Strengthening Leadership Development in Southern Africa
Social Connectedness and the Bridging Leadership Approach

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report is focused on exploring the relationship between social connectedness and leadership development. In particular, the research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the linkages between the two tenets of Synergos Institute South Africa's work – the Bridging Leadership approach and social connectedness, as well as strengthening the Social Connectedness programme. The literature review found that the three dominant leadership approaches utilized in the South African context is transformational leadership, transactional leadership, as well as servant leadership. Furthermore, the literature review highlighted the impact of leadership style on organizational performance and the leaders themselves. Alongside this, based on the literature a theoretical argument of the dialectical relationship between social connectedness and the Bridging Leadership approach is made. Key findings from the research interviews include that social connectedness made leaders more effective, as well as influenced the respondents' leadership values. In particular, the respondents cited its impact at the level of inner work, their relationship with others, as well as their professional work. Furthermore, respondents cited social connectedness as significantly increasing their self-awareness, listening skills, collaborative skills within decision-making processes, resilience, confidence, as well as other leadership competencies which contributed towards creating a Bridging Leader. However, the data highlighted that there was an inadequate utilisation of the Bridging Leadership approach as a framework that reinforces social connectedness.

The report outlines key recommendations on deepening the impact of the Synergos Social Connectedness and Bridging Leadership programmes in South Africa, as well as offers key recommendations for the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness. It is recommended that the Right to Belong framework be used as a performance indicator of social connectedness best practices, and that learning strategies of social connectedness and Bridging Leadership be intentionally integrated in order to establish reciprocal learning. Furthermore, that leadership development practice could be strengthened through community mapping, leadership circles, leadership exchanges, and work in integrating best practices and policy recommendations within organizations such as the National Youth Development Agency. Alongside this, an increased focus on training and partnerships with youth, as well as increased grassroots mobilisation and campaigning is recommended.

INTRODUCTION

This report will focus primarily on the work done by the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, and the Synergos Institute South Africa. The report aims to explore the link between social connectedness, the leadership models utilized in South Africa, and the Bridging Leadership approach. The report will begin by providing a background into the work done by Synergos in utilising social connectedness to build resilience and belonging in vulnerable youth and children in Southern Africa, and underscore the rationale of the study. The report will then highlight key concepts and frameworks including social connectedness, the Bridging Leadership approach, as well as contextualizing the role and impact of leadership development within organizational behaviour and management. This report will also provide an exploration of the dominant leadership styles and models which are utilized within South Africa, particularly underscoring the extent to which these styles integrate social connectedness. The report will provide an overview of the Social Connectedness Programme, then highlight key findings from the research interviews, and utilize this data to provide policy, programme, partner, and research recommendations.

Rationale of Study

Twenty-six years after the end of Apartheid, South Africa still continues to grapple with persistent inequality and a widening socio-economic gap. This spatial and racialized inequality continues to have significant impacts on the rates of child poverty in the country. In 2020, 62.1% of children in South Africa live in multidimensional poverty, with 68.3% of these being black African children. Furthermore, 88.4% of children living in rural areas are affected by multidimensional poverty, as compared to 41.3% of those living in urban areas – reflecting the legacy

of spatial inequality left from Apartheid.[1] Furthermore, South Africa also has a high number of individuals living with HIV, which has increased the prevalence of child-headed households, and orphans. Poverty, which can be understood as the lack of income to meet basic needs, also contains multiple deprivations and experiences beyond solely material dimensions. These multiple deprivations also include the experience of social isolation, shame and disempowerment.[2]

Within this context, Synergos Institute South Africa works alongside the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness and Kim Samuel to understand and mitigate the impacts of multidimensional poverty for youth and children in Southern Africa. The work done in the Social Connectedness Programme, which will be discussed later, focuses on interventions which can assist in reducing social isolation within this vulnerable group, as well as for their caregivers. Understanding chronic social isolation as a facet of multidimensional poverty is pertinent in mitigating povertyy and ensuring child and youth development and wellbeing.

Another focal area for Synergos, within this context is a focus on building more effective and resilient leaders and caregivers within the development sector. Synergos recognizes that increasing the capacities of caregivers and leaders better equips individuals and communities to combat poverty and support the developmental needs of vulnerable children and youth. Synergos has done this in two ways. Through the Leadership and Innovation Network for Collaboration in the Children's Sector (LINC) Fellowship, Synergos has worked on improving responses for vulnerable children in the social service sector by increasing leaders' capacities.

[1] Statistics South Africa, "More than 60% of South African children are poor," July 07, 2020, http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=13438.
[2] Synergos Institute South Africa, "Social Connectedness Knowledge Emergence report," 2014.

Furthermore, Synergos has also supported leaders in Learning Journeys, which allow participants to reflect and experience social services from the perspective of the target community or populations – which allow the leaders to develop a deepened understanding of their own role and agency in these systems.[3]

What has also become evident in this space, is the potential for social connectedness to increase the capacities and support of the leaders in this sector. There has been a lack of adequate focus into how leaders in this sector struggle as a result of an increasing demand for services coupled with high levels of stress. There have also been few opportunities for leaders to take a break which then often results in leaders becoming "so emotionally and physically depleted that they are unable to function, even at the most basic level."[4] This type of leadership burnout is influenced by the leadership style practiced, occupational position, leader personality, and experiences.[5] Furthermore, leader burnout can also lead to dysfunctional workplace dynamics, and to limited solution and creative thinking.[6] Social connectedness as an approach can be cited as having the potential to reduce this type of burnout, and increase the resilience and effectiveness of leaders at both an individual and relational level, as well as within the work that the leaders do.

Through this report, drawing heavily from the work done by Synergos Institute South Africa and the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, and in particular from the Social Connectedness Programme, the report will draw together emerging

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[3] Synergos Institute South Africa, "Social Connectedness Knowledge Emergence report." 2014.

[4] Steve Bagi, "When leaders burn out: The causes, costs and prevention of burnout among leaders," *Advances in Educational Administration* 20 (2013):261-289.

[5] Steve Bagi, "When leaders burn out: The causes, costs and prevention of burnout among leaders," *Advances in Educational Administration* 20 (2013):261-289.

[6] Patrick Hyland, 2017, "Leadership, stress and the importance of self care", *Mercer,* October 13, 2017. https://www.mercer.com/our-thinking/career/voice-on-talent/leadership-stress-and-the-importance-of-self-care.html.

knowledge in how social connectedness can ultimately create better leaders, and how the relationship between social connectedness and the Bridging Leadership approach can be strengthened.

