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Using collective learning to build the trust and alignment needed to solve complex development problems

By John Tomlinson

Introduction¹

Systemic change requires collaboration. Solutions to poverty and other complex development challenges are often built in silos – and therefore fail. Governments, civil society, non-governmental organisations, corporations, marginalised communities, and other participants in systemic change must work together – not in silos – to achieve long-term solutions to poverty and other complex development challenges.

For 30 years Synergos has worked with partners around the world to solve the complex problems of poverty and its effects by promoting and supporting collaborations among disparate stakeholders. We help generate, test, problem solve, and implement solutions on issues such as agriculture, health, nutrition, community development, and the well-being of children and youth that lead to sustainable change.

But building such collaboration can be difficult. Even with the best of intentions, differences in power, perspectives, or interests can make collaboration difficult. In some cases, past or existing conflict can be even bigger obstacles to collaboration.

Collective learning is an important part of our work for two reasons. It helps build trust among stakeholders, enabling them to get beyond conflict or different interests to develop shared understanding of the problem and co-create solutions. In addition, collective learning often surfaces vital information, particularly from an initiative's intended beneficiaries, that can inform programme design and implementation.

¹ This article draws extensively from Synergos' 'Trust, Collaboration, and Collective Learning: Synergos Experience in Namibia and Ethiopia', in R. Steiner & D. Hanks (eds), *Harnessing the Power of Collective Learning: Feedback, accountability and constituent voice in rural development*.

Collaboration for impact

Three examples of our collaborations are explored in this article; efforts to improve child nutrition in India (now concluded), maternal and child health in Namibia, and agriculture and food security in Ethiopia.

In 2006 Synergos helped create the Bhavishya Alliance in India – a five-year effort with UNICEF, Unilever, Indian and international businesses, government agencies, local NGOs and community-based organisations, and others to prototype innovations for child nutrition in both rural and urban settings in the state of Maharashtra.

There were severe levels of distrust among many of the participating organisations, with business questioning the effectiveness of government, government questioning the legitimacy of civil society groups, and both government and civil society participants sceptical of the motivations of business. Yet they came together through Bhavishya. This partnership shifted stakeholder engagement practices within partner organisations from government and business, making them more capable of cooperating with other organisations and listening to the voices from poor and marginalised communities. Together they developed and tested a range of interventions, some of which were brought to scale. One example was training more than 10,000 adolescent girls – many of whom would soon become mothers themselves – about caring for their own health, prenatal care, sanitation, and breast-feeding practices as well as being advocates in their communities for their rights and the rights of their families. Community-based facilitators played a key role in this project. Another example involved chefs of the Taj Hotels of the Tata Corporation (one of the main corporate sponsors) coming up with recipes for use in government feeding programmes that suited tastes in different regions of the state, while being more nutritious, easy-to-prepare, and which met the government's budget of \$.10/day per child. Bhavishya Alliance contributed to a reduction in stunting, the main manifestation of undernutrition, with researchers finding that stunting among children under the age of two in Maharashtra fell from 39% to 23% over the approximate time period of the partnership.

In Namibia, despite a stable, democratic government and a growing economy, the maternal mortality rate roughly doubled between 1990 and 2006, and child mortality remained high. The country's prime minister and leaders at the Ministry of Health and Social Services were determined to improve the country's health system. As part of this effort, in 2007 they invited Synergos to help improve the delivery of maternal and child health services.

The programme improved leadership and collaborative capacity within the health system, and produced innovations to increase the quality and availability of health services, as well as demand for them. One type of intervention is improving access to health services through the creation of maternal and child health clinics in re-purposed shipping containers in both state and NGO-managed facilities. Another was increasing public education about and demand for maternal health services through radio drama shows. Discussions with front-line health workers, women/mothers using the health system, and people from NGOs with deep connections to communities were a key part of conceiving, developing, and

improving these initiatives. Maternal and infant mortality rates declined by about 14% between 2006 and 2013. This initiative is continuing, with an expansion of focus to also include nutrition.

In Ethiopia, Synergos is working with the Ethiopian Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA), the Ministry of Agriculture, the Federal Cooperatives Agency, regional bureaus of agriculture, NGOs with deep community connections, and others to strengthen their partnerships. They aim to collaboratively identify systemic bottlenecks, and jointly develop solutions that promote food security and improve the lives and livelihoods of small-scale farmers, bolstering the country's economy. These efforts have contributed to farmers gaining better information about soils, fertilisers and markets and improved access to higher quality seeds. Through this work, millions of farmers have also begun using a new approach to planting *tef*, a key grain, which is lowering seed costs and increasing yields. These successes have involved learning from agricultural experts, farmers, and farmers' organisations, and have used extension services, NGOs, and farmers' organisations to disseminate that learning and to obtain feedback on it so that it can be further improved. We are now also helping coordinate collaboration in four regions of the country by convening and supporting alliances of stakeholders – such as government, research institutions, farmers' cooperatives, seed suppliers, financing institutions, and buyers in millers' associations – along with value changes for priority crops such as *tef* and *wheat*.

