



What's Missing?

*A Personal Reflection on Synergos'
Twenty Years of Work*

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This paper is written with gratitude to the many friends and colleagues around the world, including past and present members of the Synergos staff, who have patiently tolerated my blundering into their space with questions, hypotheses, even assertions. Their willingness to engage, to model, to argue, to experiment has helped me peel away at least a few of the layers of blinding preconceptions that make it so difficult to see complex realities, much less engage effectively in doing anything about them. You have helped me not only to open my eyes, but eventually also my ears and, fundamentally, my heart. You know who you are.

Because this is a personal reflection, it is necessarily written from my own perspective on how Synergos has evolved and on what we have learned. I hope it will stimulate others who have had major input into its evolution to write their own perspectives so that we may come up with a common framework of learnings.

I am particularly grateful to Dave Brown for his reflections on Synergos' first ten years of work on partnerships and where we might go with that now; and to Ernie Garilao for his paper on his experience with Synergos' Bridging Leadership Program and his subsequent rich learnings directing the Mirant Center for Bridging Social Divides at the Asian Institute of Management. I also thank John Tomlinson and David Winder, two long-serving members of the Synergos team, for their contributions to this paper from their own experience, our archival material and papers written by Synergos staff.

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And finally, I thank Bruce Schearer, who partnered with me almost from the beginning in forming and leading Synergos for 18 years; and Bob Dunn, Synergos' current President, for leading us in such a creative and participatory way into the future.

Summary

This paper traces the history of Synergos' learning about addressing poverty and equity problems through building partnerships, strengthening institutions, leadership development and strengthening philanthropic efforts.

Context

- **Countries with extreme power differences**, as expressed by wealth, class, ethnic or caste distinctions **are more challenging settings in which to work collaboratively**
- In order to overcome impediments to partnership, **alliances across groups** of differential power must be formed; or **coalitions of like interests**
- **Social conflict** often occurs even in the context of collaboration and is a normal part of building partnerships.
- **Partnership** is unlikely to occur where one group has most of the power and can take decisions for itself; it usually **becomes accepted as a strategy when all else has failed**
- **People living in poverty lack access, not initiative** or interest
- **Problems** relating to poverty are often **too complex to be solved by one group alone**

Processes

- **Participation** by those affected by the problem can greatly enhance the success and sustainability of the outcome – but it **takes longer**
- **Top-down** approaches alone don't work; **bottom-up** approaches alone rarely go to scale; a combination of the two approaches is essential for success
- **Weaker groups must be strengthened** in order for partnerships to succeed so that all stakeholders have a voice in the process
- It is important to look for and engage the **allies for partnership that exist in every sector**
- Building capacity of **groups or institutions to convene partnerships and engage in bridging** across divides can lead to successful poverty alleviation
- **Philanthropists and community foundations** are two types of potential bridgers at different ends of the spectrum
- **Systematizing learning from one's own and others' experience** is essential to improving methods and achieving successful results

Social Capital

- **Partnership requires** relationships of **trust**
- **Informal relationships** among people from different sectors or groups can facilitate the building of trust across the groups

- In order for people from different groups to trust each other, they must **get to know each other**
- In order for people from different groups to open up enough to get to know each other, they must have **safe spaces** where they can interact
- **Bridging leaders**, whose credibility reaches across more than one group, **play a critical role in building trust** and enabling people to feel safe
- **Bridging organizations** can also play a key role in **convening diverse groups and creating safe space** for them to meet and build trust
- **Peer networks** represent an excellent way of building trust among like groups
- To bridge divides and create “chains of trust” necessary for partnership to work, **networks across peer groups are needed**

Personal and Group Transformation

- Learning to **listen** and developing the capacity for **empathy** for those different from oneself are **key characteristics of bridging leaders**; they are also **key prerequisites for stakeholders to work effectively in partnership**
- Each group and individual has different **assets** to bring to the table; recognizing and respecting these is an important prerequisite for success
- **Learning together** about the reality of the problem faced can be a powerful way of developing common perceptions and vision
- Fears of those different from oneself are common; to be effective, **partnership participants need to become aware of and willing to address their own fears** and preconceptions
- Participants’ **awareness of their purpose and commitments** can enhance the results of the partnership
- The stakeholders need to develop a **common purpose**
- This requires a **deeper transformation** of individual and group than a purely technical approach can achieve
- The change required is **psychosocial and spiritual** in nature, not merely social or political
- Spending time alone in **wild nature can help facilitate this shift**
- Doing **solo inner work in a group context** can build relations of trust and social capital and generate empathy and creativity necessary for sustainable solutions

Impact and Going to Scale

- Civil society strategies are insufficient to go to scale: **business thinking and government’s capacity to work nationally must be combined with the former**
- **A combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches**, the presence of bridging organizations and bridging leaders to help convene diverse groups and build social capital, and the teaching and use of personal and group transformation methods **are needed** to achieve impact and scale.

Introduction

After twenty years of working with Synergos to reduce poverty and another twenty before that of observing, reflecting and working on poverty-related issues, I am left with the image of a great puzzle with many pieces. Some of the pieces are not even on the table. They may be strewn across the grass, hiding in nearby bushes or lost altogether. The parts of the puzzle where a few pieces have been fitted together and a scene or two has begun to emerge offer tantalizing glimpses of a larger picture, but are in no way definitive in terms of what the completed image – or solution – might look like. I feel empathy for archeologists who find a few bones, but not enough to let them know for certain what kind of animal they comprise.

I see now, though, that even if the full puzzle were revealed, it is likely that questions would still arise as to how its pieces were cut, why that particular picture was drawn on it. Some of the questions that have interested me most on this journey of discovery have resided in the interstices between practices and outcomes.

We know the results we are looking for: broadly, where people can live in dignity, their basic needs met and inequities reducing, not increasing; conflicts are being managed and people are able to live in harmony with the environment, not sacrificing the resources of future generations or even of humans and other living beings of their own, to benefit the few, now.

It is less clear how to get these results, even though we may recognize an example when we see it. Even when we find a “success”, experience tells us that it may not last. The people involved change or external support is withdrawn so it collapses, or one group takes over and once again excludes another. And furthermore, many of the successes we most admire have been unable to grow to a scale that would impact significant numbers of people. This is not to say that macro-policies cannot create large-scale change – one has only to look at China to see that this is possible. But is it possible to change the basic opportunity and rights structure through policies at this level and still ensure that these rights will be respected and opportunities will be broadly available a generation later?

Economists or political scientists would address these questions in a policy framework. My own slant lies somewhere between psychology, sociology and spirituality. At the psychological level, I have come to see hope, trust and the capacity for empathy as perhaps the key factors determining whether individuals and groups are able to negotiate the complex terrain into a system that works. Social attributes required for lasting solutions include the presence of social capital, a climate receptive to inclusive collaboration and partnership and the kinds of organizational structures available to bring groups together to work out sustainable solutions. At what I would call the spiritual level, which is often left out of this equation, the qualities that come to mind as fundamental for moving toward the kind of social justice and environmental harmony goals referred to above include open-heartedness, a capacity to remain centered in the face of unsettling external circumstances and a conviction about the interconnectedness of everything across time, space and life forms, including humanity.

