when considering sustainability and the future. Picture 14 demonstrates the power of the open-ended contract. The OECD also proposes using formal and informal norms and contracts to foster trust among all actors and minimize the gaps in information, capacities, funding, and accountability (OECD, 2021). Empowering independent institutions and MLG can act as a powerful antidote to the rise of nationalists (Lenz et al., 2023). Strategies to utilize MLG to achieve sustainability goals effectively include collaborative platforms, capacity building, policy coherence, and non-partisan monitoring and evaluation.



**Picture 14 Theory of Endogenous Change in IOs (Lenz et al., 2023)**

MLG’s application to Global Gateway is vital as GG's environment is complex and involves multiple levels of government, from the EU supranational level to local authorities and

regional organizations in the EU, Africa, and Asia. This aspect affects the nature and characteristics of the collaboration. Horizontal coordination is also required to find and share best practices in the vast range of operators, and adaptivity helps to modify them to these diverse environments. The MLG framework can help identify future opportunities in the ever-more complex systems to respond to sustainability issues and other crises (OECD, 2022).

### **3.4 Summary of the Literature Review**

This literature review synthesizes vital theoretical concepts of value co-creation, strategic partnerships, and multi-level governance within sustainable development. It highlights the critical role of collaboration and dialogue in fostering sustainable outcomes and draws attention to the similarities and intersections between these concepts as they apply to global challenges.

A central finding across the literature is the importance of co-creation, as conceptualized by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), which emphasizes joint problem-solving and continuous dialogue between companies and customers. This approach to value creation extends beyond mere transactions, aiming to build sustained value through ongoing interaction and network engagement (Lacoste, 2016). The strategic nature of co-creation driven by long-term goals is crucial for addressing societal and ecological shifts (Arnold, 2017). The literature also points to the significance of transdisciplinary approaches in sustainability efforts, where non-academic actors play an active role in research processes aimed at tackling societal challenges and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Mauser et al., 2013; United Nations, 2021). This is a clear message for universities to operate closely and actively with different actors to focus energy and knowledge towards organizations.

Strategic partnerships share many similarities with co-creation, emphasizing collaboration and shared goals. These partnerships, which may involve public-private collaborations, corporate-NGO alliances, or academic institutions, leverage the unique strengths

of each partner to address complex global challenges (Demirbag et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2019). Trust, openness, and shared risk are identified as essential elements for the success of these partnerships, with transformational collaborations being particularly impactful in driving social innovation and societal benefit (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). However, the literature also acknowledges the potential pitfalls of such partnerships, including power imbalances and mistrust, which require careful management and adaptability (Ber & Branzei, 2010).

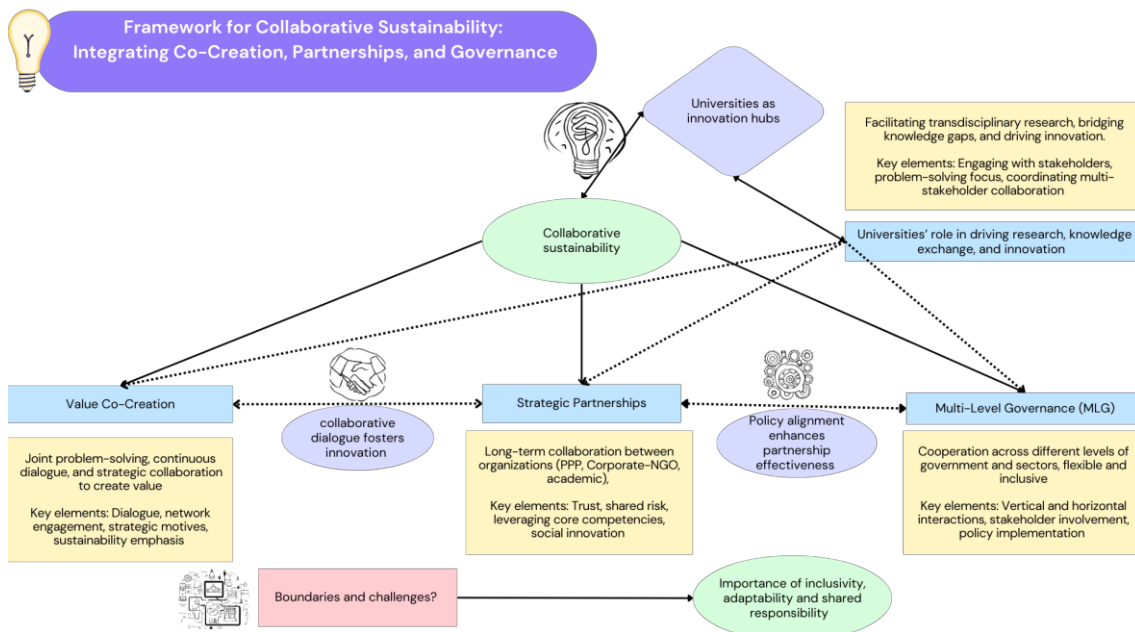
The multi-level governance (MLG) concept is presented as a framework that parallels the collaborative ethos of co-creation and strategic partnerships. MLG involves continuous cooperation and interaction across different levels of government and between public and private sector actors (Börzel, 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2003). This framework's flexibility allows it to be applied in diverse contexts, making it particularly effective for addressing complex global issues like sustainability. The review notes that, like strategic partnerships, MLG faces challenges related to coordination and accountability, especially in complex environments involving multiple actors (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). NGOs, such as universities, play a vital role in mitigating these challenges by providing local knowledge and monitoring accountability (Jraisat et al., 2022b; Lenz et al., 2023).

Across these concepts, a common thread is the emphasis on collaboration, inclusivity, and shared responsibility. Whether through co-creation, strategic partnerships, or multi-level governance, the literature consistently underscores the need for integrated approaches that bring together diverse stakeholders to address sustainability challenges. This collaborative focus is essential for creating resilient and effective solutions in an increasingly interconnected and complex world.

The role of universities in this collaborative framework is critical, particularly in fostering transdisciplinary research and innovation. As key knowledge hubs, universities are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between academic research and practical application, engaging with diverse stakeholders, including governments, businesses, and non-

governmental organizations. To effectively contribute to sustainability goals, universities must transform into innovation systems that prioritize problem-solving and adaptability in changing global environments (Mauser et al., 2013). This requires universities to actively participate in multi-stakeholder partnerships, co-create knowledge, and facilitate the flow of information and expertise across sectors, ensuring that research outcomes are directly aligned with societal needs and sustainability objectives.

### 3.4.1 Framework for future development projects



**Figure 2 Framework for Collaborative Sustainability: Integrating Co-Creation, Partnerships, and Governance**

This framework (Figure 2) presents the theory and each connection from the summary and theoretical framework. After data collection and interviews, this framework will be matched if it supports the claims.

## **4 Methodology**

Chapter 4 includes the methodology aspect of this thesis. It provides how the paper collected data to contribute to finding answers to research questions. It introduces the scoping study on Global pilots and networks. Then, it continues with data collection for this research, including semi-structured interviews, and then ends with an analysis of the collected data using the theory and background of the thesis.

The method chosen is qualitative research with scoping methods to understand the field the EU is currently focusing its investments towards and where Finnish operators are acting or could be. After the scoping study, the data collection will gather knowledge from professionals who operate in developing EU sustainability projects in Africa and Asia. As these aims “to understand the temporal or practice dynamics in organizational life” (Gehman et al., 2018, p. 297), this thesis uses Langley’s approach to qualitative research to fulfill the purpose of the study and answer the research question.

### **4.1 Data Collection**

Data collection includes a scoping study conducted in 2023 and interviews and discussions in 2024.

