



The Leadership and Innovation Network for Collaboration (LINC)

Building Leadership and Collaboration for South Africa's Orphans and Vulnerable Children

THE PROJECT AT A GLANCE:

Issue: Orphans and Vulnerable Children
Geography: South Africa
Duration: 2007-2011
Co-Convenors: CONVENE, The Synergos Institute, the South African Department of Social Development, and the African Leadership Initiative

Impacts: Leadership development and capacity building; Improved funding for children's programmes; More effective cross-organisation and cross-sector collaboration; a systemwide comprehensive database of children in need.



HUMAN CAPITAL



SOCIAL CAPITAL



INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL



PHYSICAL CAPITAL



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The Context

There are currently 14.8 million children who have been orphaned by AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa. Of these, South Africa is home to 1.9 million, second in number only to Nigeria. In South Africa, hundreds of thousands of households are headed by youth under

19 years old, and more than 10.2 million children under 18 years of age live in conditions of poverty, homelessness, and scarcity. The staggering nature and scale of this unprecedented situation has rendered adequate responses to this challenge all but impossible. 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 support effort that can be both loving and sufficiently large in scale.

In the past, South Africa's indigenous languages did not have a word for "orphan". Children in need would be absorbed by the extended family. In the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, this capacity of families to care for orphaned children exceeded expectations; however, the scope of the challenge today is such that the traditional solutions are very far from sufficient. 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.



Local and national governments, community organisations, international development organisations, foundations, businesses, and individual citizens are all widely affected by this human tragedy. With the complex web of AIDS, poverty, race, family, culture, history, and development, working to provide for Southern Africa's orphaned children has been a deeply stuck and powerfully complex challenge for all who have been involved or tried to make a difference.

Convening

In 2007, in cooperation with CONVENE Venture Philanthropy, the Synergos Institute, the South African Department of Social Development, and the African Leadership Initiative, Reos Partners co-launched and facilitated its first large-scale Change Lab in South Africa to work on the problem of AIDS orphans and vulnerable children. The project, originally known as OVC, began from a collaborative partnership between Ann Lamont of Convene and Mille Bojer of Reos Partners. By the end of 2007, the project was engaging directors and chief directors of eight government departments, heads of the major civil society organisations focused on children, some of the country's leading corporate foundations active in this arena, as well as academics, religious leaders, international donors, and community leaders.

The first phase of the project included one of the most extensive sensing processes in a Change Lab to date.

Over the course of 2006, Mille Bojer, Ann Lamont, and Busi Dlamini conducted two- to three-hour deep-dive dialogue interviews with more than forty national leaders in the children's sector in South Africa. These rich interviews proved to be powerful tools for unearthing personal and systemic issues and for initiating a process that would connect players and build the capacity for systemic leadership among stakeholders. In addition to the interviews, partners conducted two focus groups with children, desk research, several advocacy meetings, and a multi-stakeholder dialogue session. Based on these activities, the organisers initiated a synthesis process to create a systemic map of the problem through the eyes of the leaders in the system.

They found that while financial and human resources were indeed an issue, a more fundamental problem was that the system was plagued by widespread burnout among workers and a lack of coordination between sectors at multiple levels, both of which led to a lack of a "big-picture view". The system was also affected by mistrust, fear, and even deeper fractures around the issues of race, class, and poverty. The scope and heartrending tragedy of the on-the-ground



reality had been wreaking havoc on the health and morale of those working to address these challenges.

“The interviews and the sensing phase of the project revealed stories of desperation and tragedy but also of powerful commitment and selflessness. Remarkable people who, living in townships and having nearly nothing of their own, opened their homes to orphaned children, or even went so far as to set up children’s homes and community organisations.”

Colleen Magner, Reos Partners

Based on these interviews, the organisers decided that the Change Lab would focus on collaborative leadership and would take the shape of a fellowship of leaders working to improve the lives of vulnerable children. This insight and message rang true to the leaders invited, and in November 2007, Reos and Convene held the project’s first Innovation Lab. Sixty national leaders in the South African children’s sector participated. Based on the findings of the first phase, this event was aimed at creating a network to promote leadership, innovation, collaboration, and systemic approaches.

