



# **Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships at Synergos: Experience and Learning in the First Decade**

*A Background Paper for the Synergos  
Twentieth Anniversary Reflection*

By L. David Brown  
Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations  
Harvard University

April 2007

## **Introduction**

This paper reflects on the work Synergos did with multi-stakeholder partnerships in its first ten years. The intent is to describe what Synergos and its partners did in those initiatives and what we learned from them, and then to explore some implications of those experiences and learnings for the future.

I make no claims to completeness even in discussing this limited slice of the Synergos experience. I will briefly discuss four sets of activities that Synergos and its partners undertook on the use of multi-stakeholder partnerships for development purposes: (1) writing six cases of development partnerships in the initial process of conceptualizing Synergos and its work; (2) facilitating the development of multi-stakeholder partnerships in several countries in collaboration with Synergos Associates; (3) creating and comparing cases of cooperation among grassroots groups, NGOs and government agencies in countries in Africa and Asia; and (4) convening and facilitating national cross-sector dialogues to support civil society in three Latin American Countries.

My role in these initiatives varied. I was a consultant to Peggy Dulany on the initial conceptualization and development of Synergos; I coordinated the creation of the initial six cases; I heard about the consultations to the country partnerships from the Synergos Associates involved in them; I helped design and coordinate the production of the African and Asian cooperation cases and their comparative analysis; and I have only read the report about the country dialogues in Latin America.

The paper will first briefly discuss the experiences and learnings that emerged from them. Then I will turn to the implications of these experiences for Synergos' future work.

## **Experiences with Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships**

The initial conception of the work of Synergos focused heavily on the potentials of multi-stakeholder partnerships for catalyzing sustainable development. Peggy's experience with the New York City Partnership and with other interorganizational collaborations persuaded her that such initiatives could be critical to many social transformations. But it was less clear what roles multi-stakeholder partnerships might play in social and economic transformation in the developing world, where it was hoped that Synergos could make a major difference.

### **Initial Partnership Illustrative Cases (1986-88)**

Soon after the initial launch of Synergos, we agreed that having some cases that illustrated the multi-stakeholder partnership concept across a range of contexts would be very helpful in explaining what Synergos had in mind. Over about a six month period I coordinated the development of the cases summarized in Box 1. They include a range of activities and interorganizational combinations. Some are clearly multi-stakeholder partnerships that span sectors and levels, such as the New York City Partnership, the National Coal Policy Project, the

Gal Oya Irrigation program and the Mexican Community Food Councils. Others might be better described as NGOs that work in close partnership with clients and partners, such as the Grameen Bank and Tototo Home Industries.

### **Box 1: Initial Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Cases**

- **Gal Oya Irrigation Project.** An irrigation rehabilitation project in Indonesia provided grassroots organizers who helped build water user organizations that became critical actors in rehabilitating and improving management of the system far beyond anyone's expectations (Leach, 1988).
  - **Grameen Bank.** The rise of the micro-credit institution in Bangladesh from an action research project of an economics professor and his students. Explains the critical role of social accountability among grassroots women's groups in insuring loan repayments even without collateral (Brown, 1988).
  - **Mexico Community Food Councils.** An alliance between central government reformers and local community based movements increases the responsiveness of local middlemen to grassroots needs in Mexican rural communities (Aron & Fox, 1988).
  - **National Coal Policy Project.** Diverse stakeholders, including coal users, coal producers, environmentalists and government agencies build agreement on national coal policies through continued meetings and joint research on problems and options (Gray, 1988).
- New York City Partnership: Youth Employment Project.** Urban business leaders concerned about the problems of urban schools create partnerships to provide jobs for students who would otherwise have little opportunity for employment (Gray, 1988).
- **Tototo Home Industries.** Cooperation between a Northern NGO and a Southern NGO produces a Kenyan capacity building organization that has wide impacts in supporting Kenyan NGOs and grassroots organizations (Leach, Nelson & MacCormack, 1988).