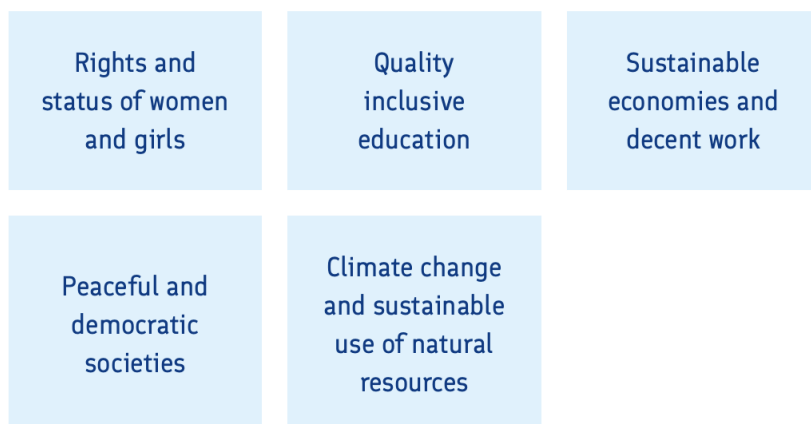
#### **4.1.1 Scoping Study**

Before starting the study, we conducted a scoping study (appendix 1) to make the base for this study and understand the environment where this initiative operates. This kind of scoping study is needed to dive deeper into the case study and for the theory building from a case to justify theory and data better and more transparently (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Therefore, even when this might act as a limitation to the validity of the results for the thesis, it also creates ground and direction for this research that is needed to tackle the sustainability issues with collaboration, and this could make a pathway to easier access for the future development projects in universities.

There are multiple different organizations and forms to create value by collaborating in this field, such as the EU's Global Gateway and EIF, the World Bank's Global Program of Sustainability (GPS), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations (UN) and the Finnish State treasury via the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action. With collaboration, it is interesting to study further what would be rational to do and what kind of operational possibilities would be to create a more efficient and effective environment. Especially in research, this study could develop an understanding for universities to utilize better and find solutions to tackle upcoming challenges with sustainability development and projects with the EU in the Global South. This Scoping study aimed to understand where the critical focus and investments are directed in the EU, where Finnish operators are involved, and if there would be something worth expanding the Finnish and UVA involvement.

The scoping study gathered information from Finland's Development Policy (Picture 15), its five priorities, and how they are aligned with global platforms that promote sustainability. Development Programme partner countries in Africa and Asia: Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Somalia, Tanzania, and Nepal. A traditionally more significant focus in Development Policy is on Africa. Still, for example, in the Higher Education Partnership HEP-Programme (2024-2026), applications to Africa (21) and Asia (20) were almost the same in the development projects. The two main themes are education-related projects and climate change and innovation.

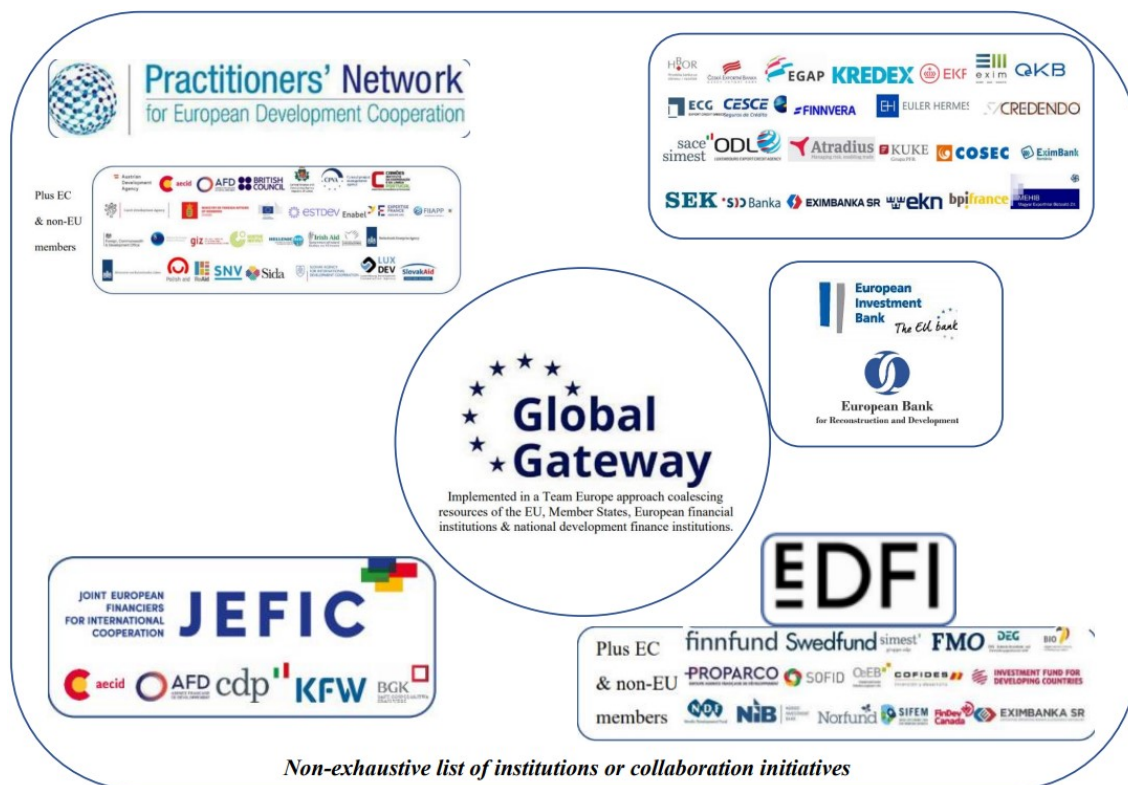
## GOALS AND PRINCIPLES OF FINLAND'S DEVELOPMENT POLICY



**Picture 15 Goals and Principles of Finland's Development Policy**

The Global Gateway EU-Africa initiative's most flagship projects are under Climate and Energy: 2 regional and 20 country-specific flagship projects. Digital flag-ship projects include two regional projects and four country-specific projects. Education and Research has one regional and two country-specific flagship projects. Of the EU-ASEAN, 16 of 21 flagship projects focus on Climate and energy, and 15 are country-specific projects.

Team Europe Initiatives (TEI) in Asia focuses on Sustainable Connectivity. This covers different “sectors from digital, energy, trade, transport, and people-to-people connectivity/higher education” (European Union, n.d.). It also includes cooperation on research, innovation, and education (Horizon Europe), where Finland is one of the actors in Team Europe.



**Picture 16 Global Gateway Finance Institutions**

Picture 16 shows the different institutions and collaboration initiatives that operate with the Global Gateway. The multitude of funding instruments and guarantee systems that support the Global Gateway Strategy make the financing complex. This requires clear communication to understand the options and where to find opportunities. It is unclear where the operational responsibility lies in spreading the knowledge to national operators, businesses, and academia, as EU countries have built their governance in various ways.

The chosen interviewees and projects for the data collection were based on these aspects and Finland's goals.

#### 4.1.2 Interviews

After scoping, the study plan was to study the projects and their results. After a deep dive into the Global Gateway project sites and contact with the EC International Partnerships team, it was shown that there is no data from the results to analyze further since

it is a relatively new initiative. As the projects might take years to start operating, this aspect is also interesting when considering prospects and agile learning to find best practices if there is no on-time data and metrics to follow.

The aim is to understand the story behind the data and reports from the field; this can provide the context for the theory gathered to understand the phenomena happening (Bansal & Corley, 2012). The data collected on the projects and funding mechanisms are all from reliable public organizations, such as reports and web pages. Therefore, the data collected will be reliable and valid. The complexity of the organizations can be an issue when gathering perfect data. Most information is collected in an accessible manner so everyone can observe the information, such as government pages, reports, info leaflets, and joint communications from the last five years (2019-2024).

This qualitative research collects data from semi-structured stakeholder interviews. In addition to these interviews, data and input were gathered from informants, and informal discussions were held with these stakeholders in related seminars and by phone calls to these introduced experts. These discussions gave their input to connections for the interviewees and aspects to study further but did not proceed to the full interview. The list of research questions that act as the base of the interview (Appendix 2) is emailed to the recipient before the interview. Also, the framework for collaboration (Figure 2) was sent with the invitation to the meeting. Before the discussion, most interviewees and informants had conversations regarding these questions and aspects with their peers and stakeholders. The interview itself is constructed via Teams and is recorded and transcribed. Interviews are conducted sequentially, which evolve through interviews. The questions were also modified to fit the interviewee's role and qualifications best.