Starting collaboration

The way a development initiative begins often shapes how it develops over time and the attitude of participants toward collaboration. It is far better to give time and thought on the front end than to try to fix things later. We have often felt significant pressure to 'just get on with it' and to move quickly to action. But the eventual action will be more effective and sustainable if fundamental issues have been addressed first – including convening appropriate stakeholders, developing shared learning processes, and helping stakeholders arrive at a shared understanding of the problem to be addressed.

Collective learning is foundational to all of these. To be sure, traditional, expert-led learning processes are used in our work. In Namibia for example, our project team included individuals from McKinsey & Co. (several of whom were medical doctors), who conducted a detailed assessment of the health system and its leadership, and also helped produce related reports on maternal health, child mortality, and child nutrition. This assessment drew upon both existing research and statistical information, as well as interviews with over 70 people from across the health system and focus groups of mothers and community members. The resulting reports helped ground the project while also providing openings for the less traditional, more collective approach to learning. In Ethiopia, the project's funder (the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) commissioned studies on output markets, irrigation, soil health, rural finance, and the seed system. This research informed an integrated study of the agriculture system, outlining problems and providing possible solutions. Synergos also conducted 50 interviews with key stakeholders on the federal and regional levels and visited two regions. In India, the initiative was able to draw upon

existing data collected or made available by UNICEF, the World Bank, *The Lancet*, and Care India.

These formal learning processes demonstrated intellectual rigour appropriate for work at the scale proposed in each country, which was important for buy-in from many stakeholders. They provided a shared basis for further discussion among stakeholders. And, insofar as interviews, broad consultations, and communication back to stakeholders were used in these research efforts, they served to begin to bring disparate voices into the process and to demonstrate that collecting such voices was essential to success.

But formal research isn't enough. In India, Namibia, and Ethiopia, Synergos also employed processes for learning in other ways, helping develop personal and collective ownership of the initiatives. These efforts were guided by [Theory U](#) (or 'the U Process'), a social technology to generate insight, manage change and generate solutions to difficult problems developed by Otto Scharmer of the Presencing Institute and MIT, as well as Peter Senge, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. Theory U helps participants in a multi-stakeholder process shift the nature of institutional relationships to enhance collaboration. Activities guided by Theory U focus on cultivating shared experiences and collective understanding ('sensing'), renewing personal commitment and energy, developing leadership skills, and identifying, testing and refining innovative solutions to persistent challenges.

In India, one of the key ways we helped create collective understanding was through 'learning journeys' where we took 30 key stakeholders from participating businesses, government agencies, civil society organisations, and international organisations, in groups of five or six, to poor urban and rural communities and tribal areas to understand the system that had perpetuated high malnutrition in Maharashtra. We encouraged participants to look at the problem from the ground up, and to try to get a better understanding of the systemic challenges that would need to be overcome. The information obtained in these journeys was essential, bringing knowledge from the communities visited into efforts involving major governmental and private sector institutions.

But at least as important were the interpersonal connections created by having people from different sectors, ideologies, and backgrounds look at the same information at the same time through their respective lenses and then spend several evenings in a row discussing what they had learned that day. This shifted mindsets and established new bonds and mutual understanding that later allowed them to co-create specific development interventions. They began to see each other as collaborators, not obstacles, competitors or adversaries. Synergos' Surita Sandosham (who was the founding CEO of Bhavishya), Ishaprasad Bhagwat of Save the Children and V. Ramani of Access Advisory wrote that:

'By working together, the alliance's partners and staff were exposed to new approaches, knowledge areas, and skill sets that built their capacity and led to innovative solutions that greatly enhanced project outcomes.'

In Namibia, the ‘sensing’ or learning aspect of our work engaged leaders and other staff of the Namibian health system in assessing that system. These learning activities included brief efforts to learn about the system from the perspectives of others, both users of the system and front-line health workers. Examples included culture surveys and ‘in your shoes’ activities to re-connect Ministry of Health and Social Services officials with the health system from the eyes of a user by riding in an ambulance or waiting in a clinic. These experiences proved vital in developing personal ownership and openness to ongoing collective learning by health system officials.

In Ethiopia, one of the key early personal and collective learning activities was the ATA learning journey held in the Rift Valley area, where subsistence agriculture is widely practiced and agriculture is the main source of income. The purpose of the journey was to expose 49 ATA staff, many of whom were foreign nationals, including from the Ethiopian diaspora, to the lives of smallholder farmers in order to increase understanding of the poverty issues these farmers face. ATA staff were assigned to stay with the families for 48 hours. These families were introduced to Synergos through a community-based organisation. Synergos spent several days meeting with the families, explaining the project objectives and ensuring that we were extended an invitation to stay. We worked with the ATA staff, explaining the value of learning through immersion, encouraging them to sense, observe, and be present throughout their host family stays.

