

# The Synergos Institute

## **Partnership Facilitation Across Boundaries: An Expanded Role for the United Nations**

A Discussion Paper for the Consideration by the UN Panel on Civil Society

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### **Introduction**

As the United Nations grapples with shifting power dynamics, forms of conflict, funding flows and development issues, the Secretary-General has asked a panel led by President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to consider the relationship of the UN to civil society and other actors such as parliamentarians, business and local government. In the evolving thinking of the Panel, partnership as a strategy and *modus operandi* for the UN has emerged as a key feature for consideration. Given The Synergos Institute's 18 year history in studying and facilitating partnership, we, the founder and Panel member, Peggy Dulany, and Synergos' President, Bruce Schearer, offer these thoughts on how the UN might engage in partnership building and facilitating as a way of relating to non-central government actors.

### **Partnership: What and Why**

A multi-stakeholder, inclusive approach to solving complex problems is a relatively new concept that has been developing over the past thirty years or so. The term "partnership" began cropping up in American cities in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a way to bring together different groups, such as government, labor and business, or black, Hispanic and white groups to address the kinds of social and economic problems that neither local government nor big business were able to solve on their own. Shortly after that, partnership approaches also appeared in the United Kingdom around similar urban problems. Many of these initial partnerships, however, were formed among the top levels of different sectors and were not particularly inclusive of those affected by the problem.

In an exploration of the viability and utility of such an approach in southern hemisphere countries in the mid-1980s, the founders of The Synergos Institute encountered a mixture of

interest, puzzlement and concern that bringing stakeholders of different power levels together would co-opt or overrun the interests of those with less voice.

Never the less, while not called partnership, Synergos and its research colleagues<sup>1</sup> did discover instances of groups collaborating together to address complex problems, and decided to undertake two series of case studies of such examples, one in Asia and one in Africa, and some analytical papers examining strengths, weaknesses and policy implications of this approach. Much of the data that form the basis for these suggestions comes out of this research and Synergos' subsequent experience jointly forming multi-stakeholder partnerships and building and strengthening community foundations with local groups in Southern countries.

*We define partnership as a joint effort to solve a complex problem where all those with a stake in the problem – including those affected by it – are included in the definition of the problem, the approach to solving it and the design and implementation of the solution.*

It is almost self-evident that, if one party could solve the problem by themselves, they would do so and not take the additional time or risk having to compromise by bringing others into the decision making process. But it is also true that, when people or groups are not part of deciding on a solution, they have less investment in it, are likely to put less energy into making it work, and may even resent it and work against it, thus rendering it less successful. The cases of successful multi-stakeholder collaboration we were able to identify involved intractable social problems, which previous unilateral approaches had failed to address. The usual decision makers – government or business – had been willing to engage other stakeholders because they could not achieve the desired result on their own. An example of this was the case of child immunization in Bangladesh where the President had committed to achieve 80% coverage by a certain time frame. It turned out that there was no way the government, which had traditionally not worked with NGOs, could meet this commitment, and resulted in its successful collaboration with NGOs and UNICEF.

Some of the findings from the analyses of these case studies might be useful in considering whether a partnership approach is viable for the United Nations and, if so, how it might undertake such an approach.

- Working in partnership does not mean an absence of conflict. It stands to reason that problems that cannot be solved by one party alone involve differences of opinion and approach. For this reason, developing effective partnerships often takes time, and may go through different phases. The nature of the “problem” may need to be reframed to make joint action possible.