KEY CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORKS

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness can be defined as the quantity and quality of meaningful relationships in an individual's life, which allow the individual to develop feelings of purpose and *belonging*.[7] The two levels of social connectedness which exist include social connectedness at an individual level, in which there are meaningful relationships with other people, as well as at a structural level, in which there are meaningful relationships with structures of support within society. These relationships enable an individual to receive emotional support, experience a sense of *belonging*, and develop personal growth and resilience.

At the core of understanding social connectedness is the interrelated concepts of social isolation, loneliness and a sense of *belonging*. According to Kim Samuel, isolation can be described as "the feeling of sitting alone at the bottom of a well, where no one sees your suffering or pain."[8] Therefore social isolation, as a direct loss of connection with others represents a break in the state of *belonging* experienced by an individual. James Lubben underscores the dangers of social isolation, stating that it is a "potent killer"[9] which both researchers and policymakers alike should pay attention to. Furthermore, he argues that socially connected

[7] Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness. "Fellowship Orientation – Definitions." May 2020.
[8] Kim Samuel, "Kim Samuel's Symposium Opening Remarks," October 01, 2014, https://www.socialconnectedness.org/kim-samuels-symposium-opening-remarks/.
[9] James Lubben, "Addressing Social Isolation as a Potent Killer!" *Public Policy & Aging Report*, Volume 27, no. 4 (2017): 136–138.

individuals are less likely to make poor health decisions, and have stronger immune systems. Similar to this, Julianne Holt-Lunstad argues that the severity and prevalence of loneliness is a major issue of public health, leading to risks such as low health outcomes, obesity, and premature mortality.[10]

Impact of Social Connectedness on the Individual

Social connectedness has significant impacts on the health as well as the psycho-social wellbeing of individuals. Socially connected individuals are more likely to have stronger social identification and positive self-esteem. Furthermore, according to a study done by Stavrova & Maike, higher levels of meaning in life were related to increased levels of social connectedness in individuals, emphasising a bi-directional relationship.[11] Individuals who provide social support and connectedness to others also experience higher feelings of self-esteem. Alongside this, socio-economic factors such as education, age, gender, race, and class all impact an individuals' social connectedness.[12]

An individuals' degree of social connectedness also influences directly their feeling and sense of *belonging*. According to Kim Samuel, *belonging* refers to "a state of wholeness: the experience of being at home in the social, environmental, organizational and cultural context of one's life."[13] A sense of *belonging* also links to an individual's feelings around a shared sense of purpose and vision, as well as shared ownership. The notion of *belonging* can be understood in terms of four connections namely: purpose, power, place, and people. *Belonging* as *purpose*

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[10] Robert Hudson, "Lack of Social Connectedness and Its Consequences," *Public Policy & Aging Report*, Volume 27, no. 4 (2017): 121–123.

[11] Stavrova & Maike, "Social connectedness as a source and consequence of meaning in life" *Journal of Positive Psychology*, Issue 5 no. 11 (2016).

[12] Peggy Thoits, "Perceived social support and the voluntary, mixed, or pressured use of mental health services" *Society and Mental Health*, Issue 1, no. 1 (2011):4-19.

[13] Kim Samuel, "Recap and reflections of the 2019 global symposium," December 19, 2019. https://www.socialconnectedness.org/recap-and-reflections-on-the-2019-global-symposium/.

refers to the extent to which an individual feels connected to a perspective and context for 'why they are where they are', and what matters most. *Belonging* as *power*, refers to the extent to which an individual is able to exercise their own agency in society, in order to shape their lives and the lives of those around them. This form of *belonging* often manifests in an individual having the ability to participate in political processes or share ideas. *Belonging* as *place* refers to the rootedness an individual experiences in a physical space or ecosystem. This type of *belonging* is fostered when an individual has a connection to a specific place they can call 'home', and be themselves in. Lastly, belonging as *people* refers to the community and relationships an individual has that are rooted in care and compassion.

Leadership

The concept of Leadership can be broadly understood, as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal."[14] This definition takes into account the conceptualizations of leadership as a process and interaction which takes place between the follower and their leader. It also views leadership "as the accomplishment of a group rather than an individual."[15] Furthermore, this definition implies that "a leader affects and is affected by followers. It emphasizes that leadership is not a linear, one-way event, but rather an interactive event."[16] Other ways of defining and theorizing leadership include a situational approach, skills-based approach, behavioural approach, as well as traits-based approach.

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[14]Peter G. Northouse*, Leadership Theory and Practice*. (Sage Publication, 2016) p.6.
[15] MS Shokane, "Description of Leadership in South Africa: Organizational context perspective," *South African Journal of Human Resource Management* 2 no.3 (2004):1-6.
[16] Peter G. Northouse*, Leadership Theory and Practice*. (Sage Publication, 2016) p.6.

The concept of leadership, having duplicitous meanings and contested interpretations, remains a fundamental and central aspect within organizational management, impacting both performance and success. Eckert and Rweyoongoza, in a white paper on Leadership in Africa, argued that "a major attribute that makes an organization stand out is the quality of leadership, which can drive up both personal and corporate performance."[17] Goleman et. al argue that "leaders motivate and help their employees to be competitive by using effective leadership styles."[18] Furthermore, leaders "determine values, culture, change tolerance and employee motivation… [and] shape institutional strategies including their execution and effectiveness."[19]

Leadership Models in South Africa

Another approach to understanding leadership is by applying and practicing leadership models within policy and practice of an organization. This however, still presents various challenges in so far as the extent to which the real organizational practice adequately reflects this model. Furthermore, a leadership model utilized by an organization is largely dependent on the organizational, social, and economic context present - with ideas about leadership itself connected to educational background, language, religion, as well as culture. This is echoed by Shokane who argues how in the South African context, leadership is heavily based on cultural clusters, and that a perceived leadership style is heavily dependent on the extent of cultural integration. Thus, this section will place specific focus on the dominant

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[17] Eckert & Rweyongoza, "Leadership in Africa, A focus on strengths" *Center for Creative Leadership,* December 2015*.* http://cclinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/leadershipdevelopmentafrica.pdf.
[18] Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis & Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002).
[19] Michael Germano, "Leadership style and Organizational impact" *Library Worklife*, June, 2010, https://ala-apa.org/newsletter/2010/06/08/spotlight/#:~:text=Germano%2C%20J.D.%2C%20M.A.%2C%20M.S.,including%20their%20execution%20and%20effectiveness.

leadership models utilized within a South African context. These include transformational leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership, as well as non-leadership or laissez-faire leadership style. Another one for consideration is the spiritual leadership style which, though practiced within a South African context, is less common than the former models.

