# The promises and perils of theory-based evaluations for cross-sector partnerships

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Interventions implemented by multiple partners require evaluation tools that adequately capture their complexity (van Tulder and Keen 2018, Vellema et al. 2017). Successful cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) are far from self-evident as they are often embraced on the basis of untested assumptions, including the presence of complementarity of resources, inclusiveness, etc. (Dentoni et al. 2018). Sub-optimal partnering configurations, limited ambitions or ill partner fit might hamper impact (Austin and Seitanidi 2012; van Tulder and Keen 2018). The impact of CSPs can thus potentially be improved by appropriate monitoring and evaluation approaches to unravel what works where and for whom (van Tulder and Keen 2018). Impacts of complex interventions are generally difficult to measure due to lack of data and the long-term and indirect nature of results. A singular focus on ultimate results of partnerships would fail to account for more direct and measurable (immediate and intermediate) outcomes of partnerships (Liket and Maas 2012). Theory-based approaches to evaluation (TBEs) – e.g. realistic evaluation, process tracing, theories of change, and contribution analysis – have developed sophisticated methods to unravel the causal dynamics and processes inherent to complex interventions (Pawson and Tilley 1997, Weiss 1997). These approaches focus on the different causal steps in between intervention and impact, thus explicating the complex pathways through which partnerships realize an impact. TBEs could thus potentially offer useful guidance and support in unraveling the workings and impact of complex cross-sector partnerships (van Tulder and Keen 2018).

However, thus far TBEs have only to a limited extent found their way into the field of partnership studies (van Tulder et al. 2016). Valuable examples of a TBE approach to partnerships include the Complexity-Sensitive ToC approach (van Tulder and Keen 2018), or the use of case studies to refine programme theories (Vellema et al. 2013). Consequently, there are many unresolved questions regarding how to apply TBEs to unpack complex partnership dynamics. The central question to this panel therefore is: what is the value of theory-based evaluations for analyzing CSP-dynamics? We are inviting contributions that either theoretically or empirically contribute to addressing this question, with a particular interest in the ability of TBEs of capturing the complexity of CSPs without oversimplifying matters; analysis of participatory learning exercises in on-going CSP partnerships; the integration of complementary causal processes from different actor perspectives into comprehensive models; and real-time evaluations based on action research.

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