Given the horrors of, in particular, human-created conflicts, degradation and destruction, we might ask whether, as a species, we are even capable of such transformation. In my mind, this is an open question, one which socio- and evolutionary biologists have been debating for generations. Rather than trying to answer the unanswerable, I prefer to start with the premise that we have a better shot at participating in and facilitating the kinds of changes that we seek if each of us on our own and together can embody and help engender the qualities listed above.

A Chronicle of Lessons Learned and Questions Raised Leading to the Formation of Synergos

I did not decide to form Synergos in an experiential or intellectual vacuum. My twenty years of work leading to the decision to create it shaped my thinking in ways that determined the initial tag line of the organization: “Working Together to Overcome Poverty.” They include:

- **The poor have the greatest interest in overcoming their own poverty but they often lack the access and connections to make this happen by themselves.** This conviction arose out of my time working and living in *favelas* (squatter settlements) in Rio de Janeiro during parts of 1965-69.
- **Environmental factors can cause people to close down to change, but they can also facilitate their opening up again.** In my work with troubled adolescents for a doctoral dissertation completed in 1976, I examined the kind of environment and practices most conducive to helping youth who have closed off the option of thriving within a socially acceptable framework to once again open up to a new image of themselves, new hope and new possibilities for creating a meaningful life. The work focused on building self-esteem through 1) a positive and supportive peer network, 2) a structured environment that led to a feeling of safety and security but which left room for creativity and experimentation, and 3) a supportive and appreciative approach that emphasized strengths, allowing people the opportunity to redefine their abilities and worth inside society rather than from outside it. The focus on circumstances which allowed people to open up to change has influenced my thinking about the importance of “safe spaces” where people of differing views on a problem and how to solve it can build the trust that enables them to work together.
- **The problems faced by people living in poverty are, by and large, too multi-dimensional and complex to be solved by a single, sectoral approach.** In a 1980 paper entitled “Making Connections: The Case for an Integrated Approach to Human Problems”, I observed how the issue of women’s health, in this instance in Brazil, was a multi-dimensional problem in need of solutions that crossed sectors, levels and disciplinary approaches.
- No matter how brilliant and collaborative the strategies agreed to and employed by those at the top of different sectors, **unless these solutions are reached with active input and participation by those whom they are intended to benefit, they will either be rejected** as not their own **or passively accepted without the energy and commitment to make them succeed.** I learned this lesson while working at The New

York City Partnership from 1981-86. It reflects the flip side of the first learning from Brazil.

- Finally, in my work with the anti-apartheid movement, I came to see that **each of us has a set of assets, in terms of skills and connections, which we bring to the table to make our own unique (and, inevitably partial) contribution to solving a problem.** In my case in this instance, it was because of a close working relationship with the US business leadership I had developed through the New York City Partnership, on the one hand, and the trust I had developed with members of South Africa's African National Congress which enabled me to help convene a meeting between US business leaders and members of the ANC leadership at the particular moment that that contact needed to be made. Had I not been there, someone else would have done it. But being there allowed me to see **the value of building trust with more than one group in order to help bridge divides.**

Early Learnings

In broad consultations with people from North and South America, Africa and Asia during the second half of 1986, before founding Synergos, I became convinced that there was a place for a Northern (hemisphere) organization that worked together with groups from the global South to link to other sectors and groups, inside and outside each country to form partnerships to address poverty. With the formation of The Synergos Associates¹ at the end of 1986, and Bruce Schearer's coming to Synergos as Executive Director in 1987, a broader agenda emerged over the next several years, based on our early experience.

The Associates agreed that two key missing pieces in the problem-solving equation were:

- **lack of collaboration** across sectors and
- **lack of participation** by those most affected by problems related to poverty

Top-down solutions alone had not worked; bottom-up solutions tended to be limited in scope; single-sector approaches only addressed one or two aspects of a problem with multiple components. Based on this assessment, the Associates proposed a three-part strategy to fill in the missing piece of collaboration across groups, or partnership. The strategies were to launch:

- **A Learning Agenda**, whose purpose would be to document and analyze our and others' experience working in partnership to enable us to understand better how partnerships work
- **A Linking Agenda**, whose aim was to connect groups working on similar partnership-building initiatives to each other, as well as to information and resources and material resources that could strengthen their knowledge, their skills and their work

¹ A group of 14 development activists from the South and organizational change consultants and researchers from the North

- **An Enabling Agenda**, whose function was to work with a limited number of local groups to form and facilitate inclusive partnerships to work on issues of poverty to achieve more sustainable results.

Learnings from Phase 1 – Participatory Partnerships

None of the initial strategies – alone or together – led to definitive solutions to poverty at the scale we would have liked to have seen. As Dave Brown states², The results of several series of case studies on partnerships around the world did contribute significantly to evidence that ultimately convinced aid and policymaking organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme, US Agency for International Development, the Inter-American Development Bank and The World Bank, as well as, indirectly through their use in graduate schools and dissemination through publications, multinational corporations, of the necessity for partnerships as a strategy for solving complex problems. While the concept has been widely accepted, however, efforts have often left out the key function of participation of those affected by the problems, leading to less far-reaching and sustainable results.

At the time at which we began to undertake case studies of participatory collaboration, perhaps the most striking insight was **how few successful, sustainable, inclusive, multi-sectoral collaborations existed**. There were participatory experiences initiated by civil society organizations. There were short-term alliances between government and civil society or government and business, but there were then very few examples of tri-sectoral partnerships.

Nevertheless, the case study series and consultations and Synergos’ partnership work cited by Dave Brown³ yielded insights – or missing pieces – that have remained the intellectual underpinning for me in Synergos’ work on partnership:⁴

- **It is hard work and takes a long time to bring groups together across divides.** If any one group could do it alone they would, because it is faster and easier, though possibly not as sustainable. **People generally don’t try partnership until everything else has failed.**
- **Only when there is common interest in solving a problem, can agreement be reached by different groups to work in partnership.**
- **Informal relationships between individuals from different sectors can facilitate the collaboration.** A later finding added to this that **there are allies in every sector,**

² In his paper, *Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships at Synergos: Experience and Learning in the First Decade*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Brown, L. David and Tandon, Rajesh (1992). *Multiparty Cooperation for Development in Asia*. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

one just has to find them. One example of this was the case of family biogas plants in Orissa, India, where Joe Madiath's (the founder of the NGO, Gram Vikas, which led the initiative) university relationship with the then State Secretary for the Environment helped to smooth over otherwise hostile relations between the state and civil society.

- **Partnerships often form in response to external actors or event.**
- **Power differences among stakeholders can make real collaboration impossible unless there are balancing forces** – like alliances between more- and less-powerful groups that enhance the capacity of the less powerful to come to the table as full stakeholders. A role Synergos has often played was to ally ourselves with less powerful groups and use our convening power to make space for them to participate.
- **Strong civil society organizations can play important bridging roles⁵** between grassroots groups, on the one hand, and the more powerful actors in the state and civil society and multi- and bilateral agencies, on the other.
- Because building and sustaining inclusive partnerships take a long time and is, therefore, expensive, **creative funding strategies must be found to sustain the work.**
- **Conflict is a “normal” part of partnership development.** If everyone agreed ahead of time as to what needed to be done and how to do it, the problem would be solved and there would be no need to enter into a formal partnership. Managing conflicts entails building a common vision and relations of trust among stakeholders, which is difficult and time-consuming. **Credible bridgers are need to facilitate this process.**

One starts out thinking that there will be one neatly cut, missing piece that will explain or solve a whole range of problems. But where participatory partnerships might have been imagined as one piece, each one of the bullet points above constitutes a critical piece in itself, each being worth further study to learn how to apply them effectively in the real world; each worthy of training programs to help those embarking on partnership initiatives to succeed.