Shokane et al argues that the most dominant leadership styles evident in South Africa include transformational leadership, as well as transactional leadership – with a clear "shift away from conventional transactional leadership to a combination of transactional and transformational leadership."[20] In transformational leadership, leaders are able to utilize strong beliefs and values to create shared purpose within the organization, as well as encourage employees to take ownership of the long-term vision of the organization. Transactional leadership is a rewards-orientated leadership style whereby performance of employees is controlled through rewards and punishments, and is in line with the behavioural approach to leadership.[21]

Another leadership model utilized in South African organizations, albeit significantly less common is laissez-faire or non-leadership style. In laissez-faire leadership, there is a lack of or inadequate decisive decision-making, employees are not motivated, and there is an absence of elements which exist within both transformational and transactional leadership.

Variations of these dominant three leadership styles also occur within South African organizations, with a particular dominance and prevalence of servant leadership, spiritual leadership, as well as authentic leadership. Within authentic leadership, the authenticity, transparency and honesty of the leader is emphasized,

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[20] MS Shokane, "Description of Leadership in South Africa: Organizational context perspective," South African Journal of Human Resource Management 2 no.3 (2004):1-6.
[21] Peter G. Northouse, Leadership Theory and Practice. (Sage Publication, 2016) p.161-194.

and becomes the dominant culture of the organization. These qualities also characterize the relationship between the leader and their followers. With servant leadership, the leader takes on the qualities or role of serving, placing particular focus on the needs, wellbeing, and development of the followers. With spiritual leadership, the leaders are often guiders and beacons to their followers and their followers realize their own purpose, and impact. Spiritual leaders often draw their consciousness and self-awareness from religious or spiritual traditions, and use them to influence and develop the leadership of their followers.[22]

Bridging Leadership Approach

Peggy Dulany, Founder of Synergos Institute, has argued that there is insufficient research and literature within leadership, on the styles of leadership which could potentially bridge divides.[23] She suggested that as the world became more and more complex, our response to leadership needed to adapt in order to respond to this. This type of leadership response rested on an idea of a "bridging individual" who would be able to mitigate social issues by bridging the gaps between often diverging interests and organizations. This 'bridging individual' would have the ability to channel various views, interests, and ideas from different sectors within society, towards a common purpose and goal. The Synergos Bridging Leadership approach was then launched in 1999, and focused on research into Bridging Leadership, the creation of a curriculum, the training of leaders in the skills of Bridging Leadership, as well as the promotion of Bridging Leadership as both a methodology and concept. Research developed through the programme found that

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[22] Raluca-Elena Hurduzeu, "impact of leadership on organizational performance," Practical Application of Science volume 3, no.1 (2015): 1-6.

[23] Peggy Dulany, "Toward a New Paradigm for Civil Society Leadership: The Art of Bridging Gaps," *Synergos Institute* (New York, 1997).

solving complex societal issues required a diverse range of partners; and developing and building partners is an often difficult process.[24]

Bridging Leadership can be defined as a leadership style which "focuses on promoting multi stakeholder processes to address complex social, institutional, and environmental challenges."[25] Bridging Leadership focuses on collaborative efforts in convening various stakeholders to take action around a specific social outcomes, collective response or vision[26], by bridging different opinions and perspectives. The Bridging Leadership approach also recognises that many social challenges are beyond the capacity of single individuals, or even single sectors to solve – and thus require collaboration from various stakeholders across different sectors[27].

Becoming a 'bridging leader' requires inner work such as building integrity, capabilities, and knowledge, which illicit confidence and trust as well as deepened self-awareness.[28] Thus, the approach rests on a framework of trust in oneself, consisting of inner work, alongside trust in others which consists of collaboration, skills development, and strategies to help work together. The inner work and skills development in Bridging Leadership underscores a shift within leadership. This shift takes place within understanding a leader as holding all the power, the commander, expert, sole owner of a problem, and solutions – to the idea of a leader as a power-sharer, facilitator, mobiliser of expertise, and co-owner of a problem and solutions. The fundamental skills and building blocks of Bridging Leadership include being empathetic and a deep listener, possessing collaborative skills as well as low ego needs. Furthermore, the entire process of Bridging Leadership rests heavily on

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[24] Ernesto D. Garilao, *Bridging Leadership at Synergos: Experience and Learnings*, April, (2007):1-2.
[25] Synergos Institute, *Bridging Leadership An Overview,* p. 2, https://syngs.info/files/bridging-leadership-overview.pdf.
[26] Ibid., p.3.
[27] Ibid., p. 2-3.
[28] Garilao, Bridging Leadership at Synergos, 1-2.

building trust – which is a determinant factor on whether the Bridging Leadership process will be successful or not.[29] Another important building block within the process of Bridging Leadership is systems thinking. Systems thinking is required for a leader to grasp how certain problems and issues exist within systems and social structures, meaning that in order to solve the issue an understanding of the complete system is required.

The process of Bridging Leadership consists of 3 main processes: ownership; co-ownership and co-creation. The first step of ownership entails a leader's personal response to a social issue, with a vision of what they want to see, as well as a mission to create the change. The leader in this context becomes an agent of social change in response to the social issue, and utilizes systems thinking in order to understand the issue. In the next step, the leader brings in the various stakeholders into dialogue and collaboration, whereby this vision is actualized through collaborative work across sectors. Thus, the various stakeholders take collective ownership of the issue, and collaborate to solve it. The last step is co-creation. In this step, the various stakeholders create changes within institutional arrangements in order to solve the issue, and allow for more responsive mechanisms as well as citizen empowerment to be put into place. Thus, the various stakeholders participate in a process of co-creating viable solutions to lead to societal equity.

Impact of Leadership Models

Leadership styles that promote strong interpersonal relationships have led to increased positive impacts on the wellbeing of employees. Increased social connectedness directly contributes to heightened efficiency and overall wellbeing of

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[29] Synergos Institute, Bridging Leadership Open Workshops, May 07, (2019):5-61, https://www.syngs.info/files/synergos-2019-bridging-leadership-open-workshop-in-ny-presentations.pdf.

both employees as well as the leaders themselves. As a whole, these leaders are then able to lead better and are less susceptible to isolation and burnout as a result of their role. In particular, this leadership style has significant impacts on an employee's mental, physical, emotional, as well as spiritual wellbeing. A study by Dr. Rose Mathafena provides evidence of this; she studied the impact of line managers' leadership styles on employees. Mathafena argues that certain leadership behaviours lead to increased effectiveness. In particular, Mathafena finds that the leadership styles which increase employee wellbeing include transformational leadership, as well as servant, empowering, authentic, and ethical leadership.

