



# **Understanding Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships**

## *Examples from Latin America and Southern Africa*

*A Background Note for the Synergos Twentieth Anniversary Reflection by David Winder,  
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### **Background**

In 1994 and 1995, The Synergos Institute undertook two major assignments aimed at deepening knowledge on different facets of multi-stakeholder partnership formation and disseminating the information to key stakeholders with a view to increasing commitment to this approach. Following its normal practice, Synergos staff designed each assignment with local partners in each country, ensuring gender balance, and jointly executed the activities with a range of individuals and organizations in each country.

The first assignment focused on building momentum for increasing partnerships between governments and civil society organizations. Focusing on Brazil, Mexico and Colombia, the program involved creating task forces in each country, facilitated by local civil society organization (CSO) partners, commissioning background papers from local specialists, convening one or more “national consultations” or “dialogues” in each country to generate an action agenda, and convening an international workshop to analyze the recommendations and results. As described below, the results in terms of outcomes were mixed. However the program as a whole succeeded in giving greater priority to the role of civil society in the agenda of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and strengthened the voice of advocates of increasing partnership between government, donors and civil society in each country. With few exceptions, representatives of the corporate sector were not involved and our conclusion is that the process would have benefited from their inclusion.

The second assignment again focused on three countries, in this case South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe. It focused on harvesting learning from the experience of business/community partnerships. It involved the commissioning of case studies from local researchers and the convening of workshops involving all sectors to review the findings and develop strategies for encouraging more business/community partnerships building on the lessons learned. The government sector was only marginally involved and in retrospect the exercise would have benefited from its involvement.

In undertaking these assignments Synergos recognized the importance of both building on its earlier studies on multi-stakeholder partnerships (analyzed in L. David Brown’s paper for the Synergos reflection) and attempting to use the increased knowledge and understanding to influence the behavior of key actors who were positioned to encourage and facilitate the formation of more partnerships. This work, which spanned almost two years, served also to increase our realization of

the critical role played by leaders with the capacity to inspire trust and confidence across sectoral divides. This led to the decision to deepen our understanding of these key actors through the development of a bridging leadership program (which is analyzed in Ernesto Garilao's paper for the reflection).

## **National Consultations to Explore How Governments and Multilateral Donors can Form Large-Scale Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations**

In late 1994, at the request of the Inter-American Development Bank, Synergos and CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation convened a group of Latin American civil society leaders and representatives of bilateral and multilateral donors to explore ways of building multi-sectoral partnerships to tackle the challenges of poverty and social development in the decades ahead. The group recommended that Synergos and CIVICUS convene national consultations involving government, civil society and donors in Brazil, Mexico and Colombia with the objective of developing strategies for increasing the role of CSOs in the design, planning and implementation of official development programs and strengthening their capacity to play this role.

In each country a task force was created under the leadership of a Synergos partner organization. Background papers were commissioned and presented to National Consultations bringing together all three sectors and action plans were developed. The outcomes were documented in each country and presented in a volume published in Spanish <sup>1</sup> under the editorship of Valencia and Winder.

One of the major lessons learned was that the prospect of creating strong partnerships between government and civil society is greatly enhanced where high level government officials are convinced that their own ability to address major social problems is enhanced by bringing in the skills and expertise of civil society organizations. The fact that the First Lady of Brazil, Dr. Ruth Cardoso, placed her full support behind the consultation meant that its recommendations became the centerpiece of a three-year plan to strengthen civil society implemented by a State Commission (*Comunidade Solidaria*) with multi-sectoral membership. In contrast the mistrust of the Mexican government in civil society at the time and a lack of clear consensus on how to relate to civil society resulted in an absence of high level government participation in the national consultation and limited the impact of the recommendations. Unequal levels of commitment to dialogue generated a lack of trust in the Mexican case.

A second learning was that the task force structuring the consultation needs to have broad representation from all sectors (i.e. act as a microcosm of the larger system) in order to ensure that there is buy-in from strategic allies whose support is required to translate recommendations to action. This worked best in Brazil where the civil society conveners were able to build a relationship of mutual trust with senior government officials responsible for social policy in advance of the National Consultation. It worked reasonably well in Colombia, where the 1991 constitution had opened space for civil society participation in development planning. It worked less well in Mexico where the process was almost completely driven by civil society leaders. As a result, civil society

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<sup>1</sup> Valencia, Enrique and Winder, David (1997). *El Desarrollo, Una Tarea En Común: Diálogos Sociedad Civil-Gobierno: Brasil, Colombia, México*. IDEA A.C. and The Synergos Institute.

organizations in Mexico came out of the consultation process with enhanced realization of the need to cultivate strategic allies in key government departments.

