

Take heart: Learning from six case studies

A analysis by Shirley Pendlebury



INNER WORK *for* **SOCIAL CHANGE**



Fetzer Institute



SYNERGOS
Building trust works

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The Inner Work for Social Change Project



Synergos and the Fetzer Institute began the project on Inner Work for Social Change in 2018 to demonstrate how Inner Work and Bridging Leadership can make social action towards

a better world more effective. In dialogue with thought leaders, development practitioners, activists, and others, the project aims to spark a global conversation on how reflective practices can make social action more aware, more ethically attuned, and more sustainable. Six commissioned case studies, a definition paper, and a cross-case analysis form the project’s knowledge core.

Within the project, *inner work* is any form of reflective practice that increases awareness of self, others, and the systems in which complex social problems arise. Inner work is core to *bridging leadership*, which is the capacity and will to build trust and tap the fullest contributions of diverse stakeholders, helping them to come together across divides to work in concert for the common good.

About this paper

The case studies for the project are diverse in subject and setting. Each depicts a collaborative initiative to address a complex social problem. In their rich diversity, the case studies offer many insights into the experiences, benefits, challenges, and achievements of collaborative ventures. This paper spotlights inner work or reflective practice. Through a cross-case comparison, the paper offers a thematic synthesis of the role of inner work in social action, as portrayed in the case studies. In so doing, it refines a loosely articulated theory of change.

Ten claims, derived from an initial analysis, were presented for critical discussion at a project workshop. On the basis of their reading of all six case studies, mixed groups of case writers, core team members, and advisors identified central themes and cross-case learning. Their notes were a starting point for the paper.



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Take heart: Learning from six case studies

Introduction

The heart is the centre of concern, the mind is the centre of purpose or attention, and these cannot be dissociated .

Mary Midgley¹

Troubled times shine a harsh light on the disorders plaguing our world. Covid-19 has revealed the fissures that cleave humanity into privileged or deprived, loved or neglected, connected or isolated. Hunger, systemic racism, deprivation, violence and brutality in their many forms, and now a pandemic – these are but a sample of a host of wicked problems that thwart wellbeing, especially where social injustice is rife.

We may lose heart in the face of such problems and turn away to tend our own gardens. Or, as experts, we may rush to offer technical solutions; or, as activists, rally to change the systems where problems breed. But technical solutions are not enough; the challenge is seldom, if ever, a shortfall in technical expertise. And unreflective activism, justly eager to right the world’s wrongs, may begin to mimic the patterns it hopes to change.²

Around the world, there is a growing recognition that resolving complex problems calls for change from within – in people, organizations, sectors, and systems. This is not easy. It entails shedding cherished identities and arrangements within a problem’s ecosystem, finding new ways of working with others whose views may clash with ours, and changing systemic patterns, ideally to co-create conditions for a new social reality.

What role does inner work play in these transformations? This question animates the project on Inner Work for Social Change launched by Synergos and the Fetzer Institute. Within the project, inner work – very loosely understood – encompasses any form of reflective practice that increases awareness of self, others, and the systems in which complex social problems arise. Inner work here is a relational and purposive

notion, conceptually and purposively tied to outer work for a more just and caring world.

Through an analysis of six case studies for the project, we consider the role of inner work in social action. Each case study portrays a collaborative initiative to address an urgent problem: child malnutrition in the Indian state of Maharashtra; infant and maternal mortality and troubled public health systems in Namibia and the Philippines; dysfunctional schools and an underperforming education system in South Africa and in the state of Pará in Brazil; and a fragmented, stagnating agro-economy in Ethiopia. The Brazilian case is an outlier, as it involved no intentional inner work. In the other five cases, inner work featured to different degrees, from thick to sparse, and not always under the label of “inner work”.

The case studies are retrospective and exploratory. They make no direct causal claims about inner work and social impact. Several of the case studies portray initiatives that were completed some time ago; others portray ongoing initiatives. All of them are the subjects of previous case studies.³ However, the previous case studies had a different object, namely, to offer exemplary knowledge on collaboration, collective learning, and bridging leadership. The case studies considered here bring a new facet into view: inner work, or reflection, and its role in social change initiatives.

A starting assumption – a theory, if you will – is that inner work is vital for effective social action. Together, the case studies provide grounds for testing and tuning the theory.