⁵ Dave Brown introduced the term “bridging organizations”, a concept that has been critical to Synergos’ thinking and work.

Box1: Gram Vikas as a Bridger

Gram Vikas has worked with poor and marginalized communities of Orissa, India since 1979. Its mission is to promote processes which are sustainable and socially inclusive to enable critical masses of poor and marginalized rural people or communities to achieve a dignified quality of life.

Gram Vikas' role as a bridging organization is shown in the India biogas program, which resulted in over 45,000 biogas units that convert cow dung to energy being placed with rural families in the 1980s. In 1982, OREDA, the Orissa state energy agency, invited Gram Vikas to participate in the national program for biogas development. Gram Vikas became the most active non-governmental organization in the effort in Orissa, installing more than half the biogas units. High levels of cooperation among Gram Vikas and state and national government actors were possible due to personal and professional connections among the staff of these organizations, and also to Gram Vikas' placement as a "bridge" between government and local communities. The process also involved Indian banks and a Canadian foundation.

Gram Vikas also helps to build bridges within communities. Among its core values are inclusiveness and social and gender equity. One way in which these values are operationalized is through providing 100% coverage for all families in every place its programs are conducted. Gram Vikas' work also includes representation of all sections of the community – in terms of caste, economic status and gender – in decision-making processes.

For more information on Gram Vikas, visit www.gramvikas.org.

Learnings from Phase 2 – Strengthening Local Grantmaking Foundations

In launching partnerships in Ghana, Brazil and Mexico, Synergos quickly came up against difficulty finding funding both for its own role facilitating them and for our local civil society partners' work to guide the partnerships. In retrospect, this was symptomatic of the lack of awareness of or regard for partnership as a problem-solving tool.

Grupo Esquel, a Latin American network of NGOs with which we intended to create partnerships in different countries, was concerned about the funding problems most civil society organizations (CSOs) were experiencing. Roberto Mizrahi, one of Esquel's founders, raised the question of why groups in the Southern Hemisphere could not create community foundations, much like the ones that support the non-profit sector in the United States and

United Kingdom. He proposed that we work jointly in creating such a foundation through Esquel Ecuador, one member of the network.

This exploration not only led Synergos to work with Cornelio Marchán and other Ecuadoreans to create a national Fundación Esquel, whose start-up was funded by The Rockefeller Foundation; it was the start of the second phase of Synergos, in which we gradually phased out working directly on partnerships and took on as our major focus the building and strengthening of grantmaking organizations that could both support the strengthening of civil society and become bridging organizations capable of convening and facilitating partnerships in their own societies to address problems of poverty and inequity.

During a number of years, the bulk of Synergos' energy went into helping found and/or strengthen Fundación Esquel, the Foundation for Community Development (in Mozambique), the Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe, Fundación Vamos (in Mexico) and Instituto Rio (in Brazil).

This work, too, proved very time-intensive and costly. Unlike our prior work to facilitate partnerships, however, major foundations like Mott, Ford, MacArthur, Rockefeller, Hewlett and Atlantic Philanthropies became very interested in strengthening philanthropy in the Southern Hemisphere, in large part through financing the strengthening of local grantmaking organizations. Since Synergos was one of the few organizations in the early 1990s doing this work, we were able to sustain this aspect of our work largely through large foundation support.

It became evident that working intensively with five or six foundations was not going to change the capacity of civil society globally to grow stronger. It was also clear that a few northern foundations were not going to be able to finance and endow hundreds of Southern community development foundations. Two new missing pieces showed up at this point:

- **mechanisms were needed at the national level to provide support to the dozens or hundreds of foundations** we hoped would spring up
- **new sources and types of funding were needed** to strengthen and sustain both local grantmaking organizations and civil society more broadly.

In addition to work with individual foundations, Synergos began working with associations of foundations (including CEMEFI in Mexico, GIFE in Brazil, CERES in Ecuador, SAGA in Southern Africa, the Association of Foundations and PBSP in The Philippines). We developed the Foundation Building Sourcebook for use in training groups starting foundation in governance, programming, evaluation, grantmaking and fundraising. This was based on case studies commissioned by Synergos on ways in which different foundations successfully handled these issues. We co-led workshops jointly with national and regional associations.

Box 2: Fundación Esquel as a Bridger

Ecuador's Fundación Esquel was established in 1990 in response to the worsening economic and social situation in Ecuador in the 1980s. Its mission is to work as an agent of social change by supporting initiatives with the most disadvantaged segments of Ecuadorian society, principally children and youth, women and indigenous populations, to solve their own problems, modify current conditions that restrict their development, and help them overcome social injustice.

Esquel directly implements development projects and also strengthens the efforts and capacities of smaller national civil society organizations through the provision of funds, technical assistance and networking. It plays an important bridging role in channeling resources received from national as well as international, such as the Inter-American Development Bank, to local initiatives that can use them effectively.

Esquel has also taught bridging leadership to various actors in Ecuador. With Synergos' involvement, it was instrumental in the creation of the Consorcio Ecuatoriano para la Responsabilidad Social (CERES – the Ecuadorian Consortium for Social Responsibility), the country's key network of foundations and corporate social responsibility programs. In addition, it has conducted courses on bridging leadership skills for young Ecuadorian leaders.

Esquel is encouraging collaboration at the local and regional level. It has used "local development plans" that engage a diverse set of local representatives in identifying local needs and conducting a coordinated set of development projects.

We also began to focus more of our energy on community foundations, (as opposed to corporate, family or private foundations which were also members of these associations). While our own work with the foundations with which we partnered was all with regional or national community development foundations, a funding trend emerged of strengthening philanthropy in the South more generally. While we viewed creating linkages between community development and other types of foundations as useful in broadening the access and, potentially, the funding base of community foundations, our main interest lay in supporting those foundations whose primary focus was responding to the needs of communities and grassroots groups. We therefore also took on the role of helping to strengthen groups of community foundations in Mexico, Southern Africa, and along the US-Mexico border where we play a capacity-building role for a consortium of 21 foundations.

Just as we, at one point, viewed the need to build partnership as one missing piece of the puzzle and discovered that that one umbrella word contained many pieces, so the deeper we got into promoting grant-making organizations as a way of strengthening civil society, the

more we realized that this work too was comprised of multiple pieces beyond the two listed above. In fact, as we entered more deeply into the complexities of building strong bridging organizations in the form of grant-making foundations that responded to community needs, we realized that our still relatively meager institutional resources were being spread too thin. This recognition led to the difficult decision to disband the Synergos Associates, whose primary focus had been on collaboration and partnership, and to build a staff whose strengths lay more in institution building than partnership facilitation. By the end of 1995, the first phase of Synergos' work with partnerships had ended.