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<sup>1</sup> The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), the Institute for Development Research (IDR), U.S., Grupo Esquel (Latin America), The Highlander Research and Education Center (U.S.), African Association for Literacy and Adult Education (AALAE)

- Informal relations between individual stakeholders with differing interests can often help to break the logjam to gain consensus. The relationship capital of trust that exists between the parties who know each other from another context can gradually extend to the groups they represent. In the case of putting family biogas plants in thousands of homes in Orissa, India, the fact that the head of the NGO that was implementing the work had gone to university with the state Secretary for Energy and Environment helped to overcome the prevailing mistrust between government and NGOs enough for the collaboration between them to succeed.
- Where there are significant power imbalances among the stakeholders, it may be necessary to create alliances which strengthen those with the least power (coalitions among the poor or common interest with a higher power group). Without some balancing of power, it is likely that those with more will push their agenda onto those with less, thereby not gaining full or lasting agreement or commitment of energy and resources of those whose interests were not met.
- In order for all parties to be willing to come to the table and stay there for the time-consuming process of developing partnership, the problem at stake must be important to the various stakeholders and the consequences of not resolving the problem costly to each. Many of these partnerships grew out of a perception of crisis or significant opportunity.
- Outside actors often played a key role in facilitating these partnerships (including, in several of the cases studied, UN agencies). Such outsiders must be credible with at least several stakeholders and not viewed as involved to meet their individual or group interest to be effective.
- Partnership that includes and strengthens grassroots participation in the process can release energy and resources from those groups making the solution more sustainable. An example is the Orangi Pilot Project in Pakistan, where a local NGO mobilized lane associations who did most of the work in implementing a sanitation project, contributing free labor to construct it and taking the responsibility to maintain it once it was in place.

### **The Process of Building Partnership: Bridging Across Divides**

Partnership is a structure, a form of organizing to solve a problem. But what is the process required to build it? We postulate that a process of bridging across divides is necessary to enable partnerships to work. But who can do this, and how?

Some groups serve as “bridging organizations”<sup>2</sup>. In working with many such organizations, Synergos has identified several characteristics that enable them to play such a bridging, or partnership facilitation role:

- Diverse composition of board and staff, often consciously comprising individuals from different sectors or constituencies
- Consciously relating to and reaching out to diverse groups in ways that enable them to maintain credibility and trust across boundaries
- Playing roles (for example, the fundraising or funding and technical assistance roles of community foundations or the research and development as well as teaching roles of universities) that enable them to traverse different levels or sectors of society
- Having convening power, as a result of their roles, that extends beyond a single group
- Because of their credibility and convening power, being able to create a “safe space” where groups with differing perspectives are willing to come together.

Synergos further observed, in working with many community foundations over a period of years, that many of the individuals who gravitated toward work in these foundations tended to be natural bridgers. We became interested in the role that “bridging leaders” could play in promoting partnership. Since this phenomenon had not been widely studied, we undertook a research and development initiative together with partners from different parts of the world<sup>3</sup> to do case studies of natural bridging leaders to try to determine what some of the qualities were that enabled them to effectively bring together different groups. While the analysis of the case studies is still underway, the following are traits that seem to characterize bridging leaders:

- Ability to listen attentively to others’ perspectives and the meaning behind their words
- Ability to put themselves in others’ shoes, to empathize with other perspectives
- Low ego needs – do not need to take the credit for success themselves
- Openness to interacting with groups other than their own

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<sup>2</sup> L. David Brown of IDR coined this term in the 1980s

<sup>3</sup> Asian Institute of Management (The Philippines), Associação Brasileira para o Desenvolvimento da Liderança (Brazil), LeaRn (South Africa), Universidad Tecnologica de Monterrey (Mexico), University of Natal (South Africa), Fundación Esquel (Ecuador)

- Credibility with their own constituency
- Transparency
- Self awareness
- Skills to analyze the situation, see where bridging is needed and figure out how to get the different stakeholders involved – sometimes by using other bridging leaders with different access
- Commitment to using their time and relationship capital to work on issues where divisions play a key role in the problem.

### **Partnership Facilitation and Bridging as Roles for the UN**

If the primary principle of partnership is true – that problems are becoming increasingly complex and cannot be solved by one party alone – then is it not time for the primary multilateral organization responsible for facilitating peace and development around the world to consciously and deliberately take on a partnership facilitation role in all its activities?