This cross-case analysis traces four themes from the case studies: trust and trustworthiness; the inner–outer dance; leading for change, changing to lead; and pathways to social change. Agency and empowerment, identity and belonging, resilience and wellbeing are recurring motifs, and courage, hope, and compassion run as golden threads through the case stories. Each theme suggests two to four claims that crystalize into a conclusion about the place of inner work in social change initiatives. Before concluding, we sketch some convergences between the case study findings and other work in related fields.

The Case Studies

The Bhavishya Alliance (2006–2012, Maharashtra, India)⁴

The Bhavishya Alliance brought together government, corporate, and civil society actors with the purpose of accelerating the end of child undernutrition in the state, using an approach to social change with inner work at its heart. Through the journeys of some key participants, the case study uncovers the influence inner work may have had on their collective efforts.

The African Public Health Leadership Initiative (APHLI) (2008–2013, Namibia)⁵

The APHLI aimed to strengthen Namibia's Ministry of Health and Social Services by realigning stakeholders to build capacity, unlock potential, and untangle complex systems. It brought some rapid changes to the health system, including decreased maternal waiting time, increased efficiency in one region, and additional clinic space. The case study focused on **seven** key actors whose reflections point to the ways in which trust-building enabled collective action.

The Health Leaders for the Poor and Health Leadership and Governance Programs (The Philippines, 2008-2019)⁶

The case study portrays a Bridging Leadership program designed by the Zuellig Family Foundation to rescue a health system that was failing far too many Filipinos. The program builds the commitment and capacity of mayors and governors, in partnership with health officials, to oversee healthcare provision. During the period studied, the program was extended from an initial 10 pilot municipalities to almost 800 municipalities countrywide. Leadership stories illuminate the relationship between personal change and systemic change.

The Beyers Naudé Schools Development Programme (2010–2016, Free State, South Africa)⁷

From 2010 to 2015, 166 government schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyane District of South Africa's Free State province participated in a development program conceived by the Kagiso Trust. District results in the National Senior Certificate examinations improved from 65% in 2010, to 87.5% in 2015, and to 90% in 2018, three years after the program had ended. The case study portrays the visionary leadership and empowerment approach that sparked these remarkable achievements.

Supporting transformation in Ethiopia's agro-economy (2011–2017)⁸

Poor collaboration and alignment among stakeholders were impeding Ethiopia's agricultural development. Smallholder farmers were especially hard hit by systemic barriers to their participation in Ethiopia's economy. Since 2011, Synergos has played a vital role in efforts to remove systemic barriers and change the mindsets that deter collaboration. The case study focuses on cluster commercialization in the malt barley value chain. One leader's story illustrates the power of inner work.

The Pact for Education in Pará (Brazil, 2012–2018)⁹

The Pact formed multisectoral partnerships to improve the public education system of the Brazilian state of Pará. Initially, the Pact was able to raise overall education quality scores, but these results were not repeated in the next phase. One municipality, Ulianópolis, stands out as a success story. The Pact left a legacy among those participants who recognize the power of collaboration and personal transformation in addressing complex social challenges.

Trust and trustworthiness

The notion of trust permeates the case studies, as much through its absence as through its presence, in its breaking as well as its making.

Matters of trust lie at the core of the problems that spurred the initiatives portrayed in the case studies. In the Brazilian and South African cases, we see how dysfunctional schools betrayed the trust of young people who yearned for a sound education to set them on the path to a better life. Education is a constitutional right in both countries, yet in both a failing education system scuppers the chances of children and young people to realize this right. Both the Philippines and Namibia recognize the right to health care and the right to life, yet their public health systems struggle to stem the rate of maternal deaths among women from poor or remote communities. The Philippines case study opens with a heartrending story of a mother who dies after giving birth at night when there is no open, reachable health facility to tend to her.¹⁰ Her story is an emblem of a health system that, at the time, could not be relied upon to care for those who most needed it.

Trust is the glue for social cohesion and cooperation in all of our human interactions and enterprises. Trust-building is especially critical in situations of pervasive mistrust, where people have a collective memory of harms they have suffered at the hands of another group or when group identities involve suspicion of the motives of other groups.¹¹ All the case studies are set in democracies of the Global South, in places with a history of inequality, exploitation, and social injustice, places where the divides of gender, race, ethnicity, class, caste, and language may tear the fabric of trust that undergirds any genuine collaborative venture.

For example, the Namibian case study illustrates how the African Public Health Leadership Initiative acknowledged and worked with collective memory. Its emergent design recognized that people's experiences had resulted in accumulated layers of distrust, and revealed the need to peel back these layers to smooth the road for collaboration and innovation. While accretions of distrust are not apparent in every case study, they all accentuate trust as a necessary condition for leadership and collaboration.