Similar to our work on partnership, we realized that there were learning, linking and enabling components to foundation-building work. In order to be effective in helping individual foundations or groups of them to function well, we needed to learn both from their experience and that of others. The case studies leading to the Sourcebook addressed this part of the task. But it also became apparent that, just as had been the case among the Synergos Associates, who learned from their diverse peers about partnerships, there was a need for a peer-learning network of foundation and philanthropy professionals.

Initiated in 1999, with a three-year active status for each member, after which they became part of a permanent alumni group, there are now over 80 Synergos Senior Fellows. By linking the Fellows to each other through an annual meeting, a website, consultancies and learning visits that members made to other foundations, the Fellows Program became a powerful tool for both learning and linking. They also constitute a vehicle through which Synergos, whose staff will never be large enough to work directly with all the young foundations which need support, could expand its reach. The Fellows' interaction with Synergos and each other has strengthened their respective organizations. But through the workshops and consultancies in which they engaged they have strengthened hundreds of other foundations as well. In short, this peer network provided Synergos' work with local grantmaking initiatives a way to go to scale.

Learnings From Phase 3 – From Bridging Organizations to Bridging Leadership

If there is a theme that has persisted throughout Synergos' history, it is the notion that social and economic divides must be bridged in order to reduce poverty significantly. Our early efforts to form partnerships constituted an effort to bridge these divides by bringing diverse stakeholders together to solve poverty problems. The aim of the effort to build and strengthen foundations was to create bridging organizations that would respond to local initiatives and complement the energy of grassroots communities with the access and resources of staff, board and external donors. How much this bridging function actually worked varied according to the social context, the structure and goals of the foundation, and the composition of its board and staff.

In working with many such foundations as well as the Senior Fellows network, the Synergos Associates and the partners with whom we worked to develop multi-stakeholder

partnerships in our early years, it became apparent that bridging was not only an organizational function, but also an individual style of leadership. This idea began to take shape in 1997 when I was asked to write a paper on civil society leadership for a Salzburg Seminar on “Non-Governmental Organizations: Leadership and Civil Society”, a subject on which I did not, at all, consider myself an authority.⁶

As I began reflecting on Synergos’ then ten years of experience and cross-pollinated that reflection with a partial literature review on leadership, I began to notice a style of leadership exemplified by many of our colleagues that was not widely described in the literature. Some of the early thinking of the Linking Agenda group of Synergos Associates came back into focus, particularly the notion of building, as Associate Gustavo Esteva called them, **“chains of trust.”** This term describes a process through which bridgers, at different points along the divide, use their credibility with one group and their access to and trust with representatives of another otherwise unconnected group to create a link – and eventually to broaden the trust beyond the two individuals to the two groups. **In complex situations with many divisions or gaps, multiple links in the chain of trust need to be forged to make it possible for all the stakeholders to work together to solve the problem at hand.**

Bridging leaders, people who could reach out across divides to foster the bonds of trust that are prerequisite for partnership **were identified as another missing piece in the puzzle.** From our observations of natural bridging leaders over time, many of whom were leaders of the community foundations with which we worked, we were able to identify some qualities and skills required to do effective bridging. These included:

- **a willingness to engage with people different from oneself**
- **a recognition that finding consensus generally entails giving up some of our own interests and a willingness to do this**
- **sufficient credibility with one’s own constituency that its members trust one to talk with people who may be viewed as the enemy**
- **low personal ego needs and a willingness to allow others to take credit for jointly achieved results** (recently deceased Synergos Associate Michael Doyle used to say “You can make change or you can take credit for it, but you cannot do both”)
- **a capacity for empathy or ability to put oneself in the shoes of others**
- **an ability to listen deeply and openly in such a way that others feel heard**
- **a willingness to learn, to understand and to communicate in “languages” that different sectors and groups employ to facilitate understanding both ways across that divide.**

Synergos’ board and leadership, in 1998, committed to allocate scarce general-support funds for three years to explore adding a program on Bridging Leadership. As we had done with the Synergos Associates and the Synergos Senior Fellows, we put together a peer learning network of individuals from institutions around the world interested in the theme of

⁶ The paper was *Toward a New Paradigm for Civil Society Leadership: The Art of Bridging Gaps.*

bridging leadership⁷ under Bruce Scheerer and Steve Pierce to learn from each others' experience and from case studies of examples of this style of leadership.

Disagreement among the participants as how much to focus on individual bridging leaders as opposed to the generic practice of bridging leadership hampered the development of a consistent research protocol. Nevertheless, 18 of the 31 cases completed hold enough clues to provide a rich database for further analysis.

Unfortunately, Synergos was unable to raise the funding to complete the analysis; but two of our institutional partners, The Asian Institute of Management (Ernie Garilao and Jacinto Gavino) and Fundación Esquel in Ecuador (Cornelio Marchán and Boris Cornejo) took the learnings to date and initiated bridging leadership initiatives in their own countries from which there is much to learn.⁸ It is thrilling to see the early work of the members of the Bridging Leadership Task Force refined and put into practice in high-conflict, high-poverty zones such as Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines.

In order for the larger world to recognize that bridging constitutes a style of leadership that could both resolve conflicts and help bring people together to solve poverty problems, we need:

- more analysis of case studies of bridging leadership
- the application and adoption of training programs for bridging leaders such as those developed by AIM and Fundación Esquel in other parts of the world
- dissemination of how to practice this style of leadership for the solving of complex problems.

Learnings from Phase 4 – Engaging Private Philanthropists in Participatory and Collaborative Approaches to Solving Poverty Problems

Even before starting Synergos, I heard from virtually all the civil society groups with which I consulted that lack of funding for developmental – as opposed to charitable – approaches to reduce poverty was a major stumbling block. The groups with which Synergos worked to build partnerships in the early days complained that it was just as hard to raise funds to work on partnerships; they also expressed concern that the same scarce funds would be spread even more thinly across both types of endeavors.

Our attempt to support a whole new generation of community grantmakers was, in part, an effort to make it possible to get more funds closer to the locus of the problems related to

⁷ The institutions represented included the Asian Institute of Management (Philippines), Fundación Esquel (Ecuador), Tecnológico de Monterrey (Mexico), Associação Brasileira para o Desenvolvimento de Lideranças, (São Paulo), University of Natal (South Africa), and the Leadership Regional Network of Southern Africa.

⁸ See Professor Garilao's paper *Bridging Leadership at Synergos: Experience and Learnings* which describes in greater detail the learnings from Synergos' Bridging Leadership Task Force's work as subsequent learnings based on AIM's research, case studies, teaching and practice of bridging leadership.

poverty and to shift the decision making about how these problems should be solved to include those affected by them.

To even begin to make this shift has taken enormous effort on the part of many, including Synergos. Farsighted foundation program officers in the North, some multi- and bilateral agency professionals, researchers and, most prominently, the Southern foundation leaders themselves, all contributed. Yet still, the amount of resources available to these foundations, particularly from within countries of the South where local grantmaking foundations were beginning to play a much larger role, was minimal. Most of them functioned more as community advocates and capacity builders than grantmakers, and what grants were made were usually miniscule in scale.

