SYNERGOS

Lasting Impact at Scale through a Shared Vision for Children in Bangladesh

Overview

In February 2022, the Government of Bangladesh approved the Integrated Community-Based Childcare Centers and SwimSafe Facilities (ICBC) Project, a significant step in addressing child drowning, the leading cause of death among children aged 1-4. The project advances two of the World Health Organization's seven priority strategies for drowning prevention: childcare and survival swim instruction. The ICBC Project's first phase, through 2026, reached more than 200,500 children through 8,020 community-based childcare centers and provided survival swimming instruction to 360,000 older children, as a USD $32 million project largely funded and led by the government.

This bold action did not result from facts alone. The issue had been clear since the 2003 Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey and the effectiveness of childcare to prevent child drowning in Bangladesh was known well before WHO included it in its 2017 drowning prevention implementation guide.

The ICBC Project was the culmination of a coalition effort led by Synergos, beginning in 2018, that built steady understanding and committed support—evidenced by research, informed by parents and technical experts, and championed by local organizations, government officials, and media. The collective effort brought child drowning prevention from being an underfunded, relatively niche issue to one held as a critical part of a comprehensive set of factors for the care, protection, and development of children as the bearers of the country's future.

Synergos held roles as strategic convener, bridgebuilder, and trusted guide throughout the evolution of the ICBC initiative. Its systems analysis reframed child drowning from a narrow public health issue into one that also resonated with a broader, cross-sector base of support. Synergos drew government agencies, civil society organizations, researchers, media, and funders around a shared purpose, stewarding them through project design, advocacy, and project implementation. It built trust across stakeholders, enabled collective problem-solving, developed leadership capacity, navigated bureaucratic processes, and created the relationships and alignment needed for transformation from a donor-funded pilot into a nationally-owned and government-financed program. This role was frequently described by partners as the "connective tissue," and "thread" for diverse actors together and their collective action.

Key Insights

1. Widening the Frame to a shared child wellbeing agenda

Synergos began the work that ultimately led to the ICBC Project's design, approval, and implementation as a new entrant to a topic existing between two distinct fields: the child drowning issue sat within public health, yet the childcare solution sat within early childhood development.

Both are fields with substantial expertise, with quality research and evidence from injury prevention researchers at the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB), iccdr,b, and The Johns Hopkins University in one and early childhood development (ECD) researchers and practitioners from the Bangladesh Early Childhood Development Network (BEN) and its network of over 200 early childhood development organizations, BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED), UNICEF, and many others identified in Synergos' mapping of existing childcare models in another. Much of this expertise operated within separate institutional and disciplinary silos that grew more rigid as subject experts deepened their areas of specialization.

The cross-cutting issue also struggled to find a natural institutional home within government, as different ministries approached children through their respective mandates. The policy realm, however, envisioned greater integration. Synergos' landscape analysis found that a policy framework—including the National Comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Development Policy (2013), its associated Action Plan (2017), the Child Day Care Center Act (2021), the Eighth Five-Year Plan, and the Perspective Plan 2041—all recognized the importance of coordinated action around children's survival, development, safety, education, and care. However, formal coordination mechanisms existed more clearly in written policy than in actual practice.

As Synergos brought together insights from research, partner consultations, and ecosystem mapping, patterns of connection began to emerge, highlighting shared priorities, complementary strategies, and common aspirations from across the wider system. Collectively, evidence from Bangladesh demonstrated that supervised childcare could simultaneously reduce drowning risk, support early learning, improve nutrition and caregiving practices, and create opportunities for women's economic participation. Synergos used this wider framing to urge actors to envision how their seemingly disconnected agendas may converge around common outcomes. The Nurturing Care Framework developed by WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank and its country-by-country status reporting reinforced this idea and served as a global reference for this widened lens. Rather than focusing on individual sector objectives, the framework emphasizes the interconnected conditions required for children to survive, thrive, and reach their developmental potential.

Partners described this period as one in which conversations gradually moved away from defending organizational priorities and toward understanding how different forms of expertise contributed to the same objective. The shift in framing created space for a more diverse coalition. Organizations retaining different mandates and expertise could nonetheless contribute to a shared agenda without abandoning their institutional priorities, which they now saw as part of a larger collective vision.

> *"The aim was no longer only to prevent drowning, but to improve the safety, security, and development of children under five."*
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> Dr. Md. Al-Amin Bhuiyan, Team Lead, CIPRB

Such culture and mindset shifts are not moments in time, and increasingly partners moved from asking "How does this advance my priority?" to taking active roles in answering, "What do children and families need, and what role can we play in achieving it?"

2. Personal purpose that sustains through challenge and uncertainty

The ICBC Project's journey was neither straightforward nor predictable. Government leadership transitions, administrative delays, COVID-19 disruptions, and the political upheaval of 2024 repeatedly altered decision-making processes, disrupted institutional relationships, and required renewed engagement with key actors. Such halting and uncertain progress could easily have diminished the team's resolve.