The study then continues with interviews with project leaders, directors, and experts who work closely with international sustainability development platforms such as the Global Gateway and similar initiatives. These interviews aimed to gather a broad-ranging understanding of how different operators view collaboration and partnership

development to promote sustainability goals. Appendix 3 includes a list of interviewees and the informants. The interviewees are later described in terms: Interviewees A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H. The eight interviewees include experts: two in Education and Research, three in Digital, one in Global Gateway Finland, and two in Global Gateway and Green Transition. These interviewees were selected after the literature review and scoping study, where there was a discussion with an expert in the European Commission's (EC) International Partnership to understand potential people to interview. The focus on key areas of development for both the EU and Finland gave the frames for the interviewee selection. These are divided into two cases: Education & Research, Digital & Green transition. Interviewees operate in these areas and understand the initiative. The selection continued while interviews and discussions were conducted, and as collaboration and networks act in core roles in Global Gateway, new prospects arose as inquiries were made. The aim was to select interviewees at different levels and in various areas of expertise, including Digital and Education.

The interviews focused primarily on three main themes: co-creation, multi-level collaboration & partnerships, and multi-level governance in reaching sustainability goals, Academia's role in the Global Gateway initiative, and the differences and similarities between the challenges and opportunities of partnerships in different geographical areas. All the interviews were conducted with video to reach a face-to-face atmosphere and were 30-60 minutes long. These were recorded via Teams to help the analyzing process and allow the researcher to focus on the discussion and proceed with the follow-up questions. Transcription was analyzed with thematic analysis to make it possible to identify key themes and models from the material. This structure allows "to obtain both retrospective and real-time accounts" of interviewees experiencing the phenomenon. In addition to the transcription, notes, and ideas were collected during the interview to gather secondary sources of evidence (Yin, 2014, pp. 110-111), and thematic analysis was started during the interviews.

## 4.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis focuses on the interview findings and analyzes challenges and opportunities within the Global Gateway initiatives framework. From these interviews and data collection, this study first used thematic analysis to develop a frame for the data, which was started during the interviews. Then, it continued to analyze the data using the Gioia Methodology to develop a data structure, bind it to the theory base used, and then present the findings (Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

For the thematic analysis, Table 1 translates the subjects from the theory, divided by the main themes of co-creation, strategic partnerships and collaborations, multilevel governance, and challenges that arise from the interviews. It shows each subject raised in each interview (Interviewees A-H). Based on these subjects, the Gioia data structure's 1<sup>st</sup> order concepts can be collected.

Interviewees:	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
<b>Co-creation</b>								
Access	x	x	x		x	x	x	
Dialogue	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Transparency					x	x	x	x
Risk-Benefits	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
<b>Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations</b>								
Trust		x	x		x	x	x	x
Engagement		x	x			x	x	x
Emotions / Reputation	x	x	x			x	x	x
Social learning		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Openness	x	x	x		x	x		x
Social connections	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Dialogue		x		x	x	x	x	x
Information flow		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Shared risk and reward	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Shared resources and responsibilities	x	x	x		x	x		x
Evaluation	x	x	x		x	x	x	
Feedback loop	x	x	x	x	x		x	

Amplifying actions	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Synergy	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Coevolution	X	X	X			X	X	X
Adaptability/ Flexibility	X				X	X	X	X
Implementing collective action	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Social innovation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Policy implementation	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Joint-problem solving	X	X	X			X	X	X
<b>Multi-level Governance</b>								
Complexity	X			X	X	X	X	X
Collaborative platforms	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Capacity building	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Policy coherence	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Strategic alignment				X	X	X		X
Vertical and horizontal interactions	X	X	X	X	X			
Cross level communication	X	X	X	X			X	X
Stakeholder involment	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Challenges</b>								
Complexity	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Slow processes	X			X	X	X	X	X
Awareness gaps	X		X					X
Finding funding	X	X	X		X			X
Funding slowness	X				X	X	X	X
Knowledge sharing	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Communication	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Attitude	X	X			X			
Trust building	X	X			X	X	X	X
Reputation	X	X	X		X			
Global competition	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Differency on business environments	X			X	X	X	X	X
Shared responsibility & Ownership	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

**Table 1 Thematic data analysis from the interviews**

The Gioia Methodology (Table 2) starts with finding first-order concepts and proceeds to second-order researcher themes that bind it to the theory. After these concepts and themes, the study can move further to build broader aggregate dimensions to proceed with theoretical development (Gioia, 2021). This approach allows a deeper exploration

of what influences the success and sustainability of the collaboration and projects. Based on these and the challenges in the process, we can identify where and how to invest resources in Finland and Finnish academia. The data analysis focuses on the interview findings and analyzes challenges and opportunities within the Global Gateway initiatives framework using the Gioia methodology.

1 <sup>st</sup> Order Concepts	2 <sup>nd</sup> Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early adaptation of partners and multiple stakeholders to the projects</li> <li>• Data and knowledge sharing issues</li> <li>• Global competitors are more agile and flexible with funding and in organization</li> <li>• Time consuming processes</li> </ul>	Coordination complexity	Collaborative governance and strategic alignment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding slowness</li> <li>• Limited funding instruments</li> <li>• Mobilization of funds from the private sector to development</li> <li>• Risk management and insurance systems for risk reduction and attitude towards risk in different areas</li> </ul>	Resource Mobilization	Investment mobilization and risk mitigation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust building</li> <li>• Complex strategic initiative; partners, businesses and financing operators unsure and unaware of the initiative</li> </ul>	Knowledge integration	Operational efficiency and knowledge sharing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge sharing (platforms, challenges, tools)</li> <li>• Capacity building by empowering local actors and organizations</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vast differences in business environments between regions, areas, and projects</li> <li>• Measurability aligned with the EU strategy and focus changes depending on the stakeholder (receiving area, the EU, and Member State)</li> <li>• Evaluation and transparency of the projects and results</li> <li>• The role of the universities and academia's involvement</li> </ul>	Sustainable development partnerships and multilevel governance opportunities	Capacity building and local empowerment
		Sustainability as the driving force in digital innovation and education

**Table 2 Data structure by the Gioia method**

1 <sup>st</sup> - order concepts		
Coordination challenges	Funding and resource limitations	Communication and awareness gaps

<p>Early adaptation of partners and multiple stakeholders to the projects.</p> <p>Data and knowledge sharing issues.</p> <p>Fundings slowness.</p> <p>Global competitors: China &amp; US role.</p> <p>Time-consuming processes</p>	<p>Blended funding mechanisms</p> <p>Limited funding instruments EFSD+ &amp; NDICI.</p> <p>Funding slowness.</p> <p>Mobilization of funds from the private sector to business development.</p> <p>Risk management and insurance systems for risk reduction</p>	<p>Trust building</p> <p>Complex strategic initiative,</p> <p>knowledge sharing,</p> <p>Partners, businesses, and financing operators unsure of the initiative</p> <p>Attitude towards risks in different areas require deeper knowledge to businesses</p>
<p><b>Diverse needs across regions</b></p>	<p><b>Role of universities and academia involvement</b></p>	<p><b>Tools for facilitating collaboration, sustainable partnerships, evaluation and monitoring</b></p>
<p>Vast differences between regions, areas, and projects</p> <p>Focus changes depending on the receiving areas and EU strategies</p> <p>Business environment differences</p> <p>Agile and more flexible competitors to modify funding to diverse projects</p>	<p>Academics in Education project organic</p> <p>EU projects and strategies built on research material</p>	<p>Knowledge sharing platforms</p> <p>Business Advisory Board (BAG)</p> <p>Civil society board</p> <p>Evaluation by Pilar systems</p> <p>Utilizing the EU taxpayer's money requires transparent governance by ECA.</p> <p>Measurability aligned with EU strategies.</p> <p>UN17 goals.</p>

Capacity building by empowering local actors and organization		State of play communication.
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**Table 3 Thematic analysis of the data from the interviews**

The data revealed first-order concepts by thematic analysis of the data to groups (Table 2 and table 3): **Coordination challenges, Funding and Resource Limitations, Communication and Awareness Gaps, Diverse needs across regions, the role of universities and academic involvement, and Tools for facilitating collaboration, sustainable partnerships, evaluation, and monitoring.**

