SYNERGOS
Building trust works

TRUST ARCHITECTURE FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Bridging Leadership for Child Drowning Prevention and Early Childhood Care and Development in Bangladesh

Learnings and Reflections

By Bipasha Ray, November 2026



Foreword

It is with deep conviction and pride that I present the learnings and reflections document, which chronicles our collective journey to make child drowning prevention a national priority within early childhood care and development in Bangladesh. Combining narrative history, strategic reflection, and key lessons, it traces how partnerships, approaches, and contributions evolved over time to advance government ownership and scale-up of childcare and protection interventions through ICBC Project.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Bipasha Ray for thoughtfully chronicling our collective journey. She has drawn together insights from evaluation reports, surveys, and related write-ups, alongside conversations with Synergos staff in Bangladesh and globally, as well as our partners. By weaving these diverse experiences and perspectives into a compelling account, she has brought to life the lessons, relationships, and reflections at the heart of our work.

This account draws primarily on two learning evaluations of Synergos' work conducted in 2019[1] and 2025[2] by Singizi, an independent consulting firm based in Africa. It also draws on Synergos grant reports; the collaboration baseline report prepared by Synergos ahead of the ICBC Bridging Leadership workshops; reflection surveys; workshop reports; and the ICBC Lessons Learnt Report by Dev Resonance[3]. I am deeply grateful to everyone who shared their experiences through our surveys, participated in interviews for the Singizi evaluations, and contributed their perspectives to this documentation. Their candid insights have been invaluable in shaping this learning and reflection document.

This document is part of a broader learning series that Synergos is developing to capture the experiences, insights, and practices that have proved crucial to this work. Alongside this document, we are collecting reflections from a few Bridging Leadership champions, as well as developing a compendium of tools, methodologies, and practices drawn from our Bridging Leadership journey within the ICBC Project and from our global practice. Together, these resources aim to share lessons, inspire adaptation, and support others working to address complex social challenges through systems analysis, collaborative leadership and trust-building.

Esha Husain

Country Director
Synergos Bangladesh



[1] Singizi Consulting Africa, 2019: BANGLADESH DROWNING PREVENTION PARTNERSHIP: KEY LEARNINGs FROM PHASE-1. 2019
[2] Singizi Consulting Africa: A STORY OF SUSTAINABLY MOVING TO SCALE. DECEMBER 2025.
[3] Dev Resonance: Lessons Learnt from ICBC Project Phase-I. November 2025

Table of Contents

List of Acronyms 04

Introduction 05

Bridging Leadership: Introduction & Building a Trust Architecture 06

I. The System: Reframing the Systems Challenge 07

The Drowning Prevention Partnership (2018-2022) 07

II. The Individual: Inner Work and Personal Purpose as Drivers of Change 11

ICBC Phase I (2022-2025) 11

III. The Community: Building Collective Action and Transparent Collaboration 19

ICBC Phase II Development (2025-2026 and beyond) 21

The Ingredients of Successful Scaleup 22

Conclusion: For Joy and Alia 24

Appendix A: Lifecycle of a Development Project Proforma (DPP) 25

List of Acronyms

BEN	Bangladesh ECD Network
BL	Bridging Leadership
BRAC	Building Resources Across Communities.
BRAC-IED	BRAC Institute of Educational Development
BSA	Bangladesh Shishu Academy
CIPRB	Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh
DPP	Development Project Proforma
ECCD/ECD	Early Childhood Care and Development/Early Childhood Development
ICBC	Integrated Community Based-Center for Child Care, Protection and Swim-Safe Facilities
IWF	Innovation for Wellbeing Foundation
JHU	The Johns Hopkins University
MoWCA	Ministry of Women and Children Affairs
RNLI	Royal National Lifeboat Institution
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SoLiD	Saving of Lives from Drowning
TAP	Technical Assistance Partner

Introduction

"**Panir opor nam jibon**. Another name for life is water" — *Bangla proverb*

Water is the lifeblood of the low-lying coastal areas of the Ganges Delta which includes Bangladesh. It is also a silent predator in the region. For years, drowning has been the leading cause of death for children under five in Bangladesh. This learnings and reflections document shows how an **international donor-initiated effort to prevent child drowning was scaled up to a powerful and unprecedented government-funded early childhood care and development (ECCD) initiative** which has served 560,000 children in Bangladesh and is on track to serve hundreds of thousands more.

While a range of stakeholders contributed to the success of this project, this document demonstrates the critical contribution of Synergos and how it used its Bridging Leadership framework[4] implicitly and explicitly to build the "trust architecture" of the civil and public sectors. Through this, it stewarded the co-creation of the Integrated Community Based-Center for Child Care, Protection and Swim-Safe Facilities (ICBC) project. This effort transformed a relatively niche "health and safety challenge" into a government-led childcare and protection priority in less than a decade. In Phase I (2022-2025), the government funded 80% of the USD $32 million budget and is poised to fund even more in Phase II likely to start in 2027.

This document illustrates how **centering the human aspects of leadership—ego, trust, and vulnerability—at systems, individual and community levels can elicit remarkable and rapid systems transformation**. The project was not just successful in technical terms but also **strengthened leadership, and nurtured relationships, trust, and alignment across multiple civil sector silos and government officials at national and local levels.**

> *The story exemplifies **Synergos'** theory of change. "If **Synergos** engages key actors in structured reflection, cultivates their systems thinking, and facilitates meaningful engagement across divides, then the key actors will undertake collective action characterized by trust relationships, understanding of deep interdependence, and capacities to sustain collaborations, leading to enduring cross-sector collaboration and lasting systems change.*[5]

[4] "Bridging leadership is the capacity to build trust and tap the fullest contributions of diverse stakeholders, helping them come together across divides and work in transformative partnership." - Synergos website.

