The Synergos Approach to Social Problems

How we work with leaders, institutions, communities, and partnerships to help solve complex problems of poverty

www.synergos.org/approach

Synergos' approach to social injustice and poverty problems is based on a set of core concepts, which have been developed by scholars, practitioners, and community leaders working in diverse disciplines, different cultures, and varied social and political systems. The four key elements of our approach are:

- **Systems thinking** looking at complex problems from diverse, and often conflicting perspectives to understand how elements influence one another within a whole

- **Collaboration** working together with others, including those most impacted by the system as it currently operates, to leverage collective knowledge, resources, and action

- **Bridging leadership** building trust and tapping the fullest contributions of diverse stakeholders

- **Personal reflection** increasing awareness of self, others, and the system, and aligning intentions and actions accordingly.

These elements are interdependent and overlapping. Useful not just for the specific tools, they can provide a set of guiding ideas and principles, and a way to view the process of social change.

Synergos strives to adapt and apply these elements in our practice, capture the learning from using them, and share them as tools and ideas with our leadership networks.
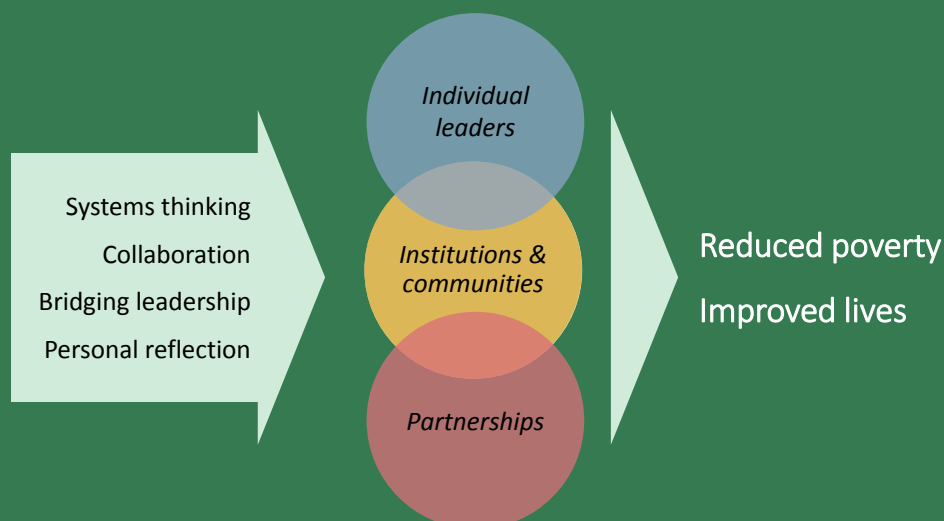
About Synergos

Synergos is a global nonprofit organization that brings people together to solve complex problems of poverty. We work on issues such as health and nutrition, agriculture, education, and employment – creating opportunities for individuals and communities to thrive.

Over the course of more than 25 years, Synergos has supported innovative initiatives in more than 30 countries and regions.

Visit synergos.org for more information.

Systems thinking
Collaboration
Bridging leadership
Personal reflection

Individual leaders

Institutions & communities

Partnerships

Reduced poverty

Improved lives

The Context: Complex & Systemic Problems

The four elements of our approach are dictated by the complex and systemic characteristics of social challenges. This complexity has multiple dimensions:

Type of complexity	Ordinary approach for simple problems	Extraordinary approach for complex problems	Process requirement
Dynamic: Cause and effect are far apart in space and time	Piece by piece	System as a whole	Systemic
Generative: Future is unfamiliar and undetermined	Existing solutions	Emerging solutions	Creative
Social: Actors have diverse perspectives and interests	Experts and authorities	Stakeholders and "stickholders"	Participative

(Based on Senge and Scharmer, and Kahane)

Additionally, systemic problems are characterized by:

- Lack of institutional accountability for the problem (often cross-sector or cross-border)
- Lack of individual ownership by the actors (problem is often too large to have one owner, so no one feels responsibility and blame abounds)
- Institutionalized arrangements and incentives that reinforce the system and keep it in place
- A large, but unorganized and weak, group that suffers the consequences
- Problems seen as the operating environment rather than an issue that can be addressed ("that's just the way things are")
- Multiple perspectives on where the problem (and the solution) lies, often full of blame
- Lack of coordination, communication, with breakdown of a management system.