When we are fearful or have no clear sense of purpose, when we do not trust ourselves and our abilities, when we are guarded and uneasy around people who are not like us, we close our hearts to the possibility of action in concert for a common cause. The case studies offer compelling stories of leaders whose self-trust, openness, and sense of purpose enabled them to inspire trust in others.

What are wise grounds for trust? I can sensibly trust someone with goodwill towards me, who has no malicious or devious intent, who can be open with me. But goodwill, kind intent, and fuzzy feelings are not enough to warrant trust in all situations. It matters whether the trusted person is competent to take appropriate care of what's entrusted to them. It matters, too, whether there is a well-founded climate of trust, with safeguards against breach or betrayal.¹²

The case studies suggest at least four interconnected ways of anchoring trustworthy practices, practitioners, and institutions: contracts, open communication, participatory decision-making, and recognition. In Ethiopia, for example, building a culture of trust has enabled formerly antagonistic actors in the malt barley value chain to collaborate in meeting shared objectives. Farmers' organizations are playing a vital role in bridging market linkages. Contractual arrangements between barley farmers, malt factories, and breweries have been crucial in developing trust. Conscious communication between farmers, traders, and brewers is contributing dramatically to more trusting and trustworthy relationships. The malt barley value chain is becoming a chain of trust.

In the Pact for Education in Pará, contractual agreements between partners provided a basis for trustworthy relationships and practices. For Aurelino Gomes, secretary of education in Ulianópolis (one of the Pact's most successful municipalities), a climate of trust is strengthened when promises are fulfilled, achievements are acknowledged, and contributions are recognized. The South African case study shows how contractual agreements, incentives, recognition, and celebration of achievement all contributed to more trustworthy schools and school communities.

Participatory decision-making is a central feature of the Bridging Leadership program in the Philippines, where leaders came to recognize the need to deploy a political approach in which leaders share their decision-making power with stakeholders and

communities in ways that are mutually empowering, forge stronger bonds of trust, and enable more trustworthy practices, especially in policymaking and public health program planning at local level.

Trust as a cross-case theme gives rise to three premises:

- **Matters of trust permeate complex social problems.**
- **Trust-building is crucial for collaborative action, especially in contexts of pervasive mistrust.**
- **Trustworthiness is as important as trust.**

Part of the task of building trustworthiness lies in the formation of character, in cultivating leaders who have the courage to act from an authentic sense of purpose, who will be true to their word and their purpose, who will not abuse their power for unwarranted personal gain or to cause hurt or harm to people or the public good. Inner work can play a role here.

The inner–outer dance: place, process, time

... because we are human beings, we are frail, and we are formed; it is our nature to shape our natures.

Kwame Anthony Appiah¹³

In a coda to her case study, Andrea Rodericks writes: “We learn from Bhavishya the power and beauty of the inner–outer dance ... it is the movement between the inner and outer realms at different levels that really opens our heart and anchors authentic, trustful, loving relationships and collective social action.”¹⁴ The dance metaphor captures perfectly inner work’s attuned rhythmic movement between inner and outer worlds, between safe spaces and brave spaces. Let the metaphor remind us that inner work for social change is conceptually and purposively tied to outer work for a more just and caring world.

The work of inner work takes place in contemplation and observation, as well as in reflective action and interaction. Its locus is both inside ourselves and outside in the material world, and – especially – in the liminal space between self and other, mind

and matter. Examples from the case studies depict reflection in the stillness of nature; in group interactions in settings cocooned from the busyness of everyday life and work; in fine-grained observation, deep listening, courageous conversations, creative play, metaphor, and journaling; through indigenous concepts and values; and in sensing journeys that confront participants with the human face of the problem to be addressed, stirring their hearts and minds through a close-up view of how a complex problem may affect those who suffer its effects most severely.

Such reflective processes are familiar to participatory development practitioners worldwide. Even so, they may be disquieting or rouse impatience among those of us who want to get moving on solutions, as they invite us to try out new ways of relating, to reveal what we may usually keep hidden, perhaps even from ourselves. Small wonder that facilitators honor the maxim “Create a safe container.”

