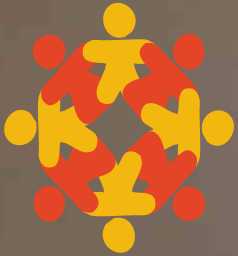




Samuel Family  
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in partnership with Kim Samuel



Social Connectedness



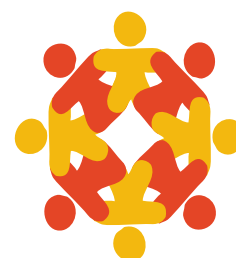
# Social Connectedness Programme



The Synergos Institute is a global non-profit organisation that works collaboratively with leaders, institutions and partnerships to create more just and lasting solutions to global poverty. Synergos aims to create a more equitable global society in which all individuals, families and communities have meaningful opportunities to improve the quality of their lives, for themselves and future generations.

*With offices in Johannesburg, Windhoek, Addis Ababa, and Cairo, Synergos is growing its networks and activities to engage across diverse regions of Africa. Registered as a non-profit organization in South Africa, Synergos South Africa is an intrinsic part of global Synergos which is headquartered in New York City.*

Synergos Institute, in partnership with Kim Samuel, and in collaboration with Oxford University's Poverty and Human Development Initiative, Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF) and the Foundation for Community Development (FDC) in Mozambique, is working to overcome isolation and deepen social connectedness for children and youth in Southern Africa.



## Social Connectedness

The research paper and approach combatting isolation and deepening connectedness emerges as a result of work and thinking advanced by Kim Samuel in her collaboration with Oxford University's Poverty and Human Development Initiative and through her leadership as President of the Samuel Family Foundation. Kim Samuel's work advances that social isolation includes the experience of profound, sustained loneliness and lack of belonging and can create significant barriers to socio-economic individual and community well-being.

Moreover, Kim Samuel has suggested that social connectedness provides people with a sense of belonging through meaningful and trusting relationships and bonds with those around them, facilitates access to supports and opportunities to achieve improvements that are desired and valued by both individuals and groups, and results in tangible assets for communities and nations.



The Social Connectedness Programme is made possible thanks to funding from the Samuel Family Foundation.



## Overcoming Isolation and Deepening Social Connectedness

# What is the Social Connectedness Programme?

The Social Connectedness Programme aims to:

- understand and reduce chronic isolation as a contributor to and consequence of poverty;
- increase social connectedness of children and youth

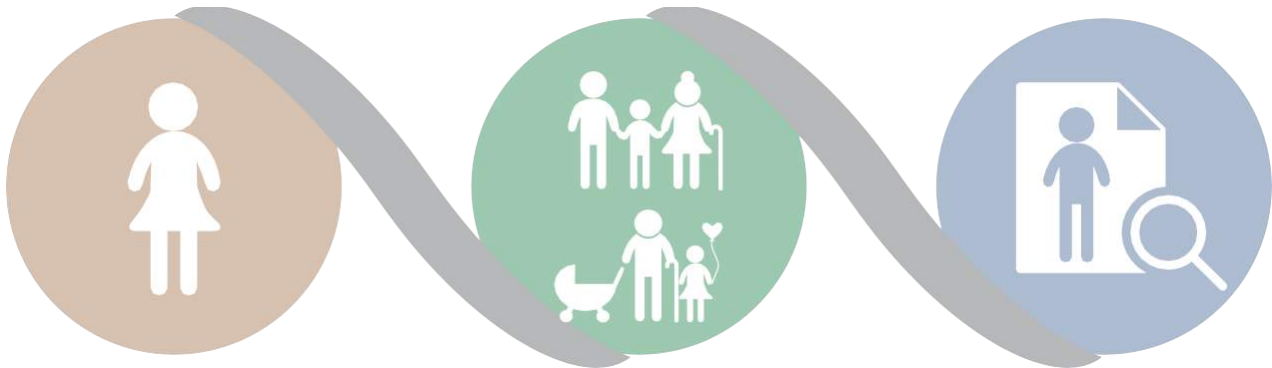
Synergos Institute, in partnership with Kim Samuel, and in collaboration with Oxford University's Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF) and the Foundation for Community Development (FDC) in Mozambique, Synergos has embarked on a major initiative regarding isolation and social connectedness for children and youth, particularly within the context of South and southern Africa.

