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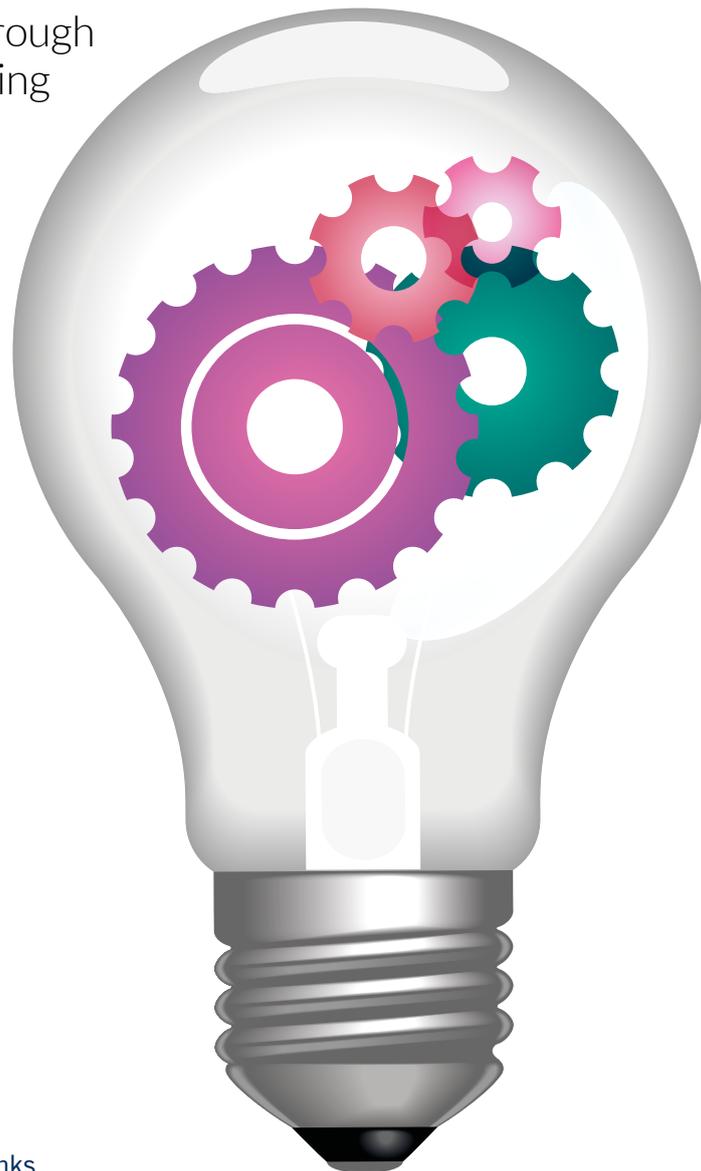
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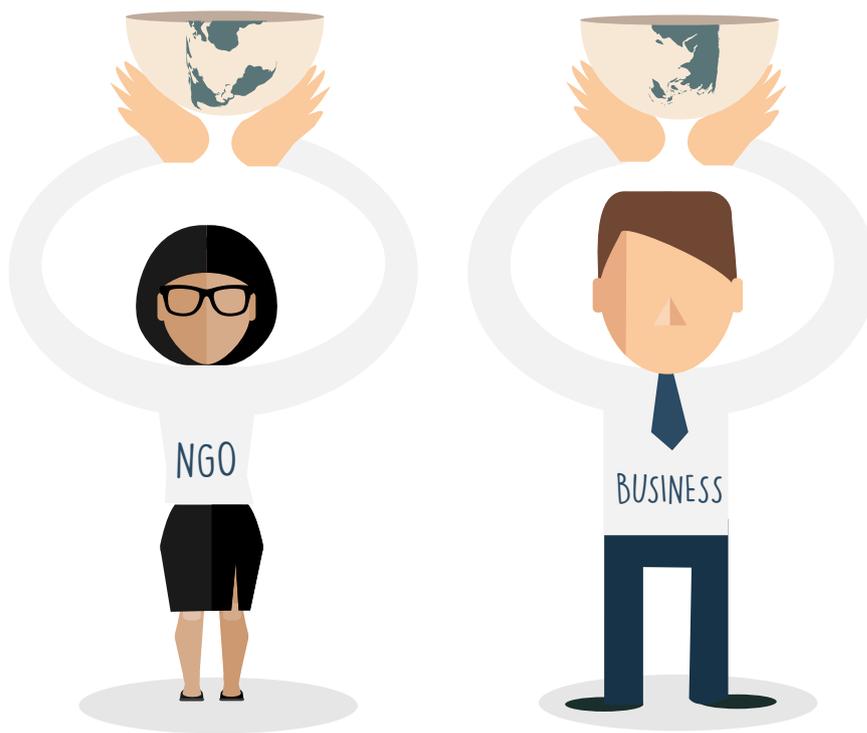
By Colin Lee



