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PrC Insight Series

Partnership Principles



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The **Partnerships Resource Centre** ([PrC](#)) at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University is an international centre for research and knowledge about public-private collaboration for sustainable and inclusive development, bridging science and practice. PrC aims to understand how cross-sector partnerships work and how they can contribute to sustainable transformations. Through the **PrC Insight Series**, we share evidence-based knowledge to enhance the effectiveness and impact of partnerships.

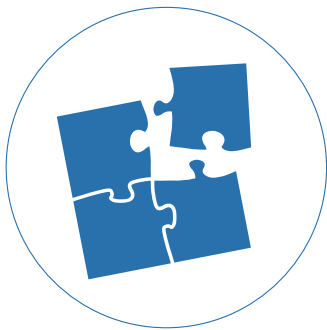
#1 MAKING PARTNERSHIPS – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Partners who are not accustomed to working together need time to build a working relationship. This is particularly true for partners from different societal sectors, for example an NGO working with a company. These two types of partners will often have different interests, a different language, and a different working culture.

When cross sector partnerships (CSPs) aim to achieve change, they need time to develop forms of co-operation that are appropriate to the context and goals. Partnership principles can help build relationships and guide collaboration processes.

There's not much in academic literature about the meaning or application of partnership principles. But we know that in practice, partnerships formulate common values or principles to support working together or to characterize a collaboration. So we've based these Insights on several [PrC research projects](#) in which partnership principles were developed, analysed and compared. We looked at what partnership principles are built on, and how they are developed and applied in practice. These Insights also explore developing your own partnership principles and how to make them specific and applicable to your partnership and what you want to achieve from it.

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Partnership principles can be considered as common starting points that help partners to properly organise their interaction and build their relationship based on shared values.

#2 WHAT ARE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES?

Partnership principles help partners to navigate working effectively together. They capture the uniqueness of the collaboration and link it with the partnership's purpose. They contribute to embedding partnering as a way of life in organisations (internationalisation) and help to communicate the added value of the partnership within the organisation and externally. Establishing partnership principles can also start a dialogue about the progress of

the partnership and the quality of the relationship, supporting its continuous improvement or adaptation – because the partnership's ability to be adaptive in changing circumstances is important. Partnership principles are often based on partners' values, which can be described as humanitarian principles, good governance, or corporate values.

#3 HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES

Often, partnership principles are based on frameworks of humanitarian action and human and labour rights. If, for example, UNICEF engages in partnerships, then it uses [key principles](#) that are related to its mandate and include a mutual focus on delivering results for women and children, and a mutual commitment to the core values of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Other humanitarian organisations refer to the [Principles of Partnership](#), a framework for all actors in the humanitarian space – including governments, academia, the private sector and affected populations – in order to engage effectively. NGOs that work with companies to improve social and economic conditions such as Oxfam often refer to [International Labour Rights](#).

Companies can also refer to the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) or the [OECD Responsible Business Conduct](#). These guidelines, which are validated by labour or sector organisations or institutions such as the ILO, UN or OECD, are not mandatory but if they are applicable to a partnership, are usually non-negotiable.

#4 GOOD GOVERNANCE

Principles of [good governance relate to](#) how partnerships make their strategic decisions, determine who has a voice, who is engaged in the process, and how they are accountable and to whom. The most-frequently applied principles of good governance are transparency, accountability, complementarity, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, and equality.

Principles of good governance can be considered to resemble a Code of Conduct or a Code of Ethics that companies often use to outline the principles that govern the company's decisions and behaviour, as well as specific guidance for dealing with issues like conflicts of interest, confidentiality and liability. Companies use a variety of forms for their [codes of conduct](#), varying from very detailed to a simple list of answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs). Dutch NGOs have [codes of conduct](#) too, often as part of their integrity policy and including guidance and regulations for cases of whistleblowing.

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**autonomy and
independence** as
corporate values.*

#5 CORPORATE VALUES

From an organisational perspective, corporate values – sometimes also referred to as company or core values – underpin and guide business strategy and company behaviour, including relationships with stakeholders. Each company or organisation has its own priorities, for example:

- Philips, has innovation as a [core value](#).
- Unilever emphasizes integrity which forms the heart of its [Business Integrity Framework](#).
- WWF includes the mutual right to disagree in working partnerships, especially in the private sector which often has very different interests. WWF's inclusion of a partnership principle for disagreeing with its partners recognises the importance of being objective, independent and credible.
- Oxfam has included corporate values such as autonomy and independence into its guidance for collaborating with others. It also emphasises the importance of shared visions and values in its version of [Partnership Principles](#).

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#6 HOW TO DEVELOP PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES?