Chronic isolation – 'the feeling of being alone at the bottom of a very deep well, with no straightforward way to get out'<sup>1</sup> – is one of the 'hidden dimensions' of poverty.

While isolation affects diverse people in every part of the world, the Synergos initiative focuses on children and youth living in poverty in South Africa, and more widely in southern Africa.

The programme works collaboratively to strengthen local resources and traditions of care; to identify and promote effective models for enabling meaningful connections for vulnerable children and youth; to influence practices of those who interact with children in a helping role; and to assess the impact of relevant public policies.

## Three strands of research inform the Social Connectedness Programme:



Under the broader theme *Missing dimensions of poverty*, the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) is exploring social isolation and its interconnections with poverty. A primary objective is to develop indicators to capture internationally comparable data on social connectedness and isolation, as dimensions of poverty.<sup>2</sup> Field work and other qualitative methods explore people's lived experiences of isolation and the social conditions that produce isolation.

The *Imbeleko*<sup>3</sup> research project of the NMCF and FDC is documenting endogenous approaches to family- and community-based care so as to understand the nature and magnitude of isolation among children and to explore endogenous ways of preserving social connectedness. Initially focussed on Mozambique and South Africa, *Imbeleko* is currently expanding into more Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries.

Synergos has conducted its own research on whether and how social isolation is recognised as an issue in research, policy, programming and practice concerning children and youth in South Africa. The research comprises a desktop review, policy analysis, interviews and focus group discussions with key role players. Documented knowledge exchanges and reflection sessions with organisations in Synergos networks also add to the knowledge base.

Alongside research, collaborative engagement with children and youth sector leaders is central to the Social Connectedness Programme, which works with selected organisations to embody social connectedness within their practice and as part of their programme activities. Through this process, we expect to identify guiding principles for best practice to prevent and overcome chronic isolation among children and youth.

# Defining social isolation and connectedness

Two working definitions, drawn from the OPHI conceptual proposal, guide the Social Connectedness Programme.

- **Social isolation** is ‘a deprivation of social connectedness’ and can be defined as ‘the inadequate quality and quantity of social relations with other people’ at different levels of interaction (individual, group, community and broader social environment)<sup>5</sup>. Subjectively, isolation may be experienced as loneliness or a persistent sense of being unable to approach others to find comfort, seek advice or engage physically or emotionally. It is like ‘being at the bottom of a well’, a situation in which others are unaware of one’s distressing condition.<sup>6</sup>
- **Socially connected individuals** have meaningful relationships and bonds with those around them, including their peers, families and communities. **Social connectedness** is intrinsically important to people because it gives them a sense of belonging; it is instrumentally important because it facilitates people’s access to opportunities and nurtures their participatory abilities.



## The benefits of social connectedness

Reducing social isolation improves the quality of life and health of individuals and contributes to social cohesion in communities.



People who feel socially connected tend to contribute more towards their communities, participating in the creation of social capital, in networks and in relationships that allow society to operate effectively.<sup>14</sup> Social connectedness is also associated with the economic performance of a community or region.

Being socially connected enables the young to participate in activities that build their social networks and strengthen their relations with their peers and communities. Such activities support self-actualization, enhance self-esteem and help to give children and youth a sense of belonging. Social connectedness is also a strong protective factor for children.

# Understanding chronic isolation<sup>7</sup>

Social isolation is a neglected dimension of poverty; it has adverse effects on individuals' quality of life, health and well-being; and it erodes people's sense of dignity and hinders them from realising their rights. Overcoming social isolation among vulnerable children and youth is a vital endeavour.

## *Social isolation is a neglected dimension of poverty*

Social isolation can be both a cause and a consequence of poverty. In turn, poverty can give rise to experiences of humiliation and shame that result in increasing isolation when people cannot forge meaningful connections with others. Worldwide studies, such as *The Voices of the Poor8*, have found that shame and isolation are common experiences for people living in poverty. So fundamental are social relations to human wellbeing, Amartya Sen argues, that deprivations of social connectedness are a core component of absolute poverty.<sup>9</sup>

For children, poverty is a multi-dimensional social condition that allocates disadvantages before birth and complicates children's capacity to develop to their full human potential. Although South Africa has made considerable progress in addressing poverty through social grants and other forms of social security, historical circumstances continue to affect, in complex ways, the relationship between and spatial distribution of poverty and social isolation.

