

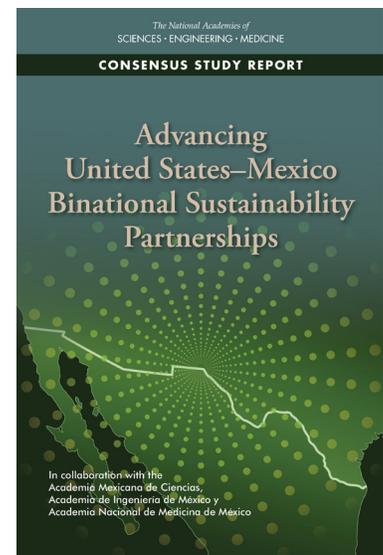
# Advancing United States–Mexico Binational Sustainability Partnerships

The U.S.–Mexico border region faces significant sustainability challenges that impact both nations. Warming and drying conditions threaten surface water and groundwater availability in the region. Coupled with rising urban demand for water, this can disrupt farming, grazing, and other livelihood systems. The region’s rapid population growth, high rates of poverty, urbanization, volatile economic conditions, and increased exposure to extreme weather events are also critical challenges facing communities, commerce and industry on both sides of the border, all of which are compounded by the often-tense border politics. Navigating these sustainability challenges while preserving the area’s cultural richness, economic dynamism, and unique ecology requires partnerships that engage a broad range of stakeholders from both countries.

There has been a long history of U.S.–Mexico collaborations among federal and state agencies around water management, flood control, fire management, and the sharing of information and scientific findings related to the region’s sustainability. However, as both countries’ priorities for the region change (for Mexico, to serve as the gateway for binational commerce and foreign investment, and for the United States, increasingly as a buffer against immigration), it has become clear that additional innovative partnerships are needed to bring together a diversity of public, private, and civil-society organizations to foster comprehensive binational collaboration and the coproduction and stewardship of regional solutions.

To address this need, the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, together with the Mexican Academy of Sciences (Academia Mexicana de Ciencias), Mexican Academy of Engineering (Academia de Ingeniería de México), and Mexican National Academy of Medicine (Academia Nacional de Medicina de México), appointed a committee of experts from the United States and Mexico to conduct a consensus study to identify partnership strategies to address select binational sustainability challenges.

The committee’s report, *Advancing United States–Mexico Binational Sustainability Partnerships* (2021),<sup>1</sup> identifies needed action in the region in the context of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically focusing on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, which calls for revitalizing global partner-



<sup>1</sup>The committee defines U.S.–Mexico binational sustainability partnerships as: “Organizations and individuals from different sectors and interest groups within the United States and Mexico, voluntarily coming together with organizations or individuals across the United States–Mexico border to address shared binational challenges and opportunities for sustainable development that isolated efforts or national initiatives would not be able to effectively accomplish.”

ships for sustainable development.<sup>2</sup> This report outlines potential strategies and mechanisms to increase coordination among relevant government agencies, the private sector (such as the mining and energy industries), and civil society in the United States and Mexico. Strategies for achieving effective partnerships are also described, including the need for organizational flexibility, adaptation to change, financial resources, and norms of distribution, as well as the promotion of an environment that fosters innovation, learning, collaboration, and trust.

## ACHIEVING EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN THE U.S.–MEXICO BORDER REGION

Sound governance and strategic partnerships that engage a diverse set of stakeholders on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border are needed to address sustainability challenges in the region, particularly to ensure the economic vitality and livelihoods of its people while protecting its cultural richness and unique natural environment. In particular, the committee identified the growing potential for partnership efforts around binational mining, energy, and commercial sustainability. The report offers the following conclusions to support and enhance strategic partnerships:

- Effective data sharing in transnational partnerships, or partnerships involving a mixture of private, public, and civil society actors with different sets of knowledge, experience, and information access, requires respecting the norms and institutional constraints of participants with enhanced transparency and accountability through partnership-specific data management protocols.
- Establishing informal community relationships and integrating Indigenous and local knowledge are instrumental in partnerships that span administrative levels and geographic boundaries.
- Knowledge coproduction creates value in sustainability partnerships when it emanates from mutual or “horizontal” relationships among all the involved actors, confronting current power asymmetries with a commitment to combat inequality and exclusion.
- Partnership persistence requires a systemic approach toward a shared goal. It is a function of the partners’ organizational flexibility, adaptation to change, financial resources, and norms of distribution, as well as whether they maintain an environment that fosters innovation, learning, collaboration, and trust.
- Alignment as a process among partners to identify synergies for pursuing and securing the common good achieves coherent, efficient, and effective outcomes. Effective alignment requires flexibility in the partners’ perspectives, values, and processes to enable coordination, identify appropriate entry points for new information integration, and achieve continuous learning.

Additionally, partnerships developed to address sustainability challenges in the region could be strengthened by adopting a complex socio-ecological systems (SES) approach. A SES approach can improve how stakeholders adapt and transform in response to a range of interconnected economic, cultural, political, social, and environmental dynamics. Such a flexible approach can also inform stakeholders as they develop responses to unpredictable, often extreme, and high-impact events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, severe drought, or other disasters. Aligning partnership strategies with the SDGs can be directly supported by systems thinking and integrated development.