In an effort to explore new ways to stimulate funding for community foundations, in 1993 Synergos and Fundación Esquel organized a “people-to-people” trip to Ecuador for Americans interested in learning more than ordinary tourism could teach them about Ecuador and the issues its people were facing – and in potentially finding a way of getting involved to help make a difference. Even though it did not generate a lot of funds for programs visited, the trip was a success in terms of the participants gaining a far more complex understanding of Ecuador and a tremendous appreciation of the key role Esquel was playing in creating access for local communities to resources, information, skills and the market.

The experience lit a flame in my own mind about the potential for connecting influential, skilled, well-connected and well-resourced people with exciting initiatives addressing poverty, both at the grassroots and support organization levels. Lack of access as well as lack of financial resources together constituted a large piece of the problem. Then perhaps creating opportunities for which those without access but deeply committed to solving their own problems to encounter those with connections and resources but without much familiarity, could provide a way to bridge this gap on a case-by-case basis. But Synergos did not have the capacity or the will to launch such a program at the time. It was not until Bruce Schearer met with and subsequently hired Jim Brasher in 2000 that the idea to create a network of philanthropists interested in playing an effective role in reducing poverty became a reality.

Benefiting from the convening power of my father, David Rockefeller, we co-hosted three dinners for members of philanthropic families over the course of three months. These served as focus groups to determine whether families of wealth and with expressed interest in becoming more effective philanthropists would find it useful to learn from each other, under the auspices of Synergos, about how to have a greater impact with their dollars and their personal engagement.

There turned out to be even greater hunger for such interaction and peer learning than we had anticipated. While we hoped that some southern hemisphere philanthropists would join, we had supposed that the membership in the emergent Global Philanthropists Circle would

be comprised mainly of Americans interested in giving outside their own borders.⁹ In fact, over 50% of the nearly 70 member families come from outside the US – from 19 other countries. And one-third of these families are from the Southern Hemisphere.

Several motives were expressed for people to join:

- to learn how to give more strategically
- to find a sense of community with other member philanthropists
- to learn how to structure and run their own foundations
- to learn more about opportunities for giving in other parts of the world
- to learn about others' creative and impactful strategies
- to learn more about and find others with whom to collaborate on a particular interest (education, microfinance, climate change, the Middle East, Africa)
- to engage others in a theme or initiative about which they are passionate
- to have a forum in which younger members of families could formulate their own philanthropic passions and strategies.

Creating activities for the Global Philanthropists Circle members has been time-consuming but, by and large, well-received and with good results in terms of members learning from each other and, in many cases, becoming more strategic and impactful in their giving.¹⁰ Some members have decided not to renew after several years of membership, finding that they were either not having time to participate, or that they had gotten what they wanted, in terms of connections and learning, from the time that they had been involved. But a growing core group of members has become an increasingly attractive draw for others who yearn not only for knowledge about how to be more strategic and impactful in their giving, but also for a safe space in which to reflect and learn. And, as with most peer networks, the friendships and bonding that have developed from shared trips, dinners, retreats and seminars, have become the glue that holds people together beyond their philosophical and intellectual interests.

The new missing piece, which is showing itself now that the network is strongly functioning, is **how to create the same safe space and bonds between GPC members and members of other groups as those that are so strong within the GPC itself.** Put more generically, Robert Putnam speaks of *bonding* social capital (among people of like backgrounds), which is easier to develop, and *bridging* social capital (among people of different backgrounds), the former of which is much easier to create than the latter.¹¹ The

⁹ Only 2% of US philanthropic dollars go outside the country, in part because givers do not know how to connect with effective organizations in other countries.

¹⁰ A report commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, *Encouraging Thoughtful and Effective Philanthropy*, echoes our experience that exposure to examples of peers inspires others to become more effective philanthropists.

¹¹ In remarks to the board of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in 2000.

challenge of creating bridging social capital between GPC members and other partner groups with which Synergos works is complicated in several ways:

- Because many of the groups with which Synergos is in contact are in need of financial resources to do their work, it is sometimes difficult for them to view the GPC members as more than just sources of money
- The network was not set up for the purpose of soliciting money from members for specific projects or causes; rather it was designed to help its members clarify their own interests and strategies and then become more effective in allocating their philanthropic resources.
- Therefore we are in the awkward position of having to construct something of a firewall between those exciting initiatives to which we expose members on trips or in meetings, and the need and hope the groups running them have to find support for their work.
- Many philanthropists feel that people only value them for their money – and many of them do not sufficiently value their other attributes, such as their connections, influence, skills, ideas and humanity.
- Groups working on social problems also often undervalue these other attributes, which contributes to the distance that sometimes exists between funders and fund seekers because it reinforces the philanthropists’ sense that they are only valued or valuable for their money.
- Many philanthropists start out trying to alleviate *symptoms* and do not participate with time or brain power or money in figuring how to address the *causes* of poverty.
- Even when they develop an interest in looking at root causes, they sometimes come to this (as does everyone) with their own conceptions of the “problem”, which are based on the sometimes narrow base of experience to which their often-sheltered lives have exposed them. This is sometimes accompanied by a strong sense of how the problem should be addressed that does not always involve listening to the perspectives of others or being willing to design something together.
- It is difficult and painful for someone who lives a privileged life to look squarely at the lives of people who lack such privilege. And it is even more of a challenge to consider the inequity of that reality – and the implications of facing that for how one might choose to live one’s life differently.

Despite these considerable challenges, though, there have been some examples of success in overcoming these barriers, in terms of relationships built, funding relationships established and understanding of the context of the problems deepened. There have also been cases of Synergos Senior Fellows or members of partner groups coming to see the value of the highly creative initiatives of some GPC members – even when not all of these are participatory and collaborative. I credit this progress in cross-group understanding and appreciation to several factors:

- the bridging qualities of many of the members of the various peer networks and partner organizations of Synergos, which allows them to be more than normally open to meeting and developing trusting relationships with people different from themselves

- the safe space that the Synergos team has been able to create within each network, which makes it easier for members to venture beyond that space together with other trusted colleagues from Synergos and their own network, whether on trips, at University for a Night or at meetings.
- the basic patience and humanity with which many people involved in grassroots initiatives exhibit when hosting visitors, that is both educational and heart-opening and that allows for human bonds to grow across wide divides of language, culture and background.

An important missing piece of the puzzle is organized ways to make the human connection between haves and have-nots.¹² Without this, it is less likely that sufficient numbers of people with enough financial and other resources to make a difference in reducing poverty will fully engage. This piece of the puzzle includes:

- the **creation of safe spaces** for peer networks which can then be connected to each other through bridging
- the **nature of the mutual exposure** – in which people are able to meet with a stance of listening and learning
- the adoption by GPC staff of a **“learning journey” approach** from our Generon partners (who will be described shortly) which helps people open their ears and hearts in such encounters and provides space for deep reflection afterwards, both among GPC members together with Synergos staff, and between members and hosts.

