



WE CAN'T KEEP MEETING LIKE THIS: DEVELOPING THE CAPACITY FOR CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

BY MILLE BOJER

About a year ago, I participated in a climate change event in Johannesburg, South Africa. In the room were one of the lead negotiators for the South African government on climate change, key activists, a representative from a major energy company, a few scientists, and about 40 others. The facilitator opened the event by reminding the group of Albert Einstein's famous statement, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it." The session then continued with a series of PowerPoint presentations from the different constituencies, with no time for questions or dialogue. Several of the presentations were excellent, but my overriding feeling as I listened to speaker after speaker was "these people don't speak each other's language."

At the end of the session, I commented with some emotion that "we can't solve this problem with the same level of *communication* that created it." By that I meant not only the conference setup. I meant the scientific language, the graphs, the acronyms, the detached analysis, the corporate image-orientation, as well as the dismissive activist style and the very localized and disconnected community perspective. I felt that what I had witnessed during

the session was not the solution, but rather the climate change problem *coming into being*. I left feeling discouraged about our ability to address this monumental challenge.

Why We Must Change

From climate change to AIDS, from culture clashes to poverty, we are faced with complex, global problems. These problems have many causes and many manifestations, and multiple different players have different kinds of influence over them. Cause and effect are distant in time and space and not easily discernible. The causes themselves have many causes of their own and are often interlinked and reinforce each other: *Poverty causes AIDS, AIDS causes poverty, and both poverty and AIDS are causes of the rise in the number of vulnerable children*. Because of this complexity, solutions directed at one part of the system, without a view of the whole, can compound problems in another part: *The prospect of climate change increases use of biofuels which leads to food shortages which lead to increased deforestation which in turn compounds carbon emissions and increases climate change*.

This is the reality of the messes we are coping with in the globalized world of the 21st century. There is no one button or leverage point that we can press to make these problems go away. They require us to work out creative and systemic solutions by not only communicating but also learning and collaborating across sectors, levels, and cultures. We just can't get out of these situations separately.

For the past couple of years, I have had the privilege to work intensively on a cross-sector collaboration project called LINC (Leadership and Innovation Network for Collaboration in the Chil-

dren's Sector), which addresses the difficult situation currently faced by South Africa's children. Primarily as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and compounded by other factors, over one million orphans under the age of 18 currently live in the country. Many more children subsist in difficult circumstances. This unprecedented, heart-breaking situation is straining people, communities, and institutions. The LINC project brings together senior officials from four government departments, CEOs of NGOs and faith-based organizations, leaders of major business foundations and other business representatives, as well as community members, academics, and international donors. These people participate in a series of "Innovation Labs," combined with leadership coaching, project coaching, and networking support in order to develop collaborative leadership and innovative, systemic responses to the crisis.

Through this work and many other recent experiences, I have been paying attention to what I can learn about cross-sector collaboration aimed at addressing complex problems and creating systemic solutions. What are the qualities of the types of solutions we need? What mindsets and capacities do we need in order to be effective? How do we overcome the blockages we face? What processes and resources can support this work? My intention with this article is to share some of these ideas to contribute to strengthening a wider dialogue and practice, and to build our capacity to cope in these times.

Systemic Solutions

There are many different understandings of what it means to think or act "systemically." For years, I used the word "systemic" because it sounded right,

TEAM TIP

Discuss the following statement as it applied to your organizational context: "We can't solve this problem with the same level of communication that created it." How might you change the ways in which you communicate in order to tackle problems in a profoundly new way?

without having a clear picture in my mind of what it meant. I knew that it had to do with seeing connections and relationships, addressing root causes, and shifting our way of thinking. I didn't really know how to recognize a "systemic solution" when I saw one.