Second-order themes			
Coordination complexity	Resource mobilization	Knowledge integration	Sustainable development partnerships and multilevel governance
<p>"In the EU the processes are long and slow compared to global competition, even though they might not follow as good governance—in the future agile and more flexible processes are needed"</p> <p>"How team Europe organizes and intensifies collaboration to be able to mobilize investments and new projects"</p> <p>"Requires trust to be able to build new innovative mechanisms and joint projects"</p> <p>"Own coordination and learning platforms with Multiple stakeholders and MLG to actively collaborate"</p> <p>"Early phase adaption required"</p>	<p>"Team Europe mindset makes it possible to profit from scaling when operating together and smarter way of mobilizing our funds and resources."</p> <p>"Support to our partner countries by guarantees and instruments"</p> <p>"To mobilize investments in the development projects in infra there needs to be ownership in the partner country."</p> <p>"Resources jointly from Europe and from African operators is important operationally"</p> <p>"Lot of competition and other partnerships, but a will and</p>	<p>"Together with partner countries, private sector and delegations in the same learning curve"</p> <p>"There are seminars and panels as well in the partner countries"</p> <p>"What are the ways companies can share information and to promote joint learning"</p> <p>"We need new kind of collaborative development"</p> <p>"Knowledge deficit without having the early phase local consultation and missions to bring local operators to the project early on"</p> <p>"Local dialogues and events in Africa have longer traditions and now building in</p>	<p>"To reach SDG17's with just public development funds, we need new ways—international partnerships mindset to promote our joint key goals together with different stakeholders"</p> <p>"Empower the local operators and companies together with private sector"</p> <p>"Build environment for the ownership to be integrated to each stakeholder and partner"</p> <p>"There is a strong geopolitical framework and interest in the EU and finding the strategic balance and sweet spot to nurture partner country's development needs and interest to EU's strategic interests"</p>

<p>“Collaboration and learning platform sometimes difficult to follow and laborious operating model”</p> <p>“We need to develop team Europe model to operate better to be able to adapt partner countries in an earlier phase for the joint development”</p> <p>“The stiffness due to complexity makes the coordination of information and financing difficult”</p> <p>“Face-to-face meetings early on is one best practice in the project coordination to help with the complexity”</p> <p>“Global Gateway itself is a complex concept, that operates mostly in the strategy level at the moment”</p> <p>“Platform that gathers GG projects and their info to Member States, but now it requires more contacts to Brussels as they are project informed so generally.”</p> <p>“Which actor acts as the facilitator of the member state discussion, communication, and collaboration regarding GG to get the private sector aboard and most of this initiative.”</p> <p>“Good toolbox of different methods to tackle the complexity and challenges”</p> <p>“Long implementation periods that goes over the political cycles requires continuity.”</p> <p>“We in Finland can learn from other member states and their agencies in governance,</p>	<p>now a way to mobilize resources”</p> <p>“EC has a big role how Europe is seen and heard and what kind of partnerships are created in the higher level to be then transformed into regional and operative levels”</p> <p>“Financing is a significant question, and it's essential that we see and communicate it systematically at both regional and country levels. This approach will ensure that everyone is well-informed and involved in finding the best solutions.”</p> <p>“Financing wise in Europe there is still difficulties to compete globally as competitions are faster and more flexible to mobilize investments.”</p> <p>“Complexity in the structure makes the mobilizing slow and diverse.”</p> <p>“There are development steps for mobilizing financing and guarantees to faster efficiently build new packages.”</p> <p>“Investment risk management in the developing of the business environment makes it possible to mobilize investments and private sector along.”</p> <p>“To be able to address issues effectively, everyone cannot be involved everywhere in everything as it does not benefit anyone. The strategic decision is required to be aligned with other goals is needed.”</p> <p>“There are evaluation bases that are not public and</p>	<p>these Asia at the moment with the local branches--- we can scale some best practices”</p> <p>“Regular dialogue to reach joint understanding in the collaboration to deepen collaboration and co-creation— joint common understanding is a vital aspect in collaboration”</p> <p>“Finnish expertise can be seen as added value”</p> <p>“Embassy should be in touch with the local delegation and the the capital to promote and inform further on the new possibilities – generally there has been information assemblies with Foreign ministry with private sector operators”</p> <p>“Academia are rather autonomous that might prevent or at least slower the knowledge sharing.”</p> <p>“Business Advisory Group and Civil Society Forum that help to navigate and spread the different stakeholder's knowledge.”</p> <p>“Local EU delegations act an important role as they have the knowledge and understanding from the location, we cannot only have Europeans, European companies or civil society in our advisory groups because the issues are global. We need local civil society and academia involved, and there are already some great examples, but a lot of variety on the involvement.”</p>	<p>“We need equal partnership and co-creation to transform the traditional development projects to international partnerships and GG strategy”</p> <p>“There is willingness to have dialogue with Europe after years of collaboration and preparation and desire to have this kind of sustainable partnerships in the operational model.”</p> <p>“Success of the initiative depends also on the satisfaction of the partner country.”</p> <p>“We need all the local and member stakeholders along as Team Finland and Team Europe to get a bigger force and effect. Well organized network to develop efficient MLG.”</p> <p>“Global gateway is a strategic value priority, that enhances the discussion to other levels from high strategy level to more technical collaboration as well, --- connections need to be constant and multilevel, but it requires high level involvement”</p> <p>“At the moment, projects come more as given to Finland as presented as options, we need to transform our mentality towards a more proactive to enhance better utilization of Finnish capabilities and this way put ourselves into a more driver role.”</p>
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project management and building of the capacity in global projects in Global Gateway. Regulations and laws build a complex environment for the collaboration”	evaluation forms that affect the qualification of projects; knowledge would benefit the understanding of the requirement better early on.” “Restrictions in the project financing prevents the full possibilities of Finnish involvement.”	“...then to discuss the learning from past projects and phases and build on top of that to achieve continuity and effectiveness in Team Europe.”	
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**Table 4 Second-order Themes with quotes from interviews**

Second-order themes (Table 4) are developed by combining the first-order concepts gathered from the interview and transforming these into the theoretical framework from the literature review. Table 4 provides evidence from the interview data as proof to fit the theme. This research found four themes from the data: coordination complexity, Resource mobilization, Knowledge integration, and Sustainable development partnerships, which are color-coordinated by theme. It gathers emerging comments and notes from interviews to support the theme.

## 5 Findings

This chapter opens the findings from the data analysis. Based on the remarks, this section collides the data with the literature review framework to deepen the understanding of the toolbox used and opportunities for the best practices and barriers to overcome for communication and dissemination of information, project initialization, trust building, and financing. Based on these aspects, this section provides input to understand better how complex partnerships and collaboration organizations can support reaching sustainable development goals. Langley stated that the more complex the organizational phenomena are, the higher the complexity of the data rises as a reflection (Langley, 1999). In this case, the complexity of the governance, global business environment, and sustainability is high, reflecting the data gathered.

Finland's role in Global Gateway is active. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed Roy Eriksson as the official ambassador of Global Gateway in 2023, which is different from other Nordic countries. Finnish strategy in development projects is in digital, education, and energy, where the expertise also lies. Data analysis divided the cases into Education and Research and Digital and Green transition. The core nature of the collaboration is aligned, and this analysis starts with the basics for both cases linked to this study's theoretical framework.

The last step of Gioia's data structure for the data analysis gives the input for the findings: this combines first-order concepts and second-order themes to develop aggregate dimensions (Table 5). These dimensions aggregate the spoken with the theory in hand. These are **Collaborative governance and strategic alignment**, **Investment mobilization and Risk mitigation**, **Sustainability as the driving force in Digital innovation and education**, **Capacity building and local empowerment**, and **Operational Efficiency and knowledge sharing**.

Collaborative governance and strategic alignment	Trust building
	Effective multilevel governance structure
	Balancing geopolitical goals
	Bureaucratic challenges
Investment mobilization and Risk mitigation	Lowering risk by guarantee and insurance systems
	Blended finance models
	Communication and understanding about the local business environment
Sustainability as the driving force in Digital innovation and education	Co-creation
	Joint problem-solving of global and local challenges
Capacity building and local empowerment	Ownership
Operational Efficiency and Knowledge sharing	Synergies
	Tools, collaboration methods and measurability
	Transparent and open information flow
	Agility and flexibility

**Table 5 Aggregate Dimensions**

Data analysis showed that co-creation and multilevel collaboration are vital for successful sustainable development projects. Interviewees highlighted that the Global Gateway initiative's success depends significantly on the coordination and open ongoing dialogue between different actors at different levels, local, national, supranational, and international. Other partnerships, such as Public-Private sector partnerships and academic partnerships, are essential for promoting innovation and sustainable solutions. **Collaborative governance and Strategic alignment** capture the need for effective multilevel governance structures and reflect the complexity of building trust, balancing geopolitical goals, and overcoming bureaucratic challenges (Interviewees A, G). Differences in the organization's base of being (for-profit vs. nonprofit) can lead to tension and conflict. The interviewees discussed coevolution, adaptability, and flexibility to solve this.

