

SYNERGOS

OUR REFLECTIONS
INVOLVE YOUTH IN CREATING SOLUTIONS

DEEPENING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

A review of Synergos' work to reduce isolation in Southern Africa from 2013-2017



NETWORKS
SYNERGOS | SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS REPORT
CRITICAL IN THE POVERTY EQUATION



Meet Synergos

Synergos is a global organisation that's helping the world **deepen trust and collaborate better to solve the most complex causes of poverty.** We use our proven approach to help diverse groups work together to achieve lasting change on a range of issues, including agriculture, health, youth development, employment, and education.



What is social connectedness?

Social connectedness refers to **the quantity and quality of meaningful and supportive relationships** between individuals and their peers, mentors, and community.

Social connectedness is the alleviation of social isolation, which is both a contributing factor to and a consequence of poverty.

In partnership with the Samuel Family Foundation, Synergos established the Social Connectedness Programme in Southern Africa to address social isolation in the context of poverty.





“

Beyond definitions, what matters most is how isolation is experienced—which I describe as the feeling of sitting alone at the bottom of a well. The isolated person feels ‘less than,’ trapped, and alone, outside all circles of concern, suffering, invisible in a dark, cold place where no one loves them and nobody cares.”

”

- KIM SAMUEL

Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness



Why does social connectedness matter?

Meaningful social connections improve emotional, physical, and economic wellbeing. **They can be the determining factor in whether an at-risk youth is able to break the cycle of poverty and vulnerability.** Studies also demonstrate that socially isolated children are at significant risk of poorer physical and financial health in adulthood, compared with non-isolated children.



Not just a feeling – a health risk

Social isolation is worse for a person's health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day.¹ It raises stress hormone levels and boosts inflammation, which can lead to arthritis, type II diabetes, and heart disease.