Mathafena argues that employees are better able to positively participate, contribute and find purpose within an organization when they feel psychologically safe. This form of safety is usually found within organizations that employ transformational leadership styles. Furthermore, Mathafena argues that positive working cultures allow employees to feel empowered and develop decision-making competencies. This in turn enables more creative employees which then drives up organizational efficacy. Alongside this, organizational cultures which utilize ethical leadership allow for better guidance and integrity within the organization. Lastly, competencies such as serving and empowering employees are seen within servant leadership.[30]

Not only does social connectedness have a significant impact on reducing isolation and developing individuals but an argument can also be made of the efficacy of social connectedness in creating better leaders through the development

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[30] Rosa B. Mathafena, "Exploring the influence of line management on an employee's wellbeing," *University of Johannesburg,* (2018):1-16.

of competencies such as strong communication skills, ethics, accountability, and trustworthiness in leaders.

Social Connectedness and the Bridging Leadership Approach

Social connectedness and the Synergos Bridging Leadership approach are deeply intertwined, as the Bridging Leadership approach emphasizes principles of *belonging* as well as inner work in creating a 'bridging individual'. This theoretical interconnectedness of the principles takes place at both an individual and intrapersonal level. Social connectedness also helps bridging leaders better understand and relate to the core pillars of Ownership, Co-ownership and Co-creation.

The first convergence that can be demonstrated between social connectedness and the Bridging Leadership approach takes place at an individual level. The process of becoming a bridging leader requires inner work and personal reflection. This includes building skills around self-awareness and integrity which are vital to becoming a bridging individual who is able to work collaboratively and whom others can trust as the bridging leader. Similarly, individuals who are socially connected are more self-aware and are able to build competencies, which ultimately uphold and develop the traits of the 'bridging individual'. In particular, the fundamental skills built within individuals who are socially connected, as well as also emphasized within 'bridging individuals include deep listening, trust, confidence, and empathy.

Alongside this, the underlying connections of *belonging*, *power*, *people*, *place*, and *purpose*, find alignment with the 3 main processes of Bridging Leadership – ownership, co-ownership, and co-creation. In particular, the Bridging Leadership

process of ownership is directly linked to connection to people, place, and purpose. This means that individuals who have a better relationship and connection with their community, rooted in mutual care and interest (*people*); have a strong sense of preservation and commitment towards a specific place (*place*); and find meaning, perspective and a vision for where they are as a result of their social connectedness (*purpose*), are able to more effectively embody the first step of ownership within the Bridging Leadership Process.

The second process of Bridging Leadership – co-ownership – can also be directly linked to and rests on an individuals' connection to *people*, *place* and *purpose*. In the process of co-ownership, a bridging individual is required to actualize their vision through collaborative work, and encourage stakeholders to take collective ownership of the process. This rests on the leader's sense of *purpose*, which allows them to echo a clear vision and mission for the stakeholders, and on their connection to *place* and *people*, which allows them to create and sustain collaborative relationships within this multi-stakeholder process.

The last process of Bridging Leadership – co-creation – can similarly be linked to connections to *purpose* and *power*. In this step, the stakeholders co-create institutional changes and solutions. These leaders ultimately need to have a strong sense of purpose to meaningfully contribute long-term solutions rooted in the vision they created (*purpose*), and they need to have the capacity and ability to practice their agency to shape social outcomes (*power*).

Ultimately, the 'bridging leader', which the Bridging Leadership approach develops, is an individual who has a strong sense of social connectedness and belonging. Social connectedness thus can be seen as forming the basis of the

Bridging Leadership approach itself, as well as the point of departure in which to build trust and collective action around solving complex issues.

Social Connectedness Programme

The Synergos Social Connectedness Programme offers a space to "build proof of concept around social connectedness" and the possibilities for poverty alleviation through children and youth programmes, supported by careworkers in communities.[31] Synergos South Africa has broadly placed its focus on developing multi-stakeholder partnerships, leaders as well as networks to collaborate in addressing some of the main causes of inequity and poverty. The Programme engages organizational leaders, careworkers, community leaders, youth, and children within the Southern Africa region. The Social Connectedness Programme is rooted in Africa's broader traditions of 'harambee' (pulling together) and Ubuntu (I am because you are), which find expression within broad-based community development and empowerment.

In mitigating social isolation within vulnerable youth and children in Southern Africa, the Social Connectedness programme works in 5 key areas:

- Research: Spearheading research around understanding the contributing factors of isolation within vulnerable youth and children.

- Awareness: Raising awareness of isolation to practitioners and leaders, particularly within the children's sector.

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[31] Synergos Institute South Africa, *Report: Social Connectedness Context & Strategy South African & SADC Region,* https://www.syngs.info/files/deepening-social-connectedness-in-southern-africa-2013-2017.pdf

- Practice: Practicing social connectedness by integrating it into educational tools as well as training modules - directed at community members, government, and non-governmental practitioners.

- Programs: Developing and supporting programs which address isolation.

- Policy: Influencing and informing public policy. The Programme focuses on building evidence on methods and practices in fostering resilience and social connectedness, as well as tackling isolation, particularly in youth, children, and care workers. The Programme integrates tools and knowledge into the programmes and practices of partner organizations to ensure growth and sustainability. The Programme engages in partnerships and networks to share knowledge and collaborate in more deeply understanding the importance of meaningful connections to mitigate isolation.

The Social Connectedness Programme works around a theory of action and theory of social change. The social connectedness theory of change is founded on the belief that if vulnerable youth and children have meaningful connections, their performance, access to resources, as well as resilience increases and will thus provide them with the ability to overcome both isolation and poverty. The theory of action fosters social connectedness through action, in particular by understanding the impacts of isolation on vulnerable youth and children; identifying resources which are pre-existing, and which assist in preventing isolation; influencing both public policy and programmes; as well as promoting social connectedness practices.

The Social Connectedness Programme also rests on two frameworks: Child and Youth protection, and Community Systems Strengthening. These frameworks focus on linking "cash, care and protection for children in Southern Africa," and building communities through dialogue, and mobilization to improve community

conditions.[32] The Programme focuses on stakeholders, parents, caseworkers', community leaders, and extends to include social workers, clinics, police, and schools. The Programme asserts social connectedness as an accelerator of poverty alleviation, in particular to mitigate the impacts of intergenerational poverty. The Programme does this through the promotion of practices that sustain and build meaningful connections which include indigenous knowledge systems, and strengthening local community resources for care. The Programme ultimately works in utilizing social connectedness and integrating it into policies, training workshops, and programmes to address the multidimensional impacts of poverty such as chronic isolation, thereby strengthening community systems, as well as empowering and developing leaders within the childcare sector.