As my colleagues and I in South Africa started to work on high-stakes projects with multistakeholder groups, challenging them to come up with "systemic solutions," we had to get specific about what that meant. On that journey, we encountered Elisabeth Dostal, co-author of *Biomatrix: A Systems Approach to Organisational and Societal Change* (African Sun Press, 2003), whose life has been about applying systems thinking to complex social problems like poverty and unemployment. As we engaged with Elisabeth and with each other around the deeper meaning of our work, we started to see the following:

Systemic Solutions Shift Logic. They change some of the underlying thinking that is producing the problem situation, thus going to the source of the problem. As a result, systemic solutions aim at problem-*dissolving*, as opposed to problem-*solving* (which tries to "fix" a problem within a current logic). This is, I suppose, what Einstein was also trying to communicate: that the logic of the solution is not the same as the logic of the problem.

Systemic Solutions Work on Multiple Dimensions and Levels. Because complex problems are produced by many causes, systemic solutions have to work on multiple dimensions (for example, technological, economic, and cultural) and levels (for example, global, societal, organizational, individual, and internal). These approaches embrace paradoxes and look for *both/and* instead of *either/or*. As an example, it is futile to discuss whether AIDS is a health problem or a poverty problem; it is both and requires solutions working on both these dimensions (and many others).

Systemic Solutions Harness Synergies. One of the core ideas of systems thinking is that "the whole is more than the sum of the parts." Systems display *emergent* properties that are unpredictable

outcomes of the interplay between their parts, the relationships between their parts, their context, and what could be called their identity. Emergent properties can be either *synergistic* (more than the sum of the parts, with the parts reinforcing each other positively) or *dissynergistic* (less than the sum of the parts, with the parts undermining each other, leading to a dysfunctional whole). Ideally, a systemic solution shifts some of the "vicious" cycles among causal factors to "virtuous" cycles.

Systemic Solutions Are Iterative.

Because cause and effect are so complex in these big messy problem situations, we can't predict all the outcomes of an intervention with certainty (Russell Ackoff coined the term "mess" as it relates to major complex societal problems). This means that we can't completely separate planning from implementation. Rather, there has to be a constant communication and iteration between our *conceptual reality* and *physical reality*. We need to work on re-perceiving and rethinking the situation at the level of the whole (shifting conceptual reality), and then act on this basis in physical reality at the local level. Then we need to attentively observe what is happening, or emerging, in the physical reality and consider whether it has implications for changing our thinking.

Talking Across Sectors

To act more on the level of "whole" problems and "whole" systems, we must get together with people who are based in a different part of that whole. We need to get better at talking to each other across sectors and at working in partnership where necessary. How we do so effectively is a vast topic. For the purposes of this article, I've chosen to focus on four important principles that stand out in reflecting on our recent practice in South Africa:

- Becoming self-aware as sectors,
- Understanding complementarities,
- Iterating within microcosms, and
- Seeing the system in the room.

Becoming Self-Aware as Sectors. One of the biggest reasons cross-sector collaboration is difficult is because sectors

have different logics, values, priorities, and comfort zones, in short, different cultures. People seldom invest in understanding these different identities, even though it is an integral part of cross-sector partnership efforts. They fail to give attention to the need for the cross-sector system to self-reflect and create a healthy foundation for its work together.

My favorite university course was an interdisciplinary one on international development. For a year, I worked in a team composed of a biologist, a geographer, an engineer, a humanities student, and myself—a political science student. Our joint task was to study development and to write a paper about shrimp-farming in Bangladesh. The real genius of the course was that *half the assignment*—half the time, half the paper, and half of our shared mark in the end—was based on our ability to become aware of the differences in logic across our disciplines and to create a *cross-disciplinary, shared scientific methodology* as a team. Though I didn't have the language for it at the time, I think we were creating a systemic way of looking at the problem and its solutions because we had to find a place for each of our disciplines, and in doing so, we had to look at the issue from the multiple dimensions represented by our disciplines.

Until I participated in this course, I never realized how disciplines are like cultures. Our team started out by trying to describe the assumptions and norms of each of our disciplines, which most of us had never thought about. We drew on cross-cultural literature in designing our group process and philosophy of science. The course offered us a unique opportunity to self-reflect on our differences as a team, while still having a clear collective goal of something we all had a stake in producing. How often are we given a chance to give equal attention to our collective process and culture as to our product?