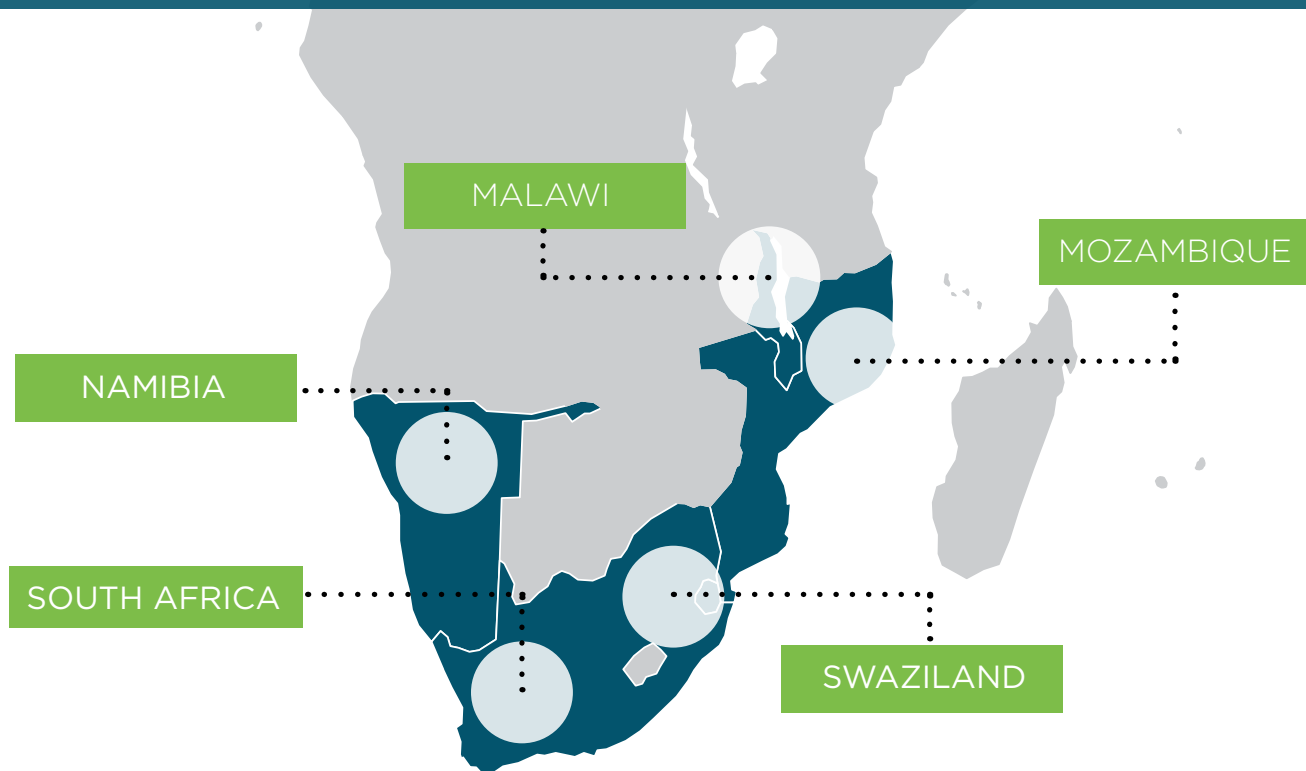
Our strategy on social connectedness

We know that a socially connected child is more likely to escape poverty and lead a healthy, productive life. That's why **we focus on children by influencing the policies, programs, and practices of organisations that serve them.**

Our goal is to help organisations see the benefits of social connectedness and learn how to increase it among the children, youth, and caregivers that they work with.

A focus on Southern Africa

For the last five years, our work has centered on five countries in Southern Africa, where we **design, learn, and evolve together** with partners to help them develop community-centered solutions.



Partnership is our secret sauce

Our priority is improving social connectedness for as many children as possible, and we achieve it by fostering trusting partnerships. Southern Africa is home to a rich diversity of well-established, respected organisations that already occupy a trusted place in thousands of communities. **We call these partners multiplier organisations because of their innate capacity to boost social connectedness in the communities they serve.** By coming alongside these organisations, starting conversations about the benefits of social connectedness, and providing them with trainings and tools to incorporate it into their intervention approaches, programme designs, practices, and training curricula, we help them reduce isolation among thousands of children and youth.



Our closest partners

We have worked with eight key global, regional, and national partners to adapt our model in communities across the region.



**Samuel Family
Foundation**

A leader in the global connectedness movement, founded by Kim Samuel, that works to catalyze innovative strategies to build connectedness within and between communities.



Psychosocial Wellbeing For All Children

Provides training on social and emotional services to, and produces activities and tools for, children, youth, families and communities.



**Nelson Mandela
CHILDREN'S FUND®**



CHANGING THE WAY SOCIETY TREATS ITS CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Works to change way society treats its children and youth by giving voice and dignity to the African child by building a rights-based movement.



NACOSA
COLLECTIVELY TURNING THE TIDE
ON HIV, AIDS AND TB

A network of over 1,500 civil society organisations working to turn the tide on HIV, AIDS, and tuberculosis in South Africa.



A U.S.-based organisation, with affiliates in South Africa and the UK, that uses education to help every child reach his or her potential.



An Oxford University research center advancing a more systematic, methodological, and economic framework to reduce multidimensional poverty, grounded in people's experiences and values.



A University of Pretoria-based knowledge generation platform dedicated to the study of resilience in the Global South.



Works to build the capacity of Mozambican communities with the objective of overcoming poverty and promoting social justice.



OUR APPROACH

Foster relationships

AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHO ARE POSITIONED TO ACT ON THEIR BEHALF.

Build networks

OF LINKAGES BETWEEN CAREGIVERS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS WHO CAN ADVOCATE FOR THE CHILDREN THEY WORK WITH.