Preliminary Learnings from Phase 5 – A Return to Partnership

At the point at which it became clear that it was going to be impossible to sustain financially the Bridging Leadership Program, it felt untenable to me to not find some way of incorporating what we had learned about bridging into our deep experience helping to strengthen intermediary organizations of civil society, namely grant-making foundations. We had become very good at strengthening such organizations but were not as advanced in working with them to bridge divides in a systematic way, even if many of their leaders had found their own way to this role. With the growing strength of both the Synergos Senior Fellows program and the Global Philanthropists Circle, as well as our continuing strong relationships with the partners with which we had been working across three continents for up to fifteen years, it felt like the right moment to reengage with the original mission of the organization: to work with others to promote participatory partnership approaches to reducing poverty.

Always better than I at taking an idea and forming it into strategies and actions, Bruce Schearer, then President of Synergos, convened a group of people with deep experience in

¹² “Have-nots” here refers to the financial sense of the word; there are many people without money who have non-material resources, just as there are some with plenty of money but have not a good quality of life in other ways.

bridging, dialogue and partnership in the fall of 2003 to both hear what others had been learning and how they were working and to explore the possibility of finding one or more partners with whom we might move forward in this work. We had concluded that we needed a partner because we had formed a staff whose skills included strengthening organizations and developing and managing peer networks, but not partnership facilitation.

In the course of the meeting, I had a chance to talk with Adam Kahane, co-founder of Generon Consulting with Joseph Jaworski, about whom I had heard a lot but had not met. Joseph's earlier book, *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*, had had a profound effect on me as I was writing the paper on bridging leadership for the Salzburg Seminar in 1997.

I learned that Generon had recently shifted its emphasis from corporate consulting to engaging in deep partnership work to resolve intractable social and economic problems, using a U-Process methodology that had been developed by Joseph and Otto Scharmer of MIT, and which was laid out in *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*. Adam had also described the evolution of his thinking and experience as described in *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities*. Both books led to the direction Generon was now taking.

The essence of their approach was that, to achieve sustainable change, it was necessary to transform the hearts of those engaged in it, both individually and as a group. The right group of stakeholders needed to come together and engage in a process of "sensing" the current reality of the problem they wished to address, through carefully structured "learning journeys." The members of the group, having analyzed the problem preliminarily, based on their shared learning, would then retreat into a wilderness setting and spend three days alone reflecting on their deepest purpose in being on this earth. Refreshed, energized and deeply bonded to each other after this, the group would come back together and, with the energy released into the group from their time alone, brainstorm and refine "break-through" solutions to the problem to which they could all commit. These ideas would then be presented to a group of pre-selected, committed sponsors who would further help the group refine the ideas until consensus would be reached on pilots through which to test the ideas. This interaction would gradually hone the solutions through a pilot phase until agreement would be reached as to how to take it to scale.¹³

After some intense preliminary discussions among Bruce Schearer, Joseph Jaworski, Adam Kahane, Tom Rautenberg and myself over the next several months, a widening circle of Generon and Synergos staff engaged around what we might do together and how. As a first step, we agreed that Generon would lead a retreat, based on the U methodology, for GPC members at my ranch in Montana in the summer of 2004. Generon partners were convinced that, **unless many people shifted the way they were addressing problem solving from**

¹³ This in no way does justice to the complexity of the U Process. I only lay out this brief outline here for readers who may be unfamiliar with it, but highly recommend reading *Presence* to those interested in gaining in a more complete understanding of the theory.

a mind-centered, to a mind-, heart- and spirit-centered approach, that any outcomes would be only partial and ultimately not sustainable. We at Synergos were intrigued by this notion, having struggled for so many years with the difficulties of getting people to engage across boundaries to achieve sustainable results. We also felt that, among the remarkable group of members of the Global Philanthropists Circle, there were a number that were yearning to go deeper inside themselves to hone their own commitments and realize their greatest potential, and who were seeking ways to achieve greater impact by working with others.

This first retreat was life-changing for most, if not all, of the participants. For me, it clarified at a much deeper level than I had accessed previously the underlying purpose of my engaging in this work. When I had moved to Montana seven years previously, I only knew that I needed more time for reflection and a deeper connection with wild nature, but could not articulate more than that. This retreat (and the subsequent ones we have run at the ranch for GPC members and Synergos staff as well as a vision quest and several workshops I have attended with Animas Valley Institute,¹⁴ a group that initiates people into the mysteries of the soul and which is now collaborating with Generon and Synergos on the retreat program) added a whole new dimension to my understanding of the complexity of the changes needed. It led me to believe that **psychosocial and spiritual development must complement the economic and political change in order for us as individuals, as well as groups and societies, to move past the planes of conflict, injustice and degradation in which we appear to be stuck.**

Generon and Synergos entered into a partnership agreement in 2004 with the intention of working together to form inclusive partnerships to solve up to ten intractable problems related to poverty. Our intention was to learn from each experience and refine our practice, to demonstrate the viability of the approach and to build capacity for hundreds, if not thousands, of people to lead similar partnerships to address problems of poverty and inequity.

To date, we have immersed ourselves in two, are just beginning work on a third and have formed to work team to initiate a fourth. They are:

- **A Sustainable Food Lab**, launched in 2004 by Generon, joined by Synergos shortly thereafter, and led by The Sustainability Institute, seeks to change the way we grow, harvest, buy and distribute food in order to create better livelihoods for local producers, produce healthier food to improve the health of consumers, increase consumer demand for sustainably produced food to encourage less use of harmful chemicals, less monoculture production which destroys soils and more local sourcing of food to avoid excessive energy use. To date, a new Business Coalition for Sustainable Food is

¹⁴ See, for example, Plotkin, Bill (1993). *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

- developing sustainability standards for members; and a model supply chain project has been formed to connect small Latin American producers to major buyers.
- **The Partnership for Child Nutrition**, launched in 2005 by Synergos (partnering with Generon), Unilever and UNICEF, to find break-through solutions to the persistent problem of child malnutrition, initially in India, but with the intention of moving to other countries in the future. This is being piloted in several urban and rural districts of the populous state of Maharashtra with an initial target of 50,000 malnourished children and an expanded pilot target of 8-10 million children, after which it is the intention to move to other states in India. To date, the Bhavishya Alliance, India's first corporate-government-civil society partnership for child nutrition, has been formed to lead the project; mobile Nutrition Rehabilitation Centers are targeting the worst pockets of malnutrition in Maharashtra; improvements are being made to the supply chain management for micro-nutrient distribution; and "Mother-Child Nutrition Day" information campaigns are being launched to educate mothers about nutrition.
 - **The Aboriginal Leadership Initiative** seeks to improve the ability of aboriginal communities, government agencies, businesses and non-profit agencies to collaborate on projects that improve the quality of life for indigenous people in Canada. The initiative will launch in the summer of 2007 in British Columbia with the Nu Chah Nulth peoples of Vancouver Island. Participatory design work, involving input from community, corporate and government leaders, has begun and capacity building for Aboriginal leaders will begin in the third quarter of 2007. This pilot is a first step toward a larger initiative, first across Canada, and then with replication activities taking place across Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia.
 - **The African Public Health Leadership and Systems Innovation Initiative** will develop a replicable model for improving public health leadership and system performance, starting in Namibia. It seeks to increase health leader effectiveness by cultivating managerial and administrative skills and by addressing the attitudes, values and relationships that drive behavior. The project design has been completed and agreements secured from senior Namibian government and public health officials; resources are being sought to enable the launch of the program. The project seeks to improve health services for approximately one million poor and rural Namibians. If successful, it will be a springboard for replication projects across Southern Africa.