[5] Internal Synergos Theory of Change

Bridging Leadership

Building a Trust Architecture

In 2017, Bloomberg Philanthropies invited Synergos into Bangladesh to support in developing, co-designing, and implementing a sustainability strategy for Bloomberg's pilot of 2,500 daycare centers serving more than 60,000 children. This pilot contributed to an impressive evidence base. Bloomberg had funded the Saving of Lives from Drowning (SoLiD) research project which was implemented by two local agencies, the Centre for Injury Prevention Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB), and -iccdr,b[6], under the supervision of The Johns Hopkins University. This study conducted between 2013-2015 showed that **early childhood (ages 1-5) drowning deaths could be reduced by 88% through improved supervision and access to community-based daycare centers** (anchals), while also supporting early learning and caregiver livelihoods[7]. But as a single donor-funded effort, this project wasn't sustainable nor could it operate at the scale required to significantly reduce drowning deaths nationwide.

As Synergos worked to develop a sustainability solution, it used systems analysis to **adapt the challenge and design in order to scale**. Partnering with Bangladeshi civil society, media and the public sector, Synergos stewarded a cross-sectoral coalition called the Drowning Prevention Partnership to convince the government to adopt this approach. It acted as an advocate and "ligament" between stakeholders to turn this partnership into action. Then it facilitated the co-designed vision and provided technical assistance and leadership development to implement the ICBC project. These efforts built leadership and collective action, and elicited success at the system, individual and community levels.



[6] formerly known as the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh

[7] Alonge, O., Bishai, D., Wadhwaniya, S. et al. Large-scale evaluation of interventions designed to reduce childhood Drownings in rural Bangladesh: a before and after cohort study. Inj. Epidemiol. 7, 17 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40621-020-00245-2

I. The System: Reframing the Systems Challenge

The first pivotal shift in the journey was a fundamental redefinition of the problem of child drowning using systems analysis. Initially the Government of Bangladesh was not swayed by the evidence or by the success of the childcare center pilot which significantly reduced child drowning deaths. Many government officials and civil society actors saw child drowning as a health issue, and therefore not a top priority amidst more visible issues such as malnutrition and communicable diseases in the country. As long as drowning was framed as a public health problem, it would remain trapped in the health sector which lacked a dedicated "prevention" policy.

Using a holistic, panoramic lens to capture system complexity, Synergos identified the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) as the lead ministry and a strategic entry point to reframe drowning not merely as an injury prevention issue or public health failure, but as a childcare gap. In this reframed systems analysis, Synergos and its partners placed children at the center of the system and adopted the Nurturing Care international framework.[The Nurturing Care Framework, by WHO and UNICEF, outlines five essential components for holistic child development: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and opportunities for learning.] This aligned the injury prevention and early childhood care and development (ECCD) sectors around the broader common goal—for children to survive and thrive.

Synergos also negotiated media partnerships to launch key resear ch findings at strategic junctures and worked with reporters to produce child-centric journalism and human stories. This helped change the narrative so the public could understand child drowning deaths as preventable, rather than simply an "act of God's will."



The Drowning Prevention Partnership (2018-2022)

Synergos was known internationally for its expertise in solving complex problems through systems thinking, collaboration, and inner work. But within Bangladesh, Synergos was a newcomer and the systems thinking approach of "reframing the challenge" was unfamiliar to many. "We were new, and no one knew us," Esha Husain, Country Director of Synergos-Bangladesh recalled. "Acceptance is wider if it comes from an entity with a locally-recognizable name but we had to earn that legitimacy." Synergos leveraged the reputational strength of The Johns Hopkins University and Bloomberg Philanthropies brands to reinforce the credibility of their evidence and to find common ground with local partners in order to build in-country cultural and systemic legitimacy. Moving from the data-driven proof of concept, Synergos, along with civil society partners CIPRB and iccdr,b, united under a vibrant existing alliance called the Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN), and co-created a government advocacy and leadership development approach called the Drowning Prevention Partnership.

Coming Together with Other Partners Under BEN Platform

[8]The Nurturing Care Framework, by WHO and UNICEF, outlines five essential components for holistic child development: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and opportunities for learning.

[9]Esha Husain interview with the author, May 12 and June 8, 2026

Drowning Prevention Partnership

key dates and milestones | 2018-22

Feb 2018

First multi stakeholder workshop to explore opportunities for collaboration and scope for uniting under BEN, an existing ECD alliance.

Sept 2018

First roundtable on scaling up of ECD, organized by Synergos and BEN.

Nov 2018

First meeting between Drowning Prevention Partnership members and MoWCA that highlights child drowning in Bangladesh as an urgent issue and evidence on childcare as prevention. MoWCA Secretary expresses intention to aim for wider scale-up, beyond taking over Bloomberg-funded daycare centers.

Jan-Mar 2019

Study conducted with BEN alliance maps ECD approaches and sustainability analysis of community-based childcare centers.

July 2019

Synergos contracts and leads a feasibility analysis survey, on behalf of Bangladesh Shishu Academy (BSA) to scale the proposed childcare and protection model.

June 2019

MoWCA Additional Secretary makes public commitment in support of ICBC on national television.

Jan 2020

First version of Development Project Proforma (DPP) is submitted to MoWCA.

Mar 2020

disruption of COVID pandemic starts. Synergos continues advocacy work through webinars with support from BEN.

May-Dec 2020

Synergos works closely with MoWCA Planning Unit and BSA to revise the DPP per government requirements.

Oct 2020

Press launch of JHU international publication of SoLiD research findings.

Feb 2021

BSA endorses the DPP.

May 2021

Revised DPP submitted to the Planning Commission.

Feb 2022

Government of Bangladesh approves $32M ICBC budget.

Through this period, the Synergos team modeled an implicit Bridging Leadership (BL) approach in how it partnered with national civil society, the development sector, and government in order to mitigate sectoral silos, combat mutual mistrust, and build common purpose.