Train the trainers

WE OFFER TRAININGS AND MATERIALS TO INDIVIDUALS, LIKE TEACHERS AND CAREGIVERS, WHO WORK IN THE LIFE-SPACE OF THE CHILD.

Actions we take



Hosting trainings and workshops

We've held dozens of trainings and workshops on social connectedness, reaching hundreds of practitioners and benefiting thousands of children and youth.



Partnering with indigenous communities

Through partnerships in five countries, we've helped build community resilience, reduce child neglect and abuse, and promote leadership and role models for youth.



Raising awareness of social connectedness

We've introduced social connectedness—and our methods for increasing it—to hundreds of practitioners in multiple venues across the region and the world.



Engaging academic and research partners

We've continued to develop the concept of social connectedness with academic partners, publishing research briefs for analysts, policy makers, and practitioners.



IN 2017 ALONE, WE REACHED...

950 care workers

AND COMMUNITY CARE WORKERS AND LEADERS.

2,000 young adults

WHO HELP YOUTH BUILD RELATIONAL SKILLS AMONG THEIR PEERS.

8,000 children

THROUGH ACTIVITIES THAT STRENGTHEN THEIR CONNECTIONS WITH PEERS AND ENHANCE SAFETY.



In action: matching children with ‘grannies’ in South Africa

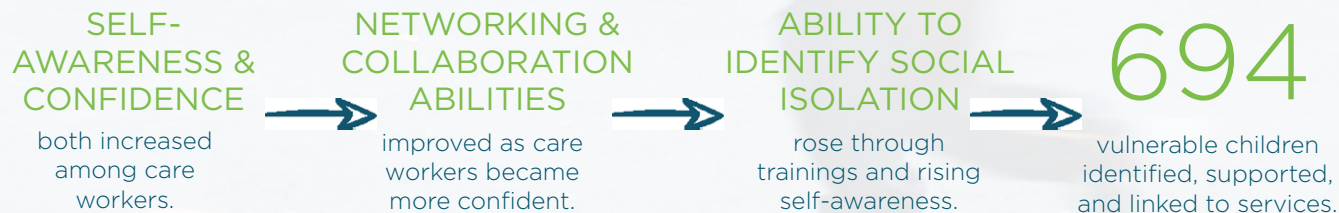
The Othandweni Children’s Home in Johannesburg, South Africa provides long-term care and support for vulnerable, abused, and neglected children, many of whom are orphans. **These children lack the deep, meaningful social connections to a caretaker that every child needs to thrive**—connections that bring consistent love, attention, and a listening ear that doesn’t go away.

The ‘grannies’ programme pairs each child with a ‘granny’, a volunteer woman also known as a ‘gogo,’ who commits to spend two hours with her child every day, Monday through Friday. The relationship proves transformational for the children, who over time blossom from withdrawn, closed, and unhappy, into energetic, joyful, and curious, seeing improvements in school performance, behavior, and health. Most ‘grannies’ report emotional and health benefits for themselves as well, finding renewed purpose and vitality in making a difference in a child’s life.

In action: scaling social connectedness with NACOSA

Our partnership with NACOSA, the Networking HIV and AIDS Community of Southern Africa, demonstrates how the multiplier model scales up social connectedness programming to reach more children through existing networks. **NACOSA is an association of over 1,500 civil society organisations collaborating to combat HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis in Southern Africa**, which faces the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in the world.

We introduced social connectedness into NACOSA's programs by providing a suite of dialogue tools, forums, and support groups where caregivers, parents, and community members can learn how to identify vulnerable and isolated children and develop action plans for meeting their needs. Here's how NACOSA reports it's made a difference:





Results for children

Caregiver surveys show our programs consistently improved children's lives. Here's how.

- ✓ Improved relationships between children
- ✓ Increased openness
- ✓ Better school performance
- ✓ Improvements in hygiene
- ✓ More happy, confident demeanor
- ✓ Safer children and youth



“They used to discriminate against children from other communities, but **now they play together** even with other children who are not so close to them.”