But a conundrum lurks here. Self-revelation and open engagement call upon qualities of risk, difficulty and controversy that are incompatible with safety, especially in settings of pervasive mistrust or where identity, power, and privilege shape the relationships among those in the room and in the wider ecosystem in which they work.¹⁵ Examples from the Namibian, Indian and South African case studies illustrate a productive tension, or movement, between safe and brave spaces.

In Namibia’s African Public Health Leadership Initiative, the task of the project coordinator, Kasee Ithana, was to design activities to enable public health officials to trust, show empathy, and undertake action. Yet before she could begin to build trust among them, she had to establish her own identity in their eyes. “Who are you?” they asked repeatedly. Was she an outsider or “one of us,” a Namibian who shared the hurts of the country’s history? Their probes and her responses prepared firmer ground for entrusting her with “holding the space.”

In India, the organizers of a 12-week Change Lab tried to curate a safe container where participants could be vulnerable as they looked inwards. Interviews for the Bhavishya Alliance case study reflect on how the lab gave some participants the courage to speak out and act in ways that would have been impossible elsewhere. For those who were ready, the lab allowed them to draw from within to bypass hierarchy and inter-sectoral dynamics and intervene in powerful and unusual

ways. In a memorable example, a community health worker sings a folk song about hungry children and so reminds wrangling senior government officials of the group's collective purpose. But the Change Lab was not always a safe space. Much depended on the skill of facilitators in creating and holding a sensitive space that allowed for audacity, conflict, and refusal. The movement between safe and brave appears as part of a dynamic whole: "Inner work both sparks and demands courage."¹⁶

In the Beyers Naudé Schools Development Programme in South Africa, school stakeholders participated in an engagement process for forming collective responsibility across a school's ecosystem. The process was designed around four questions, two of which show the tension between safe and brave. One asks: "What are two things that you personally do that hamper the performance of your team?" The next is more hazardous: "Tell us two things that any of your colleagues do that hamper the performance of the school." For many participants, talking from the heart was empowering, a "hallelujah moment," despite feeling fearful at first. But some denied their failings, and one went so far as to take legal action against a colleague for defamation of character. Holding a space that invites accusation makes unusual demands on facilitators and participants, demands that are underplayed by too naive a notion of safe space.

The initiatives portrayed in the case studies all attempted to enable a multifaceted, systemic understanding of the problem to be addressed. With the exception of Brazil, all the case studies depict a sequence of reflective movements intended to open the hearts, minds, and wills of participants; to cultivate compassion, renew or rouse hope, deepen understanding, and energize collective action.

Three initiatives – in India, Namibia and Ethiopia – followed Theory U, a social change approach that amplifies presence, a fine-tuned awareness of oneself, of others in the room and beyond, of the facts of the matter, and of emerging directions for innovation. Typically, the U-process moves from activities and data to build a shared understanding of a problem, to a deep connection with individual purpose, and finally, into the co-creation of possible solutions. The Bridging Leadership program in the Philippines follows a similar pattern, with a curriculum of three learning modules structured around the processes of ownership, co-ownership, and co-creation. In South Africa, empowerment and training workshops for school communities use four

demanding but generative questions to catalyze collective agency and more humane relationships within each participating school and its wider community.

An array of case study examples illustrate how such practices may facilitate more trust, more compassion, more agency and more solidarity. Questions of the human heart tapped into Namibian health leaders' beliefs, experiences, and values: Who am I? Where am I from? Why am I here? What can I do? Where am I going? Carefully curated spaces and activities helped to dismantle the ubiquitous us and them barriers "to build causeways of understanding and trust."¹⁷ The founders of the Bhavishya Alliance used Presencing – the U-process of becoming totally present to ourselves and the larger field around us – to help participants uncover and overcome their individual barriers and blind spots that prevented them from engaging in new forms of collaboration or inhibited their openness to emerging solutions to the problem of child undernutrition.

Two case studies use indigenous concepts that enrich our conception of relational awareness. In the case study from South Africa, the notion of ubuntu ("I am because we are") illuminates the role of retreats in forging collective agency to improve school performance. In the Bridging Leadership program in the Philippines, the second learning module includes the concept loób, which is the core of personhood as relational will. Loób only has meaning in tandem with kapwa (loosely translated as "self-in-the-other") and embedded in a web of connectivity.¹⁸ Making a personal commitment to address a complex problem means connecting to one's loób.