As with disciplines, professions and sectors are also like cultures. But while a lot of attention goes into cross-cultural education, little seems to go into interdisciplinary or cross-sectoral understanding. As part of our education, we generally don't learn how to

become aware of the assumptions of our disciplines and how they differ from those of other fields.

At the first “Innovation Lab” of the LINC project, we had nearly 50 leaders from across sectors in the room. One of the tasks on the opening day was for them to spend time with people from their own sector in a dialogue around the things that they were proud of and the things that they were sorry about in relation to their sector’s response to the situation of the country’s children. Each sector presented back to the larger group while the others listened and reflected.

This session proved to be one of the most powerful moments of the event. Why? Because participants benefited from time for self-reflection to acknowledge the differences between the sectors and to notice the varied ways the sectors tackled the task and shared their stories. Also, the process disarmed some of the negative dynamics across sectors, because each sector had a chance to name for itself its own weaknesses and challenges.

Understanding Complementarities. Surfacing the differences across sectoral cultures is only a first step. The path to creating synergy lies in understanding that there are *complementarities* across these differences, seeing what these complementarities are, and then finding ways of harnessing them.

One of the major challenges in developing true cross-sector collaboration is that the sectors have perceptions and judgments of each other. At the risk of being simplistic, I would even dare to venture that sometimes people in a sector just want the others to “go away.” Government and corporations at times want civil society to go away so they can get on with their jobs. NGOs want corporations and government to go away, and corporations want NGOs and government to go away. Or, they wish that the other sectors could be more like themselves, think like they do, and operate from the same logic.

I experienced a powerful moment of shifting such perceptions and discovering complementarity in the LINC project. In the first phase of the initiative, we interviewed 40 stakeholders,

and we were struck that many of them were struggling with the same burning question: *Given that millions of children in South Africa are in need of care, should we be going for a “Woolworths” solution or a “Checkers” solution?* In South Africa, Woolworths is a high-end supermarket that provides expensive but healthy, high-quality products to a small portion of the population, while Checkers is a low-end supermarket that provides cheap products to the masses. So the question was: *Do we provide a basic package of services to the largest number of children possible, or do we focus on a smaller number of children that we can give personal attention to and provide with everything they need?* One of the interviewees told us, “I always think of the five kids we fed today, I don’t think about the 5,000 we couldn’t feed. Otherwise I wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

At the time of doing and analyzing the interviews, I didn’t even notice that this question of quantity versus quality, which seemed valid, was coming only from the NGOs and business stakeholders. When I raised it at the workshop with an academic participant who works with government, she became frustrated and said she was tired of hearing this question because “It’s a false choice. It’s a basic rights issue.” From her perspective, you can’t take a few kids, give them everything, and provide nothing to the rest. It’s simply unjust.

In that moment, I realized that the problem the South African government faces every day is in some ways completely different from the problem the NGOs deal with. The government struggles with how to provide for millions of children equally, to deliver on their rights, and to deliver on justice. They don’t have the luxury to choose not to think of the 5,000, or 50,000, that weren’t fed that day. The NGOs and community workers, on the other hand, look into the eyes of specific children, children who need much more than the level of care and support that is possible if you spread your resources evenly and thinly.

In his book, *Shaping Globalization: Civil Society, Cultural Power and Three-folding* (New Society Publishers, 2003), Nicanor Perlas posits that *in a healthy society,*

The three key institutions [government, business, and civil society] are aware that they have consciously entered into a social process that mobilizes the unique perspectives, strengths, resources, and capacities of the cultural, political, and economic realms of society. The three key institutions . . . place their respective talents towards the pursuit of comprehensive sustainable development, balancing economic, political, and cultural, social, ecological, human, and spiritual imperatives of development.” (p. 13)

Each of these powerful institutions has the potential to “represent,” in its own way, the realm of society from which each is active—civil society represents culture; government represents polity; and business, the economy. . . . business, government, and civil society will naturally emphasize different aspects of society as a whole.” (p.4)

In the Woolworths versus Checkers question, the shift happens when government and NGOs start to see that they each represent different imperatives. Part of the reason government struggles with bureaucracy is because they have to cope with the reality of millions of children every day. Part of the reason NGOs seem sentimental or struggle to prioritize is because they look into the eyes of the individual child every day.

