

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP, MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS AND THE SDGs: THE CASE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN SDG HUB

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Multi-stakeholder partnerships are viewed as key to achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs. Yet the nature of the leadership required to establish such partnerships has received scant attention. Building on emerging non-individualist and heterarchical approaches to leadership, this paper explores the leadership capacities needed to create impactful multi-sector partnerships, particularly between academic institutions and governments. The South African SDG Hub, a South African initiative focused on building networks to foster the evidence-informed realisation of the SDGs, is used to illustrate the viability and effectiveness of such approaches to leadership. This analysis is used as the basis for proposing good practices that could accelerate the realisation of the SDGs – particularly in the context of developing countries.

Introduction: The SDGs as heterarchical agenda

In 2015 the 193 United Nations member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 SDGs with their 169 targets. In many ways, the 2030 Agenda and SDGs represent a sea-change from previous development agendas. The 2030 Agenda, for example, is to be implemented by both developing and developed countries. To reach its ambitious targets, the notion of multi-stakeholder partnerships is foregrounded, particularly in SDG 17 (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development). Underlying the notion of multi-stakeholder partnerships is the idea that all major societal groupings – notably government, business and civil society – should partner around issues of shared concern.

An important platform for the inclusion of academic and other research institutions into the realisation of the 2030 Agenda is the Technology Facilitation Mechanism, originally established by the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. It has three components: the United Nations' Interagency Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs (which includes the 10-member group of representatives from civil society, the private

sector and the scientific community), the multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation, or the STI Forum and an online platform to disseminate STI 'initiatives, mechanisms and programmes' (UN, 2019).

The prominence of multi-stakeholder partnerships, linked with the voluntary nature of the SDGs, provides an important indication of the need for understanding the implied nature of the kind of leadership necessary for achieving the SDGs. Conventional approaches to leadership that assign influence to charismatic individuals do not seem to be up to the task of responding to the decidedly heterarchical conception of influence that underlies the 2030 Agenda. Rather than being located in one person, the influence needed to realise the 2030 Agenda seems to be distributed across a large array of individuals and institutions. In this sense, even transformational leadership – arguably the most prominent contemporary leadership theory – seems insufficient to significantly accelerate attainment of the SDGs. In fact, the heroic bias of transformational leadership seems to introduce the risk of disabling such partnerships (Fourie and Höhne, 2019).

Yet the heterarchical distribution of influence implied by the 2030 Agenda and required to achieve the SDGs does not mean that the scholarship on leadership is unable to add value. But this does require that the focus needs to shift from heroic theories to theories that are based on an understanding of leadership as distributed influence. One of the most fruitful areas of research on this understanding of leadership as distributed influence is network leadership theory. Building on the foundational work on network theory by Balkundi and Kilduff, the following four principles form the basis of the analysis of leader influence: the primacy of relations between actors, the importance of actors' embeddedness in social fields, the social utility of network connections, and the notion of structural patterning (Balkundi and Kilduff, 2006). This forms the basis for an understanding of leadership that will be used to make recommendations for creating multi-stakeholder partnerships to attain the SDGs. Leadership, understood in this way, is 'an emergent quality of a group', with distinctly 'heterarchical' patterns of influence (Carter et al., 2015).

Literature review: Leadership in heterarchical contexts

We use experience of the South African SDG Hub to illustrate the potential impact of collective approaches to leadership in order to develop an understanding of how to create impactful multi-stakeholder partnerships to achieve the SDGs. The core contention is that the heterarchical context implied by the SDGs – the absence of punitive measures for non-compliance as well as the absence of an authoritative body which is able to enforce forms of compliance – requires collective leadership. In order to appreciate the ways in which the experience of the South African SDG Hub confirms the use and value of collective leadership in attaining the SDGs, a snapshot of the literature on the topic is required.