Some examples of such problems from the work of Synergos and our network members are climate change (on a global level), malnutrition in India, poor public healthcare in Namibia, and a low-quality public education system in a state in Brazil.

These challenges require seeing the big picture – systems thinking – in order to identify the most effective leverage points and strategically coordinate interventions. We will explore this idea in the next section.

Resources on Complex and Systemic Programs:

Overview of Synergos' Approach to Social Problem PowerPoint to adapt (syngs.info/sa20)

"Community Action Research: Learning as a Community of Practitioners, Consultants and Researchers" – by Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer, in *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (London: Sage, 2001)

The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization – by Peter Senge (New York: Doubleday, 1990.)

Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities – by Adam Kahane (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004)

Systems Thinking

The reason for using systems thinking is precisely to deal with the multiple dimensions of complexity and the structural/systemic nature of the problem. Systems thinking is the process of understanding how elements influence one another within a whole. In the case of organizations, communities, and societies, systems consist of people, structures, and processes that work together to make them functional or not, sustainable or not.

In other words, systems thinking is a way of looking at complex (or systemic) problems in relation to a larger system rather than in isolation. Many social issues don't have a simple cause-and-effect relationship. Instead they interact with other issues in mutually reinforcing relationships, which makes addressing them difficult.

Synergos Senior Fellow Brian Whittaker of South Africa explains that if we say we take a systems view we need to be clear about three pairs of ideas:

Structure and emergence – Ask:
- Of what wider circumstances is what I am interested in a part?
- What are the parts that make up what interests me?
- What properties emerge at each level in the structure that are not found at lower levels?

Communication and control – Ask:
- How are the parts organized?
- How do they communicate with one another?
- How are their relationships controlled?

Perspective and appreciation – Ask:
- From what perspective is this meaningful?
- What circumstances lead us to appreciate what is seen from this point of view?
- What happens if we look at this from a different point of view?

West Churchman, a philosopher and systems scientist, says, "The systems approach begins when first you see the world through the eyes of another."

Author and environmentalist Donella Meadows describes how you can know if you are looking at something as a system. She defines system as something in which:

- You can identify the parts
- Describe how the parts affect one another
- Explain how the parts together produce an effect that is different from each part on its own
- Show how the behavior persists in a variety of circumstances over time.

Meadows' article about leverage points in a system (syngs.info/sa23) suggests top places to intervene. These leverage points start with the framing, the values, and our way of thinking about the system and only later include more concrete or technical interventions. These points are:

- The mindset or the paradigm out of which the system (its goals structure, rules) arises
- The goals of the system (for example, depoliticization of education)
- System structure
- Rules of the system (incentives, punishments, constraints)
- Information flows (who has access to what information).

Visit donellameadows.org for more information.

The theoretical underpinnings in the work of these scholars and practitioners provide us with a powerful set of practical applications of systems thinking in our work. Generally, this means the following movements:

- Understanding the perspectives on the issue of all major stakeholders at all levels of the system you are looking at, including the explicit and implicit rules of the system.
- Mapping the causal relationships between the various elements, identifying leverage points and analyzing the intended and unintended consequences of interventions in these points.
- Considering the three types of complexity – dynamic, generative and, social – in designing the process of analysis and stakeholder organizing.

Resources on Systems Thinking

Systems Thinking presentation (syngs.info/sa21) – by Brian Whittaker, a Synergos Senior Fellow

Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System (syngs.info/sa23) – by Donella Meadows, at the Donella Meadows Institute website (donellameadows.org)

Habits of a Systems Thinker (syngs.info/sa24) – from the Waters Foundation (watersfoundation.org)

Theory U (syngs.info/sa09) – at the Presencing Institute website (presencing.org)

Systems Assessment Tools

Tools we use in systems assessment include the following:

Tool	Purpose
Case studies illustrating systems thinking	To provide examples of what systems thinking can include and the results it can have, based on real-life case studies
Sensing Journey (syngs.info/sa30)	To gain first-hand experience and fresh perspectives on a system and its needs, through immersion visits
Landscaping (syngs.info/sa31)	An alternative, multi-media presentation and learning tool when learning journeys are not possible
Stakeholder Voices (syngs.info/sa32)	To bring to participants the direct voices and perspectives of key stakeholders when learnings journeys are not possible
Back to the Field (syngs.info/sa33)	For senior executives in an organization to reconnect with the experience of frontline practitioners
Stakeholder Shoes (syngs.info/sa34)	To build understanding of other stakeholders' perspectives and experiences
Stakeholder Interviews (syngs.info/sa37)	To gather quantitative or qualitative data to inform fact-based analysis and assessment, by speaking with people within the system; sometimes the objective may be developing a high-level view of the system at different levels (e.g. national, regional, local) and for different core functions (e.g. finance, infrastructure, etc.)
Dialogue Interviews (syngs.info/sa36)	To uncover insights and information from key stakeholders and to help establish a positive rapport by engaging them in a reflective and generative dialogue process