With that realization, we can start to ask the questions, “What is the value that each of these positions in the system can offer to the collective work of improving *quality and quantity* of care for children? What are the different dimensions and levels that they can bring to the systemic solutions?” Some decisions can only be taken at a distance by the government, which has to prioritize justice, and at the same time, some insights can only be had at the local level. The two *need* each other. The original question dissolves and changes from *either/or* to *both/and*. The logic shifts.

Iterating Within “Microcosms.” We use the term “social complexity” to describe a problem situation in which the players involved have contrasting logics or frames of mind, and therefore

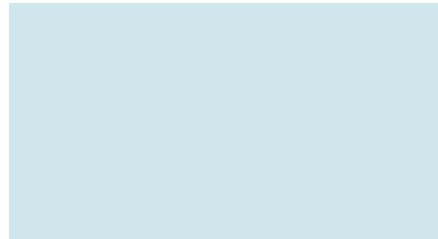
sometimes conflicting perceptions and explanations of what the problem is and how it should be addressed. This is usually the case with the kinds of complex problems that require cross-sector intervention. One of the most eye-opening things I have learned about intervening in social complexity is that all the players do not have to share the same perspectives and imperatives. If you insist that they must, then you may spend a lot of time creating a plan that no one is excited about implementing. Furthermore, by getting a group of people in a room to agree to the lowest common denominator, you lose important details that are crucial to successful implementation.

For systemic solutions, instead of getting everyone to agree on what the problem is and on one frame of mind, we need to think “both/and.” Building on the deeper sense of complementarity described above—respecting that different institutions represent diverse dimensions and levels of society—we can seek out systemic solutions that *make sense* in multiple frames of mind.

A powerful way to create such solutions is to bring diverse stakeholders together to generate and test ideas for intervention. This is what is meant by convening a “microcosm” of the system. The idea of convening a microcosm is that you create a group that together has the power to see the whole situation and to act on or influence it. The primary requirement in forming the microcosm when addressing societal issues is to have balance between government, business, civil society, and/or the other major groupings related to a problem. It is of course impossible to literally get the “whole system” in the room. There will always be voices missing, but it *is* possible to get a group of people together who reflect the major parts of the system.

In the case of the LINC project, it took us over a year just to convene the players, through a process of dialogue interviewing and ongoing advocacy work and consultation. In the end, we had 50 high-level participants representing most of the key groupings from government, civil society (NGOs, faith-based groups, and community-based organizations), business, academics, and

donors. The convening process had to pay attention both to who the individuals were and to the composition of the group as a whole. Still, it was not a complete microcosm in that the children themselves and the grannies who take care of them were not present in the room, though people close to them were.



As the participants started to form cross-sector teams to generate initiatives to work on, they were explicitly encouraged to provide constructive perspective across teams from their place in the system. What can you see from where you stand that the larger group might not?

Seeing the System in the Room. When you bring together a microcosm, you essentially get the “system in the room.” Over time, the *dynamics* of the problem situation manifest in the group, which leads to extremely powerful learning. The problem shifts from being “out there” to being “in here.” Of course, when convening microcosms, we look for different kinds of diversity—not only sectoral diversity, but also gender diversity, cultural diversity, social diversity, and so on. What always results from including these other types is diversity of *power*.

There is nothing radical about creating a situation of diversity of power by inviting some young people or poor people to a conference. It is extremely radical, on the other hand, to create the kind of set-up where the more powerful and the less powerful can participate on an equal footing or to shift the power dynamics as an integral part of the process. In my experience, doing so requires pointing out the power differences in the room, which are reflective of the power differences in the larger society, and not pretending they don’t exist.

