

South Africa, 2006-2009:

## **LINC: Leadership and Innovation Network for Collaboration in the Children's Sector**

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### **The Challenge**

South Africa is living an unprecedented situation. Never in human history, in no time or place, has there been a situation where so many children are being left behind by both parents. In South Africa, there are currently at least 1.2 million children orphaned by HIV/AIDS; there are nearly 250,000 households headed by children and youth under 19 years old; and as many as 10.2 million children under 18 years old live in conditions of poverty, homelessness and insecurity. Despite the historic advances in democracy and development in South Africa since 1994, widespread poverty and social exclusion, exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, have created a reality in which millions of children need support and care. One of South Africa's most pressing systemic challenges is how to deliver on the rights of children promised in the Constitution and to provide a concerted response that can be both loving and sufficiently large in scale.

In the past, there was no word for "orphan" in South Africa's indigenous languages. Children in need would be absorbed by the extended family. But with the scope of the challenge today, the old solutions are no longer working. Many organizations and individuals are working creatively and actively to improve the situation, but more collaboration and systemic approaches are required to address the crisis.

### **The Players**

Addressing the challenge of children growing up in such difficult circumstances requires a societal and systemic response. All sectors and the population at large need to get involved. The LINC project was launched in 2006 as a partnership between *CONVENE*, *Reos Partners*, and *the Synergos Institute*. By early 2008, the project was engaging Directors and Chief Directors of eight government departments, heads of the major civil society organizations active for children, heads of corporate responsibility in some of the country's largest national and international companies, as well as leading academics, religious leaders, international donors, and community leaders.

### **The Project**

The partners set out in 2006 to explore the creation of a cross-sector leadership development programme that could contribute to improving the effectiveness of interventions for children in South Africa. They started with an investigation into the needs and perspectives of key stakeholders, and an assessment of what kind of process would be appropriate and useful. They conducted forty dialogue interviews with leaders from every sector, two children's focus groups, desk research, several advocacy meetings, and a multi-stakeholder dialogue session. A report on this phase is available.



The interviews revealed that stakeholders were deeply committed to their work, but often overwhelmed and experiencing burnout, struggling to find space to look at the "big picture" and to think creatively. The stakeholders also thought that improving leadership and collaboration across organizations and sectors were key leverage points in improving the situation.

From these insights emerged a design for a **leadership and innovation network**. As a first event of the network, an "Innovation Lab" workshop was held near Cape Town in November 2007, in partnership with the South African Presidency, the Department of Social Development, and the Hollard Foundation.

The project is now designed as a fellowship programme in which high-level leaders join a series of activities over the course of two years. These activities include participation in

innovation lab workshops, project team work, networking events, and leadership coaching. The leadership development approach combines training, dialogue and peer coaching, with immersion in community reality, stakeholder engagement, experiential problem-solving, and action-learning.

The project has also set up an Innovation Fund that supports the innovation process of the project teams. The Innovation Fund is designed to specifically foster innovation and learning, accept risk and allow for a fast turnaround on proposals. The fund will assess the innovation initiatives with a lens of change, learning, and the overall purpose of the Leadership and Innovation Network initiative. The facilitation team along with the innovation fund team provide support for the testing and institutionalisation of innovations.

### **The Impact**

The high-level purpose of the project is to create a space for leaders to practice and enhance their leadership skills and improve their collaboration, with the ultimate intention



of transforming their systems to provide a response that can be both loving and sufficiently large in scale. Thus, the overall intended impact of the process is to increase both quantity and quality of support to children. Though this impact will often be indirect, project teams are challenged to draw this link consistently between their activities and making a difference in the lives of children.

The project has so far spurred 6 initiatives: An initiative to improve coordination of the childrens sector, an initiative on data management, an initiative on scaling up, a new donor network, an initiative on building community capacity, and an initiative on

leadership in local government. In addition, a number of smaller collaborations have resulted, such as a collaboration between two academic institutions on creative ways to bridge research and action.

The project achieved participation from key players from across sectors, as a result of a thorough and determined convening process. According to participants, the project has significantly increased their ability to work with complex situations, to work at higher-level, and to collaborate across sectors.

### **The Learning**

One of the many key learnings from this project that stands out is the value of a neutral convener and safe space, that was not available to the participants before. The process of convening took a long time, and a great deal of patience, but it was very important to persist in getting the key leaders into the room and participating in a process that was fresh and new to them, and which helped to build trustful relationships. Related to this, a very important understanding has started to emerge about the role of different sectors – on the one hand, the NGOs realize that government is charged with dealing with millions of children every day, and on the other, government realizes that the NGOs are face-to-face with children in need every single day. These are very different contexts which create different cultures and different roles, but must be transformed into a complementary relationship.

Further, it was important to be extremely flexible in the design process and to continually consult and bring stakeholders in. The time constraints of leaders working on such a complex challenge was a key design challenge that had to be factored in.

### **The Future**

The LINC project is currently scheduled to continue through the end of 2009. The initiatives will continue with their testing and implementation and with support from the innovation fund.

For more information, please contact Reos Social Innovation through Nicole Antonie: [antonie@reospartners.com](mailto:antonie@reospartners.com).

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