What sustained the Synergos team was more than professional responsibility. Team members each held a deep personal purpose in connection to the project's larger vision: protecting children and helping them realize their potential as Bangladesh's future. Their commitment deepened as they came to understand the scale of child drowning and heard directly from families about the difference safe, high-quality childcare could make for themselves and their communities. Examples from other Synergos programs that advanced similarly complex systems change efforts elsewhere reinforced the team's belief that new possibilities can be created even in challenging circumstances, by harnessing collective knowledge and action.

That sense of purpose became visible through the team's consistent actions. Despite setbacks, they continued convening partners, maintaining relationships, sharing information, rebuilding support after leadership changes, and finding new pathways around institutional obstacles. Partners described Synergos as a trusted and fair interlocutor that listened carefully, elevated others' contributions, and remained present when progress appeared unlikely.

> *"In a garland, each flower is different, but strung together with care, they become one cohesive piece. The partners in ICBC were like those flowers, each with its own nature, and Synergos was the thread."*
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> Nahida Parvin, Senior Manager, Early Childhood Development, BRAC Institute of Educational Development

The experience also revealed a tension at the heart of purpose-driven leadership. Personal conviction can sustain people through prolonged uncertainty, but commitment cannot depend indefinitely on individual sacrifice. Synergos therefore increasingly incorporated wellbeing and renewal into its practice as a team and with partners, recognizing that lasting systems change requires leaders who can sustain both their purpose and themselves.

Over time, the team's commitment helped strengthen the commitment of others. Government officials, technical experts, NGOs, and donors increasingly saw the initiative not merely as a project, but as a shared responsibility to Bangladesh's children. Synergos regularly included wellbeing sessions in workshops to help replenish the fuel of personal purpose. By embodying the persistence and collaboration they sought to cultivate, Synergos helped sustain momentum through periods when formal processes stalled.

3. Embedding collaborative leadership as a systems asset

Securing approval for the ICBC Project was a significant milestone, and its longer-term sustainability would depend on ongoing capacity to sustain the project's distinctive, cross-sectoral design. While largely funded and led by the government, the ICBC Project also relied on technical assistance from drowning prevention experts providing survival swim training curricula and standard operating procedures for childcare centers; early childhood care and development partners providing play-based learning curricula and positive parenting trainings; researchers providing monitoring and evaluation design; local-level project implementation and district-level supervision from implementing NGOs; and strategic guidance from Synergos and many of its coalition partners. As the ICBC Project comes into its own, how would the collaborative leadership practices required for its operation and growth be embedded across the project and its key partners?

Synergos began explicitly including collaborative leadership topics and processes alongside technical topics in its workshops and outreach agendas with current and new partners, including the new ICBC Project team. Understanding grew of how the systems thinking, collaboration, and inner work central to Synergos' Bridging Leadership approach are important skills for partners as members of a collective effort. As the ICBC Project grew, so did the ecosystem of those operating with this understanding—at national, district, and local levels—from across government and non-state actors.

Many stakeholders interviewed by project evaluators reported that their greatest learning was not technical knowledge, but new approaches to collaboration, problem solving, and engagement across organizational boundaries. One district official described learning that in leadership, "speaking is not enough; you must listen to others as well." Another reflected that challenges were often resolved more effectively once stakeholders were brought together to understand different perspectives before deciding on solutions.

> *"Synergos also organized workshops in the districts for stakeholders involved in the implementation of the project. That helped the same collaborative spirit reach the local level. In each district, a committee chaired by the district's senior administrator held meetings that brought officials from health, youth development, and primary education together with local journalists and elected representatives to agree on who would do what for early childhood development."*
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> Md Abdul Kadir, ICBC Project Director

Post-workshop assessments found that 84 percent of participants reported applying lessons from the workshops in their work, while 73 percent reported sharing those lessons with others. Participants reported improvements in collaboration, empathy, communication, and systems awareness that influenced both organizational practice and cross-sector relationships.

Participants carried new practices into ministries, district administrations, NGOs, media organizations, and community institutions. District officials reported placing greater emphasis on listening before directing. NGO leaders described more participatory approaches to problem solving. Technical experts noted their increased openness to perspectives outside their own disciplines.

As individuals moved between roles, these practices accompanied them. Building collaborative leadership contributed to a gradual strengthening of the social infrastructure needed for collaboration: trust, perspective-taking, shared problem-solving, adaptive responses to emerging scenarios, and the ability to engage constructively across real differences and disputes.

4. Expanding the coalition through shared ownership and co-design

When planning for the ICBC Project's next phase began, the initiative had become an attractor for a broader ecosystem of partners who increasingly recognized the value of aligning with it. Newer partners complemented existing ones in government agencies, technical organizations, NGOs, civil society networks, and media who meanwhile grew increasingly committed to its continuation and expansion. As a result, the ICBC Project evolved into a platform through which diverse actors could pursue shared goals for child wellbeing.

New partners to the ICBC Project's next phase brought additional expertise in early learning, disability, eye health, child protection, parenting support, and referral systems. The contributions broadened the project's offering to a more integrated model of child wellbeing. Orbis International, for example, joined as a technical assistance partner upon recognizing that ICBC's network of childcare centers offered an opportunity to provide critical early screening and family outreach to children in rural and remote communities.