To be sure, this process was important as an opportunity to engage farmers in the initiative by telling them directly about the diagnostic study and receiving their input and feedback. The dialogues were fruitful as the farmers were both inviting and healthily sceptical about the imposition of one more ‘big idea’. But the learning journey was also an essential opportunity for collective learning on the part of the ATA staff. At the end of the stay, they met together and shared their observations in a reflective session. They reported the importance of first-hand experience with poverty versus merely accepting the academic definition of poverty. They shared the ‘moments of truth’ they had in their experiences with the farmers. And they shared experiences that inspired and reconnected them to their commitment to the mission of ATA and to the smallholder farmers.

The ATA staff acknowledged that the learning journey gave them the opportunity to have a direct experience with smallholder farmers and their families as most had never seen a farmer or been inside a farmer’s house before. They attested that the learning journey experience helped them to understand better why ATA was established and why its work is so important. They recognised that farmers are knowledgeable about their work and their needs. Each ATA staff member greatly appreciated the hospitality and kindness they received and were touched by the generosity of spirit of the farmers. This collective learning process thus not only provided them with useful information, but strengthens commitment and trust within the organisation.

Looking at systems

Our collective learning processes go beyond simple fact finding. We encourage stakeholders to examine what they have learned together, as well as the products of formal

research processes, from a systems perspective. The reason for using a systems perspective is to deal with the complexity and the structural/systemic nature of the problem, and points of high leverage to act upon. Systems thinking is the process of understanding how elements influence one another within a whole. Many social issues do not have a simple cause-and-effect relationship. Instead they interact with other issues in mutually reinforcing relationships, which makes addressing them difficult. Understanding the perspectives on the issue of all major stakeholders at all levels of the system you are looking at, including the explicit and implicit rules of the system is essential to creating lasting solutions.

Looking at ourselves

Throughout these efforts, we encourage stakeholders to also learn about themselves through personal reflection. This in turn helps them go into the world in a more authentic, open-hearted, and generous way. This is vital to building the trusting relationships that are the basis of collaboration and innovation. We use reflective practices such as journaling, solo retreats, and dialogue walks with other stakeholders to help participants in our programmes better connect to their own sense of purpose. Solo walks and retreats allow participants to get out of their usual environments and set aside their everyday pressures, to create space for emotions and thoughts that are usually subdued. Journaling enables participants to gain a new awareness of themselves. These journaling practices can be free-form (in which participants write freely about their experiences) or directed (with a facilitator providing questions which the participants are invited to answer in a private journal). Dialogue walks provides the opportunity for individuals to develop deeper relationships and trust with each other by sharing their personal leadership journeys during a casual walk. Participants practice dealing with complex problems and contrasting points of view, and they discuss their future goals and aspirations. The self-awareness and skills these practices develop gives participants the ability to be what we call bridging leaders, with even great capacity to elicit learning and trust from others.

Learning at all levels

We use these collective learning and personal processes not only at the initiative-wide level, but for particular sub-projects within them.

In Ethiopia, for example, we have worked to improve collaboration between the federal Ministry of Agriculture and the Bureau of Agriculture of Oromia Region. Building upon a 2014 workshop using Theory U, a joint vision for alignment and collaboration is being created. This workshop included extensive ‘in your shoes’ exercises – playing the role not only of staff of other government entities but also of farmers – to enable participants to individually and collectively gain a better understanding of the challenges they face. What is noteworthy is the degree to which ongoing information sharing is considered vital to collaboration. As one participant put it, ‘Challenges exist because we have information gaps. As we innovate there are secondary generation problems that emanate’.

In Namibia, a front-line health worker pointed to an increased ability to simply learn from expectant mothers themselves:

‘Before we were very short-tempered. Even me, I really had to hold my tongue...and you always ask the clients to please limit their stories because if someone comes with a long story you just don’t have time. Now we are able to say, “Mama, talk”. We also have time to give them much more information about why they have to go to the doctor and all these things.’

Helping health workers and Ministry of Health and Social Services staff increase their personal capacity to welcome and elicit feedback from others in the health system, including clients, is a key part of the success of our work there.

Conclusion

It takes time to build the necessary trust for the collaboration needed to improve complex nutrition, health, or agricultural systems. The processes and tools Synergos uses recognise that for many of the participants in our initiatives, this is often the first time they are being asked to observe the system they are seeking to change, step into the shoes of others, and reflect individually and collectively on what they have learned – and then experiment with solutions they own. Building trust, collaboration and collective learning that complement each other to create sustainable change.

Author

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