“They **trust us more and share with us their pain and suffering**, for example, ill treatment at school.”

“Children now want to play, talk, and share their playing equipment and food with others.”

- CARETAKERS IN REPSSI PROGRAM





Results for care workers

Our programs have also brought repeated benefits—both personal and professional—for care workers.

- ✓ Improved ability to identify isolated or vulnerable children
- ✓ Better preparedness to help vulnerable children stay in school
- ✓ Greater capacity for empathy, and to offer love and support
- ✓ Stronger support systems and relationships between care workers
- ✓ Increased ability to advocate collectively for better care services and for children's rights



“There was a child that did not go to school. I went to that child and asked what the problem was. **I focused on trying to understand how the child felt and not on her behaviour.** So, the child eventually talked to me.

I found out that she did not go to school because she did not have a school uniform. I spoke to her caregiver and asked her to find clothes for the child. And then the child went to school. **I made a difference in that child’s life.”**

- CARETAKER IN REPSSI PROGRAM





Results for communities

Our programme has made communities more child-inclusive and influenced national policy.

- ✓ More support from community leaders for care workers
- ✓ Increased participation of children in community activities
- ✓ Psychosocial support framework and guidelines adopted by South Africa's Department of Social Development and other countries
- ✓ Other countries across region encouraged to adopt their own psychosocial support frameworks



“They listen to children’s views and opinions, especially during community meetings and when addressing domestic violence against children.”

“Children’s views are now sought and considered by the leaders before making decisions.”

“They take action and get involved in addressing and resolving children’s issues.”

- CARETAKERS IN REPSSI PROGRAM





Results for the childcare ecosystem

Our approach has invigorated the network of people and institutions working on child wellness issues.

- ✓ Improved networking among stakeholders across sectors
- ✓ Increased information sharing between institutions
- ✓ Deepened relationships and communication among parents, children, educators, and caregivers
- ✓ Increased awareness of children's rights among stakeholders



“Talking is healing, healing is talking... The social connectedness workshops and dialogues gives us space to talk and heal.

Our stories heal us and others. When we are healing ourselves, we are strong and we can grow healthy children.”

- REX MOLEFE, MOTHEO TRAINING INSTITUTE



Social connectedness in the world

Our work on social connectedness goes beyond Southern Africa. It's part of an emerging movement for social connectedness begun by Kim Samuel and led by the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness. Here are the key ways that we continue to expand our influence.

- Partnering in two global symposiums on Overcoming Isolation and Deepening Connectedness, convened by Samuel Center for Social Connectedness.
- Currently building collaborations with five key organisations and research institutions around the world
- Engaging more than 75 researchers and institutions from 11 countries in 2017 alone.
- Prepared paper for Social Inclusion and Poverty Eradication Conference at Harvard University, later published by the Comparative Research Programme on Poverty.

There's something very personal about social connectedness. It has to happen within each of us, and then among us. It's something that does need to be built from the bottom up, but also across the divides—across the sectoral divides and across the vertical, social class divides.

— PEGGY DULANY
Founder, Synergos



What's next?

The next three big steps that we can take to bring the benefits of social connectedness to more people across Southern Africa.

Start building a movement for policy change. Political will for large-scale investment in support networks is still weak across Southern Africa. With the evidence and program models established, it's time to advocate for social connectedness in national social programmes.

Forge partnerships to boost employment. Our framework has demonstrated potential to improve employment. By incorporating it into national youth development programmes and organisations' training curricula, we can help reduce unemployment while strengthening the economic case for social connectedness.

Intensify our focus on care workers to empower women and girls. Child care is a rapidly growing sector of the regional economy with great potential to reduce unemployment by formalizing work traditionally unpaid work done by women and girls. By growing our focus on care workers, we can strengthen a vulnerable sector, empower women economically, and expand access to child care and support services.