

# Collective Leadership as a Path for Sustainable Development

## *Putting People, Agency and Leadership First*

### **Introduction**

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### **Introduction**

The economic, health and education challenges facing communities are becoming all the more pressing, and it is clear that our historic paradigm for development will be challenged to meet this moment. The well-intentioned 2030 Sustainable Development Goals have slipped even further out of reach.

For decades, the international development community has grappled with how to enable local ownership for development, which is essential to foster sustainable, systemic change. Calls for decolonizing aid by elevating the leadership of people marginalized by systemic oppression, for prioritizing community driven approaches, greater localization and direct grant-making to local organizations, among others, are becoming louder.

However, one of the missing pieces of the broader effort to foster locally led development over the past decades has been the importance of recognizing and developing collective leadership as a path to sustainable progress.

The People-First Community (referenced hereon as Community/We) is a cross-sectoral and globally diverse group of practitioners, academics, public and private sector actors with a shared belief in the importance of prioritizing investing in collective leadership development as a path for sustainable development. This Community believes we have not had enough focus on leadership development within the international development field to this point, and that when the international community has focused on it, we have not done so with a goal of developing collective, diverse, locally rooted, ethical leadership.

This Community initially emerged from a convening at The Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in 2019 aimed at building a movement for change inspired by a central question, "How do we ignite a revolution in development that has people and leadership at the center?" In recent months, we have worked collaboratively to clarify our focus and the objectives of this effort.

This working paper summarizes our main learnings thus far and is intended to be a starting point for further feedback and engagement.

## I. Why? — The case for prioritizing leadership development as a path to sustainable development

The approach of the international development community has contributed to massive progress over the last decades. We have achieved immense wins by making vaccines broadly available, enabling all children access to schooling, building roads and investing in easily scalable technical solutions that could be driven top down with the promise of delivering short-term outputs. Now, as the problems we are addressing become all the more complex, and the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to disrupt years of progress, we will need to evolve our approach. Tackling the adaptive challenges ahead — like managing chronic diseases and delivering high-quality primary care, fostering learning in schools, and building resilient infrastructure- will require shifting the power to drive development to local stakeholders, enabling them to be globally informed and continuously improve over time.

As the development community has reflected on progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and focused on reaching the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, there has been growing recognition that locally led development is crucial. Shifting the narrative from local people and communities as the beneficiaries and recipients of development efforts, to understanding their critical role and inherent ability to drive and own development efforts in their own contexts becomes paramount.

Locally led development and local ownership can be achieved through different dimensions. Among many others, some of these dimensions include:

- Community-driven development (CDD): CDD approaches aim to empower local people by putting decision making around how to identify and implement projects and investments into the hands of the community. In so doing, CDD works to build opportunities to strengthen the peoples' voice to demand greater accountability from the institutions that are relevant to their livelihoods.<sup>1</sup>
- Localization agendas: The Grand Bargain commitments between donors and major aid organizations prompted a significant shift in the way humanitarian aid was financed. Since then several organizations have called on donors to change partnership and funding arrangements to be more favorable and directed to local actors.<sup>2</sup>
- Decolonizing aid: The murder of George Floyd and subsequent #BlackLivesMatter protests in the US and globally have reinvigorated discussions about power and privilege in all parts of society. Within the global development and humanitarian aid sector, the global movement against systemic oppression has manifested in greater calls for the decolonization of aid and historically engrained colonial systems and mindsets that remain to be addressed.<sup>3</sup>

This Community acknowledges all these efforts as critical ones. At the same time, we believe that growing support and investment in efforts to develop collective leadership is one of the

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<sup>1</sup> Community-Driven Development: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/communitydrivendevelopment#1>

<sup>2</sup> Grand Bargain Commitment: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

<sup>3</sup> Aid reimaged <https://medium.com/@aidreimagined>

dimensions that could have a significant impact on fostering locally led development and decolonizing aid, but that has been mostly overlooked by the international development ecosystem.

Although all major aid agencies have included “capacity building” as a key program element since the mid-1990s, in practice, capacity building efforts to date have primarily focused on targeted technical skills for the purpose of implementing specific projects and interventions, rather than a more comprehensive approach that includes the soft skills needed for leading long-term change. These include decision-making skills, relationship management, self-awareness, adaptability, and a growth mindset among others.

In parallel, a keyword analysis of Official Development Assistance (ODA) grant descriptions found that only \$15.2M went to projects related to local “leadership development” across sectors in 2018—approximately .01% of total development assistance. And even this small fraction was not directed towards developing the collective leadership of local communities.

In the ‘80s and ‘90s, several foundations and aid agencies invested quite significantly in leadership development as a critical ingredient for sustainable transformation. However, the architects of these efforts have reflected that they were not undertaken with a focus on developing diverse leadership inclusive of marginalized populations. Also, the leadership development focus was often on providing local leaders with an elite, Western education rather than on developing leadership deeply rooted in local context, culture and values, and focused on their own communities’ sustainable development<sup>4</sup>. As a result, while these efforts contributed to the diaspora and to an elite, they did not have the desired result of generating what we refer to as “collective leadership”.

However, the impact we have witnessed first-hand from initiatives focused on developing collective leadership give us confidence that this focus is critical to increasing the likelihood of improved outcomes and systems change.