Collaboration

The kind of multidimensional social challenges described above require us to go beyond a traditional analysis and problem-solving approach. Instead, they require tapping the wisdom, knowledge and experience of multiple stakeholders, some of whom may require additional support and capacity building to participate in the process. Collaboration is thus at the core of how social change happens.

By practicing collaboration, Synergos aims to create solutions by assembling partnerships that transcend traditional social boundaries and problem-solving methods. Our programs:

- Convene people and institutions with the resources, leverage and insight to collectively solve systemic problems at scale
- Enable those people and institutions to think and act together, unleashing the leadership and commitment needed for sustained effort by connecting people to meaning and their highest purpose
- Translate ideas into action on the ground by testing innovations and institutionalizing what works – building collaboration among key leaders and institutions to enhance the successful implementation of innovations.

Resources on Collaboration

Ten Lessons on Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (syngs.info/sa10) by Synergos

Synergos' Partnership Lifecycle (syngs.info/sa26)

"Collective Impact" (syngs.info/sa25) – *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article by John Kania and Mark Kramer of FSG

Theory U (syngs.info/sa09) – at the Presencing Institute website (presencing.org)

"Bridge-Building for Social Transformation" (syngs.info/sa41) – by L. David Brown in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*

Bridging Leadership & Personal Reflection

An important enabling element of an inclusive partnership is one or more bridging leaders within the system who, through his/her leadership style, is able to build shared ownership, perspective and solutions to the problem. The bridging leader (and his/her institution) is often the owner/coordinator of the partnership process, but not necessarily the owner or implementer of the solutions themselves.

Bridging leadership is a style of leadership that focuses on creating and sustaining effective working relationships among key partners and stakeholders. By "bridging" different perspectives

found across the breadth of different stakeholders, a common agenda can begin to be developed and shared in order to find solutions to social and economic problems (see Synergos' *Bridging Leadership Overview* presentation at syngs.info/sa22).

Key to addressing systemic problems is building ownership and shifting mindsets at various levels in the system. This requires tools and approaches that go beyond intellectual analysis, involve the stakeholders individually at a deeper level, and connect them to the system.

Transformation of the system requires personal reflection of the people who comprise it. Social change work without personal development work, broad participation, or an integrated approach will often fail to achieve the desired results. The failure to address all of these elements together diminishes the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions. It also increases the prospects that changemakers themselves will not be able to stay the course without burn-out.

In contrast, personal reflection and development work can help changemakers better understand themselves. In turn, they can go into the world as their authentic selves in an open-hearted and generous way. This is vital to building the trusting relationships that are the basis of collaboration and innovation.

To this purpose, Synergos employs a set of facilitation techniques and practices that draw upon our experience as well as the expertise of numerous partners. Through these techniques, we enable individuals and groups to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their highest purpose – transforming themselves into more whole and effective leaders.

Resources on Bridging Leadership & Personal Reflection

Synergos' *Bridging Leadership Overview* presentation (syngs.info/sa22)

My Leadership Life Line (syngs.info/sa27) by Synergos

Bridging Leadership Reflection Practices (syngs.info/sa28) by Synergos

Creating an infrastructure of trust: Shifting ourselves and the world by overcoming fear (syngs.info/peggytedxdanubia) TEDx talk by Synergos' founder Peggy Dulany

Approaching the Heart of the Matter (syngs.info/sa08) by Synergos' founder Peggy Dulany

Synergos Bridging Leadership Resource Center (syngs.info/sa29)

Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (siyli.org) – founded by Chade-Meng Tan of Google, and his book *Search Inside Yourself* (New York: HarperOne, 2012)

Otto Scharmer's articles, presentations and books (www.ottoscharmer.com/publications/)

Good to Great (syngs.info/sa35) by Jim Collins and his book Good to Great (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001)

Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe (syngs.info/sa38) – TED Talk by Simon Sinek

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most – by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen (New York: Viking, 1999)

Management classics such as *7 Habits of Highly effective People* by Stephen Covey (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989) and others