In the LINC project, as one of the first activities we introduced a brief power dynamics game that brought the issue to light and set the intention among participants of “changing the rules of the game.” This, along with the dialogue-based design of all the activities, helped to level the playing field and allow community members to participate on a relatively equal footing. The interesting thing is that because we have now introduced power as a legitimate area of work, participants have started to request more direct work on the power and race dynamics in the room.

Myrna Lewis is a psychotherapist and facilitator of group processes using a methodology called “Deep Democracy” (see www.deepdemocracy.com). One of her main beliefs is that a system is healthy when there is “role fluidity” and unhealthy when “roles are stuck.” Roles in this sense are not simply positions, but can also include opinions, emotions, attitudes, and so on. A role is stuck when someone feels they are the only one in a certain situation or with a certain opinion or emotion (“I am doing all the work, and I am so overwhelmed”), or when a certain characteristic is being projected onto someone and disowned by those projecting it (“The government is so inefficient and out of touch”).

Role fluidity can develop in many ways. What struck me in our LINC Innovation Lab was the realization of shared overwhelm. In one group, one of the government representatives shed a tear and said how overwhelmed she was when she thought about the children. Government had been perceived as distant, cold, and out of touch, but with that display of emotion, others realized that government workers are in the same situation that they are. In that moment, roles became more fluid, and some of the kind of trust needed for collaboration was established.

This idea raises a paradox. You need role clarity for the sectors, in terms of understanding the different positions they are in, the different demands on them, and the different imperatives they represent. This transparency is what enables us to harness what each grouping brings to the task.

At the same time, you need role fluidity when it comes to the judgments, the “they are like this, and we are like that” statements, in order to overcome the stuckness of the situation and release true collaboration.

The Journey Ahead

My intention with this article is to stress the importance of systemic solutions to complex problems and of attentive cross-sector collaboration for systemic solutions. I have not tried to outline all the tools, practices, and capacities related to cross-sector partnerships, as I know this has been done well elsewhere (for example, see the Prince of Wales International Business Leaders Forum at www.iblbf.org). Rather, my intention is to contribute to deepening this field, specifically in relation to addressing complex social problems. I have focused on four principles that I think are central to this deepening.

The LINC project is ongoing. The stakeholders periodically meet in Innovation Labs, where they work on seeing and designing together, and outside of

the Labs, where they test their ideas against reality, work in project teams, participate in leadership coaching, and do what they can to contribute in their daily jobs to serving the children. Meanwhile, the search for insights on how to create systemic change continues. ■

Marianne “Mille” Bojer is an experienced facilitator and designer of group dialogue and change processes. She is a co-founder of Reos Partners, an international group of organizations dedicated to supporting and building capacity for innovation in complex social systems. She is also one of the founders of Pioneers of Change (www.pioneersofchange.net), a learning community of young change agents across the world. Mille recently relocated to São Paulo to set up Reos in Brazil.

NEXT STEPS

Although Mille Bojer focuses on the social sector in this article, the principles can apply to any complex systems challenge.

Become Self-aware as Sectors or Functions: Have people spend time with others from their own function area in a dialogue around the things that they have done well and the things that they can improve in relation to their function’s response to the challenge. Each function then presents back to the larger group while the others listen and reflect.

Understand Complementarities: Ask the questions, “What is the value that each of these positions in the system can offer to the collective work? What are the different dimensions and levels that they can bring to the systemic solutions?”

Iterate Within Microcosms: Seek out systemic solutions that make sense in multiple frames of mind. Bring diverse stakeholders together to generate and test ideas for intervention.

See the System in the Room. When convening microcosms, look for different kinds of diversity—not only sectoral diversity, but also gender diversity, cultural diversity, social diversity, and so on. What always results from including these other types is diversity of power. Over time, the dynamics of the problem situation manifest in the group, which leads to extremely powerful learning.