> *"Synergos is not running a project. It is building a system in which leadership and governance can work sustainably, by identifying who can contribute most in which sector. It also learns from the people it works with, so the bridging runs both ways, through learning and sharing. Experts talk less about technical matters and more about the qualities of leadership, and in doing so they enrich one another. That is what makes Bridging Leadership unique."*
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> Dr. Munir Ahmed, Country Director, Orbis International

Shared ownership also extended beyond program delivery; media partners helped broaden the initiative's reach, accountability, and public relevance. Journalists previously had treated child drowning as an isolated issue, stories about childcare and child development struggled to attract editorial attention, and coverage sometimes relied on sensational framing. Synergos thus held journalist trainings that included quality information and evidence, dialogue with practitioners, and opportunities for field-based reporting, with support from media partner organization SoMaSHTe. The trainings emphasized listening skills, particularly when engaging with families and communities. Reporters increasingly included the perspectives of children, caregivers, local leaders, implementers, and service providers and produced more solutions-oriented coverage. Their reporting examined operational challenges, service gaps, and policy implications as solvable areas for action.

This communications outcome represented a shift in ownership and agency. Journalists became active contributors to public accountability and informed dialogue rather than simply observers of service delivery. In turn, their reporting gave policymakers and more general audiences greater insight into the needs of young children and their families.

> *"The main objective of the Bridging approach is to bring everyone together across distances and divisions, and to build relationships of mutual trust and confidence among people."*
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> Mir Mashroor Zaman, SoMaSHTe (Societyfor Media and Suitable Human-Communication Techniques)

5. Working through government builds lasting change

Throughout the initiative, ICBC Project partners focused on existing government processes as pathways for institutionalization. The government's procedures for preparing and reviewing major project proposals were extensive, but partners looked to it as an opportunity to translate evidence, innovations, and ideas into established planning and budgeting mechanisms as a language understood by the government. The negotiations, adaptations, and continuous consensus-building needed to meet procedural requirements became key ingredients for government ownership, resource allocations, and championship of this new, transformative initiative.

Working through official systems also made the initiative more resilient to leadership turnover. Since decisions and approvals were embedded in recognized processes, they held legitimacy even as individual officials changed. As leadership and ownership became distributed across a wider government network and officials moved into new roles, they carried the initiative's relationships, knowledge, and commitment with them, helping maintain continuity through successive transitions. Administrative processes also created repeated opportunities for government officials, technical experts, and implementing organizations to engage with one another. These interactions built shared understanding of both the evidence and the practical realities of implementation, strengthening collaboration beyond what formal procedures alone could achieve.

The most durable change may lie in the combination of institutional structures and relationships. Partners reported greater trust, communication, empathy, and willingness to collaborate across sectors. These capacities enabled government, civil society, research, media, and technical partners to work more effectively through existing systems. Government processes thus became not only administrative mechanisms, but also platforms for collective problem-solving, adaptation, and shared ownership.

Reflection

The ICBC Project demonstrates how lasting change at scale can emerge when diverse actors align around a shared vision for children's wellbeing. What began as an effort to address child drowning grew into a platform connecting child safety and protection, learning, development, and community support. Researchers, government officials, civil society organizations, practitioners, media professionals, and community leaders increasingly recognized their complementary roles in advancing these interconnected outcomes.

A key lesson from the Bangladesh experience is that sustainable systems change depends not only on evidence, funding, or technical design, but also on the quality of relationships and the capacity of institutions to work together across boundaries. Through the active work of fostering shared understanding, strengthening collaborative leadership, supporting co-design, and working through existing government structures, the initiative created conditions for broader ownership

and collective action. The ICBC Project became more effective as resources and government priorities were aligned, and because trust, communication, and cooperation improved among the actors responsible for implementation.

The project's resilience through leadership transitions, political change, and implementation challenges suggests that its most significant contribution may be the strengthening of the underlying relationships, capabilities, and institutional connections that support collaboration.

As Bangladesh moves forward with the next phase of the ICBC Project, it is expanding the foundation to go beyond a specific intervention or project cycle. The ICBC exists in a growing ecosystem of institutions and individuals with the commitment, capacity, and relationships to continue advancing shared outcomes for children. The collaborative approaches have been part of translating evidence into policy, policy into implementation, and implementation into sustained impact at scale.

Sources

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This Insight Paper is part of Synergos' ongoing effort to capture and share learning from complex systems change initiatives around the world. Synergos is global organization that has pioneered the use of bridging leadership, which builds trust and collaboration to address deeply rooted social challenges of poverty, social injustice, and climate change. We believe lasting change happens when people and institutions work across boundaries to address complex challenges together. By fostering reflection, a systems approach, trust, and collaboration, we build the relationships and collective action needed to drive impact and change.

The insights presented in this document reflect lessons and observations from our project teams and partners. It highlights key patterns, practices, and learnings that emerged through the work and that may be relevant to practitioners, policymakers, funders, and other actors working to advance systems change. These reflections contribute to Synergos' ongoing learning agenda and are intended to inform future efforts to build collaborative solutions to complex social challenges.

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