What about time and timing for inner work? In the cases considered here, curated opportunities for reflective practice came in varying pockets, stretches, and recurrences of time. Few were long or concentrated enough to establish a continuing practice. Still, for those who were ready and open to the process, the experience catalyzed new ways of being and doing. A South African school serving one of the poorest communities in its district holds annual "re-retreats" where teachers, the principal, and members of the school governing body gather to renew their collective purpose and "to remember not to forget" their commitment to quality education. In Maharashtra, when the Change Lab came to an end, the Bhavishya Alliance team leaders found ways of creating spaces for reflection in regular work routines, so as to infuse in the work a culture that valued a balance between inner and outer selves.

Together, the case studies and an accompanying concept paper¹⁹ offer grounds for the following claims:

- **Inner work for social change moves from safe to brave spaces, and requires skilled facilitators.**
- **Well-established reflective processes can open hearts, activate minds and energize individual and collective action.**
- **Inner work takes time; it is not a specific step but an ongoing practice.**

Changing to lead, leading to change

Opening the heart is key, and leaders who are able to do this, start to work in very different ways.

Manish Srivastava²⁰

The case studies are a wellspring of stories about how inner work can change the way leaders lead, showing how inner work can inspire and direct outer work, enabling leaders to build trust and support, and engage in collaborative action, and hold to their purpose in the face of inevitable obstacles and setbacks. There are stories, too, of an awakening to leadership potential; of a renewed and more lucid sense of purpose; of resilience, courage and hope in the face of hostility, skepticism, or indifference; of empowerment to take brave action and transgress time-honored boundaries and hierarchies.

Perhaps the richest source of leadership stories is the Philippines case study, as we might expect from an in-depth Bridging Leadership training program for local government leaders and municipal health officers across almost 800 municipalities. Bridging leadership is the capacity to build trust and tap the fullest contributions of diverse stakeholders, helping them come together across divides and work in partnership for the common good. Of all the case studies, this one presents the most concentrated, structured, and extensive initiative in building capacity – at personal, practice, service delivery, and systems levels – to address the complex social problem of health inequity.

Interwoven stories and reflections from mayors, local health officials, and academic partners attest to the power of inner work (coupled with coaching, formal learning about health system and Bridging Leadership, and a practicum) in changing how they lead. Their leadership journeys, through a finely crafted learning curriculum, enabled them to achieve a more lucid sense of purpose and a greater integrity and authenticity in their work and home selves. Mayor Sam Parojinog recalls: “I learned to be true to myself, to be honest and not corrupt, to be transparent, and to have courage as I serve as mayor . . . Who I am as Sam when I go home, is the same as the Sam they see in office?”²¹

Authenticity and the power of attentive, receptive listening (to oneself and others) are leitmotifs of leadership across the case studies. Listening reflects leadership. Again and again, the case studies display leaders who change from an autocratic style of “I speak and dictate, you listen and obey” to a participatory style where a leader listens with care, shares and welcomes ideas, recognizes others for their contributions, and builds and maintains connectedness.

Dr. Wynona Vega (Nona) in the Philippines and His Excellency Usman Suru in Ethiopia are among those who epitomize this shift. Nona recalls: “Before, my understanding of leadership was . . . you tell your members to do it . . . if you’re not on board with me, you’re against me . . . Before in meetings, it was me always talking. But now, it’s ‘You talk, I’ll listen.’” For Usman, director of Ethiopia’s Federal Co-operative Agency, the reflective processes of Theory-U sharpened his self-awareness, shifted his thinking, and inspired him to change leadership patterns in the agency. He came to see “that ‘mine is always right’ is wrong.”²²

Individual and collective reflective practices rekindled hope and nurtured resilience in situations where leaders were weary or dispirited. As a public health official in the Philippines, Baj Datinguino had all too often reached a point where her tired body, mind, and heart had said enough is enough. Connecting to her purpose and personal values through the Bridging Leadership program gave Baj a hopeful mindset and “served as fire” to influence others and act boldly in her work “to make a significant dent in public service.”²³

Case examples show how awakening or stretching the imagination through metaphor, creative play, drama, or the visual arts may spark or mark personal change and activate leadership at all levels. Denise Boois, a nurse who coordinated a regional development unit in the health leadership program in Namibia, offers a vivid metaphor for how her participation in the program had changed her: “I was a butterfly because I was emerging. Later I was an eagle, I could fly. I never went back into the box.” Her self-image as an eagle soaring surely signifies empowerment.