The Process

During the first Innovation Lab, 45 stakeholder leaders moved through a three-day process to build

their relationships with one another, create a systemic understanding of the current reality, reflect on their own roles and contributions, and start developing new partnerships and cross-sector initiatives. On the third day, they were joined by 15 senior champions, who helped them develop the initiatives further. Despite the busy schedules of this overburdened group of leaders, at the end of that first workshop, 44 of the 45 full participants agreed to participate in a long-term process the following year.

Between 2007 and 2011, LINC evolved into a fellowship of connected leaders, all directly involved in the issue, working together across sectors to systemically and collaboratively address the challenge of the effects of AIDS on children in South Africa. LINC fellows worked collaboratively in a set of innovation teams, based on a structured series of workshops to address systemic leverage points.

Fellows also engaged in coaching to build their capacity for effective collaboration and leadership within innovation teams and in the field. These coaching sessions provided individuals with an opportunity to develop their own capacities for leadership and participation in cross-sector collaborative processes. They learned how to make



their voices heard while working effectively in their own organisations and with other LINC fellows.

By 2011, LINC membership had grown to 99 fellows, and the management of the programme had passed to the Synergos Institute. The programme today includes: (1) events that promote learning, networking, and collaboration, (2) individual and group coaching, (3) innovation initiatives, and (4) an online social network and portal. The project's long-term intention is to foster a systemic response that can be both loving and sufficiently large in scale to increase both the quantity and the quality of support to children. The path to this outcome is through building the resilience and systemic outlook of leaders working in the children's sector to enable them to act more effectively.

Results

The ongoing, systemic work of the innovation teams and the group as a whole has culminated in the following five focus areas and corresponding initiatives:

Leadership development and capacity-building at the local government level

Local governments were overburdened and understaffed, bearing a great deal of responsibility for children's issues but unable to effectively manage the workload. This innovation team worked to build

leadership and capacity in local government to enable more effective responses.

More effective community capacity

This innovation team worked to build capacity within community organisations and NGOs. It prototyped innovative models of care and new ways of expanding access to social welfare resources.

Improved donor coordination & funding flows

This team was composed of international donors, governments, cooperatives, and foundations working to raise the issue of orphaned children on the priorities lists of global funders. The participants innovated new ways of measuring and demonstrating the impact of child welfare work, and worked to raise the profile of the issue on a global scale.

More effective organisation of the children's sector

This innovation team worked to build better systems collaboration between the South African Department of Social Development, local NGOs, funders, and local businesses.

A comprehensive database

This technical group, eventually incorporated into UNICEF, worked to improve monitoring and information on the social welfare system and its clients to better map where help and support were



needed most. These initiatives are only part of the impact that LINC has had in South Africa. In addition, LINC has had a significant effect on the leadership capacities of and relationships between the fellows. In their evaluations, they voiced that they developed resilience, selfawareness, confidence, openness to change, ability to think systemically, and a reconnection with personal energy and purpose. Their enhanced relationships and collaborative capacity were evident through their increased responsiveness to each other, increased ad hoc partnerships beyond the formal LINC initiatives — particularly NGO-government partnerships — and enhanced co-planning and co-creation. The improved relationships among these leaders had a contagious effect on other national forums, and the Department of Social Development and the Treasury have engaged in a co-planning process with LINC, another example of pushing systemic change.

Learnings

Because this is a multi-year project, the learnings are many-fold. There are learnings about what works in the children's sector and deep process learnings we have internalized in Reos.

What most stays in our memory at Reos Partners as a learning from this project is the persistence required

in the convening phase, and that sometimes people need to experience it to believe it. Before the first Innovation Lab, nearly all the stakeholders were saying they did not have time for such a process. Through an effort of encouraging each stakeholder individually and finding out who else needed to be there to give legitimacy to the project, we managed to get people to make a three-day commitment. Out of the three-day commitment, we then got a one-year commitment, and out of that a multi-year programme evolved.

For more information on LINC, please contact Colleen Magner of Reos Partners at magner@reospartners.com.

Or check out these other project-related materials:

[We can't keep meeting like this,](#)
[an article by Reos Partner Mille Bojer](#)

[Video about LINC on youtube](#)