

Collective Leadership for Sustainable Development Evidence from Research and Practice

Despite progress towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), many challenges persist due to emergencies, crises, and systemic complexities. To drive lasting and transformational change, it is imperative that we embrace collective leadership as an important lever for advancing global development and invest resources in its development.

There is a growing body of evidence documenting the critical role of people working throughout systems in driving development outcomes across a range of key sectors, including economic development, government, education, and health.

Despite this, very little official development assistance is directed toward leadership development. In addition, few efforts are focused on developing leadership capacities that would help individuals and groups participate and lead the work of changing the systems within which they operate.

This brief summarizes an evidence review commissioned by the [People First Community](#) and generously funded by the Lemann Foundation. To develop the report, a team of researchers reviewed existing evidence and insights to understand how collective leadership can be harnessed to transform systems and catalyze sustainable development. Specifically, researchers aimed to define collective leadership, review evidence on its relevance and effectiveness, link it to sustainable development and systems change, and propose a framework for its development.

KEY CONCEPTS

Collective leadership is defined as a group of people (a “collective”) making meaning together so they can find direction and coordinate their interdependent actions to achieve a socially useful outcome that each would not have produced on their own.

Collective leadership development is a process that includes any program, intervention, or activity that intentionally promotes the capacity and practice of a group of actors who engage with each other in advancing a valued common purpose. Organizations working to develop collective leadership utilize common programmatic approaches to drive a number of key outcomes. Approaches include cohort-based fellowship programs, forms of network building, and efforts to create spaces and processes for dialogue, learning, and collaboration. Outcomes include ensuring relevant systems have: a critical mass of purpose-driven leaders; capacity (in individuals and the groups) to do collective work; relationships and trust among leaders; and spaces, processes, and cultures to advance learning and collaboration.

FINDINGS

1. Evidence of Impact

The evidence shows that collective leadership enhances community resilience; improves performance of organizations, groups, and teams; and fosters personal growth.

- **Community Resilience:** Communities that embrace collective leadership practices are better equipped to respond to shocks and setbacks by fostering diverse perspectives, collaboration, and problem solving.
- **Organizational Performance:** Teams and organizations perform better when they embrace collective leadership, likely because a collective approach leverages diverse perspectives, promotes collaboration and communication, fosters adaptability and innovation, and ultimately nurtures a positive organizational culture.
- **Individual Transformation:** Individuals engaging in collective leadership are themselves transformed through the experience. Participation in collective leadership programs enhances civic engagement and efficacy, empowers marginalized groups to find solutions, and boosts individuals' belief in their potential to make a difference.

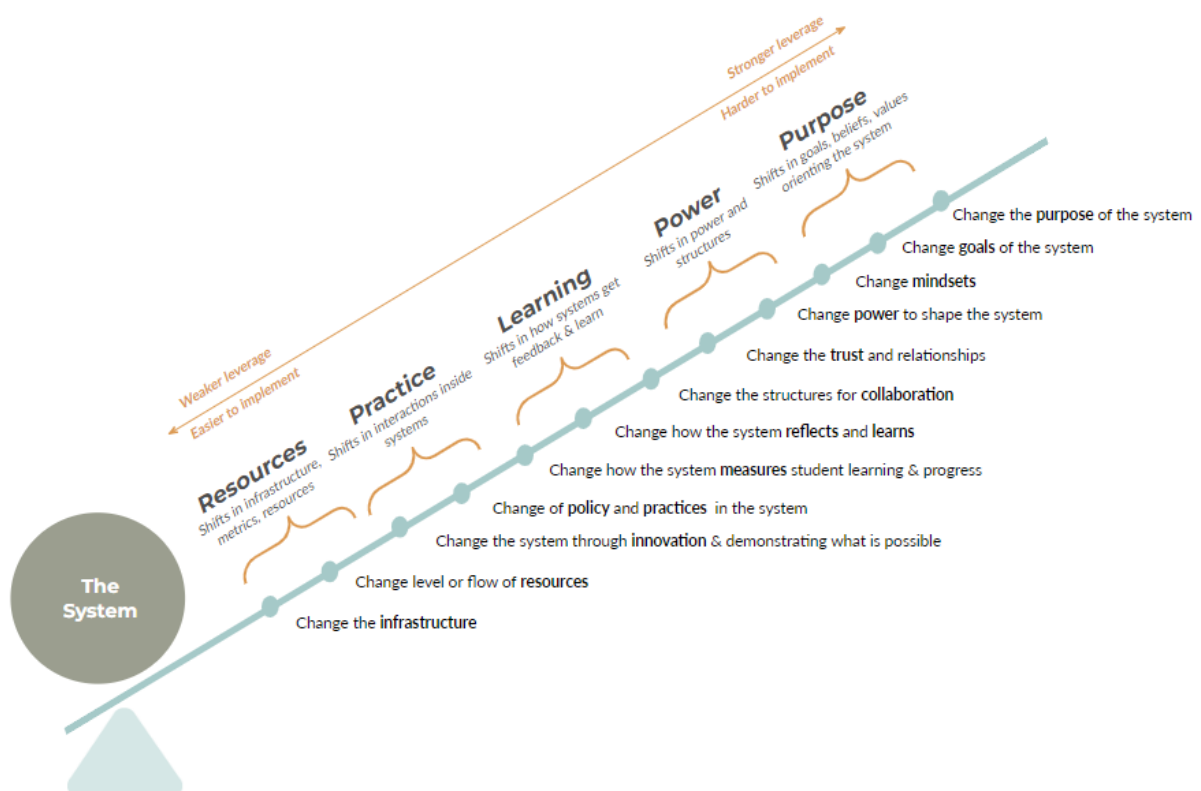
2. Collective Leadership is needed to drive systems change