Some of the interventions and achievements of the Social Connectedness Programme to date include various policies influenced, papers published, and bodies of knowledge produced. The Social Connectedness Programme contributed to bodies of knowledge around social connectedness and isolation, such as the tools and resources developed for the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) and the Networking HIV & AIDS Community of Southern Africa (NACOSA) - two of the largest networks for psychosocial support in Southern Africa. Alongside this, the theories and sub-programs of the Social Connectedness Programme have contributed to academic papers published by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) on multidimensional poverty, as well as the Centre for the Study of Resilience on resilience, agency, and collective resourcefulness. Alongside this, the Social Connectedness Programme has also developed

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[32] Synergos Institute South Africa, *Report: Social Connectedness Context & Strategy South African & SADC Region,* https://www.syngs.info/files/deepening-social-connectedness-in-southern-africa-2013-2017'.pdf.

community dialogues facilitated by caseworkers, as well as circles of care and support, which consists of positive dialogues with caregivers and parents. Further initiatives include child and youth care forums whereby community leaders and stakeholders develop social connectedness capacities within decision-making. Lastly, the Social Connectedness Programme also influenced the Department of Social Development Psychosocial Support framework and guidelines.[33]

EVIDENCE AND KEY FINDINGS

Whilst the argument can be made theoretically on how social connectedness is linked to the Bridging Leadership approach in creating better leaders, this still requires measurable proof of concept through data collection and case studies. Hence interviews were conducted with five leaders and focussed on four main themes: social connectedness, leadership development, Bridging Leadership, and the Social Connectedness Programme.

Research Methodology

The research question examines how social connectedness creates better leaders, and in particular the extent to which it contributes to leaders developing key competencies of the Bridging Leadership approach. A qualitative approach was used to gather data around the experiences of leaders involved in the Social Connectedness Programme. Qualitative methodology was chosen as it provided a deepened understanding from the personal experiences of participants, and valuable in-depth responses. The research utilized a literature review as well as primary data

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[33] Synergos Institute South Africa, *Report: Social Connectedness Context & Strategy South African & SADC Region,* https://www.syngs.info/files/deepening-social-connectedness-in-southern-africa-2013-2017.pdf.

through individual interviews as the main form of data gathering. The research utilized purposive sampling as well as snowball sampling.

Interviews were conducted with five organizational leaders from four different organizations which are involved within the Social Connectedness Programme and that work in the youth and childcare sector. These organizations included the Cape Town Children's Institute, City Year South Africa, Motheo Training Institute Trust, as well as the Wits Inala forum. These organizations all centre around addressing key social issues impacting youth and/or children. All five leaders interviewed formed part of the executive leadership within these organizations, with four out of the five being either the Director or Chairperson of the organization.

The interviews utilised a mix of open-ended and closed questions, and focused on how social connectedness contributes to the leadership development, collective resilience and agency of leaders, and in particular how it contributed to their leadership competencies and them becoming a bridging leader. Further questions were focused around ascertaining whether the concept of social connectedness maintained salience beyond the workshops or training they were initially given by Synergos Institute South Africa through the Social Connectedness Programme. The interviews were conducted through video interviews due to the geographical spread of the participants and limitations brought on by lockdown restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were interviewed on one occasion each. The data gathered in the interviews were analysed using content analysis. A limitation to the analysis of this report is the small sample size.

<u>***Interview Findings***</u>

Social Connectedness

When asked questions around the participant's perceived levels of social connectedness, all of the participants reported high levels, with the average respondent specifically reporting between 10-20 or more strong quality relationships in their lives at the time of the interview. Participants also acknowledged understanding of the distinctions between the relationships which were more meaningful and those which were not.

Understanding Social Connectedness

Participants demonstrated a strong understanding of the importance of social connectedness, as well as of loneliness and isolation. In particular, all of the respondents reported experiencing loneliness and isolation at some point within their lives, with three out of the five respondents stating that feelings of loneliness and isolation seemed to be endemic to leadership positions. One respondent stated that:

> *Being isolated … comes with the profession, or being in the position of a leader because while we're still with other members who are not leaders, in whatever organization, whatever environment you are in - you as a leader ... you're still thinking of your actions towards these other members. You're still taking decisions that are going to impact these members so while we're still with them, we're not really connected with them to a full length [extent] … So, it kind of creates a part of being isolated in some way from them; so much responsibility, and it came with a lot of isolation.[34]*

Another respondent similarly stated that: "The higher up you go in terms of the work you do, it becomes a lonely space because your understanding and your learning is different."[35] When reflecting on what assisted the respondents in overcoming feelings

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[34] Tshepo Mokoena (Wits Inala Forum), Interviewed by Lebogang Mahlalela, Mpumalanga, South Africa, July 2020.
[35] Dayleen van Buuren (City Year), Interviewed by Lebogang Mahlalela, Mpumalanga, South Africa, August 2020.

of loneliness or isolation, respondents attributed being socially connected and having sufficient support networks.

Impact of Social Connectedness on Self-development (inner work)

Respondents were also prompted to reflect on the perceived impact of social connectedness within their lives, in particular on their own self-development, and development of skills or competencies, which assisted them on an individual level. Respondents cited social connectedness as having an impact on their healing, on allowing them to be more compassionate, and in their ethical basis. Other impacts mentioned are included in the figure below:

Figure 1: Impacts of social connectedness on an individual level

| Healing | Resilience | Empathy | Awareness | Reducing Solipstic tendencies | Ethical Basis |

Furthermore, four respondents cited social connectedness as having an impact on the way that they form bonds with those around them. Alongside this, all the respondents stated that social connectedness encouraged them to build and invest in the wellbeing of others. Respondents also reported that understanding social connectedness has an impact on the way that they lead others, with the most common responses echoing the collaborative competencies gained. Two respondents also stated that being socially connected increased their openness to learn from others and work with others, referencing that trust was developed through social connectedness to do this.