For most of its history the scholarly field of leadership studies approached the phenomenon of leadership as something that is located in an extraordinary individual. Trait-based theories of leadership, popularised by Galton in the late 1800s, for example, hold that leaders are individuals who exhibit specific character traits. A focus on the primacy of an influential individual can also be found in charismatic and neo-charismatic theories of leadership. Transformational leadership – the most influential contemporary neo-charismatic theory of leadership – uses the ‘four Is’ to cement the connection between individual leaders and the influence process (e.g. Bass, 1985). According to this theory, leaders exhibit idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, individualised consideration and inspirational motivation.

Despite the continued impact of leadership theories that assign influence primarily to the individual leader, collective leadership theories are increasingly challenging this narrative. These theories approach leadership as manifested in ‘a collective behaviour resulting from a number of interdependent entities interacting with one another, typically in a non-linear way’ (Cullen-Lester and Yammarino, 2016: 173). Understood in this way, leadership resides not in extraordinary individuals, but in interactions between people, thereby ‘constituting a network of relationships that emerges and shifts over time’. Put differently, leadership is understood as ‘a property of the collective, not the individual’ (Cullen-Lester and Yammarino, 2016: 173). When defined in this way, collective leadership serves as an umbrella term for a range of leadership theories, including team leadership, shared leadership, distributed leadership, rotated leadership and network leadership.

Three concepts are helpful in understanding collective leadership, namely concentration, roles and time (Contractor, 2012: 995–998). The first aspect has to do

with patterns of concentration of influence in a group. Central to collective leadership is the shared nature of the influencing process. Yet the ability to influence others is not distributed evenly in any group. Most, if not all, expressions of collective leadership find some measure of concentration of influence amongst sub-groupings or individuals within the group – even though sub-groups and individuals outside of these concentrations also have a measure of influence.

The second aspect of collective leadership sharpens our awareness of the existence of the shifting and therefore dynamic distribution of roles within a group. A role, used in this sense, is defined as ‘a dynamic set of recurring behaviours, both expected and enacted, within a particular group context’ (Contractor, 2012: 995). Carson and Tesluk (2007) identify four collective leadership roles. The navigator role ‘enables the collective to establish and maintain a clear purpose and direction’, the engineer role ‘structures the collective and task’, the social integrator role ‘maintains healthy and productive social interactions and relational processes’ and the liaison role ‘develops and maintains productive relationships with key external stakeholders’ (Contractor, 2012: 998). The distribution of these roles within a group context can be expected to change as group dynamics, the external environment and the shared goal evolve. The third aspect, therefore, namely the dynamics of collective leadership over time, can only be adequately understood when this temporal dimension is included as ‘multiple individuals enact multiple roles (Contractor, 2012: 998).

Social network analysis is the most important way of analysing concrete examples of collective leadership, as it is ‘an inherently relational approach’ and – importantly – allows for the emergence of multiple leaders in a group (Mehra et al., 2006: 233). A network, used in this way, refers to the ‘form of an integrated structure’ that involves numerous actors with ‘multiple linkages, working on cross-boundary, collaborative activities’ (Silvia and McGuire, 2010: 265). In their study on the identification and evaluation of leadership networks, Hoppe and Reinelt (2010) develop a framework for identifying types of leadership networks, including peer leadership networks, organisational leadership networks and field-policy networks. Yet the type of leadership network most applicable to creating multi-stakeholder partnerships and responding to a complex set of shared goals is what Hoppe and Reinelt call collective leadership networks. Put differently: collective leadership can be analysed fruitfully when the distribution of influence is viewed in terms of network theory. They define a

collective leadership network as a 'self-organised system of social ties among people attracted to a common cause', often rooted in a 'sense of community and purpose' (Hoppe and Reinelt, 2010: 601). Such leadership networks are characterised by 'flexible leadership, according to what is perceived and required' and the inclusion of a 'diversity of people and perspectives' (Hoppe and Reinelt, 2010: 612).