Financing is always a crucial challenge in sustainable development projects. This is also the case with the Global Gateway initiative. The EU has set a goal to mobilize 300b€, and to achieve this, the private sector must join in. Some issues might lie in adapting the

projects to be nearly commercial projects (Interviewees A, B, and E), which might be difficult in more developing markets where risks are higher, and competition is brutal, especially the competition with China. EU has provided tools for this issue with different financing methods and guarantee systems, such as EFSD+ & NDICI (Interviewees D and E). Truly finding projects that nurture true partnership with the partner country/area/city has been found to best answer to the sustainability goals EU has set (Interviewees A, D, F, and G). **Investment Mobilization and Risk Mitigation** focus on fostering collaboration and investment in partner countries to lower the private sector's barriers to operating and investing. This requires mechanisms such as guarantee and insurance systems and blended finance models, as well as strong communication about the business environment and knowledge sharing with the partner country (Interviewees A, D, F, G).

The dimension of **sustainability as the driving force in digital innovation and education** emphasizes the importance of co-creating sustainable solutions that address global and local challenges. Findings show that academic collaboration might have limitations. Interviewee A stated that universities and educational entities are autonomous, and communication can be difficult. Interviewees A, B, C, D, and G call for a more systematic approach, where universities can participate more in co-creation by providing relevant research input, expertise, and innovative solutions. Much of the activeness of universities in this collaboration starts from the Universities themselves and what they can bring to the table (Interviewee D). A proactive approach is the key for universities such as UVA. This is also the case for member states such as Finland.

For European international partnerships to be sustainable, **capacity building and local empowerment** must be at the core of their operation. This can happen through education, training, and innovation ecosystems as influencing methods. Ownership here lies in all the partnerships' stakeholders, ensuring long-term impact. (Interviewees A-H)

The interviews pointed out that best practices are yet to be found as the initiative started only in 2022, and only a fraction of the projects are live or going live. The timeframe for projects ranges from 1.5 years up to 7 years, which makes it somewhat hard to measure the effectiveness of the project or whether the way to operate was best for that specific kind of operation (Interviewees B, C, D, and E). There is good collaboration within the EU partner countries and operators, but organizations vary in how they are organized to support the best member countries' strategies. In the early part of the initiative, this provides many learning opportunities for operators such as Finland to absorb knowledge and methods from colleagues. Traditionally, the big European countries, such as France, Belgium, and Germany, have been active in development projects in Africa and Asia. This is why their organizations have good knowledge of project management from different points of the process and more technical expertise in navigating the complex environment. In a complex environment and governance, **operational efficiency and knowledge sharing** are crucial when the end goal is to achieve synergies through collaboration. Tools and methods can enhance collaboration and project efficiency, such as digital platforms, thematic seminars, and other knowledge-sharing mechanisms that facilitate communication, information flow, and learning across borders. The agility and flexibility of organizations and processes can promote these aspects to address the rising challenges in the learning curve. There must be access and transparency throughout the strategy and operations to reach these at various levels. (Interviewees A—H)

In digitality, Finland is recognized globally as a leader in the field with solid capabilities in digital skills, e-governance, connectivity, cybersecurity, and data governance (*The Digital for Development (D4D) Hub*, n.d.). In Global Gateway projects, Finland has also been able to join projects in a specialist role, providing the knowledge, not monetary input. This shows new opportunities and ways to be part of the collaboration when working in multistakeholder collaborations. Universities can participate more in co-creation, especially in digital and green transition projects, by providing relevant research input, expertise, and innovative solutions. (Interviewees A,E,G, and H)

There were some noticeable differences between the strategies for Africa and ASEAN. Still, the wide variety of areas, countries, and cultures made it impossible to simplify them regarding collaboration, co-creation, and partnerships. This requires more tailored approaches that consider the different tones of voice, local needs, and environment. In the Global Gateway strategies, there are some differences area-wise: in Africa, the development of infrastructure and basic digitalization steps are highlighted in the flagship projects and needed, and in Asia, the strategy is more towards the green transition and more advanced digital solutions in, such as cyber safety.

Finland is also seen as a significant expert in education and research. Finland has been requested to join projects and has received excellent feedback in their new endeavors in Global Gateway projects such as FinCEED. Due to limited resources, the role is mainly reactive rather than proactive. Even though there are a lot of strengths in the Finnish working culture, one can see that there is still a lot to learn from our European colleagues and change our working culture to adapt best practices and network effectively. Learning from Team Europe partners and other Member State organizations is still more of an individual responsibility than a collective necessity. It is already part of Finland's target to learn and build our capabilities in global projects (Interviewees A, B, C, and D). University participation was seen as essential and more organic in education field projects, where they partner with academies and provide education and teacher training to partner countries (Interviewees A, B, C, D, F, and G).

Challenges lie in the complexity. Figure 4 shows the challenges discussed by interviewees A to H. Multi-level governance provides difficulties in coordination between the different levels and actors. It is crucial to collaborate at a higher level to provide a continuum of strategy and mobilize resources to implement the joint causes; there needs to be a strong collaboration with the local delegations regarding the day-to-day operations and to understand the environment where the project operates. Everyone in this research interview brought this up. Also, it might be challenging to match EU strategic goals with local needs and priorities in some areas if this aspect is not well coordinated. This kind

of Strategic initiative, such as Global Gateway, can lower the barriers to the receiving country and help the move of the projects, businesses, and development reach the receiving country.



**Figure 3 Challenges Communicated by the Interviewees**

## **6 Conclusion, Discussion, and Implications**

This section proceeds with the theoretical and managerial implications that the data collection and analysis give to the field. These earlier sections highlighted future research possibilities for studying the phenomena further. However, the data and study also highlighted some limitations of this study.

### **6.1 Implication to Theoretical Aspects of the Field**

This research provides theoretical implications for the field, including the strong emphasis on trust building to achieve co-creation and strategic partnership and the importance of clear strategic motives (Ber & Branzei, 2010; Jraisat et al., 2022a; Kaur et al., 2019). For sustainable co-creation to bloom, the engagement of different actors was seen as mandatory. Arnold (2017) pressed the importance of broad engagement between various other actors and joint programs; this and partner countries' early adaptation and stakeholder involvement were seen as elements to collaborate effectively in projects. This co-creation and connectivity can foster inclusivity and ownership among actors, which was an aspect each of the interviewees pointed out.

The data supports Lacoste's dimensions of sustainability theory and its process aspect (Picture 1), combining economics, education, ethics, and environment to sustainability (Lacoste, 2016). Addressing each of these aspects in an international partnership development project is required to reach ownership and long-term strategy implementation, and this can be seen as one of the critical competitive advantages the EU and GG have in the global competition. Mauser et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of effectiveness to sustainability that can be reached by the co-production of knowledge (Mauser et al., 2013). The data supported this and knowledge-sharing in collaborative platforms and formal and informal networks.

Co-creation cannot fully operate top-down management, but it benefits from clear, high-level communication that matches and understands the other levels. Interviewees

supported that high-level strategy initiatives such as GG require strong management and clear initiatives. On the other hand, top-down management at the operational level was seen to mobilize resources not the most efficient way. The data supports the theory from Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) that joint problem-solving and continuous dialogue are required to reach co-creation. Their building blocks of interaction (picture 6), dialogue, access, risk-benefit, and transparency were seen in the challenges in the current environment of value co-creation.

Synergistic value in co-creation and collaboration, especially in the EU and GG aspects, was transcribed as one of the core reasons for the international partnerships policy that the EU operates; the Collaborative Continuum's Nature of Relationship in Transformational stage (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012) together with deep trust, high engagement, significant strategic alignment and using of core competencies are all aspects that were validated by the interview data.