A third learning from the three consultations was that in order to strengthen the role of civil society as an active partner with government in the development sphere there is a need for a strong enabling legal and fiscal environment, sustainable independent sources of financing for CSOs, the provision of financial support for strengthening CSO capacity in project design, implementation and evaluation and enhanced levels of communication and coordination between CSOs.

The dialogues produced a number of concrete outcomes to address the needs identified above. For example in Colombia a permanent multi-sectoral committee on the reform of the legal environment was formed. In Brazil the dialogue gave additional focus and impetus to efforts to reform the national legal framework and regulations governing the relationship between civil society organizations and the government. In all three countries specific opportunities to enhance the role of CSOs in IDB-funded programs were identified.

## **Partnerships for African Development: Business and Communities Working Together in Southern Africa**

In 1995, Synergos partnered with The Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum to prepare case studies on business/community partnerships with the support of United Nations Development Programme's Private Sector Development Programme, the British ODA's Small Enterprise Development Fund and the Ford Foundation's South African Office.<sup>2</sup>

Six cases were selected from Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. In all cases companies had worked – either directly or through their corporate foundations – with low income communities to support micro-enterprise development, job creation, training and other educational projects. We were particularly interested in examining the degree of participation of community based organizations in the design and implementation of partnership activities and the relative effectiveness of different forms of corporate support (financial, technical support and equipment). Cases were written by African writers who were introduced to case writing methodology in a two-day workshop.

Two workshops were held in South Africa and Zimbabwe to review the cases and draw out key learnings for different audiences. The cases provided important insights into the dynamics of business and communities working together at a time when an increasing number of companies were starting to move beyond philanthropy. Here are some of the main findings:<sup>3</sup>

- 1) Partnerships require as a minimum starting point a shared interest and objective. The studies point to the difficulties of community-based organizations/NGOs and corporations collaborating together for development as they often do not understand each others point of view, capacities or motives. In one case a promising commercial partnership between an

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<sup>2</sup> *Partnerships for African Development: Business and Communities Working Together in Southern Africa*. The Synergos Institute and the Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum. October, 1995

<sup>3</sup> See the Lessons and Conclusions sections of the above report and also the foreword by Henry Jackelen.

NGO and a for-profit company which had the potential for a win-win outcome failed due to distrust.

- 2) Corporate-based foundations (three of the cases involved corporate foundations) can be a two-way bridge that “translates” and matches the needs of development activities to the capabilities of the corporation. They can become centers of expertise in terms of development and enhance immeasurably the credibility of a corporation in development issues. Their “business-like” approach can be more sensitive to the issues of overhead, efficiency and transparency than public sector actors (or even NGOs). Initiatives to generate incomes, jobs and social services for development tend to be scrutinized by these foundations in a more “hard-nosed” and practical way than by their public sector and NGO counterparts. At the same time these foundations tend to be less sensitive to the issues of participatory development and can more easily be “top down” or supply side oriented than their public sector and community counterparts.<sup>4</sup>
- 3) A number of “critical success factors” or obstacles to success in the partnerships were identified. Some of the key issues related to: a) control and participation; b) the need to understand, respect and manage different motivations and expectations especially when structuring partnerships between individuals and/or organizations from different sectors, cultural and /or economic backgrounds; c) the need for clear and attainable goals based on mutual benefit; d) the need for a realistic understanding of the limitations of each partner and of the societal infrastructure; e) the need to spread partnership risks and responsibilities among a variety of businesses and/or NGOs. Problems arose where one individual or organization was over-dominant or where the lead NGOs failed to recognize their naivete in negotiating sophisticated business contracts; f) the need for open and ongoing communication between partners supported by commitment and perseverance; g) the need for acceptance that no partner has all the answers; and h) the critical role played by individuals with the vision, skills, commitment and courage to make non-traditional relationships work.
- 4) Problems are bound to emerge in partnerships so the means for resolving disputes and re-negotiating contracts should be established even in initial agreements. When commitment to the partnership is tenuous, then funding is uncertain; when one actor is able to dominate another excessively, the partnership has difficulty sustaining itself. Finally partnerships require a difficult balance of idealism and pragmatism, creative vision and practical hard work, a strong commitment to principle and a willingness to adapt and compromise.

Finally the learning workshops that were attended by all partners and case writers produced useful guidelines on how to best communicate the learning from the partnership case studies to each sector.

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<sup>4</sup> The broader issue of whether the creation of a corporate foundation gave the parent companies an excuse to keep at arms length relationship to their community and social investment activities, rather than integrating them into core business values was not explored.