Impact of Social Connectedness on their Work as Leaders

When reflecting on the impact that social connectedness had on the respondents' work, two of them stated that being socially connected made them feel a common purpose with those around them. A third respondent shared that it made them feel like those they worked with were family. Other respondents cited feelings of admiration for those that they worked with. When exploring whether being socially connected had any impact on how they perceived and responded to challenges within their organizations, participants cited being socially connected as allowing them to view the problem as not something that they would have to solve alone, but that solutions were embedded within their ability to work with others through co-ownership. Lastly, one respondent cited the importance of social connectedness in assisting individuals to build trust as well as a common vision – which is a key competency in partner development, as well as Bridging Leadership.

Leadership

The dominant leadership styles which respondents indicated they were utilizing had common traits of servant leadership, transformational leadership, bridging leadership, as well as authentic leadership. All respondents indicated that their leadership was highly collaborative and participatory, with three out of the five illustrating aspects of shared leadership within their overall leadership approach *(see Appendix 1)*. When asked how social connectedness impacted their own leadership development, respondents indicated that social connectedness had a direct positive impact on their internal resilience and emotional stability, and in particular on overcoming feelings of isolation, which in turn contributed to this resilience. Another respondent indicated that therapy also had an impact on developing their internal resilience. All the respondents also reported high levels of confidence within their

leadership, and in particular stated that social connectedness had direct impacts on the following elements which boosted this confidence:

Figure 2: How social connectedness boosted respondents' sense of confidence

Impact of Social Connectedness on Perceptions of their Work

When prompted to reflect on whether or not social connectedness had any impacts on their decision-making processes, four out of the five respondents indicated that it had made their decision-making process more collaborative in nature. Alongside this, three respondents reported experiencing leadership burnout at some point in their lives, while another respondent cited that they did not experience it personally but had seen it in their colleagues. The last respondent indicated that they had never experienced burnout, attributing this to their passion and deep commitment. Of the three respondents who did indicate that they had experienced this burnout, they stated that they were able to overcome this through: (1) support from friends, (2) meditation, diarizing and self-reflection, (3) social support and shared leadership, as well as (4) social support and therapy.

All the respondents indicated positive feelings around the work that they do, with respondents indicating that their motivations included: (1) passion, love for humanity, and personal experiences; (2) purpose and the investment others made in them; as well as (3) trying to position their role and contribution in society. Lastly, all respondents indicated that having meaningful relationships to those around them had an impact on how they viewed their work.

Impact of Social Connectedness on their Perspectives of Leadership

When prompted to reflect on whether social connectedness had any impact on how they viewed and understood leadership, all respondents indicated a generally positive impact. In particular, one respondent indicated that it shifted their understanding of a leader from a controller to a facilitator, another to understanding the centrality of connecting to other leaders as an important trait of leadership, whilst another indicated that it shifted their perceptions of leadership as titles and organizations towards seeing the people behind them. Respondents also indicated that traits they considered to be important for leaders include trust, agency, authenticity, compassion, deep listening, integrity, accountability, transparency, as well as humility.

Social Connectedness and Bridging Leadership

Respondents were then prompted to reflect on how social connectedness impacted other leadership competencies. These questions focused around ascertaining which aspects of a 'bridging individual' the respondents embodied, and to what extent this embodiment was the result of their social connectedness. Whilst all the respondents indicated that deep listening was an important aspect of listening, three out of the five respondents indicated that social connectedness had a direct impact on developing this competency. One respondent stated that with "being

socially connected, you're able to listen, but with emotions."[36] Another respondent stated that through social connectedness, "I have learnt … that listening is not necessarily the activity of the ear. Listening is the activity of the mind."[37]

Respondents also indicated that being socially connected impacted their own confidence and that it increased their self-awareness and reflectiveness. All participants indicated high levels of self-awareness, with the reasoning for this ranging from: influences from those around them, therapy, and life-long journaling. Whilst respondents indicated generally positive leadership values which were part of the competencies of a 'bridging individual', respondents did not attribute these values as having any link to the Bridging Leadership approach. Respondents also indicated weak or unsure perceptions around 'overcoming/bridging divides' as a central aspect of their leadership.

Analysis: Summary, relevance and meaning

Whilst the participants demonstrated recognition of how social connectedness impacted the development of skills such as listening, self-awareness, and confidence – which form part of the key competencies of a 'bridging individual' – they did not demonstrate any indication or awareness of these skills specifically embodying the elements required of individuals practicing 'Bridging Leadership'. The analysis from interviews, however, supports the assertion that being socially connected creates better leaders, in so far as the 'better leaders' are characterised by attributes of effective leadership. Furthermore, when asked about their leadership approaches, though the leaders indicated having an approach which was highly collaborative in

[36] Tshepo Mokoena (Wits Inala Forum), Interviewed by Lebogang Mahlalela, Mpumalanga, South Africa, July 2020.
[37] Rex Motheo (Motheo Training Institute), Interviewed by Lebogang Mahlalela, Mpumalanga, South Africa, July 2020.

nature, none of the leaders made any reference or indication of bridging leadership as their own leadership style. This in particular demonstrates that whilst there are clear and articulable links and proof of social connectedness contributing to the inner work required for better and more effective leaders, and encouraging good practices around leaders' interactions with others, there was no direct link discussed by any of the participants towards the notion of either the 'bridging individual' or the Bridging Leadership approach. An argument can be made from the evidence and findings that, intentionally practicing competencies of social connectedness reinforces applications of the Bridging Leadership approach and vice versa. Thus, more intentionally applying and advocating the use of social connectedness creates a foundation to support principles of the Bridging Leadership approach.

Participants were also prompted to reflect on their experiences within the Social Connectedness Programme itself. All the respondents reported positive impacts *(see Appendix 2)*, with key lessons learned ranging from understanding how important being and feeling needed (belonging) is for everyone within society, to understanding the often subtle and unconscious impacts which social isolation had had on them as a leader. Participants however, did not indicate any strong responses in their perceptions around whether they directly encouraged social connectedness on a daily basis, but had positive perceptions around recommending the Programme to others around them and more generally within society. One respondent indicated that encouraging principles learned through the Programme became difficult when moving into different organizational environments. Lastly, participants were also prompted to reflect on any perceived gaps or recommendations they themselves had for the Programme *(see Appendix 3).* The findings from interviews ultimately support the assertions made in the literature

review that social connectedness builds upon and strengthens leaders and leadership capacities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Utilize belonging as a framework to assess the efficacy of policy and programme implementation**

Within policy and programme implementation, the principles of belonging can serve as an assessment and performance indicator as well as help ensure that policies are more multidimensional in its development and analysis of issues. The belonging framework can be applied to both internal policies and best practices, as well as in developing frameworks within other organizations or governmental entities. This specific measurement framework can be used specifically in the Social Connectedness Programme, but also for the overall work of Synergos and SCSC. Furthermore, there should be increased collaboration and connection between partners of the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, to facilitate exchange, best practices, and knowledge sharing across the different organizations such as the Synergos Institute South Africa, Partners In Health, and TakingITGlobal.