We constructed these cases from documents and interviews with key actors. The intent was to give some flesh to the concept of multi-stakeholder partnership so that we could explain how they might contribute to social problem-solving in both industrialized and developing country contexts.

The comparisons across cases helped clarify the differences between cooperation among development actors in the same sector and cross-sectoral cooperation between grassroots organizations, NGOs, governments, and businesses. In some of these cases, the partners were largely from civil society. In the Tototo Home Industries case, for example, the focus was on relations between THI, its Northern NGO partner World Education, and the Kenyan community-based organizations that it served. In other cases the stakeholders were more diverse and more likely to have histories of conflict, such as the National Coal Policy Project effort to

bring together long-term antagonists to craft a common set of policies. Discussions of these cases helped set the stage for a lot of later work.

### **Direct Partnership Consultations (1986-1995)**

At the start Synergos leaders hoped to actively support the development of multi-stakeholder partnerships in many different regions. Peggy's experience as the coordinator of the New York City Partnership gave her a lot of ideas about how Synergos might act as a catalyst for particular partnerships, and many of the original Synergos Associates had been consultants to multi-stakeholder problem-solving initiatives.

So during its first several years, Synergos supported efforts to catalyze collaborative multi-stakeholder initiatives in a number of settings. Box 2 briefly describes three initiatives in Brazil, Mexico and Ghana.

#### **Box 2. Consultations to Initiate Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships**

- **Roda Viva and Street Children in Rio (1986-93).** Working with Associate Wanda Aduan, Synergos helped an alliance of academics to build a broad coalition of actors to work on the problems of street children. Drawing on other Associates, Synergos trained Roda Viva in visioning and change management processes which they then used to build strategy and wider participation in the alliance.
- **The Chimalapas Coalition (1988-94).** With Associate Gustavo Esteva, Synergos helped grassroots groups in Mexico build alliances with government agencies, environment NGOs, human rights organizations and international agencies to build a plan for the future of the forest region that protected local culture and environment while enabling sustainable livelihoods for indigenous groups.
- **GAPVOD and Structural Adjustment in Ghana (1988-93).** With Associate Anorbah James Sarpei, Synergos worked with the national association of NGOs to promote multi-sectoral participation in discussions of how to deal with the grassroots consequences of World Bank structural adjustment programs.

These experiences demonstrated that outside actors like Synergos could have a positive impact on complex problems. Synergos' links to powerful parties made it possible to get attention and often action in situations that might otherwise have locked in stalemate or exploded in violence. The focus on building linkages to diverse stakeholders and to mediating agreement among them could sometimes produce significant improvements

At the same time, these experiences also demonstrated the limitations that constrain external third parties in problems that are intensely politicized, characterized by gross power inequalities, and require constant monitoring and sustained intervention over years and decades. Even with Synergos resources, it was very difficult to keep track of events on the ground, let alone influence

key actors in a timely way. Associates on the ground benefited from their links to Synergos, but they also were vulnerable to being perceived as actors with their own agendas rather than neutral third parties.

The consultations demonstrated the potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships, but they also illustrated the importance of power relations in many contexts and the challenges of understanding and shaping events as outsiders. A central role for Synergos in many of these settings became providing access to resources, such as getting funding from international donors and providing public visibility for events on the ground. But it was also painfully clear how expensive it was as an outside party to engage and influence events on the ground over the length of time required to achieve positive results.

### **Comparative Analysis of Partnerships in Africa and Asia (1989-1995)**

By the late 80s, Synergos and its Associates had become concerned with more systematic learning about the ingredients of successful multi-stakeholder partnerships. The Associates' Learning Committee (Noreen Clark, Rajesh Tandon and I) proposed that Synergos develop case studies of successful cooperation between NGOs, grassroots organizations and government agencies for comparative analysis within and across regions. Synergos created a consortium composed of several Associate-led organizations – the Institute for Development Research (IDR), the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), the African Association for Learning and Adult Education (AALAE) and Grupo Esquel – to design and implement the project. We hoped initially to cover many regions, but funding limited us to Asia and Africa.