It is true that the United Nations is an organization whose members all belong to one sector, and one particular branch of that sector: central governments. Is it, therefore, possible for such a single-group organization to be the broker for partnerships? If the will to do so is there, there is precedent for this: many of the urban partnerships in the United States grew out of primarily corporate organizations. The New York City Partnership, for example, grew out of the New York City Chamber of Commerce, which was comprised of mainly large businesses. While the NYCP expanded its membership to smaller businesses and some non-profit organizations, it did not include labor or government representatives among its members. But it did include them in its task forces, which were the bodies that forged agreement on such issues as youth employment, housing, economic development, public safety and education.

The United Nations is, in fact, uniquely suited to play such a partnership facilitating and brokering role – becoming the bridger across different interests and groups to solve significant social, economic and conflict issues. It already does play this role in some of its agencies and functions. UNICEF is renowned for convening multiple stakeholders to achieve results that would be beyond the reach of its own resources. UNDP Resident Representatives often play a useful convening and facilitating role within countries of their assignments. UNHCR does not only work with governments in providing relief, but coordinates with organizations of civil society as well. And these are only a few examples.

Never the less, there is a prevailing attitude among many member governments that the UN is and should be the forum where they, the members, attempt to forge agreement, not having to consult with other groups such as civil society, business, local government or parliamentarians. There is no question that broadening the mandate – not of membership, but of participation – could be messier, costlier in the short term, and more time consuming.

It is hard enough to gain agreement among the member governments. But the fact is that the United Nations and the rest of the world are losing the battle for peace and development. This may be the moment when crisis and opportunity come together to jump-start a different approach.

The crises are self-evident: escalating conflicts within and between countries, new methods of warfare, including terrorism on a global scale, rapidly evolving and globally transmitted diseases as well as unresolved diseases which kill primarily the poor, an increasingly polarized world in terms of rich and poor, powerful and powerless, a rapidly deteriorating natural environment, and development methods and regulatory structures which are unable to address the magnitude of the problems. In addition, there has been a power shift away from central governments as business globalizes beyond the regulatory reach of nation-states and some corporations have annual sales larger than the GNP of many poor countries.

The opportunity exists in the growing recognition across sectors, including many governments, of the impossibility of any one group resolving these intractable problems and increasing acceptance of partnership based on a growing number of successful examples of collaborating among unlikely partners. In addition, the fact that the top leadership of the United Nations is actively seeking new strategies makes it more likely that this large, diverse and sometimes unwieldy organization could shift its *modus operandi*.

Let us then look at the United Nations in terms of its potential capacity for playing the bridging and partnership facilitation roles outlined above.

#### *The UN as a Bridging Organization*

- As mentioned above, many agencies of the UN already play the role of the *catalytic outsider*, which places it in an excellent position to broker partnerships
- Similarly, the UN has a history of playing the *credible convener*, and all requisite qualities of further amplifying such a role
- Many within the UN, the Secretary-General and his peace negotiators among them, have demonstrated talent and skill in being *active listeners*. There may be a tendency among some agency personnel in some countries to decide on and push for the “right” answer, so there may be room for skill development among UN staff in this area
- In the arena of *balancing power* so that different stakeholders can come to the table for fruitful discussion, the UN has a mixed record. On the one hand, its commitment to development inherently tries to strengthen the poor. On the other, the methods used are not always participatory and, given its mandate to work with national governments, do not always result in strengthening the organizations and voices of the least powerful.

*The UN as a Builder of Local Capacity*

- More emphasis could be placed on *building local capacity* at the grassroots, as well as national levels (with some agencies excelling at this)
- Should the UN take on a bridging and partnership building role, then creating or facilitating *training programs for bridging leaders* both within the UN and in the countries where it works is a major new role it could play
- Similarly, there is a need both within the UN and in the countries where it works for *training partnership facilitators*
- Committing to a partnership approach implies a shift in priorities and working arrangements from a project orientation to *a long-term capacity-building focus*, working in partnership with local – and not necessarily only government – organizations.