The work being undertaken jointly by Synergos and Generon is still so new that we have less perspective on it than on Synergos' other programs which range in age from 6 to 20 years old. Nevertheless, we have learned some preliminary lessons that will eventually form themselves into more missing pieces.

Interorganizational Learnings

- Despite tremendous good will and common purpose, **overcoming organizational culture differences between Synergos and Generon has taken longer and proven more difficult than we might have imagined**; the fact that one is a for-profit company and the other a non-profit organization has added to the complexity of the task

- These **difficulties have been exacerbated by shortage of financial resources** to proceed with the labs to which we had committed, thereby raising anxiety levels and sometimes stimulating competition and resentment over scarce funds.
- The Synergos team has come to value its own contributions to partnership formation and management. We started with the perspective that we were weak in partnership facilitation – which was true in terms of our team’s lack of tools and experience in this regard. But it became apparent that **our convening power, credibility with certain stakeholders, cultural sensitivity, experience in organization building and bridging capacity constituted important complements to the strengths that Generon brought, including the tremendous contribution of the U Process, their credibility with different stakeholders and their method for convening.**
- The **time committed to alignment of the two organizations** has been as **valuable** as the actual work together in keeping the partnership between the two organizations on track through difficult times.

Learnings from the Partnership Work

- **The challenges of applying the U methodology in different cultural settings** have been greater than anticipated and have called for more flexibility of application.
- **The importance of including and building capacity of local facilitators to employ the U Process** has been affirmed in the school of hard knocks. This is critical not only to help the largely northern team adjust to the culture of the particular partnership, but also to have a fully capacitated local team ready to take the partnership work forward beyond the pilot phase, thereby making the application more affordable than has been the case to date.
- **The crucialness of choosing the right participants for the “lab team”** has been highlighted by seeing the consequences of not always succeeding in doing so – particularly with regard to insufficient buy-in by the Champions, whose support is crucial for moving the initiative forward from the pilot phase onward. More time and sophistication up front is required for the enrollment phase.
- **The importance of the inclusion of people affected by the problem**, despite potential communication and language difficulties, and not only their representatives, is a challenge that still must be addressed in future labs.
- **The challenge of keeping the stakeholders informed and involved** beyond the actual lab is one that we must grapple with in future initiatives. Participants feel like the owners of the process and, if there is no role for them going forward, can start to feel left out and resentful. On the other hand, to get the work done takes focus and may not always need the participation of everyone.
- Running the lab and running the initiatives decided on therein requires different skills. If there is no agreed in place on the right implementing agency, one must be formed, which is highly complicated and can slow down the entire process.

Learnings from Engagement in the U Process

- **The potential for personal and group transformation by going through the U Process is tremendous;** but the internal upheavals should not be underestimated.
- **The internal impact occurs in what I would call both the spiritual/soul and psychological realms.**
- In the spiritual/soul realm, **engaging in practices such as meditation, xi gong, yoga or ceremonies honoring wild nature in a natural setting by oneself exposes us to who we are at the deepest level** – and to what is our deepest purpose in being alive. This is both clarifying and complicating, because many of us have not been living our deepest purposes. Realizing what that is can either upset the apple cart of a carefully organized (and sometimes limited) life and/or free us up to commit our selves more deeply to what we know we must do.
- **On the psychological plane, spending time alone in wild nature can peel us back to our barest essential self,** exposing our carefully hidden shadow sides as well as the strong and independent side of our self that it may have felt too dangerous to live out. Seeing these revelations through can be liberating and exhilarating – and also terrifying. It is therefore **important that the people guiding the experience be present and aware of the risks and have the capacity to accompany the participants through difficult moments** afterwards.
- What makes it worth it is that, **if we persist in the journey and uncover the layers that had been repressed for so many years, new energy and clarity are released.** We are no longer always listening to others through our own fears, neuroses, anger, shame or whatever other issues we have been hiding away. It becomes possible to listen “with the ears of the heart”, in Animas Valley Institute terminology – directly, openly and empathically. And when we do this, **it becomes easier to understand the other’s point of view, which is the most fundamental prerequisite for becoming a bridging leader.**
- **Reincorporating into our life after such an experience can be difficult.** If we are led onto a different path than the one the side of us seeking safety and security had organized for us, this may imply a level of risk taking and reinvention of our selves that we had not anticipated.
- **Incorporating the U Process into other social change methodologies is not an easy task.** Most people have not considered personal transformation an important part of social change and many resist the idea because they are not ready to change their lives or themselves.¹⁵
- Beyond the impact on individuals of going through what Jaworski et al call “the bottom of the U” (presencing alone in nature), **the resulting effect of the individuals’ experience on the group is a powerful change stimulator.** The combined effects of

¹⁵ Michael Rennie, a talented senior partner at the consulting company, McKinsey & Company, has found that, in doing this work, about one third of people gravitate toward it immediately; one third find it interesting but don’t want to pursue it further after the initial experience; and another third think it’s ridiculous or far out and either refuse to participate or hate it when they do. What the implications of this are for the success of the U Process in social transformation remains to be seen.

the trust that has evolved during the “sensing” phase of the process, when people travel together to look at and learn about the problem they seek to solve, with the shared experience of going through the solo wilderness time and telling their stories to each other afterwards creates what the authors of *Presence* call “a single intelligence.” **The resulting shared energy, creativity and commitment is palpable and can, if guided properly, lead to a strong commitment to truly innovative solutions that would not have been possible without the combined personal transformation, bond of group trust and shared learning experience.**

- Other practitioners are working along similar, if not identical lines, some with considerable success. **Ways must be found of allowing for effective practitioners using slightly different methodologies to appreciate each others’ success, learn from each other and collaborate, rather than competing and creating new silos of practice.**
- **In order for the U Process to have a truly broad impact, ways must be found to bring its application all the way to the community level and to build the capacity of facilitators across sectors and levels to lead the process.** For this to be possible, **the cost must be brought down** to levels affordable for use everywhere.

As mentioned above, it is still early in the application of the U Process to social problems to have discovered all the ways it needs to be refined and adapted. It is not yet widely accepted as a method for social change. And it is considered suspect by many.

At the same time, more people are recognizing the urgency of addressing problems related to poverty in ways that lead to sustainable solutions. More people are in despair about the degree of poverty in the world, as well as about environmental degradation and persistent conflicts. This could translate into a moment of openness to new approaches – even to transforming our selves in the context of larger social change.

Challenges for the Future

The above learnings still add up to a very incomplete puzzle. It is a puzzle whose shape and textures are gradually becoming clear, but whose exact picture remains elusive. As with any worthy puzzle, however, each added piece lends clues as to what we should be seeking next. The clues that are now on the table, after twenty years at this puzzle, have to do with the way forward for Synergos, in its program development, and for all of us working on issues of poverty. No one of us will be able to solve them all; but together we might be able to come up with at least an outline of a solution.

The first five of these are challenges that relate to Synergos’ point of evolution and perhaps to other organizations working in a similar way; the last three are more generic challenges to people and groups working on poverty issues, in which Synergos may or may not be able to play a role.