All of this required a **"trust architecture," for deep relationships and partnerships to enable collective action**. Childcare centers had been proven to be the appropriate technical intervention. But the challenges that Synergos had to resolve were adaptive ones—building and sustaining a broad base of support across civil society and media, and successfully advocating for the government to adopt and lead the intervention. This was even more challenging amidst the realities of frequent government staff turnover, bureaucratic hurdles, competing government priorities, and fear of uncertainty and the unknown. When identifying the real barriers to collaboration, **the missing ingredients weren't technical such as skills or knowledge, but rather adaptive such as relationship barriers; lack of trust respect, and accountability; control issues; and power differentials.**

Synergos set the foundation for the co-designed and co-owned partnership by elevating its local partners such as the CIPRB, which had been championing drowning prevention for years. "In the early days, we always spotlighted CIPRB to talk about their research," Husain noted. "We were the supporters and enablers, not the technical experts. We made space for them to lead."

Synergos also joined the Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN), seeing this network as a key ally in reframing drowning prevention as an early childhood development (ECD) issue. Even as some partners were initially apprehensive and suspicious, Synergos team members informally practiced BL to bring them along. The team acted as a "connective tissue" between stakeholders, meeting them where they were, to evolve their understanding of drowning not just as a public health but as an early childhood care and development issue. Even when BL was not named explicitly in the project's approach, Synergos team members' own orientation—centering mediation, active listening, co-creation, strategic humility, trust and relationship-building, and facilitating towards a shared purpose—was the implicit strategy. "Synergos did nothing alone," said Rizwan Khan, Senior Project Manager of Synergos-Bangladesh.[10]

Synergos as "Connective Tissue"

Tensions arose in the early days of the Drowning Prevention Partnership between the drowning prevention and the early childhood development sectors as they were divided by different mental models on the purpose and design of center-based care. The former focused strictly on "protection" for children under age 5, and the latter prioritized "learning" for ages 4-6 years. **Synergos mediated to align them under a shared purpose to keep children safe and healthy.** Building on the SoLiD pilot that highlighted best practices for prevention strategies for children under five years, and the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) and CIPRB's survival swimming curriculum, Synergos adopted a comprehensive approach to expand drowning prevention benefits for a wider age group. The Partnership renamed the centers to "childcare centers" as a neutral term to satisfy all sides, and co-designed a flexible, integrated model that allowed more children to access both safety-focused care and education. Children under five accessed daycare centers and pre-primary school, and children aged 6-10 accessed essential swimming skills. Synergos could "***stretch the base***," as Husain put it, to encompass more than drowning prevention, bringing in learning partners such as BRAC Institute for Education Development (IED) for early childhood learning curriculum and ORBIS International for vision care.

[10] Rizwan Khan interview with the author, June 24, 2026

Synergos understood that government ownership was critical for sustainable scaling. In collaboration with civil society partners under BEN, Synergos identified a strategic entry point in the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA). While the health sector lacked a drowning prevention policy at the time, MoWCA's 2013 National Comprehensive ECCD policy contained a "care" pillar that offered a "bigger tent"[11] to bring together siloed actors from health, education, and social welfare into a unified alliance.

Synergos honed its government advocacy strategy by centering leadership—by identifying the specific government officials who were instrumental in moving along the project. Synergos team members engaged with government staff and leaders building trust, and familiarity, often spending hours in their offices, in order to co-design the official proposal and planning roadmap called the **Development Project Proforma (DPP)**. This was done in partnership with ministry and BSA officials, along with development partners including Bloomberg, RNLI, CIPRB, and BRAC-IED.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major disruption during the initial Partnership and advocacy phase. This period also illustrated how the implicit BL behaviors of the Synergos team were foundational to sustain the Partnership and advocacy momentum during extreme disruption. As Bangladeshi society prioritizes face to face interactions, the deep relational foundations laid between 2018 and 2020 and Synergos' reputation as an unbiased facilitator, meant that the Partnership had momentum even when physical meetings were not possible. This time also enabled deep collaborations with MoWCA and BSA to revise the Proforma to meet government requirements.

The Drowning Prevention Partnership ended in resounding success. Unlike many other development models the **distinct alchemy of "trust infrastructure," systems analysis, relational agility, and collaborations** that Synergos stewarded in Bangladesh, resulted in swift and concrete action. Within five years, Synergos had facilitated, co-led, and co-designed an advocacy effort leading to the Government of Bangladesh approving the USD $32 million ICBC project as the first major government investment on its 2013 ECCD Policy. With MoWCA as the lead administrative agency and the Bangladesh Shishu Academy as the implementing agency, this Phase-I was implemented in 16 prioritized districts with 8,000 childcare centers serving 200,000 children under five and safe swimming instruction serving another 360,000 children ages 6-10. Critically for scale and sustainability, **the government agreed to fund 80% of the program**, with development partners Bloomberg Philanthropies and Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) covering the rest to provide technical expertise through their partners.

The scale-up model was sustainable economically, designed to be **low-cost and integrated**, making it financially feasible for the government to absorb. This high level of domestic resource mobilization ensured that the daycare centers were viewed as government services and community-owned rather than temporary international donor projects.



Kelly Larson Formally Handing Over Bloomberg Supported 2500 Community Daycare Centers to BSA Director General After the ICBC Launch in June 2022.

[11] Andrea Rodericks interview with the author, May 28 and June 11, 2026.

II. The System: Inner Work and Personal Purpose as Drivers of Change

An individual's mindset is often the most influential determinant of system behavior. "The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor," as Bill O'Brien, former CEO of Hanover Insurance once said. **This project's success was driven by a deliberate decision to center individuals as leaders and agents of change, and explicit leadership development as a fundamental driver of systems change.** Through Bridging Leadership, Synergos could work to build a shared understanding of the reframed systemic challenge—child drowning seen as an ECCD challenge—and support individuals from diverse sectors to achieve a better future for children.

ICBC Phase I (2022-2025)

With the launch of ICBC's Phase I, Bloomberg engaged Synergos to provide technical assistance to successfully transition the Bloomberg-run daycare centers to government oversight and roll out the ICBC design. Synergos had to pivot from **its "external" advocacy stance to "internal" technical assistance (TA) and accompaniment**, while scaling its own role in building and supporting leadership. Beyond scaling in breadth, Synergos also saw the need to scale in depth and build a holistic and sustainable ECCD system**. This would require ecosystem awareness and collaborative leadership capacity—nurturing diverse leadership across sectors to support ECCD and align with shared purpose and goals.** This entailed leadership workshops, 1-1 relationship building, media training, and learning journeys to connect directly with children, caregivers, families, and community members, to cohere a joint vision.