## STRATEGIES FOR FORMING AND MAINTAINING SUCCESSFUL BINATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY PARTNERSHIPS

To be effective, binational sustainability partnerships must be centered on trust, be transparent, have clear, mutually defined objectives, be able to navigate internal and external power dynamics, and, above all, rely on process and governance as mechanisms to deliver partnership outcomes. Below are the seven key strategies for forming and maintaining successful binational partnerships identified in the report:

### STRATEGY 1: IDENTIFY CRITICAL AREAS TO BE ADDRESSED BY THE PARTNERSHIP

It is important for stakeholders to have a clear, mutual understanding of the objectives of a partnership. Developing partnerships and understanding objectives involve identifying a target audience for activities and learning what impacts the partnership will have on other audiences and processes. When considering the desired outcome, partners also need to consider the assumptions around that outcome—such as resource availability and codependent processes—and the risks involved in pursuing it.

<sup>2</sup>For additional information on SDG 17, see <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2017/goal-17/>. SDG 17 focuses on the advancement of multi-stakeholder partnerships that require coordination and collaboration among diverse stakeholders in pursuit of a common and mutually beneficial vision.

## **STRATEGY 2: ESTABLISH TRUST AMONG PARTNERS**

Relationship building is essential to successful partnerships, often starting long before a formal partnership has been established among stakeholders and continuing long after it has ended. In the case of partnerships among stakeholders from the United States and Mexico, particularly those involving representatives from local Indigenous communities, intercultural communication and competence—*interculturalidad*—is critical.

## **STRATEGY 3: BALANCE AND ORGANIZE POWER DYNAMICS**

Achieving and maintaining successful multi-stakeholder partnerships requires the pursuit of “horizontal” interactions among partners that are fair and transparent. This means adopting a rotating leadership, even if the partners vary in size, organizational strength, financial standing, or other key characteristics. Addressing power asymmetries effectively requires active listening, for example, around engagement with Indigenous communities on the border.

## **STRATEGY 4: ESTABLISH A STABLE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE**

Adopting strategies for effective partnerships requires a highly flexible and adaptive collaborative structure that incorporates robust decisionmaking and goal-oriented action. The overall approach requires strong leadership support to articulate and pursue short-, medium-, and long-term goals that set stakeholders’ expectations for partnership effectiveness. Adaptive governance of multi-stakeholder partnerships entails the adoption of iterative approaches to monitoring, assessment, and interpretation of outcomes. This may require discarding or significantly modifying the original expectations, goals, projected impacts, and internal and external benefits of the partnership.

## **STRATEGY 5: AGREE ON A DEFINITION OF EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP EXECUTION**

For partnerships to succeed, there needs to be a clearly defined outcome and a mutual commitment by each partner to execute the outcome. Although there are numerous similarities between cities and industries in the U.S.–Mexico border region, each country and each stakeholder group’s understanding of partnership success is likely to vary—and they may at times contradict one another. While desired outcomes may evolve, mutual commitment and a trusted process can ensure that such evolution brings all partners forward in continued collaboration.

## **STRATEGY 6: DEVELOP SHORT-, MEDIUM-, AND LONG-TERM GOALS**

While sustainable development is a long-term goal, pursuing it requires consistent short- and medium-term efforts, which will be enhanced through partnership-based initiatives. Effective partnerships require a strategy that is mindful of the timing and sequence of the assumed tasks, since appropriate timing and sequence are crucial for reaching broader sustainable development goals.

## **STRATEGY 7: ESTABLISH GUIDELINES FOR PARTNERSHIP EVALUATION**

There are three key measures for assessing partnerships: process (partnership formation, goal setting, defining stakeholder roles, and conducting partnership activities); governance (flexibility, equity, accountability, responsiveness, transparency, and consistency among partners and external stakeholders); and outcomes (results in relation to goals and associated tangible factors that emerge from partnership activities). Process guidelines for effective partnerships start with the way clear goals are achieved, with participants and external stakeholders jointly defining the roles and responsibilities they will pursue, and where appropriate, modifying goals. Governance guidelines include flexibility and responsiveness, especially the ability to produce qualitatively different strategies for different approaches to partnership goals, activities, and outcomes. Outcome guidelines for a partnership, that is, the degree to which results and impacts are generated, sustained, and equitable, are perhaps the best signal to external constituents that partnerships are effective.

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Addressing the sustainability challenges of the U.S.–Mexico border region requires an acknowledgement of the region’s complex social and political context, its intertwined histories and cultural, geographical, and ecological diversity, as well as its shared climate vulnerability and commercial interdependence. Navigating these challenges requires attention to sound governance—of which sustainability partnerships as assessed in this report are a crucial but by no means sufficient element. Essential is a focus on effective strategic partnerships that engage a diverse set of stakeholders on both sides of the border. Through these strategic partnerships, opportunities will arise to support the broader pursuit of sustainable development in this critical region.

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**For More Information . . .** This Consensus Study Report Highlights was prepared by the Board on Environmental Change and Society based on the Consensus Study Report, *Advancing United States–Mexico Binational Sustainability Partnerships* (2021). The study was sponsored by the Mexican Academy of Sciences, the Mexican Academy of Engineering, the National Academy of Medicine of Mexico, the George and Cynthia Mitchell Endowment for Sustainability Sciences at the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences W.K. Kellogg Foundation Fund. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242 or <https://www.nap.edu/26070>.

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