Time and space away from everyday demands revitalized leaders. A solitary, contemplative retreat in nature (three days and nights alone in the Himalayas) enabled a more lucid sense of purpose, a deeper knowing, for participating leaders in the Bhavishya Alliance. Difficult though some found it to be alone with their thoughts and fears, their shared experience of the retreat kindled trust and brought the group closer together. For Kgotso Schoeman in South Africa, the inspiration for school retreats came to him when, as a Synergos Senior Fellow, he spent three days in solitary retreat in the remote wildlands of Montana.²⁴

In the Brazilian case, participation in the Pact for Education in Pará amplified the leadership qualities of Aurelino Gomes, deepening his appreciation of the reflective awareness needed for bridging leadership. His story is one of a natural bridging leader with a nuanced understanding of what it takes to build trust, co-create a collective vision, and energize action in a collaborative effort towards a strong local education system.

Common threads across the case studies show that:

- **Inner work can awaken and hone leadership capacity.**
- **Inner work can change the way leaders lead, helping them discover a more compassionate, inclusive approach that builds on trust and collaboration.**
- **Inner work can build leaders’ resilience and agency, sustain their hope, and nurture their wellbeing.**

Pathways to social change

Each of our actions bears the footprints of our soul. The two are inextricably fused.

Carolyn T. Brown²⁵

As a form of reflective awareness, inner work can be both a starting point for social change and a constant companion along the way. Case examples show how inner work engenders and sustains whole-hearted collective agency towards resolving an urgent, complex problem. Regardless of impact, all the case studies illuminate the value of personal awareness, of attuned observation and attentive listening, of building trust, nurturing hope, and sparking courage for authentic engagement and new ways of acting.

“If an egg is broken by an outside force, life ends. If an egg is broken by an inside force, life begins,” says Dr Ryan Guinanan, an academic partner in the health leadership program in the Philippines.²⁶ His metaphor evokes the vitality of inner work in a program which has transformed leadership and improved public health services in the country’s poorest municipalities. Maternal mortality rates have declined, health inequity is decreasing. “Bridging inner and system governance,” the case study title, renders the connection between self and system, placing self-mastery and collaborative, reflective practice at the heart of public health leadership.

Similar patterns of connection between self-awareness, reflective practice and social impact are apparent in all the other case studies, bar Brazil. Through the Bhavishya Alliance, diverse actors from across the system worked together, as they had not done before, to end child undernutrition in the Indian state of Maharashtra. They learned together, looked within themselves and opened their hearts and minds to listen to others, allowing new kinds of solutions to emerge. Their efforts, more than likely, contributed factors for nutritional success during this period when stunting among children under two years declined by 15 percentage points in Maharashtra.

In Namibia, the APHLI helped to decentralize antenatal services which, in turn, contributed to a decrease in maternal mortality. This success was in large part a result of exposing a public health team to reflective exercises to open their hearts,

activate their minds, and energize their actions. Greater self-awareness and group cohesion led to strong mobilization for action. In South Africa, short retreats for school communities engendered a change of heart and mind that has invigorated a culture of teaching and learning in participating schools, with remarkable improvements in the education outcomes of districts involved in the Beyers Naudé Schools Development Programme and its successor. In Ethiopia, Theory U processes led to profound changes in the organizational culture and practices of the Federal Co-operative Agency. Reflections on homestays with smallholder farmers gave members of Ethiopia's Agricultural Transformation Agency deeper insight into the purpose of their work.

Inner work had no role in the formation of the Pact for Education in Pará in Brazil. Yet the experience of being at the table with social actors who did not usually act together was personally transforming for some key participants. Experiential learning through the Pact deepened their self-understanding and sparked their awareness of education as a public good for which they had collective responsibility. While this may not have happened across the board, for those who were receptive, partnership around a common cause enlarged their consciousness – of themselves, their relationships, and their place in a larger system.

The reflective processes described in the case studies helped to catalyze change and sustain collaborative effort in significant ways. But the gains have not been retained in all cases. Change within systems, especially government systems, is slow, vulnerable to political upheaval, ever-shifting leadership, and the stranglehold of bureaucracy and fierce habit.

Political turmoil and changes in leadership at government level are serious deterrents to sustainable social innovation. The case of the Pact for Education in Pará, in particular, shows how politics can sabotage collective effort. Political jockeying in the years leading up to elections in Pará distracted attention from the Pact, which failed to replicate its initial successes and was terminated after state elections brought a new faction to power.