আইসিবিসি

ICBC Phase I

key dates and milestones

June 2022

Synergos supports MoWCA and BSA to host the grand launch of ICBC Project.

Dec 2022

Synergos organizes a learning journey for newly recruited Assistant Project Managers to daycare sites.

Jan 2023

Synergos, together with the ICBC Project and CIPRB, organize a weeklong orientation on ICBC for Assistant Project Managers and District Children Affairs Officers.

Apr-Nov 2023

Synergos conducts a Referral Strategy and two high-level workshops with government to map design opportunities for ECCD integration.

June 2023

MoWCA invites Synergos to Technical Evaluation Committee to select ICBC Project's implementing NGOs.

Aug 2023

ICBC Project Steering Committee commits to adopting "Bridging Leadership" as its working approach.

Oct-Dec 2023

Synergos conducts baseline study that shows adaptive challenges related to collaboration and coordination were more present than technical ones.

Oct 2023

Synergos assists the Project with ICBC brand development and positioning.

Dec 2023

Synergos holds inaugural BL Champions workshop, which is the first formal orientation for ICBC, technical partners, BSA, and other ECCD partners.

Feb 2024

Grand inaugural ceremony of Synergos' Bridging Leadership for ECCD initiative adopted by the ICBC Project. The event was attended by high profile government and nongovernment leaders as well as media.

Feb 2024

National BL workshop with 40 senior government officials, implementing partner NGOs and technical partners.

Mar 2024

All Bloomberg-funded childcare centers turned over to government ownership.

July 2024

Uprising in Bangladesh. Three most relevant MoWCA and BSA senior leaders, who are ICBC project champions, are moved from their positions.

Dec 2024

CIPRB develops learning and monitoring framework in deep partnerships with Synergos.

Dec 2024

Critical meeting between Synergos and new MoWCA advisor to gain one-year extension for ICBC project given delayed implementation at district and upazila levels.

Dec 2024

Learning journey to ICBC field in Habiganj, Sylhet by the new MoWCA Senior Secretary and Director General, Bangladesh Shishu Academy (BSA).

Jan-Mar 2025

District level BL workshops for District Child Affairs Officers (DCAO), APMs and NGO representatives.

April 2025

First fulltime ICBC Project Director is appointed.

April 2025

Senior MoWCA officials attend Bloomberg Philanthropies Global Drowning Prevention Partner meeting in New York as champions of this project.

June 2025

MoWCA forms working committee and invites Synergos for ICBC Phase II design

April 2026

New elections forming a new government in Bangladesh.



Synergos Team along with ICBC NGO Met the MoWCA Advisor



MoWCA Senior Secretary and DG BSA's Learning Journey to ICBC Field Site in Habiganj, December 2024

A 2023 Synergos baseline study showed that the key barriers to successful implementation, that prevented effective collaboration and coordination, were adaptive—involving ego, mistrust and power dynamics. The success of the initiative thus far owed credit to Synergos team members implicitly practicing the BL approach through deepening human relationships and finding common purpose.

As the ICBC evolved and this leadership approach showed promise, Synergos convinced the government and local partners to explicitly integrate BL into the project's design. **This institutionalized leadership transformation was a driver for systems change.** The ICBC Project Steering Committee adopted BL as an official working approach in August 2023 to support linking the ICBC to the wider ECCD ecosystem. This explicit leadership focus was unveiled at a marquee Champions workshop in December 2023, followed by the grand inaugural ceremony celebrating this new phase of Bridging Leadership in February 2024. This event was attended by about 80 high-profile government and non-governmental leaders such as the then-Secretary of MoWCA, then-State Ministers and then- BSA Director General, representatives from health and local government, as well as Synergos Founder Peggy Dulany and Synergos CEO Camille Massey.

A number of journalists and media partners also attended, lending high-profile media coverage including a TV talk show on Channel 24. This increased visibility for the ICBC project and emphasized its public demand, garnering higher level policy support for a potential Phase II. The ceremony underscored a commitment to "Joy and Alia," symbolic names for the young children of Bangladesh, to remind all participants of their shared purpose and whom this project was designed to serve.

This pivot moved the team from just being bridging leaders to training others. With additional funding support Synergos became more intentional in applying the three core elements of BL in its programming and workshops: inner work, systems thinking and collaboration.

A national BL workshop held in February 2024 brought together senior government officials, civil society, implementation and technical partners, signaling a shift towards a more "democratic learning community" where diverse voices were heard and honored.[12] Additionally, district level workshops for local and upazila officials, implementation partners, and others were held in early 2025 to help them make sense of the complex ECCD ecosystem and the ICBC project nestled within it. *"We welcomed them equally, we entertained them, and created an enabling environment together,"* said Khan, who co-facilitated the district workshops.

[12] Rodericks interview.



National Level Residential BL Workshop in February 2024 with Senior Cross Sector Government Officials

These workshops were focused on helping diverse participants s**urface tensions, suspicions, and conflict in order to work on resolving them**. The primary ways to develop trust, increase vulnerability, and decrease suspicion were through "inner work" practices that were eclectic and quite novel in the Bangladeshi context. "We chose beautiful natural surroundings, used interactive tools, and created a relaxed environment so people could unwind, connect deeply, and forget about positions or power differences," Husain said. Synergos also curated the environment where **participants could develop a self-awareness of their own biases and narratives of how the world and system around them works.**

The spatial planning of the workshops and retreats was deliberate in order to reduce traditional hierarchies. "We had to think very hard about how we planned the space. We ended up having two spaces, a stage space with an elevated platform for the opening ceremonies, and then workshops in circle spaces," said Andrea Rodericks, a Synergos Fellow, who co-facilitated the national workshops. "We had to think about how organic work happens. One of the key things is constant awareness of your position and power - so we tried to break it down slowly and subtly. **A lot of unlearning needs to happen, to make them spaces that actually hold some meaning."**

The facilitators also trusted participants to find their own answers together. "I resist the temptation to fill awkward or uncomfortable silences, allowing for a certain amount of discomfort, holding the tension for what is ready to emerge," said Rodericks. "In order to ignite people's passion, curiosity and connection, **an invitation is more powerful than instructions**." And every workshop was rooted in practice with a learning journey to a child care center to connect directly with children, caregivers, families, and community members.