In the early stages, many partnerships use good governance principles or general core values to guide your work. They mention respect, equity, being open and responsive, and being responsible and committed as important guidelines for how partners interact. These basic principles are generally valid and applicable to all working relationships. They are used to indicate that partners are reliable, trustworthy and have good intentions. Often, they may be unilaterally formulated: each of the partners has formulated them as the basic desires and values for working and interacting with partners. These basic principles clarify the values that the partner organisation aims to follow when collaborating with another organisation. These core principles are common and valid for everyone involved. They do not distinguish between types of partner or a specific partnership. In other words: they do not reflect the added value of cross sector partnerships.

CAPTURE ADDED VALUE

It is important to capture the added value of the partnership in the partnership principles to help ensure partners' commitment. What's more, from time to time the development or adaptation of partnership principles encourages an important and necessary dialogue between partners: how are things going, what difficulties does the partnership encounter, and what can be improved? Partners increasingly want to communicate what makes their

collaboration unique. Colleagues and clients are curious and interested, funders want confirmation that their resources are well spent. This is especially important if the partnership enters a next phase, or when it has to deal with new leadership, or a new partner comes in.

USE CAREFUL WORDING

Careful use of words can surmount any awkward power dynamics without explicitly mentioning them. For example, WWF uses the words 'to agree to disagree', and the need 'to be transparent in all decision-making processes'; UNICEF uses 'to be responsible to fulfil partnership obligations and commitments'.

FORMULATE PRINCIPLES TOGETHER

Ideally, partnership principles are jointly formulated, and all partners genuinely commit to them. What makes them really valuable – and feasible – is when every partner has a hand in defining them. The joint process of developing partnership principles strengthens everyone's sense of ownership and ensures internalisation. This process also helps to align the organisational values of the core partners. Usually, challenges are first to be identified, then joint principles are established. After all, it must be clear why a principle helps a partnership in achieving its ambition, or how a specific principle can benefit a partnership.

#7 HOW TO MAKE PRINCIPLES PARTNERSHIP-SPECIFIC?

Partnership principles should anticipate situations that can challenge the partnership or put it at risk.

- Partners may have hidden agendas, so agreeing to be transparent in decision-making may reduce any mutual mistrust.
- WWF's 'agree to disagree' clause is a good example of managing power dynamics between partners.
- Competitiveness between partners can be addressed by agreeing that the partnership must deliver mutual benefits.

Many partnerships also face uncertainty; for example, when partners collaborate for the first time or take the partnership into unknown territory. Oxfam's inclusion of a

'commitment to joint learning' in its partnering principles addresses this. Including co-creation and entrepreneurship as founding principles also ensures breakthrough results.

In our work of developing partnering principles, we encourage partners to be very clear about what makes their partnership and the way they work together unique from their other existing collaborations. Which characteristics of the relationship are they particularly proud of? Which characteristics best illustrate the way they work together? This process helps partners to describe their relationship and what is of value to them. In addition, it can be a powerful process for demystifying the core of a partnership.

A ROADMAP FOR DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES



#8 HOW TO MAKE YOUR PRINCIPLES WORK?

Your carefully designed partnership principles are specific and tailor-made for your partnership, but still there are some useful [rules of engagement for effective partnering](#) that will support effective partnering. They include discussing mutual assumptions or prejudices about each other, working on a shared understanding of the context in which the partnership operates, and making sure that both partners continue to develop partnership skills.

MAKE THEM PRACTICAL

There are some additional ways to make partnership principles very practical.

The Global Humanitarian Platform provides [ten ways of implementing](#) their Principles of Partnership. One suggestion is to include partnering skills as a requirement when recruiting partnership staff. Another is to review the principles as part of the partnership's regular review



process; encourage partners to have a frank conversation about if – and how – they are living up to the principles. And if either partner is falling short in this respect, what needs to be done to do better?

CAPTURE THE PRINCIPLES

You can record your partnership principles in more than one document. They can be included in the partnership

communication strategy, or you can use them in your annual reports that describe the partnership's outcomes. Partnership principles are usually not part of a formal or legally binding agreement, but they can be attached as an introduction. You should be able to fit them on one page. Try limiting the number to 10 or fewer to keep them focused and to the point. This also makes it easier to remember them.



FURTHER READING

It can be challenging to put the [Global Humanitarian Platform's](#) Principles of Partnership into practice. Catherine Russ, a trainer and associate of the Partnership Brokers Association ([PBA](#)), outlined some of the challenges and lessons that were learned in *Hard-earned lessons for putting the Principles of Partnership into practice in Betwixt and Between* in *The Journal for Partnership Brokering*, issue #4, November 2014.

Julie Mundy, PBA's Director of Training, wrote about the importance of a principled approach in creating inclusive partnerships. She highlighted that 'the fundamental principles of good partnering' have emerged from practice and examined the role [partnership brokers](#) can play in developing effective and ethical ways of working together. Read more in *Embedding ethical and principles partnering approaches*, in Leda Stott (eds.), [Shaping Sustainable Change](#), Greenleaf/Routledge, London, 2019.

COLOPHON

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