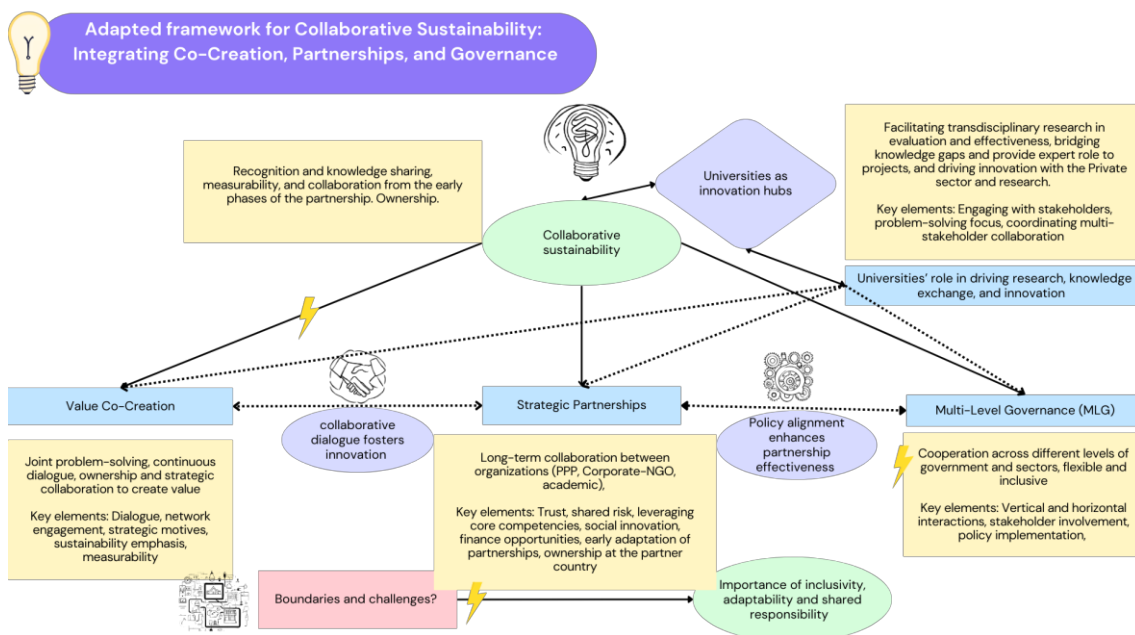
Different forms of Strategic partnerships encounter challenges with bureaucracy and slowness. This can create obstacles to trust, dialogue, and information flow. Joint problems and goals build a common ground for the partnership and help divide ownership among all the stakeholders. (Ayala-Orozco et al., 2018; Ber & Branzei, 2010; Jraisat et al., 2022a; Kaur et al., 2019)

To MLG, the aspect of cooperation and communication with different levels of governance and the data highlighted the importance of the high-level communications role in opening and facilitating cooperation at other levels. The flexibility issues in the MLG environment act as a significant challenge. Due to the complexity and intricacies of the MLG environment, the need for transparent and inclusive platforms to follow and share data and know-how is vital but a hurdle.

The study clearly states that effective governance and funding are required to receive successful cross-sector partnerships necessary for global competition and international

partnerships (Selsky & Parker, 2005). The Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) theory emphasizes the significance of private-sector investment in sustainability to achieve our global targets (Liu et al., 2021). The data underscores the importance of reducing barriers to funding and risks and developing the agility necessary to improve international competitiveness in financing to address just that. This aspect, as well as transparent information, funding capacity, and accountability, were shown to leverage trust among stakeholders.

Based on the data analysis, the framework from the theory summary was tested on the data and modified into a new adapted framework for collaborative sustainability development (Figure 4).



**Figure 4 Adapted Framework for Collaborative Sustainability**

## 6.2 Implication to Managerial Aspects of the Field

In terms of the Finnish role and export role globally, public funding has limits. Effective collaboration and utilization of the Global Gateway Initiative and PPP can exhilarate growth and Finnish attendance globally in these rising areas. A proactive role, guiding

the way towards the chosen strategic goals combined with the Finnish knowledge and expert role in areas of Digital, Education & Research, and Green Transition, can change action towards more effective sustainability. This will require a proactive role from the beginning of project development and discussions, as well as the utilization of collaboration and joint learning at multiple levels. Now, co-creation happens more from the top down, which means that the High-level talk does not match the operational level perfectly. This can create a false sense of present as the strategy adaptation already starts without the possibility of reaching the best results. Strategies will always have trade-offs, but for the trade-offs to happen unconsciously at the operational level due to resource limitation- strategy cannot succeed as planned.

Big countries in Europe and globally make significant investments with money, time, and knowledge in international partnerships and sustainability endeavors. Finland and other European countries need to be there in a driver role, not just to follow and passively get on board what comes around. This aspect is critical for the whole of the EU to operate at the best capabilities of its Member States.

For universities, there are many confluences with the Global Gateway initiative. The idea is to strengthen these and find new opportunities for them. In Digital, a project commencing in 2025 will promote regional research collaboration in Africa and Europe, the Africa-Europe Innovation Bridge. This provides higher knowledge sharing and an opportunity to enhance the University of Vaasa's and other academic roles. Also, in Cyber and Digital Diplomacy, Finland will be president of a HUB regarding digital communication and collaboration, which can open opportunities for better information flow to Finland. Overall, universities in Finland should operate together with other academic organizations to receive synergistic value. Joint activity in the shared sustainability platforms and Civil Society Boards and Groups can enhance the participation as the business environment in the Global Gateway initiative, in the EU, and with the MLG is scattered and complex.

Who oversees Finnish private funding instruments being on top of these options, and how should it be organized in the future? This is crucial for Finland, as we now depend on the organization to know and understand the opportunities of the Global Gateway and Team Europe. Based on this study and its interviews and discussions, Finland should have someone to communicate different funding options to the government and various departments, as well as internal market marketing for information and knowledge sharing. This can promote the involvement of other stakeholders, empower trust, and receive new partnership opportunities.

### **6.3 Limitations**

This study has many limitations due to the nature and state of the Global Gateway initiative. The only input in the data collection is from people in Europe, showing only the European aspect. Including the partner countries' EU delegation data would give this research the necessary input. As the Global Gateway initiative is a new strategy, there is still no data to examine and compare to get some quantitative and more measurable side to the research and the successfulness and effectiveness of Global Gateway projects. From the projects that are going on, the data and info from the beginning were impossible to receive. Also, this freshness of the initiative and projects made it difficult to discuss the best practices further, even in Team Europe collaboration and global partnerships.

### **6.4 Future Research Suggestions**

Future research would benefit from adding EU Delegations and Local actors in the Global South to the interviews to study how the Global Gateway strategy is implemented in the partner country. Examining how the EU's message is translated adds a critical dimension to the data.

After more projects go live and there is more data on each project's effectiveness, the data can be compared and then studied to see how the perception of effectiveness translates to the projects. Then, the aspects of co-creation and collaboration can be aligned

with the effectiveness. Also, the evaluation methods of the Global Gateway projects could be studied by including these theories.

Other essential aspects arise during the study, such as further studying the private sector approach and similar approaches in other countries. Future research could profit from benchmarking the best practices in big countries with long track records in development projects, including the private sector.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Scoping Study Summary: Africa/Asia Platform for Sustainability

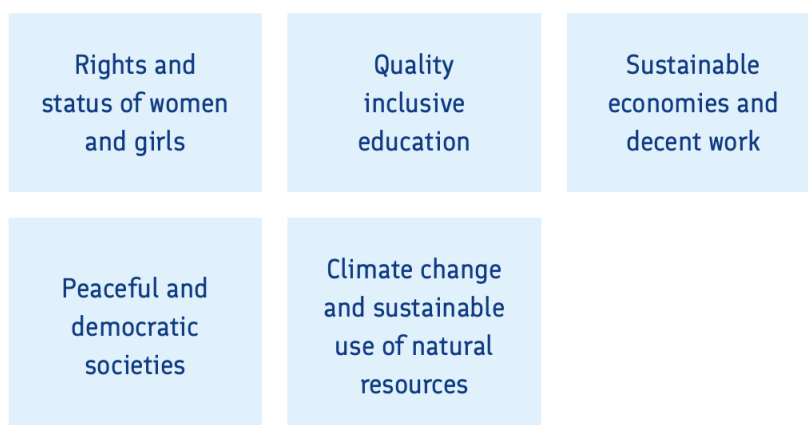
There are multiple different organizations and forms to create value by collaborating in this field, such as the EU's Global Gateway and EIF, the World Bank's Global Program of Sustainability (GPS), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations (UN) and the Finnish State treasury via the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action. With collaboration, it is interesting to study further what would be rational to do and what kind of operational possibilities would be to create a more efficient and effective environment. Especially in research, this study could develop an understanding for universities to utilize better and find solutions to tackle upcoming challenges with sustainability development and projects with the EU in the Global South. This Scoping study aimed to understand where the critical focus and investments are directed in the EU, where Finnish operators are involved, and if there would be something worth expanding the Finnish and UVA involvement.