This intentional design and appreciative facilitation led to profound shifts.

Some powerful exercises

Dialogue Walks

Pairs of unlikely partners—such as a senior District Child Affairs officer and a junior NGO project manager who might have unequal power in other contexts—had to listen to each other for 15 minutes without any interruption. This simple act of listening and presence **"really created outstanding repercussions and a really vibrant environment,"** Khan shared. Some participants even cried as they told their own stories freely. **"During a dialogue walk with an unfamiliar partner, they uncovered their own listening habits and began opening up to authentic conversations. They started feeling empathy for each other, not as colleagues or positions of power, but simply as people,"** said Rodericks. One official in Chandpur later shared a breakthrough: **"My boss... is no more my boss. He is my mentor now. He is my elder brother,"** Khan recalled the official telling him.



Sharing Experience After Dialogue Walk at District Workshop

6-9 Exercise

This was a simple exercise to illustrate the importance of being open to different perspectives and how two contradicting truths can be held at the same time. Participants faced each other with a 6 drawn on the floor. **"That really helped people understand the other person's perspective. If I am seeing 9 from this side, I'm correct. But the other person seeing 6 from the other side is also correct. So that level of empathy, active listening, all helped go a long way,"** said Rafi Chowdhury, Senior Program Associate at Synergos-Bangladesh[13]. This provoked a conversation on the value of empathy and active listening.

[13] Rafi Chowdhury interview with the author, June 24, 2026

3D sculpting

In another exercise that explored inner work, participants in the national and district BL workshops used pipe cleaners, feathers, stones, and string to represent the system and discover their role in it. Rodericks observed a profound atmospheric shift: **"You're seeing these very senior people play... It's like the whole tone in the room shifted. It got quieter, more focused."** They used these materials to express "hard truths" about implementation rifts that they previously couldn't name explicitly in hierarchical settings. These creative tools shifted mindsets from "egocentric" (protecting my turf) to "ecocentric" (serving the collective future of the children).



Mapping Execise at District BL Workshop

These exercises built capacity to develop and express empathy and vulnerability, to practice generative and active listening, and to connect personal purpose to professional roles—critical skills for understanding and navigating complex systems.

A number of leaders shifted their mindset. More senior officials and leaders downplayed their own ego and decreased their "power over" approach, and NGO leaders and more junior officials recognized more agency in themselves and increased their "power within" approach, said Rodericks. This enabled new solutions to emerge.

Resolving deep-seated "adaptive blockages"

A District Child Affairs Officer (DCAO) and the local NGOs implementing the project were experiencing friction and lack of trust. The situation got so tense that the Synergos team worried that the DCAO might derail all project operations in that district and even damage the national project's credibility and sustainability at a sensitive time with the new government. This official participated in District level workshops in 2025, which functioned as **"an outlet. We provided a space for everyone to speak freely and not to worry about anyone thinking negatively of you or judging you,"** said Chowdhury. After the DCAO had the chance to share

her perspective and be heard, **“she felt lighter, and she also felt the need to think of the greater good”** of the project and its impact on the children. This led her and the NGO representatives to reconcile and build trust based on good faith.



Generational shifts in traditional hierarchy

The national workshops were deftly facilitated by BL experts, but key turning points were achieved **when participants themselves leaned into their own agency, defying generational and gender hierarchies**. Rodericks recounted an incident where the agenda was getting derailed by senior-level government officials who were eager to end the session early to return to their offices. A group of younger MoWCA and Health ministry officials noted to the facilitators privately that they did not want the workshop to end early, as they found the sessions and tools on self-awareness and active listening to be productive and helpful for their work. These women set the stage for deeper participatory dialogue, connecting their work with their personal purpose and creating a **“democratic learning environment,”** shared Rodericks. Synergos recognized this enthusiasm and invited them to additional sessions focusing on personal wellbeing, held shortly thereafter.

Generational shifts in traditional hierarchy

The national workshops were deftly facilitated by BL experts, but key turning points were achieved **when participants themselves leaned into their own agency, defying generational and gender hierarchies**. Rodericks recounted an incident where the agenda was getting derailed by senior-level government officials who were eager to end the session early to

return to their offices. A group of younger MoWCA and Health ministry officials noted to the facilitators privately that they did not want the workshop to end early, as they found the sessions and tools on self-awareness and active listening to be productive and helpful for their work. These women set the stage for deeper participatory dialogue, connecting their work with their personal purpose and creating a **"democratic learning environment,"** shared Rodericks. Synergos recognized this enthusiasm and invited them to additional sessions focusing on personal wellbeing, held shortly thereafter.

Building Leadership through Vulnerability

Inner work led to leadership breakthroughs for a number of participants. Facilitators recognized that an Assistant Project Manager, who often found himself feeling insecure when faced with professional challenges, could use an additional boost to assert his own leadership. During a session, he was called to the front to peer-facilitate. After the break, he expressed deep gratitude to being picked as a leader and he said that built his confidence. **This district-level official found his voice and renewed his purpose and courage as an agent of social change.**

Synergos created space to build self-awareness and to counter deep-seated and complex adaptive blockages, such as ego, suspicion, and mistrust, by airing them openly to be addressed. "Through this self-awareness, many committed to taking personal responsibility after the workshop to overcome challenges and support service integration," said Rodericks. "I saw a few light bulbs go off, asking themselves is this challenge now a technical or adaptive one?"

