

Impact case: Partnerships resource Centre

Necessary partnerships

For more than two decades now, cross-sector partnerships have been on the rise as one of the new attempts to address a variety of sustainability challenges¹. By combining the unique resources and capabilities of businesses, civil society organisations and/or governmental actors, outcomes of partnerships are expected to exceed those of any sector acting in isolation². Cross-sector collaboration is often considered as a crucial condition for the creation and operation of sustainable business models that contribute to societal goals³. Global policy frameworks, like the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations, echo the assumption that cross-sector collaboration is necessary.⁴

Meaningful research

Cross-sector collaborations are complex and may be accompanied by high transaction costs. Yet it is challenging to fully understand how partnerships work and how they can contribute to societal transformations.

Ten years ago, the Partnerships Resource Centre (PrC), a specialist research centre at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM), started its work to create, connect and share knowledge of cross sector partnerships⁵.

Initially, research focused on the development of typologies, partnering logics for companies, NGOs and governments, risks and conditions and it contributed significantly to understanding and improving partnering practices⁶. However, the focus increasingly shifted towards understanding how partnerships work, how to enhance their effectiveness and on identifying their added value.

Integrating partnerships in business models and the management of partnerships portfolios is a conspicuous bottleneck for companies as they work towards becoming more 'purpose driven', to add value to society and ultimately contribute to the SDGs. It's a similar story for civil society organisations. It's not easy or self-evident⁷ to create active collaboration with companies that are so different.

Scientific knowledge and practical challenges have not always been well-matched. There was, and still is, an increasing demand from societal actors to jointly find meaningful ways to research and implement systemic solutions to sustainability challenges.

Key impact aim

The PrC fosters impactful research to contribute to societal challenges. The Centre aims to achieve societal impact by developing and validating new impact methodologies and interventions. This impact becomes evident by the willingness of societal parties – such as businesses, national and international NGOs, and governments – to participate in and fund research and learning processes, and the research-led transformational results and outcomes.

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The PrC is an ambitious initiative to rethink the connection between scientific research and practitioners' experiences. Its ambition is substantiated through developing an active approach to research characterised by active stakeholder engagement in all phases of research – design, implementation (data collection), validation (sense-making), and dissemination (publication of lessons and insights and tool development). In this way, it generates a meaningful interaction between knowledge and practice, and creates a 'living laboratory' in which co-creation takes place. This results in cross-sectoral learning, development and accumulation of knowledge, and strengthened partnering capacity⁸.

The PrC is an answer to recent pleas in the scientific discourse to enhance the contribution of management science to society⁹. PrC does so by taking up 'grand challenges' and by developing and exploring new methods to increase the impact of research projects. The PrC consequently actively engages in multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary research.

The PrC applies the principles of triangulation in both theory and method development¹⁰. The PrC's collaborative action research approach incorporates innovative and state-of-the-art insights concerning into multi-stakeholder engagement and continuous (but structured) iteration processes between theory and practice. These efforts include insights from developmental evaluation literature, and from theory-based evaluations, applying the principles of living laboratories, theories of wicked problems (and complex adaptive systems), the use of participatory observations, qualitative case studies and grounded theory¹¹.

Consequently, several of the PrC's academic publications focus on methodology development (including delineating impact pathways and presenting the results of action research) to contribute to more impactful research and practice. The PrC is actively and firmly embedded in global research communities for partnering¹².

Over the past 10 years, the PrC has built an impressive portfolio of completed and ongoing research projects. A few examples of PrC's flagship research projects illustrating its innovative working method are described below.

Working towards collaborative solutions

In conducting collaborative research, PrC engages with actors from public and private sectors and civil society in various locations around the world. The examples here are from two ongoing projects to develop sustainable value: the 2SCALE project, and an NWO-Groene Zaak project.