The scoping study gathered information from Finland's Development Policy (Picture 1), its five priorities, and how they are aligned with global platforms that promote sustainability. Development policy aims to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality, and achieve sustainable development. The cross-cutting objectives that Finland promotes through its development policy include gender equality, non-discrimination, climate-resilient and low-emission development, and environmental protection, with an emphasis on safeguarding biodiversity. Finland takes a long-term perspective on development cooperation, focusing on **five priorities** building on its values and strengths:

- Strengthening the status and rights of **women and girls**, emphasizing sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Education, especially the **quality of education, participation of persons with disabilities**, and gender equality.

- **Sustainable economy and decent work, especially innovations**, the role of women in the economy and female entrepreneurship.
- Peaceful, democratic societies, especially developing tax systems in developing countries and **support for democracy and the rule of law**.
- **Climate change and natural resources, with an emphasis on strengthening adaptation** alongside mitigation of climate change; **food security and water; meteorology and disaster risk prevention; forests and safeguarding biodiversity**

### GOALS AND PRINCIPLES OF FINLAND'S DEVELOPMENT POLICY



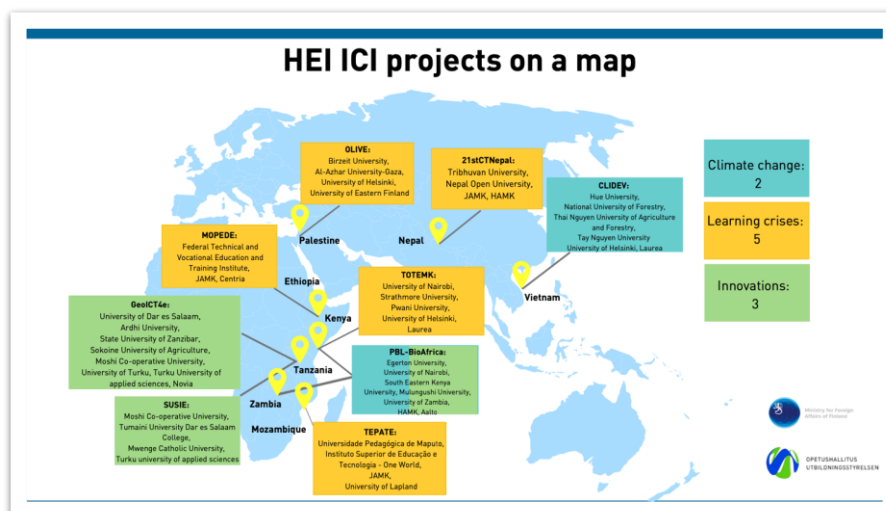
Picture 1 Goals and Principles of Finland's Development Policy

Development Programme partner countries in Africa and Asia: Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Somalia, Tanzania, and Nepal. Table 1 shows how development programs are divided into the focus areas. A traditionally more significant focus in Development Policy is on Africa.

	Ethiopia	Kenya	Mozambique	Somalia	Tanzania	Nepal
Economic growth and livelihoods	X				X	
WASH	X					X
Basic education	X		X	X		X
Women and girls		X	X	X	X	X
Vocational education		X				
Governance			X	X	X	
Health				X		
Forestry					X	

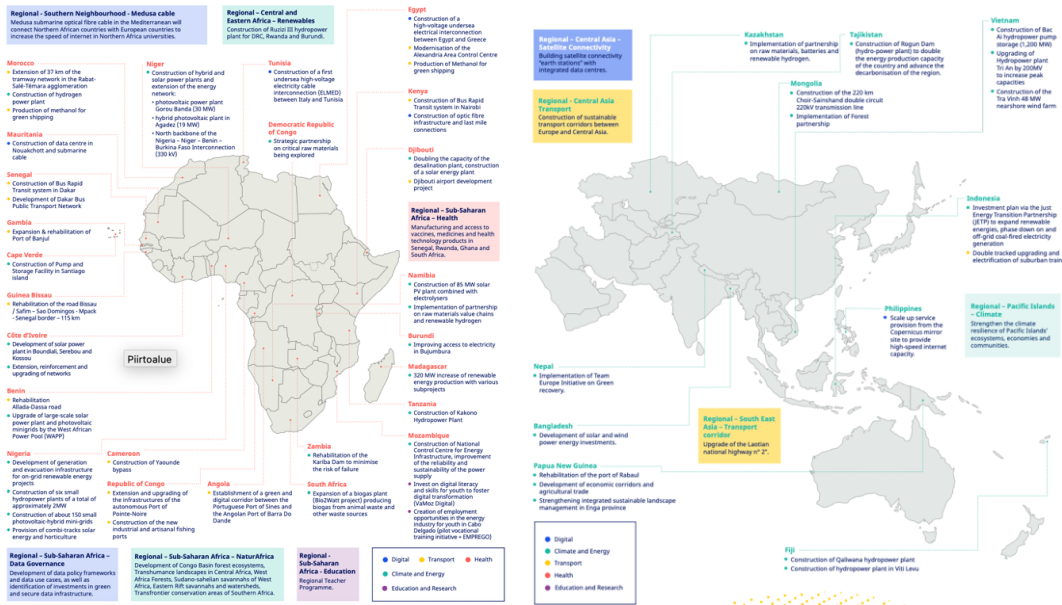
Table 1 Finland's Themes in Development Programmes

Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument (HEI ICI) was a development Programme 2020-2024, and in 2024, it was changed to a new Programme, focusing on the Partnership aspect further aligned to the European Commission's International Partnership strategy. In the Higher Education Partnership HEP-Programme (2024-2026), applications to Africa (21) and Asia (20) were almost the same in the development projects. The two main themes are education-related projects and climate change and innovation.



Picture 2 HEI ICI projects on a map

The Global Gateway EU-Africa initiative's most flagship projects (Picture 2) are under Climate and Energy: 2 regional and 20 country-specific flagship projects. Digital flag-ship projects include two regional projects and four country-specific projects. Education and Research has one regional and two country-specific flagship projects. Of the EU-ASEAN, 16 of 21 flagship projects (Picture 2) focus on Climate and energy, and 15 are country-specific projects. This shows that the flagship projects in Digital or Education are more significant regional projects, including multiple stakeholders in these massive projects. This makes it even more critical for Finland to be a driver and proactive member in the seed phase of projects, driving Finnish capabilities and businesses to the projects.