The consortium constructed a shared protocol of questions and regional partners, PRIA in Asia and AALAE in Africa, took responsibility of selecting cases, training casewriters, and hosting a case conference for discussion and comparative analysis of the cases. The Asian cases were completed by 1991, discussed at a conference in Delhi that year, and assessed in several analyses published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP – Brown and Tandon 1993; Tandon 1993). The African cases were analyzed at a conference in Zimbabwe in 1995 (See Schearer and Tomlinson, 1995). IDR subsequently developed and published comparative analyses across all thirteen cases (Brown and Ashman 1996; Brown and Ashman 1999). Box 3 briefly describes the cases from the two regions.

These analyses suggested a number of lessons about partnerships, including the identification of quite different forms (NGO-centered vs. grassroots-led), the importance of managing conflict and enabling participation and mutual influence among the parties, and the possibilities of generating social learning, new social capital and catalytic effects as well as problem solutions from successful collaboration across levels and sectors.

### Box 3. Grassroots, NGO and Government Cooperation Cases in Africa and Asia

<b>AFRICA</b>
<b>Kenya Cookstove Program:</b> to promote environmental protection through distribution of 5000 new fuel-efficient cookstoves.
<b>Lesotho Credit Union Program:</b> to improve rural poverty conditions by creating more than 70 credit unions to make credit available to more than 19,000 members.
<b>Sudan Popular Health Program:</b> to improve the availability of health services by creating more than 40 clinics to serve more than a million urban refugees in Khartoum.
<b>Uganda Fishing Program:</b> provided technical assistance and equipment to 10,000 fishermen and 300 self managed groups in fishing villages in Northern Uganda
<b>Zambia Integrated Rural Development:</b> to promote food security, market access, and reduced emigration via technical assistance to 5000 farmers in North Western Province.
<b>Zimbabwe Water and Sanitation:</b> to expand the number and quality of wells, dams and latrines for 30,000 people in Gwanda District.
<b>ASIA</b>
<b>Bangladesh Immunization Program:</b> to provide expanded immunization program for millions of children throughout the country.
<b>Indian Biogas Program:</b> to build 45,000 biogas plants that affected more than 200,000 poor rural people in the state of Orissa.
<b>Indian Workers Initiative:</b> to revive and make profitable a “sick” industrial plant and create a precedent for worker-owned plants in India.
<b>Indonesian Irrigation Program:</b> to turn responsibility for maintenance and control over small irrigation systems to local water users
<b>Malaysian Youth Technology Centers:</b> to encourage rural youth to undertake local economic activities in more than 30 Youth Centres.
<b>Pakistan Urban Sanitation Program:</b> to build sewage systems and 64,000 latrines for 250,000 people in Karachi slum areas.
<b>Philippines Urban Upgrading:</b> to establish ownership and improve housing and other facilities for 170,000 residents in Manila slum area.

The comparative analysis of these cases identified two different patterns of partnership: (1) NGO-mediated cooperation, in which NGOs provided linkage between grassroots groups and government agencies, and (2) grassroots-centered cooperation, in which NGOs were resources to grassroots organizations in their problem-solving and engagement with government agencies.

In both patterns NGOs were central as “bridging organizations,” building links across sectors in the former pattern and links among grassroots organizations in the latter. Participation, mutual influence, conflict management, and organizational and social learning were important in all the successful partnerships, and particularly in the grassroots centered pattern (Brown and Ashman, 1996; 1999).