Challenge 1: Philanthropy as Bridging

How can Synergos maintain and strengthen its networks and the credibility gained mainly through its work strengthening grant-making organizations and private philanthropists while shifting its substantive emphasis to bridging and partnership work?

It was never our intention to support grant-making foundations just to be grant makers. Our intent was to help spawn and strengthen a generation of bridging organizations across the South that had resources to apply to strengthening communities' capacity to reduce poverty and that could help bridge divides and facilitate partnerships to enable this to happen. The new generation of foundations now exists, but they have not, by and large, focused on their role as or strengthened their capacity to become better bridging organizations.

Is there sufficient appetite among community, corporate, private, national and global foundations to play this broader role? Would foundations engage with us in learning about and facilitating partnerships to reduce poverty and increase equity? And is there a role for Synergos to support foundations – and other kinds of bridging organizations – through joint learning, linking them to other players and capacity building?

Challenge 2: Bridging Leadership

How can Synergos most usefully reenter the bridging leadership space?

Because of lack of funding, we disengaged from the study and promotion of bridging leadership several years ago. In the meantime, Fundación Esquel and the Asian Institute of Management's Mirant Center for Bridging Social and Economic Divides have made major strides in the teaching, study and practice of bridging leadership. What are the ways we can best collaborate with and enhance their work in this field? Should we play a research role in harvesting learning from the Bridging Leadership Task Force's case studies or commission new ones? If we do, how can we ensure that the research protocol reflects and stimulates what we really want to learn?

How can we bring our experience in bridging leadership into work using the U Process or other partnership methodologies? And finally, do we want to play a dissemination role by making our and others' learnings available to other training institutions? If so, would this best be done through the formation of another peer learning network?

Challenge 3: Partnerships

What is the best way to move ahead our work in inclusive partnerships through psychosocial transformation without becoming or seeming doctrinaire, too much on the fringe or pricing ourselves out of the market?

Others have had experience combining personal and social transformation; what can we learn from them? Should we be doing a data search, interviews? Should we be participating in or forming a network of people interested in this question?

Now that we have been working with Generon in this field for over three years, what can we learn – and how can we systematize the learnings – from our joint experience to date? Should we be posing questions for others' research or should we be undertaking some of our own?

How can we participate in the effort to make capacity building and practice in this arena more affordable so that it can be disseminated more widely beyond those who can pay high fees to learn?

Challenge 4: Systematizing Our Learning

How can Synergos systematically capture the knowledge we have garnered so far, mostly intuitively, and build in or contract out the capacity to do this in the future?

While we have occasionally done case studies and engaged in evaluations of our work, we have not, since the first ten years, considered ourselves as a learning organization with either a built-in or contracted-out capacity to do serious research on the questions we were exploring through our work. Is now the moment to build in-house capacity for research or only for knowledge management and dissemination? What can we still learn from our early experience in participatory action research for the Asia and Africa case studies and from our later case study series that could inform and guide our future in this field?

Challenge 5: Communicating More Effectively

How can we better communicate what we have learned and what we do to different constituencies?

If, in fact, we seek to engage people to work in inclusive partnerships, to become bridging leaders and to transform themselves in order to engage more effectively, we need to be able to articulate the importance of these so that they will both understand them and want to participate.

Is the best short-term strategy word of mouth through peer networks? Clear dissemination of successful results? Dissemination of research findings on what works and how? Whatever strategy or strategies we develop to communicate what we do has to be couched in clear, simple language that people find comprehensible, not in jargon or generalities.

Challenge 6: Harnessing Entrepreneurship to Social Change

How can we integrate into the work of civil society to reduce poverty and increase equity the entrepreneurial capacity of the business sector? And how can we do this without losing the value and values of community?

Over time, we have seen some great examples applying entrepreneurial strategies to poverty problems. For example, Eugene Gonzalez' work with the Foundation for Sustainable Societies, Inc.¹⁶ linking to a venture capitalist to sell natural fertilizer, the production of which produced decent livelihoods for coconut growers and fisherfolk in the Philippines; Marissa Camacho Reyes' work creating "Peace Bonds" to fund social initiatives in the Philippines; Magid Osman's work to do a debt swap that endowed a national community foundation (the Foundation for Community Development) in Mozambique; Eric Molobi's and others' work to create Kagiso Trust Investments, a successful business whose main shareholder is Kagiso Trust, a civil society organization that addresses education in South Africa¹⁷; the Sainsbury's Aquifer agro-investment in Mozambique, whose profits will benefit small producers and civil society organizations; Rose Mazula's Zimbabwe Progress Fund, a venture capital company in Zimbabwe that has created livelihoods and ownership for small black producers in an otherwise failing economy; or Mohammed Yunus and Josh Mailman's Grameen Phones, which have created livelihoods for village women and provided affordable access to phone communication for the rural poor of Bangladesh through a profitable company. Yet there are not so many examples of these successes and most have not grown to any significant scale.

Is there a role for Synergos in promoting and stimulating these kinds of solutions? Should we be documenting, analyzing and disseminating this kind of experience for both civil society and business audiences? How can we further engage and connect people already in our various networks with talent and inclination in this direction – from both civil society and business – to inform ourselves, learn from each other and help others bridge this divide? How can we assess the risks as well as the benefits of this approach?

Are there ways in which entrepreneurial approaches could address some of the funding problems of community foundations and other bridging organizations? Of partnerships?

Is there room for such approaches for communities – that don't endanger their fragile integrity and social capital?

Challenge 7: Dealmaking

Is there a role for Synergos or others to take bridging to the next – and more entrepreneurial – level by becoming deal brokers with and on behalf of our key constituencies?

Merchant banks basically play the same role Synergos does, except in the for-profit field: finding the right relationships and putting people together to create deals. We have behaved like most other civil society organizations, which characteristically do not take a very

¹⁶ Gonzales, Eugenio M. (2003). *Building and Managing Endowments: Lessons from Southeast Asia*. New York: The Synergos Institute.

¹⁷ Schutte, Lauren Blythe (1997). *The Kagiso Trust (South Africa)*. New York: The Synergos Institute.

entrepreneurial approach to creating connections to address problems. Is there a niche for Synergos and other CSOs that would make it possible to earn income while achieving social goals? Is it possible that corporations are paying such a high price to deal with social conflict that they would be willing to pay for help in finding solutions that are acceptable both to them and to the communities they have been fighting? If so, how could we ensure that such deals would benefit – and not further erode – communities?

Challenge 8: Engaging Governments

How could Synergos and other civil society organizations collaborate effectively with governments in order to bring to scale solutions to poverty problems?

Synergos has traditionally worked with other civil society organizations as our primary partners. In fact, we missed a huge opportunity when our first partner, Wanda Engel, founder of Roda Viva, became Minister of Social Development for Brazil and invited us to work with her on children and youth; we declined because of our too-rigid definition of with whom we work. Yet it is mainly governments that are capable of taking innovations to scale – even if they often don't succeed in doing so. What are the risks and benefits of working more closely with governments? What experiences are there of successful partnerships in which government has played a key role? Should we be documenting some of these, beyond our work with the government of the State of Maharashtra in India and the Canadian national and British Columbia Provincial government?

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