2SCALE: making value chains more inclusive

In eight African countries, incubator programme 2SCALE¹³ – implemented by a consortium of NGOs and granted by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs – offers support services to business champions (SMEs and farmer groups) and partners, enabling them to produce, transform and supply quality food products. These products go to local and regional markets, including to Base of the Pyramid (BOP) consumers.

The PrC facilitates an action research trajectory to create opportunities for 2SCALE staff to reflect, assess and improve its approach so that it can enhance its capacity to collaborate and manage change. In this project the PrC works with the concept of impact pathways, which help critical thinking about the desired societal change, and illustrate how complex process of change unfold over time. These impact pathways can help to manage and steer interventions. In this project the PrC supported 34 partnerships through action research from 2015-2018. From 2019-2023 it will

support an additional 60. So far, this actions research project has resulted in two peer-reviewed articles in academic journals¹⁴.

NWO-Groene Zaak: enhancing sustainability transitions

In the NWO-Groene Zaak programme 'Sustainable Business Models', PrC executes an action research project called: 'Managing the transition to sustainable business models: the role of leadership and measuring shared value creation'. The main aim of the research project has been to consider the transition process that enhances organisations to create shared value, with the organisations acting either as implementers themselves or as advisors.

In practice, the project is creating a framework to evaluate the current value constellation of organisations. This framework provides businesses with relevant insights into their position, patterns, vision and ambitions for sustainable value creation relative to their environment and competition and gives future direction by showing medium and long-term objectives. To help managers assess their position in the transition towards higher levels of sustainability, a practical on-line scan was introduced in collaboration with the largest digital platform on sustainable business in the Netherlands. The scan is the first to link companies' SDG strategies to their transition trajectories. In just two months, almost 500 Dutch companies have used the scan.

A vital part in this transition trajectory is the question of whether companies can effectively make use of partnerships and integrated them in their mainstream business model and into their business case

The added value of partnerships

A challenging question in all PrC's activities concerns the added value of partnerships. Usually, partnerships have quite transformational ambitions – aiming for societal change – but what do they add and how can it be measured and assessed? The PrC focuses on explicating, measuring and assessing partnerships' contributions to societal transformations. The purpose is often a combination of accountability, learning and adapting, increase credibility and legitimacy, exploring scaling potential and understanding how to improve effectiveness of partnerships. It involves a mapping of the gap between intention and realisation, as well as a mapping of present and future stakeholders. The assessment serves various target groups such as donors and funders, partners, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders. A running example of this approach is the role the PrC plays in a German partnerships' platform.

GIZ/MSPs: implementing 2030 Agenda partnerships

The German Platform for Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs) for Implementing the 2030 Agenda (P2030) and the Competence Centre Change Management (FBM) of the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) support MSPs between NGOs and business working on the SDGs. It is funded by the German government.

The PrC designed and currently executes a collaborative research project about the added value of MSPs and the role for the backbone organisations to maximise the added value, together with P2030, FBM and four German based MSPs. The project is funded by GIZ and aims to generate insights on three interacting levels:

- at individual MSP level with a focus on learning, monitoring, and communicating value
- at the collective level – between MSPs – with a focus on peer-learning
- and at a generic level, to generate knowledge about the added value of MSPs from which others can learn.

Supporting and guiding strategizing in partnering processes

Focusing on mutual learning to contribute to change processes, the PrC facilitated tailor-made systematic learning cycles. These learning trajectories support strategic collaboration, strengthen partnering capacity and assess the meaning of partnerships for all stakeholders involved. Two recent examples are described below.

Philips-Amref: scaling a strategic partnership

In 2013 Philips and Amref Flying Doctors joined forces to improve primary health care in Africa. Having recently agreed to extend their collaboration until at least 2023, the partnership is now at a crucial point at which to decide on its scaling so Philips and Amref, together with PrC, have set up a learning trajectory co-funded by both partners. PrC has offered support by systematic analysis of the current state of the partnership. Research findings were translated into practical tools for both partners. For example, the joint development of a theory of change has provided both partners with insights into what is needed, and what is possible. The joint process reinforced mutual trust. Now, the partners are better able to make decisions and deal with the contradictions that are often inherent in partnerships. Through this intensive collaboration, PrC gained in-depth insights into the operation of a strategic partnership that have contributed to the body of knowledge of partnerships.