From the point of view of influencing development policy and practice, the comparative analysis across cases proved to be an important tool for influencing the policies of other agencies. UNDP, which provided partial funding for the research, published its results and subsequently advocated multi-stakeholder partnerships as a development strategy. The cases and their analysis also provided the base for the US Agency for International Development’s staff manual for encouraging development partnership initiatives (Waddell and Brown 1997). The various publications that emerged from the initiative helped to shape the development debate about interorganizational cooperation over the next several years. That debate expanded to include relations among civil society and business as well as government organizations as many other development actors have seen the possibilities of multi-stakeholder and multi-sector cooperation. Indeed, teaching cases constructed from some of the partnership descriptions have been used often in executive education about innovations in governance at the Kennedy School of Government and elsewhere to train leaders from many different sectors over the last ten years.

### **National Consultations on Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (1994-96)**

By 1994, Synergos was highly visible as an exponent of intersectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration in the service of development. Working with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and leaders from several Latin American countries, Synergos organized a series of national consultations between governments and civil society representatives to explore how such partnerships among civil society, government, business and international donors could foster social development. Box 4 provides an overview of three regional conferences.

These experiences built on Synergos’ reputation from past programs to catalyze government and IDB investment in cross-sectoral partnerships at the national and regional level, strengthening the awareness at top levels about possibilities of collaboration with civil society. They demonstrated that key stakeholders at the national level could come together to discuss the roles of civil society actors, to explore policy interventions that would enhance their contributions to national and regional development, and to build agreements across organizations and sectors on policies and practices for future capacity-building.

The report on these consultations frames events in terms that are somewhat different from earlier cases and reports. Earlier case and consultation descriptions of multi-stakeholder relations often graphically portrayed large power differences and inequities among the parties, capturing the sense of oppression and marginalization felt by many grassroots actors. The reports on consultations with international donors and national governments as well as NGOs are couched in more antiseptic terms like “political tensions” among some parties. The consultations also illustrated the long time perspective associated with influencing national and sectoral policies. Although the consultations occurred over several years, information about their consequences and whether they strengthened civil societies will not be available for years, much

like the time horizons encountered in consulting to specific partnerships. The consultations apparently also contributed to enhancing the legitimacy and value of civil society in the eyes of many participants, given the importance attached to it by prestigious external agencies (like IDB and Synergos) as well as the experience of constructive consultations.

#### **Box 4. Latin American Consultations on Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships**

- **Brazil Consultation.** The Comunidade Solidaria, headed by the First Lady, facilitated this consultation. The consultation brought together many stakeholders to create a strategy for strengthening civil society to be implemented by the Comunidade Solidaria and civil society, including information sharing, capacity building, and legal reforms to enable more cooperation across sectors.
- **Colombia Consultation.** The 1991 Constitution recognized the importance of civil society and opened space for more participation in development activity. FES, the consultation facilitator, brought together civil society organizations, government agencies and international donors. They focused on improving communication and coordination among civil society organizations, better legal frameworks, and more civil society alliances to engage other sectors.
- **Mexico Consultation.** Philos, the NGO convener of the consultation, brought together a wide range of stakeholders. They proposed that IDB set aside resources for civil society capacity building and for civil society and IDB collaboration. They also proposed initiatives to reduce tensions between the state and federal governments and civil society, including a pilot project in Jalisco to get CSOs involved in design and implementation of state development programs.

## **Implications for the Future**

What implications can we draw from Synergos' experience with multi-stakeholder partnerships over the first decade of its work? I think the evolution of Synergos' initiatives – from initial cases to direct consultations to systematic analysis across cases to catalyzing national multi-stakeholder dialogues—has several important implications for how Synergos understands its past and how it might shape its future.

First, the decade of experience has affirmed the initial insight that multi-stakeholder partnerships have enormous potential as development interventions. An idea that was intriguing but hardly obvious in the mid-80s is now widely accepted by international development agencies (e.g., Thorup, 1997), many transnational corporations (Austin, 2000; Prahalad and Hammond, 2002), and governance theorists (Nye and Donohue, 2000; Rischard, 2002). That recognition has emerged out of a wide range of activities, some catalyzed by Synergos and others independent of it. For the future, I would argue that Synergos attend to importance of a long time horizon and continued (mono-maniacal?) commitment to developing and disseminating the multi-stakeholder partnership idea. Similar impacts in the future may require similar focus and commitments.

