

EDUCATION GOVERNANCE---SYNERGEIA'S PHILOSOPHY AND APPROACH



1. **Education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty.** Almost 3 out of 4 poor families in the Philippines have household heads whose highest educational attainment is elementary education.¹ Data show that income increases with higher levels of educational attainment.
2. **Literacy and livelihood programs are not just developing knowledge and skills.** They are about enabling people to think for themselves and developing processes through which they can identify issues that speak to their hearts, discuss them intelligently, debate on priorities, form a consensus, and work together to implement doable and small programs to address their needs.
3. **Synergeia's approach: bottom up, collaborative, and systemic.**
 - Bottom-up: decisions, programs, processes are developed by communities and not prescribed from the top.
 - Collaborative: everybody participates in decision-making so that programs are in accord with what they need.
 - Systemic: the difficulties in basic education are addressed as a whole and not through separate and discrete programs.

¹ National Statistical Coordination Board, Poverty Statistics

4. The process of transformation is “simple”.

- **First Encounter:** Synergeia uses data to enable local leaders to understand the deterioration in the quality of basic education. The crisis in education is made a personal issue: “Children are your constituents and their education is your responsibility as a leader.” Almost, always, a Synergeia mayor gives a testimony of his transformation as an education champion. His/her strategy broadens perspectives of local leaders, i.e. from a hard infrastructure orientation to a greater if not equal emphasis on soft infrastructure reforms, i.e. teacher training, parents’ training, provision of instructional materials. Governor Coscolluella named this “education governance” or making the process of delivering basic education collaborative, community-based, transparent, and cost-effective. Mayor Jesse Robredo (now DILG Secretary) added focus on results rather than inputs, and making officials accountable for decisions and resources spent. Mayor Diding Gamboa exhorts that the child is the focus of all our programs and that for every expenditure, local leaders should ask how this will improve learning achievement.
- **Shock and awe:** Through the process of osmosis, the Mayors and their local government officials become converts and practitioners of education governance. Of course, this is reinforced by small results of success: increases in achievement scores, high morale of teachers, strong parents’ participation in schools, and increasing popularity of mayors.
- **Education Summits.** The journey towards empowerment starts with calling the parents to an “education summit”. They are shocked on how poorly the children perform, and a cathartic period is provided where they share their thoughts on the following questions:
 - * What are my dreams for my children in school?
 - * What factors prevent these dreams from coming true?
 - * What can we do together to make our dreams come true?

To give everybody an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, every participant is given a card where he writes his answers to the questions. The rule is “One card for every answer”. This allows facilitators to cluster similar ideas together and to quickly summarize the response of a group. The Mayor then summarizes at least three of the doable programs that the LGU will undertake for the year.

- **Capacity building. What are the values, abilities, skills, and relationships that communities have to develop to achieve their goals?**

It would be easier for Synergeia to bring consultants to deliver training packages. But this approach will not develop their capacities to assess their needs and conduct training programs to address these needs. Synergeia chooses the more difficult path of working with them so that they can assess their needs, design and implement the training programs that best meet their needs. Synergeia's role is to facilitate and "systematize" discussions, guide consensus- building, review best practices and translate them into training modules, serve as a broker and connect them to resources, and be a "faceless partner" in program implementation. These involve being a cheerleader, a constructive critic, and a facilitator.

There are occasions when Synergeia "facipulates" by focusing discussion on research results. For example, instead of focusing on inputs, research shows that fostering accountability of schools to communities, developing autonomy in decision making, and performance incentive systems can improve the quality of education.

- **More than a Training Program.** What gives soul to Synergeia training programs? It is the genuine concern for the community members ----the dignity we give them by treating them as co-equals and articulating their worth as individuals. We listen to their ideas, and recognize that they know the best solutions to their problems.

Synergeia's role is to reassure them that they are not alone in their mission. We are there to strengthen their mastery of content by being conversant with best practices that they can consider.

This is the spirit that drives Synergeia's training programs. Trainors are from Synergeia partner-institutions who share and appreciate its mission: empowering their peers, or make them reach their potential. Discussions are experiential, workshops center on sharing best practices and reflections on how lessons learned can be applied.

- **Holding their Hands.** From experience, Synergeia knows that "sparks of inspiration" can easily die. Regular monitoring even through text messages and coaching are important. Some areas need less mentoring, but many need regular "guarding". Other concerns take the mayors away from the education agenda. Communities are not used to holding regular discussions. They lack resources and systems to translate plans into operations. Synergeia has to be "present" (even virtually) to enable

them to cope with their day-to-day challenges and constraints. We regularly converse with PMTs / Local School Boards and local leaders to review targets and work programs. We connect them with organizations that can provide them with more resources and expertise. Synergeia provides them with modules for training programs that they can consider.

- **Reinventing the Local School Board.** Local School Boards have the power to disburse the Special Education Fund tax. Imagine their potential if their capacities on collaboration, transparency, budgeting and revenue generation are built. They can focus the budget on programs to improve learning performance. They can engage the community in supporting the children and their schools. They can make schools and their officials accountable for performance.

Synergeia uses the Robredo model that broadens membership and functions of Local School Boards. The philosophy is “what the law does not prohibit it allows.” The Robredo model says the “budget is the key”. Local governments are accountable for spending public funds efficiently.

- **Building Blocks.** Program implementation is like building a house: one block on top of the other. Programs need to be continuous, regularly monitored and evaluated. Program results are communicated to community members who celebrate successes and learn from failures.

5. Reaping the Rewards of the Program.

- **Paradigm shift in tackling the education crisis.** “We have stopped finger pointing and finding faults. Education is our concern and we will tackle it collaboratively. “(Walang turuan sa problema. Hindi na natin tinitingnan ang mali; no finger pointing; lahat tayo may problema.)
- **Communities accept that “It takes a village to raise a child”.** Education is no longer the sole responsibility of DepED. Parents are now asking for results and holding schools accountable for the performance of their children. “Hindi na bahala si sir. Ang mga magulang at pamahalaang lokal, tinatanong na ang resulta, binabantayan ang mga paaralan.” (Sir is not the only one responsible. We are equally responsible. Parents and local leaders are holding schools accountable with respect to achievement scores)

- **Local governments are deeply immersed in understanding the problems in schools and are working with their communities to address them.** Their management is totally hands-on. The mayors visit the schools regularly, confer with the teachers and principals, and have taken charge of distributing workbooks and teachers' manuals.
- "One-half of our children can read!" "Test scores in achievement tests are increasing!"
- Barangay officials serve as lookouts for children who drop out of school. In some communities like Magsaysay, Misamis Oriental there is 0 dropout.
- **Teachers are visibly more articulate and participative.** This is a big contrast to past year's meetings when they did not have the courage to speak. Synergeia summits and workshops have given them ample opportunities to share their ideas and raise questions. "We have greater confidence in teaching. Training programs enhanced our teaching capabilities particularly in saying the English sounds well and in developing the capability of children to comprehend."
- **The provision of Teachers' manuals and workbooks helps teachers in day-to-day instruction.** In a way, they can standardize the ways through which the subject matter is taught every day. The children on the other hand are exposed to multiple opportunities to develop their comprehension and creativity.
- **"For the first time in their life, children have a book to read.** The books connect their mothers and siblings to the classrooms. Every night, they go over the work exercises together."
- Local School Boards are now operational with functions, membership and initiatives that go beyond what the law, the Local Government Code requires.

6. Synergeia's Journey Towards Empowerment