GDL: developing an innovative diplomacy

The founding partners of the Global Diplomacy Lab (GDL) – including the German Federal Foreign Office – believe that more inclusive and agile formats of diplomacy and international co-operation are needed to deal with cross-border and global challenges. The GDL creates and uses innovative formats, bringing together decision makers and future leaders from various sectors, as well as those from different geographical and cultural backgrounds, to find new answers to the most pressing challenges of today and tomorrow.

The PrC supports the GDL in creating its future strategy. As it is not yet known what innovative diplomacy will ultimately look like, the GDL is at the forefront and wants to continue to lead the way in shaping innovative diplomacy for the future. The GDL made budget available for a year for the PrC to facilitate sessions with a group of ambitious GDL members to co-create an impactful value proposition.

To conclude: pathways to impact

Collaborative research is a process in which participants systematically examine their own practice using the techniques of robust qualitative and quantitative scientific methods for the purpose of increasing the learning of all participants. It starts from the understanding that interventions take place which improve practice and thereby develop into new knowledge (what works, what doesn't work and why?). This form of research is an iterative, cyclical process of reflecting on practice, acting and intervening, reflecting, and taking further action. The research takes shape while the intervention takes place. Greater understanding gathered from each cycle points the way to improved practice. Lessons learned are made publicly available in academic and professional publications.

The PrC's collaborative research approach includes several factors that are critical for success. They include engaging with societal stakeholders by actively involving them in research design, collecting data, and sensemaking. The PrC provides a valid and reliable methodology and applies state-of-the-art scientific knowledge. In this approach, the PrC is recognised as an independent partner because of the close academic relationship with RSM and the EUR.

Collaborative research requires a different role from the researcher, or more accurately the researcher can play a variety of roles during the research projects. The researcher is not only the knowledge expert, but also a facilitator, supporter, or collaborator, depending on what is needed.

PrC's success is evident from its earning capacity. Partners are willing to grant systematically set-up research trajectories that unleash their own partnering potential as well as that of their partners.

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- ⁴ United Nations General Assembly. Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development, 2015. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E.
- ⁵ For more information on PrC's strategy, reference is made to PrC's [Knowledge Agenda](#) 2018-2022.
- ⁶ See *Facts & Figures Partnerships Resource Centre* (2020) and www.rsm.nl/prc
- ⁷ See the references mentioned in endnote 3.
- ⁸ PrC's [Research Principles](#) explains the characteristics and objective of the principles in more detail.
- ⁹ George, G., Howard-Grenville, J., Joshi, A. and Tihanyi, L. (2017) Understanding and Tackling Societal Grand Challenges through Management Research. *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 59, No. 6., pp. 1880-1895; Kolk, A., Kourula, A. and Pisani, N. (2017). Multinational enterprises and the Sustainable Development Goals: what do we know and how to proceed? *Transnational Corporations*, Vol. 24, No.3., pp. 9-32.
- ¹⁰ See the reference in endnote 6.
- ¹¹ Vellema, S. & van Wijk, J. (2014). Partnerships intervening in global food chains: the emergence of co-creation in standard-setting and certification. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 107, 105-113; Vellema, S., Ton, G., de Roo, N., & van Wijk, J. (2013). Value chains, partnerships and development: Using case studies to refine programme theories. *Evaluation*, 19(3), 304-320.
- ¹² See *Facts & Figures Partnerships Resource Centre* (2020).
- ¹³ 2Scale stands for: Toward Sustainable Clusters in Agribusiness through Learning and Entrepreneurship.
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