



CASE STUDY:

# INSPIRING CHANGE AND NEW VISION IN THE CHILDREN'S SECTOR

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Too many children and youth in South Africa face poverty and isolation due to the HIV/AIDS crisis and related problems such as poor education and a lack of job opportunities. Despite having one of the world's best legal frameworks for the wellbeing of children and extensive governmental and nongovernmental programmes, there remains a gap in social equity and the delivery of social services. Overstretched organisations, individuals battling with overwhelming need in the context of bureaucratic systems, funding shortages, insufficient human capital, lack of co-ordination within the sector and burnout among practitioners are all obstacles to fulfilling South Africa's promise to its children.



## Structure and approach

Leadership and Innovation Network for Collaboration in the Children's Sector (LINC) is a network that brings together practitioners/stakeholders from government, business, academia, civil society and funders working on children's issues in South Africa. The network numbers nearly 100 Fellows, whose organisations reach about 11-million children.

LINC aims to improve the quality and quantity of services to children by supporting these Fellows with opportunities to:

- Build trust, relationships and collaboration across organisations and sectors that impact children;

- Pilot innovative projects;
- Reflect and focus on personal wellness and growth in an environment that is nonthreatening and empathetic; and
- Generate, share and access critical knowledge and information.

## Origins

The idea of LINC started in the mid-2000s with social entrepreneur and Synergos Senior Fellow Ann Lamont who worked in a partnership with a process specialist Mille Bojer of Reos Social Innovation and Synergos South Africa (part of Synergos, a global nonprofit organisation).

In 2006 research was conducted into the

needs and perspectives of key stakeholders in the children's sector for the purposes of designing the organisation. Key concerns that were identified included:

- Government faced significant challenges in implementation, integration and leadership;
- Government players often felt misunderstood by other players;
- Community-based organisations were generally welfare-driven and tended to be short term in their outlook as they aimed to meet immediate needs;
- NGOs struggled with competition for funding, duplication of activity, short-term

planning, as well as limited capacity and skills. Sometimes they needed to juggle conflicts between funder requirements and what they saw as their beneficiaries' real needs;

- A key challenge for large funders was how to channel funding to the local level. When co-operation and communication among global funders were limited, they inadvertently fostered competition rather than co-operation among their grantees;
- There was a general lack of academic research on how complex social innovations go to scale at national level, beyond normal centralised policy approaches; and
- The child sector was not sufficiently profiled as an area of attention with media not fully utilised to focus relevant issues in a strategic way.

Analysis of this research revealed that alignment around four key areas – systems thinking, innovation, collaboration and leadership – could yield definite improvement.

LINC was subsequently formally launched in 2007 as a partnership among Synergos, Convene Venture Philanthropy, Reos Social Innovation and the South African Department of Social Development. Initial funding came largely from the Hollard Foundation and the Capricorn (later Yellowwood) investment fund. In 2011, Synergos took on the full role of convening

and managing LINC.

Underlying LINC are three key beliefs:

- The problems in the children's sector are complex, and it is thus essential that stakeholders seek to understand and address that complexity;
- It isn't possible for any one stakeholder or type of stakeholder to address these problems alone – collaboration is vital. Multistakeholder collaboration underpinned the creation of LINC and is a key part of its programming; and
- Organisational and sectoral changes are not possible without personal and professional development of leaders within the sector.

LINC uses the concept (pioneered by Synergos and its partners) of "bridging leadership" – leadership that creates and sustains collaboration – as a key framework. Fellows nurture competencies such as acknowledging ownership, systemic analysis of complex situations, creating a shared

vision, and collective action that enhances effective collaboration.

## Activities and impact

LINC offers individual professional coaching and support to regional groups through quarterly peer-learning sessions. It also offers national convenings, with LINC Fellows meeting each year for a multi-day residential retreat in a space conducive to promoting peer support. These retreats serve not only as opportunities for leadership development, but also allow the collective harvesting of knowledge in the children's sector and for building personal connections that can form the seeds of collaboration and prototype promising innovations.

LINC Fellows have shown measured improvements in bridging leadership capacities such as personal, collaborative and sectoral mastery. They have also reported an increased interest in collaboration within the children's sector and more collaboration across organisations.

**The LINC network and approach continues to have value within the children's sector and may serve as a model for promoting collaboration among government, business and civil society to address other critical issues and sectors in South Africa.**



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