Children and youth who live in extreme poverty experience many layers of deprivation, all made worse by stigma and social isolation. The effects of HIV/AIDS, in particular, cannot be underestimated. In South Africa, and more widely in Africa, the pandemic has disrupted family, community and social structures, leading to an increase in the number of orphans and of children who take care of sick and dying parents and siblings. Poverty, stigma, premature burdens of care and consequent school drop-out, and an inability to access services – all these circumstances put children at risk of social isolation, which in turn heightens the risks of further deprivations.

## *Social Isolation impairs wellbeing and development*

Satisfying and secure bonds and relationships with others are vital to people's wellbeing. According to neuroscientists, complex neuronal connections in the human brain form neural circuits<sup>10</sup>. Thought, emotions and action occur through the activation of these circuits, which are wired through both genetics and experience. The parenting we receive as children and the kinds of relationships we have throughout life change the brain by changing synaptic connections and circuits. The attunement and attentiveness of others profoundly affect the wiring of our brains.<sup>11</sup>

Poverty can undermine these vital connections by causing feelings of humiliation and shame, which can in turn result in isolation. Objective isolation can impede people's access to health facilities and geographic isolation, especially in poor rural community settings, has been associated with the perception of lower welfare.<sup>12</sup> Chronic feelings of subjective isolation can trigger physiological events that have a risk to health comparable in magnitude to the risks of smoking, obesity or high blood pressure, and can accelerate ageing<sup>13</sup>.

Just as social isolation is an essential element for understanding child poverty, so is social connectedness crucial in alleviating child poverty and supporting healthy physical, cognitive and social development. Children and youth who experience social isolation grapple with low self-esteem and poor emotional health, often played out in negative behaviours. Adolescence is a time for young people to expand their horizons and venture out into the world. But for many South African children and youth, the opposite is often the case: it is a time when social connections are constricted, just when they are most needed and desired.

*Preventing isolation among children and adolescents is vital to their healthy social development during these critical stages of life.*

# Enabling laws for addressing social isolation

The world over, common objectives of programmes to address social isolation and enhance meaningful social connections are to reduce vulnerability and provide support and care for those affected. The massive coordinated effort entailed in achieving these goals requires an enabling policy environment.

Social isolation is rarely mentioned in South Africa's national frameworks and policies for children and youth. Yet an analysis of existing policies reveals an enabling policy environment for programmes that promote and support social connectedness. The rationale for strengthening social connectedness resides in the South Africa's Bill of Rights and related legislation that safeguards the rights, dignity and best interests of children, as well as in policies for building the capacities of families and communities to protect and care for children. Children's rights are protected by global, regional and national commitments, which aim to ensure that all children have a quality of life that preserves their dignity and safety while meeting their basic needs.

South Africa's Departments of Social Development (DSD), Basic Education (DBE), and Health (DOH) all recognise social connectedness as a critical factor in healthy development. For example, the DSD's National Policy Framework for Orphans and Vulnerable Children is based on an ecological model of support that regards social connectedness as an outcome of psychosocial wellbeing and a principle of psychosocial support<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, the DBE's Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) Programme<sup>16</sup>, adopted in 2008 by all the SADC Ministries of Education, uses an ecological model to understand the interplay of intrinsic, systemic and societal barriers

to, and support for, learning and wellbeing. The CSTL programme regards meaningful social connections – for learners and teachers – as an enabling condition for school

learning. Within the DOH's Policy Guidelines on Child and Adolescent Mental Health<sup>17</sup>, social connectedness is an important underpinning idea in the definition of mental health and in protective factors for maintaining mental health.

At the level of long-term planning, the National Development Plan (NDP) offers a solid platform for engagement and influence. In order for South Africa to thrive as a prosperous non-racial democracy, the NDP claims that each person 'must have the capabilities they need to live a life they have reason to value and to which they aspire'<sup>18</sup>. Although not named as a capability, social connectedness is implicit in the NDP's vision for a socially cohesive society which promotes mutual respect and responsibility among its citizens.

South Africa has fine policies to protect and support children and an enabling policy environment for programmes to reduce isolation and increase meaningful connections for children and youth whose survival, care or development are compromised by poverty and other difficult circumstances. More needs to be done to translate policy into consistently good practice.