We see a clear gap and an untapped opportunity resulting from the lack of a concerted effort to invest in collective leadership development as a path to driving sustained outcomes.

### OUR VISION

This Community envisions a world where everyone in communities and countries — from young people and their families to people in positions of influence at every level of the system — exert leadership in a collective way towards a better future.

Our vision of a world where collective leadership development is prioritized is one where:

- Developing leadership is seen as a critical and actionable investment priority, rather than an ‘add on’ or ‘knock-on effect’ of policies, programs, tools and infrastructure.
- Not investing in collective leadership development would be seen as detrimental to efforts for sustainable development.

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<sup>4</sup> Conversations with Darren Walker, Gary Toenniessen and Joyce Moock, March-April 2021

- Collective leadership would be seen as coming from within developing contexts e.g. local people, communities, institutions and governments, and supported by the global development ecosystem.
- Capacity building investments would focus on long-term collective leadership development as opposed to short-term transference of technical skills.
- Measuring success would be based on the growth of individual and collective leadership capabilities.

We feel a sense of urgency to move towards this vision in partnership with the international development community.

## II. What? — What do we mean by efforts to develop collective leadership and what do they entail?

In this paper, by collective leadership we mean the collaborative action of many, who through their vision and commitment inspire the leadership of others—and who, by working together, can effect far greater, more sustainable change than individuals acting alone.

Our commitment to developing collective leadership references developing the ability of everyone to exert leadership including, but not limited to, those who by nature of their positions have significant influence over the welfare of others. We believe that leadership is an action and something that anyone can practice, starting with the inner-self work of growing consciousness. It is not something that any particular person is born to do, but rather can be cultivated and nurtured.

We believe we need to move beyond individualistic leadership models towards leadership that is inherently a collective pursuit that involves diverse stakeholders building relationships, listening to each other, and collaborating.

There are no shortage of efforts prioritizing the development of collective leadership as described above.

These efforts entail an evolved learning and evaluation approach to measure leadership development as a path to systems change. The current research agenda mostly focuses on the impact of discrete interventions in policy or practice and in short time-frames. Achieving the adaptive change needed for the next era of development will require a new approach that values how leadership capabilities are developing and understands how longer-term systemic effects are emerging.

Within this, a particular focus on the role that people, leadership, and agency play in advancing development progress is critical. All too often, what we evaluate and understand determines what is visible and where funding flows. We do not pay sufficient consideration for the role that people, leadership, and institutions play in making effective policy, innovating locally for change, or scaling innovations successfully. This important element for contextualizing evidence is often missing,

despite the fact that individual agency and leadership is a critical lever for change that can enhance the success of other investments.

We also need a better understanding of which approaches to developing leadership and agency are most effective. A learning agenda that explores openly and adaptively how to better develop people to exert leadership and work collectively with others would serve us well. We seek to look not just at the long-run, but also to explore our assumptions about the best ways to engage, develop, and support the emergence and advancement of the leadership identities, mindsets, and practices in the short and medium-term.

Finally, we need to advance the conversation around how funder accountability mechanisms that are increasingly focused on measurement and evidence privilege intervention-led approaches. One promising direction might involve focusing indicators of success not based on traditional output and outcome metrics, but rather on whether those who have received funding are learning and growing in their leadership capability and ownership for development.

This Community also believes that global organizations and networks need to evolve their roles to contribute to collective leadership development. Global networks can play a significant role in enabling local leaders to be globally informed and able to respond to development challenges by exposing them directly to knowledge and insights from other local leaders and communities.

Network approaches can spread and share knowledge across geographies through fostering peer-learning, and can help reach significant scale. They can support the inner-self work of local leaders and in building the mindsets, processes, and capabilities among leaders in communities of learning and adapting, rather than simply transposing a technical set of best practices.

### **III. How? — Considerations and actions to advance this agenda**

In recent months, we have worked collaboratively with the other stakeholders in this Community to clarify our focus and priorities to advance this agenda.

Looking ahead, we will be working collaboratively as a Community to move the following priorities:

1. Advancing collective thinking on the kinds of leaders we need to be developing and how to develop them;
2. Defining and exploring learning questions through a research agenda around leadership development as a path to systemic change; and
3. Building support and advocating for a greater investment in leadership development within the global development community.

With this focus and priorities, the objective of this Community is twofold: first, the Community intends to be a space for learning and thought partnering among its members, a space for informing members' own priorities, organically looking for potential synergies and areas for collaboration. Second, it also aims to be a community dedicated to raising awareness of this topic and influencing the international development ecosystem.

## Draft Working Paper

We acknowledge that there is still a lot to unpack and collaboratively learn from one another as we work to advance this agenda.

These are some of the questions our Community will be focusing on in the next months:

- What are we learning about the kind of leadership we are working to develop?
- What are we learning about how to recognize, respect and develop the leadership that is needed?
- What shifts in measurement and evaluation would be necessary to achieve this vision?
- What is the role of global actors in support of local leaders?
- What more can be done to build support and advocate for greater investments towards this agenda?

As we undertake this journey, we invite you to join the conversation! Please share your ideas, give feedback on our evolving effort, and contribute to our expanded understanding of collective leadership development as a path to sustainable progress. For more information, please visit [www.peoplefirstdev.org](http://www.peoplefirstdev.org) or contact us at [people@peoplefirstdev.org](mailto:people@peoplefirstdev.org).