2. **Strengthening leadership in Southern Africa**

Practices and programmes to strengthen leadership within Southern Africa through the Bridging Leadership approach can have significant impacts on not only fostering social connectedness, but also in creating more bridging individuals who are better equipped to contribute in solving community and social issues. This strengthening can take place on 4 levels.

(1): The first way is through the development of community mapping. This community mapping would contribute to the creation of a database of all

organizations within specific areas, as well as their core focus - highlighting the work they do, the networks they can embed themselves in, toolkits for implementing similar programmes into their organisation, as well as opportunities to contribute socially innovative ideas to other organizations in how better to integrate social connectedness and Bridging Leadership. The overall aim of this would be to foster connection and collaboration between Synergos and other organizations, as well as between the organizations themselves.

(2): The next way to strengthen leadership would be through the implementation and encouragement of circles of care and support, specifically for existing leaders. These circles would act as spaces for existing leaders to share and encourage one another, to 'offload' as well as explore ways to practically apply social connectedness within their everyday lives, and foster increased self-awareness, healing, purpose, and resilience. This will also encourage leadership development as a continuous process, involving a lot of reflection and feedback.

(3): Special attention should also be paid to new and emerging leaders. Spaces where youth leaders as well as 'older' leaders are able to interact and draw from one another should be encouraged in order to foster social connectedness as well as a spirit of collaboration. New and emergent leaders have a great deal to learn from other leaders who have been in certain spaces, for decades, and vice versa. These interactions can be facilitated through physical events such as seminars or dialogues, as well as pilot mentorship programmes. The Bridging Leadership approach should be taught and fostered during these initiatives.

(4). Lastly, the National Youth Development Agency should consider drawing from Synergos' expertise and research into social connectedness and Bridging

Leadership to strengthen their capacity and existing policy frameworks within the youth development space. Furthermore, collaborations between youth citizens and communities should be encouraged through programmes which strengthen civic leadership.

(5). The South African Government as a whole should be increasingly engaged in Synergos' work to develop policies which foster social connectedness at a national, provincial and local level. This should go hand in hand with multi-sectoral collaboration in influencing policies and budgetary requirements around the childcare and social development sectors. Furthermore, more stringent monitoring and evaluation of programmes should be encouraged to account for the gap in how policies are implemented and translated into tangible results for youth and children.

3. Focus on Training and Partnerships with Youth

The Social Connectedness Programme should more directly and intentionally foster social connectedness, as well as the competencies and understanding of how to utilize the skills of a 'Bridging Leader' within the youth and student space.

(1): In particular, the Social Connectedness Programme should work with university student offices (ex. Department of Student Affairs) across South Africa to strengthen their existing policies and frameworks for student engagement and success. The pilot project can take place at the University of Witwatersrand, with which Synergos has already worked. This can also take place at the level of student societies and university mentorship programmes such as the University of Pretoria STARS mentorship programme.

(2): The Social Connectedness Programme can also increase their impact by working with the Department of Basic Education to strengthen their policies and

frameworks so as to take into account the overall psychosocial support needed by students.

(3): Innovation for advancing both Social Connectedness and Bridging Leadership particularly within youth organisations can be awarded with working grants to encourage its practice and development within emerging organisations.

(4): The Samuel Centre and other organizations should consider expanding the reach of their programmes, such as the Social Connectedness Fellowship program, by working with more youth from the Southern Africa region.

(5): Furthermore, youth leadership programmes which focus on training and workshops should widen the scope of their curriculum to include social connectedness and Bridging Leadership. This will help strengthen the current and next generation of student leaders and young professional leaders.

4. Programme and practice toolkits need to more actively address Bridging Leadership as a key component of fostering social connectedness

The Social Connectedness Programme should more intentionally utilize Bridging Leadership within workshops and toolkits as a means of reinforcing practices and principles of social connectedness. This means that the Social Connectedness Programme would shift from not only creating individuals who understand social connectedness and how to apply this, but 'bridging individuals' who more consciously understand how to practice the bridging leadership approach on an individual and organizational level. Centring the dialogical relationship between Bridging Leadership and social connectedness within policies and interventions of the Programme would strengthen both approaches.

5. Fostering social connectedness and Bridging Leadership

The Social Connectedness Programme should also increase efforts to foster both Bridging Leadership and social connectedness through grassroots movement building. This can take the form of:

(1): increased advocacy, grassroots campaigning targeted at the youth, as well as the establishment of community level branches, and organizational strongholds. These steps would increase the scope of community outreach for both the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness as well as the Synergos Institute through the Social Connectedness Programme. The notion of social connectedness and belonging offer salience as a movement and ideology, thus advocating for these need to be more rigorous and embody characteristics of not only an organizational approach but a social movement, lifestyle and way of being.

(2): Within the University space in particular, the social connectedness principles can have a more significant impact and traction by reaching out to existing organizations and student societies with aligned missions of youth leadership and empowerment. These groups may be open to adopting a similar programme and model, which enable them to foster social connectedness through their own grassroots campaigning and youth mobilization.

6. Further Research

In-depth and systematic research is also recommended in the following areas:

(1). The extent to which leaders and organizations are able to translate social connectedness into both practice and policies after a substantial period has passed between initial workshop trainings provided by Synergos.

(2). The impact and efficacy of the Social Connectedness programme cross-culturally. This comparative analysis would provide deepened understanding into the extent to which prevailing traditional practices can be strengthened and integrated into fostering both social connectedness and Bridging Leadership.

(3). The impact of social connectedness within organizations that report practicing forms of transactional, authoritarian or laissez-faire leadership approaches, as opposed to transformational.

(4). The impact of the social connectedness workshops on the overall organizational culture of partner organizations from the perspective of employees. This analysis can assist in deepening understanding of practices beyond the executive/senior level.

(5): How existing traditional knowledge systems, including Ubuntu and its applications, can be integrated into existing leadership models and reinforce both social connectedness and Bridging Leadership, and vice versa. This would also more effectively strengthen community and traditional leadership systems, and increase the adoption of social connectedness and Bridging Leadership within these systems.