# Practices that help to overcome social isolation

Findings from Synergos research and focus group discussions point to four ways of addressing social isolation among children and youth.



Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCW) who support socially isolated children and young people have found that **building relationships** is crucial in ameliorating the emotional pain experienced as a result of poverty and its associated difficulties. They focus on building relationships with all role players in the cycle of poverty that their work entails – children, family members, teachers and relevant community or governmental agencies, so creating a network of connections for the children as well as their caregivers.



Children's **participation in decision-making** at home, at school and in their communities not only enhances their confidence in themselves but can help to develop a sense of belonging, and thus of feeling connected. Through participation, children and young people see themselves as contributing to their own development and immediate surroundings in a way that values them as competent individuals. As part of on-going efforts to increase resilience, it is critical to engage children and youth in the debate around poverty and isolation. Their involvement in any research process and in program design, implementation, and evaluation is necessary in order to assess their perceptions of isolation and enable them to play a part in finding, and acting upon, their own solutions to the problem of isolation<sup>19</sup>.



**Enabling environments** include the creation of “safe spaces” that can foster social connectedness; the experience of love and respect, and opportunities for children and youth to demonstrate their full potential. When children and youth feel that they can contribute meaningfully within the spaces in which they participate, this enhances their sense of belonging and connectedness to the programmes they are involved in.



Religion, culture, schools and teachers, and sport were associated with positive influences in dealing with chronic social isolation. For children and youth relationships with **caring adults** in the community – including teachers, traditional and spiritual leaders, coaches, and mentors – is an important measurement of social connectedness. For many of the children and youth these tools and meaningful interactions are their way out of isolation, and give them the courage and ability to emerge from their very painful pasts and situations. Initial findings from the *Imbeleko* research in Mozambique suggest that ceremony and other traditional practices have a crucial role in assisting people to emerge from painful pasts and connect with others in meaningful ways. The *Imbeleko* research suggests that respect for endogenous systems of care, centred on the value of ubuntu, should be a touchstone for this work.



## What needs to be done?

Efforts to address social isolation are currently hampered because the nature, magnitude and effects of isolation have not been well understood. Together we can change this by:

- increasing awareness and understanding of the problem and its spread
- identifying models of good practice in nurturing social connectedness
- training practitioners who engage with children
- highlighting social connectedness as a cross-cutting theme in public policy on children and youth; and developing a strong evidence base for advocacy.

Concerted action, on all these fronts, can unlock powerful prospects for preventing and mitigating the ‘wicked problem’ of chronic isolation<sup>20</sup>.

Synergos awareness-raising activities represent a start in the efforts of the Social Connectedness Programme to influence practice in the SADC region.

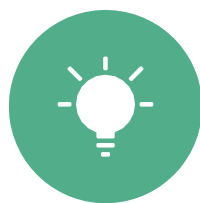
Synergos has facilitated knowledge sharing interventions with leaders and practitioners in the children and youth sectors.

Knowledge sharing dialogues:

- introduce the concept of isolation
- describe how it is both a cause and consequence of poverty
- validate existing practices, programmes and policies that strengthen meaningful social connectedness.

## How can you get involved?

As additional field research provides insights into promising ways to identify isolation and build meaningful connections for children and youth, the Social Connectedness Programme will support a limited number of innovative community-based initiatives, in partnership with key organisations in the children and youth sectors. We look forward to collaborating with our current – and new – partners to overcome a sometimes invisible problem, social isolation, that contributes to and exacerbates poverty among children and youth.



*We welcome your feedback with ideas, resources and suggestions*



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### Endnotes

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- 2 Zavaleta, D., Samuel, K. & Mills, C. (2014). Social isolation: A conceptual and measurement proposal. OPHI Working Papers 67.
- 3 “Imbeleko” means “caring for children” in several indigenous South African languages.
- 4 See note 2.
- 5 Note 2, p.5.
- 6 See note 1.
- 7 This section draws extensively on the OPHI Working Paper 67, and its earlier drafts. See note 2.
- 8 Narayan, D., Chalmers, R., Shah, M.K. and Petesch, P. (2000). *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the World Bank; Narayan, D., Patel, R. and World Bank. (2000). *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* Oxford: Oxford University Press for the World Bank.
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