Cross-sector partnerships key to sustainable development

Rebecca Morris talks with Rob van Tulder

At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, alliances between business, government and civil society were declared key to achieving sustainable development. Yet they are difficult to implement successfully. RSM's Partnerships Resource Centre is helping to change that.



The years since the 2002 summit have seen a surge in the number of cross-sector alliances. These partnerships now sit at the heart of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, formulated in 2015. Yet for all their promise, cross-sector partnerships are too often limited in scope and impact. They remain a complex managerial chal-

lenge for which there is no precedence and very little know-how – until now.

'From the moment the partnership movement began in 2002, it was clear there was a huge gap in knowledge and that this was a managerial challenge,' says Rob van Tulder, professor of international business-society management at RSM. 'It was an open op-

portunity for us as a business school: here was a demand and we had the expertise to meet it.'

Prof. van Tulder and his affiliates responded with the creation of the Partnerships Resource Centre (PrC), an academic consortium inaugurated in 2009 and led by RSM, with initial co-funding provided by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The centre's goal is to fill the knowledge gap on cross-sector partnerships. From the outset, the emphasis was on impact. 'When we started I didn't want to wait five years before establishing theories that organisations could use,' says Prof. van Tulder. 'Organisations couldn't wait and nor could we.'

Problems without solutions

Beyond philanthropy, the incentives for companies to partner up are compelling. Consumers are demanding products that contribute to societal well-being. Employees are asking what their organisations are doing to address sustainability challenges. Changing regulations require companies to adopt more sustainable practices. The result is that corporations are recognising the need for input from other sectors that have the complementary skills needed for long-term growth.

'Many of these new demands are better understood and implemented by government bodies and NGOs than by company executives,' says Prof. van Tulder. 'An NGO can point out flaws in a company's sustainability policy, for instance, that the company might not realise themselves.'

Cross-sector partnerships key to sustainable development *(continued)*

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Rob van Tulder, professor of international business-society management

NGOs and government bodies also lend credibility to a company's activities, he says: ‘NGOs are the voice of civil society and society trusts what they say, as opposed to company leaders.’

But partnering across societal sectors is much easier to endorse than it is to implement. The problems are more complex than the typical obstacles found within traditional public-private partnerships. Cross-sector partnerships usually involve multiple stakeholders. Stakeholders are often “unusual suspects” – small NGOs and the like. Their objectives are less clear and broader in scope, addressing complex and often interrelated issues.

One common challenge that arises is lack of trust, says Prof. van Tulder: ‘Companies often don't trust a government body or an NGO that talks about partners on the one hand, and on the other describes the private sector's approach towards the environment as PR.’

Hence the legion of cross-sector partnerships whose impact is a scratch on the surface of what is required to meet sustainable development goals. ‘Everyone is trying,’ says Prof. van Tulder, ‘but no one knows what to do.’

Establishing a platform

The PrC was formed at the request of a large number of stakeholders including the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The demand was for a platform for the regular exchange of knowledge on cross-sector partnerships and the development of new knowledge on a subject on which there existed very little literature.