Inner work for self-awareness and common purpose was complemented with personal wellness efforts—**these were catalysts to strengthen the bridge between individual leadership and collaborative impact**. The district-level workshops incorporated an explicit focus on personal wellness, partnering with Innovation for Wellbeing Foundation (IWF). "Wellbeing is one of the most important things, how to care for yourself, love yourself, and share love with each other. This practice made a significant change with local level stakeholders," said Khan. **This focus on self-care enables participants to stop being reactive due to fear**



Early Morning Meditation Practice at BL Workshop



Government Officials Expressing Personal Purpose and Ownership Over Advancing Work for Child Development

or insecurity, and start being able to engage in structured reflection, cultivate systems thinking, and participate in meaningful engagement across divides.

The cumulative effects of these BL trainings have been remarkable. The post-workshop surveys showed that 84% of district-level participants were applying the skills and attitudes learned in the workshops, and 73% were sharing learnings with others. The training boosted collaboration across the ICBC



Commitments Shared at the End of National BL Workshop

partnership and enabled them to learn and apply empathy, active listening, proactive communication, co-design, and understanding of the system as a whole. The relationships built during these workshops also increased connectivity and communication among formerly-isolated peers. For example, a WhatsApp group between District Child Affairs Officers and other implementers has created space for informal sharing, problem-solving, and ongoing reflection. A number of partners have also advocated for extending the BL approach, combined with wellbeing and mental health, to the caregivers and communities running the care centers on the ground.\

By centering **inner work that prioritizes active and generative listening, connecting personal purpose to professional work**, senior officials and other stakeholders connected as humans through these workshops rather than just positional figures, which melted traditional hierarchies, built trust-based relationships across hierarchies, and allowed for authentic problem-solving towards a common purpose. Local media partnerships were also a critical component of building trust. Synergos' systems analysis revealed not just mistrust and lack of cooperation between government and civil society, but also that **media often contributed to misrepresentation and erroneous messages**. Synergos used intentional awareness campaigns and workshops on child-sensitive journalism to build knowledge and trust between media, government, and NGOs in order to ensure accuracy of media coverage and narratives. It contracted a media agency SoMaSHTe to plan media training and sensitization workshops to ensure sustained and accurate coverage, including a journalist training manual to model child- and community-centered journalism.

All of these efforts helped shift the narrative of child drowning as an intractable health issue or unavoidable "God's will" **towards understanding that the issue is solvable—through effective childcare coverage—and that these officials are the change leaders who could bridge different sectors and mental models to implement the solution**.

III. The Community: Building Collective Action and Transparent Collaboration

Synergos undertook sustainability and scaling advocacy twice through this journey—once to convince the government to adopt the ICBC Phase I, and then again to push for a Phase II. Scaleup was achieved by building coalitions, nurturing a relational coordination and collaboration approach, and catalyzing a community of interest that worked to prioritize shared mission over organizational or personal egos.

Synergos' contributions to ICBC design—by engaging a wider partner base in co-designing and validating the adaptive design—helped build accountability and ownership at all levels from top government officials and ministers to district and local level technocrats, all the way through to diverse NGO sectors, and local communities themselves.

Synergos modeled BL by **developing its reputation as a fair and trusted interlocutor and playing an ombudsman role**—by facilitating regular partner coordination meetings in the early days, and through the TAP platform under ICBC Phase I. As the only non-government member of the Technical Evaluation Committee, Synergos elevated project integrity by ensuring that NGOs were recruited in transparent ways, building accountability and trust with all parts of the ecosystem. For the first time, local organizations felt the process was "very transparent."

As a technical partner, Synergos supported the government with project design, feasibility studies and proposal development but **continued elevating and partnering with civil society partners in design, to retain their trust and relationships**. "We didn't forget them when we got this attention from the government," said Husain. Synergos also institutionalized a collaborative landscape where all partners share ownership, responsibility and extend legitimacy over the project's success, including the TAP as a collective implementation structure involving BRAC-IED, CIPRB, BEN, and Orbis International. This meant that ICBC is viewed as a **shared ownership model with the government, civil society, and community, rather than a donor-driven effort**. This has since been further built out in an emerging Referral Strategy under the ICBC—exploring opportunities to bring cross-sectoral resources, services, and initiatives, including vision health, disability access, and other aspects of inclusion, so that daycare centers can be referral pipelines for holistic child development. **Community ownership was created through intentional co-design**.

Sustainable scaling required successful coalition building with advocacy partners and also skillful navigation of the government bureaucracy. Synergos acted as a **deft and nimble facilitator and even as a "shock absorber"** by working out ways to resolve bureaucratic blockages. This meant developing relationships within ministries and other spaces of decision-making and power, identifying specific people responsible for approvals, nurturing partnerships, and making nimble decisions and engagements to get proposals and decisions "unstuck".

Through this process, Synergos became a technical expert in the **art and the science of the Development Project Proforma (DPP)** process—a critical pathway to get budget allocations approved for development and social impact projects. Rizwan Khan, a core team member at Synergos-Bangladesh, and long-time development professional, took it upon himself to become intimately familiar with the DPP process. He along with colleagues from the implementing agency BSA spent days studying the Proforma documents. "I said, let us fall in love with the Proforma!," he recalled with a chuckle. Instead of viewing the long DPP document as a chore or bureaucratic hassle, Khan and the team treated it as a guiding path for the nation. As before, with the development of the DPP for ICBC's first phase, Synergos saw the DP**P as a roadmap to understand government priorities and internal dynamics, identify alignments, and embed social impact concerns and priorities into developmental planning processes.** For example, through the Proforma process, Synergos learned that donor data was not adequate, and had to be bolstered by government data on return on investment. So it hired consultants to collect this data. This agility was critical.