In India, the Bhavishya Alliance's work of cultivating attention to collective purpose ran the risk of a setback every time senior people from key partners left their posts

and their replacements came with a different mindset or understanding of purpose. In Namibia, seven years after the closure of the APHLI, the delivery units that were one of its main innovations are no longer functioning. When the permanent secretary was transferred to another department, the project lost its champion. As staff were transferred or left public service, some of the original team spirit dissolved. The APHLI had been unable to leverage the cohesion and solidarity of the health leadership forum to maintain higher levels of systemic change, and reflective practice had not been embedded deeply enough in the system to retain its gains. For sustainable change, peak experiences from retreats and other reflective processes need to be grounded in everyday systems. But, as the case studies suggest, reflective approaches are not easily embedded within large bureaucracies.

The Bhavishya story presents some finely observed lessons about the nature of inner work and its value in pathways to social change. Reading across the cases, we may discern crucial insights about inner work and pathways to change:

- **Inner work prepares the ground for collective agency which, in turn, has the potential for social impact.**
- **Reflective, experiential learning through collaboration can catalyze personal change.**
- **Peak experiences and reflective processes need to be grounded in everyday systems to gain traction.**

Challenges of political turmoil, turnover of senior leaders, and a lack of government commitment are not reasons to give up on inner work. Rather they are reasons to persist. Sustaining a sense of purpose and discernment through periods of upheaval or stagnation calls for patient reflective practice to keep hope alive and nurture courage and collective agency.

Convergence

The paths traced in this cross-case analysis converge with many others. Trust-building, collaboration, and systems thinking have long been part of development practice, engaged scholarship, environmental stakeholder platforms, and the like.²⁷

Leading from within, transformational leadership, and reflective practice, too, are well-established notions across diverse fields. Inner work shows up in leadership for sustainability, a concept that includes everyday leaders whose actions reflect a mindful way of being, rooted in interconnectedness. In sustainability science and in new social movements, there are calls for an “inside-out” approach, where the condition of people’s inner worlds is taken as a dimension of sustainability or social justice.²⁸ The Wellbeing Project has conducted an investigation, across some fifty countries, of how change makers’ inner well-being influences how social change happens.

But there is little, if any, existing scientific research that establishes measurable causal links between personal transformation and systemic social change. To seek for such links may well be misguided, a category mistake.

Daniel Groody²⁹ sees it this way:

The heart symbolizes the whole process of human understanding that can only be grasped from the depths of one’s being, the place where the human and the divine interact. It is the place from which flows one’s values, one’s relationships, and it is intimately connected with how one responds to the most vulnerable members of human families. Therefore the work of global transformation has its origin in a more rudimentary inner transformation.

Be that as it may, a wealth of research and scholarly inquiry illuminates the connections between personal change, social action and social change. Gretchen Steidel has recently conducted an extensive review of this research, as the basis for a proposed conceptual model of pathways from personal transformation to social transformation.³⁰ The model has five personal domains – mindfulness; wellbeing and resilience; social and emotional intelligence; empowerment and agency; a sense of community and belonging – that interact to catalyze prosocial behavior which, in turn, enables social change. Self-awareness, self-understanding, self-regulation, and connection with others pave the way for prosocial behavior.

The case studies from India, Namibia, and the Philippines, especially, offer unusually rich exemplary knowledge about how well-established types of reflective practice can facilitate more trust, more compassion, more agency, and more solidarity.

Conclusion

The object of this series of case studies was to illuminate the role of reflective practice in collaborative initiatives to address a complex social problem. Taken together, the case studies portray the connection between our inner selves and our work in the world, and show how the connections play out through the multilayered ecology of human action and interaction. They depict the connective tissue between inner and outer work – between reflection and action – and how each can enrich, steady, and direct the other; how each brings to the other a deeper awareness of how one is in the world; and how an absence of reflection may impair collaborative action.

Of course, to say that inner work, as reflective practice, *can* do these things is not to say it *will*. In the arenas of human action there are no foregone conclusions. We should not downplay the difficulties of sustaining change in environments that are hostile to reflection, where political jockeying overrides the commons, where the divides between “us” and “them” may have histories that can be hidden but not erased, and which we may have an ethical compunction to acknowledge, not ignore. We should be wary of turning a blind or sentimental eye to the pitfalls of leading for change.

Still, we may take heart in the prospects of reflective practice and bridging leadership. There may be no better way to venture in an uncertain and divided world.