Solving adaptive, complex challenges requires collective leadership. The traditional global development paradigm relies heavily on technical solutions, which have fallen short in achieving sustained progress on many development outcomes. Achieving sustainable development and solving many of the problems of the 21st century – from climate change, to economic and education inequality, to health crises – requires us to abandon previous notions of leadership to re-imagine it as a collective and adaptive pursuit.

Collective leadership involves a group of diverse collaborators working together to find direction, coordinate actions, and achieve shared purposes. It is characterized by a commitment to power sharing, an asset-based approach, a relational way of being, and a systems lens. This approach leverages the strengths and knowledge of diverse leaders to create sustainable change.

Collective leadership and its development can help shift a system's purpose, power, and learning, which are all critical for sustainable change.

According to systems theorist Donella Meadows, leverage points are places in a system where *a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything*. They range from easier-to-implement but weaker levers (like resources and practice) to more challenging but highly effective levers (like purpose, power, and learning). (See graphic below).



Many global initiatives still primarily conceive of development as a technical challenge, focusing their efforts on changing the visible, easy-to-target symptoms of an under-performing system, while leaving more fundamental aspects of the system such as mindsets, beliefs, and power distribution intact. This limits their sustainability and impact.

3. Collective Leadership can be developed

Evidence and practice shows that collective leadership is most likely to emerge under certain conditions: when a critical mass of leaders at many levels of the system share a purpose, represent the perspectives of the communities served, are deeply connected with and trust each other despite their differences, and have spaces and processes for reflection, collaboration and learning. Moreover, global and local stakeholders can support the development of collective leadership. Common approaches (not necessarily mutually exclusive) include:

- **Cohort-based fellowship programs to build collective leadership capacities.** These programs aim to attract and develop new talent often from diverse backgrounds to create new leadership pathways for individuals in leadership roles. The key objectives include shifting the overall leadership landscape at the system level. The fellowships provide a combination of on-the-job experiences, training, and time-bound leadership development activities, all the while developing collective leadership capacities in individuals or groups as part of their professional development.
- **Network building activities connect individuals with shared interests or a commitment to shaping specific areas of practice or policy.** Networks foster collaboration, information sharing, and support among leaders, enhancing collective leadership.
- **Convening to facilitate dialogue, collaboration, and action seek to directly relax the constraints to collective action and learning.** These approaches create spaces and facilitate processes for individuals to develop a shared sense of purpose, collectively understand problems, imagine and pursue solutions, and co-construct meaning from experience and/or evidence. They develop insight and practice necessary for working on complex issues, emphasizing systems thinking and problem-solving.

THE WAY FORWARD

While momentum is building around collective leadership development, there are still a number of gaps that practitioners, funders, and the research community need to address to realize the potential of collective leadership for systems change:

- **Focus collective leadership development efforts on growing collective capacity to change the system,** not just on developing individual leaders. This involves practitioners focusing on the scale of the effort needed to reach a critical mass, as well as considering network building and process facilitation as complements to efforts to develop leadership capacity in individuals and eco-systems.
- **Prioritize long-term investments and operational support** for global, regional, country-, and community-based organizations dedicated to developing collective leadership at different levels.
- **Invest in measurement and strategic research** to further the field of collective leadership development. This involves innovating and improving how we measure collective leadership development in individuals and in ecosystems; putting practitioners at the center of research and evidence generation efforts for how to develop collective leadership; and investing in supporting emergent research that establishes the link between collective leadership development and system change.

METHODOLOGY

The [People First Community](#) initiated this project to explore collective leadership and its significance for sustainable development. This project was designed as a collaborative endeavor with planned engagements between the research team and other collaborators. The project unfolded in two phases: an Evidence Review (Phase I) and Co-operative Inquiry (Phase II).

Phase I: Evidence Review. The research team gathered evidence from diverse sources, including academic research, input from the People First Community's members and committees, and by following citation trails within the collected evidence. They intentionally sought a broad range of evidence, including publications in multiple languages. Over 300 documents were collected, cataloged, and reviewed for relevance. The team applied an interpretive and pragmatic approach to their review.

Phase II: Co-operative Inquiry. The evidence review indicated that collective leadership matters for sustainable development and can be developed. However, it also revealed a disconnect between academic and practitioner sources. To bridge this gap, the research team engaged in a co-operative inquiry process. This phase involved collaborative meetings among the authors, blending insights from academic research with practical knowledge from the field of global sustainable development.