

PrC's Research Principles

The Partnerships Resource Centre (PrC) creates, connects and shares knowledge on cross-sector partnerships for sustainable and inclusive development. PrC aims to understand how cross-sector partnerships work and how they can contribute to sustainable transformations. To that end, the research of PrC is grounded in three overarching principles:

1. Research is based on societal, methodological, theoretical, and empirical triangulation.
2. Research is oriented to practice and action.
3. Research contributes to strengthening partnering capacity.

This document explains the three principles in detail by elaborating the characteristics and objective of the principles.

1. Research is based on triangulation

Triangulation is an approach that serves to advance the analysis and interpretation of findings. It has been embraced by the PrC to avoid thinking in dualisms or artificial opposites and to encourage integrative thinking. The principle of triangulation implies that the multi-dimensional problem drives the research approach and not the other way round. We actively search for a combination of societal 'relevance' and scientific 'robustness' in this endeavor. Four different forms of triangulation can be identified, which all contribute to improving the reliability of findings (based on Denzin 1987). The particular forms are discussed below.

First, **societal triangulation** refers to the practice of relating the issue under study to the most important and sufficiently diversified group of stakeholders that surround the issue under study. This is important because stakeholders each may have distinct understandings, interests and approaches towards complex societal issues. A range of perspectives is consequently required for a comprehensive and unbiased understanding of the issue under study.

Second, **methodological triangulation** is about using multiple methods to gather relevant data in a timely manner, for instance through combining interviews, observation, and census data. Combining different methods enables augmenting and clarifying results from other methods. Furthermore, methodological triangulations facilitates the compensation of one method's weakness with the strength of another method, and thereby improves richness and reliability of data.

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Third, **theoretical triangulation** concerns the use of multiple theoretical schemes to interpret the phenomenon under study. It is often unlikely that one theory or framework is sufficient or to understand and explain the diversity found in complex phenomena or problems, such as partnering configurations. Theories, used as lenses to study reality, frequently prove to be of limited scope. Theories should therefore be blended with findings from empirical research, to detect plausible processes that generate outcomes.

Fourth, **data or empirical triangulation** refers to a technique of cross-examination in which different sources of data are used to check the results of the subject under study. Data, involving time, space, and persons, is through this form of triangulation validated through cross-verification from two or more sources. The objective is to explain in more detail the richness and complexity of partnership configurations by studying it from multiple angles.

2. Research is oriented to practice and action

PrC research is oriented to practice and action, which implies that PrC engages with tenacious practices to proactively inform decision-makers in partnerships. Consequently, PrC investigates situated practices and uses comparative analysis of case studies for theory development and/or refinement. This results in the following four orientations.

First, research engages **with tenacious practices** performed by organizational actors, in order to analyze how partnerships navigate wicked problems. Wicked problems are characterized by their complex nature, which means there are no single or simple solutions for these types of problems. An effective approach to wicked problems is also related to changing mindsets or helping participants to search for new – paradoxical, out of the box, integrative – ways to address complex issues. The researcher should therefore keep an open mind to what seems to work in specific situations, and engage in configurational thinking. Configurational thinking is rooted in a case-oriented approach, based on notion that people, processes, context, and action are interconnected and should not be analyzed in isolation. Practically this means to consider multiple actors involved in the issue, consider who is present in the case under study, and acknowledge multiple causalities and the contributing processes to the topic one is interested in.

Second, the PrC's research includes **systematic and flexible forms of monitoring**, data collection, process observation, and analysis tailored to partnership specific contexts. As such, decision-making processes in partnerships on emerging solutions can be proactively informed. This is to be achieved through an open dialogue that generates collaboration and a jointly produced position. For PrC researchers, this requires strategic management involving continuous planning, monitoring, analysis, assessment; priority setting; and pragmatic ways of mixing methods in order to enable a flexible research approach.

Third, the PrC's research incorporates **design and application of protocols** for feedback and validation by organizational actors. This requires team work of practitioners and researchers. PrC researchers need to reflect and publish on the modalities used for connecting society and research. And research as intervention is discussed, monitored and examined in a transparent way with practitioners. This could for instance entail to investigate whether and how Theories of Change capacitate partnership facilitators to strategize. The PrC aims at

contributing to a number of research practices: e.g. developmental evaluation, impact pathway and impact loops or process-tracing approaches.

Fourth, research **investigates situated partnering practices** and **compares** case studies for theory development and/or refinement. Research of the PrC is anchored in existing theories. The practice of studying context-dependent partnerships and PrC's access to this data sharpens theory and contributes to theory development. The participation of PrC in on-going change processes, natural experiments, and evaluation practices facilitates theory-testing. PrC has a publication strategy for contextual action learning, and it transfers actionable knowledge along the way through practices such as trainings, simulations, and mid-term reviews.

3. Research contributes to partnering capacity

The third principle entails that the PrC's research contributes to partnering capacities aimed at creating transformational change in support of grand societal challenges – as defined in particular by the Sustainable Development Goals.

First, PrC through its research contributes to the capacity to **deliberate and strategize** as partners for addressing complex problems. Its research examines the ways in which deliberations are inclusive, authentic, and consequential, it connects short-term and long-term perspectives, and determines conditions for alignment of private and public interests, by recognizing the life cycle and map sequentiality of actions in partnerships.

Second, research contributes to the capacity to **diagnose and create partnering space** between private, civil and public domains. This requires diagnosing the institutional conditions that enable and constrain the collective capacity to solve problems, discovering whether and how partnering is necessary to address a societal problem or issue, mapping space for partnering in specific contexts, delineating proper partnerships configurations (linked to the issue), identifying leverage points and scaling pathways, and embedding research in multiple scales.

Third, PrC through its research aims to contribute to the capacity to **learn and evaluate specific contributions** of partnering, in order to address complex problems. PrC analyzes practical realities of partnering processes that can be learned at individual and group level. It documents and explicates joint navigation and strategizing processes and identifies feedback mechanisms in partnering configuration. PrC's research contributes to appreciative and situational inquiries of partnering by using jointly selected markers for change and impact pathways of a Theories of Change approach, and translates experiential and tacit know-how into transmittable models and codified knowledge.