Photo: Andrea Rodericks

Notes

- ¹ Mary Midgley, *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience* (London: Methuen, 1981).
- ² Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff, *A Delicate Activism: A Radical Approach to Change* (Cape Town: The Proteus Initiative, 2014).
- ³ See David L. Brown, “Bridge-building for Social Transformation,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2015); Synergos, “Trust, Collaboration, and Collective Learning: Synergos Experience in Namibia and Ethiopia,” in *Harnessing the Power of Collective Learning: Feedback, Accountability and Constituent Voice in Rural development*, ed. Roy Steiner and Duncan Hanks (New York: Routledge, 2016). The Bhavishya Alliance is one of the cases in Adam Kahane, *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010).
- ⁴ Andrea Rodericks, *The Courage to Lead: The Bhavishya Alliance’s Journey in Tackling Undernutrition in Maharashtra, India, 2006–2012* (Synergos 2020).
- ⁵ DeeDee Yates, *Exploring Inner and Outer Geographies: A Joint Expedition in Public Health Leadership*. A case study of the African Public Health Leadership Initiative, Namibia, 2008–2013 (Synergos, 2020).
- ⁶ Heidee Buenaventura, *Bridging Inner and System Governance: Co-creating Responsive Health Systems for Better Health Outcomes of the Filipino Poor* (Synergos, 2020).
- ⁷ Morabo Morojele, *Remember Not to Forget: Reigniting Ubuntu for School Change in South Africa* (Synergos, 2020).
- ⁸ Beyene Tadesse, *A Blink of Transformation: Building Trust and Collaboration in Ethiopia’s Malt Barley Value Chain* (Synergos, 2020).
- ⁹ Renato Guimarães, *Jumping into the Waves of the River: A Case Study of the Pact for Education in Pará, Brazil* (Synergos, 2020).
- ¹⁰ Buenaventura, *Bridging Inner and System Governance*.
- ¹¹ On collective memory and pervasive mistrust, see Barbara Misztal, *Trust in Modern Societies: The Search for the Bases of Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).
- ¹² For a philosophical analysis of trust, see Annette Baier, “Trust and its Vulnerabilities,” *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).
- ¹³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- ¹⁴ Rodericks, *The Courage to Lead*, 34.
- ¹⁵ See Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue around Diversity and Social Justice,” in *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, ed. Lisa M. Landreman (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2013), 135–50.
- ¹⁶ Rodericks, *The Courage to Lead*, 29.
- ¹⁷ Yates, *Exploring Inner and Outer Geographies*, 7.
- ¹⁸ For a philosophical account of these concepts, see Jeremiah Reyes, “Loób and Kapwa: An Introduction to a Filipino Virtue Ethics,” *Asian Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2015): 148–71.
- ¹⁹ Shirley Pendlebury, “Inner Work for Social Change: A Conceptual Paper” (Synergos, 2020).
- ²⁰ Quoted in Rodericks, *The Courage to Lead*.
- ²¹ Buenaventura, *Bridging Inner and System Governance*.
- ²² Tadesse, *A Blink of Transformation*.
- ²³ Buenaventura, *Bridging Inner and System Governance*.
- ²⁴ Morojele, *Remember Not to Forget*.
- ²⁵ Carolyn T. Brown, “Footprints of the Soul: Uniting Spirit with Action in the World,” *Essays on Deepening the American Dream* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: The Fetzer Institute, 2003).
- ²⁶ Buenaventura, *Bridging Inner and System Governance*.
- ²⁷ See Heather A. Schoonover *et al.*, “Creating Space, Aligning Motivations, and Building Trust: A Practical Framework for Stakeholder Engagement Based on Experience in 12 Ecosystem Services Case Studies,” *Ecology and Society* 24, no 1 (2019).

²⁸For instance: *ICEA Journal, Special Issue on Social Justice, Inner Work & Contemplative Practice: Lessons & Directions for Multiple Fields* 1, no. 1 (July 2017); Christopher Ives, Rebecca Freeth, and Joern Fischer, “Inside-out Sustainability: The Neglect of Inner Worlds,” *Ambio* 49 (2020); Sonali Sangeeta Balajee, “An Evolutionary Roadmap for Belonging and Co-Liberation,” *Othering and Belonging* 3 (2018).

²⁹ Daniel G. Groody, “Globalizing Solidarity: Christian Anthropology and the Challenge of Human Liberation,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 262.

³⁰Gretchen Ki Steidle, “Proposed Conceptual Model for the Interrelationships of Personal Transformation, Prosocial Behavior and Social Change,” *Global Grassroots* (May 1, 2020).

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