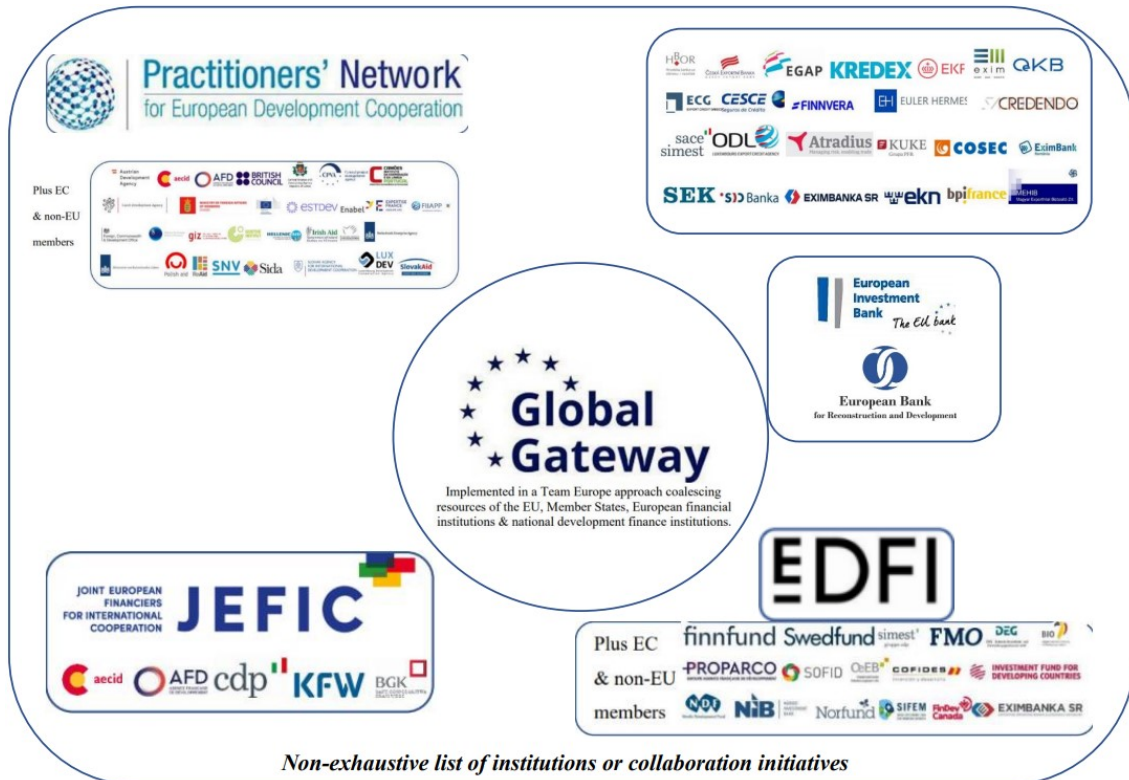


Picture 3 Africa and Asia Flagship projects

Team Europe Initiatives (TEI) in Asia focuses on Sustainable Connectivity. This covers different “sectors from digital, energy, trade, transport, and people-to-people connectivity/higher education” (European Union, n.d.). It also includes cooperation on research, innovation, and education (Horizon Europe), where Finland is one of the actors in Team Europe.

Picture 2 shows the different institutions and collaboration initiatives that operate with the Global Gateway. The multitude of funding instruments and guarantee systems that

support the Global Gateway Strategy make the financing complex. This requires clear communication to understand the options and where to find opportunities. It is unclear where the operational responsibility lies in spreading the knowledge to national operators, businesses, and academia, as EU countries have built their governance in various ways.



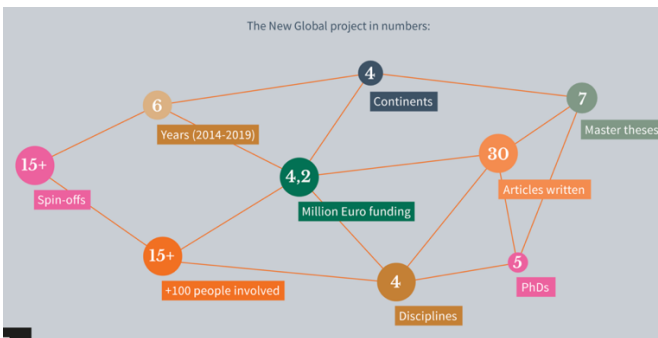
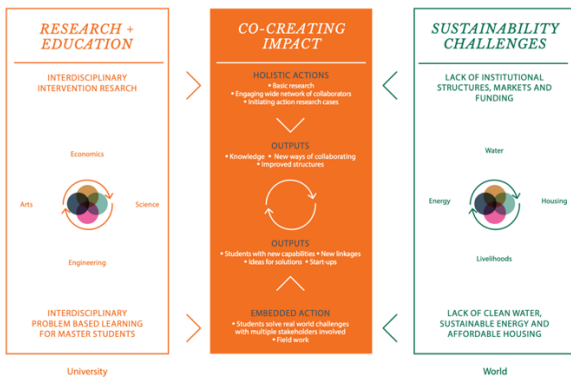
Picture 4 Global Gateway Finance institutions

In Finland, Universities operate in their international relationships instead solely, as they are also competing from international students. This aspect can slow down collaboration on other aspects and investments in collaborative platforms. Aalto University has Global Impact projects and New Global Projects in Africa and Asia as shown in the Table 2 and Picture 5.

Aalto New Global projects:
Namibia: Transition to sustainability in energy and water sectors

Tanzania: Sustainable and innovative forestry, Urban bio-waste to energy, Urban densification and affordable housing, Design with low-resource communities
Kenia: Energy transition, innovation intermediation, Water sector innovations
India: Grassroots innovations, Design with low-resource communities, Distributed renewable energy

Table 2 Aalto New Global



Picture 5 Aalto New Global strategy and numbers

## Appendix 2. Interview Questions

1. *How to promote multilevel collaboration and co-creation in multi-stakeholder collaboration in sustainability in the EU with Asia and Africa?*
2. *How to create an environment for multilevel collaboration to develop sustainability?*
3. *How can co-creation be promoted in multi-stakeholder collaboration in sustainability in the EU Global Gateway with Africa and Asia?*
4. *What kind of partnerships are most influential for universities like UVA?*
5. *How does multilevel governance affect the collaboration (with the EU Global Gateway to promote Sustainable Development Goals)?*
6. *For effective, prosperous, and sustainable collaboration, what is needed?*
7. *What metrics and indicators are the most effective for assessing the sustainability outcomes of the collaborations?*
8. *How can sustainability principles be integrated into the planning and choosing of development and research projects?*
9. *What sustainable finance options can be utilized for these projects?*
10. *What key factors contribute to successful co-creation between European and African stakeholders in sustainable development projects?*

11. *How can co-creation practices enhance stakeholder engagement in the Global Gateway projects?*
12. *How can the University of Vaasa effectively and successfully collaborate with institutions in Europe, Africa and Asia to drive innovation and capacity building under Global Gateway?*
13. *How can collaboration foster innovation and sustainable solutions within the Global Gateway EU-Africa initiative?*
14. *What are the primary challenges and barriers to success in collaboration between European, African, and Asian partners, and how can they be addressed?*
15. *How do governance, cultural differences, and resource disparities impact the success of a collaborative project in Global Gateway?*
16. *What best practices can be identified, and how can they be replicated and scaled?*
17. *Are there characteristic differences between the EU Global Gateway projects and African and Asian collaborations?*
18. *How can the effectiveness of co-creation and multilevel governance approaches be measured in the context of sustainability in Global Gateway EU-Africa initiatives?*
19. *What mechanisms can be established to ensure policy coherence and effective coordination across different levels of governance in the Global Gateway projects?*

20. *How can multilevel governance facilitate the implementation of the Global Gateway initiative EU-Africa and EU and ASEAN?*

### Appendix 3. Interviewees

	Interviewee	Role	Lenght	Area of Expertise
1	Roy Eriksson	Ambassador of Global Gateway and Team Europe instructor from Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs	45min	Global Gateway Finland
2	Anne Hämäläinen	The Finnish National Agency for Education Project Manager for Global Gateway projects The Finnish Centre of Expertise in Education and Development (FinCEED) provides training, networking, and deployment of experts in education and international development.	60min	Education & Research
3	Saara Paavilainen	The Finnish National Agency for Education Project Manager for Global Gateway projects The Finnish Centre of Expertise in Education and Development (FinCEED) provides training, networking, and deployment of experts in education and international development.	60min	Education & Research
4	Antti Karhunen	Deputy Director General of International Partnerships in European Commission.	45min	Global Gateway
5	Silja Leinonen	Senior Adviser, Innovation and Digital Development, Department for Development Policy. Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland,	60min	Digital
6	Suvi Leinonen	Member of the Cabinet of Jutta Urpilainen, European Commission. In charge of the Global Gateway and Green Transformation at the Cabinet.	45min	Global Gateway & Green Trans
7	Liisa Ketolainen	Expert in Digital for Development, HAUS Finnish Institute of Public Management Ltd. Part of the D4D Hub established by the EU and its member states and part of the Global Gateway initiative.	35min	Digital
8	Angela Méheut	Angela Méheut, D4d expert. The global coordination including facilitating the D4D Hub private sector and civil society and academia advisory group.	30min	Digital
	<b>Informal dicussions</b>			
	Director X	Director in Business Finland.		Funding
	Matias Ingman	International Partnerships International Development in European Commission.		Global Gateway