Five Minutes to Secure a Lasting Champion

The ICBC Phase I in its last scheduled year was disrupted by revolution, political instability, and government change in mid-2024. The new interim government took office preparing to terminate all projects from the previous administration, in most cases without evaluating merit. Synergos team members moved nimbly to prevent this fate for the ICBC, and rushed to secure a meeting with the interim Advisor of Women and Children Affairs who granted them five minutes. In that document time, Synergos reframed the ICBC project not as a legacy of the previous government but as a "nation-building" initiative essential for Bangladesh's children and its future. This intervention changed the Advisor's perspective and she became a dedicated project champion. This relationship and trust with the new MoWCA leadership was further built through organizing a learning journey for government and BSA officials to a childcare center in a northern district, as well as hosting the MoWCA Senior Secretary and other senior officials at the Bloomberg Global Drowning Prevention Partner meeting in New York. **This five minute meeting with the Advisor and subsequent learning tours resulted in a critical one-year project extension and** an invitation to submit a Proforma for ICBC Phase II.

Relational Agility and the 1 am Coffee Shop Meeting

At every step of the Phase II Proforma approval, which would scale this project to 30 districts and 90% government funding, Synergos has stayed on top of process and bureaucratic blockages, and cultivated trusted partners who are just as committed to this project. **"At every stage, we know which officer is responsible for approval,"** Husain said. Because of this active stance and its relationships, the Synergos team learned about a bottleneck at a critical juncture. A trusted journalist colleague alerted Khan about this bottleneck and facilitated an introduction with the relevant minister. Although this official was extremely busy between parliamentary sessions and a family emergency, Khan managed to catch the minister at his only available free time—at 1 am—and conveyed the importance of the ICBC Phase II. The minister was initially skeptical, questioning why drowning prevention should be a priority during a national political and fuel crisis. But through patient explanation, aided by the minister's wife who was a nurse and saw the systemic impact of the project, the minister was converted into a supporter. This ensured that the Phase II proposal has moved forward without budget cuts.

These examples demonstrate its relational agility—how Synergos used small windows of opportunity and key relationships to shift leaders from skeptics to champions.

The true test of the Bridging Leadership model came during the extreme volatility of the August 2024 uprising that brought down the government. Amidst administration reshuffles and leadership turnover—the Project Director changed four times, and a number of key positions were dropped or transferred—Synergos **exercised "patience as a strategy."** When momentum slowed due to the Aug 2024 uprising, and before and immediately after the April 2026 elections which stalled the Phase II approval process, Synergos team members worked patiently on developing new allies. It also knew when to accelerate advocacy and relationship building efforts when bottlenecks or political apertures

opened up or a new champion emerged. “In those moments, Synergos’ quick action and agile moves worked wonders,” Husain recalled.

Well-documented institutional records, communications materials, and relationship-building were a buffer during times of upheaval. After the uprising, Synergos was able to use these materials and relationships to quickly re-orient new leadership, secure an extension, and keep up progress. Relationships outlasted solitary champions and sustained momentum especially at the local level, where there was less turnover.

আইসিবিসি

ICBC Phase II Development (2025-2026 and beyond)

The successes of Phase I strengthened Phase II from the start. The years of shared purpose and relationship building meant that Phase II was government-owned from the outset. Civil society, implementing and technical partners were united under the Technical Assistance Partner (TAP) platform. Through the Bridging Leadership approach, Synergos cultivated more advocates for the ICBC. And the project was continuing to generate positive and robust evidence of impact. All of these elements have been critical to sustain momentum, even through political changes, loss of champions who have left office, and a new government in power, and have culminated in the planning for Phase II, which promises a larger government investment and hundreds of thousands more children served.



DG, BSA and PD, ICBC in a ICBC Phase-II Planning Meeting with Technical Assistance Partners and District Officials

The Ingredients of Successful Scaleup

This effort to successfully scale up a donor-initiated project into a government-led one within less than a decade offers some valuable lessons about sustainable scaling through leadership, institutionalization, collaboration and collective action.

This effort to successfully scale up a donor-initiated project into a government-led one within less than a decade offers some valuable lessons about sustainable scaling through leadership, institutionalization, collaboration and collective action.

Robust Evidence Base: Evidence from multiple credible sources, including JHU research, SoLiD pilot, ECD mapping, systems analysis, sustainability studies, referral mapping, served as evidence base for why child drowning could be addressed through a ECD lens.

Reframing the Systemic Challenge: Using systems analysis to find natural entry points. In this instance, reframing child drowning from an intractable health issue or "God's will" to a solvable "childcare coverage gap."

Integration into Existing Policy Frameworks: By aligning with existing policy frameworks, such as the government's ECCD policy and the international Nurturing Care Framework, advocates could demonstrate a clear pathway to implement government objectives.
Ongoing Advocacy and Partnerships: Collaboration with existing in-country networks and alliances, and building alliances to turn a narrow issue into a more general one. Turning data into collective action through contextual validation, co-design, and shared ownership, as well as strategic media partnerships.

Relational Agility and "Trust Architecture": Acting as "shock absorbers" and facilitating a web of deep relationships and trust to meet diverse stakeholders where they are, especially during times of disruption and volatility such as during the pandemic in 2020 and political uprising in 2024.

Government Process as a Pathway to Partnership: Viewing the public sector as a partner rather than a competitor or opponent, understanding government processes and requirements, and viewing bureaucracy as a window into government priorities. Also having agility and nurturing relationships and informants to rapidly adapt to systemic shocks and changes in priorities.

Institutionalization as Resilience: Institutionalization and documentation, including important endorsements and key decisions, enabled the project to stay on track, even when leadership and key roles changed amidst political transition in 2024.

Economic Sustainability: Building a low-cost and community-owned model, and gathering evidence of its economic sustainability and social value, that the government could absorb into its budget and into its nation-building goals.

[14] Partner quoted in "Key Learnings from the First Phase of Bangladesh Drowning Prevention Partnership Project," Singizi Consulting Africa, Nov 2021

Conclusion

For Joy and Alia

While this document narrates the impact of Bridging Leadership starting with the initial success of a $32 million government-led development project, the ultimate impact of this work lives with children like Joy and Alia. These are the names Synergos uses to symbolize a young boy and girl as a reminder of shared purpose and whom the system truly serves, and to ensure that community voices remain at the center of every decision.