The extent to which collective leadership differs from other forms of leadership is explored in a study on public leadership networks by Silvia and McGuire (2010). They find that collective leadership approaches, in particular network leadership, prioritise behaviours that differ from those prioritised by more individualised approaches to leadership. Their study of 417 public sector leaders identified the following characteristic behaviours:

- Treating all network members as equals;
- Freely sharing information amongst network members;
- Creating trust among network members;
- Encouraging support from and keeping the network in good standing with the higher authority; and
- Encouraging support from and keeping the network in good standing with internal and external stakeholders (Silvia and McGuire, 2010: 270–271).

The case: The South African SDG Hub in a heterarchical environment

The evolution of the South African SDG Hub at the University of Pretoria provides a helpful illustration of the potential impact of a number of tenets of collective leadership theories.

To start, the South African SDG Hub needs to be contextualised in terms of the critical role that academic institutions are perceived to be able to play in the realising the 2030 Agenda. In their report on the topic, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (Kestin et al., n.d.) highlights the critical role of universities. Researchers – based at universities and elsewhere – could assist governments and broader society to better understand the challenges addressed by the SDGs, localising the SDGs, developing solutions, evaluating responses and supporting further operationalising the SDGs. Within this context, the South African SDG Hub

seeks to unlock the developmental potential of research and innovation developed at African universities.

The South African SDG Hub was launched in 2017 by the then Minister in the Presidency, Jeff Radebe, as a response to these and other imperatives. Hosted by the University of Pretoria, the Hub currently structures its activities in four work streams.

1. Knowledge sharing: Its online platform shares open access South African research on the SDGs. An Artificial Intelligence grant from Microsoft enabled a team of developers to investigate the potential of deep learning to improve the search functions. The Hub also co-curated a monthly national SDG bulletin with the United Nations and South African government, and released a multi-stakeholder publication on the SDGs.
2. Policy advice: The Hub's primary avenue for policy advice is direct engagements with the South African government. But it also releases its numerous briefing notes.
3. Dialogue promotion: The Hub partners with interested funders to host public lectures on matters related to the SDGs.
4. Capacity building: The Hub hosts South Africa's first Master's in Development Practice, with its curriculum developed in collaboration with the Global Association of Master's in Development Practice hosted by Columbia University in New York City . Its first cohort started with the programme in 2019.

The Hub's strong position in facilitating stronger relationships between the government and the research community, as evidenced by its four work streams, however, is less the result of detailed planning and more a matter of emergence. An account of some of the key moments in its development illustrates the emergent character of the Hub.

When the concept of the Hub was first presented to South African government departments, the reception was lukewarm. In response to this reaction, the team based at the University of Pretoria decided to design and launch the platform without any external support. But within six months after the launch of the free-to-use online platform with some of South Africa's best SDG-relevant research, it became clear that the number of users remained low. This challenge led to a deeper investigation into

the barriers to the successful utilisation of evidence to improve policy-making processes (Fourie, 2018).

That review revealed a number of barriers. The researchers need to accept, in a spirit of self-criticism, that peer-reviewed research is not the only form of evidence that policy makers rely on to craft policies. They also rely on other forms of evidence, notably experience and political know-how (Hunsmann, 2012). Linked to this finding is the fact that policy makers are often faced with conflicting forms of evidence, which are typically a consequence of conflicting paradigms or ideologies adopted amongst researchers in a particular field (Juntti et al., 2009). Viewed from the demand-side, government departments often lack the appropriate analytical capacity, making it difficult for them to gauge the relevance of research and/or integrate research into policy-making processes (Howlett, 2009). Another barrier to evidence-informed policy making is the perceived lack of timeliness of peer-reviewed research (Innvaer et al., 2002). Whereas policy makers often face challenges that need to be addressed over the short term, peer-reviewed research is mostly a medium- to long-term endeavour.