*The UN as a Mobilizer of Resources*

- While different agencies have always brought in outside expertise, this partnership approach may imply *identifying and mobilizing new kinds of skills*
- The UN has traditionally mobilized financial resources from member governments for its programs. Recently it has begun approaching the business sector and civil society organizations for support in some of its initiatives. A partnership approach with these other sectors could radically *increase the commitment of other sectors* to working with and supporting UN initiatives.

*The UN as a Partnership Facilitator*

To make the transformation from a member body whose members alone are charged with taking decisions and implementing policies to a membership organization that actively reaches out and seeks to involve many different constituencies in a partnership approach, a number of new skills must be developed and roles shifted. Drawing on the research mentioned above on bridging leadership and successful partnership, here are a few of the roles UN personnel would need to play and for which skills would need to be developed in order for them to be effective:

- secure participation of all stakeholders in any problem area that lends itself to partnership
- Identify and strengthen bridging leaders from each stakeholder group
- Facilitate identification of common interests, common understanding of the problem, common goals and, eventually, common strategies and actions leading to sustainable solutions by creating a safe space where trust can be built

- Facilitate emergence of permanent local institutional arrangements to ensure successful implementation of agreed upon actions
- Facilitate learning among participants on how to build partnership – research, documentation, training
- Invest in strengthening grassroots groups as key stakeholders
- Use influence and skills to help national policymakers see the benefit of working in partnership, providing incentives and rewards for best practices
- Use informal contacts with local and national governments to identify those individuals most amenable to a partnership approach and strengthen their capacities to promote, initiate and participate effectively in partnership
- Encourage grassroots innovations for local answers to achieve lower-cost, sustainable results
- Draw on the connectedness of those civil society organizations that work closely with the grassroots in a participatory way to link the latter to specific partnerships
- Draw on the organizational development innovations of business and partnership-oriented business leaders to develop these skills in un personnel
- Draw on the direct connections of credible local government officials and parliamentarians with their constituencies to link communities into partnership strategies
- Resist engaging in traditional top-down approaches which dictate solutions to governments and civil society and encourage government and business partners to do the same.

### **Some Possible Next Steps**

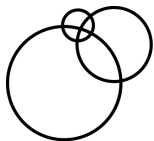
The authors do not presume to be sufficiently familiar with the complexities of the UN structure to be able to propose the best methods of getting from here to there. In particular, the differences in operating methods, roles and internal politics of the Secretariat, the General Assembly and the agencies of the UN will require expert attention in designing the best strategies to effect such change. With that disclaimer, here are some suggestions for steps that might be taken by the Secretary-General to create a framework for partnership as a primary *modus operandi* of the UN.

- Establish a normative framework for much broader intersectoral convening and partnership-building role within the UN system by expanding the political conception of the United Nations from simply a multilateral membership body of governments to a membership body whose primary mission is to search out and

strengthen common ground among diverse stakeholders to advance the common good of all.

- Commission a high-level policy paper on this subject and submit it to the General Assembly for approval.
- Establish an interagency executive body to design and put in place operational mechanisms throughout the UN family of institutions to perform this expanded convening and partnership-building role.
  - Consider the appointment of a new Under-Secretary-General reporting directly to the SG to lead this process.
- Engage the participation of the civil society and business sectors, as well as parliamentarians and local governments in these actions by establishing an Advisory Council of Non-Central Government Actors made of a rotating membership partly appointed by the Secretary-General and partly selected by the Advisory Committee itself.
  - Consult with existing civil society, business, parliamentarian and local government groups currently associated with the UN.
- Convene the UN specialized agencies and extended family of related institutions (WHO, ILO, etc.) in a process designed to produce a new framework of principles and actions directed at their playing a much larger role in the future of catalyzing, enabling and participating in multi-stakeholder, cross-sectoral development partnerships.
  - Make use of expert organizational consultant assistance in planning and facilitating this process.

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**Synergos**

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