Led by Prof. Rob van Tulder, the PrC quickly established itself as a prolific resource centre with a broad portfolio of activities. It strives to help organisations in several ways: through applied and action research, teaching and training, and knowledge exchange and networking.

Research is commissioned on the study of various aspects of multi-stakeholder engagement and management, involving top scholars around the world. Much of this is action research. ‘I want to get stakeholders directly involved in action research initiatives,’ says Prof. van Tulder. ‘For me this is the most important challenge.’

The PrC is now the leading centre in Europe in cross-sector partnership research, with a large number of publications in peer-viewed journals. And its initiatives pave new ways of engaging stakeholders. ‘The PrC pioneers new formats for action research, teaching and stakeholder engagement,’ says Prof. van Tulder.

New ways of engaging

The PrC website shows just how outward facing the organisation is. Services offered include executive training modules and workshops as well as custom-made programmes. Fact sheets are available to download on partnership models in Asia, Latin-America, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Research papers offer stakeholders insights into, for instance, the top-five success factors for partnering. Executives are invited to attend events such as Max Havelaar lectures on inclusive development. Eye-catching headlines invite stakeholders to participate in a “PPPCafe” event on Scaling, or one of six “Wicked Problems” meetings at the New World Campus in The Hague.

These latter events are connected to two of the centre's major action-research streams: the PPPLab



and the Wicked Problems Plaza. The PPPLab, which stands for Private Public Partnership Laboratory, is an action research and joint learning initiative that focuses on partnerships within water and food sectors, specifically those funded by the Sustainable Water Fund (FDW) and the Sustainable Entrepreneurship and Food Security Fund (FDOV).

The goal of the PPPLab is to enhance the effectiveness and quality of these Dutch-supported public-private partnerships. It has produced no less than 75 research papers collating its findings and recommendations. The PPPLab website reflects its focus on its stakeholders, with accessible, relevant content such as latest events, interviews with policymakers, and profiles of current initiatives.

The Wicked Problems Plaza is a unique methodology that brings stakeholders together to collaboratively brainstorm a “wicked problem” and devise solutions. The term “wicked problem” is used to describe the big issues related to sustainable development. Six Wicked Problem Plazas are scheduled for 2016, each related to one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The events are organised in conjunction with the New World Campus (NWC) and the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO).

And if there were any further doubts as to the centre's focus on impact, its latest project will dispel them. The centre is collaborating with four other institutions to develop an online platform that will offer a full informa-

tion, advice and networking resource for organisations looking to partner. ‘I am very proud of this Promoting Effective Partnering (PEP) Initiative, it's a great collaboration to be part of,’ says Prof. van Tulder.

Preparing to partner

Cross-sector partnerships are challenging, says Prof. van Tulder, but the obstacles are not insurmountable. The success of corporate giant Unilever in the sustainability stakes is largely

The partnership must also be one of equals. If it is merely a company funding a charity, for instance, the charity is unlikely to give constructive criticism for fear of the funding being withdrawn. Unilever, for example, allowed Oxfam to carry out an in-depth review of one of its Vietnam factories, revealing poor labour practices. In a bid to be transparent, Unilever agreed that Oxfam could publish the report and return two years later to assess its progress.

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down to effective partnering – offering lessons from which we can learn. ‘Unilever understands that partnerships take investment and are based on a common agenda and transparency,’ says Prof. van Tulder.

Respect is a key component of strong partnerships, he says. ‘Respect means that as a government organisation you respect that a company needs profit to be sustainable and that, as a company, you understand that a government body can be bureaucratic and must look at an issue from many different angles.’

‘The CEO of Unilever, Paul Polman, is considered by far the most sustainable business leader in the world and what he says is that Unilever is not there yet. That's a sign of true leadership. Leaders accept criticism and grow from it. Partnerships offer a space for organisations to receive and discuss such criticism; to join forces for a better world.’ ■

For more information on RSM's Partnerships Resource Centre, visit

WEB www.rsm.nl/prc