By reframing the issue from “drowning prevention” to “child protection and development,” Synergos created a scope for **interconnected ecosystems to collaborate—a range of cross-sectoral ministries, a broad alliance of NGOs under the Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN), a range of other stakeholders including funders, as well as the grassroots communities**. Synergos facilitated and modeled intentional co-design throughout the process to ensure that not just project creators and implementers felt co-ownership, but also the community itself. Synergos created common ground with natural allies such as the BEN, converted once-skeptical ones such as the CIPRB, and brokered alliances with unexpected ones, such as Orbis International that has brought in vision and ear care as part of a holistic model of childcare and wellbeing.

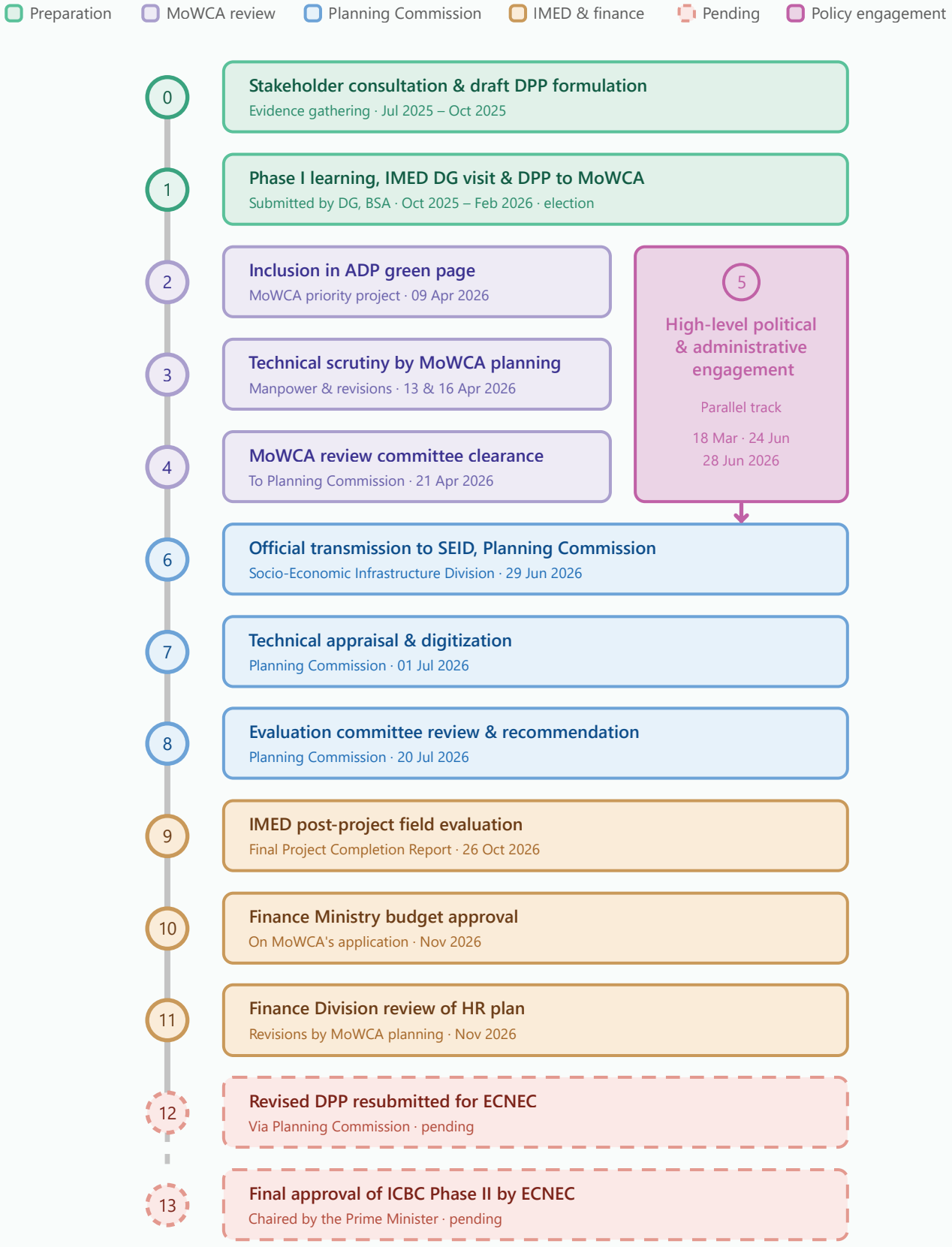
Moving beyond just a technical success, this project reached a **much higher tier of systems impact** transforming norms and beliefs. It achieved **structural change** by successfully securing significant government investment in this issue, and perhaps more importantly, **relational and cultural change** by transforming a number of cross-sectoral leaders’ understanding of adaptive challenges and their own bridging leadership potential. This included expanding the notion of **who is a leader and shifting the understanding of leadership not just as an “expert” providing answers to that as a facilitator who creates the conditions for answers to emerge—the core of Bridging Leadership.** Government officials shared how this shifted the culture with a newfound appreciation for collaboration and collective problem-solving.

Ultimately this relational journey succeeded in building a resilient “trust architecture” across multiple sectors in Bangladesh. By acting as “shock absorbers” and facilitating a web of deep relationship, trust, and common purpose, Synergos helped shift diverse leaders from government, civil society, media, and grassroots communities, from an “egocentric” way of working to an “ecocentric” one. Collective ownership of this effort was the "ultimate success.” This “trust architecture” will inform and undergird future advocacy efforts for the well-being and dignity of children, and cross-sectoral and inter-agency partnerships for nation-building in Bangladesh for years to come.



Appendix A

Life Cycle of a Development Project Proforma: End to End ICBC Phase-II DPP Approval Trajectory



SYNERGOS
Building trust works

Published by Synergos Bangladesh
First Published: November 2026
Copyright © 2026, Synergos Bangladesh. All rights reserved