Second, the development of persuasive examples, intellectual capital, intervention skills, and policy insights has emerged from a combination of inter-related and mutually stimulating kinds of initiatives—exploratory cases to understand the nature of the phenomena, direct interventions to foster partnerships on complex issues; comparative case analyses to build new intellectual capital, and cross-sector national consultations to shape development policies and practices. This sustained series of initiatives built the bases for increasing credibility and for influencing key actors. It enabled the generation of ideas and theories and the documentation of persuasive examples that appealed to increasingly high levels of development decision-makers. The combination of projects created cases, frameworks, relationships and policy insights that enabled interventions in the mid-90s that would have been unthinkable in early years. For the future it is worth noting that this kind of credibility and capacity to affect key actors has emerged from a sustained process of learning and relationship building across many interlinked activities.

Fourth, these experiences suggest the power of partnership to shape institutional perspectives and analyses. The shifting language and perspectives on power differences makes sense given the gradual development of Synergos' relationships with key development decision-makers. Work in Chimalapas is described in terms that empathize with the experiences of "exploitation" of grassroots actors linked to Gustavo Esteva, Synergos' primary client there. In contrast the Latin American consultations involved close coordination with government and IDB officials who expressed concern about "political tensions" among some of the stakeholders. Understanding both the grassroots ("exploitation") and the government ("political tensions") perspectives is important for Synergos as a bridge between unequal stakeholders. As Synergos is increasingly recognized by wealthy and powerful actors, it may need to guard against becoming less attuned to the views of less powerful stakeholders.

Fifth, Synergos has been extraordinarily successful in creating a bridging role that spans enormous chasms in wealth, power, culture and perspective. In part this has been the result of the skills and commitment of its entire staff. But I think it's important to recognize that the initial foundation of this capacity is rooted in Peggy's unique combination of commitment and ability to relate to grassroots actors with her credibility, on the basis of both character and family background, with global leaders from both business and government. She has been able to share some of that unique capacity with Synergos and its work has built its institutional credibility over the years. In the future, however, I think the Synergos should recognize that Peggy has a unique capacity that will continue to be in great demand. Synergos should be highly strategic in its utilization of that resource.

Sixth, Synergos has worked hard to act on its principles of partnership in its relations with partner organizations. Many initiatives of the first ten years involved organizational partners with a wide range of capacities and strengths that complemented Synergos' own resources. It was often able to frame initiatives so partners could advance their own agendas while contributing to the accomplishment of Synergos' objectives. This convergence of interests and perspectives enabled partners to build on joint initiatives in independent initiatives that complemented Synergos goals in the longer term. For example, work with partnerships like Roda Viva and the Chimalapas Coalition set in motion initiatives and later impacts in Brazil and Mexico even after the direct consultation had concluded. The partnership to develop and analyze collaboration cases in Africa and Asia catalyzed later work by PRIA and IDR to further

analyze and disseminate findings. PRIA and IDR later carried out studies of civil society-business collaboration to support development initiatives in India, South Africa and Brazil; Synergos undertook a similar initiative in collaboration with the Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum. Successful partnerships can produce transformations among the partners as well as the results initially intended. Such catalytic impacts are not easily predictable, but attention to partner effects as well as project effects may be important in developing maximum leverage from future initiatives

Finally, the evolution of ideas about inter-organizational and inter-sectoral cooperation over the last two decades has produced significant shifts in the concepts and discourses that provide the intellectual context for development policy and practice. Synergos has fostered engagements among researchers and practitioners, between global South and North, across sectors and between disciplines that have documented multi-stakeholder partnerships empirically and framed them conceptually. It has created or documented examples that have revealed new possibilities for sustainable development initiatives—examples that demonstrate the potential for initiatives that mobilize the resources and advance the interest of many different stakeholders. Reflection on the ingredients that have been pivotal to this contribution would help Synergos replicate its success on future initiatives.

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