The most significant barrier to the effective uptake of research into policy making, however, is the absence of personal relationships between policy makers and researchers. Innvaer and colleagues (2002) found, in a foundational study, that personal contact is in fact the most important ‘facilitator’ for incorporating research into policy making. This finding is echoed by an extensive literature review conducted by Oliver and colleagues. According to Lorenc and colleagues, the concept of ‘credibility’ is important in describing the type of personal relationships that enable policy makers to make effective use of research. Credibility, in this sense, refers ‘less to the methodological or substantive characteristics of the research itself than to the personal authority of the individuals putting it forward, particularly senior academics’, as academics and academic institutions are typically seen as ‘neutral and disinterested’ (Lorenc et al., 2014).

Based on the outcome of this analysis, the Hub decided to devote its relatively limited resources not to the expansion of its online platform, but to building trust with key stakeholders in the South African government and in multilateral institutions. The team based at the University of Pretoria came to the realisation that the risk of not investing in such relationships was greater than the risk of engaging in relationship-building activities – by definition difficult to quantify or measure. It was also decided to use the

credibility of the existing platform – essentially the fact that it manages to make SDG-relevant research available online at no cost – as the basis for such engagements. Despite the continued need for funding, these engagements were not framed as primarily aimed at seeking additional funding.

After months of engaging potentially interested partners and building high-trust relationships, the South African Department of Science and Technology agreed to form a strategic partnership. This partnership was followed by a Memorandum of Understanding with the United Nations. With these two partnerships formalised, the South African SDG Hub was requested to support South Africa's preparation for and participation on national and multilateral platforms. This included the STI Forum and the Africa Regional Forum for Sustainable Development, Africa's annual preparatory meeting for the United Nations' High-Level Political Forum on the SDGs. These partnerships also formed the basis for establishing partnerships with other academic institutions and multilateral institutions. The South African SDG Hub also partnered with Statistics South Africa, the national statistical institution, on drafting the first national SDG report.

Only at this point, and in dialogue with its core partners, could the team at the University of Pretoria finalise the Hub's core work streams. Interestingly, this led to work streams that diverged significantly from the initial, and rather narrow, goal of making SDG-relevant research available online. Even after significant funding was acquired, this function remained of lesser importance when compared to the other three work streams. In fact, senior researchers were appointed not to expand the number of articles, but rather to create products based on synthesised research..

Lessons learned

When superimposing the theory of collective leadership onto the experience of the South African SDG Hub, a number of lessons emerged.

Firstly, the Hub's experience indeed confirmed *the need for collective forms of leadership*. On a pragmatic level, the SDGs are too all-encompassing in nature to be 'controlled' by one actor. Put differently: they imply a vast range of knowledge and experience and skills that goes beyond the rational abilities of any one leader. On a conceptual level, the very assumption that individualised forms of leadership are

appropriate goes against the moral grain of the SDGs themselves. The SDGs are expressly designed as a collaborative agenda. This collaborative foundation of the SDGs is also reflected in the ways that adherence to the agenda is gauged. At best, actors are expected to voluntarily disclose their attempts to achieve the SDGs. Notions of mutual accountability and transparency are of greater importance than compliance and punitive measures.

Secondly, the Hub's experience confirms that *creating trust amongst network members and with external stakeholders* is of fundamental importance. Rather than attempting to build relationships based on the 'expert' role, often assigned to universities and their researchers, the Hub's team rather opted for a different approach. They used continued engagement to cultivate and promote synergies between their aims and the needs of important stakeholders. This approach made it possible to treat all stakeholders as equals. Rather than using a hierarchical framework to engage and build networks, a heterarchical, functionally differentiated framework was adopted. This meant that stakeholders were treated as equals, as they were seen to bring different yet essential experience and knowledge to the network.

Thirdly, and closely linked to the above points, *objectives are understood to be dynamic and should be crafted together*. The Hub's initial objective was to collect and share SDG-relevant research produced at South African universities. But engagement with stakeholders, and the subsequent establishment of partnerships, showed that this objective is of secondary interest to these stakeholders. Of greater importance is synthesising existing research, setting up platforms for dialogue, and using the Hub to showcase SDG-relevant research on global platforms. Without disregarding the importance of collecting and disseminating research findings, the Hub chose to change its priorities and add additional objectives.

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