IMPACT

This research project sought to deepen the understanding of how social connectedness creates better leaders, as well as strengthen the relationship between social connectedness and the Bridging Leadership approach. In particular, the research focused heavily on the Social Connectedness Programme in an attempt to develop stronger evidence and best practices for leadership development within the Programme. The research can help Synergos in strengthening the Social

Connectedness Programme, as well as reinforcing components and development of the Bridging Leadership approach. This research can also contribute to the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness by increasing their understanding as well as advancement of social connectedness within Southern Africa. The research also has implications for South African universities, policy makers, and national departments/agencies such as the Department of Basic education and National Youth Development Agency. Ultimately, the research can be shared across sectors and across nations to better understand the power and impact of social connectedness on leadership development, organizational management, community building, and policymaking.
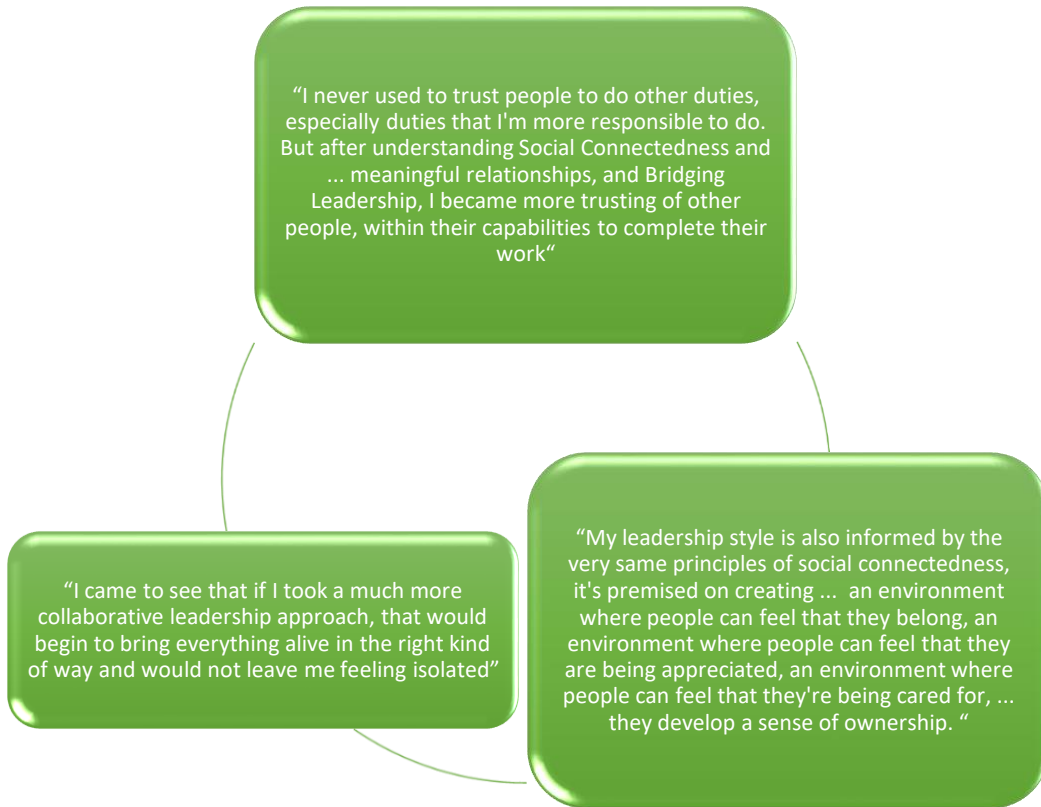
CONCLUSION

This research report focused on exploring the impact of social connectedness on leadership development. Alongside this, the report aimed to strengthen the linkages between the Bridging Leadership approach and social connectedness, by drawing from the existing work of the Social Connectedness Programme. The literature review found that the dominant leadership approaches utilized in a South African context were transformational leadership, transactional leadership, as well as servant leadership. Furthermore, this review highlighted the impact of various leadership styles on organizational performance as well as the leaders themselves, alongside a theoretical basis of the dialectical relationship between social connectedness and the Bridging Leadership approach. Key findings from interviews with organizational leaders revealed that social connectedness increased their competencies for effective leadership at both an inner and interpersonal level. In particular, respondents cited social connectedness as significantly increasing their resilience, confidence, and collaborative skills within decision-making processes.

Social connectedness also increased other leadership competencies, which contribute towards creating a 'bridging individual'. However, the research also highlighted the inadequate integration of Bridging Leadership as an approach which reinforces social connectedness. The report concluded with key recommendations on how various actors can integrate social connectedness and Bridging Leadership into their policy and programme work around leadership development and youth empowerment. Furthermore, specific recommendations were provided for the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness and Synergos Institute South Africa to deepen the impact of the Social Connectedness Programme. Moving forward, further research is needed to better understand how social connectedness as well as the Bridging Leadership approach can be deepened and applied across Southern Africa.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Respondents percieved connection between Social Connectendess and Leadership style

"I never used to trust people to do other duties, especially duties that I'm more responsible to do. But after understanding Social Connectedness and ... meaningful relationships, and Bridging Leadership, I became more trusting of other people, within their capabilities to complete their work"

"I came to see that if I took a much more collaborative leadership approach, that would begin to bring everything alive in the right kind of way and would not leave me feeling isolated"

"My leadership style is also informed by the very same principles of social connectedness, it's premised on creating ... an environment where people can feel that they belong, an environment where people can feel that they are being appreciated, an environment where people can feel that they're being cared for, ... they develop a sense of ownership. "

Appendix 2: Interview Respondents biggest 'take-aways' from the Social Connectedness programme

"The biggest the biggest takeaway to me is that attentiveness is a sense of being needed. Everything that we do it must be based on a need"

"Learning what isolation is and how people can get this psychologically and emotionally ... And that made me realize that some of it is not sometimes even in our own doing. It can be in your family, the environment you're in"

"How Social Connectedness impacts on a societal level"

"Relationships need to be meaningful, relationships need to be more and relationship need to be substantial. And having meaningful relationships will really help you to go a ... long way"

Appendix 3: Recommendations by interview respondents

There should be set psychological debriefing within the social work

Social Connectedness should be viewed as a therapy

Social Connectedness needs to become a global movement

The social connectedness concept has to move from a training, to a lifestyle organization.

We need to continuosly advocate and make it a point that [social connectedness] finds expression in various policies that our governments all over the world are formulating.

Some of it might have been just a little bit too superficial. So it could have had greater depth

K: under-resourced – could impact more people and organisations work with

To do more work with Synergos. And continue what we have been doing, but also adding elements around COVID.

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